



National
College *of*
Ireland

AN EXPLORATION OF HOW SENSORY
SHOPPING EVENINGS INFLUENCE
SHOPPING BEHAVIOUR IN PARENTS
OF CHILDREN WITH ASD

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact that sensory shopping evenings have on the shopping behaviour of parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder living in Ireland. The prevalence of autism is increasing worldwide, and there is a need for retailers to understand and provide a more suitable store environment for this growing segment. This is not just prudent on a corporate social responsibility level, but it also offers a commercially beneficial opportunity for retailers.

This research project was based on an extensive literature review and a subsequent qualitative research approach through semi-structured telephone interviews with eight parents of children on the autism spectrum who have shopped during these sensory evenings. Data analysis was performed using a thematic approach which were deemed relevant to the research objectives.

The main findings from this study were that parents of children with autism had changed their shopping behaviour positively since the sensory shopping evenings were launched, they consider themselves more store loyal to retailers who offer these evenings and feel they gain from a better customer experience and less stigmatisation.

The primary conclusion drawn from this research was that sensory shopping evenings are commercially beneficial to Irish grocery retailers, and it is recommended that it is in their best interest to provide them to this increasingly influential and growing customer segment.

Further research opportunities were identified at the end of the study also.

Keywords: Sensory shopping, autism, store environment, disability and consumption, environmental psychology, stigmatisation.

Declaration

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland
Research Students Declaration Form
(*Thesis/Author Declaration Form*)

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Title of Thesis: An exploration of how sensory shopping evenings influence shopping behaviour in parents of children with ASD

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And how can I forget my two adorable little munchkins, Luca and Annamay, who were the real inspiration for embarking on this Masters journey, you make me a prouder Dad with every passing day.

Dedication

My Autistic Son - by Jim Boudier

Autistic shackles hold your little tongue
From telling me the punch line of the joke
That caused your fits of laughter to provoke
Excited happy tears. You've never sung
Your favourite Barney song and, when you clung
To me that winter night when you awoke
To bitter, fearful sobs, you never spoke
A word of what tormented one so young.
Although autistic shackles bind his speech,
His love is blazoned on his beaming smile.
Although I missed the punch line of that jest,
I laughed myself to happy tears. And each
Dark night when he awakes and fears defile
His sleep, in Daddy's arms he finds his rest.

**This dissertation is dedicated to my hero, my inspiration,
my little Braveheart, Luca **

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Background

Providing the most suitable store environment for customers is a necessity for retailers who wish to attract and retain customers (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al. 1994; Spence et al., 2014). However, for special needs customers, this is not always the case, as some retailers operate at a reactive level for this segment and do not proactively cater for their needs (Goodrich and Ramsey, 2012). This is clearly evident as research by the National Autistic Society showed that 64 per cent of autistic people avoid going to retail outlets at all (Kentish, 2017).

To give the special needs landscape some perspective for this research, in 2018 the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention determined that approximately 1 in 54 children is diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder, affecting one in every 34 boys and one in every 144 girls (Autism Speaks, 2020).

As the statistics suggest, there is a real need to cater for this target group of shoppers not only on a corporate social responsibility level but also as a commercially beneficial way to differentiate from the increasing competition in the Irish retail grocery sector, which was estimated to be worth €12 billion in 2019 (Paul, 2020).

As a result, individual Irish retailers have recognised the importance of the autistic community and launched sensory shopping evenings in stores. These may comprise of a shopping environment with no music, dimmed lighting, additional accessibility at checkouts, reduced queuing, and no instore announcements (Checkout, 2018). **See Figure 1.**

Figure 1 – Autism aware quiet evenings poster



Image source: www.lidl.ie

1.2 Research focus

This research specifically focuses on the impact that sensory shopping evenings have on parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) living in Ireland. ASD is classed as a disability and is defined by DePape and Lindsay (2015) as “*a developmental disorder involving abnormal communication, repetitive and restrictive interests and impaired social functioning.*” This dissertation topic has an emotive context for the author as he is a parent of a child with autism and has worked in a retail marketing capacity for the last fifteen years.

Sensory shopping evenings are a relatively new phenomenon and have only been launched in Ireland in recent years with the first trial taking place in a Supervalu store in Clonakilty in 2015 (Ring, 2015). As such, there is a distinct lack of academic research around their influence on consumers. The impact of the store environment has been studied extensively in the literature, and the significant influence of various atmospheric elements have on consumers behaviour (Spence et al., 2014, Garaus, 2017). However, no studies have specifically looked at how the reduction of store atmospheric variables such as dimmed

lighting and no music affect parents of children with ASD when shopping, which is the focus of this research.

Previous studies in the sociology and health sphere have focused on how parents cope with going to public spaces with their autistic children (Ryan, 2010) and on the damaging effects that deemed misbehaviour by these children by others can have on their parents (Farrugia, 2009, Ryan, 2010; Gill and Liamputtong, 2011). Critical to this study is the expansion of the above research with a specific focus on the gap identified in the literature of how sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD.

This will be facilitated through a further review of relevant literature and empirical data collection by the researcher.

1.3 Overall research aim, objectives and methods

The overall aim of this study is to explore how these sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. To evaluate if parents of children with ASD have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of Irish grocers' sensory shopping evenings.
2. To ascertain if these sensory shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD.
3. To explore how parents of children with ASD feel about these sensory shopping evenings overall.

The primary research is conducted qualitatively using semi-structured telephone interviews with parents of autistic children who have shopped during these sensory evenings, with the expectation of contributing to existing knowledge in the literature. The research approach being undertaken is justified as similar peer-reviewed research has also utilised this method (Gray, 2002; Faruggia, 2009; Ryan, 2010; DePape and Lindsay, 2015).

The author hopes to benefit from a more in-depth understanding of how these shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of autistic children by comparing the theory in the literature with results from their real-world study. Full details on research methodology will appear in a later chapter.

1.4 Organisation of the dissertation

The subsequent literature review chapter will critically explore and analyse the relevant theory pertaining to the study, which will then help generate the research questions and objectives. The research methodology will then outline and justify how the research should be undertaken in order to answer the specific research questions and objectives. The findings from the interview data will then be analysed to provide insights and will be contrasted against the theory in the literature to establish conclusions. Limitations of the research will be discussed, along with recommendations for further research and finally, a personal self-reflection section by the author.

1.5 Value of this research

This research will add value to the literature as there have been no studies to the authors' knowledge carried out concerning the relationship between sensory shopping evenings and their impact on the shopping behaviour of parents of children on the autism spectrum. Although the findings from this research cannot be generalised due to the small sample size, they can be used to offer some insights into this topic and provide a foundation for further research. The author hopes that further value from the research will be the fact that it may help raise the profile of research into the autism community in general.

The next chapter will critically examine the literature relevant to the objectives of this research.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

2.1 Introduction

Throughout the literature review, the author will critically examine how the topics of disability and consumption, environmental psychology, store atmosphere and accompanying shoppers influence a consumer's buying behaviour. It will conclude by identifying a gap in the current literature where the researcher's study fits in, which will, in turn, facilitate the formulation of the relevant research question and objectives.

2.2 Disability and consumption

With over 80 million people now living with disabilities in the European Union (Dubost, 2018) of which 643,131 reside in Ireland (CSO, 2016), marketers must meet the challenge of identifying the needs of this increasingly influential segment of the market and provide them with products and services that are suitably adapted to their requirements (Goodrich and Ramsey, 2012).

This recognition of the importance of disabled consumers is not universal, and there seems to be a reactive approach by some retailers who define accessibility as being ready to react to any problem's shoppers may have. Critically, this is not in alignment with disabled consumers needs as they want potential issues identified and solved in advance of their visit (Goodrich and Ramsey, 2012).

Consumers with disabilities should be comfortable in user-friendly environments, such as retail outlets and not feel vulnerable (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999). However, unintended shopping barriers, such as loud store music can contribute to sensory overload, further excluding them from shopping and compounding their vulnerability (Beudaert et al., 2017). Through better understanding of the sensory environment of children with ASD, it will be easier to involve them in society (Manning et al., 2015). Studies have shown that some companies overlook or even harm a disabled consumer's wellbeing (Rosenbaum et al., 2011) by regularly underserving, excluding, or ignoring their special needs in the marketplace (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2015, p. 157).

Marketers must understand that exposure to servicescape cues (Bitner, 1992), such as store environmental factors can influence the extent to which special needs customers feel

welcome or unwelcome and their assessment of the servicescape as being enabling or disabling (Baker et al., 2007). From a critical perspective, through this servicescape influence, parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will decide whether to shop at a specific store and if so, for what duration.

2.2.1 Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and public spaces

There has been limited research on how parents cope with going to public places when they have children with ASD (Ryan, 2010). However, there have been no specific studies on how retailers sensory shopping environments influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD.

In the experience of parents of children with ASD, stigma is a re-occurring theme (Ryan, 2010). This stigma is explained as children with ASD can look physically normal, but underneath have an extremely pervasive disability (Gray, 2002). It is this normal appearance of the autistic child plus the lack of public awareness or knowledge about the disorder, which may mean that parents of an autistic child may experience some hostile public reaction to any inappropriate behaviour by their child (Farrugia, 2009; Ryan, 2010; Gill and Liamputtong, 2011). It is this stigmatisation of their child's behaviour when out in public that can cause parents to feel embarrassed, and as a result avoid specific outings such as social activities and shopping as a group (Voysey, 1972; Gray, 2002).

In a pioneering piece of research, Ryan (2010) linked children on the autism spectrum, and their disruptive behaviour in public places to sensory issues and the difficulties children with ASD have in dealing with different environmental settings. Ryan (2010) showed that children went into "meltdown" not as willful displays of bad behaviour but as intense responses to overwhelming sensory stimulation, e.g. lighting, music, unusual noises, darkness, crowds, queues, smells, unfamiliar places and people.

Critically, this is important to understand for retailers in the current market as depending on the customer's exposure to specific servicescape cues, such as store environmental factors, including store noise level and lighting, this will affect the extent to which they feel welcome or unwelcome into a store and view the servicescape of the company as being enabling or disabling (Baker et al., 2007). In essence, if a child with ASD feels more comfortable in a

retail setting due to reduced sensory inputs, the parent will be more influenced to pick this store to patronise, will spend longer in, and have a more pleasant shopping experience.

The author critically has identified a significant gap in the literature, as although there has been research into effects going out into public places has on the parents of children with ASD, there is no specific research into how these sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping habits of this same group.

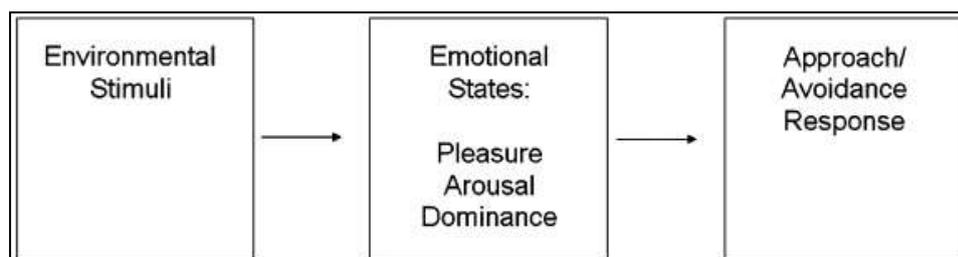
2.3 Environmental psychology

The application of environmental studies to store atmosphere originated from the formative work of Mehrabian and Russell (1974); which was an unintentional outcome of their research, as their primary investigation stemmed from the discipline of psychology and not marketing.

This environmental psychology approach draws from the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) paradigm whose primary focus is on *“the direct impact of physical stimuli on human emotions and the effect of the physical stimuli on a variety of behaviours, such as work performance or social interaction”* (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974, p.4). **See Figure 2.**

In applying this to a retail context, the store atmosphere is the stimulus (S) that causes a consumer’s evaluation (O) and causes some behavioural response (R) (Spangenberg et al., 1996).

Figure 2 - The Mehrabian-Russell model of environmental influence



Source: Adapted from Mehrabian and Russell (1974)

Mehrabian and Russell (1974), propose that three basic emotional states mediate approach-avoidance behaviours in environmental situations; these are pleasure, arousal, and dominance (PAD). Their pioneering SOR model posits that any environment, including a retail outlet, will produce an emotional state in a customer that can be characterised in terms of these three PAD dimensions (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982).

In essence, shoppers respond to an atmosphere with one of two responses, approach or avoidance (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). These approach behaviours are perceived as positive responses to an environment which can lead to final consumer actions such as intending to spend more time in a store browsing and buying more (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Bitner, 1992). In contrast, avoidance behaviours are deemed negative and could include not wanting to enter or explore a retail outlet or stay in it at all (Turley and Milliman, 2000).

The SOR model is not without its limitations. Russell and Pratt (1980) postulated that the dominance dimension required a cognitive interpretation by an individual and is not purely applicable in situations that need affective responses. This was not the only study that deemed the dominance dimension unnecessary, other critics of the model believed that the two orthogonal measures of pleasure and arousal were adequate to portray a consumer's emotions (Dawson et al., 1990; Sweeney and Wyber, 2002).

From a critical perspective, there is no doubt that the SOR model is one of the most powerful methods in explaining the effect of the physical environment on human behaviour. However, the literature suggests a cautionary note in its application, as it offers a primary affective view and it is necessary to consider both the emotional and cognitive reactions elicited by the environment (Liu and Jang, 2009).

2.3.1 Environmental psychology in a retail setting

It was Donovan and Rossiter (1982) that pioneered the extension of this environmental psychology research in the literature through the application of the SOR model of Mehrabian-Russell (1974) to a retail setting.

Through their exploratory study, Donovan and Rossiter (1982) demonstrated that approach behaviours in a retail outlet (including shopping enjoyment, returning, attraction, friendliness, time spent browsing, money spent and store exploration) were influenced by a consumer's perception of the store environment (Bitner, 1992).

Subsequently, in their research, Donovan et al. (1994) addressed the significant limitations of the Donovan and Rossiter (1982) study, which they identified as; **1.)** they used students as their research subjects, not shoppers **2.)** they measured respondents attitudes and intentions,

not their shopping behaviour **3.**) no screening of shoppers for familiarity with the store was carried out beforehand. Critically their results also reinforced the findings that the SOR model was useful in predicting store behaviour and that a retail store environment does have significant and measurable effects on consumers shopping behaviour (Eroglu et al., 2003).

It is crucial to recognise the importance of the Mehrabian and Russell (1974) conceptualisation in the literature, especially in a retail context, as it forms the foundations of most research on the impact of environmental factors on the emotions of customers (Havlena and Holbrook, 1986) and their actual shopping behaviour (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006).

The author's study fills a gap in the literature that helps understand how these reduction and removal measures of store atmosphere stimuli influence the approach or avoidance shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD.

2.4 Store atmospherics

2.4.1 Definition

In a pioneering approach, Kotler (1973-1974, p. 50) suggested the use of atmospherics in a marketing context; he defined it as *“the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in buyers. More specifically, atmospherics is the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability”*.

Similarly, Turley and Milliman (2000, p. 194) defined store atmosphere as *“as the stimuli leading to some cognitive affect within the individual which, in turn, leads to some behavioural response”*.

Both definitions are congruent with environmental psychology and the SOR model, where there is a stimulus (e.g. store environment) an organism (e.g. customers pleasure or displeasure) and a response (e.g. buying behaviour).

It was Kotler's (1973-1974) seminal work around atmospherics and how it affects consumer behaviour that started of a literature stream of studies looking at the conceptualisation of store atmosphere including various terminology that is used interchangeably, such as atmospherics, store environments, servicescapes and shelf space studies (Ayadi and Cao, 2016).

2.4.2 Critical dimensions of store atmosphere

As evidence was accumulating regarding the effect of specific store environmental cues on consumers, researchers started to work on developing typologies and classification schemes for the atmosphere of a store (Eroglu et al., 2003). There is general agreement among academics that there is a near endless list of store environmental dimensions (Bitner, 1992). However, there are some differences in what specific environmental cues are to be used and classified in the literature (Ayadi and Cao, 2016).

Kotler's work (1973-1974) suggested that atmosphere is four-dimensional as it is always presented as the quality of space around and absorbs through the four main sensory channels of; **Vision:** colour, brightness, shapes and size; **Hearing:** volume and pitch; **Touch:** softness, smoothness and temperature and **Smell:** scent and freshness.

One of the first researchers to develop a classification scheme differing from Kotler (1973-1974), was Baker (1986) when she proposed a general typology of store environmental cues which composed of three dimensions; **1.) Ambient factors 2.) Design factors 3.) Social factors.** Similarly, Bitner (1992) in her seminal study in retail service organisations proposed a three-dimensional typology for the store environment made up of; **1.) Ambient conditions 2.) Spatial layout and functionality 3.) Signs, symbols, and artefacts.**

In an effort to produce a more comprehensive framework for classifying store atmospherics, Berman and Evans (1995) added to Bitner's (1992) typology and divided these environmental elements into four categories **1.) Store exterior 2.) General interior 3.) Store layout 4.) Interior displays.**

Although Berman and Evans (1995) classification was extensive, Turley and Milliman (2000) criticised it for not having a human variable, and they extended Berman and Evans (1995) typology to produce the most comprehensive list of store atmospheric variables into five distinct dimensions (**See Table 1**).

Table 1 – Store atmospheric variables – Turley and Milliman

<p>1. External variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Exterior signs b. Entrances c. Exterior display windows d. Height of building e. Size of building f. Color of building g. Surrounding stores h. Lawns and gardens i. Address and location j. Architectural style k. Surrounding area l. Parking availability m. Congestion and traffic n. Exterior walls 	<p>2. General interior variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Flooring and carpeting b. Color schemes c. Lighting d. Music e. P.A. usage f. Scents g. Tobacco smoke h. Width of aisles i. Wall composition j. Paint and wall paper k. Ceiling composition l. Merchandise m. Temperature n. Cleanliness
<p>3. Layout and design variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Space design and allocation b. Placement of merchandise c. Grouping of merchandise d. Work station placement e. Placement of equipment f. Placement of cash registers g. Waiting areas h. Waiting rooms i. Department locations j. Traffic flow k. Racks and cases l. Waiting queues another individual or group m. Furniture n. Dead areas 	<p>4. Point-of-purchase and decoration variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Point-of-purchase displays b. Signs and cards c. Wall decorations d. Degrees and certificates e. Pictures f. Artwork g. Product displays h. Usage instructions i. Price displays j. Teletext
<p>5. Human variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Employee characteristics b. Employee uniforms c. Crowding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Customer characteristics e. Privacy

Source: Turley and Milliman (2000, p. 194)

Subsequently, in a critical review of the literature, Melia et al. (2014) propose that there are only three primary dimensions to store atmosphere which are classified as physical, social and sensorial. This sensorial dimension composes the four senses of sight, hearing, touch and smell, in congruence with Kotler's (1973-1974) earlier theory which relates to the intangible store atmospheric variables that affect the human senses (Hamrouni and Touzi, 2011).

More recently, there is growing recognition that consumers process store environmental factors as a combination and as such, generate a multidimensional perception of the store atmosphere (Bhatt et al., 2020).

From a critical perspective, there is no general consensus on the precise composition of the dimensions of store atmosphere or whether it is perceived holistically or not by consumers. However, there is universal agreement that it is a multidimensional concept composing of many environmental factors (Levy and Weitz, 2012).

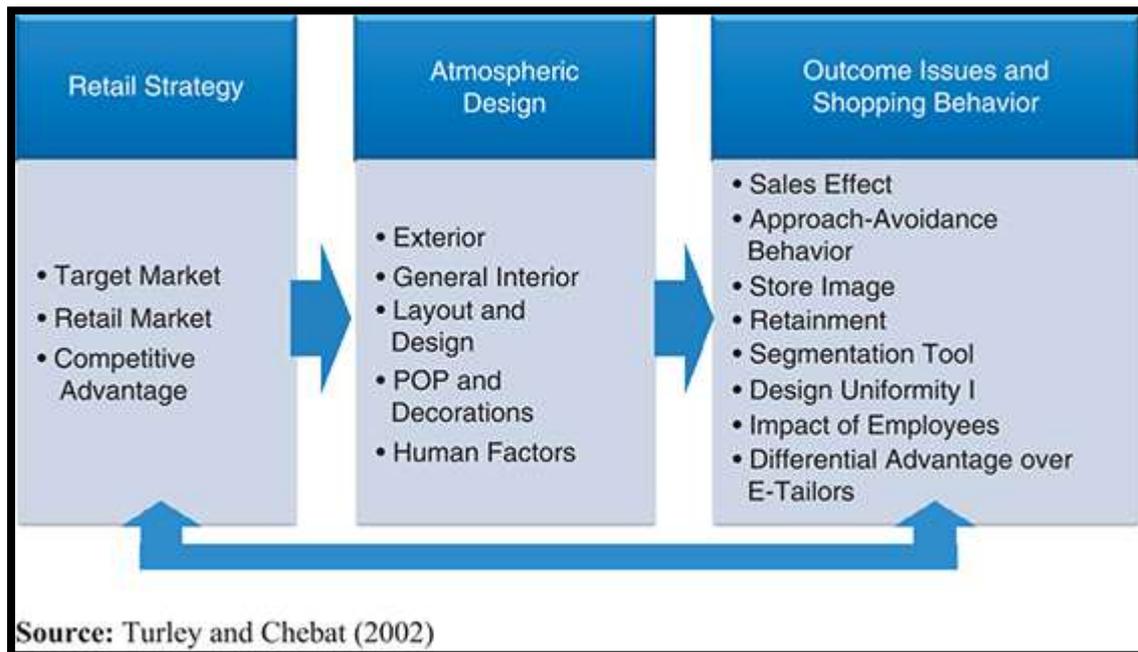
In this study, the main store environmental factors that will be examined further are lighting and music. These two dimensions are deemed to be particularly relevant to the present research during sensory shopping evenings, as there is no music, reduced noise, dimmed lighting and reduced queuing.

2.4.3 Store atmosphere and targeting strategy

It is in the strategic interest of retailers to create an atmosphere that reflects their target market (Kotler et al., 2019). It should fit the motivations of the shopper, e.g. if the target consumer is task-oriented with a functional mindset, the retailer should offer a simpler, more restrained in-store environment (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006).

It was Turley and Chebat (2002) that examined the link between retail strategy, atmospheric design and consumers shopping behaviour. **See Figure 3.** Critically, they demonstrated the need for retail marketers to have specific goals for their target market facilitated through the stores' atmospheric design, as it is capable of eliciting a broad range of behaviours from the customer.

Figure 3 – Strategic view of the retail environment



In congruence with this view, Hultén (2011) developed a multisensory store experience model and used diverse sensorial strategies to differentiate itself and connect with its target market. Spence et al. (2014) concur and claim that it would be more meaningful to segment markets according to those who are seeking stimulating experiences versus those who tend to avoid such environments.

Retailers have recognised that they must move beyond a product focus to one offering an enhanced customer experience (Spence et al., 2014) and design retail environments that offer unique, memorable shopping experiences (Petermans et al., 2013), specific to their target markets (Turley and Chebat, 2002; Hultén, 2011).

This strategic fit through targeting is relevant in the context of this study as retailers through these sensory evenings are designing the store atmosphere to suit a specific target market, i.e. parents of children with ASD and consumers with sensory difficulties overall. Through this targeting strategy, retailers aim to influence consumer behaviour through the tailoring of the store atmosphere.

2.4.4 Importance of store atmosphere and its impact on consumer behaviour

There are two main paradigms identified in the literature to explain how consumer behaviour is influenced by the store atmosphere, namely, positivism and constructivism (Aubert-Gamet,

1997). The positivist approach relies on the SOR framework (Mehabrian and Russell, 1974) as the dominant model and in which the consumer is passively exposed to a defined object, e.g. the store environment.

In contrast, the constructivist paradigm asserts that the store environment acts on consumers to achieve marketing goals but also is acted upon by a customer to frame existential goals and facilitates co-construction (Ayadi and Cao, 2016).

The difference in these two paradigms is apparent as the retail store is no longer just a place where customers preferences and purchasing arise (Bitner, 1992), it also embodies a space in which relationships, strategies and emotional exchanges happen between a consumer and a retailer (Castaldo and Mauri, 2008).

It is long recognised by retail marketers the significant influence that various in-store atmospheric elements have on consumer behaviour (Spence et al., 2014; Garaus, 2017). Baker et al. (1992) demonstrated that the shopping experience, as created by the store environment, is found to play an essential role in building a stores patronage. From a critical perspective, there is a broad acknowledgement of the importance of pleasure and arousal as emotional states that mediate between the store environment stimuli and approach/avoidance tendencies by consumers (Garaus, 2017).

More recently, Helmfalk and Hultén (2017) posited that it is vital for retailers to optimise the sensory stimuli in the store for customers. For example, if the intensity is sub-optimal, customers may avoid the store, if optimal, approach behaviour is enabled, but if overstimulating, store avoidance may occur. This view is in congruence with Spence et al. (2014) who also advocated for an optimal level of stimulation, which would lead to desirable shopping behaviours, but warned that increasing sensory touchpoints in the customer's journey could lead to sensory overload. These theories are particularly relevant in this study, as retailers need to get the atmospheric cues (e.g. music and lighting) right for the sensory needs of the ASD shopping community.

In summary, there is no doubt among academics that stimulating in-store atmosphere, including intangible elements such as lighting and music can induce specific emotional outcomes from customers (Turley and Milliman, 2000; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006) which

influences their shopping behaviour and can lead them to spend more time and money in the retail outlet (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994).

2.4.4.1 The impact of lighting on consumer behaviour

Retailers configure lighting in their stores as visual stimuli to develop a suitable retail atmosphere for their target market (Kotler 1973-1974; Turley and Milliman, 2000) as it is argued to be the most dominant of all the senses (Hecht and Reiner, 2009).

There is general agreement in the literature that lighting can influence consumer behaviour. For example, Belizzi et al. (1983) discovered that customers preferred blue coloured lights over red, they were perceived as more relaxing; as a result, consumers would browse for more extended periods and promote purchase intentions. A store with appropriate lighting may persuade consumers to experience the store and create an urge to purchase more (Mohan et al., 2013). Other positive influences identified of a suitably designed lighting system in a retail store are that it can offer an added dimension to the interior, highlight key sales points, create an energising ambience and induce a positive effect (Hamrouni and Touzi, 2011).

Retailers may use lighting to achieve optimal levels of stimulation that will lead to more desirable consumer behaviour, so adding or reducing illumination to enhance a customer's experience would depend on the consumers optimal level of stimulation (Spence et al., 2014). This is particularly relevant to this study, as the researcher will explore the influence that dimmed lighting has on parents of autistic children in their store choice.

Critically although there have been many studies into the impact of lighting on consumer behaviour, this study addresses a significant gap as it looks at how dimmed lighting in these sensory shopping evenings influences the shopping behaviours of parents of children with ASD.

2.4.4.2 The impact of music on consumer behaviour

Shoppers respond to music on a psychological and behavioural level (Mohan et al., 2013) and it is one of the critical store ambient variables (Bitner, 1992; Baker, 1994), that can shape a shoppers behaviour (Milliman, 1982; 1986; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990). Numerous studies have shown that music can have a significant impact on a shopper's habits in terms of

sales, perceptions of time spent in the store, traffic flow and arousal (Turley and Milliman, 2000).

The auditory atmosphere in a store environment also will affect a customer's level of stimulation, mood (Alpert and Alpert, 1990) and emotions (Konecni, 2008), such that shoppers will spend more time in environments that they find pleasant (Spence et al., 2014). e.g. music turned up too loud could deter some groups of consumers from even entering a retail setting (Forsyth and Cloonan, 2008). It is shown that loud music is a significant irritant of shoppers (d'Astous, 2000), that it can cause physical discomfort (Bitner, 1992) and may induce a negative effect (Mohan et al., 2013). In the context of this study, this is important as over-stimulation through loud music may lead to a parent of a child with ASD in avoiding the store altogether as it could lead to this physical discomfort for their child.

The studies mentioned above demonstrate that the presence of music has an effect on consumer behaviour in a retail store, including increased time spent in the store. However, critically, studies into the absence of music to facilitate consumers with sensory needs have not been examined and represent a significant gap in the literature.

2.4.5 In-store behaviour with different shopping companions

It is not only the store environment that influences consumer shopping behaviour but also their choice of shopping companion. Underhill (2011) suggests that the person who accompanies the consumer on their shopping trip can influence the amount of time and money spent in a store. For example, women are less inclined to stay longer in a store when an impatient male partner or child accompanies them and prefer to shop with female friends or relatives.

Underhill (2009) recognises the vital link between more time spent in the store and a parent buying more and suggests that retailers should make children feel welcome as parents will follow. McSpadden (2015) concurs and asserts that if children enjoy themselves while shopping, their parents will spend more time in the store and buy more.

In conclusion, it is in the retailers best interest to ensure that parents of children with ASD who bring them shopping are providing minimum sensory stimulation in order for them to want to stay longer in the store and their parents spend more.

2.5 Conclusion

The literature review represents a critical and purposive examination of the literature addressing store atmospherics and environmental psychology. There is general agreement in the literature that a stores environment is made up of various elements; however, there is much debate on the exact composition and classification of these environmental dimensions.

The existing literature shows there is broad acknowledgement among academics that it is in a retailer's best interest to provide the most appropriate store environment (Donovan and Rossiter 1982, Donovan et al., 1994) if they wish to attract customers, have them spend more time in their store, browse more, give them shopping value (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Garaus, 2017) and benefit from improved store patronage (Baker et al., 2002).

In the case of parents of children on the autism spectrum, adapting the store environment is taking it to a more sensitive level for retailers. By providing a more sensory-friendly and enabling environment for these children (e.g. reduced lighting and no music), it will influence the extent that these shoppers feel welcome in a store (Baker et al., 2007), and help reduce the stigma associated with any inappropriate behaviour, by their autistic child in public, as deemed by other shoppers (Farrugia, 2009; Ryan, 2010; Gill and Liamputtong, 2011).

This makes commercial sense for retailers as the prevalence of autism in children is estimated at 1.5% of the population based on the number of children accessing special education services, and this is growing year on year (Dept. Of Health, 2018). This increasing prevalence rate strengthens the argument of Goodrich and Ramsey (2012) as they recognise that this segment is becoming more powerful and influential.

The researcher has identified a significant gap in the literature as there no specific peer-reviewed research conducted on how these sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children with autism. This gap in the literature represents an opportunity for the researcher to shed more light on the topic and empirical research will be conducted to facilitate a better understanding of how sensory shopping evenings influence the

shopping behaviour in parents of children with ASD. Specifically, this study will attempt to ascertain if sensory shopping evenings have changed consumer shopping behaviour, if they influence store choice and store loyalty, and how respondents feel overall about them.

As the author is a parent of a child on the autism spectrum, it is also an area which has an emotive context too. The next step in this study will be to outline the specific research question and objectives.

Chapter 3 – Research Question and Objectives

3.1 Research question

A review of the literature revealed a common theme which has shown the need to discover meaningful insights into whether or not Irish grocery retailer's sensory shopping evenings influence consumer behaviour, specifically of parents of children with ASD. Consequently, the main research question asks:

How do Irish grocery retailer's sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children who are on the autism spectrum in Ireland?

3.2 Research objectives

In order to answer the main research question adequately, the following sub-objectives were formulated from the literature review.

4. To evaluate if parents of children with ASD have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of Irish grocers' sensory shopping evenings.

A store's environment can predict a consumer's shopping behaviour, including shopping enjoyment, returning to the store, attraction, friendliness, time spent browsing, money spent and store exploration (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994). The first research objective will attempt to explore any changes in consumer behaviour of parents of children with ASD since these sensory shopping evenings were launched in the Irish grocery market.

5. To ascertain if these sensory shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD.

Baker et al. (1992) demonstrated that the shopping experience, as created by the store environment, is found to play an essential role in building a store's patronage. Objective two of this research seeks to understand if these sensory shopping evenings help determine where parents of children with ASD shop and if it influences their store loyalty.

6. To explore how parents of children with ASD feel about these sensory shopping evenings overall.

There has been some limited research into how parents of children cope with going to public places with their autistic children (Ryan, 2010). However, there was a significant gap in the

literature concerning how parents of autistic children feel about sensory shopping evenings, which the final research objective aims to address in an Irish grocery context.

In comparing the theory with practice, i.e. literature review findings with the real world, the researcher will gain a fuller understanding of how these sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD and be better placed to contribute useful knowledge to the literature.

The subsequent chapter explains the research methods used with these research objectives in mind.

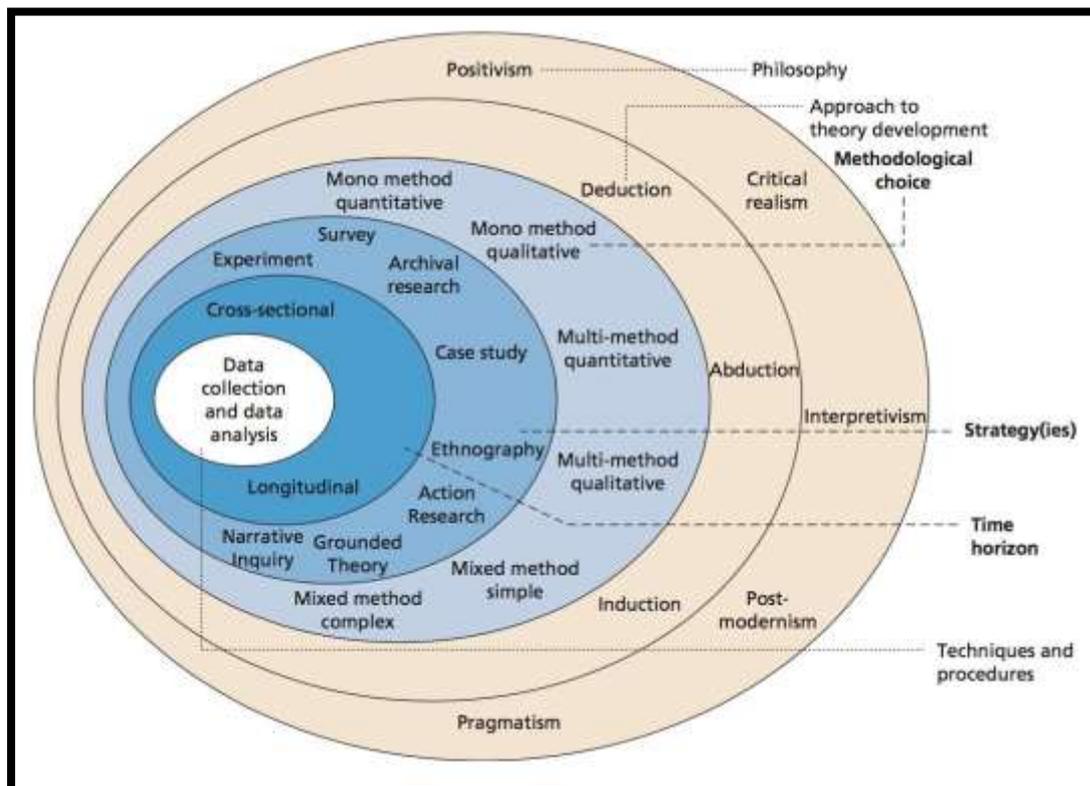
Chapter 4 – Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

After reviewing the relevant literature on the research topic, this chapter will provide a detailed discussion of the various methodological considerations behind this study. The research methodology refers to the theory of how research should be undertaken (Saunders et al., 2019), and it is the overarching approach or philosophy which will guide the research (Dawson, 2012).

To ascertain the most suitable research method to use in this study, the researcher referred to The Research Onion (Saunders et al. 2019, p. 130), which illustrates the entire research process. It offers a clear framework to determine which methods and strategies are most suited to address the research problem and reveals the stages through which the researcher must follow when piecing together an effective methodology.

Figure 4 - The research onion



Source: Saunders et al., 2019, p. 130

Within this research methodology chapter, the author will examine and discuss relevant theoretical research philosophies, the research approach, sampling methods used, data collection and analysis process, specific research limitations and ethical considerations pertaining to the study.

4.2 Research Philosophy

The term research philosophy is defined as *“a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge in relation to research.”*

(Saunders et al., 2019, p. 815). Put more simply; it refers to a person’s assumptions about how the world is perceived and how they come to comprehend it (Trochim, 2001). The adoption of a suitable research philosophy represents the starting point of the research process. According to Saunders et al. (2019), there are two fundamental research philosophies, namely, epistemology and ontology.

Epistemology is concerned with assumptions about knowledge, what constitutes acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge, and how we can communicate knowledge to others (Saunders et al., 2016). There are two main epistemological assumptions, namely positivism and interpretivism.

With the positivist view, the researcher is focused on collecting data about observable realities with the primary objective of establishing cause and effect relationships (Gill and Johnson, 2010). It is used extensively in the study of the sciences (Collis and Hussey, 2009) to justify knowledge through facts and pure data which is uninfluenced by human interpretation or bias (Saunders et al., 2019). In contrast, interpretivism challenges the positivist theorists’ beliefs, and it emphasises that humans are different from physical phenomena through its subjective nature. The interpretivist approach develops new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts. (Saunders et al., 2019).

Ontology is the study of reality or things that comprise reality (Slevitch, 2011). It is composed of two primary theoretical positions, objectivism and subjectivism. To explain the different meanings, objectivism *“incorporates the assumptions of the natural sciences and is independent of and external to social actors concerned with their existence”* (Saunders et al., 2019, p.133). In contrast, subjectivism *“incorporates assumptions of the arts and humanities*

and asserts that social reality is made from the perceptions and consequent actions of social actors” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 818).

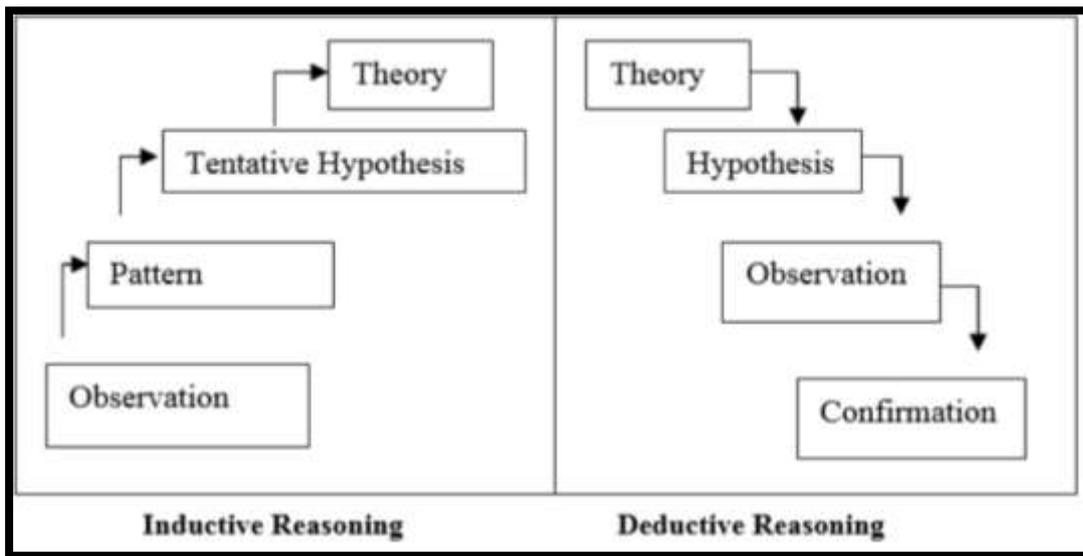
The researcher will employ an interpretive philosophy to the methodology for this research due to its subjective nature. The study wants to understand the world of the research participants (Cohen and Manion, 1994) through gaining insight into their backgrounds, beliefs and experiences (Creswell, 2003; Yanow and Schwartz-She, 2011). Specifically, this interpretive study wants to develop new richer understandings and interpretations (Saunders et al., 2019), of parents of children with ASD regarding their experience of Irish grocery retailers sensory shopping evenings.

4.3 Research Approach

Choosing the right research approach according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) is essential for three key reasons **1.)** it enables the researcher to take a more informed decision about research design, **2.)** it helps clarify what research strategies and methodologies will work and will not, and **3.)** by knowing the different research traditions the researcher can adapt the research design to cater for constraints.

In carrying out social research, there are two well-established ways of how to make valid assumptions and believable discoveries, namely the deductive and inductive approaches (Bell et al., 2019). The critical difference between the two approaches is that the inductive method focuses on exploring patterns or new phenomena, whereas the inductive approach concentrates on examining causality (Gabriel, 2013). The inductive approach has been likened to climbing a ladder starting upwards from observation to theory. In contrast, the deductive method is like a waterfall, starting from theory and going on a downward trajectory to confirmation (Bryman, 2015). **See Figure 5.**

Figure 5 – Inductive Vs deductive approach



Source: Adapted from Bryman, 2015

As this study is concerned with exploring and examining the feelings, experiences, and shopping behaviours of parents of children with ASD, an inductive research approach will be adopted. Some of the key strengths of using an inductive approach lie in the fact that it enables us to understand how humans interpret their social world and are more flexible than a deductive method (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.4 Research design and method

Saunders et al. (2019, p. 815) define research design “as the framework for collecting and analysing data to answer research questions and meet research objectives, providing reasoned justification for the choice of data sources, collection methods, and analysis techniques.”

The first methodological choice faced by the researcher at the research design stage is whether to use a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approach (Saunders et al., 2019). The fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative strategies are illustrated in **Table 2**.

Table 2 - Fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative research strategies

	Quantitative	Qualitative
Principal orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing of theory	Induction; generation of theory
Epistemological Orientation	Natural science model; in particular positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological Orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism/ Subjectivism

Source: Bryman, 2011

Silverman (2000, p. 8) asserts that the “*choice between different research methods should depend on what you are trying to find out.*” According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research is often associated with an interpretive philosophy, and by adopting this inductive approach will naturally lead to qualitative research design (Bryman, 2008). Qualitative research allows investigators to explore the experiences of individuals, develop a rich understanding of social phenomena (Tong et al., 2009), connect theory with research and tends to be more open rather than strict (Bell et al., 2019).

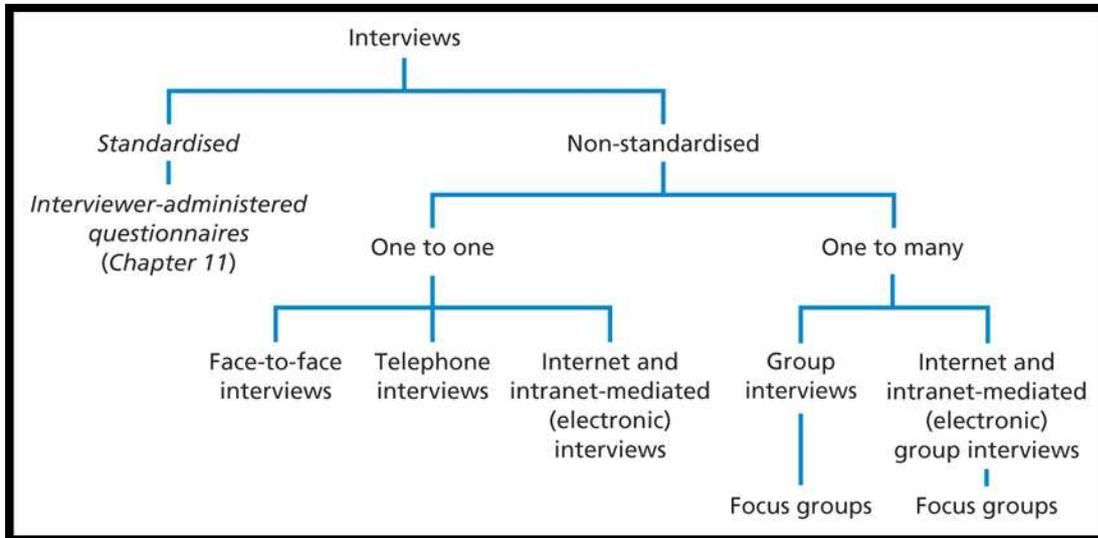
As this study adopted an inductive approach with an interpretivist philosophy, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable in exploring the feelings, experiences and shopping behaviours of parents of children with ASD concerning these sensory shopping evenings. This approach is in congruence with previous research, identified in the literature review, into parents’ experiences of caring for a child with ASD, which has in the main been conducted via qualitative research as exemplified by (Gray, 2002; Faruggia, 2009; Ryan, 2010; Gill and Liamputtong, 2011; DePape and Lindsay, 2015).

4.5 Data collection

The research instrument used to collect the data from this empirical research was semi-structured (non-standardised) interviews. An interview can be defined as “*a purposeful conversation between two or more people, during which the interviewer asks concise and unambiguous questions and listens attentively to the interviewee talking.*” (Saunders et al.,

2019, p. 434). The various interview structures available to the researcher are shown in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6– Interview structure



Source: Adapted from Saunders et al., 2019, p. 437

Although most semi-structured interviews occur on a face to face basis (Bell et al., 2019), this was not possible for this study, due to the social distancing protocols in place for COVID-19. Therefore, the researcher decided to adopt a telephone interview approach which consisted of eight semi-structured interviews with respondents, using an interview guide (see appendix). These responses were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis with the respondents' consent. The semi-structured interview approach was also used in the literature as exemplified by (Gray, 2002; Faruggia, 2009; Ryan, 2010; DePape and Lindsay, 2015). However, their research was not restricted by social distancing protocols, and they opted for face-to-face interviews.

The semi-structured telephone interview approach offers critical advantages to the researcher associated with access (e.g. travel distance, safety), speed and lower cost (Saunders et al., 2019). Although Vogl (2013) criticises telephone interviews for their limited scope for personal contact and their reliance on verbal and paralinguistic signals, other studies have shown that through their utilisation; **1.)** respondents produced more open and full accounts, **2.)** it facilitated respondent participation, **3.)** it allows respondents to move around their

environment during the interview, 4.) and due to its convenience, they enjoyed it more than a face-to-face one (Holt, 2010; Trier-Bieniek, 2012).

In summary, the rationale for choosing telephone interviewing was that it was safer for both the respondent and researcher to carry out these interviews over the phone due to COVID-19. Also, parents of children with ASD may have restricted access or mobility, so it was more convenient for them. Finally, it is possible that respondents felt more comfortable discussing their personal experiences with their children's ASD experiences via a telephone interview.

4.6 Research Sample

4.6.1 – Sampling technique

Due to the impracticality and time constraints of collecting data from the entire population for this study, it was necessary to select a sample. Saunders et al. (2019) identify two types of sampling, namely, probability and non-probability sampling. In probability sampling, each sampling unit in the defined target population has a known probability of being selected for the sample. In contrast, in non-probability sampling, the probability of selecting each sampling unit is not known (Hair et al., 2010).

The researcher used a non-probability sampling approach for this research as it allows one to be more specific when selecting a sample (Saunders et al., 2016). There are four main types of non-probability sampling, which include quota sampling, purposive sampling, volunteer sampling and haphazard sampling (Saunders et al., 2019).

Participants from this study were selected via a non-probability purposive sampling approach by the researcher. In this approach, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002; Lewis and Sheppard 2006). There are two types of purposive sampling, homogenous, i.e. respondents chosen to have similar characteristics and heterogeneous, i.e. respondents chosen have significantly diverse characteristics (Saunders et al., 2019).

As the participants of this study were asked to participate based on the researcher's knowledge that they were parents of children with ASD who have shopped in Irish grocery

retailers during these sensory shopping evenings, they represent a homogenous sample. The advantage of using homogenous sampling for this study is that it allows participants to be explored in greater depth and minor differences become more apparent (Saunders et al., 2019).

4.6.2 – Sample size and target population

The issue of sample size is ambiguous for non-probability sampling, and there are no set rules. However, with limited guidance, Saunders (2012) recommends that for a homogenous purposive sample that between four and twelve participants be selected. A limitation on purposive sampling is that it is often used when working with small samples and also that they cannot be considered statistically representative of the target population (Saunders et al., 2019).

This study sought to ascertain the views of the target population, which is composed of eight parents of children with ASD who have shopped during these sensory evenings in Ireland. The criteria for inclusion were parents of children with ASD, living in Ireland, and have experienced these sensory shopping evenings on more than three occasions. With respondents having sensory shopped more than three times, the researcher believed it would offer a more informed insight into the sensory shopping experience. The sample was accessible as the researcher is a member of numerous ASD parenting groups online and a member of several autism organisations.

Before conducting the interviews, following the advice of (Silverman, 2000), a pilot study was conducted with a parent with a child with ASD who used these sensory shopping evenings. This step helped identify any limitations or flaws with the interview design and allowed any necessary changes to be made before embarking on the study (Kvale, 2007).

4.7 Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis was carried out based on the interpretivist research philosophy and inductive approach, which underpins this study. The focus of data analysis for a qualitative research project can vary between analysing themes or topics, or focusing on actions or processes, and others on analysing language use (Saunders et al., 2019).

The analysis method best suited to review the collected data was determined to be thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis requires a researcher to search through their collected data to identify themes and patterns, which can then be coded for interpretation (Saunders et al., 2016). The six phases of thematic analysis are in **Table 3**.

Table 3 – Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarise yourself with your data	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples; final analysis of selected extracts; connecting the analysis to the research question and literature; producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: Adapted from Braun and Clark 2006, p. 81

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study as it offers a systematic yet flexible way to analyse qualitative data and is relatively straightforward to use (Saunders et al., 2019). Previous studies in the area of special needs research also used thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative data, as exemplified by (Gray, 2002; Ryan, 2010; Gill and Liamputtong, 2011; DePape and Lindsay, 2015).

4.7.1 Interview participation

Each interviewee name was kept anonymous by the researcher, and all data was retained under GDPR guidelines with the respondent's consent. The average interview time was 37 minutes; each interview was recorded with a dictaphone and transcribed manually into a word document. The researcher also took handwritten notes during the telephone interviews.

The boundaries of the data to be analysed refers to the telephone interviews transcription and handwritten notes by the researcher. The participants in the study were composed of six female and two male respondents. **See Table 4.**

Table 4 – Interview participants

Participant	Sex	Age	No. of Children with ASD	Gender of Child(ren) with ASD
Parent A	F	40	1	F
Parent B	M	38	1	M
Parent C	M	33	1	M
Parent D	F	38	2	M AND F
Parent E	F	39	1	M
Parent F	F	43	2	M AND M
Parent G	F	35	1	M
Parent H	F	45	1	M

4.8 Research limitations

One of the main constraints of this study was the limited amount of research conducted around these relatively newly introduced sensory shopping evenings and the ASD community. This lack of literature represented a genuine research gap for this study, but it did necessitate the author studying other disciplines such as psychology and the social sciences to develop a literature review as there was no specific literature available.

A second limitation relates to the small number of respondents in the study, which means the findings cannot be generalised to the overall population. This is recognised as a limitation of qualitative research overall (Saunders et al., 2019) and not solely to this project. However, this study does provide the foundations for further academic exploration on the topic.

A third limitation arose due to the impact of COVID-19 on the interviewing process. The researcher was forced to opt for telephone interviews due to social distancing, which offers limited scope for personal contact and are reliant on verbal and paralinguistic signals (Vogl, 2013).

The final limitation is that a qualitative research approach can be criticised due to a researcher's personal bias, background and values possibly affecting the study's findings during the collection

and interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2014). The researcher, throughout the process, was aware of this critical limitation and tried to minimise any subjective impact.

4.9 Ethical considerations

Research ethics is defined as “*the standards of behaviour that guide conduct in relation to the rights of those who become the subject of your work or are affected by it*” (Saunders et al., 2019, p. 815). Due to the sensitivity of the topic concerning parents of children with ASD, the author assured respondents that there would be complete anonymity of their identity and they can receive copies of their transcripts, recordings, and notes if they so wish. They were also informed of the option to pull out of interviews at any time and up to 14 days after the data had been collected

Participants were informed that the data was confidential and was solely to be used for a Master’s dissertation at the National College of Ireland (NCIRL). They were asked to sign the NCIRL consent form before the interview, which was emailed to each interviewee. Each telephone interview was recorded on a Dictaphone, and the digital file saved into a password protected folder in the cloud. The interview file was then deleted from the recorder after it was transferred and transcribed. All participation in the telephone interviews was voluntary. Each interviewee was assigned a letter from A-F to ensure no personal details were revealed, and all GDPR guidelines were followed by the researcher.

4.10 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to provide the rationale and operational details of the research strategy used in this study. As this research adopted an inductive methodology with an interpretivist philosophy, a qualitative approach via personal interviews were deemed the most suitable in exploring the feelings, experiences and shopping behaviours of parents of children with ASD concerning these sensory shopping evenings. The researcher opted to use telephone interviews as the research instrument, and the rationale for this choice and limitations of this method of data collection were examined and discussed. The reasons for choosing the specific sampling technique and size were detailed and thematic analysis being presented as the qualitative data analysis method. Ethical considerations and limitations of the study were also considered and documented. The next chapter informed by the research methodology will detail the findings based on the research objectives outlined in Chapter 3 of the study.

Chapter 5 – Analysis and Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reveals the findings of the eight telephone interviews carried out with parents of children with ASD between the 18th and 24th of July. Through the six-stage process of thematic analysis, as outlined in the previous research methodology chapter, the data will be analysed, themed and the findings summarised separately under the relevant research objectives. The views of respondents will be presented with raw data using the parents' quotations verbatim to support the research findings. The identity of interviewees will be protected using generic labels, e.g. (Parent A, Female, age 40).

5.2 To evaluate if parents of children with ASD have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of Irish grocers' sensory shopping evenings

The first research objective was to determine if parents had changed their shopping behaviour since these shopping evenings were launched. The researcher asked respondents about their grocery shopping experiences in general before and after these sensory evenings were introduced. Most parents had mentioned that their shopping behaviour had changed since the launch of these sensory shopping evenings, all in a positive way.

The following themes emerged from the telephone interviews analysis.

5.2.1 – Theme 1: More Accessible store environment improves inclusion

The first emerging theme from the discussions with interviewees was the fact that these sensory shopping evenings all offered a more accessible store environment for parents and their autistic children when going shopping, it was now more inclusive. To clarify, the inclusivity parents spoke about was that of their autistic children now being able to be included in the shopping trip with them. This theme was strong among all the participants who claimed their shopping behaviour had changed as a result of the enhanced inclusive nature of the shopping experience.

Parent E (Female, 39) claimed her shopping experience was less inclusive prior to the introduction of these sensory shopping evenings:

“It was a little bit of a nightmare; the lighting is very very bright and Rory has a complete dislike for it ...ehhmm it’s already difficult enough bringing a little boy with special needs into the shop anyway.”

However, she then contrasted with what it was like since they were introduced and the improved accessibility of the shopping experience:

“The environment in general is much more acceptable, it’s much more tolerable for Rory to bear and it’s just a more pleasant experience since they introduced these sensory evenings...you can now take Rory to the shop with you and that probably wouldn’t have been something I would have done before.”

Similarly, Parent A (Female, 40) mentioned the improved inclusivity that these sensory shopping evenings offer her family:

“We’re definitely able to include Abbey now in shopping...ehhmm I mean, before, like I said, it got to the point where one of us would do the shopping, and one of us would stay at home with Abbey...ehhmm because there was just no way we could bring her. I mean, now, with these evenings, when we know that they’re coming up, we don’t have to, I suppose, plan in advance so much for just doing the shopping....I mean she’s much more involved.”

5.2.2 – Theme 2: Lights and music impact

The second theme to become evident through these telephone interviews was the influence that the store’s atmosphere, especially the music and lights had on the parents shopping behaviour. However, it was noted by the researcher that not all the autistic children of these parents had sensory processing issues with music or lights in a store.

Parent B (Male, 38) felt that the lack of music and the dimmed lights make the shopping experience easier for him and his autistic son, he commented:

“Well, I felt that he’s more relaxed because before he was going in and the lights and the music and he’d be running off, but now he seems to be ehmm more calmer because there is no light and then the no music and it’s basically a lot easier.”

Another interviewee, Parent G (Female, 35) also had a similar positive experience with these reduced sensory inputs during these shopping evenings:

“It was much different with SuperValu with the lights turned down...ehhh he wasn’t kind of shielding his face in SuperValu and he wasn’t kind of wild as he used to be or putting his hands over his ears.”

Overall Parent A (Female 40) described the store atmosphere *“as much calmer”*, and as a result, their sensory shopping experience with their autistic child was expressed as *“everything kind of went according to plan.”*

5.2.3 – Theme 3: Time, Store exploration and money spent

One of the most robust themes that emerged during the conversations under this research objective was how these sensory shopping evenings had changed parents shopping behaviour in terms of greater store exploration, increased time in the store and more money spent.

As all of the parents felt that as their autistic children were more relaxed in the store environment, so were they. It allowed them to spend additional time in the store, browse and explore the store further and spend more money.

“I wouldn’t be in as much of a rush now as I was then, ehmm I find that I have more time. Before I would have been pushing myself to get around as quick as possible and get out the door. Now, I spend a little bit longer looking at all the stuff and other products.”

(Parent B, Male, 38)

“Definitely, I would say you spend time longer because you’re not rushing, and you know you can take your time there’s not going to be any big surprises or anything like

that. So, you definitely spend longer, and when you spend longer, you're definitely going to spend more on your things."

(Parent F, Female, 43)

"Instantly you are more relaxed, there is less people there, you can browse around more and you're not rushing...you enjoy it more."

(Parent C, Male, 33)

"Ehhhh...I'm probably more likely to browse a bit more instead of rushing around just to get everything and be in and out. I can have a little stroll without having to worry... I'd be able to look and find something that I actually wanted...I would be able to see if it was going suit me whereas before I wouldn't have been able to do that."

(Parent G, Female, 35)

"You can take your time a little bit more and relax and walk around or whatever."

(Parent D, Female, 38)

5.3 To ascertain if these sensory shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD

The second research objective was concerned with ascertaining whether these shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD. The following themes were uncovered throughout the interviews with respondents.

5.3.1 – Theme 1: Preference choice for stores

The first theme under this objective theme indicated that interview participants would choose a store that did offer these sensory shopping evenings over those that did not. Interview participants posited views that these sensory shopping evenings do influence their store choice when shopping.

“Well, I find that if people are having the sensory thing, I’d be more likely to go there than to go with somebody that wasn’t having this...ehmm I’d rather go there than go somewhere else because I’d like to take care of him.”

(Parent B, Male, 38)

Parent D (Female, 38) claimed that even travelling further to benefit from the sensory shopping would not be a problem, *“I don’t mind going the extra few miles to go to do the sensory shop.”* While, Parent H (Female, 45) stated that advertising influenced their decision on which store to choose *“It would a big influence. If that store wasn’t advertising this, I wouldn’t be inclined to go.”*

5.3.2 – Theme 2: Influence store loyalty

The second theme to become apparent among the majority of respondents was that sensory shopping evenings do make them more store loyal to those that offer them. The responses below clearly indicate the general consensus on the positive influence that these shopping evenings have on the store loyalty of respondents:

“I would have been more loyal to a shop that I would know that we’re going to be able to do this every week with less sensory stimulators definitely.”

(Parent F, Female, 43)

“Any businesses that are kind of aware and support autism awareness, I will try to support shops like that. I mean, I might have not initially gotten to them. I would tend to go back to them now, suppose, more than I would the shops that don’t do the sensory shopping...I would be more of a loyal shopper to the shops that do the sensory evenings.”

(Parent A, Female, 40)

Although there was no overall agreement in terms of their influence on all interviewees store loyalty, this was shown when Parent G (Female, 35) commented:

“This is going to sound awful, but I wouldn’t really have a loyalty to any shop. It’s whatever it is for me at the time. Whatever is going to suit me at the time, I’ll go with like whatever’s going to suit... I don’t think I’d have a loyalty to anywhere.”

However, later in the interview, the same interviewee, Parent G (Female, 35) contradicted her earlier claim when she stated that she is loyal to stores who offer these shopping evenings:

“I just try and kind of keep it to the same kind of routine and keep the places that have the sensory shopping and just do the same things that I normally would do.”

5.4 To explore how parents of children with ASD feel about these sensory shopping evenings overall

The final research objective was the exploration of how interviewees felt overall about these sensory shopping evenings. The subsequent themes were identified.

5.4.1 – Theme 1: Better customer experience

One of the strongest themes identified throughout the interviews was that all respondents mentioned that they benefited from an overall better customer experience, it was more enjoyable since the introduction of these sensory shopping evenings. They were all complimentary of the retailers who had introduced them and outlined their feelings with comments such as:

“Well, for me, I think it’s just the experience with Abbey and her being able to, I suppose, experience kind of a normality and a normal life. I mean, her being able to kind of enjoy it being calm throughout the entire process, that’s worth everything...it’s made a huge difference to our lives and I think definitely in Abbey’s life and her kind of ehmm, fulfilment.”

(Parent A, Female, 40)

“It’s nice and quiet and relaxed and you don’t feel that you have to just try and get out the door as quick as you can. So, definitely, a more positive experience and a big step in the right direction.”

(Parent F, Female, 43)

One parent, however, claimed that the better customer experience was short-lived, and it didn’t offer her the same benefits while shopping with her autistic children:

“It was good for the first few times when I went for the sensory experience, then I found they were getting as busy as a typical evening and I was like, ehmm this is not really working out anymore.”

(Parent D, Female, 38)

5.4.2 – Theme 2: Less stigmatisation

The second major theme under the third research objective was parents feeling less stigmatised since these sensory shopping evenings were introduced. This was a common theme among parents, they felt very strongly about it, it had impacted their shopping experience negatively prior to these shopping evenings, as they felt embarrassed, ashamed and stigmatised if their autistic child had a meltdown or were stimming, i.e. self-stimulating behaviours, usually involving repetitive movements or sounds.

“Before these evenings, if Alfie had a meltdown, ehmm, I’m feeling frustrated that I can’t help him and then I’m sad because other people are looking and even given not dirty looks but giving it that pissy look of, Oh, the poor woman, but still walking by you and no kind of helping you out...ehmm now though, ehmm it’s easier, less people, less stressful and the people there understand what you are going through, including the workers.”

(Parent G, Female, 35)

“If something just doesn’t go the way the child wants it to go, and it’s embarrassing for people, and it can be embarrassing and stressful for the parents as well. You are conscious of people around you as well. And then you just don’t want any negativity either because you could have somebody that might say something about the child like, if the child was screaming or lying on the ground, not understanding what was happening and somebody could say a negative comment, and that upsets everybody, ehmmm I don’t think its as bad now during these autism shops as it’s other autism parents...ehhhh shopping too.”

(Parent H, Female, 45)

“Back in the day, when you would be having the bad auld times in the shop, you would get a lot of stares and a lot of tutting, but ehhhh I think now people are starting to understand and cop on.”

(Parent C, Male, 33)

It is clear that these sensory shopping evenings provide a source of relief for parents as they feel less stigmatised when shopping.

5.5 Miscellaneous findings

Throughout the course of the research, there were other themes that emerged that fell out of the researcher’s question remit but represent important findings from an academic and real-world point of view. The other ancillary themes that emerged the researcher has grouped around three main areas **1).** Crowds and queueing **2.)** Other atmospheric variables **3.)** Lateness of sensory shopping evenings **4.)** Sensory shopping evenings as a PR exercise.

5.5.1 Crowds and queueing

The issue of having to queue with their autistic children or crowds in the store posed a problem before the introduction of these sensory shopping evenings for some parents. This was highlighted when Parent B (Male, 38) stressed his concern with the crowds in stores *“ehmmm crowds were a worry, ehmmm, what’s the best time to go was, would there be many around, so in my opinion, my major concern was more of the crowds”*.

Parent E (Female, 39) also thought overcrowding was a problem for them going shopping with their autistic child during normal shopping hours *“it was definitely worrying, ehmmm the shop themselves would be overcrowded”*.

When asked about the biggest challenges they faced before the sensory shopping evenings were introduced, Parent H (Female, 45) claimed: *“Oh, it would be definitely all the people for him, all the people around and the hustle and the bustle and the queues.”*

With a similar viewpoint, Parent F (Female, 43) stressed her frustration with queuing prior to the introduction of the sensory shopping evenings:

“You have to queue up...That doesn't go down well either, the queuing, nightmare because you could be there for like 15-20 minutes in a big queue and they just wanted to go, and it was a flashpoint.”

It was clear that crowds and queues also negatively affected the shopping experience of parents of children with autism when shopping prior to the sensory evenings.

5.5.2 Other atmospheric variables

It was not only the music and main store lights that caused concern for parents when shopping with their autistic children. Other atmospheric variables such as fridge and freezer noises and lights, staff restocking shelves and shopping trolleys being moved, also affected their shopping experience. Some of the comments are detailed below:

“The noise, he kind of notices...noises that I wouldn't hear like fridges or any kinds of buzzing or ehmmm the thing he could hear I couldn't, he'd have the hands over the ears then”.

Parent G (Female, 35)

“a lot of places took it as a chance to kind of stack up because it was quieter. So, it wasn't really quiet if you know what I mean. Somebody would think “Oh look, it's darker,” “Oh look, there's no music. Oh, it's great” whereas I knew sometimes I have to avoid fridges or freezers because of the sound because I couldn't bring him past the fridge or freezer because he'd just go absolutely berserk”I just found it wasn't

really quiet either. It was always stacking the shelves or dragging a trolley or whatever and it just wasn't the most fun anyway for them, if you know what I mean".

Parent D (Female, 38)

"light flashing of a fridge if a light was broken or if the milk fridges when the lights would be flashing on and off, that would be something that either he'd hate at the time, or he'd want to go over, and ehmm stand there for ages."

Parent H (Female, 45)

5.5.3 Lateness of sensory shopping evenings

When parents were asked to mention if there were any negatives to the sensory shopping experience, some of them mentioned the late time they were on in the evenings. Although all of the parents affirmed overall, they were hugely positive; these were the only negatives they mentioned during the interview. Some examples of this are outlined below:

"they do a sensory evening, I think, on Tuesday or Wednesday between 8 and 9. I think that's crazy because you're never going to go out with your child at that time... maybe in summer you might bring your child and you'd run in and get something but definitely not winter."

Parent H (Female, 45)

"The only thing would be the timing. I know it's difficult to get around. They're on usually quite late when our kids are so routine based, bedtime is bedtime. So, if you're going around Super Value at like 8 o'clock, it's not going to go down very well with them but, again, I understand why they have to do it that way that it's better to have a crap time than no time at all really."

Parent F (Female, 43)

Parent C (Male, 33) also thought that it was too late in winter to bring his son sensory shopping
"The only thing I would say negative is that during the winter it's probably just a little bit late."

5.5.4 Sensory evenings as a public relations tool

Another miscellaneous finding arose in response to the interview question “*Some people think that retailers have only introduced these shopping evenings for positive PR purposes....what do you think about that?*”, Respondents were quite vocal in their responses, and some disagreed strongly with that suggestion. Parent B (Male, 38) fervently opposed the veracity of the statement: “*I don’t agree with that one bit.*” Parent C (Male, 33) also thought that they were not a PR stunt: “*No. It would probably be PR if they rolled them, maybe once and then that’s it, but they didn’t do that, so eh...No...I think they are fantastic.*”. Parent D (Female, 38) stated: “*ehmm I just do not think that is the case.*”

Parent F (Female, 43) did not think that it fair to say that retailers launched the sensory shops for positive public relations purposes, but they were not overly concerned even if they were as they were benefiting from the initiative:

“I don't think it's fair to say that. I think that they could just easily said “We're not doing it. Why should we make the efforts? You have to buy your groceries anyway.” So, I wouldn't say it is fair to say that they're only doing it for PR. Even if they are, I don't care because it benefits us. So, I think that would be pretty unfair. They put a lot of time and effort into training their staff, their security staff. No, I wouldn't agree with that. It's not fair.”

Whereas Parent A (Female, 40) offered a more cynical view that they may be a PR exercise, but like Parent F (Female, 43) was happy to take advantage of it either way:

“Well, I think that the cynical side of me said that that could be it but, to be honest with you, I'll take advantage of it either way. I know a lot of places do kind of autism-friendly things, and I'm sure a lot of it is down to kind of PR but, like I said, regardless of the reason I'll take advantage of it either way.”

Two of the parents interviewed thought it might just be a bit of both and could see it from both viewpoints. Parent E (Female, 39) claimed that: “*I can see it from both sides. I can see what people are saying and the opinion that’s coming across.*” Parent E (Female 39), commented:

“I don't think it is only PR...Ehhh....Whatever their agenda of actually doing this, I think what it is creating is it's creating an environment by where everyone is becoming more aware of what autism actually is. So, I think, to be honest, whatever their agenda, whether for PR, it's educating people more, people are becoming more aware of what autism is. So, in general, it's two-fold. It's educating people, and it's PR.”

Parents seemed to lean more towards the opinion that they were not launched as a PR exercise solely, with some parents displaying the attitude that they could see both viewpoints on it, while others were just happy to benefit from the advantages it offered to their family when going shopping.

5.6 Summary of findings

This chapter offered a thematic presentation of the main findings from the telephone interviews with parents of children with ASD who have shopped during Irish grocery retailers sensory shopping evenings. These themes were interpreted separately against the research objectives detailed in Chapter 3. The study provided invaluable insights that parents have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of these shopping evenings, that they do influence parents store choice and store loyalty and that parents feel positively overall about their experiences when shopping during these sensory shopping periods.

The themes which emerged from this study resulted in some useful considerations for retailers. These will be discussed in alignment with existing theory and literature in the subsequent chapter. The researcher realised that from these interviews with parents of children with ASD that there is a need for further research, specifically regarding some of the miscellaneous findings that were uncovered during the research process, which will be mentioned in the recommendations for further research section of this study.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to comparing the findings from the telephone interviews with parents of children with ASD and discussing with extant literature from Chapter 2. For the purpose of a logical discussion, the findings will be presented based on each of the research objectives:

1.) to evaluate if parents of children with ASD have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of Irish grocers' sensory shopping evenings; 2.) to ascertain if these sensory shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD; 3.) To explore how parents of children with ASD feel about these sensory shopping evenings overall

6.2 To evaluate if parents of children with ASD have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of Irish grocers' sensory shopping evenings

It became clear from the primary research that parents of children with ASD had changed their shopping behaviour as a result of the introduction of sensory shopping evenings. These changes become evident through the themes identified which are discussed below.

6.2.1 Theme 1 - More accessible store environment improves inclusion

The research findings in this study concur overall with the view in the literature that it is in a retailer's best interest to provide the most suitable store environment if they wish to attract customers (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994). It suggests that consumers with disabilities should be comfortable in-store environments and not feel vulnerable (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999), these environmental factors can make special needs customers feel welcome or unwelcome based on their assessment of the servicescape as being enabling or disabling (Baker et al., 2007). Through better understanding of the sensory environment of children with ASD, it is easier to involve them (Manning et al., 2015).

In the findings, the importance of having special needs customers attracted to the store through a more enabling, welcoming, and less vulnerable atmosphere, was facilitated through a better understanding of the sensory environment. This was highlighted in the findings by Parent F (Female, 43) when she stated:

“It’s a very sensory environment, they have the music on, all the lights, the people, everything was a barrier, to be honest...now it’s nice and calm...Definitely turning off the music, dimming the lights, all of that definitely attracts autism families, especially with small children like ourselves.”

These findings also support the view of Goodrich and Ramsey (2012) in the literature that retailers need to identify any potential issues in advance of the visit of disabled consumers to a store and not adopt a reactive approach. The majority of parents expected that a more suitable environment would be provided on these sensory shopping evenings as this was a proactive measure specifically suited to the needs of the ASD community.

6.2.2 Theme 2 - Lights and music impact

The literature posits the importance for retailers to optimise the sensory stimuli in the store for customers as overstimulation or sensory overload (Beudeart et al., 2017) could lead to store avoidance (Helmefalk and Hultén, 2017). This study would appear to confirm the views of Spence et al. (2014), that stores use lighting to achieve optimal levels of stimulation that will lead to more desirable consumer behaviour. This was evident as Parent G (Female, 35) commented on the dimmed store lighting: *“when the lights being dimmed and stuff came in, ehmm, that was very helpful for us.”*

Music was identified as one of the critical store ambient variables (Bitner, 1992; Baker, 1996;) in the literature. However, there were no specific studies carried out into how the absence of music affects consumers with sensory needs. It is cited in the literature that loud music could be an irritant of shoppers (d’Astous, 2000) or could cause physical discomfort (Bitner, 1992). So the findings of this study tie in with the secondary research as the parents of children with ASD who have sensory processing disorders stated that the absence of this loud music or any music at all has led to less irritant and painful outcomes for their child. This was confirmed with the statement from Parent B (Male, 38) that *“that he’d be running off when the music was too loud or irritating”*.

Most of the interviewees in this study, who had children with sensory processing disorders, were now able to go to the store in the first place and stay in the shop longer as the dimmed lights, lack of music prevented any sensory overload for their autistic children.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Time, Store exploration and money spent

The existing literature shows there is broad acknowledgement among academics that it is in a retailer's best interest to provide the most appropriate store environment if they wish to have customers browse the store further and spend more money and time in their store, (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994; Garaus, 2017).

The primary research correlates strongly with the literature as all respondents asserted that the sensory shopping environment had influence either the amount of time browsing, money spent and further exploration of the store. Parent A (Female, 40) expresses this in her statement below: *“Definitely we’re taking our time, but I definitely spend more time in the shops now.,* and further affirmation from Parent E (Female, 39) with the claim that: *“The sensory evenings certainly do have a massive effect on how much I actually spend.”*

It was evident that parents shopping behaviour had changed significantly as a result of these sensory shopping evenings, as their autistic child was more relaxed. This facilitated them to spend additional time in the store, browse and explore the store further and in turn, spend more money.

6.3 To ascertain if these sensory shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD

The second research objective was to ascertain whether or not these sensory shopping evenings influenced the choice of store and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD. The following themes emerged preference choice of store and store loyalty influence, which will be discussed under the one heading due to their similarity.

6.3.1 Theme 1: Preference choice of store and store loyalty influence

In the literature, Baker et al. (1992) posited that the shopping experience, as created by the store environment, is found to play an essential role in building a stores patronage. The findings from this study tie in closely with this research. Most of the participants in the primary research indicated that these sensory shopping evenings did influence their choice of store and their loyalty towards that store.

In terms of store choice, participants were even willing to choose the store with sensory shopping evenings over others, regardless of whether they had their autistic child with them or if it meant travelling further. Parent A (Female, 40) commented:

“I suppose I would tend to frequent those shops more even with or without Abbey because I definitely want to support shops that are doing that...there would be shops closer to home but, again, I’d like to kind of, ehmmm like I said, support the shops that do that.”

Participants tendency to be more store loyal was also mentioned by a large number of parents in the study as a direct result of the introduction of these sensory shopping evenings. This was made clear when asked about the impact these sensory shopping evenings have on his store loyalty, Parent B (Male, 38) asserted: *“I think it’s having a massive impact. I’d rather go there than go somewhere that’s not helping the child.”*

Overall, the primary research shows that these sensory shopping evenings do play a crucial role in building store patronage among parents of children with ASD.

6.4 To explore how parents of children with ASD feel about these sensory shopping evenings overall

The final objective of the research was to explore how parents of children with ASD felt about the sensory shopping evenings overall. The following themes emerged.

6.4.1 Theme 1: Better customer experience

The literature states that retailers must move beyond a product focus to one offering an enhanced customer experience (Spence et al., 2014), they should design retail environments that offer unique shopping experiences (Petermans et al., 2013) which are specific to their target markets (Turley and Chebat, 2002; Hultén, 2011).

In light of this previous research, this study shows that by adapting the environment to suit their target market, in this case, parents of children with ASD, this will facilitate a better customer experience for the ASD shopping community. The findings in the primary research

show that this is the case, as Parent C (Male, 33) mentioned concerning the sensory store environment that:

“Ohhh definitely, without a doubt you enjoy it more because you’re calmer. You’re not on tender hooks and it’s nobody’s fault, we’re all in the same boat at the end of the day, ya know.”

This strategic fit through targeting has given parents of children with ASD a more tailored and unique shopping experience, specific to them. All the respondents except one had reported an enhanced customer experience while doing their shopping as a result of this paradigm shift by retailers from a product focus to improved customer experience.

6.4.2 Theme 2: Less stigmatisation

Stigmatisation is a re-occurring theme in the literature for parents of children with ASD (Ryan, 2010). It is the normal appearance of the autistic child and lack of public knowledge about the disorder which may mean parents of children with ASD experiencing some hostile public reaction to any inappropriate behaviour by their child (Faruggia, 2009; Ryan, 2010; Gill and Liamputtong, 2011), which in turn can cause parents to feel embarrassed or avoid specific outings such as shopping as a group (Voysey, 1972; Gray, 2002).

The primary research directly correlates with the literature, as many of the parents interviewed had stated that they felt upset, stigmatised, and embarrassed if their child had a meltdown or indulged in what other people deemed to be inappropriate behaviour. Critically, as there was no secondary research available in the literature around the effects of these sensory shopping evenings, this primary research has also indicated that these sensory shopping evenings have lessened the stigma associated for parents regarding their child’s behaviour.

This is clear from the observation from Parent F (Female, 43) below:

“now when you’re going into the sensory shop, you know you’re going into an environment where people know that your child is autistic, that you’re not shit parents... and if they do happen to have a meltdown, it’s not the end of the world

because people there understand what's going on and it's not that they're just trying to get attention."

Other parents who had experienced this stigmatisation also felt the same that there was a higher level of understanding, acceptance and less judging when they go shopping during these sensory shops. This is further explained by Parent E (Female, 39):

"I'm no longer stressed going shopping with Rory using the sensory evening, and my shopping behaviour is more enjoyable and I actually get to spend a little bit of time with Rory because the environment is more suitable to his specific needs."

One of the most conclusive findings that emanated from this study was that parents of autistic children feel less stigmatised when using these sensory shopping evenings. It was one of the strongest themes uncovered from this qualitative research.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

The overall goal of this study was to explore how sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children who are on the autism spectrum. The specific research objectives were advanced from the literature, and the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach using telephone interviews. The primary data was analysed using thematic analysis which enabled the author to enhance his understanding of the influence that retailers' sensory evenings have on the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD. Limitations of this research were identified as; **1.)** scarcity of research literature on this topic, **2.)** small sample size, **3.)** inability to carry out face to face interviews due to COVID-19 and, **4.)** the emotional connection of the researcher with the subject matter.

A comprehensive literature review emphasised the salience of retailers providing the most suitable store environment to their customers if they wish to attract and retain customers. Several seminal authors have contributed to the literature in this field including, Donovan and Rossiter (1982), Donovan et al. (1994), Baker et al. (2002), Spence et al. (2014), Garaus (2017). The literature review also delved into the sociology and health disciplines as ASD is a neurological disorder, principal authors to be acknowledged for their pioneering studies around autism and its impact on families, include Gray (1993, 2002), Faruggia (2009), Ryan (2008, 2010) and DePape and Lindsay (2015).

Through thematic analysis, the author identified significant themes from the eight telephone interviews, which then led to the interpretation of the data and its comparison against the literature.

The first objective of the study was to evaluate if parents have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of these sensory evenings. The findings strongly indicated that parents had changed their shopping behaviour. Parents now found the store environment far more accessible and relaxing to bring their autistic children shopping. As a result, they spend a longer time shopping, exploring and browsing the store and crucially from a retailer's perspective they spend more money.

The second objective of the research was to ascertain if these shopping evenings influenced their store choice and store loyalty of parents of autistic children when shopping. The results once again demonstrated that the majority of parents interviewed would be highly influenced in their store choice and their store loyalty towards retailers that offer these sensory shopping evenings over those that do not. The findings suggest that it is critical for retailers to continue to offer and even expand the times of these sensory shopping evenings as they have a positive influence on where parents of autistic children shop even when they do not have their children with them. Retailers should be cognisant that this group of parents consider themselves extremely loyal to the stores who offer these sensory shopping evenings.

The third objective focused on exploring how parents of children with ASD feel about sensory shopping evenings overall. The themes that emerged from this study were that parents overall felt hugely positive about the better customer experience they were enjoying, and there was less stigmatisation involved when shopping. By further facilitating this group of customers with more sensory shopping evenings, it will, in turn, enhance the reputation of the store and could offer a significant point of difference in their service offering, as not all Irish retailers offer these sensory shopping hours.

During the interviews, there were several miscellaneous findings that the research uncovered around retailers sensory shopping evenings. Although these results were out of the research question remit, they are important findings from both an academic and a real-world point of view. The main miscellaneous themes that were derived from the interviews included; parents being concerned with crowds and queues when shopping with their autistic children, the influence of other atmospheric variables affecting their shopping experience, the late times the sensory shops were on, and the mostly positive opinion that these shopping evenings were not a PR exercise by retailers.

However, the PR question was not universal in agreement among parents interviewed, and there was some slight cynicism, but also impartiality. The impartiality of these parents can be attributed to their view that these shopping evenings are a huge step forward for their families when going shopping compared to their historical shopping experiences before their launch.

These findings definitely warrant further research. Retailers should take notice that parents would like earlier sensory shopping times, having them on more frequently, and for retailers

not to use them as shelf stacking exercise. By retailers doing so, it will assure parents that their needs are being more fully met as a valued customer segment and these shopping evenings are not just for positive PR purposes.

Overall, the central question of this study was: *How do Irish grocery retailer's sensory shopping evenings influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children who are on the autism spectrum in Ireland?*

This study has found that Irish grocery retailers shopping evenings positively influence the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD. This customer segment, through this research, has shown that a suitable store environment will facilitate them bringing their autistic child(ren) shopping with them, as it makes it a more relaxed, enjoyable, and less stigmatised experience for everyone. This was not really possible beforehand as sensory overload was common, and this group of parents were restricted in bringing their autistic child(ren) shopping. If they did, they were always prepared for a meltdown or having to leave the store prematurely due to sensory overload.

In addition, and crucially for retail marketers, this study has shown that these parents overwhelmingly indicate that it would positively influence their store choice and store loyalty when doing their grocery shopping. This study concludes that sensory shopping evenings are commercially beneficial to Irish grocery retailers, and it is in their best interest to provide them to this increasingly influential and growing customer segment.

7.2 Recommendations for further research

It has been noted throughout the research that this is a relatively new area for academics to explore, so although this study has contributed to new knowledge, there is broad scope to further develop and enhance this research. The researcher has detailed the limitations of this research, one of which was the small sample size, which limits the generalisation of the findings to the entire population. Therefore, one recommendation would be to conduct a similar study with more respondents to determine if similar results materialise.

A second recommendation around the sample would be to expand or complement this proposed study by examining how these autism quiet evenings affect adult shoppers who are on the autism spectrum too. There are many people who are autistic but are considered high

functioning. As such, they do their grocery shopping themselves, so this could offer further insights into the whole area through the vignette of an autistic adult. The researcher contacted Ireland's National Autism Charity and Advocacy organisation (ASIAM) through the course of this research who advised that there is a UK based research charity call Shaping Autism, who have developed a comprehensive package for including autistic people in academic research, where the sample for such a study could possibly be sourced.

Another recommendation for further research would come in the form of more in-depth research with parents of children with ASD, as there were supplementary themes that emerged from the primary research, some were mentioned in the findings but not covered in the discussion as they were outside the researcher's remit. However they are important and represent academic and real-world value, this further research could come under the headings of; **1.)** how queuing and crowds impact the shopping experience of parents of autistic children, **2.)** the irritation of noises throughout the shopping experience, e.g. freezer and fridge buzzing sounds, checkout noise which may be heightened for children with sensory processing disorders **3.)** impact that trolleys being wheeled in by staff and the restocking of shelves **4.)** influence of other people on the shopping experience, e.g. staff and other customers **5.)** store accessibility and parking, parents chose to pick stores who had easy access, so in the event of a meltdown or the child running off, there was an easier and safer way to exit the store **6.)** the positive impact technology could have, e.g. self-scanning shopping trollies. **7.)** how convenient the time that these evenings take place is for parents of autistic children. **8.)** customers perceptions on these evenings being a PR exercise.

Finally, further research could be undertaken, both primary and secondary, with the retailers themselves to determine any additional, non-confidential insights into the influence sensory shopping evenings have on Irish consumers. The researcher contacted all the Head Offices of the retailers who are offering these sensory shopping evenings, however only received a reply from one and spoke informally to the Corporate Social Responsibility Manager who was very interested in the study. Although confidential information may not be shared, mutually beneficial insights could be if that was the focus of the study for future research.

7.3 Self-reflection

The dissertation journey for this MSc in Marketing has brought a roller coaster of emotions to the author, highs, lows and in-betweens. It began with trying to think of a topic that was not just run of the mill to get a grade and move on. The author wanted to choose something he

was passionate about and more importantly, to try to genuinely offer new insights with a worthwhile piece of research, something that may be relatively untouched in the literature.

As a parent of a child with autism and working in retail marketing, it was the thought to marry the two together to form a dissertation topic. The author knew very little about autism until the diagnosis of his son when he was two and a half, and as the saying goes, “*when you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism*”, each individual has their own unique characteristics, beautiful in one sense, frustrating in others and many other adjectives along the way. It was my little boy’s inspiration that led to the idea being born to investigate the influence retailers sensory shopping evenings have on the shopping behaviour of parents of children with ASD. The author was enthused to learn that there was a massive gap in the literature, as sensory shopping was so new, research was so very scarce in the field.

This was exciting on the one hand but also quite daunting, as it was so unique, it provided challenges around sourcing peer-reviewed research in the area. This proved to be the biggest obstacle, where was the literature review to be derived from? Which leads to the next section of what would the author advise other students embarking on their dissertation journey? What the researcher has learned can be surmised in five points, and this would be the advice I would pass on if asked; **1.)** Start thinking about your dissertation topic early in your college career **2.)** Speak to all the lecturers you can, fellow students, family and friends about what the initial dissertation idea is, they may have an angle or suggestion that you may not have thought of **3.)** Pick a topic you are genuinely passionate about; this was crucial. Be ready to down routes that may seem a little obtuse, I never imagined having to read psychology, sociology and health articles when I started out **4.)** It is not easy, lots of blips on the road, but do not give up, keep your chin up no matter what setback comes your way **5.)** It will make you realise just how precious your loved ones are as they support you through the process, so they will deserve the biggest of hugs when it’s all over.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE PAGE 1

Interview opening

Reminder on what research is about and look to establish rapport over the phone with the interviewee. Assure them of anonymity and confidentiality.

Objective 1 - To evaluate if parents of children with ASD have changed their shopping behaviour since the introduction of Irish grocers' sensory shopping evenings.

*****Behaviour pre the introduction of the shopping evenings*****

Q.1) To start with could you please tell me about about your experiences of going out shopping with your autistic child(ren) before these Sensory shopping evenings were introduced? **Researcher Probes on** – What were they like overall? Bad and Good Experiences?

Q2.) What were the main factors that influenced your grocery shopping behaviour before these sensory shopping evenings? **Researcher Probes on** – Where you went? How did you manage? When did you go? Why were they the main factors?

Q3.) What were the main challenges/issues you faced when shopping with your autistic child(ren)?

*****Post Introduction of Sensory Shopping evenings*****

Q4.) Can you tell me about your experiences of going out shopping with your autistic child(ren) after these Sensory shopping evenings were introduced?

Researcher - Lots of probes here – TBC

Q5.) Do you think your shopping behaviour has changed since you started using these shopping evenings? **Researcher Probes on** – **If yes**, in what ways has it changed? **If No**, why has it not changed? **Also** (Ask about influence on below if not mentioned)

- a. Shopping enjoyment?
- b. Time spent in the store?
- c. Exploration of the store?
- d. Money spent in the store?

INTERVIEW GUIDE PAGE 2

Objective 2 - To ascertain if these sensory shopping evenings influence the store choice and store loyalty of parents of children with ASD.

Q1.) Retailers believe that with no music, reduced noise and dimmed lighting this is beneficial to attract shoppers from the ASD community to their store. Tell me how you feel about that statement?

Q2.) What influence (if any) do you think these sensory shopping evenings have on your choice of store when doing your grocery shopping?

Q3.) What factors influence you the most when choosing a store when going out shopping with your autistic child(ren)?

Q4.) What impact (if any) do you think these sensory shopping evenings have on your loyalty to the store that is offering them? **Researcher Probes on – If a positive**, would they always carry out their weekly shopping with this retailer during these evenings? Would they consider themselves store loyal? **If negative**, Why are they not an influence?

Objective 3 - To explore how parents of children with ASD feel about these sensory shopping evenings overall

Q1.) How has your shopping experience changed since the introduction of these sensory shopping evenings? **Researcher probes on –** Has it become easier? More convenient? Has it reduced the stress involved? Fewer meltdowns?

Q2.) Some people think that retailers have only introduced these shopping evenings for positive PR purposes....what do you think about that?

Q3.) In your experience, can you tell me about any negative things about these sensory shopping evenings?

Q4.) What is the most positive thing about these sensory shopping evenings for you?

Q5.) Would you be able to tell me about anything else you think retailers can do to facilitate better the shopping experience for parents of children with ASD?

The closing question I think that is all I had to ask you about, is there anything else you would like to comment on or add concerning this topic?

*****Stop the recording device, thank the interviewee for their time. Ask if they have any questions about the research process*****

SAMPLE OF RAW DATA

Raw data from the telephone interview with Parent F (Female, 43)

I mean, from where we started, things have changed so much fantastically really and shopping is so much easier than it was before.

Darren: The next section is just going to talk about if your shopping behavior has or hasn't changed since you started using the shopping evenings, can you tell me about that please?

Parent F: Definitely, I would say you spend time longer because you're not rushing and you know you can take your time there's not going to be any big surprises or anything like that. So, you definitely spnd longer. And when you spend longer, you're definitely going to spend more on your things. That's the other thing about the scanner. You know exactly how much you're spending and the home delivery. So, you can't go to the thing and get the shock your life because you picked up 20 bars of soap from Africa or something like that. So, yeah, you would spend longer and you would spend more, I reckon, definitely but if the other shops were to pick up on the what you call it the barcode thing, scanning shop, I think they'd get a bigger share of the autistic family market. Also, deliveries, now Super Value do deliveries now as well. So, you have a bit of choice there. I think that those things really help as well.

Raw data from the telephone interview with Parent B (Male, 38)

Interviewer: What impact, if any, do you think these sensory shopping evenings have on your loyalty to a store that's offering them?

Brian: I think it's having a massive impact. I'd rather go there than go somewhere that's not helping the child.