

An exploration of sensory marketing in fast-fashion retailing

Gabriella Ujvari

Obuda University Keleti Karoly Faculty of Business and Management

ujvari.gabriella95@gmail.com

Aniko Kelemen-Erdos

Obuda University Keleti Karoly Faculty of Business and Management

kelemen.aniko@kgk.uni-obuda.hu

Abstract: Human senses, such as sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste, consciously or unconsciously influence emotions. These effects, in conjunction with individual experiences, may have favorable or even negative impacts on customer behavior. The purpose of sensory marketing is to transmit positive and influential messages to the customer via stimulating the receptors of the brain. These effects have been studied in the field of fast fashion, which has significantly transformed the fashion market over the last twenty years and is now playing a decisive role in purchasing. The aim of the research described in this paper was to analyze the relationship of sensory retail marketing strategies to effects on customer behavior. A further target was exploring the connections between sensory marketing and sustainability. A quantitative survey method was used to research and highlight the effects of visual communication, background music, scent, and touch on customer behavior. Results confirmed the hypothesis that minor forms of stimulation such as the right lighting, background music, or an appropriate scent can lead to significant growth in sales, a more positive brand image, and the acquisition of loyal customers. It is suggested that further research into the techniques that can be used in online shopping is conducted as the sense of smell and touch are not available to the related marketers.

Keywords: retail strategy, retail marketing, sensory marketing, fast fashion, apparel store

1 Introduction

The five senses (sight, hearing, scent, touch and taste) influence everyday life through facilitating the interaction between the environment and human beings, resulting in diverse forms of behavior. These senses, in conjunction with

individual experiences and emotions, may favorably or even negatively affect behavior. This impact is discernible in several situations, among others in retailing through its influence on customers.

Sensory effects can determine the length of time customers spend in a store, thereby influencing buyer satisfaction, thus the profitability of the retailer. The purpose of sensory marketing is to send stimulating messages to the brain that have a positive impact on customer behavior. Such impacts are mostly subconscious, so it is not possible to exclude them. Purchasing in the absence of lighting, of smelling the scents and hearing the sounds that surround us, or buying apparel offline without touching it – are almost impossible. Sensory marketing can be applied in both a strategic and in a tactical way because it can support differentiation and foster customer value creation [16]. The present research focuses on apparel retailing, thus it concentrates on sight, hearing, smell and touch as the external cues which enable the retailer to enhance the customer experience. However, it does not deal with taste, which is an important tool of food retailing.

The effects of these four senses have been studied in the field of fast fashion, which has significantly transformed the fashion market over the last twenty years and is now playing a decisive role in purchasing. The concept of fast fashion is to replace the product range as often as every two weeks with affordable goods, thereby boosting rotation speed, product turnover, and the liquidity of the enterprise. There are now many fast fashion stores around the world, including Zara and Stradivarius, which are the part of the Spanish Inditex Group, the Swedish H&M, and the Polish Bershka, and Mohito. The aim of the present research was to analyze the relationship of sensory retail marketing strategies to customer behavior. For this analysis, secondary and empirical methods are used. The functions of the sensory elements in purchasing habits and decisions are analyzed through online questionnaire surveys.

2 Literature review

“Fast fashion” is a term used by fashion retailers and is based on the quick replication and production of the fashion of the catwalk and taking advantage of maximizing logistical and shipping efficiency, resulting in the newest trends arriving in the stores within two weeks [4]. Over the past twenty years, the fashion industry – thanks to fast fashion – has improved significantly and motivated retailers to produce more, faster, and cheaper [2]. In this, consumer decision making that involves sight, hearing, touch and smell play an important role, thus understanding the role of these impacts can create valuable benefits for sellers [18]. In stores, variable factors such as colors, shapes, sizes, music, scents, textures and temperature affect customer behavior and may generate favorable responses [6]. According to Hulten [8], sensory marketing is a service process that

generates consumer value and experience by focusing on instincts and helping create a multiple sensory brand experience that supports individuals' identity through cognitive processes and the five senses. Krishna [9] suggests that sensory marketing is connected with the customer's mind and affects their perceptions, judgement and behavior.

The most dominant and strongest sense used by marketing specialists is vision [3]. The lighting of a store enhances not only the quality of its visual appearance, but is also able to affect customers' emotions, and thereby their behavior [7][14]. It is a fact that colors are also able to influence the functioning of the human brain through stimulating emotional effects which are consciously used in retail to inspire consumers to shop [1]. Use of the right colors can favorably affect brand identity, product differentiation, competitive advantage and loyalty; furthermore, it can increase the volume of sales, shorten the time taken to purchase, lengthen the time spent in stores by customers, and increase the number of return visits [19].

Visual elements can affect the human senses and so can background music, which requires conscious planning [1]. Judicious use of this medium can improve a store's appearance, positively impact employees, and encourage purchasing [12]. In addition, it may spur customers to act or change their mood by subconsciously affecting the brain and emotions (Scott, 1999). The effects of music may include increasing the tolerance of customers (concerning, for example, waiting time), their susceptibility to employee recommendations, and dwell time in stores [1].

When choosing the style of background music, it is important to know the target audience [13] because the style of music can attract different segments. Musical tempo and volume can affect how customers traverse a space, determining time spent in the store, while also building corporate and brand identity. Quiet sounds encourage conversation with shop assistants, while louder ones tend to be more attractive to younger customers [5].

Scent is one of the more effective ways of affecting human emotions because it stimulates the limbic system of the brain which plays a fundamental role in emotion, memory and behavior, thereby potentially influencing the buyer's mood in a subconscious way [11]. Olfactory effects are dependent on personal traits; for example, what motivates a customer to enter the store, and whether they are utilitarian or hedonistic shoppers, which can be differentiated in the following way [11]:

- utilitarian shoppers are motivated by targets and are significantly affected by scents, perhaps because they are more receptive to perceiving them subconsciously;
- hedonistic customers are looking for happiness, pleasure and enjoyment while shopping, but may be scarcely influenced by scents, although other factors such as the variety and design of clothes affect them strongly.

Peck and Wiggins [15] claim that even the possibility of touch can influence customer behavior. Tactile stimuli may foster interactivity because they can trigger movement through direct contact [8]. Traders have also discovered that when customers want to touch products, they may also be willing to buy them: surveys have also shown that allowing customers to touch products can increase sales, while not allowing touching can lead to frustration and non-purchase [10]. In the field of fashion, form and texture (e.g. softness and silkiness) may dominate purchasing decisions in comparison to other experiential characteristics like weight. However, the latter factor may be a factor in some cases of purchasing such as with sportswear and jackets.

3 Research methods and sample

Based on secondary research, the empirical investigation this paper is based on explores the influence of the four sensory marketing strategy elements on customer behavior. The hypotheses, which are based on secondary research, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Hypotheses

H1	Customer behavior regarding sensory stimuli are multidimensional.
H2	Customers can be segmented according to which sensory stimuli they are more receptive to.
H3	Hedonistic customers are influenced by assortment variety and design and can be differentiated by their focus on shopping-related pleasure and enjoyment.
H4	Scent-influenced utilitarian customers are a distinct segment of customers.

Source: Authors' own construction

Quantitative research was carried out with the use of online questionnaires. Because of the sampling method and limited sample size, the research was not representative, and findings are thereby limited. Results were analyzed with the use of the SPSS Statistics 20 software package.

The target population of the survey consisted of those individuals who regularly shop in fast fashion apparel stores. From 265 questionnaires, 213 usable surveys were included in the research after filtering out outliers according to a boxplot diagram. The sample is not balanced regarding gender: the share of men is only 10.3%.

The variables referred to in the hypotheses were examined with factor and cluster analysis. Factor analysis as a data reduction technique was applied to reduce the complex dataset of the research by clustering variables into homogeneous groups. After excluding two variables due to inadequate scales, 27 variables remained to measure the four senses related to the atmosphere of the fast fashion store.

4 Results

To reduce and abstract the variables, VARIMAX rotation with Kaiser normalization was applied. The eigenvalue of nine factors is more than one, but the scree spot diagram had a breaking point at the seventh factor, thus seven factors were extracted, although only 58.4% of the content of the variables was explained. The existence of stochastic relations are assumed with the applied scales. As the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.709 ($p < 0.05$), the results were considered appropriate and significant for factor analysis (Table 2).

Table 2. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.709
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1850.131
	degree of freedom (df)	351
	Significance	.000

Source: Authors' own construction

Factors are clearly defined by their content (Table 3), so characteristic names for each of these were created.

Table 3. Rotated Component Matrix

	Component						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Awareness raising due to scent	.829	.279	.078	.038	.014	.075	-.026
Stimulating power of scent	.812	.295	.110	-.016	.077	.108	-.035
Attraction of scent	.811	.191	.039	.101	.098	.148	-.034
Lack of need for scent	-.697	.122	.221	-.117	.191	.100	-.169
Influence of scent on buying	.579	.463	.062	-.095	-.098	.077	-.169
Scent does not have an impact	-.553	.178	.191	-.057	.042	.141	-.067
2 Scent influence on multiple item buying	.201	.663	.258	-.016	.052	-.083	-.266
Attraction of background music	.179	.628	-.273	-.020	.084	.295	.009
Lack of background music influence on multiple item	-.006	.502	-.342	-.248	.037	.290	.088
3 Lack of need for background music	-.041	.066	.819	-.112	-.025	-.140	-.067
Background music impact on sense of time	-.004	.089	.782	.037	-.094	.018	.036
Enjoyment of background music	.064	.359	-.637	-.039	.210	.103	.097
Disturbance of background music	.074	-.113	.530	-.081	.244	.125	.241
Lack of background music impact on buying	-.199	-.366	.406	-.062	.059	.276	-.103
4 Attraction of shop windows	.032	.085	-.054	.787	-.075	.118	.155
Influence of shop windows	.179	-.101	-.011	.744	.139	.088	.181
Lack of influence of shop window on buying	-.025	.005	.041	-.636	-.229	-.125	.134
5 Opportunity to touch items	-.111	.024	-.094	.146	.865	.033	.052
Opportunity to touch items without buying	-.094	.126	-.099	.241	.830	-.100	-.011
Checking material of items before buying	.192	-.058	.057	-.274	.371	.101	.274
Deterrent influence of unpleasant scent	.178	-.203	.190	-.090	.333	.274	-.021
6 Awareness raising due to apparel placement	.030	.041	-.084	.132	-.032	.715	.144
Attractiveness of design	.041	-.010	.007	.211	.047	.707	-.067
7 Preference for brighter stores	.001	.130	.057	.017	.071	-.016	.767
Attraction of colorful supply	.001	-.172	-.065	.093	.007	.016	.575
Attraction of stronger lighting	-.019	.382	.073	.366	-.018	.181	.426

a. Rotation converged in nine iterations.

Source: Authors' own construction

The variable groups can be denominated as follows:

- (1) “scent orientation” is the factor group which contains the most information, including variables connected with scent;
- (2) “incentive complex senses for customer attraction and buying” shows the influence of scent and sound on customer attraction and buying. However, the role of sound is related only to attraction to the store not to purchasing;
- (3) “disturbance of background music” is related to the negative impacts of background music in stores;
- (4) “shop window orientation” includes factors which refer to how a shop window attracts customers and influences buying behavior.
- (5) “touch stimuli-centered behavior” contains variables related to the opportunity to touch the items in fashion stores;
- (6) “product placement orientation” contains factors relating to the importance of in-store apparel placement and design elements for influencing customer perceptions;
- (7) “visual influence” includes factors related to the attractiveness of the brightness and colorfulness of a store.

To better define sensory segments, hierarchical cluster analysis was undertaken. Use of Ward’s clustering method and the analysis of agglomeration schedule coefficient values led to the formation of four clusters (Table 4).

Table 4. Main characterizing segments (N=211)

Cluster	Number of members	Characteristics of cluster
Olfactory sensitives	68 people (31.92%)	The segment is dominated by scent. However, except for product placement, all other stimuli have an impact. This group is also highly sensitive to disturbance by background music.
Tactile dependents	83 people (38.97%)	Touching determines the buying behavior of this cluster, and product placement is influential.
Receptive to delightful sights	28 people (13.14%)	Brightness and colorfulness have the main influence.
Visually sensitive	Hedonistic buyers 34 people (15.96%)	Visual design and product placement can affect the buying process – this is associated with McDonnells “hedonistic” group.

Source: Authors’ own construction

As the results indicate, the buying behavior of customers is influenced by the four senses in fast fashion apparel stores. However, not every buyer is affected by stimuli, and not in the same way.

The former can be differentiated into an olfactory sensitive group, which is affected by scent but which also very sensitive to more effects simultaneously, such as shop window and sound. However, such customers are very sensitive, especially to sound effects, which have a negative effect in the case of inappropriate style.

The store atmosphere should be managed carefully as product placement and design elements influence other factors such as lightning and colorfulness. The visually sensitive segment is identified as the hedonistic group which was identified by McDonnell [11]. One group of respondents is highly engaged by touching, and lacking this opportunity are not attracted to shops.

Table 5 presents the verification of hypotheses.

Table 5. Verification of Research Hypotheses

H1	Customer behavior regarding sensory reactions may be multidimensional.	Not rejected
H2	Customers can be segmented according to which sensory stimuli they are more receptive to.	Not rejected
H3	Hedonistic customers are influenced by assortment variety and design, which can be differentiated to increase pleasure and enjoyment.	Not rejected
H4	Scent-influenced utilitarian customers are a distinct segment of customers.	Rejected

Source: Authors' own construction

Research limitations involve the construction of the factors which are only suggestive with a Cronbach alpha value of only 0.563. A further consequence is that correlation between the variables is low, which may question the use of factor analysis. Another limitation of the factor analyses is that the results have an explanatory power of slightly less than 60 per cent of the total. Sample size should have been ten times higher than the number of variables involved in the analyses but because of outlier answers the sample size was reduced. For this reason, further research is required to measure the variables properly.

5 Concluding remarks

All four sense-related sensory marketing approaches can affect customers' perception, decision making and behavior. Customers' attention seems to be mostly attracted by tactile elements. Examination of the data concerning tactile factors suggests that almost every respondent likes to touch apparel, regardless of their willingness to buy.

Sound and scent may affect buyers' mood. However, although background music may improve a customers' mood, most respondents state that this is not a major element in their attraction to a store. Scent also does not increase customer purchases, but it creates value in terms of the general enjoyment of the shopping experience.

Survey analysis reveals that scent, visual design and touching can significantly influence customers, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of a store and the enjoyment value of purchasing. Background music plays a less significant role, although it has a remarkable indirect effect, which is perhaps why customers could not evaluate the factor properly. The involvement of observation as a research method could create a more complex picture. It remains a question for further research which sensory marketing strategies may be employed by sellers to influence customers who shop online.

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