

# Retail Atmospheric and In-Store Nonverbal Cues: An Introduction

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## ABSTRACT

**Customers' in-store experiences are having a profound impact on their shopping behavior. In this special issue, two key variables are highlighted: the retail environment and role of nonverbal cues. The eight papers in this special issue present numerous cutting edge issues in these two research domains. Each of these papers and some of their salient contributions are briefly overviewed in this introductory editorial. The goal of this special issue (and the articles in it) is to serve as an impetus for additional research. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.**

The retail marketplace is facing radical changes. Traditional retailers are confronting stiff competition not only from online retailers, but also brick-and-mortar retailers who have increased their online presence. In response, most retailers strive to increase their efficiency by integrating their various channels that include physical stores, online, and catalogs (George, Kumar, & Grewal, 2013). Accordingly, the influence of technology has taken a more pronounced role in managing this integration and ensuring customer convenience and value across these multiple channels (Grewal, Roggeveen, Compeau, & Levy, 2012).

However, in the age of online connectedness with customers, it is critical that retailers do not lose sight of the basics of customers' in-store experience. Increasingly, it is clear that there are a wide range of psychological factors influencing consumer decision making—and these factors are substantially influenced by the in-store experience (Puccinelli et al., 2009). It is often this in-store experience that will form the foundation of a longer term relationship both in person and online. The goal of this special issue is to refocus attention on the importance of retail atmospheric cues and in-store nonverbal cues as critical components of the in-store experience.

This issue explores these areas with a set of eight conceptual and empirical papers. These papers have been carefully selected to ensure that they are cutting edge and focus on the most contemporary topics within this domain. The objective of this issue is to provide strong exemplars of research in this area, which will serve as a springboard to stimulate further research.

## OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

Retail atmospheric and nonverbal cues are broad umbrellas that include a multitude of research avenues. These areas are explored in greater detail in the various articles in the special issue. The insights generated by these articles provide retailers with a richer and more complete understanding of how retail atmospheric and nonverbal cues may shape consumer responses.

Retail atmospheric includes anything in the store that impacts the consumer environment. This can range from the lighting, to music, to the employees. Recent research into retail atmospheric cues has focused on how a particular cue impacts customer reactions. For example, simple scents (vs. complex scents or no scent) result in more spending (Hermann, Zidanek, Sprott, & Spangenberg, 2013), and red-colored prices (vs. black-colored prices) result in greater perceived value for males (Puccinelli, Chandrashekeran, Grewal, & Suri, 2013).

In the first article, Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, and Roggeveen highlight the role of the different sensory atmospheric cues by reviewing the five sensory domains: visual atmospheric (e.g., color, brightness), auditory atmospheric (e.g., music type, tempo, and volume), olfactory atmospheric (e.g., scent), tactile atmospheric (e.g., ability to touch merchandise), and taste atmospheric (e.g., ability to sample merchandise). They also highlight the influence of congruent versus incongruent cues and the potential effects of sensory overload.

The second article by Feng, Suri, and Bell focuses on the auditory atmosphere to discern how consumers

process price information when the prices do not allow for easy computation of the offered savings. Difficult-to-compare prices often result in consumer (math) anxiety, which can be alleviated by slow tempo, classical music. In contrast, high tempo music or the absence of music increases avoidance behaviors by consumers.

In the third article, Hall, Vergis, Stockton, and Goh examine the role of auditory cues provided by employees. They report the results of an innovative study in which they analyzed the first 2 minutes of 84 service support calls. The immediate impression (according to a proxy coder, who either listened to the call or read its transcript) is highly predictive of callers' satisfaction with the technical support person. Using linguistic inquiry and word count (LIWC) software, they also code the communication style of the support person; it offers another significant predictor of callers' satisfaction.

In the fourth article, Wiener and Chatrand highlight the importance of a person's voice, but their focus is on message efficacy. Interesting effects of voice arise as a function of the genders of both the announcer and respondent; specifically, women are more likely to purchase from a female announcer with a creaky voice (vs. a tense or whispering voice or any male voices). No purchase likelihood differences emerge among the male respondents. These results have important implications for retail training programs, especially for firms that target female customers.

In the fifth article, Hagtvedt and Patrick explore how the general style of products that retailers offer influences evaluations. Building from research in aesthetics (e.g., Hoegg, Alba, & Dahl, 2010), they explore the moderating role of functionality on how aesthetics impact evaluations. Their research demonstrates that styling can offset minor problems in functionality (but not major ones), though this effect appears contingent on the usage context (i.e., hedonic vs. utilitarian).

Compared with atmospherics, nonverbal cues in retailing and marketing domains have received relatively less attention (see Puccinelli, Motyka, & Grewal, 2010), though some recent retail research notes the influence of salesperson touch (Orth, Bouzdine-Chameeva, & Brand, 2013). A central purpose for this special issue is to enhance the extent of research and insights in this domain.

In the sixth article, Kidwell and Hasford provide a review of insights gathered from nonverbal information such as facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and perceived similarity. They examine how emotional abilities (perceiving, facilitating, understanding, and managing) impact four aspects of face-to-face interactions (consumer characteristics, salesperson characteristics, convergence of emotional abilities, and environmental characteristics). They also highlight a moderating role of emotional ability on the effects of those nonverbal communication characteristics on subsequent behavior. The multiple research propositions they offer represent compelling directions for future research.

The seventh article by Bashir and Rule, examines nonverbal characteristics of the communicator and how

that impacts perception and behavior. More specifically, they find that respondents view information as more accurate when the communicator displays nonverbal dominance. The two cues they examine are the color of clothing worn and facial height-to-width ratio. They find the color red is a dominance cue (vs. blue or white). They also find that a high (vs. low) height-to-width ratio is a dominance cue. These results highlight the need for retailers to pay careful attention to the apparel that their sales associates wear, especially if the natural physical cues the employee has do not suggest dominance.

The eighth and final article by Kulesza, Szybowska, Dolinski, and Jarman, demonstrates how salesperson attractiveness and nonverbal mimicry can affect customer shopping behavior. Their results highlight that the highest service ratings accrue when the salesperson is attractive and mimics the customer.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While the papers in this issue offer a variety of exemplars of research involving retail atmospherics and nonverbal cue, there is much work to be continued in this domain. A number of these papers have investigated the auditory component of retail/service environment. In the future, it would be interesting to understand how the effects of these auditory atmospheric cues interact with how customers process nonverbal cues expressed by store employees. For example, imagine walking into a store that is playing classical music, and being greeted by a salesperson with a pleasant lilt in their voice. Now imagine walking into that same store with the classical music playing, but you are now greeted by a salesperson with a guttural voice. How does the congruity or incongruity between the music and the voice of the salesperson shape the customer experience?

Insights from these papers also highlight the importance of carefully managing the five sensory cues. Future research is required into all of these areas: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, and taste. One area ripe for investigation is the visual impact of digital screens in the retail environment. Future research should examine the impact of different types of display content (active, passive, interactive). There has also been initial exploration into the impact of product sampling (e.g., tasting) on consumer reactions (e.g., Biswas, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2010; Wilcox, Roggeveen, & Grewal, 2011). Future research should consider the impact of the retail environment where the sampling experience takes place in order to determine how that impacts perceptions and behavior.

The papers in this issue focusing on nonverbal cues bring to the forefront that in a retail environment, retailers must focus on how employees present themselves in the store even when they are not interacting with the customer. It is likely that such cues (e.g., an employee stocking shelves in a hasty manner) also impact customer evaluations and behavior.

**Table 1. List of Reviewers.**

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Mark Alpert, University of Texas at Austin  
Susan Andrzejewski, Franklin & Marshall College  
Barry J. Babin, Louisiana Tech University  
Rajesh Bagchi, Virginia Tech  
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Hillary Wiener, Duke University  
Jared Wolfem, Duke University  
Richard Yalch, University of Washington  
Eric Yorkston, Texas Christian University  
Zhen Zhu, Suffolk University

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Additional research should therefore focus not only on the nonverbal cues presented by employees, but also the nonverbal cues presented by the customers (e.g., a customer who is avoiding eye contact), and the nonverbal cues expressed while the employee and customer are interacting. More research is required into issues that investigate both passive cues and more active cues presented during interactions.

The primary objective of the issue is to stimulate additional research in the areas of retail atmospherics and nonverbal cues, and thus ultimately to help guide marketers and retailers as they seek to provide better service to their customers. The articles included provide an excellent overview. The success of the issue will be a function of the research they stimulate and the real-world uses of the insights they provide.

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