A SIZE BIGGER: LOCATION PREFERENCES OF FASHION RETAILERS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Reflection on the research process

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REFLECTION ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

This section presents a reflection on the research process in order to discuss how and why the approach did or did not work and to ultimate draw lessons in retrospect.

Research period before P2

The first phase of the research process was aimed to write a sound research proposal, with a demarcation of the scope and a preliminary literature study. During this first period I had chosen a too broad scope: the retail sector and its current trends. As such, writing a coherent proposal became very difficult to say the least. The main critique was a lack of focus.

In order to bring more focus in the research proposal, I have read ten scientific articles with a clearly defined scope and in which the research focusses on only a few variables. The article of Guenzi and Troilo (2007) “The joint contribution of marketing and sales to the creation of superior customer value”, has especially helped in finding the focus in my research proposal. This article focusses on a specific subject (company) and six criteria. As a result I have changed the scope of the research proposal into: fashion retailers as the subject, and their selection criteria for new store locations as seven main variables. Furthermore, central and supporting areas are chosen as the main areas of focus. See figure 54 for the conceptual models of the research proposal.

Figure 1. Conceptual models P2 (above the model without focus, and below the model with focus) (ill. author).
Research period before P4

The subsequent period was aimed at conducting the empirical research. I have chosen a cross-sectional study design with a case study element. The research strategy is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The final research design is presented in figure 54.

Figure 2. Final research design (ill. author).

This research design has proven to be successful in answering the research questions. However, there are some aspects of the research design that could have been improved in retrospect.

Firstly, this study primarily focuses on the development of the fashion supply in central retail areas, on the one hand, and supporting retail areas, on the other hand. Because of the limited time of this period (8 weeks) both the interviews and the quantitative study (the cases studies) had to be conducted parallel of each other. As a result the case studies were conducted right from the start. However, both the quantitative analysis and the interviews revealed that there are striking changes in the supply when a comparison is made between cities, as opposed to central versus supporting centres. Even within the top-17 largest Dutch retail agglomerations the supply shows different developments. Cities such as Amsterdam and Haarlem are witnessing a strong increase while other prime cities, such as Breda or Alkmaar have witnessed a decline of the fashion supply. It seems that there are insights about the location preferences of fashion retailers to be found when assessing solely central retail areas: e.g. small and midsized against large prime cities. As such, the case studies could provide knowledge about why fashion retailers are leaving certain central areas. For example, it would be interesting to choose two large cities, such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam with a strong increase of the supply on the one hand, and Breda or Alkmaar with a decreasing fashion supply on the other hand.

Secondly, for the interviews both consultants and retailers with over 10 years of experience in the retail (real estate) sector were asked to participate. However, it was very difficult to convince the professionals from the
retail organizations to participate in this study. For example, organizations such as H&M have the policy to always decline graduation projects. As a result, only five professionals were interviewed in this study instead of the desired eight. Furthermore, planning the interviews has also been more difficult than expected. The reason is primarily the very busy schedule of the participants, which resulted in a couple of rescheduled interviews. Especially the period of only 8 weeks makes it very difficult to find the right interview participants, schedule the interviews, write the transcripts, and write down the insights. It would have been more workable if the interviews were planned September and not in October.

Thirdly, an important part of the interview was primarily aimed to reveal a ranking of the most important selection criteria among fashion retailers. During the interview rounds it became clear that location was the most important criteria, as one could expect in the real estate sector. However, the interview participants were not very eager to rank the other selection criteria: competition, store characteristics, economic factors, population structure, magnet and saturation. According to the interviewees, the different selection criteria in the post-crisis have become more important altogether as fashion retailers have become highly demanding. As such, it became clear that a list of the most important criteria for a nationwide and local assessment was more insightful, as opposed to a ranking in importance. The result is that the ranking of the selection criteria has been omitted from the research results.

Fourthly, in the interview rounds during the first set of questions, the participants spoke mostly about building characteristics. During the second set of questions, the participants spoke mostly about the nationwide location preferences. By switching these two sets of questions, the interview results would have been more logical to analyse. Starting with the selection criteria from a nationwide view (cities and regions) and subsequently focussing on selection criteria on object level (buildings).

Lessons

The research process of this graduation project has taught me some important lessons of conducting research. Firstly, the research project needs to have a clearly defined and focused scope. Otherwise, the student will be overwhelmed with all available information that has the slightest relation with the problem. Focusing on a few variables brings this focus to the research.

Secondly, it is important to aim for results early in the research process. As such, striking insights or dead ends will be revealed early in the process. When dead ends or striking unknown insights are revealed, the student can adapt the research questions or research design in order to improve the overall research project and ultimately aim for better research results.