Exploring the Everyday Branded Retail Experience- the Consumer Quest For ‘Homeyness’ in Branded Grocery Stores

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ABSTRACT
This paper extends consumer culture theories of branded retail environments by analyzing the consumer experiences of the everyday site of the branded grocery store. The analysis suggests that McCracken’s (1989) ‘homeyness’ framework succeeds to understand the orientations inflected in the everyday branded retail experience, as opposed to the ‘mythotypic’ (see Kozinets 2002) that explicates the power of the more spectacular. The implications for theoretical transferability in consumer research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION
During the last decade the marketing management literature has paid a lot of attention to the growing impact of branded retail experiences on consumers, and especially to relationships in-between retailers’ corporate, store and product brands (Ailawadi & Keller 2004; Burt & Carralero-Encinas 2002; Burt & Sparks 2000; Kotler 1973; Kumar & Kurande 2000; Kankurra & Kang 2007; Pine & Gilmore 1999; McGoldrick 2002; Moore, Fernie and Burt 2000 etc.). The majority of this literature focuses on branded grocery retailers, and quantitatively investigates specific factors that influence the preference of national or retailers’ own brands (such as between store aesthetics and the evaluation of private brands (Richardson, Jain and Dick 1996), between quality and feature differentiation from the national brand (Choi, Chan, and Coughlan 2006), or the impact of retailer store image on private brand perception (Collins-Dodd and Lindley 2003)). These measuring exercises result in useful advice to retail managers regarding how to manage very specific components of the consumers’ retail brand experience.

In contrast, in a quest for a more holistic understanding of the branded retail experience, consumer researchers inhabiting the marketing research tradition of consumer culture theory, CCT (Arnould & Thompson 2005), have begun to successively contribute to this domain of interest, or as Borghini et al. (2009) p. 363) recently expressed it; “in the past few years, retail theory has developed a growing cultural orientation.” This has been done by bringing in empirical data and analyzing it through cultural theory in order to understand what is really going on inside the branded retailers’ stores from an overarching sociocultural perspective. Instead of testing relationships between already identified variables and factors, this growing cultural orientation has been able to offer cultural accounts that invent radically different concepts and ways to understand the retail brand experience as a whole and from a consumer-centric perspective. For example, Sherry (1998) found parallels to the narrative contents of certain mythologies in consumers’ experience of the Nike Town and coined the expression ‘brandscape’, upon which Thompson and Arsel (2006) built their investigation of the Starbucks (anti)brand experience. Through ethnographic studies, Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf (1988) found dualistic opposites in their investigation of consumers’ behavior at a swap meet, McGrath (1989) described consumer gift selection processes in a retail gift store, and McGrath et al. (1993) identified patterns of buyer-seller interactions and farmer/vendor behaviors in the periodic marketplace of a farmers’ market. Kozinets et al. (2002) explored the mythological power of a themed flagship brandstore (ESPN in Chicago) where a flagship brandstore was defined as a retailer that (1) carries one brand only, (2) owns that brand, and (3) exists to build brand image rather than make direct profit. Later, Kozinets et al. (2004) explored ludic behavior and identified elements of interagency between the themed brandstore and the consumers at the same spectacular venue. Building upon this themed flagship store framework, Borghini et al. (2009) recently presented findings on retail ideologies at the American Girl Place, a themed brandstore claimed by the authors to be so experientially powerful due to its sophisticated play with many different ideological expressions in the same store.

Above examples of cultural analyses of consumer behavior in the physical marketplace provide fruitful insights regarding how consumers experience retailers’ environments and branding efforts. However, although the found experiential elements probably can be readily applied to many themed flagship brandstores, to flee markets, swap meets and gift-stores, it is harder to see its transferability to retail sites of a more ordinary kind, e.g. the typical rationalized grocery store.

The grocery store is probably the most common retail experience of consumers in the western world, as it is part of people’s everyday activities. Yet it has—despite large focus on the grocery retail brand (such as Tesco, Wholefoods and Carrefour) in more traditional marketing management literature—in the cultural domain of marketing been somewhat neglected in favor for far more spectacular retail brand experiences as seen above. As underlined by Kozinets et al. (2002, p.17); the primary intention of flagship brandstores is to "take the branding concept to an extreme level.” But what about less extreme branded retail experiences? Which cultural constellations do consumers immerse when doing their regular everyday grocery shopping?

Thus, the contribution of this paper is to put cultural focus on a somewhat less extreme, yet branded, site; a site of the ordinary and everyday life—the grocery retailer —and to explore its more subtle brand representations through the experience of the consumer. This way, dimensions overarching the entire retailer brand experience (products, store, chain etc) that may be overlooked in the exploration of the spectacular and specific, may be unveiled.

Branded Retail Experience in CCT
The research paradigm in which this investigation takes it departure is consumer culture theory, CCT where consumer experience and meanings have been the central focal point of analysis for more than twenty years (Arnould & Thompson 2005). Here the retail experience has predominantly been analyzed, as mentioned earlier, in terms of brandscapes, myths, narratives and ideologies. Brandscapes refer to “consumers’ active constructions of personal meanings and lifestyle orientations from the symbolic resources provided by an array of brands” (Sherry 1998, p. 112) and a ‘hegemonic brandscape’ to “a cultural system of servicescapes that are linked together and structured by discursive, symbolic, and competitive relationships to a dominant (market-driving) experiential brand” (Thompson & Arsel 2004, p.632). Brandscapes are claimed to work as cultural models for consumers’ behavior, identity-work and emotional experience on, but in terms of object of reference also off, the specific retail site, and the authors account for the cultural structure (global/local) and anti-branding discourses through which consumers experience these scapes.

Other concepts cultural scholars use to understand retail environment experiences are myths and ideologies that the narratives of these environments convey. Retail ideology is by Borghini et al.
(2009 p.365) defined a “retail branding initiative and experience based upon a detailed representation of moral and social values, presented in an extensive and intensive manner through the physical environment and linked to actual moral action in the lives of involved consumers”. They show how the retail environment of American Girl Place conveys narratives with strong ideological imperatives concerning femininity, motherhood and communality. Myths on the other hand “serve ideological agendas” (Thompson 2004) and can for example be spotted as archetypic characters (e.g. the protective man and the fragile woman), through storylines (e.g. the rise and fall of empires). Sensitive to these mythic constructions, Kozinets et al (2004) used Olson’s (1999) ten characteristics (openendedness, verisimilitude, virtuality, negentropy, circularity, ellipticality, archetypical dramatis personae, inclusion, omnipresence and production values) of mythotypic (highly meaningful and emotionally generative symbols) narratives, to analyze ESPN Zone Chicago (a flagship brandstore for the ESPN sport network). They managed to show how spectacular brandstores could become experientially powerful to consumers by delivering on these mythotypic characteristics.

Above concepts make out important corner-stones in consumer culture research, as do concepts related to specific constellations of consumer goods and meanings found in sociocultural research generally. However, these prior conceptualizations of retail environments have largely ignored marketplaces of less mythotypic character, such as the ordinary branded grocery store. As these are probably the most frequent branded retail experiences consumers have on an everyday basis, its symbolic characteristics very likely differ from the mythotypic ones. In this paper we address this gap and propose an alternative analytical model for this everyday branded retail experience.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

In consumer culture theory (CCT) the lived experience of consumers in the abstract and concrete “marketplace” is of most and common interest (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Thompson, Locander & Pollio 1989; Thompson, Pollio & Locander 1994). In our study, to capture these lived experiences various ethnographic methods (Elliott & Elliott 2003) were used with the aim to find spoken and unspoken meanings:

1. **Semi-participant observations** of the women shopping for groceries.

2. **Unstructured interviews**: After the shopping session, long interviews (McCracken 1988) lasting for about 2 hours, were conducted at the womens’ homes.

3. **Photo diaries**: Each woman was given a disposable camera and a photo diary to fill in during five days over the course of one month. In each diary there were 40 questions and a request to take pictures corresponding to every question in the diary, hence in total at least 240 photos that came out of this exercise. Each question in the diary had a complementary question where the participant was instructed to describe what she has taken a picture of and why.

4. **Artefact collection**: All food shopping receipts and shopping lists of the household were also collected over the course of the diary month.

The women were instructed to send the diary, photos and receipts after a month, receiving a reward of 1000 Swedish kronor (approx 100 Euros) as compensation for their work.

The respondents were six Swedish women (see table 1), three from an urban area, and three from a suburban/rural area, aged 30-45 years. Three of these women were selected from a pool of approximately 50 women answering an add put up in a large award-winning grocery store with the ICA corporate brand and a local sub brand in the countryside in southern Sweden. These three women also lived in the countryside. The other three women lived in the city area of southern Sweden’s largest town, Malmö, and were selected through the snowball method where we asked people to ask acquaintances’ colleagues’ friends’ (etc) to contact the first author if they were interested in participating in the research project. Of 30 interested, three were chosen based on certain criteria decided beforehand. The six women should belong to different quintiles of the middle-class and differing from each other in lifestyles, type of work engagements, and family constellations (alone with children or married with children), but should all have children living at home. This because the research project itself had a focus on retail brands and family shoppers.

When doing participant observations during grocery-shopping the first author came along to the store where “they most often go grocery shopping”. However, in the photo diary they were asked to document and take pictures of other visits to other stores during the one-month period. All, except from one, visited many different grocery stores during this time but had one clear favourite for everyday shopping. This way we obtained sufficient variety in each individual’s descriptions and experiences of different formats, chain and product brands, but could still immerse into the meaning structures of the retail environments they preferred the most. Every store that participants referred to in the diaries or interviews, the first author went to visit afterwards in order to see the environment with an ethnographer’s own eyes, to better understand the experiences described by the informants.

The selected women’s identities were not necessarily bound up around being a mother (as is the case in Moisio, Arnould & Price (2004)) although two of the women’s perhaps were more than the

<table>
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<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Family Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Hanna</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Countryside, Southern Sweden</td>
<td>Kindergarten teacher, temporarily home with baby</td>
<td>Child-caring</td>
<td>Married, one child age 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeleine</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Countryside, Southern Sweden</td>
<td>Researcher, natural sciences</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Married, two children ages 6 and 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stina</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Countryside, Southern Sweden</td>
<td>Foster mother</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Married, one child + various foster children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birgit</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Larger town, Southern Sweden</td>
<td>Surgeon, temporarily home with children</td>
<td>Medical doctor</td>
<td>Married, two children ages 1 and 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrin</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Larger town, Southern Sweden</td>
<td>Student and practitioner within HR</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Single, one child age 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angelica</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Larger town, Southern Sweden</td>
<td>Project manager</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Married, two children ages 7 and 9</td>
</tr>
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</table>
other four. However, one may still argue that these women were all the main care-takers and family providers, in terms of grocery, whereby the theoretical analysis foremost can be said to have a valid transferability across other “providing” and “care-taking” consumer segments, rather than say women in single households or student dorms. Thompson (1996) called these “caring consumers” juggling in a shared system of conflicting ideologies regarding motherhood, feminism and professional careerism.

‘HOMEYNESS’ IN THE BRANDED RETAIL ENVIRONMENT

While hermeneutically moving back and forth between data and theory (Thompson, Pollio and Locander 1994; Thompson 1997) one specific cultural constellation, excellently described in the consumer cultural literature, namely that of ‘homeyness’, by Grant McCracken (1989), emerged as a readily applicable model to understand what could be discerned in the data analysis. Whereas Kozinets et al. (2002) analyzed the spectacular ESPN brandstore according to Olson’s (1999) ten characteristics of mythotypes, as presented earlier, the more subtly branded retail environments in our investigation, turned out to be much better understood through McCrackens eight symbolic properties of ‘homeyness’ and how they act upon the environment: (1) the diminutive property (small and graspable, making places “good” to think because they are “easy” to think) makes it thinkable; (2) the variable property (inconsistent, non-linear, antiuniform/assymetrical, haphazard, made out of sudden passion and desire, far from anonymous calculation e.g. rubblestone) makes it real, (3) the embracing property (intimacy, layer on layer enclosing each other, a pattern of descending enclosure, encompassing e.g. the ivy and the books, the “extraordinary intellectual geography for self-construction, memory walls, part-whole logic, takes time to accomplish) makes it cosseting, (4) the engaging property (welcoming, draws you in, openness, warmth, invites interaction and playfulness) makes it involving (5) the mnemonic property (historical character, significance of objects from the past, deeply personalizing the present circumstances, localized in time) makes it emplacing in time, (6) the authentic property (real, natural, personal nature, untouched by the calculated marketplace, “someone lives here”) makes it emplacing in space, (7) the informal property (warm and friendly, humble, accessibility, not pretentious, puts people at ease) makes it reassuring and riskless, and finally (8) the situating property (the occupant takes on the properties of the surroundings and “becomes” a homey creature) makes it fully capturing.

Before moving forward to the findings, here is a short introduction to the corporate retail brands coming up in the empirical fieldwork; ICA, Willy’s and Netto.

ICA is the biggest retail brand in Sweden, and thereby bigger than Coop and Afox (owns the retail brand Willys) who are number 2 and 3. The Swedish competition authorities have many times warned that ICA is larger than the monopoly regulations allow but due to the franchise format ICA keeps on balancing on the critical 50% market share limit without getting penalties. To consumers in Sweden ICA is famous for its historical presence since the 1950’s in almost every little village and town, its four different retail formats (ICA När, ICA Supermarket, ICA Kvantum, ICA Maxi) and not the least, their famous long-lived TV-commercial campaign consisting of the same actors since 2001 with soap opera story line and a new film every week. ICA has their own very successful private labels; ICA Selection (premium), I Love Eco (organic), ICA gott liv (Health), ICA-handlarnas (medium), and Euroshopper (budget). Approximately 20% of ICAs total sales is from private labels.

Willys is part of the Axfod Group and is famous for its large, low budget stores and supply. The stores are predominantly situated in the outskirts of city areas. They have a family owned background but were bought by Axfod in 2001. Axfod has since created private labels for Willys; Willys (medium /budget), Garant (organic) and Eldorado (budget) that make out approximately 20% of total sales.

Netto, is also mentioned on several occasions by the respondents. It is a relativley new medium-hard discount retailer concept on the Swedish market, with origins in Denmark. The Netto stores are often situated in central areas and offers to the Swedish audience a range of discount brands they don’t see in other stores. They also have lines of baskets with goods quite atypical for concentrated grocery stores in central areas of the stores.

Below follows a categorization of our ethnographic observations and consumer experiences into these characteristics of homeyness. As the experience of a store in many aspects is a different one than of a home (where McCracken did his ethnographic study) we found that every property of homeyness could also complemented by a mythic theme, in terms of how the consumers filled these properties with aesthetic meanings. This meaning content was typically anchored in myths infused in consumer culture regarding the ideal place and the ideal foods. These complementing themes give aesthetic meaning to the homey properties and succeed the property theme in every headline. [Due to the limited space in this conference paper each characteristic doesn’t go as deep as it would in a final journal paper].

The Diminutive Property- The Family Ownership Myth

Entering the large ICA Kvantum Anderssons store in Södra Sandby, a small village on the countryside, is to an outsider like entering most large ICA stores in Sweden. It is quite large and has an open butcher space close to the meat counter. I visit this store with three of the respondents; Stina, Madeleine and Hanna, and even if the store is large the way they describe it is always in a way that emphasizes its diminutive characteristic. They call the store Bröderna Andersson, meaning “The Andersson Brothers”. The store is famous in the larger local area for being well-taken care of by its small, tight family owners and exactly this family reference, rather than ICA reference, is central in observations, interviews and diaries from the participants regularly visiting this store. “I feel like home in this store. Everything is familiar and safe” says Madeleine and smiles. Also Sanna points at this emotional wellness character of ICA Kvantum Anderssors; “It would be a lie if I were to find anything negative in this store. Everything’s perfect here. The staff is so nice, I always feel so good in this store and I’m never stressed when I’m here. It’s top!” Hanna emphasizes this by saying that “I feel so safe here, and I know exactly what they have and don’t have so [even if its more expensive] why go anywhere else when it’s this great at home?” Thus, despite its relative largesse the store is experientially graspable, it is through experience thinkable to the informants. It does not have a diminutive character in terms of material environment, but in the consumers’ minds it has become mentally small and graspable due to its familiarity and warmth.

I go (on different occasions) with Katrin and Birgit to ICA Kvantum Malmborgs Erkilstor which is situated in a prosperous middle-class neighborhood in Malmö. The store is playfully infamous in Malmö as the “longest store in Sweden”, and fair enough, yes it is both thin and long in its store layout. Both Katrin and Birgit comment on the unorthodox layout as “oddly narrow” but “funny”. Sometimes “irritating” but more like an annoying sister than an unpleasant stranger. There is a love and hate relationship between my respondents and this pleasantly cramped store. Katrine says: “It is quite different that you really need to know which way you
must walk not to bump into somebody, on the other hand bumping into someone can turn out to be quite amusing as well!”. The smallness of the store creates an intimacy with other customers on a physical level, sometimes annoying but also a source of surprise and the spontaneous whims of life.

The Variable Property- The Myth of Mediterranean Life
In the diaries where participants were asked to take pictures of the most inspiring parts of their stores/store experiences and also to describe in what way this was the case, the responses had a certain thing in common. They were all pictures of variable melanges of goods, for example of asymmetrical stacks of French, Italian, Portuguese, Swedish, and Danish cheeses; “Cheese lovers like myself fall head over heals over the grand cheese department. So many kinds—so many jummy cheeses! I quickly run pass them and save them for a more special occasion.” Angelica writes about the cheese counter at ICA Maxi Västra Hamnen in Malmö. Other accounts on inspiring experiences relate to how the variety is presented, like the shelves with a wide variety of transparent bags with beans and olives, and Madeleine writes about the most inspiring counter at Bröderna Anderssons—the cooked meats counter; “these entire chunks of salami and hams everywhere, I get this feeling of the open marketplace, the Mediterranean and other pleasant experiences”.

The store aesthetics should offer asymmetrical layers on layers of various goods and brands to live up to this variability ideal, but must not break the rules too much; Madeleine, who loved the “Mediterranean” feel at ICA Kvamntum Andersson, takes pictures of the aisle baskets at Netto and writes “It’s complete chaos in this store. Tools and food in a terrible mess. I don’t feel like home here, it’s like being abroad”.

The Embracing Property- The Myth of a Loving Market
The diminutive property of is intensified by the embracing property. It has as McCracken writes “a pattern of descending enclosure”. At ICA Kvamntum Malmborgs Erikslust the long and narrow layout literally embraces the customer. She feels “cuddled with” as Katrin expresses it. The opposite is described by all respondents in diaries and interviews, illustrated with photos of empty cartons and shelves. Nothing irritates the respondents as much as when what they have planned to buy is out of stock. Especially if the store normally never is out of stock. As in Fournier’s (1998) brand relationship thesis, where brands get anthropomorphized into humans with whom you can have loving and un-loving relationships, here someone you really trusted has betrayed you and it hurts more than if you had counted on it. It is a light shock.

An embrace can be further intensified through marketing tactics, e.g. by ICA’s multichannel marketing. The respondents all refer to ICA Buffé, ICAs monthly magazine with recepies and inspiring images of happy dinner and lunch guests. To Angelica it is ICA Buffé that inspires almost all of her cooking, and ICA Maxi Västra Hamnen that inspires her most in store. That way ICA offers an embracive enclosure by providing inspiration from all directions.

The Engaging Property- The Myth of Smalltown Friendliness
The intimacy offered by the diminutive property and the family ownership myth at ICA Kvamntum Andersson not only feels like an embrace to the respondents, but it also engages them. Hanna and Madeleine both stop at the different counters to chat with the staff, to discuss new deliveries and to get advice for cooking. They also stop to taste at a corner where a store representative cooks meat balls from the store’s own minced meat; “I trust ICA again, it could have happened to any of the retailers” Madeleine says (there had just been a national minced meat scandal connected to ICA where some ICA retailers had been revealed to repack “old” meat in later date packages). Hanna, Madeleine, and Sanna take many pictures of the butcher’s space of the store where the meat is cut up. They all express love for this “openness” which seems to draw them in through trustworthiness. The store involves its customers by bringing them into its own making, its core existence and family core, and gets engagement back.

The Mnemonic Property- The Myth of the Magic of the Past
Three of the respondents have childhood memories in relation to their everyday stores. “I live in the neighbourhood and when I was little my mum used to take me here, it was so exciting because the store is so long!” Birgit recalls about her childhood experiences at the ICA Kvamntum Malmborgs Erikslust. “I’ve come here with mum since I was a baby, so I know exactly what I can get and not get. I feel safe with that” Hanna writes about ICA Kvamntum Andersson.

Madeleine, who has been to Netto to by special protein rich pasta flour, shares one of the brand narratives she connects in relation to the Netto logo. “Scottish terriers always make me think of Netto, and even more of my youth when we went to Denmark to bargain. At Netto there are so many Danish products and brands, like for example cherry marmalade. Odd and exciting! In the brand line “O Sole Mio” there are some odd products, like they used to have dried cranberries. Fun!” In the case of Netto, Madeleine does not feel at home at all, as we saw earlier. However, she does find a home for Netto in pleasant memories from her youth, that through the magic power of nostalgia somehow compensates for this lack in spatial homeyness.

The Authentic Property- The Myth of a Real and Genuine Market
The women in this investigation have all taken up on the mega trend of authenticity. Authenticity which usually is associated with the tastes of the high cultural capital class (Holt 1998; Ulver-Sneistrup 2008) has since the mainstream market picked up on this winning concept (Pine & Gilmore 2007) proliferated to the mass consumer of western consumer culture. There is a consistent idea of a dichotomy between real and unreal, where the real is considered more morally legitimate than the unreal. ICA Kvamntum Anderssons get the role of the real and authentic in this investigation. Even if the store in no way is small like a local specialty shop (the stereotypical image of an authentic food market) it manages to play on myths narrating authenticity “here you see how they cut the meat and I mean that’s so…nice” Sanna says. In fact, in every tale about ICA Kvamntum Anderssens it is the story about meat cutting that is persistently told. Apart from the staff’s friendliness and the fact that it is two brothers who own the store, the meat-cutting is the genuine proof that these people really love what they do, a prerequisite for true authenticity.

In contrast, Angelica has her roots in northern Sweden and writes that “I would love to buy mushrooms at the store but I just don’t trust their origin. I always wait for my mum to come down with freshly picked mushrooms from the Northern Sweden’s forests. That’s the real thing!”.

Authenticity emplaces a store in space, and if the origin is not seen (as the meat-cutting is at ICA Kvamntum Anderssens or as the mushroom picker is to Angelica) the constellation of homeyness cannot be complete.

The Informal Property- The Myth of the Humble Farmer
As has been abundantly clear in this paper, ICA Kvamntum Anderssens is a retail case that scores high on every property of homey retail experience. The informal property is another one of these. This store puts its visitors at ease with its down-tuned but friendly
approach to its customers. This in turn creates this embracive feel of well-being seen in many quotes earlier in this paper.

As all our respondents visited many different stores during the month of diary-writing we could compare through which categories they evaluated a shopping experience. In no other store than ICA Kvantum Anderssons was the staff mentioned, neither in interviews nor in diaries. It was as if there was no service staff. But at ICA Kvantum Anderssons the friendliness among the staff was mentioned at many occasions and in field observations casual conversations between staff and customers were seen at many occasions. Here are fieldnotes from the visit with Sanna:

I am amazed how unpretentious Sanna is and that she is proud, rather than embarrassed, about admitting that she’s been abroad once (and only once). How she so casually shares that she doesn’t understand much of these new, international, “fashionable” products. When she asks one of the staff (I presume it is the store manager as I recognize him from the website), who is pottering around with the olive oil bottles, what kind of oil this “green liquid is” (olive oil), I expect him to reveal some kind of snobbish latent nature (“dear lord, have you never seen olive oil before?”) towards Sanna. But instead he shines up like a sun and enthusiastically brings her with him into the universe of olive oil consciousness. He talks of sun, terroir and tree qualities. Of its sublime marriage with ripe tomatoes and parmegiano cheese. Sanna looks entertained and inspired, however doesn’t dare to buy that green liquid. But the man had an air of ease to him. The kind of air that makes people courageous to ask “dumb” questions without having to “lose face”. Fieldnotes 11 November 2008

This quality of accessibility and lack of risk comes with the property of informality, and must be mediated through social interaction, hence people, be it the service staff or the other customers. But it must not be too informal as we will see in the next paragraph.

The Situating property- The Myth of Hermeneutic Transformation

The last property of homeyness, that also makes this very experience complete, is the situating property. Here, the consumer experiences such involvement with her surroundings that she takes on its properties. She becomes part of the whole—a hermeneutic metamorphosis if you will. Although the experience at the everyday grocery retailer is far from spectacular, such subtle transformation may nevertheless take place. Especially this can be seen in the way respondents comment other customers in the store in the interviews and in the diaries. One can never fully immerse into one’s surrounding and become homey if one does not identify with the surrounding customers. Katrin shares with me; “I feel so good in this store [ICA Kvantum Malmöhus Forskluist]. It’s not stressful and everybody looks like they know and can afford to eat good food. I mean it is much nicer than say Överskottsbolaget [a hard discount store in a socially troubled neighbourhood in Malmö], ha ha. When I was there there two people were fighting. They had all kinds of technical aid, wheel chairs etc, but suddenly they were perfectly mobile! It’s another breed of people there, not nice. But it’s cheap. But I’m glad if I never have to go there again.”

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have focused on the consumer experiences of branded spaces and environments where there is explicit branding-work going on but on a radically less extreme level than in themed flagship stores previously treated in the consumer cultural literature. Whereas the themed flagship brandstore is highly meaningful to a particular audience, and express a combination of “universal emotional states” such as “awe, wonder, purpose, joy and participation” (Kozinets et al 2002), the everyday branded retail environment expresses a somewhat more subdued, but yet very meaningful, experience. This experience turned out to be ‘homeyness’ among our care-taking grocery consumers.

‘Homeyness’ as conceptualized by McCracken (1989) is a constellation of cultural elements, creating a distinctive feeling of well-being. Hence, one cannot select one or the other specific factor, which the managerial retail literature often tends to do, that makes “the big difference,” but it’s the whole constellation of expressions that makes the everyday retail experience homey, and therefore inclusive. In addition, this experience can be even more seductive if each property plays on certain myths, supporting Kozinets et al (2002, 2004) and Borghini et al (2009), serving ideologies naturally succumbed in society. Here we could discern myths of the superiority of southern lifestyles, smaller town goodness and the personification of a loving market.

But why was it homeyness, and not, say, sexiness or cosmo-politanism, that encapsulated these consumers? There are probably many alternative explanations to this, but, in the culturally distinctive site of the everyday grocery store, one can imagine that consumers do not seek a transformative experience that fully blows their mind away. In fact, they are shopping for their family household and perhaps therefore need to have surroundings representing or at least supporting an ideal life at home. It is ideally a home outside home where the meanings of goods do not change despite being transported from the one site (shop) to the other (actual home).

One can also reason that the selection of the care-taking (providing for others at home) women in this study may have influenced this quest for homeyness. Do these women want homeyness more than, say men or women without families? McCracken (1989) found that differences could be found between lower and higher status groups (rather than between gender) where lower status groups were more apt to desire the homely atmosphere. A non-supporting pattern was present among Holt’s (1998) low and high culture capital consumers where higher status groups preferred formal aesthetics and lower status groups pragmatic solutions, hence ‘homeyness’ was not an elaborated construct. In our investigation, five women belonged to a typical middle quintile of a large middle class, whereas one (Sanna) to a lower middle class, judging on education and parental background. That no difference was identified between these respondents in terms of homeyness would therefore imply that it very well may be a female, middle-class, local desire, but it may just as well be universally global, at least in the parts of the world that have “home” and “privacy” as cultural constructs in their meaning structures (Rybscynzki 1987). However, to get more comparable examples, this would have to be explored in future research.

This paper contributes to the consumer culture literature on retail by bringing in the culturally distinctive site of the everyday branded grocery store and thereby showing that other analytical models, than have been suggested for more spectacular arenas, are at play here; namely the cultural constellation of ‘homeyness.’ It also contributes to the more managerial retail literature in that it takes a cultural perspective, and giving this more holistic understanding of what is happening in the interaction between the consumer and the retailer brand, than more evidence based variable-focused work can do. The experience of homeyness consists of a complex but highly meaningful constellation of properties that can be intensified by the immersion into myths supporting the agendas of dominant, rather than emerging (which more spectacular arenas may strive
for in their quest for overwhelming the consumer), ideology. Future research may concentrate on exploring further theoretical transferability options for the constellation of homeyness in branded retail environments across industrialized/less industrialized contexts, across gender, ethnicity and class. Homeyness may very well change character across settings, peoples and times, and there may also be contexts where other cultural constellations are of equal importance. However, in this investigation it stood clear that homeyness was highly meaningful as the fundament for the ideal everyday retail experience, and the lack of it was the fundament for avoidance. Or as Hanna so succinctly put it; “why go anywhere else when it’s this great at home?”

REFERENCES
Aaker,