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# Building experiential contexts in-store: what levers should be associated with each experience?

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## Abstract

### • *Research objectives and questions*

The aim of this paper is to extend research into the creation of in-store experiential contexts. Based on the identification of seven in-store experiences expected by customers, it suggests the combination of levers to be associated with each in order to create suitable experiential contexts.

### • *Methodology*

Following a qualitative approach including 12 interviews to identify the expected experiences and 38 life histories to explore the registers in greater depth and identify the levers which characterize them, a quantitative study was carried out on a sample of 303 people to measure the weight of the levers associated with each experience and to illustrate them with reference brands.

### • *Results*

Seven experience registers were identified: simplicity, efficiency, conviviality, entertainment, learning, discovery, and escapism. Each of these is associated with a combination of levers to be activated in order to build the ideal experiential context.

### • *Implications for marketing decision*

The matrix of experiential contexts proposed in this research should enable managers to design contexts aligned with the intended positioning and the expectations expressed by consumers. The challenge is to offer customers one or more meaningful and memorable experiences, in line with the retailer's intended positioning.

### • *Originality*

This research supplements the literature on the production of in-store experiences and gives full scope to more ordinary experience proposals. For the first time, it associates a mix of stimuli with a typical experience and enhances our knowledge of how experiential contexts are created.

• **Keywords:** experience production, stimuli, easy shopping, efficiency, interactions, inspiration, stores.

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Despite the Covid-19 pandemic and mounting interest for on-line shopping, brick-and-mortar stores remain the preferred outlet for retail trade in France.<sup>1</sup> This preference owes much to the services that physical stores can offer to make the customer experience memorable and economically worthwhile (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

Stores are taking more and more initiatives to capture customers' attention and to provide this "shopping experience": flagship stores serve as showcases by which to re-enchant store visits; hybrid stores with their spaces for co-working (4C), entertainment (Citadium), sports (Adidas) or arts and crafts (Cultura) become activity spaces; or digital technology is included in-store so as to combine on-line and off-line shopping and make the purchasing process smoother (Ikea). Whatever the levers used, the stated purpose of all retailers is to provide customers with the finest all-round experience (Roederer and Filser, 2015). Even so, distributors' initiatives plainly produce contrasting outcomes with many initiatives being discontinued within months. While flagship stores may be successful in re-enchanting visitors, business performances seldom live up to expectations. Many cases are partial or total failure. Carrefour, first with *Planet* and then *Next*, has still not come up with the formula for changing its hypermarkets into experiential venues. Casino's *4C*, which at its opening was introduced as a model of technology but also a model activity space, has failed to live up to its initial promise: countless malfunctions of its digital tools that have nearly all been removed and were looked upon more as gadgets than as genuine purchase support tools, as bridges that failed to span the divide between on-line and off-line (the C Discount space has vanished). Having formerly given pride of place to initiatives to stage retail spaces, many experts now take the view that the priority is to simplify customer

journeys.<sup>2</sup> Was the extraordinary experience just a mirage and is it now a question of rediscovering the mundane experience (Filser and Roederer, 2022)?

Research into experiential marketing has been continually enhanced for four decades now (Filser and Roederer, 2022) and ranges from the understanding of consumers' search for experiences (Holbrook and Hirschmann, 1982) to thinking about how an offer of experiences is constructed (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Filser and Plichon, 2004). Identifying the key success factors for in-store dramatization of experiences remains a major challenge for distributors. This is particularly important today because technological innovations like live shopping, 3D views of products, and augmented reality offering an immersive visit (particularly so in the Metaverse) now mean the advantages of going to the store can be transposed to the internet, where customers can engage in dialogue, touch, see, test out and try on products. The development and routinization of remote commerce, whether it be e- (electronic), m- (mobile), or s- (social) commerce, are an unprecedented source of competition for brick-and-mortar stores; but they are also becoming a source of opportunities, forcing physical stores to review both the substance and form of their commercial offer.

There is a need, then, to become proficient in compiling stimuli for constructing experiential contexts capable of prompting high-intensity, spontaneous instead of carefully considered responses among customers (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Academic work so far has both highlighted different types of point-of-sale experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Filser and Plichon, 2004) and identified suitable levers for bringing about memorable experiences

2/ *La simplicité à ériger en priorité*, Franck Rosenthal, LSA Commerce Connecté, 5 février 2020.

1/ Statistiques FEVAD 2023.

(Bitner, 1992; Filser, 2002; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). However, to our knowledge, the connection has never been made between types of experience and their associated action levers although the pairing of the two is fundamental. The fact of the matter is that whereas distributors shape contexts with some particular experience in mind, only consumers ultimately live those experiences. Yet, in order for the experience the store seeks to provide to match the experience lived by the customer, it is important to match a compilation of stimuli with a type of experience.

The present paper attempts therefore to extend research into the creation of in-store experiential contexts as sources of value for customers optimized in terms of retailers' objectives and the resources to be employed. Just what experiences do consumers expect? How can experiential contexts be constructed to meet those expectations?

After a round-up of research on the production of experiential contexts, we compare and contrast them with consumer expectations and perceptions using an approach that is both qualitative (to elicit the structuring dimensions of the experience and generate the levers associated with each context identified) and quantitative (to measure their significance for each type of experience). Our slant is to question consumers because their views highlight what it is that is perceived and that makes the experience memorable. The ultimate goal of this research is to set out a combination of variables associated with each experience that may help managers in constructing experiential contexts for the positioning they seek to achieve.

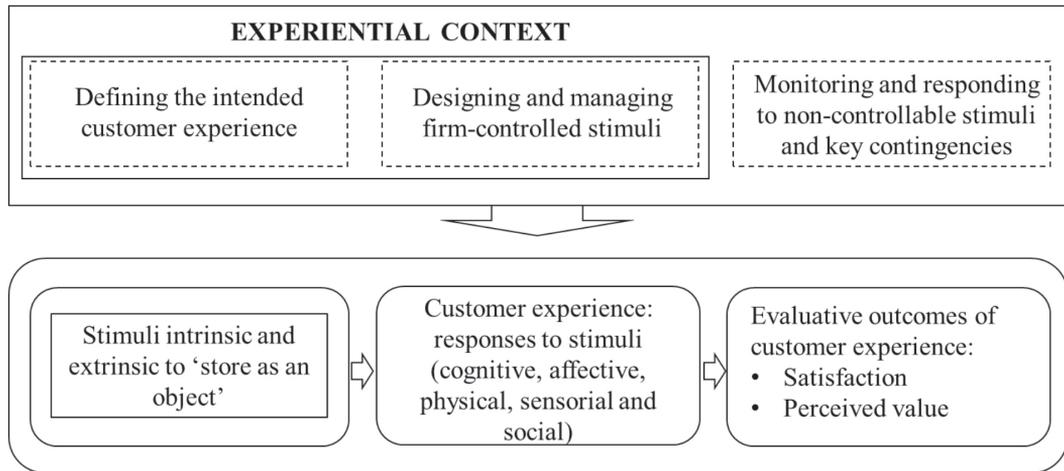
### **Conceptualizing experiential contexts in physical retailing**

The work developed in the early 1980s by Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982) was the starting point for the experiential strand of

research. That work highlighted the scope of emotions in consumption and especially the quest for fantasies, feelings, and fun that provided a better account of what consumers experienced. Drawing on a meta-analysis, Becker and Jaakkola (2020) define the consumer or customer experience as “*non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli along the customer journey*”. It is “*an individual's personal lived experience*” (Filser, 2002) that may be either positive or negative and that “*results from an interaction between it and an object (in this case, the store) or a set of stimuli in a given situation*” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Alongside this approach to experience focused on customer emotions and reactions, other more recent research has taken a complementary perspective involving the production of experiential contexts in distribution. The experiential approach views the firm's role as being to help consumers produce their experience by way of a conducive experiential context. This is defined as “*a combination of stimuli (products, environment, activities) designed to elicit an experience*” (Carù and Cova, 2006b). It is the object and situation dyad in the Person-Object-Situation interactionist definition of experience (Punj and Stewart, 1983).

Becker and Jaakkola's (2020) conceptual framework provides an integrative understanding of the customer experience. The authors claim that the lived experience should be viewed as emerging from customer responses to various stimuli. Because firms cannot control customer responses, they cannot create the customer experience as such; but they can attempt to produce stimuli that customers respond to. An experiential context therefore combines an experience for the customer to enjoy and that the business wants to provide with a set of stimuli chosen and controlled by the business (Figure 1). The objective is for the experience to be enjoyed by the customer (maximizing

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the customer experience, adapted from Becker and Jaakkola (2020)



satisfaction) and for it to generate value that is perceived as consistent with the experience the distributor intended to provide.

The main research identified in the literature and presented below (i) highlights the types of experience proposed to customers (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Filser and Plichon, 2004), (ii) identifies the levers that distributors have to activate to design memorable experiences (Bitner, 1992; Filser, 2002; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011), that is, experiences lastingly etched in customers' memories (Pine and Gilmore, 1999).

### The in-store experiences on offer

Back in 1999, Pine and Gilmore pioneered the way to highlighting two important dimensions for characterizing an experience. The first covered the importance of mobilizing consumers (active or passive participation). Holbrook (1999) spoke in this respect of active as opposed to reactive orientation: store visits are active if potential buyers can handle items, and on the contrary reactive if purchasers are passively exposed to the store's offering, in much the same way as one might take a trip around a museum (Filser and Plichon, 2004). The second dimension relates to the

environment surrounding the experience, which is determined by the extent to which individuals are immersed in the experience (Carù and Cova, 2006a), and corresponding to the intensity of the relationship or connection between the individual and the environment of that experience (absorption vs immersion). One type of experience may merely hold individuals' attention—absorption—(looking at the shelves) whereas another type might require greater (physical or psychological) immersion of customers, meaning that they co-create the experience (e.g. testing products in situ).

These two dimensions combined mean that individuals can be offered "*memorable and extraordinary*" experiences. Pine and Gilmore (1999) refer thereby to firms' capacity to create value and get consumers to invest in an image and memory bank. They come up with four realms of experience: entertainment (entertain customers), educational (teach customers something), escapism (enable them to get away from it all) and aesthetics (enable them to live moments of sheer pleasure, to make them marvel). This typology is interesting because it takes on a strong operational character and enables managers to position themselves more easily

with regard to the experience they wish to have their customers live. However, it focuses on offers that respond to what are essentially hedonic drives. But a shopping experience may be very far removed from this. Everyday shopping, or “*filling up for the week*” is still a lived experience even so (Badot, 2005; Barth and Antéblan, 2011; Persico, 2018). The value perceived at the point-of-sale, a source of competitive advantage, is an idea marshalled by Filser and Plichon (2004) to categorize the types of experience that stores may offer in conjunction with their positioning. The typology, derived from the research by Mathwick et al. (2001) and from Holbrook’s (1999) three facets of value—*intrinsic versus extrinsic orientation, individual versus interpersonal orientation, and active or reactive orientation of frequenting the point-of-sale*—, has eight positioning registers that may be defined as experience pathways to propose to customers. They are efficiency, fun, excellence, aesthetics, social standing, ethics, esteem, and spirituality. This typology enhances that of Pine and Gilmore (1999).

### The levers activated to produce experiences

The levers, or stimuli, specific to producing experiences have been developed in the work of Bitner (1992) and of Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) on servicescape and Filser (2002) on the metaphor of theatre.

Bitner’s (1992) servicescape provides a sound framework for understanding how the physical environment can be used strategically to shape positive and memorable experiences for customers. It encompasses all tangible components of a service provision venue such as atmospheric factors, design factors, symbols, and artefacts.

Beyond these objective stimuli, which the organization can control, Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) take the view that there are also social, symbolic, and natural stimuli that contribute to the experience and often

underpin customers’ attachment to the place. That work provides a wider framework of servicescape made up of four dimensions: the physical dimension (including atmosphere and the design factor highlighted by Bitner), the social dimension (customer involvement and interaction with employees or other customers), the symbolic dimension (source of comfort and inclusion when the symbols concur with customer values) and lastly the natural dimension (promoting the remedial qualities a venue may have for the customers’ psychological or physical state).

Working with drama as a metaphor, Filser (2002), like Moiso and Arnould (2005), suggest that the production of an experience can be understood through a design combining an intrigue (i.e. the story told often in conjunction with the offer of products), a setting (the shop, its dramatization, its atmosphere), and actions (customer participation and interactions in the store) to show how distributors can activate experiential marketing levers to enhance the experience.

For the history to be told, which enables customers to enter the world of the brand or store name, the specialization of the offering is often a facilitating factor (Cova and Herbert, 2014). Specialization makes it easier to propose a highly distinctive content and create an affective bond with customers. Specialized store names can draw support from factors such as local anchoring or a favourite activity.

As for the decor, atmospherics is “*the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability*” (Kotler, 1973). Whether examined holistically (the atmosphere as a whole) or analytically (one component of the atmosphere), the atmosphere’s influence on emotions has been validated time and again. The role of the music, smells, colours, or lighting that often make up the store decor are recurrent

features (Baker, Grewal, and Parasuraman, 1994; Rieunier, 2017).

Lastly customer mobilization (the third component in the theatre metaphor) is a central feature in constructing the experience: the consumer is the unit of production of the experience through the processing and interpretation of the products and services that the marketplace has to offer. Depending on the experiential contexts encountered, consumers therefore come across as being more or less active in their interactions with the selling space (especially through handling products) but also with staff. Carù and Cova (2003) take up this idea of active customer participation and pair it with the involvement of “facilitators”, meaning shop-floor staff or other customers who guide consumers in their experience. Accordingly, the experience production process begins when a compilation of stimuli trigger an interaction between customers and the point-of-sale. This interaction must be deemed meaningful enough for customers to remember it (Roederer and Filser, 2015; Flacandji, 2017) and to want to come back.

While the research of Bitner (1992), Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011), and Filser (2002) provides useful frameworks for constructing point-of-sale experiences, it fails to specify how retailers can operationally define a combination of stimuli specific to each experience from which to construct separate experiential contexts. The present research looks to fill this gap.

## Research method and results

From the perspective of identifying the experiences lived/expected by consumers so as to compare and contrast them with the literature and to highlight the levers with which to construct contexts conducive to them, we opted for a three-stage approach.

Two structuring dimensions emerged from the first stage in line with the marketing literature (Holbrook, 1999; Mathwick et al, 2001). The first relates to the reasons for visiting the points-of-sale and unsurprisingly contrasts utilitarian aspects corresponding to a predominantly extrinsic orientation (“going to the shops to get things”) with more hedonistic aspects corresponding to a predominantly intrinsic orientation (“going to the shops as a source of gratification in itself”). The second dimension concerns the relationship consumers want with the stores and contrasts purchasers who want to be active, to interact widely with the store through the products, sales staff and with other contextual features, against more passive or reactive consumers who primarily want the store to guide them throughout their visit, during which there is little need to think and compare and easy shopping prevails. This is the same contrast between the active and reactive orientation identified by Holbrook (1999). The degree of immersion pointed out by Carù and Cova (2006a) did not transpire in what respondents had to say.

By combining them with the two dimensions referred to earlier, four experiences that purchasers expect stand out: efficiency and simplicity for visits related to predominantly extrinsic motivations; inspiration and interactions for visits of a more intrinsic character (Figure 2). These expected experiences have been validated by two academic experts and two managers. Their description (Box 1) was used in the second stage of the research.

During the second stage, respondents were asked for recollections of positive experiences for each of these four types. This stage of the research enhanced some of the types. For interactions, respondents revealed three separate registers: entertainment, learning, and conviviality. For inspiration, a further three registers were revealed: discovery, escapism, and, reading between

### Box 1: Methodological approach

#### Stage 1: Identify expected experiences

Twelve semi-directive interviews were conducted with consumers aged 25–67 years old, with equal numbers of men and women, lasting from 25 to 70 minutes. The interview guidelines concerned visits to physical stores and sought to identify what buyers expected of the stores. Respondents expressed the motivations for their trips to points-of-sale and their expectations of each motivation. No particular store format was imposed. The interview contents included recurring keywords that were compared with the marketing literature. This first stage brought out two main structuring dimensions leading to four main experiences.

#### Stage 2: Identify levers (stimuli) characteristic of each lived experience

Thirty-eight accounts were collected from 16 men and 22 women aged 21 to 62 years old. Each account was based on material briefly describing each of the four experiences, drafted on the basis of the stage-1 interviews. Each account was drafted first by each researcher separately and they were then pooled. The descriptions were then validated by two academic experts and two store managers. The description began for each experience by: “Can you recollect in-store visits when ...

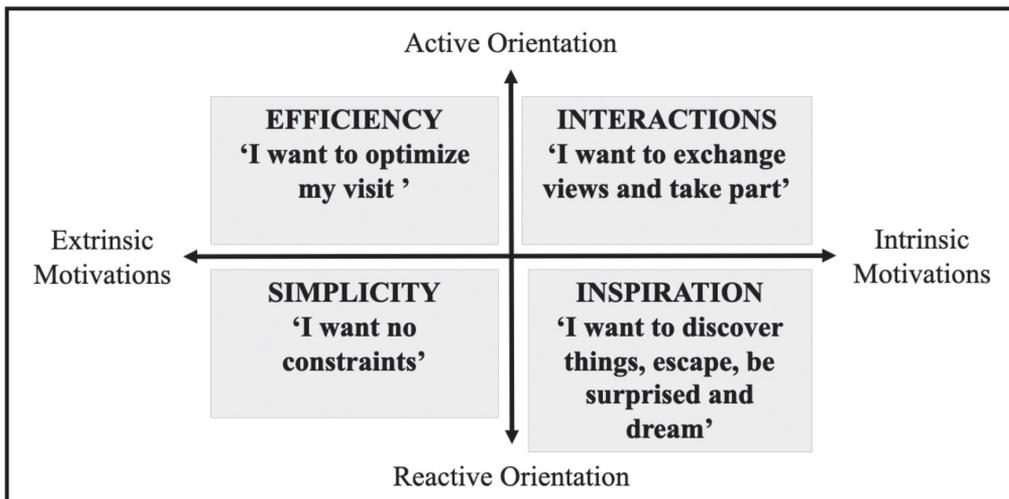
- (Simplicity): ... *the store met your needs quickly and easily without you having to make any effort either to seek out the products or for the time spent in the store?*”
- (Efficiency): ... *the store enabled you to get bargains and to optimize your choice in exchange for efforts you accepted to make (you may have had to search around, to rummage about, to compare multiple products, to spend time in the store ... to strike the best trade-off)? Although you expended energy, you feel you came out on top!*”
- (Interactions): ... *you were able to talk with staff or other customers and to enjoy the exchange?*”
- (Inspiration): ... *you felt surprised, inspired, that you escaped from things, or even lived a dream?*”

The interviewees were invited to recollect enjoyable experiences when they felt each of these emotions. A follow-up focused on the components that, in their view, were decisive in the experience. This brought out what were perceived as six important levers.

#### Stage 3: Weight of the levers associated with each experience and store names of reference

A quantitative questionnaire was administered electronically with a convenience sample of 303 people. A filter question checked that the respondents had no connection with retailing or marketing circles. Their socio-demographic profile was asked for. The objective was to attribute levers to each experience for designing the experiential context. Respondents had to evaluate the contribution of each of the six levers to each experience on a 5-point scale (from “of no importance at all” to “very important”) and to name stores associated with each experience. The sample was representative of the French population (Appendix 1). The Ipsos survey organization (Baromètre 2022) reports that women make up close to 70% of shoppers.

Figure 2: Expected in-store experiences



the lines, aesthetics (included at this stage of the research since it reflects the literature although it was cited less often). All told, from the initial four experiences, we came up with eight types of lived experience counting the additional registers identified. A summary description arising from the interviews is proposed for each. Some of the store names recurrently associated with each description are also indicated. Respondents named various stores in different distribution circuits for each of the experiences. Accordingly, no particular circuit seems to be explicitly associated with an experience despite a number of characteristic asperities being identified. Likewise, various sectors (food, textiles, decoration, DIY) were mentioned, none of which seems to be attached to any specific type of experience. This reflects the concept of the perceived polarity of store names (Lambrey and Filser, 1992): consumer perceptions form clusters characterized by a specific combination of attributes related to the advantages sought (assortment, price, service and advice) and not to being part of the same form of sale.

**The efficiency experience:** The store enables purchasers to find bargains, optimize their choice and their spending in exchange for the effort they are prepared to put in. They may have to search around, rummage about, compare multiple products, spend time in the store, and so on to find the best trade-off and the best value for money. Although they expend energy, they feel they come out on top.

*“Hypermarkets are big places. You have to spend at least an hour there but at least you have everything to hand”* (Julien); *“Rummage through the dump bins and you find good quality things”* (Marine); *“It’s busy, you have to queue, but the prices are attractive”* (Fabienne); *“I know I’m going to be there over an hour, but I find everything I need because there’s a wide choice and more brands”* (Pascale); *“I do a lot of comparing,*

*I go through all the aisles in order, I look for value for money, but it’s worth it in the end”* (Anaïs); *“At Leroy Merlin, I’m bound to find what I want, even if it takes time and you have to search around, sometimes a lot”* (Philippe); *“At Picard there’s only frozen foods, but so much choice, not as much anywhere else, ... it means you have to look carefully, but in the end it’s worth it”* (Martine); *“I like to have a good look at everything and think what goes with what; there’s all sorts of veg you don’t find anywhere els”* (Christine C about Picard).

Stores named:<sup>3</sup> Leclerc, Carrefour, Intermarché, Action, Ikea, Picard, Leroy Merlin, Costco.

**The simplicity experience:** The store is perceived as being able to respond quickly and easily to customer needs without them having to make any particular effort either in looking for products or for time spent in the store. Customers feel they do their shopping effortlessly and without wasting time, as a matter of convenience. The limited and stable range of products and the size of the store seem decisive characteristics of this experience.

*“I like it to be fast, with no-one to bother me, no sales staff and no customers all over the place”* (Lydia); *“you fill your basket and come to check-out without realizing it ... it’s no hassle”* (Daniel); *“Carrefour City, the corner shops in my neighbourhood ... they’re all small shops ... I save time there”* (Clément); *“I like it when the aisles are arranged logically and don’t change much ... it’s easy and I don’t have to think about it”* (Thomas); *“at Aldi, I’m not going to go on a spending spree, you’re not tempted ... it’s not complicated, not too many products everywhere”* (Mélissa); *“I don’t waste any time searching around in this shop because they don’t have the same product 10 times*

3/ In decreasing order of the number of times cited during the quantitative stage.

over” (Sarah B); *“With their coloured stickers, you see the cheapest products straight away, the best value for money and the big brands. That helps me choose”* (Charles); *“At Ikea, I soon find the box in the warehouse, it’s well signposted in the aisles or on the internet”* (Marie).

Stores named: Picard, Monop, Carrefour City, Aldi, Lidl, Ikea.

**The interactions experience:** Visitors give precedence to shopping as an activity over the acquisition of products and look to co-construct the lived experience with others (sales staff or customers) very actively or through technological solutions. The underlying motivations may be social (convivial experience), fun (entertaining experience) or related to the acquisition of knowledge or know-how (learning experience), which lead to three registers in the interactions experience.

**The conviviality register:** The store is perceived as an almost familiar place where customers feel good, almost “among friends”, where they can sometimes engage in exchanges around an activity. Customers feel decidedly close to the place/people.

*“The sale is made quite naturally and with a feeling of cordiality, a genuine moment of exchange”* (Bertrand); *“I felt I was talking not with a sales person but with someone met on an evening out and talking about their own experience”* (Bruno); *“a hide-out for knowledgeable practitioners who give the impression they are part of a community”* (Jean-Marie).

Stores named: Nespresso, Decathlon, Leroy Merlin.

**The entertainment register:** The store is a place where customers can play, try out products, have fun, in short, have an enjoyable time.

*“At Cultura, it’s often very colourful, there’s a wide variety of innovative products, books,*

*craft workshops, board games each more inspiring and exciting than the next ... and that you can try things out! I find it great fun ... it’s the sort of store I could spend hours in”* (Inès); *“It’s great to be able to go inside the tents in Decathlon, children love it”* (Pascale); *“children can play in this store ... there are no rules against it”* (Samir); *“It’s a bit like a treasure hunt”* (Marine).

Stores named: Decathlon, Cultura, Lego, M&M’s.

**The learning register:** The store is a place where customers can learn things, acquire or enhance their know-how.

*“It’s thanks to the sales staff who give me tips and advice”*; *“at the Apple Store, there are courses to learn to take beautiful photos”* (Philippe); *“You swap good practices straight away ... with the salesman at Decathlon who is a cycling fan with a lot of experience in the area, who gives me tips for riding and maintaining my bike ...”* (Jean-Marie).

Stores named: Apple Store, Leroy Merlin.

**The inspiration experience:** Beyond being a place for shopping for provisions, the point-of-sale may be a place for making discoveries, a source of excitement and escapism through the new products on offer or of aesthetics through the dramatization of the selling space where visitors are primarily spectators.

**The discovery register:** The store constantly offers something new and original making customers want to return.

*“At Costco, there are loads of products you can find only there”* (Fabienne); *“I love wandering round Leroy Merlin, there are loads of ideas to be had”* (Carole); *“At Lidl, you come across surprises every week”* (Marie); *“There are always original products at N&D”* (Manon); *“Fitted-out spaces give you ideas and are practical, you can just copy them”* (Jean Marie about Ikea).

**Stores named:** Lidl, Leroy Merlin, Nature et Découvertes, La chaise longue, Zara, Costco, Ikea.

**The escapism register:** The store carries customers to a different or even out-of-the-ordinary world. It provides a break from their everyday lives.

*“They invite us on journeys with aisles of original products ... sometimes a bit expensive” (Kevin); “You go around the Apple Store a bit like going around a museum and stay a long time even if you don’t buy anything. It’s like going out for a stroll” (Bernard); “I find the Rituals store inspiring for its product range, its design, the story it tells and the way it makes me feel I’m somewhere else” (Marine); “Talking with sales staff at Kusmi Tea takes me a world away” (Sabrina).*

**Stores named:** Maison du Monde, L’Occitane, Kusmi Tea, Rituals.

**The aesthetics register:** The store offers beauty and sometimes sets customers dreaming.

*“At la Grande Epicerie, the shelves are arranged as alcoves, not long boring aisles. You feel you’re being invited to admire them” (Samia); “it’s not a big shop but the objects are beautiful, even the lowliest pencil sharpener. When I have to work on a new topic, I always buy a new notebook. Just going into the shop and buying the notebook makes me want to get down to work”*

(Carole); *“Everything there is beautiful, from the walls to the ceiling, the big spaces, the beautiful products, the sales staff too, it’s a bit of a dream ... except the prices, but then again ...” (Christine V).*

**Stores named:** Maison du Monde, L’Occitane, La Grande Epicerie de Paris, sundry luxury names (Dior).

A specific follow-up focused on the factors that in the respondents’ view were decisive for characterizing each of the experiences. Given that the respondents had often cited them spontaneously in the discussion, six levers were identified that were associated in varying degrees with each experience and for variable expectations. For example, the hoped-for product offer will differ both in the range of the assortment and in its originality/ novelty for the different experiences.

These levers broadly reflect Bitner’s (1992) servicescape and Rosenbaum and Massiah’s (2011) findings that clearly identified these features that formed service contexts: atmosphere factors, management of the sales space (furniture, layout, fittings), signs, symbols, and artefacts (assortment, decorative style, etc.), and relations with others (sales personnel, other customers). Technology is a new feature that was missing from Rosenbaum and Massiah’s conceptual framework, since digitalization was just beginning its development at the time.

Table 1: Levers for constructing the experience

Levers relating to the offer	Levers relating to the sales environment	Levers relating to interactions
Assortment (narrow vs wide, undifferentiated vs differentiated)	Design (floor space, flow path, layout of aisles, access to check-out, etc.)	Human presence (sales staff and other customers)
Prices (high/low end, attractiveness, aggressive promotion)	Dramatization (decoration, atmosphere, product presentation, storytelling around the brand or store name)	Technology (digital screens, terminals for information, ordering, customization, etc.)

Table 2: Components and characteristics of the set-up associated with each experience

Simplicity	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Stable, narrow product offer focused on essentials. Little temptation with narrow assortment that may be centred on “essentials”;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Good value for money;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Straightforward flow path, small floor area, no changes, clear signage. Aisles and products easy to find;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: No frills store and decor;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Staff on hand for information or help if needed;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: No expectations other than self-scanning check-outs.</p>
Efficiency	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Full of choice: own brands and name brands. Products readily available;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Very good value for money. Products highlighted;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Pleasant store especially for supermarkets. Signage with help in choosing to simplify the flow path;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: Special offers staged;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Staff available and sales support on some aisles;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: Few expectations listed by customers.</p>
Conviviality	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Products as material for lively discussion with staff;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Consistent pricing with products recommended by sales staff;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Cosy store with layout explained by staff;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: “Homely” atmosphere;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Expert, enthusiastic staff to hand. Emphasis on advice over sale;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: Few expectations listed by customers.</p>
Entertainment	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Choice. Open access to products;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Some special offers for the store atmosphere;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Store arranged like a playground;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: Fun atmosphere. Products staged;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Sales staff demonstrators;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: Digitalization for playing and in-store demonstrations.</p>
Learning	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Varied products that can be tried out and handled. Products presented in their user context;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Prices associated with affordable products;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Workshops on hand in the midst of the store;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: Professional atmosphere for stores that are reputed and reliable;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Expert sales force;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: As a means of learning and associated with personnel.</p>
Discovery	<p><u>Assortment</u>: New products/services/uses, original and differentiated offer, renewal;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Little mentioned by customers except attractive prices</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Used to suggest ideas. Offer presented in life-situation;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: Carefully designed store atmosphere to enhance the offer;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Little mentioned by customers;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: Little mentioned by customers.</p>
Escapism	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Original products;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Products that may be expensive;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: No flow path or in-store aid expected;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: Decor and sensory marketing to carry visitors away;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Embodied by sales staff; importance of “looking the part”;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: Few expectations mentioned.</p>
Aesthetics	<p><u>Assortment</u>: Original and high quality products;</p> <p><u>Price</u>: Possibly high prices;</p> <p><u>Design</u>: Cleanliness, noble materials for comfort of purchase without specific flow path expected in the store;</p> <p><u>Dramatization</u>: Sensory marketing, beauty of the place;</p> <p><u>Human</u>: Sales staff with smart appearance;</p> <p><u>Technology</u>: Few expectations mentioned.</p>

On the strength of the lexical field indicated by the respondents, Table 2 summarizes the key components of the expected set-up and their characteristics for each experience. By focusing on the Object (the store) as defined in the POS paradigm (Punj and Stewart, 1983), respondents describe which combination of levers they would like to interact for various situations (lived experiences).

In the third stage of this research, the quantitative study aimed to attribute the weight of the levers associated with each experience and thereby to construct each experiential context (Table 3). It yielded the results below:

1. The assortment is an essential feature whatever the experiential context;
2. The creation of some experiences, in particular those that are intrinsic in orientation, involves activating a large combination of levers. This makes these experiences complex and costly (particularly because of the human factor);
3. Technology appears to be residual compared with the other variables.

To complete the analysis, paired t tests of criteria were conducted to rank them in order (Appendix 2). Only criteria with a mean

score  $\geq 3$  were used for this analysis (in bold in Table 3). Retailers efforts should focus on the criteria closely associated with each experience. The association of levers with each experience was used to construct the experiential context. The results above show that the experiential contexts of escapism and aesthetics rely on identical levers. This is confirmed by the paired t tests and with the same rank order. The differences between the two registers (Table 2) are above all that the store carries the customer away for escapism whereas it promotes contemplation because of the beauty of the venue for aesthetics. Conceptually, these registers do not seem sufficiently distinct and so we thought it relevant to merge them.

For all the other experiences, the weight and order of the levers vary. For retailers, this indicates which levers to pull to construct any particular context. By cross-referencing these with the verbatims for each experience in Table 2, retailers know what is expected for each lever.

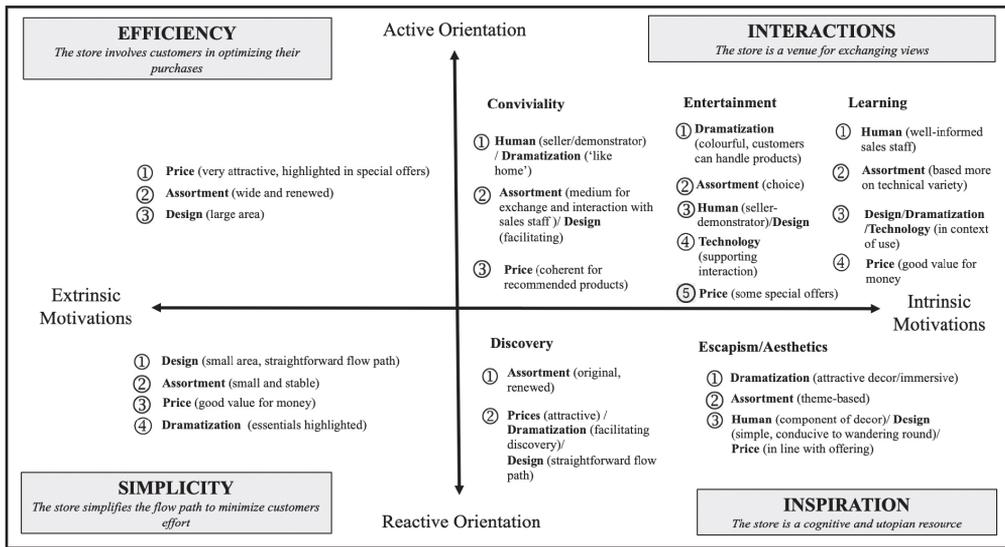
Figure 3 summarizes the overall findings. It specifies the order of the levers, which are detailed further in Table 2. The complementarity between the qualitative and

Table 3: Mean scores for the levers associated with the experiences

	Simpli- city	Effi- ciency	Convivia- lity	Entertain- ment	Learning	Disco- very	Escapism	Aesthe- tics
Assort- ment	<b>3,94*</b>	<b>3,92</b>	<b>3,95</b>	<b>3,91</b>	<b>4,11</b>	<b>4,25</b>	<b>4,20</b>	<b>4,40</b>
Price	<b>3,64</b>	<b>4,15</b>	<b>3,24</b>	<b>3,14</b>	<b>3,33</b>	<b>3,57</b>	<b>3,15</b>	<b>3,06</b>
Design	<b>4,12</b>	<b>3,56</b>	<b>3,88</b>	<b>3,71</b>	<b>3,74</b>	<b>3,47</b>	<b>3,93</b>	<b>4,08</b>
Dramati- zation	<b>3,29</b>	2,96	<b>4,16</b>	<b>4,19</b>	<b>3,71</b>	<b>3,52</b>	<b>4,52</b>	<b>4,65</b>
Human	2,88	2,83	<b>4,24</b>	<b>3,75</b>	<b>4,42</b>	2,96	<b>3,77</b>	<b>3,91</b>
Techno- logy	2,45	2,45	2,86	<b>3,41</b>	<b>3,67</b>	2,76	2,89	2,95

\*Score on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *Of no importance at all* / 5 = *Very important*)

Figure 3: Construction of experiential contexts



quantitative stages of this research serves to guide retailers.

## Discussion and perspectives

Any marketplace exchange generates a subjective experience that may be positive in varying degrees for each of the parties. This is why the agents involved, and the distributors in particular, invariably look to maximize the positive dimensions and minimize the negative dimensions of the experiences they hope to deliver. Any transaction of material goods or immaterial services is necessarily initiated and unfolds in a socialized spatio-temporal context. For distributors, the challenge lies therefore of necessity in the construction of one or more “experiential contexts” that are most effective in satisfying their customers and, as a corollary, for their own success. This is the ambition driving this research.

This research, then, enhances the existing theoretical framework first by proposing a matrix that legitimizes ordinary experiences, sometimes associated with shopping envisaged as a chore to be done (Barth

and Antéblan, 2011). Shopping as a chore has been underexplored in the literature (Antéblan, Filser and Roederer, 2013). The simplicity experience has emerged from the interviews as one of the experiences sought by customers who wish to limit the effort they make in stores, be it physical, cognitive or in terms of time spent. This clearly shows that a less-than-ordinary experience (Badot, 2005) holds real value for purchasers. It reflects the *utilitarian value* (a practice based on being functional and fast) identified by Floch (1989) when analysing the case of hypermarkets for which consumers expect uninterrupted throughput. Nearly 35 years later and this experience still seems relevant, without necessarily being associated solely with that type of store as an efficiency experience. In his analysis, other consumer values emerged, which we have identified again in our research, although not associated with that store format: amusing (strolling, sheer pleasure) for inspiration, utopian (human size “life” value) for conviviality, and critical (calculating, distancing) for simplicity. Although the assortment is central in a context of simplicity or efficiency, it is not enough for describing consumer expectations

(Filsler and Plichon, 2004). Store design is a fundamental lever to be included, above all for constructing an experience of simplicity (flow path, signage) whereas price is paramount in the experience of efficiency.

This research likewise extends the work focused on propositions of extraordinary or sublimated experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). It confirms the existence of experiences already identified in the literature: entertainment, learning, discovery, escapism, aesthetics, and is largely based both on the avenues identified by Pine and Gilmore (1999) and on some of the avenues in Holbrook's (1999) typology of value. However, in our results, the experiential contexts of aesthetics and escapism blur into one another (levers of the same magnitude and rank order). Our work also supplements extraordinary experiences with the experience of conviviality being analysed until now in out-of-store sales venues such as home sales (Cadenat et al., 2017).

Second, by identifying the combination of relevant levers that it is impossible to do without to produce each type of experience, we specify how to construct each experiential context. This is the main contribution of this research.

Producing an experience thus necessitates combining resources identified in this work and that can be clustered into five main aspects:

- Resources related to the offer, in which the assortment is central to any proposed experiences, unlike price. Accordingly, for what is primarily a utilitarian experience (efficiency or simplicity), the careful selection of the assortment in terms of the number of references, the quality proposed, and the variety is more decisive than price (value for money is only decisive for efficiency). Purchasers do not want an overabundant offer when it leads to time wasted in the store: they expect a small

assortment for an experience of simplicity and a wider but relevant one to fulfil the search for variety expected in an efficiency experience. Conversely, for a hedonistic experience, it is the originality and excellence of the selection in the product offer that are decisive.

- Resources related to dramatization. The more hedonistic (intrinsic) the reasons for the store visit, the more sensitive customers are to decor, which they cite as being one of the most decisive levers of the experience. Decor may be aesthetic or spectacular to meet the expectations of customers looking for inspiration or interactions. Conversely, in a simplicity experience, dramatization is of little importance (compared with other factors) and should be all but absent, and wholly absent for an efficiency experience.
- Resources related to human input. The more active shoppers are, with intrinsic motivations, the more important the human factor seems to be in the experience. Accordingly, human interactions, especially with store personnel, are fundamental for the interactions experience, whether it be an experience of conviviality, entertainment, or learning, with high expectations as to the professional attitude and efficiency of staff. This is a real challenge for retailers who have difficulty recruiting staff. In the case of visits for extrinsic motives, the human factor is virtually absent from the experiential context. For everyday shopping, are customers ready to accept stores without staff provided that the design enables them to find what they want easily? Stores like Amazon Go or Auchan Go are illustrations of this, but the concept does not seem to work. The technology in these stores is very expensive and they do not seem to attract enough customers to make a return on investment. Amazon has recently abandoned this set-up.
- Resources related to store design. This lever, which is important in building each experiential context, is above all decisive

for the simplicity experience. Consumers do not want to waste time and look for a quick and simple flow path, a smaller floor space, and a rational lay-out of products.

- Lastly, technology-related resources. The digitalization of points-of-sale is a central challenge given the implementation and maintenance costs. It is essential therefore for this to be a genuine ask and for it to generate extra added value. Technology only features in this research for learning and entertainment experiences, and is systematically a secondary criterion and paired with human presence (Vanheems, 2022). Although the little interest attributed to this lever by respondents comes as something of a surprise, Auffret and Picot-Coupey (2022) suggest that when technology is expected by customers, there is an interiorization phenomenon that may make it unobtrusive. An alternative hypothesis is the absence of any perceived added value or the many malfunctions that mean technology is sometimes a disappointment.

Our research has various limitations and could be extended in several ways.

The work has focused exclusively on in-store experiences. However, behaviour is increasingly part of an omnichannel logic (Gahler et al., 2023). It would be worth studying whether the same levers are expected on-line and in-store in the each register of experience and to include the dimensions of the omnichannel evaluation into the overall experience of each retailer (Roggeveen et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2022).

The social aspects of the experience were little cited by respondents and confined to relations with the sales staff and other customers. This is limited compared with Holbrook's (1999) view of things in his typology of sources of value. For instance, the community aspect surrounding values such as conscientious consumer purchases

(producer associations, local products, etc.) deserves investigation (Montagnac, 2022). Stores with strong values such as supporting growers in the context of fairer trade may supplement this social aspect that connects customers with the business and with sellers through their shared values. Looking into the customer/seller/business triad raises the question of the changing role of contact staff.

As a highly operational extension of this research, retailers may use this matrix to determine whether their customers clearly perceive the array of experiences they are looking to produce. We have observed that some stores adopt a rationale of diversification of the experiences on offer, as with Lidl for simplicity and discovery. Ikea, with its exhibition spaces, also invites customers to make discoveries, it proposes interaction through a very wide selection of products but it also simplifies things for customers: *“everything is signposted and easy to find”* (Christine, 52 years old). Among the stores cited by our respondents, Leroy Merlin is the one that offers the widest experiential mix: simplicity with *“yellow labels for the lowest price items in all the aisles”*, (Georges, 61 years old); discovery with products staged in exhibition spaces for inspiration, discussions with sales personnel imbued with conviviality, or, then again, opportunities for in-store learning. Proposing several in-store experiences is a real asset for retailers in an endeavour to meet the varied needs of shoppers: *“Buying quickly and easily on Mondays, but going to find inspiration in the same store on Saturdays”* (Isabelle, 42 years old). While respondents spontaneously make this two-way distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motives, research has shown that the two might sometimes be mixed (Babin et al., 1994). Yet most stores feature in just a single category, adopting a logic of specialization in the experience produced. Aldi, for simplicity's sake is a prototype of this, which may be an asset in proposing a clear experience. However, in adopting a

purely utilitarian proposal centred on making products available without having to provide the least effort for customers, distributors run the risk of producing what is in the end a disappointing purchasing experience. Any flaw or minor mistake, such as running out of stock, becomes a source of “irritation” that creates a halo effect around the store visit.

As an extension of this research, questioning distributors would enable us to compare the experiential mix intended by the stores and the experiential mix perceived by customers. Any discrepancies could then be identified and retailers correct them through the levers. It also seems worthwhile constructing case studies focused on several stores and in particular those that French shoppers seem to have preferred over recent years<sup>4</sup> (Leroy Merlin, Ikea, Decathlon, Picard or more recently Action) to position them in the matrix and make a closer analysis of the joint activation of the different levers. Combined with interviews of store managers, we could then see whether the distributors’ strategic intentions are accurately perceived by the stores’ customers. Reflecting the seminal work of Pontier (1986) on Ikea, it would be worth measuring, for several stores, the consistency between the experience(s) intended by the stores and the experience(s) lived by customers, and even to include the sales personnel’s lived experience. This last aspect seems a particularly interesting extension at a time when the role of sales personnel is changing so much.

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## Appendices

Appendix 1: Excerpt from the questionnaire and respondent profiles

Only the question for the simplicity experience is presented here. The principle is the same for the other seven.

*“We are conducting a survey on the experiences people live in stores and would like your views.*

*After a brief description of each experience, we would like you to tell us how the factors proposed contribute to each of them.*

*This will take you about 5 minutes. Do not be surprised if some of the questions are repeated.*

*Your answers will remain anonymous. Thank you for your help.”*

### 1) The simplicity experience

*The store is perceived as being able to respond quickly and easily to your needs without you having to make any special effort either in searching for products or in the time spent in the store. You feel you are shopping effortlessly and without wasting time!*

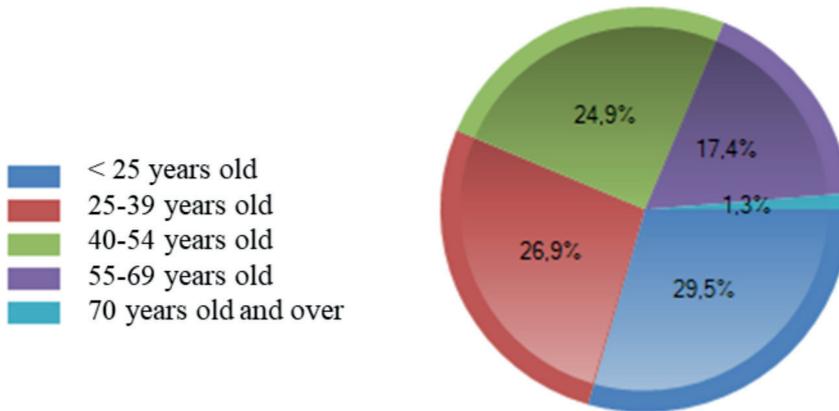
Indicate how each feature below contributes in your view to this simplicity experience:

	Of no importance at all	Of little importance	Moderately important	Important	Very important
Choice of products					
Prices asked					
Store layout (flow path, arrangement of aisles, access to check-out, etc.)					
Decoration, atmosphere, product display					
Human interactions (with sales staff, other customers)					
Technology (touch screens, terminals for information, ordering, customization, etc.)					

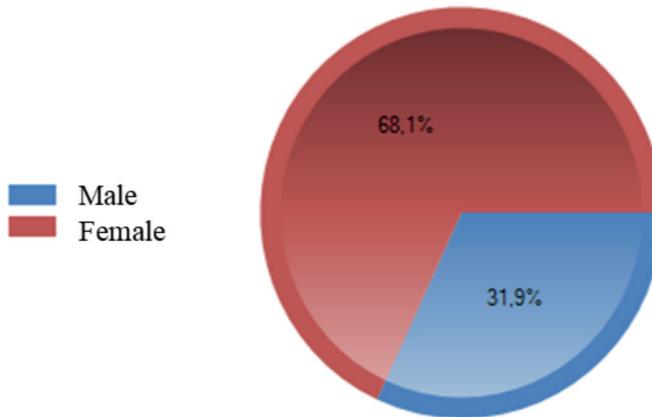
Can you name one or more stores that come to mind by way of illustration?

\_\_\_\_\_

Distribution of respondents by age



Distribution of respondents by sex



### Interviewee profiles

Stage 1: 12 interviews

First name	Age	Home region	First name	Age	Home region
Coraline	28	Ile de France	Dominique	43	Bourgogne
Rémi	36	Ile de France	Christine	52	Bourgogne
Margot	25	Ile de France	Clément	31	Bourgogne
Anne	47	Ile de France	Enzo	26	Bourgogne
Didier	58	Ile de France	Monique	67	Bourgogne
Marc	59	Ile de France	Bertrand	44	Bourgogne

## Stage 2: 38 interviews

First name	Age	Home region	First name	Age	Home region
Charles	39	Ile de France	Marine	27	Bourgogne
Alison	36	Ile de France	Julien	35	Bourgogne
Julien	44	Ile de France	Anaïs	32	Bourgogne
Laura	28	Ile de France	Bertrand	44	Bourgogne
Nicole	60	Ile de France	Bernard	51	Bourgogne
Philippe	54	Ile de France	Sarah B	43	Bourgogne
Sarah P	21	Ile de France	Martine	52	Bourgogne
Nathalie	55	Ile de France	Mélissa	36	Bourgogne
Kevin	37	Ile de France	Georges	61	Bourgogne
Inès	26	Ile de France	Christine C	56	Bourgogne
Carole	42	Ile de France	Jessica	28	Bourgogne
Jean-Marie	55	Ile de France	Samir	41	Bourgogne
Daniel	62	Ile de France	Marie	54	Bourgogne
Alain	57	Ile de France	Manon	29	Bourgogne
Samia	46	Ile de France	Bruno	57	Bourgogne
Fabienne	58	Ile de France	Pascale	43	Bourgogne
Sabrina	33	Ile de France	Christine V	49	Bourgogne
Lydia	41	Ile de France	Alexandre	39	Bourgogne
Thomas	29	Ile de France	Clément	35	Bourgogne

## Appendix 2: Paired t tests

For the simplicity experience, these paired t tests show that the characteristic differences are all statistically significant (Table 5). The rank order arising from the results has store design as the leading criterion (1), ahead of assortment (2), price (3), and dramatization (4).

Table 5: Paired t test for the simplicity experience

	Simplicity experience	Student's t	Two-tailed p significance
Pair 1	Exp_Simpl_Design (mean score 4.12) - Exp_Simpl_Dramatization (mean score 3.29)	13.791	<.001
Pair 2	Exp_Simpl_Assortment (mean score 3.94)- Exp_Simpl_Dramatization (mean score 3.29)	10.059	<.001
Pair 3	Exp_Simpl_Price (mean score 3.64)- Exp_Simpl_Design (mean score 4.12)	-6.027	<.001
Pair 4	Exp_Simpl Assortment (mean score 3.94) - Exp_Simpl_Price (mean score 3.64)	4.877	<.001
Pair 5	Exp_Simpl_Price (mean score 3.64)- Exp_Simpl_ Dramatization (mean score 3.29)	4.339	<.001
Pair 6	Exp_Simpl_Assortment (mean score 3.94)- Exp_Simpl_Design (mean score 4.12)	-2.914	.004

The same procedure was applied for the other experiential contexts. For some experiences, the differences in the paired t tests for the levers were not statistically significant at the 5% level. In such instances, we conclude that these criteria contribute equally to each experiential context.