

# Store in Negotiation: Observing the Compromise

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## ***Abstract***

As the final outpost in the distribution chain towards the end-customer, retailers are able to address consumers from a physical demarcated place: the store. Within the traditional marketing management literature store image has been viewed as a quite durable concept existing in the human mind, thereby image is neglected as an ongoing process embedded in the cultural context on which it depends. In this paper we take an intertextual approach to understanding store image. The concept of intertextuality illuminates that texts are never original, but endlessly referring to other disparate texts within the realm of cultural production where customers and retailers are located. By means of a series of observations at the Ikea store in the Swedish town Malmö, we argue that the image of the store can be metaphorically understood as a narrative constituted by volatile compromises resulting from the continuous negotiations between retailer and customers. Towards the end some suggestions on how customers and retailers may increase their negotiation skills are given.

*Keywords:* Place, Image, Negotiation, Intertextuality.

## ***Introduction***

The physical store environment communicates significant things about the retailer's products as well as conveying an objectified self-image (Bitner, 1992; Mazursky and Jacoby, 1986). The influence of the physical surrounding on how individuals form their images of stores is particularly interesting from the point of view of the retail organisation. As the final outpost in the distribution chain towards the end-customer, these organisations are in the position to address and expose customers for commercial messages in a distinct materialised way in the store.

In a time characterised by an increased focus on customers' experiences (see e.g. Pine and Gilmore's, 1999 concept experience economy), attention has recently been given to the creation of store narratives in order to catch the attention of consumers (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Based on their extensive observations of conducts at the sports dining and entertainment complex *ESPN Zone Chicago*, Kozinets et. al. (2002) examined the role of the

physical environment as a narrative, which structures staged customer experiences. The sense making of a store environment narrative is different from narratives communicated in television programs or newspaper articles in the sense that it is interpreted in collaboration with other people in the store. Kozinets et. al. (2004) observed that the store works as an 'obverse panopticon', a space where customers come to watch marketers as much as marketers watch them. In-store experience is thus formed through negotiations involving retailer and consumers in a process of interagency. The notion of interagency obstruct the view of consumers' acts as predetermined by the institutional store environment and put more emphasis on the interrelated nature between consumers and the retailer in realising the store.

In this paper an attempt is made to relate the store as a narrative structure to the formation of store image. We suggest that store image is constituted by a series of compromises settled in volatile ways when retailer and consumers encounter in the intertextual realm of cultural production. In what follows we first illustrate some of the ways in which customers act on the store environment in the case of the furnishing retailer Ikea, as we experienced it during a series of visits made earlier this year. Drawing upon these empirical observations we outline a metaphor of store image formation as constituted by volatile compromises open for negotiation and reinterpretation. Towards the end some suggestions on how consumers and retailers may increase their negotiation skills are given.

### ***Reflections on Previous Research***

Research within the marketing management literature on how an individual's image of the store is formed has traditionally considered image as a durable attitude or mental perception (Pessemier, 1980). Past studies are dominated by conceptualisations of image of the basis of information processing theory, which have tended to investigate image on an attribute-by-attribute basis (Keaveney and Hunt, 1992). By contrast, Keaveney and Hunt proposed a category-based framework, according to which store image is viewed as evaluated against previously defined categories in the individual's mind. In this sense the individual visitor does not make inferences about every attribute in the store, but generalize the store according to his/her previous knowledge about other stores. In a similar vein Mazursky and Jacoby (1986) underscored the processual nature of image. They asserted that the relatively lack of knowledge regarding store image may be due to that most studies are based on consumers' perceptions of the store as recalled from memory. On the contrary they examined store image as a set of predefined objective and subjective facets that consumers arrange into an overall picture.

The basic assumption underpinning these studies seems to be that the retailer is an institution possessing the most knowledge of what is rational behavior in the store (see e.g. Mavromatis and Burt, 2004). The sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2003) has argued that institutions guide our behavior and influence the way we feel on the basis of historical structures. From this perspective, consumers' actions in the present are not autonomously formed but calculated and pre-determined by the linearity of the past. Thereby, the contemporary is fixed as a historical fact, oriented in a certain direction, according to previously constructed plans. Following this line of reasoning, roles are regarded as shaped in social interaction according to predictable patterns. In order for the self to exist it requires a generalized other as a stable point of reference. When interacting with others we are exposed before a generalized other, which objectifies the intentions of our actions (Smith, 1999). This means that contracts of conformity between individuals do not need to be re-signed as conducts are adopted from patterns observed in other's actions. A debated question closely related to action is intention. In the 1970s the literature critic Roland Barthes (1977) sought to externalize intentions so as to remove them from the author. Barthes wrote:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture (Barthes, 1977: 146).

Due to discrepancies in the intentions of the writer and the reader of a text as well as the fact that texts are written and read within specific contexts, the original intention of a message becomes a troublesome matter. Here, the notion of intertextuality may help us to capture the interdependent nature of the text. Originally intertextuality was developed for the written word; however, using it as an analytical tool it can be applied to a variety of phenomenon. Intertextuality was introduced to the broader audience by Julia Kristeva according to whom reality should be thought of as intertextual in preference to intersubjective. This does not imply that texts mirror an objective reality; rather they are thought as constitutive of it (Moi/Kristeva, 1974/1986). Intertextuality then becomes the general space that makes these texts intelligible; a theory of endless referrals where each text is an absorption and transformation of another (ibid.).

The subsequent analysis is based on a series of hidden observations carried out at the Ikea store in the Swedish town Malmö. Observation was chosen as method because it enabled us to include ourselves and take active part in the phenomena under scrutiny; hence we could explore what was going on in the store environment from the inside. Mary-Jo Bitner (1992) states that direct observations of in-store behavior are appropriate in research concerning interactions between humans and the physical environment. The purpose of the observations was to capture how the Ikea store narrative is read through investigating the actions taken by customers in relation to it. We did thus not investigate individual subjective meanings attached to these actions. In line with the externalization of intentions in the form of texts we see texts as the material outcomes of actions, whose interpretations both require and provoke further actions. Text and action are therefore hard to separate and will here be used synonymously. When texts are arranged in a logical sequence of events to which intentions have been ascribed, they become a narrative (Czarniawska, 1998).

### ***Making Sense of the Store***

It is difficult to determine where the narrative structure of the Ikea store begins and where it ends. Does it even end? However, in this paper we will only deal with the store narrative in between the entrance, "Welcome to Ikea," and the exit "Thank you for shopping at Ikea." Our main concern here is not the story before and after these exclamation marks but how customers relate to its structure in the store. Indeed Ikea store environment is constructed to actively invite visitors to inhabit its narrative by sanctioning certain types of actions. Not at least is this evident in the large number of arrows, signs, and personnel that guide visitors in particular directions. Although Ikea is open for almost anyone to enter, it is a semi-public space with rules and norms that the visitor more or less unconsciously has to adjust his/her actions to. There is one main road to follow at Ikea, which runs from entrance to exit and is marked out by large black arrows on the floor. Deviations from this road may be troublesome for both visitor and retailer. Entering the store through the exit is inconvenient, as the customer has to pass through the narrow space between the cashiers where people are lining up to pay. At one occasion we were at the checkout when noticing that we had forgot one notebook on the second floor. Returning to the second floor from the cashiers proved troublesome as we had to re-read the narrative backwards, searching for the way upstairs while simultaneously walking in the opposite direction as the people coming against us.

In the attempt to promote a certain store narrative, Ikea lend building bricks from external sources located in disparate genres. Branded products like the mineral water Ramlösa, the

ecological baby food HIPP, and Whirlpool refrigerators are used supplementary in the showrooms, conceivably because they refer to values that Ikea wish to embrace. The Ikea store is thus made intelligible in relation to other texts existing outside it. Not only corporations tell stories about themselves. At the moment, it is popularly argued that we make sense of the many narratives encountered in everyday life through selecting desirable pieces of them, which we arrange into new narratives about us and others (Lash, 1999; Czarniawska, 1998). The experienced reality at the store is thus presented to us through narratives that latch on to other narratives that we use to interpret the surrounding world.

### *Appeal and Opposition*

Before entering the restaurant at Ikea, a sign asked us to place the shopping cart in a special designated section. Theoretically, the sign is a request, open for negotiation and controversies. We looked around for Ikea personnel that would enforce the request but there were no one to be seen. Or were there? In the distance we spotted the staff's yellow T-shirts, however they seemed busy with other customers and did not pay us any attention. So, we brought the shopping cart into the restaurant and pressed it through the narrow lanes amid the tables until we reached an empty seat. Obviously, this was not common practice at Ikea and we immediately sensed that we had done something wrong. But it was not Ikea that informed us about our misconduct but people that were eating in the restaurant. Some of them annoyingly told us that the cart should be placed outside the restaurant. Others turned their heads and irritatingly glanced at us. Hence, there is an inbuilt surveillance system in the store narrative, which to a large extent is preserved by customers. Michel Foucault (1979) has drawn attention to that the surveillance system of Bentham's panopticon exercises power through the self-disciplinary gaze, which the arrangement of the physical environment enables.

...it [the panopticon] automatizes and disindividualizes power. Power has its principle not so much in a person as in a certain concentrated distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanism produce the relation in which individuals are caught up (Foucault, 1979:202).

Even though there was no Ikea staff around to tell us how to behave in the restaurant we knew from the sign and the narrow space between the tables that carts were inappropriate. When we despite this awareness brought the shopping cart into the restaurant some of the other consumers took on the role as Ikea representatives and informed us how to act in the store as if we were unable to decode the meaning of the surroundings. Foucault's outline of how discipline is negotiated according to three criteria is here useful to illustrate how the narrative of the store attempts to incorporate us in its plot. At first, the parts involved in the negotiation try to obtain power at the lowest possible cost. In the case of the retailer it may involve making the consumers behave as effectively as possible in the store, through for instance clear pricing procedures, informative signs, credible uniformed employees, inspirational music, and so forth. The second criterion entails capitalizing on the effects of power by intensifying and extending them as far as possible. Translated to the retail context it could mean to constantly repeat how to act inside the store so as to institutionalize the desirable way of conduct. The final criterion regards the negotiators' attempt to link the growth of power with the outcome of the apparatus within which it is exercised (Foucault, 1979). For the retailer this could, for instance, involve becoming the market leader. Should customers start to follow our example and ignore Ikea's request of putting the shopping cart outside the restaurant, Ikea may answer by means of putting up a sign that forbids carts in the restaurant. In that case the dialogue between Ikea and the customer is dead and no compromise can be reached. It leaves the customer with the lone option of rebellion towards the narrative.

From Ikea's entrance we took the escalator to the second floor and got on the arrowed street. As we began to stroll down the path, couples holding each other's hands or pushing children in a stroller passed us. Along the road goods were displayed either individually or arranged in combinations in the showrooms. While we amenable followed the black arrows, we simultaneously met visitors going in opposite directions, zigzagging through the displays of products and the showrooms. Some walked back towards the entrance, others took shortcuts to other sections or got carried away by the vast amount of products put on show. Hence, new informal trails were made in contrast to the directions of the arrows. In the ceiling a sign informed us that it is possible to take Ikea sanctioned short cuts to the market hall, the cashiers and the restaurant. The short cuts give access to the market hall from the main entrance, so that the customers can go directly to the self-service area from the entrance without entering the showrooms on the second floor. Labeling an alternative road 'short cut' implies that it is an informal track and not intended as a replacement of the main road. These newly invented short cuts can be seen as Ikea's way of responding to the arbitrary zigzagging through the store by making this conduct part of the store narrative. In the market hall we observed a man traverse a physical barrier between the marketplace and the entrance. The toilets at Ikea are located by the entrance and are not accessible once one enters the marketplace downstairs. Even so, in the market hall a man successfully managed to reach them through squeezing himself through the fence that separates the hall from the entrance. From the information desk beside the toilets an Ikea employee watched the man but said nothing. The man ignored her as well as the signs, arrows and fences. By going against one of the principles of the surroundings the man violated the morals underlining the invisible contract of conformity that according to the institutionalist view should exist between him and Ikea. Through his actions he also invited Ikea to a negotiation about the locations of the toilets in the store.

Another sign informed us that the playroom was an area exclusively for children. Should we have missed the sign, we would still know from the actions performed there here that it was a place for children. In the playroom children played with colored balls or drew with crayons provided by Ikea. Children were visible in several ways in the store. The children's furniture section includes a special area where kids can test and play with Ikea's products. Within this area children took off their shoes and played together as if they were at home. Children also played by running in the opposite direction of the escalator or by hiding from their parents behind the furniture in the showrooms. Their interactions with the physical environment reminded us of the actions taken in an outdoor playground. Several parts of store resembled a genre mix of department store and out door playground. Sometimes the children cried and screamed loudly when they had to leave their playing areas. At several occasions they were then told by other visitors to calm down, be quiet and stop running in the opposite direction of the escalators. Again we noticed how children's play and even childish behavior occurring outside the playing area and thus not Ikea sanctioned, were self-regulated by the actions of the other visitors. This demonstrates how children and adults pull the store narrative in two different directions. The visitors who reprimanded the children acted as spokespersons for Ikea's rules, thus locating themselves in the same discursive position as Ikea. Scott Lash states that in the process of taking on a role, we elaborate with polarities, past dichotomies and include everything in the image of ourselves. As he writes in the introduction to *Critique of Information*:

The actors, the networks, the non-humans, the interface of humans and machines are disembedded. The information is disembedded. This is a society of the 'and', not a society of the 'there' (Lash, 2002:9)

Hence, the visitors and the staff can be seen as objects of information constituted in and through Ikea's store narrative, rather than as subjects shaped in social interactions with others (Foucault, 1979). Similar to conventional objects like a flowerpot or a wineglass, a narrative includes actions that the persons employing it are able to reflect around and, thus, assign meaning. In this sense the narratives that constitute the subject are objectified in the same intertextual realm as the conventional objects. Turned into objects ourselves it is possible to negotiate with other objects, such as those in the store environment.

The showrooms in the children's department were bordering the restaurant where lots of people were eating. The restaurant at Ikea is an open space resembling a self-service canteen with a high noise level and slightly chaotic appearance. Given the large amount of people environment includes different narratives, thus calling for different actions. During lunchtime one Wednesday, when we visited the store, the area was full of retired couples and business-like dressed men and women, perhaps working at Ikea or in the area nearby. These people may have preferred eating in a quieter environment without the noise of the children. Ikea seemed to meet this preference by allocating the children to a separate part of the restaurant where a playing area was set up including a slide and a miniature red stove. Older couples positioned themselves far away from the playing section, even though it was empty at the time for our visit. Children were arbitrarily seated around the room. This act can be seen as an input to the ongoing negotiation with Ikea about the organization of the restaurant space. Setting up the playing section in the restaurant may be taken as an invitation to settle a compromise of the allocation of people in the restaurant from Ikea's side. If no one wants to play there, the area will have to be removed. It thus seems hard for Ikea and the visitors to steer negotiations autonomously each other.

### *The Volatile Compromise*

Thus far we have sought to illustrate that the sense making of the store involves a compromise between retailer and visitors. By means of acting upon the store narrative in the present, visitors negotiate actions taken by Ikea in the past, which suggestively will lead to new corporate actions in the future. The moment we enter the Ikea store, the active negotiation between the store narrative and us begin. We read signs as well as actions performed by other visitors and staff in order to guide our own actions and feelings about the situation. Although we had visited the Ikea store many times before it was as if previous compromises on how to behave in the store needed to be re-settled. After all we are not familiar with the marks the actions of others have left on the narratives since our last visit. In this sense every visit is the first. Narratives mediate the negotiation between Ikea and store visitors. These negotiations do not occur in direct face-to-face interaction but in the way fragments of texts are organized into various narratives of the store or what we here would like to call *compromises*. Compromises come about when the store narrative is acted upon in ways that changes its linear direction (as in the case of the man reaching the toilets or the apology from Ikea) or when the narrative latch on to other narratives in unpredictable ways (as was seen in how the store narrative resembled an outdoor playground). Therefore, we regard the compromises that make up the image of the store as non-linear and disjointed. As previously pointed out, texts have intentions, however since the author seldom is present when the text is read s/he has little influence over its ultimate meanings. The compromise becomes the agreement about the subjective narratives, which allocate the reader and the text in discourses<sup>1</sup>. Dorothy Smith (1999) proposes that compromises are reconciled from multiple narratives that reveal the many-sided versions of the world from fragmented discursively constituted subject positions.

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1 We use a broad definition of discourse according to Foucault's understanding of discourse as an order of concepts and constituted objects that build its own system of relations which impose themselves on subjects. As a result discourse when articulated is constitutive of subjects.

While some visitors acted in contrast to the linearity of the narrative, others almost seemed to be spoken by it. These visitors' actions were modeled on the narrative of Ikea, rather than dependent on a generalized other. Visitors were observed acting on the behalf of the store narrative, correcting the behaviors of other visitors that may disturb the direction of the narrative or confront their version of it.

It has been argued that an increasing reflexivity in contemporary modern society has transformed the role of institutions from regulative to constitutive (Lash, 1999; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Reflexivity here refers to the awareness that complete control over the outcomes of our actions is impossible. As we left the store building we noticed a posted message on the exit door. The message contained an apology from Ikea for a chair that turned out to be harmful to children. Towards the end of the text Ikea assured that the chair had been removed from the product line. The message may be regarded as an unintended consequence caused by various externalities that Ikea did not take into consideration when the chair was designed and manufactured. These externalities did not only have consequences for the material chair but also for the narrative about it, ending with its own death. The message can be seen as an attempt to intervene in this narrative to prevent the chair from being remembered as a tragedy. Given that the intentions of our actions today may get unintentional consequences in the future there is not only one narrow route for the present to follow. Therefore, the directions that the meanings of a situation are expected to take becomes impossible to predict; at least in theory. As a result the interpretations of the categories that represent the empirical world are de-centred and given the opportunity to take place outside the historical classifications (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). In this case Ikea was not able to control the future of the chair after it got introduced in the market. Who was?

While the compromise of a negotiation occurring in face-to-face interaction involves regularized patterns of social interaction, or institutionalization, the compromise we think of here is constitutive and representational. Settled in non-linear negotiations, makes it harder to predict according to historical patterns. Hence, it has volatile features. In contrast to the constitutive compromise, the institutional compromise is founded in a role-centred rationality, which generates predictable patterns of actions depending on a mutually constructed history (Berger and Luckman, 1966). It could be argued that the retailer is able to not only expose customers to messages but also manoeuvre them to act in certain ways. On the other hand, visitors may not accept to be included in the store structure in ways that are inconsistent with the narratives that s/he feels are important. Therefore, the narratives of the other restrict the actions of both retailer and visitors.

## ***Conclusion***

This paper is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of store image formation as acted in the store. We have argued that the image of the store transpires from the compromises resulting from on-going negotiations between the store narratives promoted by Ikea and the narratives visitors bring with them to Ikea. The purpose of observing the in-store actions taken by the retailer and customers was to capture store image formation as in the making, rather than as a fixed entity. Reading a text involves acting upon it and vice versa. Therefore, it is likely that the store narrative is not fixed but re-written every time visitors encounter it. While the structure of Ikea's narrative is constructed in a linear fashion, with a clearly marked beginning and end, we suggested that the actions taken in relation to it, in between these fixed points, bring forward a series of compromises that allow the narrative to travel in several directions. This compromise is not stable but has volatile features, as it, in theory, is possible for every visitor to invite Ikea to a negotiation that will alter its shape.

When reality does not serve as the referent of the text, there is nothing outside the text against which our empirical findings can be evaluated. Consequently, the empirical reality is

also turned into an intertwined web of referring texts. Interwoven with other texts, the narrative of the store is subjected to many kinds of different interpretations. The loss of the correspondence between the reality and the text means a loss of an objective reality in which the retailer can ground the store image it seeks to promote. Therefore, image can be seen as constituted in and through textual compromises, which are continuously settled by the retailer and store visitors. Due to the discrepancies between the intentions involved in the negotiations, the compromises are volatile. The awareness of reflexivity holds that it is impossible to control the outcome of actions regardless of how careful a situation is interpreted. For example Ikea's chair was safe to use until it got known that it involved a risk. In this sense it is problematic to talk about the existence of a coherent store image. It is always possible that the compromises constituting the image will take unintended turns. The smallest signs in the store may bring about the largest consequences. Even if the observations from Ikea cannot verify that store image is not the outcome of a regulative institution, in our view, it would be more constructive to regard image as constituted by textual compromises. The compromises that guide the consumers through the store are outcomes of past negotiations, but only function as temporary instructions for the future. When the past does not determine in which direction the future will travel, the present becomes an undecided matter. For consumers this awareness may open up possibilities to push the store image in different directions so as to be able to speak it rather than being spoken by it. This involves an approach to image as acted rather than as a mental perception.

Even though we have only considered negotiations in the store, these negotiations most probably did not begin there. As we have sought to argue there is no fixed Ikea-way of acting inside the store, however, outside the store it may be fixated as a subjective memory, since the in-store compromises cannot be reached by the negotiations outside the store. The customer may, for instance, continue the negotiations around the kitchen table at home or gather information that can be used in the negotiations the next time the store is visited. This observation calls for further research concerning whether the compromises constituting store image are settled in other places stretching beyond Ikea.

Our reasoning about volatile compromises may seem overly optimistic, even naïve. Nevertheless, by revealing that the structure of the store is not a given one, nor closed to alternations, we wish to interrupt the linear view on power common to investigations of the relationship between corporation and customer in the management literature as well as in studies approaching the issue from a more critical theoretical perspective. In the management literature there is a tendency to treat consumers as manageable, while in more optimistic consumer research consumption has been portrayed as a creative process in which consumers, close to autonomously, assign commercial texts meanings. Located in between the retailer and the consumer the compromises of interwoven texts disturb this modernist dividing line by illuminating the interrelatedness of the dominator and dominated. With reference to the observations, the customers are not merely escorted around the store by Ikea. There are ways for customers to take active part in writing the store narrative, though these ways are not explicitly stated anywhere. The awareness of the possibility to re-write the store narrative may bring forward a more democratic store environment that benefit both retailers and visitors. We believe that retailers will benefit from giving up the idea of managing a unified store image and invite visitors in the realisation of it. Visitors may, for instance, leave traces or marks in the physical environment as material manifestations of their preferences or dislikes. In collecting these traces retailers will be able to keep the store updated in relation to other texts in the market.

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