



Negative effects of ambient scents on consumers' skepticism about retailer's motives

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ABSTRACT

Ambient odors are used to enhance consumer's emotional and attitudinal responses so that he behaves in a way that is profitable for the retailer. However, the literature reveals that consumer's knowledge about such marketing tactics may make that proposition fail. This article suggests that environmental characteristics can influence consumer skepticism and in turn emotional and attitudinal responses. We begin by reviewing the literature on (1) ambient odors and (2) skepticism to emphasize the potential influence of store environment on consumer skepticism. Then, we turn to a scenario-based experiment designed to shed light on the underlying process.

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1. Introduction

Atmospherics have long been acknowledged as a key-to-success factors for retailers (Bitner, 1992) and a criteria for consumers in choosing which malls to visit (Haytko and Baker, 2004). As a result, a wide body of research has examined their impact and demonstrated their influence on shopping emotions and behavior. Because of their impact on emotions (Ellen and Bone, 1998), olfactory cues have been found to be an atmospheric of great interest for retailers, by positively affecting product quality perceptions (Bone and Jantrania, 1992; Morrin and Ratneshwar, 2000; Chebat and Michon, 2003), recall and recognition of brands (Morrin and Ratneshwar, 2003), evaluations of the store (Spangenberg et al., 1996) and approach behaviors (Bone and Ellen, 1999).

Despite being of great interest, most of the research to date on olfactory cues in the store environment has focused only their positive effects on consumer behavior. However, it may be argued that ambient scent would have some negative effects if they were perceived by consumers as a marketing tactic to influence their behavior. According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), consumers become active recipients of the retailer's attempt and possess knowledge about persuasion tactics used by marketers to influence their behavior (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Thus, we suggest that ambient scent in the store environment could be interpreted as a marketing tool used by retailers to persuade them to buy more. More specifically, we propose that when consumers are exposed to an ambient scent in a store environment in which

they did not expect such a scent, they develop skepticism toward the retailer's motives. We also propose that in a skepticism-inducing environment, consumers feel less pleasure and develop negative attitude, attributions and trust toward the retailer.

Based on an experiment, results show that when olfactory cues in the atmosphere leads consumers to become skeptical about retailer's motives, it decreases their pleasure and their attitude toward the retailer, leads them to make negative corporate attributions and distrust the retailer. Prior to describing the experiment and the result, we discuss the theoretical explanations of ambient odors on consumer perception, skepticism and behavior and present hypotheses addressing those effects.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Ambient scents and shopper responses

The need for exploring the impact of physical surroundings on consumer behavior has long been emphasized. Among several others, one of the environmental dimensions of interest for retailers is ambient scent. One of the interests of ambient scent may be due to its ability to affect the limbic system, the part of the brain responsible for emotional responses (Ellen and Bone, 1998). Results on ambient scents in retail contexts emphasize their ability to affect consumers' responses. Spangenberg et al. (1996) provide evidence of ambient scent effects in a retail environment, in which scent presence positively affects overall ratings of a simulated store and of the store environment. Evaluations of the store overall and of the store environment, purchase intentions and approach behaviors are more positive when the store is scented than when it is not scented. Moreover,

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subjects in the scented store perceive spending less time shopping than subjects in the unscented store. Ambient scents have also been found to improve subjects' moods (Ellen and Bone, 1998) or arousal levels (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982).

However, such effects appear to be moderated by the congruency of the scent with the object (Bone and Jantrania, 1992), the in-store music (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001), the time of the year (Spangenberg et al., 2005) or the retail store (Gulas and Bloch, 1995). For instance, Mitchell et al. (1995) have shown that congruent ambient scents (e.g., a floral scent in a flower shop) have different effects on information processing and choice than incongruent scents (e.g., the scent of chocolate in a flower shop).

Despite their undeniable interest, these studies have all examined the positive effects of ambient scent, and thus encourage the examination of its potential negative effects in the store environment. Consumers may become skeptical of the motives of the retailer in the scented environment, by seeing ambient scent as a tool controlled by the retailer to influence their behavior.

2.2. Consumer skepticism

Skepticism is often seen as a provisional approach to claims, the application of reason to any and all ideas, implying the necessity for skeptical persons to see compelling evidence before believing (Fleming, 2005). Skeptical individuals have questions about whether a course of action is best, want more information before making a judgment, and have the confidence to rely on their own judgment by separating advertising truth from advertising hype (Boush et al., 1994). Thus, the key mechanism operationalizing skepticism is the process of doubts about the reality of phenomenon. For example, literature on skepticism toward advertising defines skepticism as the feeling that the ad is neither credible nor reliable (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998; Tsfaty and Cappella, 2003).

Although there is some debate regarding the status of skepticism (i.e., as a personality trait versus a response to a situation), there is good agreement that it refers to a stable belief (Berlo et al., 1969). For instance, skepticism toward advertising is defined as the tendency to disbelieve the informational claims of advertising (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 1998). There is also a debate regarding the dimensionality of the concept (Ford et al., 1990). Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998) distinguished between several theoretical dimensions, referring to the truth of ad claims, the motives of the advertiser, the value of the information and the appropriateness of the ad. However, assessing dimensionality through a scale development led them to conclude to the unidimensionality of the concept.

There has been substantial empirical evidence in previous empirical and theoretical research showing that marketing tactics could increase consumer skepticism. Regarding pricing tactics, evidence shows that advertised price offers influence consumers' perceptions of the discount and the claim, resulting in higher skepticism toward the ad (Gupta and Cooper, 1992). Such results are consistent with the results of Fry and McDougall (1974), Liefeld and Heslop (1985), and Urbany et al. (1988) who also found that when consumers evaluate the discount claims, their perception of the discount is likely to increase skepticism, resulting in the discount of such claims.

Similar inferences can be drawn with respect to the influence of store environment. When exposed to stimuli in the store environment, consumers evaluate information provided to them, their perception of the information being likely to affect their skepticism and their attitude toward the environment. In other words, stimuli such as atmospherics and ambient scent can be perceived and interpreted in a way that leads to skepticism which may affect decision processes and behavior.

2.3. Skepticism in the scented store environment

The previously discussed studies in the marketing literature provide support for a relationship between ambient scent as a persuasive tactic and skepticism. The novel element in our research is the focus on this relationship in the specific context of the store environment.

The relationship between persuasive tactics and skepticism is well documented in the literature, bringing evidence that heightened awareness of persuasive tactics increases skepticism (Friestad and Wright, 1994). The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) seems particularly appealing to provide an explanation for the effect of ambient scent on skepticism. Persuasion knowledge states that consumers identify when someone is trying to persuade them and how to react in a way that achieves their own goals (Artz and Tybout, 1999; Friestad and Wright, 1994; Kirmani and Zhu, 2007). Consumer's identification of persuasion attempts are based on beliefs about the tactics employed by marketers and the goal such marketers seek to achieve. Since service encounters are considered by Friestad and Wright (1994, 3) as "messages from which consumers can perceive of a persuasion attempt", the Persuasion Knowledge Model appears particularly appealing to provide an explanation for the effect of atmospherics on shoppers' skepticism. We suggest in this research that ambient scent could be seen by consumers as a tactic used by retailers to persuade them to help retailers to achieve their corporate goals. We also suggest that such a tactic is likely to lead consumers to become skeptical about retailer's motives. Indeed, despite evidence about the effects of ambient scents in the store environment on pleasure (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Ehrlichman and Halpern, 1988; Gulas and Bloch, 1995; Spangenberg et al., 1996), it would be theoretically possible that consumers react to them not by feeling more pleasure but rather by developing negative reactions. We suggest that an ambient odor, if leading to skepticism toward retailer's motives, could lead shoppers to react by behaving in the opposite way than the one wanted by the retailer. As a result, it may be proposed that consumers in skepticism-inducing environment feel less pleasure than in a non skepticism-inducing environment.

H1. The presence of a skepticism-inducing ambient scent in the environment, compared to a no skepticism-inducing ambient scent, decreases pleasure in the store.

Literature on persuasion has widely emphasized that persuasion knowledge is likely to get consumers develop resistance strategies that prevent marketers to achieve their goals (Kirmani and Campbell, 2004). As they understand and cope with marketers' actions, they form attitudes about influencers. Most of the research on the PKM has been conducted in advertising (Campbell, 1995; Cotte et al., 2005). Findings showed that such persuasive attempts have a negative effect on attitude toward both the advertising and the advertiser. Research has also empirically examined the effects of persuasive attempts on attributions about the sponsor. Consistent with this perspective, we posit:

H2. The presence of a skepticism-inducing ambient scent in the environment, compared to a no skepticism-inducing ambient scent, (a) decreases attitude toward the retailer (Att_{Ret}) and (b) influences the attribution that the retailer is primarily concerned with making money.

Almost all definitions of skepticism stress that for skepticism to be relevant there has to be some lack of trust on the side of the audience (Tsfaty and Cappella, 2003). Trust is the expectation that the interaction with the trustee would lead to gains for the trustor, an expectation of honest and cooperative behavior.

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