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Organizational climate for innovation and creativity – a study in Swedish retail organizations

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ABSTRACT

Innovation in retailing is under-investigated in academia and yet a highly relevant concern given the current changes in the retail landscape. Although retailing is often characterized by a dynamic and highly competitive environment, retail organizations are not often considered as ‘innovative,’ at least when compared with manufacturing industries, or when using existing innovation frameworks in academic literature. There are many aspects of innovation discussed in literature and a need to consider different ways of looking into retail’s innovativeness. Among them, the importance of organizational climate on influencing creativity and innovation may help explain how to enable innovation in service organizations, such as retailers. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the climate for innovation and creativity and examine how retail organizations perceive it. We applied a mixed-methods approach using an established organizational climate survey and semi-structured, one-on-one interviews regarding the innovation climate and other aspects of innovation management in the companies. The study shows that despite retail organizations still struggling to incorporate innovation on a strategic level and move beyond incremental developments in their operations, retailers score positively on being innovative regarding certain dimensions of the organizational climate survey. This indicates that retailers (especially conventional ones) could benefit from challenging current practices and moving towards becoming more active and strategic innovators since their organizational climate to a certain extent allows for it. Respondents within the organizations also express a need for better innovation support, whether it is through established structures and processes or an improvement in the current conditions of the organizational climate. How retailers could enable themselves to become more active innovators – based on what we know that retailers look more towards entrepreneurship and continuous development as a driving force rather than formalized innovation practices per se – is a potential avenue for further research.

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Introduction

The ability of an organization to adapt and develop to a changing environment is crucial for survival. This is especially true with the onset of disruptive changes when the ability and capacity to innovate becomes more important than ever. Understanding innovation in retailing is therefore a relevant concern given the current changes in the retail landscape. There are many aspects of innovation discussed in the literature (e.g. Damanpour and Aravind 2006; Crossan and Apaydin 2010) especially in domains (such as manufacturing) where innovation research has had longer traditions. Among them, many scholars have stressed the importance of organizational climate on influencing creativity and innovation (e.g. Amabile and Grysiewicz 1989; West 2002).

In this study, we particularly look upon the organizational climate for creativity and innovation in retail organizations. Retail has always been evolving, but even more so in today's landscape, where the processes of change have become faster and more complex due to unprecedented competition and uncertainty brought about by overarching trends, such as digitalization and globalization (Burt 2010; Dawson 2001; Reynolds and Cuthbertson 2014). These developments are challenging traditional retail and thus, there is an ongoing discussion on the relevance of innovation and how retail can survive disruption (Wessel and Christensen 2012). Moreover, while consumers are still the crucial drivers of innovation in retail, it is essential to pay attention to skills and technologies from the supply side (Sundström and Reynolds 2014). Retail innovations, however, have mostly been coupled to the operational level, and are usually not a strategic concern (Olsson and Johansson 2016). According to Hristov, (2007; see also Sundström and Reynolds 2014) certain characteristics of retail innovation that make it distinct from other sectors include: their intermediary role in the value chain which facilitates two-way diffusion of innovation, highly visible innovations that are easy to imitate by competitors, predominance of consumer-facing and non-technological innovations, innovations having 'hybrid characteristics' in terms of management (i.e. reflecting the complex nature of retail output), and innovations having a 'reverse innovation cycle' compared to development and investment cycles in manufacturing.

Additionally, despite the need for change and adaptation, research about retail innovation is relatively limited, under-investigated and fragmented (Hristov and Reynolds 2015). This study thus contributes with a systematic look at retail innovation, with special emphasis on organizational climate for innovation and creativity. Even though retail organizations do not appear to organize themselves in a structured or systematic way for innovation, nor use the terminologies of innovation (Hristov and Reynolds 2015; Paredes et al. 2018), it is of interest to investigate other ways wherein innovative activity is supported and enabled, one of which is through the climate. The growing importance of innovation and its management in retailing presents an opportunity to investigate organizational climate – particularly regarding innovation and creativity. Thus, we aim to evaluate the climate for innovation and creativity and examine how it is perceived within retail organizations.

Innovation and change in the retail industry

Different retail life cycle models have been proposed in order to help understand retail institutional transformation (e.g. McNair 1958; Hollander 1960; Davidson, Bates, and

Bass 1976). These theories have been reinvestigated in the light of developments in retail practice and literature (see, e.g. Davies 1992; Evans 2011; Reynolds et al. 2007). However, relatively newer investigations on retail innovation practices, moving beyond the aspects of retail evolution and institutional change, have been made in varied areas of interest. Examples include: barriers to retail innovation (Reynolds and Hristov 2009), drivers and trajectories of retail innovation (Gallouj 2008; Pantano 2014), retail business model innovation (Sorescu et al. 2011), innovation in retail internationalization (Lowe and Wrigley 2009), innovation capability in the context of retail channel management (Tuominen and Hyvönen 2004), and innovations in specific functional areas like shopper marketing (Shankar et al. 2011), pricing and promotions (Grewal et al. 2011).

Hristov and Reynolds (2015) proposed categorizations of retail innovations according to impact (e.g. strategic versus operational) and application areas (e.g. offer-related, support-related, organization-related), as well as matrices for innovation performance measurement (e.g. financial and non-financial metrics at various levels of accountability). Moreover, they discussed perceptions of innovation in retailing, discovering a wide range of meanings and interpretations among practitioners. According to Hristov and Reynolds (2015):

Respondents acknowledged that innovation – be it a “behavior” or “outcome” – is invariably embedded in organizational cultural norms, beliefs and values. Many also therefore spoke of: “innovativeness” as “achievement-oriented behavior”, or an “innate drive to succeed” strongly conditioned by an “organizational culture of creative freedom” within a strategic framework. (p.133)

The importance of organizational culture (and presumably, climate) was mentioned in their research, though it was not explored further. Moreover, as Schaffers et al. (2011) have reported, innovation in retail is ‘part of the daily work and business environment rather than a dedicated activity’ and that humans are still the main carriers of innovation. As retailers seem to interpret and enable innovation in different ways, one of which is innovativeness in terms of internal (organizational) culture and climate, we suggest that investigating this topic further could help in better understanding the phenomenon of innovation in the domain of retailing.

Climate for creativity and innovation in organizations

Broadly speaking, innovation (at the organizational level) refers to the creation or adoption of new ideas or behaviors (Daft 1978; Amabile 1988; Damanpour and Evan 1984). Developing innovations in an organization often involves an ambiguous and uncertain journey, but although management cannot ensure innovation success, it can certainly influence its odds (Van de Ven et al. 2008). Anderson, Potočník, and Zhou (2014) propose the following integrative definition of creativity and innovation:

“Creativity and innovation at work are the process, outcomes, and products of attempts to develop and introduce new and improved ways of doing things. The creativity stage of this process refers to idea generation, and innovation refers to the subsequent stage of implementing ideas toward better procedures, practices, or products. Creativity and innovation can occur at the level of the individual, work team, organization, or at more than one of these levels combined but will invariably result in identifiable benefits at one or more of these levels of analysis.” (p. 1298)

According to Tidd and Bessant (2014), the innovation process in organizations needs to be managed in a systematic or integrated way, which would require strategic leadership and direction (e.g. innovation strategy), building an innovative organization (e.g. the structure and climate that enables people to innovate), and networking for innovation (e.g. both internal and external collaboration). Thus, investigating the organizational climate is clearly not an isolated endeavor as it relates to parallel concepts such as leadership and direction, resources, and collaboration, for instance.

The concept of organizational climate is fuzzy and complex and described in different ways by many researchers. Typically, it is defined as the shared perceptions held by members of the organization regarding its policies, practices, and procedures (Schneider 1990). Organizational climate further refers to recurring patterns of behaviors, attitudes, and feelings that characterize life in the organization (Ekvall 1996). Climate can also be considered to be a domain referenced phenomenon (e.g. climate for creativity, climate for service) wherein 'multiple variables, or dimensions, act to shape performance in the domain under construction' (Hunter, Bedell, and Mumford 2007).

Organizational culture, on the other hand, is typically understood to operate at a greater level of abstraction than climate (Reichers and Schneider 1990). Tesluk, Farr, and Klein (1997) states that adjusting organizational climate to be more supportive of creativity and innovation is difficult; however, because climate is 'what employees perceive as emphasized in organizational structures, practices, procedures, and policies, the change process is more directly modifiable than it is for culture' (p.37). Dension (1996) discusses the organizational climate versus culture debate, reviewing the differences between the two paradigms as they have been presented in the literature. For instance, climate is considered as more temporary than culture, subject to direct control, and limited to the aspects of the social environment that are consciously perceived by the members of the organization (Dension 1996). However, he also suggests that the two literature streams may have similarities as well, and that 'the differences may be more closely linked to differences of perspective rather than differences of substance' of the phenomena under investigation. Nevertheless, in here, we exclude the discussion of organizational culture and instead build our study on more specific literature that considers organizational climate and how it relates to creativity and innovation.

Evaluating organizational climate for innovation and creativity

In particular, our starting point for studying retail innovation climate is the framework (and the variables) presented by Ekvall (1996) and colleagues (e.g. Ekvall 1996; Ekvall and Ryhammer 1999; Isaksen, Lauer, and Ekvall 1999; Isakson and Lauer 2002). We refer to the work, henceforth called OC, which regards climate as 'an attribute of the organization, a conglomerate of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors which characterizes life in the organization' (Ekvall 1996, 105).

Another option would have been to use the widely spread framework on entrepreneurial orientation (EO) (e.g. Covin and Lumpkin 2011; Lumpkin and Dess 1996; Miller 1983). While these frameworks have similarities, EO seems to have its core use in understanding small businesses (family business, start-up, etc.) and OC seems useful for studying large established organizations. In addition, the original EO framework has

three variables that are relevant for studying innovation climate (risk-taking, proactiveness, and innovativeness). These variables, while relevant, do not fully represent the type of variables needed to capture innovative climate in the settings we study. Hence, we have used Ekvall's OC framework, since it is better suited to study the settings we focus on, and with a framework with several more detailed variables for studying organizational climate.

Because each individual perceives the climate and can describe it on a basis of their own perception, the climate of the organization can be studied by way of these perceptions (Ekvall 1983). Ekvall (1996) thus presents a survey questionnaire that can be used to assess an organization's climate for creativity and innovation by covering 10 dimensions, which have been developed from several large-factor analytic studies. Table 1 presents Ekvall's (1996) 10 dimensions and their definitions.

Isaksen and Ekvall (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d) provide a discussion of the development and evolution of the survey, as well as the supporting evidence that promotes its reliability and validity. The survey instrument, in its various iterations, has repeatedly been used in research publications in different contexts (see, e.g. Jensen and Beckmann 2009; Moultrie and Young 2009; Mohamed and Rickards 1996; Norbergh et al. 2002; Prokesh 2009; Talbot, Cooper, and Barrow 1992; Turnipseed and Turnipseed 2013; Übius, Alas, and Elenurm 2013).

Essentially, a climate that is supportive of innovation is conducive of organization-level innovation (Jung, Anne, and Chow 2008; Patterson et al. 2005). Climate affects the results of an organization's operations as it 'influences organizational processes such as problem-solving, decision-making, communications, coordination, controlling, and psychological processes of learning, creating, motivation, and commitment' (Ekvall 1996, 106). Organizations that are 'identified as innovative in terms of products, services, methods, policies, etc., should accordingly differ in climate from deliberately conservative or unintentionally out-distanced organizations' (Ekvall 1996, 111). Through a meta-analysis of previous organizational climate studies, Hunter, Bedell, and Mumford (2007) have shown that various climate dimensions are effective predictors of creative performance, especially in turbulent, high-pressure, competitive environments wherein

Table 1. Dimensions of organizational climate for creativity and innovation (Ekvall 1996).

Dimension	Climate Dimension	Definition
1	<i>Challenge</i>	The emotional involvement of the members of the organization in its operations and goals
2	<i>Freedom</i>	The independence in behaviour exerted by the people in the organization
3	<i>Idea support</i>	The way new ideas are treated
4	<i>Trust/openness</i>	The emotional safety in relationships
5	<i>Dynamism/ liveliness</i>	The eventfulness of life in the organization
6	<i>Playfulness/ humour</i>	The spontaneity and ease that is displayed
7	<i>Debates</i>	The occurrence of encounters and clashes between viewpoints, ideas, and differing experiences in knowledge
8	<i>Risk taking</i>	The tolerance of uncertainty in the organization
9	<i>Time-slack/idea time</i>	The amount of time people can use (and do use) for elaborating new ideas
10	<i>Conflict</i>	The presence of personal and emotional tensions (in contrast to conflicts between ideas) in the organization



Figure 1. The dimensions of organizational climate for innovation and creativity, with reference profiles for innovative and stagnated climate.

(Source: Ekvall 1989, 1996).

innovation was necessary for organizational success. Moreover, they add that well-developed, standardized measures of climate (including Ekvall's survey) showed stronger relationships than locally developed measures and surveys.

From Ekvall's previous works (e.g. 1989, 1996), reference profiles have been developed to distinguish between 'innovative' and 'stagnated' companies, providing specific values that indicate the mean factor scores for each dimension (see Figure 1). Higher scores indicate an organizational climate that is more innovative and creative (except for the dimension of *conflicts*, where the opposite applies).

In this context, innovativeness is considered as 'the ability of an organization to adapt itself and its operations to new demands from its environment, perhaps by adopting new products or services, by altering new products or services, by discovering new markets and target groups, by changing methods of working, or by introducing new technologies and/or organizational structures.' While the opposite, or stagnating, is when organizations are unable to do the necessary adjustments despite an obvious need to change (Ekvall 1996). Some factors have a broader influence scope, while others have a more specific connection to creativity and innovation. These are *idea support*, *debates*, *risk-taking* and *idea time*. When it comes to distinguishing between radical and incremental innovations, *risk-taking*, *dynamism*, *freedom*, and *debates* seem to need high scores for organizations in pursuing radical innovations (Ekvall 1996).

Methodology

Our paper draws on data from a research project that involves three Swedish retail firms, derived from surveys and interviews conducted in 2017. A mixed methods approach is chosen in order to provide a more complete understanding of the organizational climate. A survey is used to generalize the results of the population and then the one-on-one

explorative interviews that follow aim to collect more detailed views from participants that could help in explaining the quantitative data.

Two of the retail firms (A and B) represent traditional trade in an established market with long traditions, where online channels were introduced only quite recently. Both companies come from the area of conventional, low-involvement retail, and have large, bureaucratic organizations; however, they have significant differences in ownership structure as well as market shares. Furthermore, in retailer A, the survey was carried out in two sub-groups of different characters: one group (A1) is a special 'project group' that is distinct from the original organization scheme, with a mandate related to innovation and marketing communications, while the other group (A2) represents the rest of the traditional, functional organization.

The third retailer (C), on the other hand, is a newer retailer built up solely on an e-commerce channel, where the entrepreneur who started the business is still heading it. It is a much smaller and more flexible organization with also a different ownership structure from the previous two companies. Although the product range in C is different from A and B, there are overlaps in certain categories.

For the survey, we use the questionnaire by Ekvall (1996) for measuring and evaluating the climate in organizations in order to investigate whether retail organizations can be considered innovative, with respect to specific climate dimensions. It builds on the 10 dimensions affecting the organization's creative climate. The survey questionnaire consists of 50 items (five items per climate dimension); all items are answered on a Likert scale from 0 (disagree completely) to 3 (agree completely).

In total, 191 survey responses are obtained (N = 43 [A1], 71 [A2], 43 [B], 34 [C]). As Ekvall et al. (1996) have established, the aggregated or mean climate score of the organizational members' ratings constitute a valid and reliable measure of the situational variation in climate terms between organizations.

We also conduct semi-structured interviews with several employees from the different retail companies, employing a smaller sample size (N = 6 [A], 9 [B], 6 [C]) but with more open-ended and explorative questions. In the one-on-one interviews, aside from organizational climate, we also inquire about parallel concepts regarding innovation-related practices within the firms, such as the innovation process, vision and strategic leadership, organizing for innovation, customers and value creation, and external networks and linkages.

One limitation of the interview study is that the interviewees in retailer A only come from the A1 group, i.e. a temporary project team with a particular mandate regarding innovation work. Thus, the A2 group is not directly represented in the qualitative study. The interviewees, however, discuss the climate of the entire organization (A) and not just the climate in the project team (A1). Moreover, all data collection is done on the level of the retailers' central organizations, and thus other perspectives (e.g. store-level managers and employees) are not part of the study.

Survey results

Table 2 shows the mean climate scores for the different groups (A1, A2, B, C) compared with the reference profiles for innovative and stagnated climates at each dimension. The mean scores are the means on the dimension ratings made by the respondents of each group.

Table 2. Retail organizations’ mean scores for each climate dimension compared to reference profiles.

Dimension	Climate dimension	A1	A2	B	C	Innovative Profile	Stagnated Profile
		N = 43	N = 71	N = 43	N = 34		
1	Challenge/Motivation	2.18	1.40	2.08	2.23	2.38	1.63
2	Freedom	1.86	1.51	1.67	1.82	2.10	1.53
3	Idea support	1.73	1.43	1.66	2.01	1.83	1.08
4	Trust/openness	1.96	1.41	1.69	1.95	1.78	1.28
5	Liveliness/Dynamism	1.91	1.48	1.71	2.41	2.20	1.40
6	Playfulness/Humor	2.13	1.44	1.74	2.25	2.30	1.40
7	Debates	1.65	1.32	1.47	1.73	1.58	1.05
8	Risk-taking	1.34	1.23	1.19	1.89	1.95	0.53
9	Time-slack/Idea time	1.27	1.15	1.10	1.42	1.48	0.97
10	Conflicts	0.59	0.67	0.73	0.57	0.78	1.40

In order to better compare the organizational climate to the reference profiles, we calculated profile deviation scores (see, e.g. Venkatraman 1990; Drazin and Van de Ven 1985) which measures the degree of adherence to an externally specified profile, which in this case are the reference innovative and stagnated profiles. The greater the deviation in co-alignment (i.e. misalignment) from the innovative profile, the less innovative the climate; conversely, the greater the deviation from the stagnated profile, the more innovative the climate. For each organization, we calculated both the measure of deviation from the innovative profile (MISALIGN_I) and from the stagnated profile (MISALIGN_S); the smaller of these two values would indicate which profile the organization is more aligned to, i.e. if MISALIGN_I is less than MISALIGN_S then the organization is more innovative than it is stagnated (and vice versa).

$$MISALIGN_I = \sum_{j=1}^9 [X_j - \max(X_j, I_j)]^2 + [X_{10} - \min(X_{10}, I_{10})]^2 \tag{1}$$

$$MISALIGN_S = \sum_{j=1}^9 [X_j - \min(X_j, S_j)]^2 + [X_{10} - \max(X_{10}, S_{10})]^2 \tag{2}$$

In (1), MISALIGN_I is the measure of Euclidean distance of the deviation from the innovative profile. Here, j = 1, 2...9, which refers to the climate dimensions except for *conflict*, X_j is the mean score for the organization along the jth climate dimension, and I_j is the score for the innovative profile along the jth climate dimension (shown in Table 2). Consequently, X₁₀ and I₁₀ are the mean scores of the organization and the innovative profile along the 10th climate dimension (*conflict*), respectively (shown in Table 2). If X_j is higher than I_j (in max), it is subtracted from itself which equates to zero; this is done because it is assumed that if an organization’s score (along the jth dimension) is equal to or higher than the innovative profile’s score for that dimension, then it is completely aligned (i.e. no deviation from the innovative profile). We separate the deviation calculation for *conflict* in the equation because unlike the first nine dimensions, a lower score here indicates a more innovative climate. Thus, for *conflict*, if X₁₀ is equal to or lower than I₁₀, we consider it completely aligned to the innovative profile score. These assumptions are taken because the reference profiles are considered as ‘ideal’ profiles, following the conventional practice of measuring profile deviation.

Table 3. Deviation of retail organizations' climate scores from the innovative and stagnated profiles.

Climate dimension	A1		A2		B		C	
	MISALIGN _I	MISALIGN _S						
Challenge/ Motivation	0.04	0.30	0.96	0.00	0.09	0.20	0.02	0.36
Freedom	0.06	0.11	0.35	0.00	0.19	0.02	0.08	0.09
Idea support	0.01	0.42	0.16	0.12	0.03	0.33	0.00	0.86
Trust/openness	0.00	0.47	0.14	0.02	0.01	0.17	0.00	0.45
Liveliness/ Dynamism	0.08	0.26	0.51	0.01	0.24	0.10	0.00	1.01
Playfulness/ Humor	0.03	0.53	0.74	0.00	0.32	0.11	0.00	0.72
Debates	0.00	0.36	0.07	0.08	0.01	0.18	0.00	0.46
Risk-taking	0.37	0.66	0.52	0.49	0.58	0.44	0.00	1.84
Time-slack/Idea time	0.04	0.09	0.11	0.03	0.15	0.02	0.00	0.20
Conflict	0.00	0.66	0.00	0.53	0.00	0.44	0.00	0.69
Total profile deviation	0.64	3.86	3.56	1.28	1.60	2.01	0.11	6.68

Note:

MISALIGN_I = Euclidean distance of the deviation from the reference innovative profile

MISALIGN_S = Euclidean distance of the deviation from the reference stagnated profile

A value of 0.00 means complete alignment with the reference profile

Equation (2) follows the same logic as (1) but inverted because MISALIGN_S is the measure of Euclidean distance of the deviation from the stagnated profile instead – the lower the measure, the closer the score is to the stagnated profile. In (2), S_j is the score for the stagnated profile along the j^{th} climate dimension, while S_{10} is the score for the stagnated profile along the 10th climate dimension (*conflict*). The calculated profile deviation scores are presented in Table 3.

As seen in Table 3, MISALIGN_I is lower than MISALIGN_S for A1, B, and C, which suggests that the climate for these groups lean more towards innovative, while the opposite is true for organization A2 that leans more towards stagnated. Moreover, the profile deviation scores also show that C has the climate that is most innovative, followed by A1, B, and lastly A2.

Although the 10 dimensions affect each other and contribute to an overall organizational climate, Ekvall (1996) notes that *debates*, *risk-taking*, *idea support* and *idea time* are dimensions more specifically connected to innovation. He adds that *debates*, *risk-taking*, *dynamism*, and *freedom* seem to be 'the dimensions that make the crucial difference between the creative climate that supports radical innovation and the creative climate that allows only incremental improvements' (122). As the results show (Table 2), the organizations scored higher than the stagnated profile for these dimensions, except for A2's *freedom* score. Moreover, C even scored beyond the innovative values for certain dimensions (*debates*, *idea support*, and *dynamism*), while A1 scored beyond the innovative value for *debates*.

Interview results

For the interview results, it should be noted that the questions asked to use the terminology of organizational climate, but interviewees tend to answer by interchanging

the terms climate and culture. Thus, for the purpose of showing the interview results in this section, they are presented as interchangeable.

Retailer A

In general, we see quite mixed responses in Company A regarding the organizational climate and culture. Some interviewees talk highly of the climate in the company, but it is also perceived as still a traditional organization that can be bureaucratic at times, and the organizational climate still varies depending on 'where' in the company one is situated (in terms of seniority, department, length of employment, etc.).

According to one interviewee, people who have been in the organization for a longer time tend to feel that the climate is open and allows for debate and discussion. However, another interviewee notes that the climate is not at all conducive to innovation because of the lack of support for new ideas, for asking questions, or for taking risks and making mistakes – something that is reflected in both the cultural and strategic levels. One interviewee observes that the organization is *'afraid of making mistakes and taking risks, both as a company with our strategies but also how our culture is.'* However, the attitude towards failure in the organization is not clear because interviewees give varying answers. Some say that it is acceptable (*'it is absolutely okay to make mistakes, you will not be hanged'*), while others suggest that it is not (*'it's actually not that okay to make mistakes, and we have some tendencies to social blacklisting and it's pretty tough'*). Despite this, all interviewees seem to agree that development work is still compartmentalized and traditional silo thinking is prevalent. One interviewee says:

We are a rather slow and tedious organization, so that even when we think of ideas, it's very difficult to get through them.

Entrepreneurship and commitment are mentioned in all the interviews as the main values that drive employees. Entrepreneurship is described by one interviewee as the mindset of *'do now, apologize later'* and *'gut-feel approach to decision making'* and that this might lead to potentially innovative ideas. However, even though *'the practical and cultural pieces for innovation are in place'* (as noted by another interviewee), all the interviewees think that innovation is not enabled to the extent that is needed because there is still a lack of support in terms of formal processes, structures and resources (e.g. time) allotted to innovation. One interviewee notes:

I think we talk too little about innovation... there are no processes, there is no budget or organization on innovation, there are no tools – I do not think there is a clarity, there is no control on innovation.

Another interviewee states, *'we do not have time to test things, no time resources and the ability to create, in some way.'* Although these are selected quotes from interviewees, all of them share the sentiment that there is a lack of formal structures and resources relating to innovation. Thus, even though some may view the climate to be open and supportive, it is still perceived that this gap in terms of an overall approach to innovation exists.

Retailer B

Although there are also mixed responses from the interviewees of Company B regarding innovation and the organizational climate, the results show mostly positive perceptions. There is also an awareness that there may be different views on the climate depending on the department or even on the individual. Most interviewees reflect positively on the climate but also pointed certain reservations; that is, even though they perceive that the climate is generally innovative, creative, open, and positive, they also acknowledge many other limitations that exist in the company that seems to constrain innovativeness to some degree. One often-mentioned example is regarding the amount of workload coupled with lack of resources. Interviewees believe that even though there are very creative and driven employees, their creativity is constrained due to lack of resources (time and money) to work on innovative activities. A strong focus on sales, profitability and operational activities limit them from considering more long-term plans regarding innovation. This results in traditional silo mentality as well, as people tend to focus on their own operational work:

Communication is generally very good but people's workload is very high so they focus on their own, instead of opening their eyes and helping others. There's the atmosphere that people want to help and cooperate more – the will exists – but the conditions may not be enough.

Another example is about risk-taking. Similar to Company A, interviewees in B say that risk-taking in their company is limited:

...in smaller areas you can do it, do small tests, but you don't dare challenge yourself properly, not really.

However, even though interviewees are asked to reflect on their own organization's internal climate, some also comment about the state of the retail industry in general and how innovation and a risk-taking mentality is generally not found here:

I think the industry is not really innovative. ...it's quite traditional in that way – it's really the goods that change, and we just try always try to make it a bit faster and better.

Retailer C

This company is the most startup-like among the three – it is the leanest and youngest, and the founder of the company still heads it currently as its CEO, while top management consists of a core team who have (along with the CEO) already been working together previously in another e-commerce company. One interviewee says, *'here it's fun, it's very new and fast, there are high demands. ...we have built everything from scratch.'* Another interviewee notes *'the synergies that arise here happen because people are interested and engage in things that happen outside their own desks, instead of being on their own island.'*

Similar to the previous companies, there are no formal processes and structures in Company C specifically for innovation. All interviewees agree that although there is no formal or systematic management of innovation, there is certainly a lot of work being done regarding operations efficiency through constant and incremental improvements. In addition, despite innovation not being stated explicitly in their company vision and

strategy, interviewees believe that there is a clear direction in the company that what drives change and development in their organization is an active decision to focus on their core competencies. That is, to continuously improve their supply chain (logistics and delivery) in order to serve the customer better. Unlike A and B, retailer C is a pure e-retailer, which explains a strong focus on logistics and customer deliveries.

The most common insight among all the interviews is that strong leadership (of the CEO and core management team) drives the climate and culture in the organization. Although it is mostly viewed as a positive thing, there is also the notion that a very leadership-oriented climate might not be suitable for everyone:

We have some strong culture bearers who have been around longer and it spreads outwards from them, and those who have come in the organization who have fully embraced it and spread further. Since this is the case, it might not work for everyone. Very few have resigned, but it has happened that someone recognized that, no, this is actually not for me.

All interviewees agree that the CEO is very hands-on and familiar with all areas of the business and highlights the need for constant improvement:

More often than not the ideas come from [CEO] because he is the type of person who thinks about work and development around the clock. When people are getting a little bit comfortable, he has been thinking about it and is already ten steps ahead.

However, having the CEO as the main driver of innovation in practice might also mean that other potential sources for innovation are being excluded, especially without the formal avenues:

So our innovation process is very much driven by [CEO]. He has many good ideas, but I think there is also a risk of not finding other good ideas if you do not have that formal process.

Discussion

Despite retail organizations still struggling to incorporate innovation on a strategic level and move beyond incremental developments in their operations, the retail organizations studied score generally positive on being innovative regarding certain dimensions of the creative climate survey.

One can note that the deviation distance ($MISALIGN_i$) from the innovation profile is 0.00 for *conflict* and *debate* for all studied organizations (except for A2's 0.07 and B's 0.01 *debate* deviation). This may imply that all the organizations put fewer efforts into personal tensions and emotions, in contrast to encounters between viewpoints and ideas (Ekvall 1996), which in turn is associated with a good environment for idea generation and development. This suggests that prerequisites for innovation exist to some degree and that innovation-related behavior or activity is present in the retailing firms.

The results show some differences between the studied organizations that might be explained by their different backgrounds, two being conventional retail (A and B), while C being a new e-retailer. By looking further into the four dimensions (*idea support*, *debates*, *risk-taking* and *idea time*) that Ekvall (1996) highlights as more specific in connection to creativity and innovation, C does not deviate from the innovative profile. Although for the dimensions relating to radical innovation, its score is most misaligned

in *freedom* (0.08). C is a relatively young organization that still profits from its original innovative business model, which helped changed the retail landscape in their specific category, and the interviews demonstrate engaged employees and the occurrence of a lot development-related work. A potential explanation as to why *freedom* is deviating from the innovative profile (albeit still deviating less than for the stagnated profile) is because even though employees generally speak highly of the climate in the interviews, a strong leadership was not always viewed positively when it relates to innovation or development-related work. Because the founder/CEO mostly takes the lead when it comes to innovative activities, it is possible that there are employees who feel that their autonomy is limited or at least perceive that taking an initiative might not be as needed or welcomed, especially as no formal innovation processes and structures are in place.

We observe from our interviews that innovation in retail is more associated with entrepreneurship and constant improvements, and that these have been more relevant to their business, as opposed to long-term perspectives, strategic approaches, or radical innovations. This may be seen to correlate to the dimensions *risk-taking*, *dynamism* and *freedom* for radical innovation (as suggested by Ekvall 1996), where *risk-taking* clearly deviates from the innovative profile for organization A1, A2 and B, and *dynamism* clearly deviates from the innovative profile for A2 and B. Hence, it is likely that the innovativeness these organizations refer to relates mainly to incremental innovations. For A and B, it would appear that there is not a strong connection between the qualitative data and the quantitative data, as interviewees have mixed responses regarding most of the climate dimensions. It is evident, however, from both the quantitative and qualitative data that *risk-taking* is perceived to be weak in these two traditional retailers. As Tidd and Bessant (2014) note, risk-taking pertains to tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity, wherein bold initiatives can be taken despite unknown outcomes – something that is not observed, according to the interviewees. This relates to what researchers have observed which is that retailers work in an opportunistic but incremental way, wherein risks associated with short-term operational gains are prioritized over long term, strategic plans (Hristov 2007; Reynolds and Cuthbertson 2014; Olsson and Johansson 2016).

Lastly, a general observation is that formal support for innovation seems to be lacking – or at least not established or institutionalized – in all three companies. This can be related in part to the dimensions of *idea time* and *idea support*. *Idea time* measures how much ‘unplanned’ time there is available for new ideas and testing of them out of the ordinary work tasks. Especially in B, which deviates most from the innovative profile in *idea time* (0.15), the interviews reveal that there is an emphasis on how the heavy workload in the company inhibits people from having time to pursue more innovative projects, even though the desire to innovate may be present. It can also be noted that for both these dimensions, A1 and C deviate less from the innovative profile than A2 and B. When innovation functions do not exist in the retail organization (i.e. in the case of A2 and B), innovation-related work has to take place and compete with other operational issues at the same location and level, or the delivery of ‘on-going’ business (Olsson and Johansson 2016). Also, A1 and C are younger and smaller units, and for A1 even temporary (as it is a project group), so routines and work specifications are probably not as fixed, while in both A2 and B which are the more established groups, the work routines are presumably more established and do not allow for much time-slack in the daily work. Even though A1 and A2 are

part of the same organization, A1 has a specific mandate related to innovation and marketing communications and is temporarily set-up as a project team, while A2 makes up the rest of the traditional organization.

Conclusion and implications

Innovation and innovativeness in retailing are under-investigated in academia and yet highly relevant in practice. This study contributes to a better understanding of the topic of retail innovation management, with a particular focus on the organizational climate for innovation. To our knowledge, the use of the survey instrument developed by Ekvall (1996) on evaluating the innovative climate has not been done in the retail context before. By taking a systematic approach and combining an established survey instrument with qualitative input on retail innovation management, with a particular emphasis on creativity and climate for innovation, the study contributes to the under-investigated and fragmented area of retail innovation.

We find that despite retail organizations struggling to incorporate innovation on a strategic level or moving beyond incremental developments, retail organizations seem to generally score positively on being innovative, at least regarding certain dimensions of the creative climate survey. This implies that prerequisites for innovation exist to some degree and that innovation-related behavior or activity is present. Nevertheless, given the current disruption of the retail landscape, traditional or conventional retailers could benefit from challenging their current practices and moving towards becoming more active and strategic innovators, since the creative climate to a certain extent seems to allow for it. This does not imply foregoing the important incremental and continuous development work done in retail but rather considering it as only one part of different potential innovation trajectories moving forward. As Evans (2011) has emphasized, retail as an evolving yet enduring sector implies that over time, retail formats and institutions must certainly evolve, and that this does not necessarily have to be a negative occurrence if firms are able to develop and adapt in a thoughtful manner. Moreover, as Olsson and Johansson (2016) suggest, 'innovation in retail systems would benefit from highlighting innovation as a functional competence in retail organization' which could further emphasize innovation management as a core competence and a strategic issue in the management of these retail companies. Clearly, innovation is no longer distant from the primary concerns of the firm.

Based on the one-on-one interviews, people within the organizations seem to express a desire for better innovation support, whether it be through better-established structures and processes, or an improvement in the current conditions of the organizational climate, given the strong entrepreneurial mindset in these companies. Especially when it comes to conventional retailers (A and B), much work is to be done. Certain respondents, at least, are suggesting that being 'reactive' might not be sufficient anymore – that the new challenges that come with digitalization might require a different and more proactive approach. On the other hand, newer e-retailer C was seen to perform better in the organizational climate survey, but the interviews show that there are still some questions whether strong leadership is enough in the long run as the company grows further, especially if some believe it affects employee freedom and autonomy to a certain extent.

Although the current paper focuses on climate that contributes to an innovative organization, we reiterate that innovation in organizations does not ‘just happen’ in a positive and enabling working environment. In today’s era of unprecedented competition and uncertainty in retail, relying only on an innovative climate could be insufficient especially if retail organizations are lacking established structures that could potentially bring about innovations beyond the usual operational changes that they have traditionally been pursuing. For future research, it would be worthwhile to have in-depth case studies that investigate further how retailers can enable themselves to take a more active stance on innovation – whether this would require a more structured and formalized approach or not – based on what we know of retailers, their strengths and limitations.

Moreover, our study reveals only a snapshot of the retail firms’ characteristics in relation to how innovation-related work is enabled. Several factors may limit the generalizability of the results. The companies are all Swedish retailers, and only the central organizations were studied, i.e. only the organizational climate in the company headquarters was considered. Future studies could broaden the sample of retail companies, as well as the sample of respondents within the rest of the retail organizations to see a more comprehensive picture of the climate within these companies.

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