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Effect of store atmospherics on employees' reactions

Hamida Skandrani
Department of Marketing,
The High Institute of Management of Tunis (ISG – Tunis),
University of Tunis, Tunis, Tunisia

Norchène Ben Dahmane Mouelhi
Department of Marketing,
Institute of High Business Studies of Carthage (IHEC – Carthage),
University of Carthage, Tunis, Tunisia, and

Faten Malek
Université de Bretagne Sud, Lorient, France

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to better understand the effect of store atmospherics on the employees' cognitive, affective and physiological responses. It tries to build on store atmospherics literature to gain more insights on how these store atmospherics – often handled to produce positive outcomes among consumers – affect employees' attitudinal and behavioural reactions.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted an explanatory approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 employees working in internationally reputed clothing stores. A content analysis was carried out.

Findings – The study reveals that employees could adopt avoidance behaviours because of the environmental factors. Specifically, it suggests that the lack of variation in the musical program, incongruence of music genre – salespersons musical preferences, long exposure to the same rhythms, task complexity, crowding, might affect the employees' attitudinal and behavioural responses. In addition, the relationships between the sales force team are found to influence employees' reactions.

Research limitations/implications – Because of the complexity of the subject matter and the research approach adopted, the study findings may lack generalisability. Further studies are required to test the suggested framework in different service settings.

Practical implications – The study finding stresses the need that in an attempt to produce positive reactions from consumer, clothing stores managers should also devote attention to employees' responses to store atmospherics as they might inhibit the quality of the service delivery process.

Originality/value – This paper fulfils a recognized call to thoroughly understand the impact of store atmospherics on employees' reactions in services marketing. The study enlarges the scope of store atmospherics research in marketing to encompass not only the consumer's reactions but also the employee's ones.

Keywords Store ambience, Clothing, Employee behaviour

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The highly increasing competition in retailing requires from managers working in this field to consider the customers' satisfaction at the core of their strategic thoughts. Such an orientation appears clearly through the implementation of new techniques and strategies that may lead to a more pleasant shopping experience. The growing number

of the stores known as "atmosphere stores" (Filser, 2001) is an illustration (i.e. Sephora; Nature & Découvertes). Their main objective is to reach a better positioning of the retail stores (Filser, 2001). Indeed, these stores are designed in such a way that consumers may easily differentiate their offer (assortments, prices, promotion, etc.) from the competitors' one, and also obtain an intrinsic value derived from living a gratifying and hedonist experience of leisure and social interactions (Dawson *et al.*, 1990).

The store atmosphere, becoming a largely adopted retailing strategy, is also a subject matter that gained a growing interest among academicians. Indeed, several researchers focused on identifying the environment's components and particularly their influence on customer behaviour (Kotler, 1973-1974; Baker, 1986; Berman and Evans, 1995; Bitner, 1992). They stressed to the need to consider the retail store environment as a multidimensional concept made up of music, scents, colours, lights, design, etc. Recently, social dimension represented by stores employees has been also included among these dimensions (Baker, 1986; Baker *et al.* 1994).

Studies addressing the impact of store atmospherics give support to their significant effect on the customers' emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses, as well as on the quality of the interaction between customer and contact personnel (Bitner, 1992; Machleit and Eroglu, 2000; Hoffman and Turley, 2002; Turley and Milliman, 2000; Grewal *et al.*, 2003; Dion, 2004; Eroglu *et al.*, 2005; Machleit *et al.*, 2000; Wirtz *et al.*, 2007; Wirtz and Mattila, 2007; Mattila and Wirtz, 2008). Despite the accumulated body of knowledge, little interest has been directed to how these store atmospherics might affect employees. This seems somehow controversial for at least three reasons. First, the widely recognized strategic importance of internal marketing (Barnes, 1989; Grönroos, 1997) and the growing interest to the employees' satisfaction-performance relationship in service delivery (Baker, 1986; Chebat *et al.*, 2002; Lovelock *et al.*, 2008; Singh, 2000). Second, the results of experimental studies in human factors design (ergonomics) supporting significant effects of ambient conditions (lighting, noise, temperature, ventilation, etc.) and equipment design in different contexts (design of computers, automobiles, employee work stations, etc.) on human reactions, stimulation level and pleasure (Munsterberg, 1915; Bennett, 1977; Oborne, 1987; Sanders and McCormick, 1987). Third, the recognition by some marketing scholars of the effects of the commercial environment design not only on customers but also on employees (Bitner, 1992). Consequently, we gain more in knowledge by investigating into how sales people react to store atmospherics. Consistent with this objective, this study aims to discover the impact of atmospherics on employees' attitudinal and behavioural responses in a service setting, namely, in clothing stores.

In the following, a review of the literature on store atmospherics and their impact on customers is first presented. In the second section, the methodology of the exploratory study conducted among 13 clothing stores employees is detailed. Then, the study results are reported and discussed. Finally, limitations and future research avenues are presented.

Literature review

Many definitions of environmental factors are suggested in marketing literature. They revealed that this concept had undergone a considerable shift in its meaning. In services marketing, Kotler (1973-1974) is recognized to be the first author to suggest atmospherics as a marketing tool. He refers to these as "the conscious designing of space to create some effects in buyers that enhance his purchase probability"

(Kotler, 1973-1974). Subsequently, Bitner (1992) suggested the servicescape's concept to refer to the environment in which services were delivered and where the firm and customer interacted (Hoffman and Turley, 2002). It is the "built environment" or, more specifically, the "man-made, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment" (Bitner, 1992, p. 65). This complex mix of environmental features includes lighting, colour, signage, textures, quality of materials, style of furnishings, layout, wall decor and temperature. These factors could be controlled by the firm to enhance (or constrain) the employee's and customer's actions (Bitner, 1992, p. 65). Thus, atmospherics can be considered as an emotionally oriented design of space which can affect the customers as well as the employees. Therefore, the critical dimensions of the store atmospherics range from tactile, sensory, gustatory, olfactory, and visual to social factors. Table I summarizes the different classifications of store's atmospherics dimensions suggested in the literature.

As presented in Table I, the store atmospherics dimensions had undergone a refinement which was primarily motivated by the increasing recognition of their role in determining the customer affective and behavioural responses in service settings. In the following section, a synthesis of research on atmospherics impact on the consumer's responses is presented.

Atmospherics influence on the consumer's reactions
Empirical findings related to the impact of environmental factors in a retail store setting support largely the relationship between environmental stimuli manipulation and consumer behaviour (Hoffman and Turley, 2002). Individuals' internal responses to these stimuli range from emotional (pleasure-displeasure, arousal level), physiological (physical discomfort) to cognitive ones (beliefs, attributions and categorization of the service organization). Behavioural responses vary from approach behaviours to

Publications	Dimensions	Notes
Kotler (1973-1974)	Four dimensions (visual; aural; tactile; and olfactory)	This typology does not include the crowd and the employee dimensions
Baker (1986)	Three dimensions (ambient; design; and social)	This typology takes into account the social dimension, but does not include the facility exterior-exterior design of the retail store
Bitner (1992)	Three dimensions (ambient conditions; spatial layout and functionality; and signs, symbols, and artefacts)	The framework is the most complete one. Nevertheless, research on the employee side is rare
Berman and Evans (1995)	Four dimensions (external variables; internal variables; landscaping; and interior design and layout)	The human component is not included in the framework and the ambient factors dimension is considered among the internal variable to the store
D'Astous (2000)	Three dimensions (irritant ambient factors; irritant design factors; and irritant social factors)	This framework is inspired by Baker's (1986) typology
Turley and Milliman (2000)	Five dimensions (general exterior; general interior; layout and design; point of purchase and decoration; and human being variables)	This framework is built on Berman and Evans's (1995) typology. It includes the human component

Table I.
Classifications of store's atmospherics dimensions

avoidance ones. These responses are expressed in different manners (Bitner, 1992; Chebat *et al.*, 2001; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Milliman, 1986; Turley and Milliman, 2000):

- a desire to stay (approach) or leave (avoid);
- a desire to further explore and interact (approach) or a tendency to ignore the stimuli (avoidance);
- a desire to communicate with others (approach) or to ignore (avoid); and
- satisfaction (approach) or disappointment (avoidance) with the service experience.

Are the employees' responses to environmental factors similar to those observed among consumers? Does the exposure to diverse stimuli during a whole day – often handled to improve the purchase atmosphere for the customer – have the same effect on employees as on customers? The results of a qualitative study conducted in a retail store context gave insights to these questionings.

Study design and methodology

To better understand the effects of store environmental factors on individuals, marketing scholars have often focused on quantitative approaches (Turley and Milliman, 2000). However, according to Vernette (2007), qualitative approaches offer a high potential to discover or rediscover the hidden meaning of the buyer's experience. In line with Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) and Wells (1993), several researchers also support the suitability of qualitative methods to study the behaviour and consumption experiences (Aaker *et al.*, 2001). Besides, qualitative approach is recognized to be more fitting to investigate understudied populations (Morrow and Smith, 2000; Shinnar, 2007) and also to allow "access and get a rough idea about person's perspective" (Aaker *et al.*, 2001, p. 184). Since marketing literature on the employees' reactions to store environmental factors is limited and that our study's purpose is to uncover these responses, a qualitative methodology is deemed to be appropriate.

Accordingly, interviews were undertaken with 13 sales people aged between 22 and 29 and working in four internationally and locally reputed retail clothing companies operating in an emerging market, namely, Tunisia (see Table AI in Appendix for more details on the respondents and companies). It should be noticed that the initial list of contacted companies included all the clothing ones often renowned for being leaders in using atmospherics in their marketing strategies. Only four companies among them agreed to let their employees participate to the study. Selected stores were located mainly in Tunis and Sousse, very important towns in terms of population and commercial activity.

A semi-structured interview guide, which allows for conversational two-way communication, was used and interviews lasted for an average of 35 min. This guide covered four main topics:

(1) the assessment of store environment in general;

(2) the range of manipulated atmospherics and the effect they elicit among them;

(3) the relationship they have with other people (customers, colleagues and the superior); and

(4) the factors that can disturb their interactions with others.

The interviews were recorded after getting the interviewee's consent. Responses were transcribed after that. Data gathering continued until no critical added information was generated when interviewing a further informant (Mucchielli, 1991, p. 114).

Data analysis was performed based on Miles and Huberman (1984) recommended three steps approach:

(1) data reduction;

(2) data display; and

(3) drawing and verifying conclusions.

To these purposes, data reduction was performed subsequent to close readings of the transcriptions. These readings allowed being more familiar with the content and also contributed to identify and define the unit of analysis, namely, the themes. Within each theme, search for subtopics and overlapping aspects was also carried out. After having reduced the material into themes and identified the subtopics and related aspects, a role matrix was generated (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Rows designated the interviewees and columns the assigned theme/themes. The process of drawing conclusions with respect to the impact of the store environmental factors on their attitude and behaviour was then carried out.

It is important to note that throughout the preparation of raw data and analysis, the trustworthiness of the findings had been carefully assessed mainly through checks of coding, categorisation and interpretations consistency between the first and third authors (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Thomas, 2006). Then, the three authors met together to discuss the constructions and interpretations. Any disagreement in the interpretation was openly discussed going back to the data until a consensus was reached (Shinnar, 2007, p. 349). Patton (1980, p. 339) describes this process of going back to data as one where qualitative analysts return to their data "over and over again to see if the constructs, categories, explanations, and interpretations make sense" (Creswell and Miller, 2000, p. 127).

Comparison with findings from previous research on the same topics or on related ones (findings from human research management, environmental psychology) was also used (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993; Thomas, 2006) to assess the credibility of the drawn results.

Results
Data analysis shows that the interviews do not give the same attention to all store atmospherics. It reveals that music and crowd have the most effect on the informants. Such a result highlights the importance of these factors in retail store settings. The kind of relationship among employees themselves and the relation between salespeople with their sales manager also has an effect on their responses (respectively nine and seven informants agreed on those effects). The items sold and their assortments were also considered by three informants as they may influence their attitudinal and behavioural responses.

Music effects on the employees' reactions
Findings from the study showed a general preference of the interviewees to work in conditions where music is played and they have a high aversion for silence. Moreover, the majority of the informants considered music as a "pleasant companion". It fulfils several functions in so far that it breaks the routine, helps the sales people to feel less bored when there are no customers and disguises the noise in the store. It also

keeps them busy which decreases interpersonal contacts. Thus, it prevents, in some way, problems occurring.

Music effects on the employees emotional responses
There was a large degree of consensus among informants regarding the music influence on the emotional states of salespeople. Indeed, 11 interviewees reported that music contributes to improve their mood state, especially when they like the music being played or when the music is familiar to them. Davies (1991) and Herrington (1996) advocated similar conclusions.

Furthermore, a pleasant musical environment and a rhythmic tempo have an arousal effect on employees. Accordingly, one informant quoted: "I become more motivated" and "more active". Whereas, according to some interviewees, a slow rhythm or a soft music affects negatively the arousal level. "Listening to a very relaxing music makes me feel sleepy", "I do not like soft music after midday when consumers begin to come to the store, and you do not feel comfortable, it is not active". Similar findings are reported in some environmental psychology and marketing studies which gave support to the relationship between the tempo of the music and the individual's stimulation level (Sears, 1957; Lundin, 1985; Kellaris and Kent, 1994).

Moreover, some informants stated that they prefer working with a soft music. They perceive fast tempo and rhythmic music as ambient factors that disturb them. "To some extent, it disturbs, in regard to the task to perform, noise and customers, you feel that it disturbs a little [. . .] and consequently reduces concentration".

It seems, therefore, that the tempo effect depends on personal variables. Highly stimulated persons seem to react positively to fast tempo music as underlined by Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1992) and Steenkamp *et al.* (1996). This effect also depends on the task to perform and on some surroundings factors (i.e. noise, consumers).

Music effects on the employees' cognitive responses
Data analysis revealed that the played music seems to affect employee's time perception. Some informants noted that when there is not much work to do, listening to music helps time go by.

Furthermore, most informants consider explicitly or implicitly that the music-accelerated rhythm helps them to work in better conditions and to keep an ongoing activity. They believe that these rhythms affect positively the client's purchase intention and gives energy to the team to work especially in moments of high affluence. Some qualify music as "necessary", "something essential in a retail store", "you cannot work without music". Others expressed a more moderate opinion. "[. . .] it is better to work with music", "preferably". Such a result gives support to the critical importance of music variable in retail stores (Baker *et al.*, 1994; Milliman, 1982, 1986; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1989).

Music effects on the employees' physiological reactions
The relation between music and physiological responses appears clearly in the employees' interviews. Music influences the way of moving in the store as well as the employees' actions. "The music rhythm makes you active, makes you move and since we move a lot we need to adapt music to our movement". Some previous studies reported

similar results. Consumer adapts his way of walking to music tempo (Smith and Curnow, 1966; Milliman, 1982).

However, a store manager noted that oriental dancing music is proscribed in the store. "Such music 'excites' too much employees. They can even dance on the rhythms and that may have a negative impact on meeting the consumer's needs". Therefore, it seems that pleasant music should not generate a higher stimulation level than the desired optimal level for the employees. This level can differ from the one that managers want to evoke among consumers. It seems very useful to consider such controversial effects in scheduling musical programs in a retail store. A balance between consumer's expected effect and employees' effective reactions is necessary.

Music effects on the employees' behavioural responses
In this study, music seems to elicit mainly two reactions: motivation and stimulation. Remarkably, for some informants, music may generate "stress" and "discomfort". This can be explained by several factors related to the music – type, tempo, style, duration, and the moment of the day it is played – and also to the personality of the employees.

Therefore, a pleasant music provides pleasure, affects positively the store environment's perception and evaluation. This music leads salespeople to adopt an approach behaviour. Such behaviour appears clearly through the desire to perform assigned tasks "happy, I do not want to remain without anything", the affiliation feeling and the way in which the task is carried out "I sing, I have fun while working, I work with pleasure". Such results are consistent with Bitner's (1992) concluding remarks about the undertaken actions that signal approach behaviour.

Music can also be a source of stress that influences negatively the employee's task performance. It seems that the continuous exposure to music is not appreciated and is very stressful. "At the end of the day, and when I am tired, the music bores me, I do not bear it any more", "one likes the music generally, but listening for long hours can become stressful [. . .], the same music is heard and sometimes, the same CD which is replayed, it is awkward". Moreover, it seems that an imposed musical scheduling represents a source of stress for the employees. Indeed, they find that all the diffused music "is the same", "all the songs have the same rhythm", and that CDs lack variety.

Filser (1994) offers a possible explanation to these negative influences. In this regard, psychologists showed that an individual ends up by feeling boredom when exposed to growing levels of the same stimulus, the marginal utility of the stimulus decreases.

The lack of variety added to the employee attendance time is likely to generate some monotony, producing feelings of boredom among employees. Not all the interviewed employees perceive this situation the same way. Thus, other variables can moderate the music effects on the employee's responses. For example, according to workplace psychologists, employees are sensitive to monotony depending upon their intelligence, temperament, beliefs about the jobs, etc. (Brief and Weiss, 2002; Le Maitour, 1967).

To conclude, results suggest that music broadcast in the store should be congruent with the moment of the day, non-repetitive and suiting the employees' tastes and preferences. They also suggest that its impact on the employees' responses appears to be much more complex than for a consumer who seemingly has more control on the situation (spend less time and can leave at any moment).

Crowding effects on the employees' emotional responses

Crowding is the second most influencing environmental factor identified by interviewees. Two major effects of crowding had been identified: the stimulation effect and the pleasure effect.

Stimulation effect. A total of 11 informants acknowledged being stimulated under high-density conditions. Crowding influences positively the team level arousal. Sales people reported being more dynamic, more ambitious and "too motivated" under crowding conditions. This effect corroborates Machleit *et al.*'s (2000) results, which show a positive correlation between the individual stimulation level and the consumer's density perception.

For some informants, crowding is a source of stress that may lead sometimes "to lose patience". Nevertheless, they are aware that they must "manage this stress and this situation well in order to satisfy the customers who are often too difficult to satisfy".

Pleasure effect. Low-density conditions seem clearly to have negative effect on the interviewed employees. "Almost all of us feel disturbed, worried and anxious when there are no clients". Unlike, crowding conditions appear to produce pleasure and satisfaction among them. "When the store is full, we are satisfied", "when shopper density is high, I am happy.", "you are happy to make more sales and to make more profit and, at the same time, the day goes by faster, discussing with some customers or socializing with others". However, in some circumstances, these conditions may produce a negative effect among these employees "In the presence of a great number of shoppers, in rush hours, we are overloaded, we cannot communicate with more than two customers at the same time". This suggests that crowding is preferred to some extent. When exceeded, it can produce cognitive overload among salespeople.

On the other hand, some employees expressed their discomfort under crowding conditions. "I do not like crowd", "I feel suffocated and disturbed". These psychological influences of crowding had been already reported in Mackintosh *et al.*'s (1975) study, which revealed that respondents carrying a given task under conditions of high density describe themselves as being tense and confused.

Results also suggest that personal characteristics may explain the divergence in the comfort/discomfort felt by some employees under crowding conditions. This result is consistent with Dion's (1999) conclusions. According to this author, personal characteristics can moderate the relation crowding conditions – pleasure. Indeed, placed in the same conditions, they expressed different feelings toward people density.

Crowding effects on the employees' cognitive responses

Results revealed that crowding has an influence on time perception. Some respondents reported that under crowding conditions, they did not realize how time goes by and working hours seem to be shorter. "Under crowding conditions, you serve that consumer, you speak with the other, you look for items in stocks, and the day is already over".

Interviewed employees also believe that under high affluence conditions – especially during the scheduled on-sales period – they learn to improve their working method, since they realize that this period is the most important time to achieve better sales results.

However, crowding could have a negative effect on the employees' store evaluation. Some informants reported that during on-sales period, the store is all in disorder, that they feel uncomfortable with the store and merchandise layout, aesthetic and appeal.

Eroglu and Machleit (1990) found a similar result. According to these authors, consumers tend to evaluate negatively the store image under conditions of high-physical density than in low-density conditions. Therefore, crowding may influence not only consumers' shopping experiences and store image evaluation but also the employees' evaluation of those aspects.

Crowding effects on the employees' physiological responses
Consumer behaviour literature identified some criteria to measure the physiological responses to crowding conditions. Among these are:

- increase in the blood pressure (Epstein *et al.*, 1981);
- increase in the levels of the skin conductibility (Aiello *et al.*, 1977); and
- acceleration of the cardiac rhythm (Evans, 1979).

The analysis of informants' discourses revealed clearly these manifestations. "I feel tired", "I feel suffocated". To cope with this state, they react in different manners. Some of them hide their feelings and try to be more patient, others experience stress and find that the solution is to slacken.

Crowding effect on the employees' behavioural responses
Crowding elicits internal responses among the interviewees. These responses in turn lead to an approach or avoidance behaviours. Thus, when they feel stimulated, informants tend to devote more effort at work exhibiting consequently an approach behaviour. Accordingly, an employee: "I become too much motivated [. . .]. I do not stop moving".

This approach behaviour can be explained, by the opportunism, which is one of the coping strategies to crowding conditions (Hui and Bateson, 1991; Machleit *et al.*, 2000; Dion, 1999). Likewise, in situation of high density, the consumer may adopt an opportunist behaviour and try to benefit from the occasion. The employees think that it is necessary to take advantage of the presence of customers to achieve more sales and therefore improve their bonus.

Moreover, the majority of the respondents relate crowding conditions to promotions, sales and holidays. These periods are the most important to make sales. That is why more efforts are needed to achieve this objective. The employees do not hesitate then to help each other, and to share tasks in order to handle, at best, the situation. In these conditions, the employees exhibit an approach behaviour in being more cooperative. Dion (1999) reported a different finding for the consumers who showed less cooperative behaviour under crowding conditions.

Expanding more efforts was not the only way reported by the interviewees as to how they react to crowding conditions. Some of them avoid actively going to customer and prefer to respond only on request. They adopt consequently avoidance behaviour and sometimes a withdrawal one.

These results are consistent with Holahan's (1982) findings. Behaviours such as small group interaction, friendship making, participation, aggression, withdrawal, and helping, have all been shown to be influenced by environmental conditions (Bitner, 1992, p. 61).

Analysis also revealed that the nature of the behavioural responses of the employees to crowding conditions is moderated by some variables. Among these: the physical density, the employees' experience, their attitude toward the selling job and some personality variables (i.e. the pleasure felt in crowding situation).

In-store social relationships quality effects on the employees' responses

According to the informants, the average time spent in the retail store exceeds sometimes ten hours. This leads to the friendship making between employees. According to one informant, his team is like a family. Another one claimed: "I found an excellent atmosphere [. . .] one would say my brothers". Such good relationship within the team members is deemed necessary. Indeed, agreement within the group may affect positively the emotional states, the behaviours and the employees' performance. According to Churchill *et al.* (1997) and Sujan and Weitz (1986), motivation is a crucial factor for employees' performance.

Besides, it appears that a retail store environment, where the social interactions are of a good quality, reduces the employee turnover. Their propensity to leave is very low due to the good relationship they have established with colleagues and the "excellent atmosphere at work".

Some informants stated that poor quality relationships between salespeople may influence their task performance negatively. The occurrence of problems within a group can lead to its dislocation. According to one informant:

> [. . .] the existence of a problem in a work team is very obstructing [. . .], I already witnessed such situation between two colleagues and that became awkward for all the team, because a problem between two colleagues can divide the team. The presence of two groups in a team work obstructs too much.

Thus, creating conditions of respect and friendship between the employees seems necessary for retail store managers. Trying to have a homogeneous group, in terms of educational level and age, is likely to be valuable. In this respect, the analysis of the interviewees' discourses revealed that a difference in the educational degrees could be one possible cause of problems within the team.

According to one respondent, a newly recruited salesperson may become a source of a poor social ambiance within the retail store. He believes that the retail store manager could have avoided this type of situation by paying more attention to such aspects during the welcome moment of new employees. Le Maitour (1967) already suggested that a bad welcome can discourage a good will, and can even generate a feeling of hostility toward the team in charge of the welcome event or the manager himself.

As a component of the retail store atmosphere, the relationship between the employees and their sales manager is deemed to be of great importance for the social climate. In this regard, informants stated that a good relationship with the sales manager encourages the team to be more effective. They think that more loyalty and hard working must reward the attention given by the store manager to his employees. They also perceive positively the participation and collaboration of the chief with the working team.

Thus, the social environment appears to have similar effects on the employees' behavioural responses than the physical environment. This result seems of a great interest in predicting the impact of store environmental factors on the employees' responses and in typifying the determinants of those responses.

The results of this research can be summarized within a conceptual framework of employees' responses to environmental factors in a retail setting as shown in Figure 1.

The above framework appears to be consistent with Bitner's (1992) suggested servicescape. Yet, it goes a step further to refine this latter by identifying more in detail
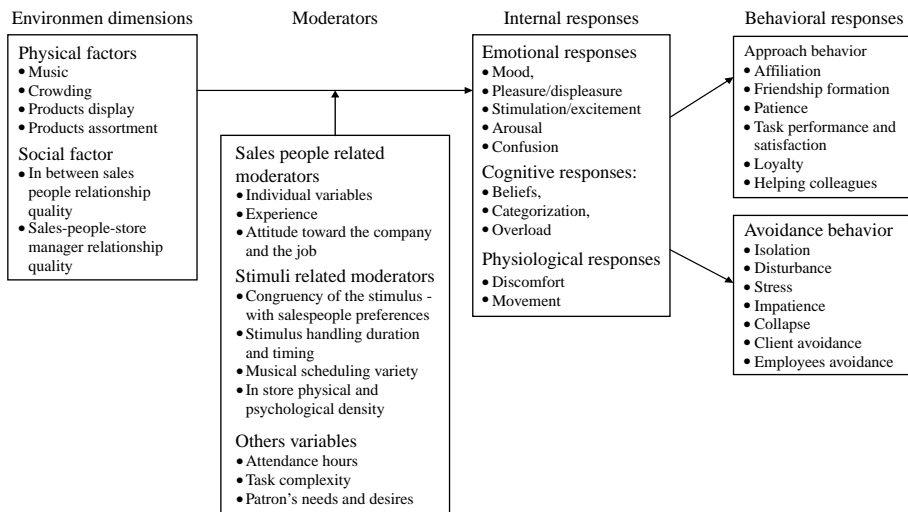
Environmen dimensions	Moderators	Internal responses	Behavioral responses
Physical factors • Music • Crowding • Products display • Products assortment **Social factor** • In between sales people relationship quality • Sales-people-store manager relationship quality	**Sales people related moderators** • Individual variables • Experience • Attitude toward the company and the job **Stimuli related moderators** • Congruency of the stimulus - with salespeople preferences • Stimulus handling duration and timing • Musical scheduling variety • In store physical and psychological density **Others variables** • Attendance hours • Task complexity • Patron's needs and desires	**Emotional responses** • Mood, • Pleasure/displeasure • Stimulation/excitement • Arousal • Confusion **Cognitive responses:** • Beliefs, • Categorization, • Overload **Physiological responses** • Discomfort • Movement	**Approach behavior** • Affiliation • Friendship formation • Patience • Task performance and satisfaction • Loyalty • Helping colleagues **Avoidance behavior** • Isolation • Disturbance • Stress • Impatience • Collapse • Client avoidance • Employees avoidance

Figure 1.
Framework of the impact of retail store environment on the employees' responses in clothing stores

the impact of physical surroundings of the retail store on the employees' internal and behavioural responses.

Furthermore, the framework sheds more lights on the stimuli to which employees are more sensitive. Indeed, not all atmospherics' dimensions described by Bitner (1992) or empirically supported for consumer responses case had been identified by our informants. This corroborates research findings in bank setting which suggest that employees and customers have different needs and desires for their physical surroundings (Baker *et al.*, 1988; Bitner, 1992).

In addition, behavioural responses identified in this study were somewhat different from the ones described in Bitner's (1992) framework. For example, analysis showed that moderating variables could be classified into three categories:

(1) moderators related to employees;

(2) moderators related to the stimulus; and

(3) other moderators related to the task complexity, patron's desires and needs and number of working hours.

Bitner (1992) did not identify the moderators associated to the employees-environment interactions in terms of congruency, company musical choices and scheduling, working hours, merchandise displaying, etc. Identifying these variables represents a major conceptual and empirical contribution of this study. Indeed, taking into account the effect of these variables allows a better understanding of the employees' reactions and thus a better management of the environmental factors of the retail store. It is worth noticing that Bitner's (1992) framework, though suggesting that servicescape influences the nature of social interactions between and among customers and employees, does not consider the social factors among the atmospherics likely to have an impact on employees' internal and behavioural responses. In this study, such a dimension is found to play an important role in shaping the employees' internal and behavioural responses.

Conclusion

This study aimed for a better understanding of the employees' responses to retail store atmospherics. The case of clothing stores employees' has been chosen to explore such responses. Findings show that employees are mainly sensitive to the presence of the music, to crowding and to the products sold and their display. The social environment factor refers to the nature of the relationships within the work team and between employees and their managers. This factor appears also to have an effect on the employees' internal responses, which in turn generate either an approach or an avoidance behaviour.

Furthermore, the impact of retail store atmospherics on the employees can be twofold. First, they could be stimulating, motivating and evoking enthusiasm. This is likely to result in affiliation, a desire to interact with the customer and to deliver a better service. Second, under some circumstances, they could be stressful, irritating and confusing. This may result in avoidance behaviours such as withdrawal, disturbance, stress, collapse, employee's avoidance, etc.

Moreover, this study helped to identify some moderators of the relationship between the environmental factors and the employees' internal and behavioural responses.

Such results appear to be of great help in explaining and predicting the employees' responses nature when managing the store atmospherics. Managers should make trade-offs between the desired consumers responses and the actual employees responses to environment factors. In addition, they should be aware of the cognitive and psychological overload that might be generated especially in sales periods when consumer affluence is high. Preparing the employees to these events, training them and being responsive to their needs would solve conflicts and enhance performance.

Limitations and future research

A number of limitations can moderate our study findings. The first one is related to the complexity of the subject matter. Indeed, not all clothing stores manage atmospherics in the same way. Besides, these stores do not use all the atmospherics identified in a servicespace marketing to gain responsiveness among consumers. That may explain why our informants had not identified more environmental factors. This could limit the generalization of the study results to other types of services settings.

Moreover, the cultural impact on the service atmospherics perception was not examined. It would be very insightful if we consider that effect in further studies. In this regard, a cross-cultural study, conducted in two hypermarkets located in France and Tunisia by Dion and Bonnin (2004), revealed significant difference in behaviours between people from the two cultures. People from a high contact culture (i.e. Tunisia) may exhibit less negative attitude to crowd density. Another limitation of this study is related to the informants' characteristics, which could have influenced the findings.

Further studies could be carried out to empirically assess the proposed framework predictability. Besides, the atmospherics dimensions in the employee case deserve to be studied more thoroughly. Perhaps, we should consider that employee's servicescape differs from consumer's servicescape suggested by Bitner (1992) for both consumers and employees.

Finally, we consider that this study may represent a starting point for future investigations aiming to refine and improve the theoretical and empirical approaches related to the understanding of the mechanisms by which retail store atmospherics influence the employees' responses.

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Appendix

No.	Age	Gender	Experience within the store	Store (company)	Information about the company
1	25	Male	Seven months	Company 1	Country of origin: France 400 stores worldwide 13 stores in Tunisia
2	24	Female	Ten months		
3	26	Female	Two years		
4	27	Male	Three years	Company 2	Country of origin: Tunisia franchise 19 stores in Tunisia Other locations: Morocco, Algeria
5	29	Male	Three years		
6	22	Female	One year	Company 3	Country of origin: Tunisia franchise 22 stores in Tunisia Other locations: Algeria, Morocco, France
7	25	Male	One year		
8	27	Female	Four years		
9	22	Male	Six weeks		
10	27	Female	Six months	Company 4	Country of origin: Italia More than 7,000 stores worldwide Nine stores and Two outlets in Tunisia
11	25	Male	Six months		
12	24	Female	Three months		
13	22	Female	One year		

Table AI.
Interviewees and companies profile

About the authors

Hamida Skandrani has a PhD in Business Administration (Marketing) from the Faculty of Business Administration, Laval University-Quebec-Canada in 2001. She is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the High Institute of Management of Tunis. Her research interests cover many areas including, trust/e-trust development and maintaining in B-to-B relationships, trust in organic products, e-learning acceptability, ethics in negotiations tactics, destination image, impact of store atmospherics, virtual exchange facilitators and inhibitors, complaint behaviour and boycott behaviour. Hamida Skandrani is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: hamida.skandrani@gmail.com

Norchène Ben Dahmane Mouelhi has a PhD in marketing from IAE de Caen/ISG Tunis. Before joining the IHEC of Carthage in 2008, she was an Associate Professor in Marketing at the University of Nabeul. Her research interests cover many areas including, experiential marketing, store atmospherics and consumer behaviour.

Faten Malek is a PhD student at the Institut de Recherche sur les Entreprises et les Administrations (IREA EA 4251), Université de Bretagne Sud. Her research interests cover areas including, social marketing, store atmospherics and neuromarketing.