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Retail spaces and consumer labour in a digital first economy: A comparative study of atmospherics and shopper behaviour in Lush, Disney and Primark

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Abstract

A substantial body of work has evidenced the effectiveness of experiential retail design, and yet only a small proportion acknowledges the role of shopper labour in the production of value. Furthermore, studies of retail design often focus on singular elements such as lighting, failing to acknowledge that the act of shopping is always a multisensory, holistic experience. This research addresses that gap, and contributes to discourse regarding the role of brick-and-mortar stores in the digital age. Observations were undertaken in three flagship retail locations on Oxford Street, London: Lush, Disney and Primark. Data was gathered on aspects of the spaces including layout, flow, lighting and scents, as well as shopper behaviour and attitudes towards the in-store experience. Utilising this combined data, this project argues that four types of consumer labour can be seen in contemporary retail spaces: physical, emotional, social and ideological. The findings suggest that retailers may be overlooking the importance of "real life" brand interaction in stores in favour of the perceived profitability of ecommerce. Additionally, it may be pertinent to consider the cultural implications of mass closures of brick-and-mortar stores, as spaces of entertainment, leisure and socialisation, as well as spaces which facilitate certain types of care work.

Keywords

immaterial labour, consumer labour, shopping, retail, experience economy, atmospherics, Disney, lush, Primark, high street

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Introduction

The growth of ecommerce has created a decline in “real life” retail spaces, with high street stores—and indeed, entire retailers—closing their doors at a rapid rate, a shift which has been further accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic (Lashgari and Shahab, 2022; Nanda et al., 2021; Shahab and Webb, 2024). Lush, Disney and Primark, along with thousands of other retailers, faced multiple national and regional lockdowns during the pandemic and, when allowed to open, were required to facilitate protocol such as social distancing, mask mandates and increased sanitization.

As the data from this project will make clear, these procedures will have significantly impacted retailers reliant on particular shopper behaviours in store, such as testing products in Lush or “cuddling” plushes in Disney. However, like most other big brands, Lush and Disney were able to shift focus to ecommerce sales. Primark, however, had no ecommerce capabilities, and chose not to take steps towards providing them (Primark began trialing click-and-collect services shortly after this research was undertaken). It is very interesting to note that after this research project concluded, Primark announced £100 million of investments into expansions and refurbishments of its UK stores, including the Oxford Street flagship, suggesting the brand is still staking its future on a brick-and-mortar first business model (Primark Corporate News, 2024).

Fieldwork, surveys and interviews for this research took place in Spring 2022, when most aspects of the retail experience in these stores would be considered “back to normal.” While trends suggest that shoppers have not returned to brick-and-mortar outlets in their pre-lockdown numbers (Shahab and Webb, 2024) this research observed that plenty of shoppers still desired, and in some cases, required, a “real life” shopping experience. This research echoes those asking for a critical examination of the approach that may consider retail spaces to be “dead weight” in the digital age (Kozinets et al., 2004, see also Lashgari and Shahab, 2022; Nanda et al., 2021).

This project also aims to highlight the need to view shopper engagement and interactivity in retail spaces as labour. The ethos of this project draws heavily on the work of Maurizio Lazzarato, who notes that contemporary capitalism has become reliant on the unpaid work of consumers as a means of producing value (Lazzarato, 1996, see also Arvidsson, 2011). While contemporary economics and brand management clearly recognises the contribution of consumer labour to economic value, it paradoxically does not recognise the labour itself as being worthy of monetary compensation.

This research addresses the following research questions:

- How do contemporary retail spaces encourage and facilitate shopper labour?
- What kinds of interactive and experiential design elements do shoppers engage with?
- How might this labour contribute to the production of long-term brand value?
- How is digital activity linked to the in-store experience?

Theoretical perspectives on experience-based retail

Philip Kotler defines atmospherics as “the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability” (Kotler, 1974: 50). Kotler clearly identifies the role of consumer labour here, noting it as the *primary goal* of this field of retail design.

In their influential text, *The Experience Economy,* Pine and Gilmore agree with Kotler’s theory that “the greatest opportunity for value creation resides in the staging experience” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999, see also Puccinelli et al., 2009). From an immaterial labour perspective, perhaps we could argue that it is actually reliant on consumers’ willingness to engage with that staging experience.

Experiences are considered unique by Pine and Gilmore because they are “created within each customer,” although they stop short of recognising this “creation” as labour (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 17). They argue consumers are willing to pay more for “happiness-generating experiences” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 19).

Sensory cues are central to both atmospherics and experience-based retail spaces, and significant research has evidenced that particular sensory cues can motivate specific consumer behaviours, alter moods and evoke memories and emotions (Herrmann et al., 2013; Moore, 2014; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Shahid et al., 2022; Spence et al., 2014).

In recent years, many theorists have argued that these types of experience-based retail spaces must be prominent in any strategy aiming to prevent the decline or collapse of high streets and city centres as a result of shifts towards ecommerce (Lashgari and Shahab, 2022; Nanda et al., 2021).

Methodology

This research implements an interpretivist approach combined with qualitative data practices to capture the holistic shopper experience and nuances of shopper behaviour and attitudes. This research was ideally suited to participatory observation, particularly in spaces such as Lush and Disney where immersion and interaction are fundamental to the design. Given this study’s intention to record the multisensory experience of high street shopping, the encounters and inference of the researcher were essential to the data. It should be noted therefore, that the data presented in this paper is subject to my own personal interpretations, understandings and associations with particular sensory stimuli and references mapped out in these retail spaces.

Observations were recorded during three extensive visits each to Lush, Disney and Primark on Oxford Street, London, during Spring 2022. These visits took place midweek and during typical working hours. While perhaps limiting the demographics of shopper seen during visits, these quieter periods allowed for more detailed observations due to lower crowds, as well as the opportunity for more interactions with workers. Rigorous data collection included mapping the spaces, detailed fieldnotes on visual, olfactory, auditory and tactile encounters and transcribed interactions with shoppers and workers.

These particular three stores were chosen due to their varying approaches to ecommerce, social media marketing and brick-and-mortar retail spaces. Furthermore, all three of these stores were originally designed as the flagship, although both Lush and Primark have since opened larger stores in Liverpool and Birmingham respectively, while Disney have closed every other regional store in England other than their London flagship. It is interesting to note that both the new Lush and Primark flagships dedicate significantly more space to experiential offerings such as spas, cafes and hair salons, an indication of their significant contribution to the production of brand value. Disney, of course, still feature very profitable brick-and-mortar stores within their ultra-interactive theme park spaces around the world.

Conversation in store with shoppers and workers were unscripted, with the interactions themselves often providing as much important data as the transcript. For example, in Primark, not a single shopper or worker made eye contact with me let alone engaged in conversation, a stark contrast to visits to Lush and Disney which facilitated several in-depth conversations with both workers and shoppers.

In addition to participatory observation in the stores, shopper attitudes were collected via survey questions and follow-up interviews during June 2022. Participants, all women aged 25–54, were asked via social media platform Instagram to choose three words to describe recent in-store shopping experiences in Primark, Lush and Disney. This data was then collated and categorised to identify the most common descriptors of each store.

The survey received 83 responses about Primark, 82 about Lush and 57 about Disney. Of these survey participants, 52 individuals also agreed to a short follow up interview conducted via email, and were asked about the motivation for their *most recent* visit to a Lush, Disney and/or Primark store, and what they purchased (if anything). Participants were also asked about their last visit and/or purchase on the Lush, Disney and/or Primark websites.

Particularly when considering the notion of shopping as a form of care work, it was decided that conducting surveys via social media would allow participants to contribute more willingly, in their own (limited) free time. The nature of this method means that by only receiving responses from voluntary participants, it is possible I only heard from those with the strongest opinions, either positive or negative. Those with neutral or mixed feelings about their in store experience—or indeed, those that had not stepped foot in these stores or others since before the pandemic—were not gathered.

Results

Data combined from in-store observations, surveys and interviews from this study has been summarised in this section, under the subheadings Store Atmospherics, Shopper Behaviour, Shopper Attitudes and Digital Activity. Further data has been made available to accompany this article (Supplementary material).

Store atmospherics

Primark takes up an entire block on Oxford Street and opens up into a cavernous, two storey entrance area. Goods, mostly clothing, are displayed floor to ceiling and grouped clearly into sections such as womenswear, children's and homewares. There is no music and throughout the store you can hear a lot of talking, in multiple languages, with many people on their phones. During all observations, crying babies and young children can be heard almost the entire time. Coat hangers scrape and click as shoppers browse the racks. Escalators in the centre of the store hum noisily and occasionally screech. The faux-tiled floor is scratched and scuffed, and while goods are clearly designed to be organised by item and by size, they are often out of place, on the floor or put back haphazardly. The store is noticeably warm, particularly upstairs.

The homewares section, the furthest section from the entrance on the second floor, is quieter, calmer and less bright. Scented candles, cushions, towels and other soft furnishings line the walls in every direction. Reed diffusers are unpackaged on an eye level shelf, but they don't emit a strong scent, and there are circular stains on the shelf where candles have been moved. This was the only "sample" experience observed in the store.

I had no interaction with any staff at all during any observations in Primark, who were often pushing large racks of stock around the store, wearing dark coloured, branded polo shirts. One shopper asked a worker where she could find a basket, and on another occasion a staff member unpacking stock shouted at a shopper to tell them not to eat their sweets in store. These were the only two interactions with staff I observed other than checkout transactions.

Disney's last remaining store in England is set across three storeys. Glass entrance doors are decorated with a stream of small white stars, giving the impression you are walking through "magic." The store is noticeably cool from air conditioning, and music from Disney movies is playing loudly throughout the store. Children and adults were observed dancing and singing along.

Goods are organised into distinct zones; the ground floor features largely products aimed at an adult audience, with immaculately displayed homewares on one side. There are rarely gaps or goods out of place. On one occasion, before I can even finish making a note about a display of plushes being sparse and crooked, a staff member has swept in and tidied them up. Large, inspirational quotes from Disney films are printed on the walls, and child-size statues of popular characters can be found on all floors.

The focal point of the store is a castle-themed staircase, complete with turrets and moving clock. As you descend the stairs you enter into an immersive Frozen-themed area, where blue acrylic mobiles create a pattern of diamond-shaped lights on the ground, followed by a Disney Princess area with sparkling multicoloured costumes, and another zone of Marvel, Star Wars and Cars goods.

The top floor is a smaller, windowless room, heavily-themed as a traditional comic book store. As the lift doors open you are hit simultaneously by blasting air conditioning, loud, rousing music from Star Wars and an incredibly bright wall of oversized comic book art. Character statues up here are larger, and workers (all men during all observations) wear plain grey t-shirts and trousers, and noticeably are much more unkempt than the more obviously "Disney" staff downstairs.

Most workers in the main areas of the store are women, approximately aged 34–65, wearing blue and white check shirts tucked into beige chino trousers. I was greeted warmly by several workers on each visit, and observed many longer interactions between workers and shoppers, full of laughter and discussion about merchandise and Disney films and characters. Throughout most of the observations, a single staff member was stationed at the front door, greeting each shopper personally, occasionally seen dancing to the music while holding plush Disney toys.

At Lush, the sweet, soapy scent hits you from several shops away as you approach. Set over three storeys, you enter the store into an enormous, high-ceilinged room with an industrial black staircase in the centre. Throughout the store, separate zones give you the impression you are walking through a market, from an actual florist to a large tiled counter displaying fresh face masks over ice, garnished with lemon slices, chocolate and flowers. A variety of textures—worn herringbone flooring, exposed brick, black ironmongery—give an industrial feel, and contribute to the perception that this is an amalgamation of retailers as opposed to one singular brand. Large quotes are printed on some walls, such as “freshness is not just important, it defines us.”

On one observation, as soon as I entered the store I was invited to put my hands in a large copper sink, which swirled with peach and pale pink, warm, bubbly water and floating rose petals. Unpackaged bath bombs shaped and scented like lemons, peaches and raspberries were displayed in crates and on tiered stands nearby.

Some goods are displayed in recyclable tubs and stacked, others remain unpackaged, piled on to wooden chopping boards and placed haphazardly inside glass jars. There are branded paper bags at every station for shoppers to pick their items and package themselves. Amongst the products are glass jars displaying key ingredients such as coffee beans, peppercorns, sea salt and oil. All ingredients displayed are recognisable and mostly edible, adding to the market atmosphere.

The first floor houses a small café featuring mismatched dark wood tables and copious potted plants, with a strong scent of coffee from the retro-looking but very obviously new coffee machine. Opposite the café, a bright area stacked floor-to-ceiling with bath bombs features sushi-restaurant style tables with moving conveyer belts full of samples. The basement is designed to look like a record store, with weathered music posters stuck on the counter and real records for sale.

Secondary to the strong scent, the most prominent aspect of the atmospherics of Lush is worker interaction. Workers appeared to be stationed in each zone of the store, and almost every one initiated conversation with me when I entered their designated area. This was the only store where workers discovered I was visiting as part of a research project due to their frequent interaction, but were still happy to continue conversation and offer me samples of their “favourite” products even once they were aware I was not intending to make a transaction. All workers wore black clothing and black aprons, and were notably diverse in ethnicity, body shape and in gender representation.

Shopper behaviour

In both interviews and during observations in store, two types of Primark shopper emerged, categorised as the “Haul Shopper” and the “Immediate Need Shopper.” Haul Shoppers were those who made a planned visit to the store with the intention of purchasing a large quantity of items, often “stocking up” on goods for the entire family.

Immediate Need Shoppers only visited Primark due to a time-sensitive need for a specific item, or items.

In observations, Haul Shoppers were usually women, often shopping in pairs, and appeared to be either friends or familial relations, e.g., mother and grandmother. Haul Shoppers took a large basket each at the store entrance and visited most areas of the two-storey store over a significant period of time. They thoroughly combed over required sections, looking through racks for correct sizes, unfolding clothes or taking them off hangers to examine length and other details, and frequently touched fabrics throughout the store.

Queues at open checkouts were consistently ten to twenty shoppers long despite banks of at least six checkouts (although only two were open on average at a time). A majority of shoppers in the queue were Haul Shoppers with overflowing baskets, which were usually placed on the floor due to their heaviness. During observations, only one to two shoppers in queues carried single or few items. These observations were consistent with data from survey respondents, who stated they visited the store to stock up on "basics" and "essentials." Goods purchased were considered necessities and referred to as not "exciting."

While almost all interview participants stated that they had visited for specific items ("on the hunt for"), Immediate Need Shoppers were categorised as those seeking out a specific item or few items that were often seasonal, short term, or single use, such as a hen party outfit or children's clothing "[that] they can get dirty in." Two respondents visited for an item required that day: a beach coverup and a rain jacket (lost that same day).

Many Immediate Need Shoppers noted they purchased further goods once in store ("got sucked into"). In fact, if Immediate Need Shoppers did not pick up additional spontaneous goods, they were likely to abandon their purchase, as consistently it was considered not worth waiting in a long queue for a single item ("couldn't be bothered"). This was also observed in store, with single items frequently abandoned throughout every section of the store, and very few customers queuing with less than a full basket of goods.

In both observations and survey responses, most shoppers in the Disney store were either families with young children or childfree adults from their late teens to forties and fifties. However, there was very little difference in the way these shoppers behaved in store.

Most survey and interview participants stated that they visited the store to browse or "window shop" for gifts, usually Christmas gifts and usually for children. Some noted that they did not buy in store but purchased at a later date, which is consistent with observations which found that very few visits to the Disney store result in a transaction. All respondents who said they *did* purchase in store during their visit described their purchase as a gift.

This is consistent with observations which noted that while almost all shoppers were generally very engaged with the goods and frequently looked at the prices of items, they very rarely purchased. If purchases were made, it was usually a single item for each child present, often a small plush toy or a sale item. During all observations, only one shopper was seen with a basket while browsing (this shopper was later seen leaving the store without making a purchase) suggesting very low levels of purchase intention.

However, every shopper observed on all visits picked up at least one item, usually touching several items as they browsed. Adults and children took photos around the store, sang along to music and exclaimed, gasped and pointed at goods, sparking conversation about related movies and TV shows. Circular displays of plush Disney characters are placed in the immediate entrance of the store, and many shoppers picked up, stroked and cuddled the toys as soon as they entered.

Observations in Lush saw extensive engagement from shoppers due to the highly interactive store design, most commonly engaging with fragrances. Almost all shoppers were observed picking products up to inhale their scent, and shoppers with friends or family members would usually share, swap or recommend items to each other. Scent appeared to be one of the primary factors in choosing goods to purchase, and this was often a collaborative decision between shoppers.

A majority of shoppers observed in Lush did make a purchase, usually a single item, which was most often a bath bomb. Shoppers were likely to spend a significant period of time sampling products throughout the store, particularly the ground and first floor, before choosing which product to purchase.

Shoppers in Lush were usually women in their late teens or twenties, either by themselves or in pairs. While many interview respondents mentioned visiting the store with their children, there were very few parent-child visits observed, which may be explained by the midweek observations.

As mentioned, shopper and worker interaction was noted as a prominent aspect of the in-store experience, with many shoppers observed chatting, taking advice and receiving samples from workers. One respondent described receiving a "mini hand massage" from a worker while sampling products.

Shopper attitude

For Primark, "messy, cluttered or disorganised" were the most common words used to describe the in-store experience. Words synonymous with "busy, chaotic or crowded" also featured very regularly. While "cheap or affordable" were also common descriptors, it is notable that "cheap" could have positive or negative connotations depending on the shopper's point of view, financial circumstances, etc. The concept of sensory overwhelm or discomfort featured very prominently amongst respondents, with words such as "overstimulating," "bright" and "hot."

Some respondents stated negative words associated with supply chain exploitation or fast fashion, which is consistent with interviews where two respondents noted they did not shop in Primark for ethical reasons, another saying they "resisted" additional purchases while visiting the store.

With few exceptions, Primark descriptors were overwhelmingly negative. Nevertheless, for most shoppers this negative perception of the in-store experience did not seem to prevent them from using the store when they felt it was required.

For Lush, descriptors relating to "smell, scent or fragrance" were the most frequent words by a significant margin, and some respondents that used words such as "overwhelming or overstimulating" specifically noted this was with regard to the strong scent.

Very interestingly, one respondent used the word "tasty," perhaps recalling olfactory stimulation.

The second most popular responses were words synonymous with "attractive, colourful or bright," and this was consistently observed throughout the store, from the very brightly coloured and elaborately displayed goods to the use of backlighting and large windows. Several respondents used words describing positive emotions such as "happy," "fun" and "cheerful," and certainly in observations it appeared that the atmospherics were strongly intended to activate these emotions in shoppers, with a bombardment of sweet smells, upbeat music, smiling staff, bright colours and humorous pop culture references.

Several respondents used words such as "calm, clean or tidy" and only one respondent used the word "busy." This is consistent with my perception during observations where it seemed that there were relatively few shoppers within the vast, three storey space, although it is worth repeating that observations took place midweek during working hours. Checkouts on all three floors were open at all times, despite the fact that was often no one waiting to be served, and queues were rare. No goods were observed out of place and despite the fact that most goods were unpackaged and often stacked on top of one another, there was no "mess" other than some colourful dust on shelving. Only sample products were handled and generally other goods were not touched by shoppers unless they were picked up to be purchased.

Twelve respondents described the "friendliness" or "helpfulness" of staff, and this was reflected in the more detailed interviews as well. Workers were described as "attentive," "friendly" and "lovely." Lush was the only store were workers were mentioned in interviews at all, and clearly they play a significant role in shoppers' perception of the in-store experience. While most respondents were positive about the interactions, several respondents used words such as "pushy" and two respondents noted that during their last visit to a store they did not purchase because they were "bothered" by staff, and had wanted to "browse in peace."

Five respondents noted their impression of the in-store experience related to ethical shopping practices, such as "environmentally friendly," and this message was prominently displayed in every area of the store.

For Disney, words synonymous with "expensive" were the most frequent response by a significant margin. One respondent in interviews noted while she liked to browse in store, she did not usually buy because she felt she could get comparable products cheaper elsewhere ("usually Amazon"). Another stated they had visited Disney to look for gifts for a "Disney mad sister" but ended up purchasing Disney-branded goods in Primark for a much lower price. This is consistent with observations where, as discussed, shoppers rarely purchased goods.

The second most frequent response was words associated with "beautiful, bright or colourful," which may be a result of the extensive theming observed in store. While goods were certainly meticulously displayed and kept tidy, items for sale were not visibly more colourful or "bright" than any other store observed. Two of the three storeys are windowless, lighting throughout the store was not excessively bright, the ceilings are often painted black with a majority of the walls painted dark green.

Many of the survey responses for Disney were words describing positive emotions or feelings, such as "fun," "exciting," "nostalgic," "happy," "cheerful," "joyful" and "magical," and this was certainly observed in shopper behaviour in store, in both adults and children. Data from both observations and survey respondents suggests that the intention in visiting a Disney store is not to make a purchase but to experience feelings of happiness and "magic."

Digital activity

In terms of links to digital activity, Primark was the only store of the three observed to prominently advertise free Wi-Fi. There were no mentions of the Primark website or social media channels observed anywhere in store, and no photo opportunities. Only three respondents mentioned visiting the Primark website, two referring to it as "pointless."

Some links to digital work were observed in the Disney store. On one occasion, a large poster in the window advertising Disney on Stage theatre productions displayed a huge QR code, and there was one sign advertising Shop Disney website, but this was not widespread throughout the store. However, while the store design itself seemingly did little to actively promote users' digital labour, during all observations at least one shopper was seen taking photographs of either goods on display or members of their party next to statues or in other "Instagrammable" locations.

The Disney website was not used frequently by survey respondents. One stated if they were looking for a specific product they would buy from the Disney website rather than the "hassle" of travelling to the nearest store, and two others mentioned browsing the website but not purchasing due to high prices.

Very few respondents mentioned visiting the Lush website. Two respondents stated they had filled online baskets but not completed their transaction, one due to the £7 postage cost and the other adding that she was "old school" and preferred to feel or smell things in person.

Despite Lush famously closing their social media accounts, almost every aspect of the store is a photo opportunity, with colourful and attractive displays clearly designed to be snapped and shared. Lush overall encouraged more digital activity than Disney or Primark, with small, tablet sized screens dotted throughout the store with rolling tutorials for products as well as encouraging shoppers to download the brand's app. There was also a digital station where shoppers could customise their own sleep spray and label, although this was out of service during all observations.

Findings

Primark's in-store experience was notably very different compared to Disney and Lush in terms of atmospherics. Where Disney and Lush spaces featured constant sensory stimulation designed to evoke positive moods, Primark was arguably a less comfortable and pleasant experience. This difference was reflected in Shopper Attitudes, where shoppers used many negatively-associated words such as "chaos" and "hot." However, this negative perception did not seem to deter shoppers from using Primark when deemed necessary.

While 'cheap or affordable' featured regularly when describing the Primark experience—it is notable that "cheap" could be classed as a negative or positive descriptor depending on the individual shopper. This is also applicable to responses that described Primark as a "jumble sale" and "car boot sale;" shoppers may have intended this comment to be derogatory and a comparison to something they typically avoid, or it may refer to the leisure pursuit of bargain-hunting.

In terms of Shopper Behaviour, data from Primark was once again notably different to the other retailers. In Lush and Disney, the primary motivator of visiting the store was often the experience of visiting itself. However, in Primark the clear goal was the acquisition of goods, made explicit both in observations and surveys and interviews. This meant that shoppers were more likely to accept a less-than-enjoyable in-store experience, such as long queues, in order to complete their task.

Perhaps most importantly on Shopper Behaviour, there was consistent observation across all three stores of almost every shopper gathering haptic information about goods. In Primark, shoppers touched fabrics, tried on clothing items unfolded items to examine sizing and design. In Disney, toys were cuddled and handled, and clothing and accessories were tried on using shop floor mirrors. In Lush, almost every shopper picked up items to test their scent, and many tried free samples of hand creams and other goods.

It is notable that all three stores were described as overwhelming to some degree, despite their very different atmospheric and sensory qualities. It is possible that for these shoppers, ecommerce offers a much more preferable experience than brick-and-mortar stores, particularly following the global lockdown where it became more common to shop online and avoid large crowds.

Across all three stores, there was much less encouragement of Digital Activity than expected. None of the retail spaces consistently advertised their websites or social media presence. While none of the stores explicitly encouraged shoppers to share photographs online, the "Instagrammable" photo opportunities in Lush and Disney ensured many customers were taking photographs, and the location tags of both these stores on social media platforms show they are often shared online.

Types of immaterial labour observed in brick-and-mortar retail spaces

Physical. When considering the physical labour of shoppers in contemporary retail spaces, it is important to remember that we are looking at the context of a digital first economy. Observed shopper behaviour such as picking and packing their own goods in Lush or carrying heavy baskets in Primark is easily overlooked as "normal" or inevitable shopper behaviour. However, we must now recognise that this labour is *not* performed by shoppers in ecommerce transactions. When purchasing bath bombs from the Lush website, a paid Lush employee selects the goods and packages them for shipping. In store, a customer selects their items and places them in a paper bag or cardboard tray. Thus, this is the very definition of unpaid consumer labour.

Perhaps the primary way that shoppers in all three stores carried out physical labour was via the sampling of products. Sampling and experiencing the goods, and collecting haptic information about products, is one of the key benefits of the in-store experience (Løkke-Andersen et al., 2021), a factor that ecommerce currently struggles to compete with. When surveyed, several shoppers mentioned filling up a basket on the Lush website and then failing to complete the transaction, but in store it was rare to see shoppers leave Lush empty-handed once they had begun the process of sampling. Physical labour of shoppers was particularly prominent in the market-like experience of Lush. Presumably goods are transported to the store in some kind of packaging from the site of production. Therefore, it may be reasonable to assume that goods are unpacked by workers in order to be repackaged by shoppers, as part of the ideologically-motivated market-like experience.

Social. In all three stores shoppers were observed participating in familial or friendship bonding during their visit, and this was reiterated in interviews. Very few shoppers were observed shopping alone, likely a very stark comparison to ecommerce transactions.

This data also strongly echoes the research of Daniel Miller, who argues that certain types of shopping must be considered an act of care work, often forming part of the unpaid domestic labour of mothers (Miller, 1998). In Primark, observations and interviews showed shoppers who were motivated to visit the store to "stock up" on what they considered to be "essential" clothing and other goods for their family. Shoppers invested a great deal of time and energy into these visits, and were frequently observed visibly exhausted by their experience, often seen rehydrating while resting on benches outside, but were also visibly pleased with their haul of goods.

Furthermore, due to the low prices, shoppers in Primark also seemed more willing to impulse purchase compared to the other stores, and so were able to provide their loved ones with what Miller refers to as "treats" (Miller, 1998). There were many examples of store layout in Primark that were clearly designed to encourage this, for example immediately next to the queuing area by the childrenswear there was a display of summer toys such as paddling pools, sprinklers and bubble machines "from £1.50." While studies of retail design and shopper behaviour often solely focus on the benefits and drawbacks for brands, this data suggests it may be pertinent to consider whether shopping that may be categorised as unpaid domestic care work becomes easier and more convenient in a digital-first economy, or more difficult.

Visits to Lush and Disney were not considered "essential" by shoppers in the same way as Primark, and yet the data still shows certain aspects of care work and nurturing. In Disney, for many shoppers the visit to the store itself appeared to be a "treat" and bonding experience, and although purchases in store were rare, they were usually related to a beloved character and evidently deeply cherished by the receiver.

In Lush, an overwhelming number of respondents mentioned that their most recent purchases from the brand had been a gift. Given the ideological messaging from Lush that consumption of their products is a form of self-care, we can see that this gift is actually one laden with nurturing tendencies.

Shoppers also engaged in varying degrees of social labour with retail workers. In Lush, almost every worker initiated conversation, attempting to glean information about product requirements and volunteer information about their own "favourite" products. In Disney, workers danced in the doorway, spoke several languages and went to great lengths to help shoppers find products they were looking for.

In addition to these individual interactions, shoppers were expected to engage in wider social bonding, such as with the brand fandom or with their peers. For example, in Lush shoppers decode the names of goods referencing pop culture and slang, strengthening their sense of belonging.

Emotional. Perhaps the most noticeable way that the retail stores were designed to facilitate and encourage the emotional labour of shoppers was with sensory cues. As mentioned previously, olfactory stimulation can be one of the most powerful motivators for consumption in retail environments, and Lush used this extensively to engage shoppers (Krishna, 2012; Moore, 2014). Lush also appeared to facilitate shopper's sensory *perception*, with many products named after or displayed alongside edible goods, to evoke shopper's sense of taste (Krishna, 2012).

In Disney, loud music was also used to facilitate a fun and happy atmosphere. Inspirational quotes were printed on the walls and shoppers were actively encouraged to "cuddle" soft plush toys resembling their favourite characters. Furthermore, many atmospheric cues seemed to be intended to trigger nostalgia and a sense of child-like wonder, through fantasy theming and merchandise referencing nostalgic Disney texts from previous decades.

In short, Disney and Lush store designs were clearly designed to facilitate a positive mood within the shopper, which, while may not have consistently resulted in transactions, inarguably creates new or reinforces existing positive feelings towards the brand.

Ideological. My data suggests one of the key forms of consumer immaterial labour facilitated by brick-and-mortar retail locations is ideological. This echoes the work of Borghini et al. (2009) which argues that flagship stores significantly contribute to brand attachment, brand loyalty and brand value by creating a tangible space in which to experience, and buy into, brand ideology.

In Lush, shoppers are first sold an ideology about ethical consumption, then the products that fulfil that brief. The slogan "fighting animal testing" is everywhere throughout the store, on every paper bag and even available as wearable merchandise such as t-shirts. Like a football kit or a band t-shirt, sporting this merchandise pledges allegiance to the brand, and ideology, of Lush.

From the moment that you step in to the Lush store, shoppers are bombarded with messages of environmentalism. The floristry area in the entrance boasts that its goods are native British flowers as opposed to imported, and a container recycling scheme is well-publicised throughout the store. Shoppers in Lush are also invited to participate in a show of LGBTQ+ pride and solidarity, with notably gender-non-conforming workers and, at the time of observations, a deeply personal graffiti display in the shop window for London Pride.

Perhaps most importantly for the brand, Lush also encourages the notion of "self-care" as an act of radical self-empowerment. This aspect of the brand ideology must appear to reject the demands of traditional beauty standards, while at the same time promoting the benefits of investing time and money into makeup, cosmetics and beauty products.

In Primark, the ideological reflections are more subtle and infrequent, but broad cultural messages come through about, for example, the need for young women to be thin, attractive and well-dressed. Ideas about gender representation are also present in the childrenswear sections, with zones full of pastel, frilly clothing emblazoned with messages about positivity, and others of dark, loose-fitting items featuring superheroes and predatorial animals. Of course, as discussed there are also examples of this store being designed to trigger feelings of domestic responsibility, nurturing and care work, particularly within the children's sections, which was almost exclusively frequented by women.

Brick-and-mortar stores and brand value

One of the primary research questions for this project was to explore how the kinds of consumer labour observed in store might contribute to long-term brand value. This is of particular importance as many brands deprioritise their brick-and-mortar spaces to focus primarily or solely on ecommerce.

As discussed, a great deal of research already exists which argues that particular atmospherics can trigger transactions in store and grow profits. Aspects such as signage, fragrances, music and worker interaction can all be used by a retailer to artificially create or exaggerate needs and desires within the shopper that perhaps did not exist when they entered the store. This is simply not possible with the search-driven, goal-orientated functionality of ecommerce. My data also supports the theory that atmospherics create positive mood in shoppers, resulting in positive associations and memories with the retailer. As supported by studies such as Borghini et al., visits to brick-and-mortar stores, even those that do not result in transactions, can be incredibly valuable to the longevity of a retailer. Shoppers are able to develop a relationship with a brand that is inextricably linked to their personal ideology and identity, which may influence their consumption habits for a lifetime, maybe even for generations in the case of brands like Disney.

Both Pine and Gilmore and Philip Kotler identify interactive, multisensory retail design as the most important way to differentiate goods in a saturated market, and the significance of this point in the digital age cannot be overstated (Kotler, 1974; Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Neither Lush nor Disney would be considered luxury retailers, and yet their goods are priced higher than most other retailers of similar products on the high street due to their strong brand ideology and elevated shopper experience. It is currently impossible for brands to differentiate their shopper experience in the same way with ecommerce (although it is possible this could change with technology such as VR or the metaverse). Arguably, the process of shopping online is relatively one-dimensional, certainly not multisensory, and generally would be difficult for shoppers to differentiate much between shopping with one brand or another. This means that shoppers are much more likely to revert back to price being the sole factor when deciding between similar products.

Conclusion

I argue that the data shows four distinct types of labour performed by shoppers that contribute to the production of brand value. Firstly, shoppers participated in physical labour, which included picking and packing their own products in Lush. The stores were also found to facilitate emotional labour, using sensory cues such as music, fragrance and touch to influence mood. Thirdly, shoppers engaged in social labour, which was seen in both interactions with peers, family members and workers, and on a wider scale engaging with aspects of brand fandom and popular culture. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, shoppers engaged in ideological labour, interacting with aspects of store design that reflected their own values, beliefs and personal identity, such as Lush's moral stance on animal welfare.

The research aims of this project also intended to explore how this unpaid shopper labour contributes to long-term brand value. My data supports theories that argue shoppers engaging with atmospherics and interactive retail design influences transactions as well as shopper mood, creating positive associations with the brand that can last a lifetime. Additionally, multisensory, interactive retail experience allows retailers to differentiate their goods from similar goods on the market, something that is significantly more difficult to do with ecommerce.

The final research question of this project aimed to uncover how digital activity was linked to the in-person shopping experience, anticipating a certain level of fluidity between online and offline shopper activity. However, observations discovered a very inconsistent and fractured relationship between retailer's brick-and-mortar store experience and their use of ecommerce and social media. As mentioned, all three brands featured here use a different combination of brick-and-mortar stores, social media and ecommerce, and yet this was not reflected in any particular difference with the in-store experience. With the exception of Lush, digital culture was barely acknowledged in the store design or layout, and in fact across all observations shoppers were so immersed in the task at hand - finding desired goods or experiencing the space—that encouraging smartphone use may have indeed been detrimental to the experience. It is clear that still, brick-and-mortar stores and ecommerce are catering for very different needs and often, entirely separate customers.

Implications

From an industry perspective, I believe this data offers important insight for retailers. Consistent with decades of retail design research, my data clearly shows that atmospherics such as upbeat music, pleasant fragrances, positive interactions with workers and clean, uncluttered spaces have a positive impact on shopper mood, creating equally positive associations with the brand. Shoppers spent significant, extended periods of time in each store, looking at, touching, smelling and discussing goods they likely would not have even come across during a search-based, goal-orientated ecommerce transaction. While many ecommerce websites attempt to replicate techniques such as "spontaneous" checkout purchases, shoppers in that environment have not been subjected to the same conditions in store that make them susceptible to it. This research argues that the economic, cultural and social value of brick-and-mortar retail spaces, and the shopper behaviours facilitated by them, are being underestimated in the pursuit of a digital-first economy.

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