



# The interactional effects of atmospherics and perceptual curiosity on emotions and online shopping intention

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## ABSTRACT

With increasing importance of online stores, a great number of studies have focused on extending our knowledge related to successful functional aspects increasing ease of use and usefulness. More recent studies have focused on identifying the effects produced by hedonic aspects of online store environment such as web atmospherics on emotional responses of customers. However, previous studies have been somewhat deficient in their investigation of studying diverse aspects of online consumer characteristics, which may have an impact on customer evaluation of atmospheric cues. Building on this research tradition, the present study addresses two critical issues. The present study adopting a well validated S–O–R framework tests the effect of atmospheric cues of online stores on the intervening affective emotional states of consumers, which have a subsequent impact on behavioral intention. Additionally, the model hypothesizes that perceptual curiosity (PC) moderates the relationships between atmospheric cues and shoppers' emotional reactions. Structure equation model confirmed that online atmospherics such as graphics, colors, and links have an impact on customer emotions such as pleasure and arousal, both of which have subsequent effects on intention. The moderating effect of perceptual curiosity has also been supported. Theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research are discussed in conclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

As the retail store evolves from a traditional brick-and-mortar format to a more advanced one, managerial and academic attention has been given to developing effective online retail stores. The trend of going online has been the norm in virtually every industry. As of the end of 2008, the sales volume of online retailing has surpassed that of traditional department stores in Korea. Consumers prefer online shopping to traditional brick-and-mortar retailing, mainly due to convenient home delivery, broader selection, competitive pricing, greater access to product and service information, and convenient time to receive product (Ahn, Ryu, & Han, 2004). The proliferation of online stores has made stores more similar in their offerings of products and services. As much as the instrumental qualities of online shopping such as ease, convenience, and useful information become important predictors of online shopping attitudes and behavior, academics and practitioners of online stores have noticed that atmospheric cues, which are defined as any component provided by an online store within an individual's perceptual field that stimulates one's senses (Milliman & Fugate, 1993), play equally important role in shaping attitudes

and behavior (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2001, 2003). Furthermore, the Internet shopping environment communicates image through product and site offerings and influences customers' satisfaction (McKinney, 2004). Accordingly, hedonic aspects of online store environment such as web atmospherics have gained more attention recently (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001; Eroglu et al., 2001, 2003; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). With this increasing importance of atmospheric cues, researchers now pay more attention to consumer characteristics, which may have an impact on evaluating these atmospheric cues. For example, Eroglu and his colleagues proposed and tested a moderating effect of two personality traits such as atmospheric responsiveness and involvement (Eroglu et al., 2001, 2003). Nevertheless, research addressing the effect of personality traits on atmospherics is surely an under researched area. Accordingly, research addressing the interactional impact of personality traits and atmospherics on customer's emotional responses in the context of online store environment is urgently needed. Building on this research tradition, the present study addresses two critical issues. First, the model tests the effect of atmospheric cues of online stores on the intervening affective emotional states of consumers, which have a subsequent impact on behavioral intention. Second, the model also hypothesizes that perceptual curiosity (PC) moderates the relationship between atmospheric cues and shoppers' emotional reactions. Collins,

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Litman, and Spielberger (2004) suggest that PC is usually evoked by complex or ambiguous patterns of sensory stimulation such as sights and sounds and motivates behaviors such as visual inspection in order to acquire new information. This study suggests that PC may have an impact on consumer judgment of atmospherics of online shopping stores. By investigating effects of atmospherics and a unique consumer characteristic of PC, the current study may contribute to extending our understanding of behaviors of on-line shoppers.

Following this introduction, Section 2 provides a theoretical foundation for the present study based on an S–O–R framework proposed by environmental psychology and provides a brief review of previous research related to atmospherics, customer emotional responses such as pleasure and arousal, intention, and PC. Section 3 presents a research model and proposes hypotheses to be tested. Section 4 describes the research methodology of the empirical study. Section 5 reports on the testing of the hypotheses and presents discussion. Section 6 presents implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Theoretical foundation

Theoretical foundation for the current study is based on the environmental psychology proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). This model is operationalized in a stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) framework. The S–O–R framework suggests that the stimuli as antecedents affect the consumers' emotional states (organism), whose response may result in their retail behaviors (responses) such as re-patronage, store search and in-store behavior (Thang & Tan, 2003). The Mehrabian and Russell model (1974) has spawned a number of studies in retail consumer behavior. Donovan and Rossiter (1982) was the first to apply the S–O–R framework into a retail context. When applied in retail setting, the stimuli are operationalized as the atmospheric cues, organism as emotional and cognitive states of consumers, and response as approach/avoidance behaviors (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The S–O–R framework has been extensively tested in the past research of traditional retail environments with promising results (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Sherman, Mathur, & Smith, 1997; Sherman & Smith, 1986). In a large-scale cross-sectional field study, Sherman et al. (1997), for example, empirically tested in a traditional retail environment that the stimuli such as social, design, and ambient factors of fashion stores positively affect organism variables such as pleasure and arousal of consumers, which have a positive impact on the amount of money spent in-store, store liking, the number of items purchased, and the time spent in-store. More specifically, Sherman et al. (1997) showed that while social and design factors have a positive effect on pleasure, ambient factor has a positive impact on arousal. In addition, they found that pleasure has a positive impact on the amount of money spent and store liking, arousal has a positive effect on the amount of money spent and the number of items purchased.

The stimuli in the S–O–R framework are represented by a set of attributes that affect the perceptions of the consumer (Mazursky & Jacoby, 1986). These attributes are the starting point of the consumer behavioral process, and are cues that enter a consumer's cognition and arouse or incite him (as a recipient) consciously or subconsciously into action. The attributes entered into a consumer's mind in a traditional retail environment include social factor such as the people in the store, customers, and employees, design factor such as visual cues of layout, clutter, cleanliness, and color, and ambient factor such as non-visual cues including smells and sounds (Eroglu et al., 2001, 2003). The organism, the sec-

ond component in the S–O–R framework, refers to the intervening internal process between the stimuli and reaction of consumer. It is a process in which the consumer converts the stimuli into meaningful information and utilizes them to comprehend the environment before making any judgment or conclusion. Essentially, it consists of the perceptual, physiological, feeling, and thinking activities and causes a change in the emotional state of the consumer. Feeling elicited during a shopping trip to a retail store, for example, may be expressed in terms of excitement, pleasure, and arousal. Perceptual activity may be represented by value judgment when a customer encounters, for example, a price tag of a product displayed in the store. Physiological activity may be produced by crowdedness in the store, resulting in sweatiness for the customer. All these activities cause a change in the emotional states of the customer. The third component, the response, is the final outcome or final action toward or reaction of the consumers, including psychological reactions such as attitudes and/or behavioral reactions. Depending on the organism process, the resultant emotional state can influence consumer's inclination to continue, curtail or cease his retail behavior in the store. Donovan and Rossiter (1982) and Sherman et al. (1997) suggested several behavioral responses that represent approach or avoidance. These are reflected by consumers' duration of visit (prolonged or transitory), the number of items purchased, the amount of money spent in-store, and so on. Sherman et al. (1997) measured the duration of visit with a single item, the amount of time spent in the store.

In the current study, the stimuli are operationalized as various atmospheric cues online stores carry. The organism is emotions consumers elicit when they navigate, search, and purchase products and services provided by an online store. Wulf, Schillewaert, Muylle, and Rangarajan (2006), for example, empirically demonstrated that the online store with correct content, well established organization, and reliable technology pleases their customers, and eventually lead them to navigate and search more, be satisfied and committed. The responses are operationalized as consumer intention to continuously use the online store they used to patronize. This S–O–R framework has been extensively tested in the previous online store studies and proved to be valid in predicting online shopper's emotions and subsequent behaviors (Dailey, 2004; Eroglu et al., 2003; McKinney, 2004; Menon & Kahn, 2002; Wu, Cheng, & Yen, 2008). Eroglu et al. (2003), for example, demonstrated that site atmospherics have a positive impact on pleasure and arousal, both of which have a subsequent positive effect on satisfaction and approach/avoidance behaviors. The components of stimulus, organism, and behavioral tendency in online shopping environments are further investigated below.

### 2.2. Atmospherics

Atmospherics are defined as “the conscious designing of space to create certain buyer effects, specifically, the designing of buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance purchase probability (Kotler, 1973–74, p. 50).” Milliman and Fugate (1993) defined atmospheric cues as any component within an individual's perceptual field that stimulates one's senses. Baker et al. (1994) presented a typology that groups the elements of store environment into three categories: social factors (people in the store such as customers and employees), design factors (visual cues such as layout, color, clutter, and cleanliness), and ambient factors (non-visual cues such as smells, sound, and lighting effects). Bitner (1992) similarly proposed a typology, which consists of ambient cues, layout and functionality, and communicators such as signs, symbols, and artifacts. Atmospherics in the current study are defined as any component in a retail environment, consciously designed and external to an individual, which enters within that individual's perceptual field and stimulates his

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