



# When atmospherics lead to inferences of manipulative intent: Its effects on trust and attitude



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## ABSTRACT

The atmosphere of a retail store is a powerful marketing tool for influencing consumer behavior to the benefit of the retailer. This article explores the case where consumers perceive the store environment as a manipulative tool in use by the retailer. This article hypothesizes that incongruent store environments urge consumers to make inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) from the retailers, and that those inferences negatively influence consumer's perception of the retailers' integrity, and attitudes toward the atmosphere and the retailers. Empirical results from an experiment confirm the hypotheses.

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## 1. Introduction

Atmospheric cues can exert a strong influence on consumer's behavior and attitude (Turley & Milliman, 2000). However, findings regarding the relationship between atmospherics and consumer behavior are quite inconsistent (Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006). As an explanation, one may argue that the influence of atmospherics is not so mechanical and that consumer's cognitive processes actually mediate their influence.

However, compared to consumer's attitudinal and behavioral responses, such consumer's cognitive evaluations of atmospherics receive little attention in the literature. This is quite surprising when considering that research dealing with the influence of atmospherics generally has relied on the S–O–R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). According to this model, stimuli (S) from the environment stimulate perceptual and emotional individual's responses (O) which in turn affect their attitude and behavior (R). When transferred to the retail context, this model posits that when exposed to stimuli in the store environment, consumers evaluate information provided to them, and their perception of the information – and not the actual information – affects their behavior.

Consequently, the importance of factors internal to the individual is of tremendous importance (Jacoby, 2002). These factors include the individual's active motives, moods, perceptions, cognitions, and so forth. Though some literature exists on the influence of atmospherics

on such internal factors, especially mood (Chebat & Michon, 2003; Gardner, 1985; Swinyard, 1993), only a few articles apply to the issue of the influence on atmospherics on the special cognitive response of inference (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss 2002; Schlosser, 1998). Indeed, to date, relatively little is known about the influence of atmospherics and the store environment on consumer's inference-making process. This article addresses this gap by focusing on the effects of atmospherics use on consumers' inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) and their subsequent effects on trust and attitude.

Particularly relevant in the present context are studies in advertising that focus on IMI. Results from studies in this area show that when consumers infer manipulative intent by the marketer, they have negative attitudes toward the sponsor and the advertisement (Cotte, Coulter, & Moore 2005). One might suppose that consumers can draw such inferences not only when exposed to advertising but also when exposed to in-store stimuli. As active recipients of the retailer's attempt, consumers may not only behave in a passive way by only feeling pleasure and enjoy the quality of the shopping experience when exposed to atmospherics. They may also interpret the reasons why the store environment is so. Thus, this article posits that consumers may interpret the store environment not only as a tool used by the retailer to improve their shopping time, but also as a manipulative mean used to make them behave as wanted by the retailer. In this case where consumers perceive store environment as a manipulative intent from the retailer, consumers will attribute less integrity to the retailer and develop a negative attitude toward the retailer and the atmosphere. Thus, the goals of the present article are to offer a conceptual framework and empirical evidence for the relevance of IMI in the store environment and their consequences on trust and attitude.

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In the next sections, the article describes research on atmospherics and inference-making process. The article then develops hypotheses about the effects of IMI in the store environment on integrity and attitude. Results from an experiment make one specific contribution by showing that the atmosphere, when incongruent, can induce negative effects on attitude by leading consumers to infer that the retailer has manipulative intent. Then, the article concludes with implications for further research and marketers.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Store environment and consumer behavior: the role of congruency

The retail environment includes three components, namely 1) ambient factors, 2) design factors, and 3) social factors (Baker, 1986). Through ambient factors, in-store atmosphere exerts a positive effect on consumer's emotions, such as pleasure (Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006) or activation (Kellaris & Kent, 1993; Valdez & Mehrabian, 1994), and behavior (Turley & Milliman, 2000). According to the environmental psychology literature, behavioral responses to an atmosphere include approach (desire to stay in a particular store and explore it) or avoidance (not wanting to stay in a store or to spend time exploring it) response.

A large number of atmospherics, such as music, olfactory cues and color, may influence behavioral responses. For example, Milliman (1982, 1986) finds out that in-store traffic flow is significantly slower with low music than with fast music. Moreover, slow music has a more positive effect on sales volume than fast music. Further empirical results exhibit the ability of music to influence perceptions of time (Kellaris & Kent, 1992), mood (Yalch & Spangenberg, 1990), sales in food services (North & Hargreaves, 1998) as well as product selection (North, Hargreaves, & McKendrick, 1999). Research also suggests positive effects of ambient scents, pleasantly scented environments eliciting approach behaviors while unpleasant environments eliciting avoidance behaviors (Bone & Ellen, 1999).

However, research on the effects of ambient scents highlights the moderator role of the congruency between olfactory cues and marketing stimuli (Bone & Jantrania, 1992; Bosmans, 2006; Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson 1996; Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprott, 2005). Such congruency can first refer to the match between atmospherics and the merchandise (for instance, a flower scent in a flower shop; Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2003). Since consumers may have expectations about what merchandise to find in a specific store according to its atmosphere, congruency may also refer to the match between ambient factors and consumers' expectations. This congruency affects shopper's evaluations and behaviors.

In the case of in-store music for instance, when comparing the effects of easy-listening versus top-forty music on shoppers' estimates of spent shopping time, Yalch and Spangenberg (1990) find out that incongruent environmental factors lead shoppers to perceive intervals of time being longer than they actually are. Indeed, in the presence of an unexpected easy-listening music, younger customers report spending more time shopping. Consistently, in the presence of an unexpected top-forty music, older customers report thinking they stay longer in the store. In a study conducted in 1993, the same authors emphasize this need for congruency in the store environment by demonstrating that various types of music may have a different effect on store atmosphere according to the department in which they are diffused. When a women's department diffuses background music compared to foreground music, shoppers spend more money, whereas shoppers in a men's department spend more in the presence of foreground music. In the setting of wine cellar, Areni and Kim (1993) show that shoppers purchase more expensive merchandise in the presence of classical music (versus Top-Forty music) and suggest music must fit consumers' expectations to create a persuasion context and to produce the desired outcome.

Congruency can also refer to the match between the different in-store atmospherics (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Spangenberg et al., 2005). Consumers evaluate the store environment not only on the basis of discrete influences of atmospherics, but rather on the basis of the congruency between them. Considering ambient scents, Spangenberg et al. (2005) demonstrate that ambient scents can induce less favorable evaluations of the store, its merchandise and the store environment if they are incongruent with in-store music. Along with these results, Mattila and Wirtz (2001) show that when arousal levels of scent and music are congruent, this congruency enhances consumers' evaluations of the shopping experience.

### 2.2. Atmospherics and inferences of manipulative intent (IMI)

In addressing consumers' IMI in the store environment, this article relies on Mehrabian and Russell (1974) S–O–R model. In the retailing context, the atmosphere is the stimulus (S) that causes a consumer's evaluation (O) and causes some behavioral response (R) (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). Despite the central role of cognitions in the SOR model, most part of the research quite surprisingly focuses on the direct relationship between stimuli (S) and responses (R), without giving attention to the way consumers process the store environment (O). Inferences refer to such a cognition process, that consumers draw during the store visit.

Baker et al. (1994) and Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley (2004) propose that when having limited a priori knowledge about a store's specific offerings, consumers can't rely on their experience and thus need to make cognitive efforts. They posit that under conditions of limited a priori knowledge, such efforts include inferences about the levels of quality, price, and value on the basis of store environment cues. As Baker et al. (2002) describe, a consumer entering a store with tile floors, the smell of popcorn, fluorescent lighting, and Top-40 music may access from memory a "discount store" schema and infer that the store's merchandise is low priced and of average quality.

The view of the present article is that when consumers receive the competing stimuli of the environment, they may sometimes process them as a marketing tactic used by retailers to manipulate them. This cognitive process refers to "inferences of manipulative intent". In the field of advertising, Campbell (1995, p.228) define IMI as "consumer inferences that the advertiser is attempting to persuade by incongruent, unfair, or manipulative means". For purposes of this article, IMI refer to consumer's inferences that the retailer is attempting to persuade through an incongruent atmosphere. This article posits that environmental cues, such as atmospherics, are likely to vary in terms of the salience of manipulative intent. More precisely, the article posits that, in the presence of atmospherics, consumer's tendency to activate a perception of manipulative intent may depend on their incongruency.

Indeed, taken together, results regarding the effects of congruency provide converging evidence that atmospherics must be congruent to persuade consumer's to behave as wanted by the retailer. If not, because they are not in line with other aspects of the store environment (Bell, Holbrook, & Solomon 1991), incongruent atmospherics may make the mismatch salient, and thus may lead to less favorable evaluations of the store. Moreover, atmospherics may lead shoppers to see their presence as a mean of manipulation. For instance, a garage selling second-hand cars can increase the perceived quality of its cars when diffusing a scent of new car; however, consumers may judge that such a smell of new cars is not justified in this context and consequently may perceive the olfactory cue as incongruent and as a manipulative mean used by the garage owner to influence their behavior.

## 3. Research hypotheses

This article proposes a theoretical framework based on IMI. The model includes three dependant variables of IMI: attribution of

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