

ONLINE ATMOSPHERICS: CLASSIFICATION AND COMPARISON BETWEEN BRITISH AND SPANISH CONSUMERS

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In today's market environment, the task of gaining and retaining customers is becoming increasingly challenging. In that context, this working paper proposes atmospherics as a useful tool to differentiate companies and create a pleasant shopping experience that encourages the act of buying.

1. Introduction and background

The general aim of this research is to explore the role of atmospherics in online shopping, identifying and categorizing the main cues that can be applied to create an encouraging online atmosphere. This will be done within the context of a double comparison, exploring both differences between levels of expertise in online shopping (experts versus novices), and dissimilarities amongst cultural profiles (British versus Spanish students).

Today's market environment, with an increasing number of alternatives for consumers, regarding both the products/services and the distribution formats (including the Internet), has led manufacturers and retailers to search new ways of appealing and retaining their clients, as the traditional marketing and the 4 P's are no longer effective [1]. Therefore, diverse and effective marketing tools are required. Amongst these, this paper's will focus on atmospherics, which some authors include within the more general topic merchandising⁴ [2] [3] [4].

Kotler [5] defined atmospherics as "the conscious design of space to create certain effects in buyers; more specifically, atmospherics is the effort to design

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⁴ According to the American Marketing Association (www.marketingpower.com, 2005), merchandising is a term of many varied and not generally adopted meanings.

buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability”.

In a general sense, some of the benefits of an appropriate management of atmospherics are the following [5] [6] [7] [8]:

- To differentiate the product or service provider
- To encourage purchase or generate more traffic, by creating a pleasant shopping experience
- To communicate the product’s or service’s characteristics
- To increase user’s satisfaction, including both staff and customers

There are several studies aiming to research retail atmospherics, which focus not only on testing how the retail atmosphere affects consumers’ behaviour, but also on studying the impact of specific atmospherics cues (e.g. music, lighting, colours, scent, crowding, etc.) and developing classification schemes for them. However, little research has been conducted regarding online atmospherics [9].

E-tailing is an increasingly growing channel and it is gaining market prominence, since it provides the consumer not only with functional benefits, such as usefulness of the technology, ease of use or convenience, but also with hedonic ones, that is, interactivity and enjoyment [10].

In this sense, recent studies show how the online atmospheric variables also influence consumers’ responses, in the same way that it happens in conventional stores [9] [11] [12] [13] [14]. As stated by Koernig [13], “the advent of the Internet has redefined the physical environment and has created the e-scape, a new type of retail establishment based in cyberspace”, that also needs to be managed. In a similar way, Childers et al. [10] “urge developers of online shopping sites to consider the overall webmospherics of their site”. They suggest that “the webmosphere, like the atmospherics of a brick-and-mortar retail store, must be configured to provide both a useful and enjoyable shopping experience”.

2. Methodology

In order to do the research, human, direct and structured observation was chosen. More concretely, consumers were observed while they were developing an online shopping task with fictitious money in two different sport apparel and footwear websites. The chosen web pages were⁵: Kappa (www.kappastore.com)

⁵ The researchers used the “Audit of sensory stimuli presence in online stores”, from Parsons & Conroy [15] and the “WSPS” (Preference framework), from Rosen & Purinton [16] to evaluate the sites and determine which could be considered as “good” or “bad” web sites, according to their atmospheric content. It has to be noted not only that the evaluation for Nike and K-Swiss was more positive than the one for Joma and Kappa, but also that all the respondents agreed with the researchers on this matter.

and K-Swiss (www.k-swiss.com) for Great Britain and Nike (www.nike.com) and Joma (www.joma-sport.com) for Spain. The observation was completed with individual in-depth interviews, in which the respondents replied to a set of open-ended questions related to both online atmospheric cues and their feelings and behaviours toward the sites.

All the interviews and observations were transcribed and the Spanish ones were translated into English. Once transcribed, the information from the questionnaires was coded, following McGivern [17]. After the coding, Spiggle's [18] approach to the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data was taken, in order to summarize and discuss the research's main findings.

Regarding the sample, ten Spanish and ten British students were chosen, half of them experts and half of them novices when referring to online purchasing processes.

3. Key findings

It can be said there is a general agreement across the four groups of respondents when considering the influence of online atmospheric cues on both the company/brand image and the purchase decision: online atmospheric influence not only the image they have about the company/brand, but also their purchase behaviour.

Although the purpose of the present research is qualitative in nature and therefore the models' constructs and propositions cannot be tested or refuted, it can be considered that the SOR model of consumer response to online shopping, developed and tested successfully by Eroglu et al. [9] [11], is the most appropriate model to explain the influence of online atmospheric cues in consumer behaviour.

As part of the interview, respondents were also asked to rank the three most important characteristics/variables/cues considered when purchasing online. Table 1 summarizes the answers of the four groups of respondents.

Table 1: Summary of respondents' most important atmospheric cues

Experts- British	Novices- British
1. Simplicity, easy navigation and cleanliness	1. Simplicity, easy navigation and cleanliness
2. Visual elements, the way the site looks	2. Visual elements, the way the site looks
3. Not having too much information (no overcrowding)	3. Information provided
4. Possibility of navigate sequentially	4. Two aspects share this position in the ranking: coherence and credibility, and after-purchase services
5. Two aspects, which are interrelated, share this position in the ranking: security aspects, and coherence and credibility	5. Security aspects

Experts- Spanish	Novices- Spanish
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Simplicity, easy navigation and cleanliness 2. Two aspects share this position: visual elements, the way the site looks, and security aspects 3. Two aspects share this position: drawing attention to the online shopping process, and speed (of downloading, making changes, etc.) 4. Two aspects share this position: coherence and credibility, and showing the advantages of purchasing online (prices, special promotions, etc.) 5. Two aspects share this position: information provided, and after-purchase services 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Two aspects share this position: Simplicity, easy navigation and cleanliness, and security aspects 2. Coherence and credibility 3. Information provided 4. Showing the advantages of purchasing online (prices, special promotions, etc.) 5. Visual elements, the way the site looks

The table shows how the first five positions are held by the same variables for all the respondents, although in different ranking order. It has also to be remarked that “Simplicity, easy navigation and cleanliness” together with “Visual elements, the way the site looks” occupy the first two positions for all the groups with the exception of the novices-Spanish group, which considers “Simplicity, easy navigation and cleanliness” and “Security aspects” as the most important elements.

Moreover, in our paper, a comprehensive taxonomy is proposed (Table 2), covering the main classifications within the literature and the answers of the respondents.

Table 2: Proposed classification of online atmospheric variables (based on Vrechopoulos & Siomkos [19], McKinney [20], Sautter et al. [14], and Richard [21])⁶

Categories	Atmospheric variables
<i>External variables</i>	Ability to subscribe to email, Promotions/ mailing list, Access to partners/alliances, Availability of security and privacy information, Store locator/finder, Site map, Customer service, Departments/brand listings, Information on return policy, Special offers/coupons <i>Entertainment contents, Possibility of changing the language of the site, Information about the company</i> Symbols and signs
<i>Internal variables</i>	Ability to shop by merchandise departments, Shop by brand name, Shop by special sizes, Detailed description of product, Size charts/fit guides, Listing of product best-sellers, Listing of upcoming product <i>Quality of pictures, Image interactivity</i> Product display techniques

⁶ In this table, the initial variables considered by McKinney are reported in black colour, while the extensions based on the respondents’ comments are reported in bold italic and the variables considered by other authors are reported in bold roman.

<i>Layout and design variables</i>	Colour scheme, Size and shape of graphics/photos/images, Text, Allocation of space, Placement of information Music and sounds (existence, rhythm, intensity, possibility of switching it off, etc.) Vividness, Brightness
<i>Point-of-purchase</i>	Price(s) of merchandise, Total cost of purchase, Option to delete previously selected items, Suggestions or recommendations for additional purchases Currency converter
<i>Customer services</i>	Option to ship to another address, Wish list or save option for later purchases, Express checkout for frequent shoppers, Gift wrap/decorative box options, Order confirmation via email, Ability to request a catalogue, if available, Multiple shipping options, Ability to store personal information, Gift suggestions and/or gift registry, Ability to pay with gift card/certificate After-purchase services, “Click and compare” options, Option “e-mail to a friend” Social elements (communication with the company and/or other customers)
<i>Usability⁷</i>	Easiness of navigation, download speed Navigational characteristics (back-and-forward navigation, sequential navigation, etc.), Structure, Organization

Regarding the different consumer profiles, the distinct levels of experience with the Internet and online purchasing processes do not seem to have an impact on how the respondents perceive online atmospheric cues influence both the image they have about the product/brand/company and their purchasing decisions. Regardless of being a novice or an expert, the majority of respondents (10/10 experts and 9/10 novices) believe the characteristics of the site affect their purchase decision and what they think about the company and/or brand. As far as their perception about online variables is concerned, it could be stated that novices have a less clear pattern of behaviour and still do not know where to focus when they enter a web site, considering all the atmospheric cues relevant. In the other hand, experts know what they value and what they expect to find in a site, therefore having a more focused browsing behaviour.

In the same way that expertise level does not influence respondents' perceptions about the importance of online atmospheric cues, their cultural profiles do not impact either. When moving on to their perception about specific online atmospheric cues, British and Spanish students agree on the following variables: visual elements, necessity to switch the music off, sequential navigation, the way the products are display, animation and vividness, signs and symbols and easiness of navigation. Some differences can be encountered when discussing

⁷ “Usability” is very related to “Layout and design” as, for example, download speed can depend on the amount and compression of the images.

general information about the company, product information and social elements. But these seem to be arbitrary or, at least, more related to the already mentioned experience level than to the actual cultural profile and the cultural dimensions considered by Hofstede [22] [23].

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