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Marketing Images and consumers' experiences in selling environments

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Abstract

In a well-functioning market, consumers exert choices not just in purchases of products but also in selections of locations to enjoy shopping. Scholarly research has demonstrated that retail atmospheres impact on shoppers' pleasurable shopping experiences. Demonstrating the marketing concept in action, shoppers consistently respond to this empowerment by for example, spending more time shopping and spending more money in retail facilities that are perceived to offer a pleasanter atmosphere and experience. This research pivots round an in-depth qualitative study that evaluated the impact of a plasma screens and specific informational content on shopping centre user behaviour. A phenomenological study of the effects of the medium, and the way in which these systems influence behaviour, permitted a far deeper investigation of our sample group *vis-à-vis* increased browsing time and the propensity to spend. A series of eight focus discussions were conducted with local user groups of varying age and gender. Key themes drawn from the group discussions using axial coding indicated that the influence created by the images varied with subjects and settings. The general consensus was that such 'screens' created a certain ambience that influenced the way our subjects felt about the selling environment under study. Moreover, for our sample groups, there was clearly a link between the screened images and modern expectations of a selling environment. The plasma screens provided added enjoyment to shoppers' experiences, providing them with more information enabling more informed shopping choices. The research concludes with implications for strategic marketing, theory and practice.

Review of theory

For decades marketers and researchers have been aware that shopping is not just a matter of obtaining tangible products but also about experience and enjoyment (see for example Martineau, 1958). Marketers attempt to satisfy peoples' wants and according to Byrne (2003) this mechanism empowers consumers:

"In a well-functioning market consumers who dislike a product [or shopping experience?] will turn to another one, punishing the producer who has not fulfilled their expectations, and rewarding those who are in tune with their demands. This is what increases competition, and competitiveness".

The ability of consumers to have control of their own choices has been reported to be central to the experience of empowerment (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002). According to Dennis *et al.* (2004), the social and experiential benefits of shopping may also be related to physical health benefits. This is supportive of work in social psychology, which argues that providing people with more control of their choices yields positive long-term effects in terms of satisfaction, general happiness and even health (Langer and Rodin, 1976). We argue, therefore, that there are concrete benefits for consumers arising from empowering their shopping experiences and choices.

Since Kotler's early observations in 1974, the marketing and retailing literature has consistently pointed to the importance of the *inanimate* retail-selling environment (see also detailed work of: Langeard *et al.*, 1981), and the degree to which cues such as product messages and colourful displays can affect atmospheres. Earlier reference to the potential effects of retail atmosphere on buyer's behaviour was evident in the 1920s (Copeland, 1927). The use of the physical setting to create atmospheric impact as a form of marketing communications can be traced as far back as 1908 and the American Telegraph and Telephone (AT&T) Company, which utilized the visual impact of its organization's building (Grunig, 1993). Of equal importance, the images that attract or repel customers and ultimately shape the atmosphere of the selling environment are also attributed to the social phenomenon present (Martineau 1958; Rich and Portis 1964; Tauber 1972; Pessimer, 1980). For example, other clientele's physical appearance and behaviour can shape the setting (e.g. Zeithaml *et al.* 1985) and inconsistent images may downgrade environments for other users (Prus, 1986). This paper addresses such issues and attempts to present several managerial propositions.

Despite considerable academic research and practitioner experimentation the extent to which desirable images, and the atmospheres they create, can influence people is still the basis for deliberation. Much of this theoretical and philosophical debate centres on the constituent parts of atmosphere, and whether there are managerial benefits to be gained from deeper understanding. More recently, the tangibility created by marketer-generated atmospheres, and related customer perceptions, has seen widespread application in the services marketing field. An abundance of work in this context draws credence from the physical and social effects of atmospherics on customers, and the evaluative benefits of these images as a basis for customers to assess the quality (standard) of the goods / services on offer (see, for example, Bitner, 1990, 1992). Hence, the customer's affective state resulting from such sales encounters influences their appraisal of quality, and plays a more critical role in influencing both customer satisfaction and, consequently, company performance (Babakus, Bienstock and Van Scotter, 2004).

In marketing terms, the perceived clarity of a company's image (and arguably reputation) is therefore intertwined with the perceived *legibility* of the setting in which the consumption (whether aesthetically or economically driven) takes place (see Newman, 2002; Newman and Patel, 2004). In this instance, the use of the word legibility alludes to the importance of the interface with the customer, and the need for clarity of offer or proposition. To deal with the underlying processes of image and atmosphere generation we now turn to the point at which environmental psychology dovetails with the marketing and services marketing literatures. On first examination a plethora of studies suggest that service customers value the atmospheres created in selling environments by marketing management as a means of ranking organizations (e.g. Shostack, 1977; Booms and Bitner, 1981; Upah and Foulton, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1990; Bitner, 1992; and Baker *et al.*, 1994).

Mounting evidence also supports the notion that place atmosphere is linked to enjoyment and entertainment factors *vis-à-vis* aesthetic enhancements during shopping (e.g. Babin *et al.*, 1994; Sit *et al.*, 2003; Yoo *et al.*, 1998), and such augmentation may be subsequently reflected in consumer spending (e.g. Donovan *et al.*, 1994; Jones, 1999; Machleit and Mantel, 2001; Sherman and Smith, 1987; Smith and Sherman, 1993). It is the intangible areas that often make the most impression and where marketing management have the control and generate the rules that influence customer behaviour (see Branthwaite 1984). This is by no means surprising as marketers have been continuously drawn to prospect of shopping as a major experience rather than just a utilitarian act of obtaining products, as touched on in the early stages of this paper (Martineau, 1958; Kotler, 1974; and Dennis *et al.*, 2002).

Indeed, enhanced moods and higher spending on unplanned purchases are all associated with pleasant atmospheres, which assist consumers with their attainment goals (Spies *et al.*, 1997). In support of this, surveyed consumers consistently choose shopping centres for the pleasantness of the atmospheres (the latter is invariably measured unidimensionally) rather than the merchandise they carry. In the case of specific needs, pleasant store atmosphere can be linked explicably to the profitability of the business (Newman and Patel, 2004). However, a major factor influencing the usefulness of atmospheres in precision marketing is the degree to which we understand how consumers evaluate and respond towards them. Uncovering such issues using traditional quantitative methods and orientations has yielded mixed results, especially when the focus of the enquiry hinges identifying ways of fine-tuning selling environments. Here we depart from our general thesis and consider the processes by which atmospheres are created and possibly sustained.

It is evident from the marketing and psychology literature that a degree of mental abstraction is applied when people recall images of environments (Newman, 2003; Martineau, 1958; Boulding, 1956). Hence, when a selling environment such as a shopping mall is considered pleasurable consumers will assign an overall assessment or ranking based on alternatives drawn from memory. Ranked attributes encapsulated within a survey design more than often form the basis for these evaluations, and rankings will vary according to the nature and emphasis in the setting. In illustration, as management's goals vary with the strategic messages so may the emphasis: settings may thus demonstrate purpose, trends, quality and expertise in specific types of undertakings. In psychological terms, consumers' emotional responses (pleasure) and impulse purchasing can increase in a store with a pleasant atmosphere compared to an unpleasant one (Ang and Leong, 1997; Spies *et al.*, 1997). Environmental psychologists Mehrabian and Russell (1974) tied this emotional response theoretically to the *information rate* or affective stimulation.

The presumption is that people respond emotionally to environmental stimuli, and that molar environments provide a certain level or rate of information (Russell and Snodgrass, 1991). This *rate* adds to the complexity of the environment as it compounds the level of information to be processed. Increases in information such as music (Herrington and Capella, 1996) are generally related to increased emotional response, which in turn *may* moderate the desire to remain (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Hence, the rate at which the surrounding and immediate environment stimulates positive behaviours (or information rate) is a function of the physical and social stimuli. These multifarious cues affect the emotional states of individuals, which in turn influences their behaviour and in pleasurable atmospheres enhances shoppers' moods. Ultimately, extra spending is dependent on marketer-driven stimuli (Sherman and Smith, 1987)

If we were to deepen the scale of the investigation we note that more precise cues such as certain types of music or visual merchandising techniques can increase pleasure, arousal and spending (e.g. Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Spies *et al.*, 1997). However, it is at this level that the limitations of quantitative approaches are revealed when broad factor models are used to describe the minutia of selling environments. Non-specific dimensions that fail to relate to strategic change in product layouts and/or store ambient factors (e.g. visual effects, sounds) provide little enlightenment for modern marketing management.

In marketing terms, we assert that the function of the information rate is to act as reminder of the purpose (high/low quality, high/low contact) of the selling environment, its service level, quality and scope (in terms of product availability). In a services marketing context its function is perhaps more critical due to the need for observable tangibility, *vis-à-vis* ability to undertake tasks for the clients. Above all, the information rate assists with, and is directly related to, the clarity of the sales offer. This proposition is consistent with work of a more theoretical nature in the architectural sciences, which notes that the physical (referring in this case to inanimate forms) environment (that which directly impinges on the individual) functions discriminately and directs the actions of people (Rapoport, 1982). The presumption can therefore be made that selling environments, made up of a range of physical and social factors, function in a manner that defines the most appropriate behavioural choices (or outcomes). From an operations perspective, management must assist consumers to comprehend the scope and benefits of the sales proposition. In shopping malls, for example, this requires intelligent use of the sorts of stimuli that optimize the information rate. Here, we wish to clearly differentiate between relevant information and environmental *noise* - the latter being the peripheral distractions such as background sounds.

We henceforth assert that the strategic use of stimuli is highly relevant in the drive to clarify and optimize the information rate of selling environments. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that when information is lacking in ambiguous settings consumers engage in processes of evaluation, or overt searches for tangible clues before purchasing (Shostack, 1977). As prior discussions suggest, this is particularly important for service firms such as hotels, restaurants, banks, and open plan settings such as shopping malls. Our study was solely concerned with the effect of information provided by networked gas plasma screens located in a busy shopping mall. In principle, the screens act by increasing the pleasure and /or other emotions, and by providing information. Thus, they act to alter consumers' images of a shopping centre and/or its retail stores. The management may wish to design stimuli such as fast tempo music, or pleasant and relevant audio-visual information that enhance the atmospherics in the shopping centre and its stores. Such cues are believed to act as symbols facilitating judgements (McKenna, 2000), and may be used to reinforce customers' expectations.

Study background and design

Plasma screen displays located in public spaces showing video material (or private TV channels) are a highly effective form of media (Clarke, 2003). Installations of this nature are to be found in a number of retail and public settings as advertising and methods of improving customer experience via the information content. For example, Thomke's (2003) research suggests that in retail banking distinct improvements in customer perceptions are evident from the use of screen media in service settings. Equally, in shopping centres advertisers may be charged and a stream of payment produced, with local retailers and social events targeted on a seasonal basis. In many respects a

system such as this has a social as well as commercial benefit, but ultimately the use of appropriate informative content is expected to improve the customer experience and perceived atmosphere.

To date, there has been little research on the effect of plasma screens on shoppers' behaviour. Most work of this nature has sought to demonstrate the degree to which general shopping environments are a substantial, and quantifiable component of image and consumer purchasing behaviours (e.g. shopping mall performance, Dennis *et al.*, 2002; share of household spending, Hildebrandt, 1998; store loyalty, Sirgy and Cocksun, 1989). For example, Dennis *et al.* (2002) linked the perceived attractiveness of shopping centres empirically to a range of image related attributes or pull factors.

Distinct drawbacks of deductive techniques, however, stem from the very nature of atmospheres, which are notoriously difficult to quantify. In this study we chose to veer from the traditional scientific measurement in favour of qualitative enquiry and hence inductive means of tackling atmosphere.

Given the likely high impact of plasma screens in public spaces, an inductive research design was far more likely to provide insight into the underlying messages within settings (Bellinger *et al.*, 1976). Notwithstanding this premise we were equally aware of the limitations of this type of enquiry. As Dey (1993, p. 263) reminds us 'qualitative data is more likely to be suggestive than conclusive'. However, a qualitative orientation permits researchers to gain richer insights into both the social interactions that may occur and, perhaps more importantly, the dynamic interpersonal processes that may help to shape the type and level of information content (*vis-à-vis* information rate). We were also far more likely to reveal the contextual and social dimensions of the person-environment interaction, and thus able to test some of the assumptions and propositions hitherto extended; these were intuitively believed to contribute to the atmosphere under study. With these issues in mind, phenomenological group discussion was selected as a method of delving into consumer 'episodes' recalled by the group informants. Subsequent content analysis of the informants' narratives was scrutinised within the context of the theoretical structure presented earlier, and used to distinguish the key research propositions.

The fieldwork took place at a well-known sub-regional shopping centre in the southern part of the UK. Consumers of the centre comprise a broad cross-section of socio-economic groups. Subjects were recruited from both within the sphere of the investigation and general mall area. Selection of the volunteers hinged on two main criteria: a) whether subjects had previously noticed mall located plasma screens in situ, b) the mall was more often than not their most frequent non-food shopping location. Financial rewards (£10 each) helped to motivate participants. A series of eight group discussions were conducted with subjects varied by age, gender, occupational status and income. Most groups contained six to nine subjects. In total, 51 subjects took part including 39 women and 12 men. The field work was conducted during the winter months between 31st. January 2004 and 14th. February 2004.

A semi-structured discussion guide was used as a basis for group discourse. This contained open-ended questions and observations cues in order to detect patterns and trends across the groups and encourage spontaneity. Sessions were recorded and later transcribed for a tape-based analysis (Kruger, 1994). Group discussions necessitate specific approaches to the analysis of qualitative data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), which must be systematic (Bloor *et. al.*, 2001). The analysis can either take a conversation analytic approach (Myers, 1998; and Myers and Macnaghten, 1999) or

concentrate on group dynamics (Kitzinger and Farquhar, 1999). Alternatively, the analysis could lead to an: 'understanding of substantive issues in the data' (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). This study opted for analysis of 'substantive content' as suggested by Bloor *et al.*, (2001) and drew substantially on Silverman's (1993) assertions that focus group analysis depends upon the research objectives.

The decision was taken to only employ traditional methods for data analysis rather than use computer software to aid sorting and theme generation. A form of axial coding was thus used to facilitate the process of listing key facts and recurrent themes. The three most common ways of coding the data are to note the following: a) all mentions of a given code, b) whether each individual participant mentioned a given code, or c) whether each group's discussion contained a given code. Morgan (1997) contends that in practice, these three strategies are nested within each other because coding all mentions of a topic will also determine whether that topic was mentioned by a specific individual or in a specific group. As with other forms of qualitative data, the nature of coding in focus groups differs between approaches that apply a priori 'templates' to the coding versus those that produce the codes through a more emergent encounter with the data themselves (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). However, for the purposes of this study, the latter approach was used with axial coding to facilitate the process of listing key ideas and recurrent themes.

To ensure consistency and systematic analysis, a transcription form based on a standard template (Krueger, 1994) was developed. Responses to individual questions were coded and assigned to the particular themes, and the corresponding sections of the text were marked for review. This process greatly facilitated the comparison across groups and reduced the need for repetitive sections in the results, which are now presented.

Results: Emerging themes

Group discussion depends on the participants that make up the group as well as the dynamics of the group as a whole. Although the individuals form the group, the influence of the group on individual participants is widely acknowledged in the literature (Morgan, 1997). In our fieldwork most subjects joined in the discussion spontaneously, others had to be encouraged and this varied within groups. Additionally, it was clear that some subjects dominated groups and this necessitated *handling* on the part of the moderator.

Our discussions commenced with an evaluation of the screens and how these influenced the shopping centre experience. For research purposes, our screens had been placed in the main concourses, cafes, and selected retail outlets.

Most subjects said they had observed the screens in more than one location around the centre, which supported our views regarding the consumer's desire to search out tangible clues to aid service evaluation (Shostack, 1977). This finding is also notable as it offers major evidence of the strategic importance of providing aesthetic enhancements for consumers during their shopping experiences. It is additionally an indication of our subjects' attempts to rank the atmosphere, and possibly even the mall, in which they intend to spend time shopping (see also: Booms and Bitner, 1981; and Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985). Hence, where stimuli generate a pleasant atmosphere this is likely to increase levels of enjoyment and, therefore, evoke increased *dwell time* and higher spending on unplanned purchases.

As discussed, the key factor influencing such precision marketing is the degree to which consumers evaluate and respond towards such stimuli. In this regard, the narratives were particularly rich in terms of precise specifications about the more visually cluttered areas of the shopping centre. This was surprising given the theoretical assumptions drawn from the work of Boulding (1956) and others who noted that the human mental abstraction process operated to alleviate complexity. However, we were drawn to idea that our study environment's rate of information (Russell and Snodgrass, 1991) had likely increased emotional response, and subsequently reinforced the desire to remain in the setting (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Specifically, the screens had added to the atmospheric quality in a manner that encouraged our subjects to explore and seek out the various broadcasts, and related images, in other parts of the centre.

It seemed that although the subjects preferred larger screens they acknowledged that the shopping centre was relatively small to accommodate them. Group discussions had revealed that not only the quantity of screens appeared important but also their locations within the various shopping areas. Indeed, most subjects provided some indication of the importance of placing screens and numbers thereof relative to specific locations in their personal shopping schematics or internalised maps. We considered this finding important as it linked directly to clarity of offer (see: Newman, 2002; Newman and Patel, 2004) and demonstrated how legibility in settings is a critical part of the marketing (communications) interface with the customer. For example, screens located in refreshment and rest areas appeared to attract more notice compared with other locations, such as the main concourse, where they appeared to become less noticeable probably due to the *dwelt time* **and** level of visual clutter in these areas. Once again, we were surprised at the amount of information consumers were obliged to process in these settings.

At this juncture in the study we focused on the vibrant nature of the mall atmosphere, which in some areas reached hectic proportions. Here, we asserted that in certain locations environmental *noise* could well negate the usefulness of marketer-led stimuli communicated via the plasma screens. In addition, familiarity with the medium may well mediate consumer responses. For example, the narratives showed that our sample of the local population had limited exposure to the type of screens used in our study. Indeed, for most of our subjects the screens were a rather novel concept only to be found in major national shopping centres. However, the potential benefit of this medium for disseminating a range of valuable information was widely acknowledged by all subjects. This confirmed the power of visual techniques to bolster pleasure, arousal and even spending (see: Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Spies *et al.*, 1997). The most enthusiastic of recommendations tended to fix on the potential social and economic benefits of the informational content, and included issues such as community announcements, special offers and price updates.

In effect, subjects viewed the screens as an extension of the visual merchandising efforts and as such part of the micro marketing of the centre. This was emphasised in narratives drawn from the latter stages of this analysis, which suggested the broadcasting of music, film and product demonstrations. Illustrating this functional approach to screen content, one particular subject related an experience encountered abroad:

'They could do with grabbing your attention like when you do go to American Malls you get...I suppose if you heard a noise and looked up and suddenly it says 'our special offer of the week is. Then you might say 'oh' that's a good bargain let's go have a quick look.

Subjects emphasized simultaneously that in order to sustain the value of information content, regular and timely updates would be equally significant. To emphasize the importance of this aspect, one participant mentioned that ‘it would be nice if they were updated practically weekly otherwise people would stop looking at them’. Other areas of recommendation included televised guidance on shopping hours, the mall floor layout and information to facilitate car parking and customer services. Interestingly, we noted the social exchange that was encouraged by the mall environment in our study, which was valued highly by all subjects who unanimously emphasised its importance as centre of the community. We viewed this finding as confirmation of the significance of the social dimension and its contribution to the shape and depth of the atmosphere; thus confirming the work of Tauber, 1974; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985 and others in this and related fields.

In many respects this segment of the analysis explains the loyalty subjects seemed to display in their choice of shopping destination, in the face of more choice and greater spaciousness offered by the nearby competitor. However, our subjects described this larger and more prominent shopping mall as ‘*functional* shopping’. We took this to mean the larger and therefore more disparate surroundings of the major competitor denied interaction due to the spatial arrangements and sheer mass. This point was confirmed in the narratives with subjects’ responses such as: ‘feeling of spaciousness’ and ‘good décor and layout’.

At this point in the discussion our dialogues returned to the topic of aesthetics, the imbued images created by the screens, and the degree to which content may contribute to the surrounding atmosphere. Taking a pragmatic stance, the idea of location and size of screens, *vis-à-vis* their contribution to the surroundings, were introduced into the discussions. Most subjects agreed that, by and large, the location of screens was poor and a more favourable position would have been where people were willing and able to ‘stop for a few moments’. This drew attention to the importance of the setting *vis-à-vis* indicators of quality and purpose, and the value consumers place on selling environments as a means of ranking quality and/or expectations (e.g. Shostack, 1977; Booms and Bitner, 1981; Upah and Foulton, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1990; Bitner, 1992 and Baker *et al.*, 1994).

Screen size on the other hand seemed to be related to the specific area in which the screen was located. However, most of the narratives suggested that while subjects understood the importance of location the manner in which they expressed this issue was dealt with aesthetically:

‘Ever so nice, they’re lovely’ [female subject].

The location of screens and the quality of the projected images were also dealt with during this phase of the discussions. From a more practical viewpoint the style of messaging and colour composition of the images was clearly important for the subjects. This supports the view that the numerous images generated by and within selling environments can stir consumer experiences, and conceivably activates the desire to spend (Dennis *et al.*, 2002; Newman, 2002; Newman and Patel, 2004). However, subjects tended to verbalise the technical dimensions of image projection using the contemporary nomenclature from this part of the UK. Size and importance of the images, and the degree to which they impacted on the immediate environment, were dealt with as follows:

'They [screens] are not particularly grabbing, they are boring ... I would make it more flashy, better positioned, bigger and more colour'.

To further support this view a second subject added:

'I was thinking why didn't I notice the screens when my attention was drawn to them I could see them everywhere. I think it was because I came in [the mall] with the idea that I was going to go to Thornton's. Just walked past everything and the screens weren't dynamic enough to arrest my attention'.

Subsequent debate at this time suggested that the screens had indeed created an impact on the shopping experience for our subjects. It appeared that the key reasons for the above narratives were because subjects felt in many ways that greater attention to the size and colour content of screens would improve the impact. This lends credence to the argument that product messages and colourful displays can indeed manipulate atmospheres (Kotler, 1974), and stresses the importance of Langeard *et al.*, (1981) inanimate retail selling environment. Interestingly, further debate suggested that our subjects viewed the screens as an entertaining part of the retail environment rather than advertising medium and were, in their responses, seeking ways of enhancing outputs and thereby augmenting their enjoyment. This finding raises questions about the influence of affective stimulation and subsequent emotional responses (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), and how varied levels of stimulation influenced behaviour (Spangeberg *et al.*, 1996).

We proposed that, as in the case of advertising messages, a greater impact was likely where stimuli could act upon subjects for longer time periods. This presumes a behavioural reinforcement approach (see: Foxall and Greenley, 2000; Newman and Foxall, 2003; Foxall and Soriano, 2005) and that the higher levels of information processed led to the retention of messages in subjects' learning history. For example, according to Newman and Foxall, 2003, retail environments need to be fine-tuned and constantly re-evaluated and altered to follow the pattern of customer expectations, and (quality) marketing orientation.

Our group sessions confirmed this view and subjects' narratives indicated a preference for screens to be in locations where shoppers are relatively stationary, waiting around, or when the dwell time was greater such as in cafes, lifts and when waiting in queues. Here, subjects specified specific content which matched their needs (moods) to environmental context with comments such as: 'music needs to be subtle, calming and not too loud'. The extent to which this was debated is demonstrated by the following narrative, which attempts to offer some help with the modification of content relative to location:

'It depends whether you are actually sitting down in a coffee bar looking at screens or whether you are watching past if you got a sit down audience then it could be a longer ad.'

The preceding narrative suggested that not only could the screens draw more attention in places where shoppers are relatively stationary, but also that the content or messages could well be modified relative to location. At this point it is useful to remember that the relayed content was derived from uplink technology and managed remotely via satellite. A network of screens had been arranged in selected locations, and based on shopping centre layout and participating companies.

Since the shopping centre was relatively small, positioning the screens so as to facilitate their sighting from multiple perspectives was a challenging task. Another aspect of screen layout was uncovered during discussion related to the size of the screens relative to their positioning in the centre. This relates directly to the optimization of stimuli and the need to avoid ambiguous messaging in such situations. Hence, the visibility, *vis-à-vis* screen resolution and colours etc., mediate attempts by spectators to observe and identify the images and text displayed. Moreover, this is further exacerbated when people are on the move:

'The screens to my mind don't really add an awful lot, there are quite small. I think if you are walking by you just don't tend to notice, for me personally I was only sitting down and looked up and saw it. Otherwise you are too busy going to where ever you need to go.'

As expected, the subjects' views reflected their age, gender and socio-economic differences. For example, several subjects within groups' felt that screens were intrusive and somewhat impaired the social dimension of the retail environment. This view was especially evident with the older and more senior age groups, and in particular those who lived locally. For them our field of study was a surrogate Town Hall and as such the social atmosphere in the recreational areas of the centre were in many ways a daily retreat from the hubbub of life outside. This was clearly emphasised by one subject in the following way:

'They irritate me especially in the coffee shop because I go in the coffee shop to read my paper or talk to a friend. I don't go in to have adverts flaring.'

Gender and age specificity were evident in many of the subjects' narratives and in particular the female enthusiasm towards shopping generally as a recreational activity. Contrasting perspectives from male subjects indicated that, for these subjects, shopping was merely a necessity. This tended to support our intuitive beliefs regarding male-female differences. However, this dissimilarity in shopping behaviour appeared not to act simply as an innate characteristic influencing consumer preferences, but was indicative of conflicting affective responses towards the environmental stimuli in the our study setting. For support in this respect we drew on work in environmental psychology and the importance of the level or rate of information (Russell and Snodgrass, 1991). As intimated previously, the complexity of the mall environment compounds the level of information to be processed by shoppers and hence alters affective responses and the desire to remain or leave the setting (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In practice, where screens had been placed in the busier areas of the concourse, and the content was perceived to be unsuitable for such locations, subjects remarked on the nature of the audio selections – this was further mediated by gender and age and supports the work on music (see: Herrington and Capella, 1996). In all the sessions, younger subjects focused with emphasis on the impact of the screen media selection, and in particular the musical content:

'Its enough to put you to sleep ... should play more up to date music. For old people they'd like that because it's relaxing but for us it's boring. We wouldn't stop to watch it because its not eye catching' [teenage subjects]

Significantly, younger age groups viewed the screens as a potential source of entertainment and, when probed, suggested that music videos, movie trailers and celebrity programmes were mostly preferred as broadcast material.

'But if there is good music in a shop I'd stay in there, but if its crap music I wouldn't stay in there because it puts me in a really bored mood...R&B, more lively stuff...But that would put off adults...It's got to appeal to like all ages' [teenage subject].

Female subjects collectively stated their desire to browse and spend more time while shopping in order to get the *best* bargain. It seemed that the most compelling reasons for shopping in retail centres or malls was the attraction of variety and range of outlets, closely followed by shopping experience as a whole. In general, the plasma screens helped provide shoppers with information that aided them in their selection of choice sets. We assert, therefore, that when coupled with the enhanced pleasure and satisfaction experiences reported by subjects, these screens (acting as stimuli) are central to the experience of empowerment (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, this demonstrated the marketing concept in action: the mechanism of consumers taking advantage of their empowerment by, for example, shopping for longer and spending more (*c.f.* Byrne, 2003).

It is towards the satisfaction of the experience of shopping that our attention now turns with the conclusions of this study, and a range of implications for management.

Conclusions and implications for management

As mentioned earlier, the shopping centre in this study is well known and serves a broad cross section of the population indicative of the region. We know from past work in the field that the degree to which consumers are prepared to, and actually do spend time in centres of this type is a function of the attractiveness of the centre. The perceived attractiveness of such retail centres has been linked empirically (see, for example, Dennis *et al.*, 2002, mentioned in the 'Study background and design' section above) to a range of image related attributes or pull factors. Like all customer facing business in the service sector, the idea is to maximise the 'pull' or attractiveness in line with the expectations of clients or consumers. For completeness we feel it important to point out that, in terms of attribution, centre attractiveness may typically be reduced to a range of factors such as branded concessions, convenient location, parking and more specific facilities such as restaurants, toilets and changing rooms.

As expected, the phenomenological approach provided deeper insight into the relationship between the screens and associated output and subjects' behaviour. This was linked closely to the information displayed on the screens rather than the screens *per se*. Hence, the evoked images, or atmosphere-generating information appeared to have had little impact on some subjects. In a broad marketing sense, the information carried by the system should be related strategically and precisely to the customer base. Given the competitive nature of selling environments and centres of this type, it is clear that cutting edge marketing approaches are required if the new more sophisticated consumer is to be reached. Moreover, a successful strategy will necessitate continuous realignments to a range of tangible as well as intangible factors (such as atmosphere) in line with customer expectations. As our theoretical review maintains, it is the intangible areas that often make the most impression and where marketing management have the control and generate the rules that influence customer behaviour (see Branthwaite 1984).

It was evident that for most (but not all) of our subjects the screens were a positive enhancement and a potential source of valuable information. This is an interesting finding and points its basis from the changing consumer predilections towards multidimensional (shopping) environments. In

such situations a mix of community local events as well as product information 'sets the scene', and in many ways is an expected *service* for most public spaces in the 2000s. A further interesting finding was the manner in which certain spaces, and social groups within these spaces, were influenced in different ways by the informational content of our broadcasted medium. For example, in some cases music type was quite unsuitable and indeed allied to negative views of the surroundings. This emphasised the need for bespoke rather than universal marketer-driven stimuli and the more sophisticated consumer attitudes towards modern selling environments. In these surroundings the emphasis is placed on distinction within age groups rather than single genres with universal appeal. In this manner, screens helped to create ambience and novelty all of which suggested an up-to-date image whilst offering a familiar *local* context - the air of the familiar creating the comfort zone for many of our subjects.

These findings have provided us with significant insight into consumers' predilections towards, or in opposition to, types of media and their usefulness as enhancements. This we believe is a departure from more traditional environment theories that suggest a more universal and homogenised approach to atmospherics. Indeed, early theories and presumptions regarding the propensity of consumers to react favourably towards generic messages in generic situations may therefore be questioned. Modern consumers, and by this we mean consumers in the 2000s, are far more discerning about the stimulants that drive their behaviours.

We concluded that an atmospheric stimulus could act to increase pleasure (and arousal), and thus improve the atmosphere of a selling environment. In our study, however, it was more likely that the screens improved the atmosphere of certain areas, and the image of the centre *per se*. This in turn may have increased the likelihood of our subjects spending more money than expected, but we viewed this as a function of the screen content. Certain atmospheric stimuli or enhancers can, we believe, be designed to increase the pleasurable nature of the consumer's experience and that this may be achieved through the use of, for example, pleasant scenes and sounds. However, there is also a need for balance and segmentation so that the majority of users of the space experience maximum benefit. What was evident from the analysis is the degree to which our subjects sought individuality for the spaces they occupied. Hence, it was likely that in some areas of the centre there was a need for high arousal approaches such as high impact film footage and fast tempo music.

We assert that screen content can positively and negatively influence consumers' perceptions of the atmosphere. Moreover, we argued that in some situations consumers could well experience positively charged moods and possibly increased levels of spend. In a marketing sense, the greatest benefit for management (both the centre operator and concessions) was the increased likelihood that customers would stay longer or 'dwell time'. This is based on the premise that the need to encourage consumers to remain in a selling environment is secondary only to the task of attracting them there in the first instance. It is therefore our contention that the degree to which dwell time converts to spend may also be determined by the pleasantness or attractiveness of the shopping environment.

In conclusion, this paper has established valuable links between mood inducing technology and managements' efforts to market selling environments or shopping centres. Moreover, we believe that this work clearly contributes to the strategic dimension and emphasis that drives place liking in modern UK society. Only the integration and a full and sophisticated segmentation of marketing

communication activities are likely to inspire and empower contemporary consumers. Our work provides the basis for much more precise targeting and leads to quality marketing orientation and shopping centre image development. However, more research is needed to evaluate the degree to which individual on-screen images or cues contribute to image, and how these vary within consumer groups. As mentioned in the 'Review of theory' section above, such cues can act as symbols facilitating judgements (McKenna, 2000), and may be used to reinforce customers' expectations. Emphasising our point made in the 'Results: emerging themes' section above, as with retail store interiors, shopping centre concourses need to be fine-tuned and constantly re-evaluated and altered to follow the pattern of customer expectations, and (quality) marketing orientation (Newman and Foxall, 2003). The purpose and effect of such marketing orientation is to increase shoppers' satisfactions and, we contend, empowerment, leading to improved business results.

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