Retail atmospherics

Lesson 4.1.3 | Consumer psychology

Core ideas

Retail atmospherics refers to the planned sensory and physical features of a shopping or service environment.

Lighting can affect visibility, mood, product appeal and the sense of warmth or luxury in a store.

Colour can shape attention and associations, but its effect depends on culture, brand and product context.

Scent may influence mood, memory, perceived quality or time spent when it fits the setting and is not overpowering.

Crowding, temperature and ease of movement can change comfort, stress and willingness to stay.

Atmospheric cues often work together, so research should examine fit and confounds rather than treating one cue as the only cause of buying.

Key terms

Retail atmospherics: The planned environmental cues that shape a customer's experience in a store.

Ambient cue: A background feature such as scent, temperature, lighting or music.

Design cue: A visible feature such as layout, colour, signs or display style.

Scent marketing: Using smell as part of a retail or service environment.

Crowding: The feeling that a space has too many people or too little room.

Store image: The overall impression a customer forms of a store or brand.

Approach behaviour: Actions such as entering, browsing, staying longer or buying.

Avoidance behaviour: Actions such as leaving, rushing, ignoring products or not returning.

Pleasure: The pleasant-unpleasant dimension of emotional response.

Arousal: The degree of stimulation and alertness.

Dominance: Perceived ability to control or act freely in an environment.

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Further detail and evidence

Mehrabian and Russell's pleasure-arousal-dominance (PAD) model connects environmental cues, emotional states and approach/avoidance behaviour.

Pleasure means feeling happy or unhappy; arousal means stimulation/alertness versus sleepiness; dominance means feeling in control versus restricted.

A calm store can be pleasant with low arousal; an overcrowded noisy store can be unpleasant with high arousal. Arousal is not automatically beneficial.

Approach includes entering, exploring, staying and interacting; avoidance includes leaving or avoiding return. Emotions mediate atmospheric effects on behaviour.

Apply PAD to odour and crowding: scent or perceived crowding can affect pleasure, stimulation and control, with responses varying by goals, preferences and culture.

Example study - Chebat and Michon (2003) compared competing explanations of scent effects in a real Montreal-area shopping mall. Shoppers' reports of pleasure/arousal, perceptions of the mall and product quality, and spending were analysed under scent conditions.

Chebat and Michon found better support for a cognition-first account: scent influenced perceptions of the environment and products, which helped explain emotion and spending. The direct scent-to-mood effect was nearly absent. This does not establish that pleasant scent always increases pleasure or purchases; compare the evidence critically with PAD.

Example study - Machleit, Eroglu and Mantel (2000), Study 1: university marketing students completed anonymous retrospective surveys after a real shopping trip. Ratings distinguished human crowding (people) from spatial crowding (feeling cramped), and measured emotions, satisfaction, expectations and tolerance.

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Continued

In Machleit Study 1, greater perceived crowding was associated with lower pleasure and satisfaction. Emotions explained only part of this association; expectations and tolerance also mattered. Crowding did not uniformly increase arousal. The real shopping episodes aid application, but retrospective correlational self-reports cannot establish the direction of causation.

Mehrabian and Russell: environmental stimuli affect the organism's emotional state, influencing approach/avoidance. Pleasure is enjoyment, arousal is activation, and dominance is perceived control. Approach can include staying, exploring and interacting; avoidance includes leaving or withdrawing.

A pleasant environment does not always need maximal arousal. The desired stimulation depends on goals and setting. Human crowding (other people) and spatial crowding (fixtures/limited space) should be distinguished from objective density.

Use Chebat and Michon's ambient-odour study to consider cognition as well as emotion: evaluations of the mall and product quality helped explain effects on feelings and spending. Machleit et al.'s Study 1 relates perceived crowding, emotions and shopping satisfaction; expected crowding and tolerance can modify responses.

Applying the ideas

Two people can experience the same busy shop differently: a rushed customer may feel obstructed, while a visitor expecting a lively sale may tolerate it. An attractive scent may change perceived product quality as well as mood. Identify the proposed mediator rather than claiming that smell directly makes everyone buy.

Evaluation and connections

Questionnaire measures access subjective experience but can share response biases. Observed spending is more behavioural, yet field conditions contain competing influences. Statistical mediation is consistent with a pathway; it is not automatic proof of its causal sequence. Compare situational atmospherics with individual preferences and cultural norms.