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Comfort in brick and mortar shopping experiences: Examining antecedents and consequences of comfortable retail experiences

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the comfort construct in brick and mortar retail settings. As a psychological construct, consumer comfort reflects a sense of ease and peace of mind during a shopping experience. Previous research suggests comfort carries a number of positive consequences for managers, such as strengthening customer relationships and increasing customer satisfaction (Gaur and Xu, 2009). However, these studies take a more interpersonal relationship theory approach and have not considered the impact of non-social aspects of retail environments on consumers' comfort. Moreover, these extant studies have not considered how comfortable environments create value for consumers. Consequently, this study examines how atmospheric elements contribute to creating consumer comfort, and how comfort impacts consumers' perceptions of shopping value. Findings from survey data demonstrate that not all atmospheric elements influence consumers' comfort levels. Moreover, comfortable environments were found to increase both utilitarian value and hedonic value. The implications of the findings for academics and managers are discussed.

1. Introduction

Extant research consistently demonstrates the important role cues from physical settings play in evoking various consumer states. Atmospheric conditions, such as temperature, noise, air quality, color, and social cures have been found to influence physiological responses (Bitner, 1992), cognitive perceptions of quality (Chebat and Morrin, 2007), and even the pleasantness of the environment (Baker et al., 1992). This indicates a strong impact of the physical retail environment on consumer perceptions and responses. However, one consumer state is noticeably absent from the literature – *psychological comfort*. Retailers often say they want customers to 'feel at home' in their store, and it stands to reason that if a customer felt 'at home' in a retail store that their attitudes and behaviors toward the retailer would be positively affected. This relationship, however, has yet to be tested.

Psychological comfort represents a sense of ease that facilitates calm and worry-free feelings within an environment (Daniels, 2000; Simmons, 2001; Spake et al., 2003). This is a commonly expected feeling to have in one's own home or office, but this feeling is also relevant to the retail environment. Specifically, this sense of comfort can lead to beneficial outcomes for retailers, such as greater commitment and approach behavior, reduced risk, and the development of trust (Spake et al., 2003). Such outcomes are becoming increasingly

important as marketers have become more focused on creating long-term customer relationships (Sheth, 2002; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Despite the intuitive importance of creating a comfortable retail environment for consumers, the examination of consumer comfort in the retail atmospherics literature is limited and focused solely on *physical* comfort (e.g. temperature, sound volume, and the like). As a result, research is yet to consider how atmospheric elements impact the consumer's perception of psychological comfort within the retail space and, in turn, the value such comfort provides as a component of the in-store retail atmosphere during the shopping trip.

Therefore the aim of this study is to empirically examine the role of psychological consumer comfort in the retail setting, and to answer the following research questions: (1) How do atmospheric elements (music, color, layout) and familiarity impact the consumer's feeling of comfort? (2) How does consumer comfort in turn impact utilitarian and hedonic value?

To address these questions, the paper is organized as follows; first, the relevant literature is reviewed. Next, the theory is developed and the hypotheses are outlined. The methods are then explained, followed by the reporting of the results. Finally, the discussion of the findings is presented, including implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Psychological comfort in the retail environment

Research on retail atmospherics explores the role of the environmental design elements on consumer behavior at the psychological level (Bitner, 1992; Kotler, 1973). For instance, by manipulating the atmospheric elements within the shopping environment, retailers can induce a certain mood in the shopper with the view to increase return intentions (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Eroglu et al., 2003; Foxall and Greenley, 1999; Mayer and Johnson, 2003; Sharma and Stafford, 2000). Yet moods represent an intersection of affect (positive and negative) and arousal (Novak et al., 2010), and as such are overarching affective states. Consequently, understanding the impact of atmospherics on such mood states alone may be limited; if the reason for manipulating the retail atmospheric elements is to induce psychological responses, it seems relevant to consider a more specific type of response - the consumer's feeling of comfort. Unlike moods, comfort goes beyond a general measure of affective valence, like pleasantness or happiness, and taps into other dimensions, such as tension, security, and peace of mind (Wang et al., 2007), and may be more relevant for the retail setting - after all, without feeling comfortable, how can a customer be expected to enjoy the shopping experience?

The examination of comfort typically considers two types: Physical and Psychological. Both types have been explored and discussed extensively in the psychology (Cook et al., 2012; Krauss et al., 2006; Lawrence et al., 2010; McBurney et al., 2006) and sociology (Gloria and Kurpius, 2001; Woodward, 2003) literature. Physical comfort research focuses on exploring matters related to alleviating conscious pain or uneasy sensations (Kinnane et al., 2013; Valkenburg et al., 2011; Yaman et al., 2011). Psychological comfort, on the other hand, represents a psychological state where individuals feel at ease, calm and worry-free while present in an environment (Daniels, 2000; Simmons, 2001; Spake et al., 2003). El-Adly (2007) found that consumers place high emphasis on comfort, both physical and psychological, within a shopping mall environment, with results further suggesting that comfort is one of the most important factors contributing to consumer's perceptions of shopping mall attractiveness. Unfortunately, El-Adly (2007) did not separate physical comfort from psychological comfort, so the relationship between psychological comfort and the retail environment remains undetermined. As such this study will consider the less understood relationship between psychological comfort and the retail environment.

The concept of psychological comfort has received some attention in a few areas of marketing. Within the advertising domain, psychological comfort with a brand, product, place, service or event can be conveyed in advertising messages through images of physical comfort (Stern, 1997), while within choice behavior research, psychological comfort has been used to explain the choices consumers make in complex buying situations, in particular comfort's role as an agent for reducing perceived complexity (Sheth and Parvatlyar, 1995). Within relationship marketing, psychological comfort has been shown to reduce anxiety and increases self-esteem (Schneider and Bowen, 1999) and can be used to strengthen relationships with consumers (Caplan and Thomas, 1995). Not surprisingly, psychological comfort is also associated with attachment (Kim et al., 2005; Brown et al., 2014), and enhanced commitment, satisfaction and trust (Gaur and Xu, 2009), enabling psychological comfort to create a barrier to exit for customer management (Spake et al., 2003). Alongside the brick and mortar settings, comfort has been found to have a positive influence on online shopping tendency (Mauldin and Arunachalam, 2002), with the sense of comfort experienced while shopping from home being both a key consideration for determining whether to shop online (Kwon and Noh, 2010) and a strong precursor of preference for online shopping (Kim, 2002). Given these findings, it seems appropriate to now work on developing a better understanding of the outcomes of psychological comfort in the retail shopping experience.

2.2. Hedonic and utilitarian shopping value

Shoppers are not only motivated by the potential purchase of product, but also by the satisfaction that can be gained from the shopping experience (Tauber, 1972). In fact, marketers today tend to consider shopping to be a multisensory 'experience' rather than a simple acquisition task (Foster and McLelland, 2015). As such consumers are expected to derive certain value (or benefits) from both the utility- and experiential-based aspects of the shopping trip (Babin et al., 1994). Not surprisingly, the consideration of utilitarian and hedonic shopping value has been a common approach in the retailing literature (Babin et al., 1994; Ballantine, 2010). In-line with this common convention, both utilitarian and hedonic value are examined herein and discussed separately below.

Utilitarian shopping value is task-oriented and non-emotional in nature (Babin et al., 1994; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Jones et al., 2006). It pertains to task-related benefits obtained through shopping, and can be derived from particular design cues (Baker et al., 2002), positive perceptions of service quality (Bitner, 1990), and certain physical cues (Bitner, 1992; Borghini et al., 2009) that support the accomplishment of shopping task. However, not all shopping behavior is "directed toward satisfying some functional, physical, or economic need" (Babin et al., 1994, 653). In recognition of this, hedonic value reflects the affective benefits gained from positive feelings experienced through the shopping trip. It can be derived during planned shopping behavior as well as impulsive shopping behaviors (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003), where shopping can serve as psychological therapy (Babin et al., 1994). In a sense, it represents the emotional value gained through the shopping experience itself. Although both types of shopping value are important, the consideration of hedonic value is especially relevant for modern retailing, as retailers seek to create unique shopping experiences by adding elements of entertainment and interactivity to their store environments (Foster and McLelland, 2015). Therefore, this study will consider the impact of consumer comfort on both utilitarian and hedonic shopping value.

2.3. The relationship between familiarity and comfort

Familiarity is a derived cue which typically describes the presence of knowledge structures about a specific target that are built over time through one's experiences with the target (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987; Edwards et al., 2009). Amongst social and cognitive psychology research, evidence that familiarity with a stimulus elicits positive reactions is prolific (Claypool et al., 2008). Certainly the more familiar a stimulus is perceived to be, the more liked (Bornstein, 1989) and attractive (Moreland and Zajonc, 1982) it is reported to be.

However research on familiarity within the marketing domain is less prolific. Despite the prominence of consumer interactions within familiar settings, few studies have investigated the influence of familiarity on consumer behavior in retail settings. Nevertheless, studies commonly imply a familiarity-comfort relationship; for example, Priluck (2003) implies that by facilitating psychological comfort, purchasing from a familiar firm facilitates consumer's satisfaction during relational exchanges. Interestingly, however, within the context of comfort food, familiarity has been shown to positively correlate with feelings of comfort (Wood, 2010). Consequently, examining the role of retailer familiarity on consumer behavior appears to be an underresearched area in retailing.

3. Theoretical development

The literature reviewed highlights the importance of consumer comfort and the need to consider the role that consumer comfort plays in shopping behavior. This study extends existing research by empiri-