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## **Effect of Store Atmospherics on the Employees internal and behavioral responses: The case of ready to wear stores employees**

### **Abstract**

While store atmospherics effect on consumer responses was a subject matter of several studies in marketing, the research on this effect on employees remains rather sparse. This seems controversial, if we consider the growing interest to employees' satisfaction-performance linkage in serving customers. Our knowledge about the overall impact of atmospherics would, consequently, be improved by investigating the employees' reactions. Consistent with this objective, our study aimed to explore ready to wear store atmospherics effect on the employees' responses in the Tunisian context. A qualitative research using in depth interviews with 13 salespeople was conducted. The results suggest that lack of variation in the musical programming, a musical genre incongruent with salesman musical preferences, long exposure to the same rhythms, task complexity, crowd density, may affect the employees' cognitive, affective and physiological responses. In addition, the quality of relationships within the sales team was found to influence the employees' reactions. Such result provides insights into the psychological climate perceptions effect on salespersons' responses and performance. Findings indicate also, that employees could adopt avoidance behaviour as consequence of the environmental stimuli. Retail store managers should consequently, devote more attention to employees' responses to ambient conditions in trying to produce positive reactions from consumer.

Key words: store atmospherics effect, employees' responses, psychological climate perceptions, behavioural responses, employees' avoidance-approach behaviour.

## **Introduction**

The highly and increasing competition in retailing imposes to today's manager working in this field to place customers' satisfaction at the heart of their strategic reflections. Such an orientation appears clearly through their increasingly recourse to sensory marketing (Lemoine, 2003). The growing number of the stores known as "atmosphere stores", or admirals stores (Filser, 2001), is an illustration. The main objective behind is to develop a specific positioning of the sales store (Filser, 2001). Indeed, these stores are designed in a way to allow, not only, to differentiate the offers from other retailers in term of product assortments, prices, promotion, etc., but also to develop the shopping act, adding to the customer an intrinsic value derived from living the most gratifying and hedonist experience possible and at the same time, an experience of leisure and social interactions.

The store "of atmosphere", becoming a largely adopted formula in retailing, represents also a subject matter that gained a growing interest among academicians. Indeed, many researchers have focused on the identification of the environment components and their influence on customer behaviour (Kotler, 1974; Baker, 1986; Berman and Evan, 1996). They point to the need to consider the retail store environment as a multidimensional concept which is composed mainly of the music, the scents, the colors, the lights, the design, and the crowd. Recently, the social dimension represented by stores employees was also included among these dimensions (Baker, 1986; Baker and al., 1994).

The study of these dimensions effect reveals the presence of an impact on the customer emotional, cognitive and behavioral responses (Bitner, 1992; Rieunier, 2000; Guéguen and al., 2002). However, according to Lemoine (2003), although the improvement of the store atmosphere has a positive influence on the customer duration of stay in store as well as his emotion state, the environment variables do not seem to affect the amount of money spent. Such a result leads to conclude that the purposes assigned to the store atmosphere management have undergone an evolution. This later seems to fall under the logic of relational marketing rather than the transactional one. This evolution must thus imply, first of all, a change in the managers' mentalities. Indeed, they should not reduce any more such commercial concepts to simple tactical marketing variables at a short-term stance. It must also mean a greater awareness of the contact personal to other objectives than those linked to the direct increase in sales but also their role importance in achieving organizational objectives. The managers must then adhere to the idea that the employees can strongly contribute to the creation of a shopping surroundings likely to lead the customer to prolong the duration of visit

in a retail store. In this line, research in HR (motivation, implication, participation...) and firms effectiveness (Becker and Gerhart, 1996 ; Kotler, 1994 ; McMahan et al., 1999 ; Pfeffer, 1994, Wright and McMahan, 1992; c.f. Arcand et al., 2002) supports a causal link between such aspects .

However, and in the light of what precedes, some interrogations deserve to be addressed. How managers must act so to encourage the employee to be consumer oriented and to adopt approach behaviours? Are such behaviours influenced by the atmospherics of the retail store? If yes, what is the nature of this effect? Are the employees answers the same ones as those studied in the literature on consumers' reactions? The exposure all the day long to diverse stimuli - often handled to improve the purchase atmosphere for the customer - has it the same effect on employees as on customers? Otherwise, is it possible to expect cognitive, emotional and physiological reactions that generate behavioural answers dissimilar to those observed among consumers? If such is the case, what are the reasons? The present study tries to explore these questions. Particularly, it tries to better understand the atmospherics impact on employees' reactions in the sales stores.

### **Literature review**

Many definitions of the commercial space atmospherics were presented in the literature. They reveal that this concept does not appear in a uniform way, and that it had undergone a considerable evolution in its meaning. In service marketing literature, Kotler (1973-1974) is recognized to be the first author to suggest atmospherics as a marketing tool (Hoffman and Turley, 2002; Bonnin, 2006). He refers to these as "the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in buyers that enhance his purchase probability (Kotler, 1973, 54). Consistent with Kotler's (1973) definition, Bitner (1992) suggests the concept of "servicescape" to refer to the environment in which services are delivered and where the firm and customer interacts (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). More recently, Rieunier (2000) proposed a more exhaustive definition of the environment concept taking into account not only the atmospherics effects on consumers but also their impact on the employees. Consistent with Biner's (1992) model, atmospherics can evoke a variety of emotional and behavioral reactions and also affect the nature of the customer-employee interaction. According to Rieunier (2000), atmospherics of a retail environment "refers to all the elements of the store which can be controlled so to influence the emotional, cognitive, physiological and or behavioural reactions of the occupants (consumers and

employees). These elements can include environmental stimuli (colour, odour, music, lighting, and signage), as well as the consumer-employee interactions” (Rieunier (2000, p: 6). Thus, atmospherics can be considered as an emotionally oriented design of space which can affect the customers as well the employees.

Frameworks proposed to study the impact of atmospherics on consumers’ and employees’ responses suggest that critical dimensions of the store environment concept are tactile, sensory, gustatory, olfactory, visual and social factors.

The tactile factors are temperature, air quality in the store. The sensory factors represent the background music, noise, etc. For example, background music has been identified as one of the most readily influential elements (Milliman, 1982, 1986) which can affect the consumer’s emotional state. The gustatory factors include the tasting and offered products. Olfactory factors consist of odors and perfumes. The visual dimensions encompass colours, lighting, design, and the social dimensions include the interactions with the employees and the crowd. The number of employees, their behaviour, the consumer density seems to have an impact on the consumers’ reactions (Baker, 1986; Bitner; 1992, ...). Table 1 represents a synthesis of the different store environment dimensions classifications.

**Table 1 : synthesis of the different store environment dimensions classifications**

Publications	Proposed dimensions	Notes
Kotler (1974)	4 dimensions 1- visual; 2- aural, 3- tactile, olfactory	This typology doesn't include the crowd and the employee dimensions.
Baker (1986)	3 dimensions 1- ambient; 2- design; 3- social	This typology takes into account the social dimension, but doesn't include the facility exterior-exterior design of the retail store.
Bitner (1992)	3 dimensions: 1- ambient conditions; 2- spatial layout and functionality; 3- signs, symbols, and artifacts	The framework is considered as the most complete one. Nevertheless, research on the employee side is rare.
Berman and Evans (1995)	4 dimensions 1- external variables ; 2- internal variables; 3- landscaping; 4- 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)	3 dimensions 1- irritant ambient factors ; 2- irritant design Factors ; 3- irritant social factors	This framework is inspired by Baker (1986) typology. It doesn't include however the social dimension.
Turley and Milliman (2000)	5 dimensions 1- general exterior; 2- general interior, 3- layout & design, 4- point of purchase & decoration; 5- human beings variables	This framework is an extension of Bermans and Evans's typology. It includes the human component.
Daucé and Rieunier (2002)	2 dimensions 1- physical environment, 2- social environment	The physical environment is composed of the ambient factors. The merchandising and the layout variables are considered as visuals factors. This typology ignores store external variables.
Mkhinini (2002)	2 dimensions 1- internal elements; 2- external elements	The ambient factors are included in the first dimension. The sub dimensions haven't been detailed.

It is worth noting that the main interest to refine the description of environment dimensions is related to the increasing recognition of their role in determining customer affective and behavioral response in service settings. A synthesis of research on atmospherics impact on the consumers' responses is presented in the following.

### ***Atmospherics influence on the consumer reactions***

Two approaches are generally distinguished in studying the effect of store environment stimuli. The holistic and single element approaches. The holistic or global approach examines the store atmosphere at a global level. This approach is criticised because of the difficulty to isolate the impact of various environmental elements. The multidimensional character of the environment elicits also a methodological concern, in so far as researchers have to deal with a great number of direct/indirect effects as well as interaction effects. The single element

approach takes into account a finite number (often two variables) of environmental stimuli and examines their effect on customers' emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions. In spite of the insights provided by single element studies, results from these studies do not take into account the interactive effects between variables in a store environment.

Whatever the approach used, results show that the store environment exerts effects on the individuals' internal responses as well as on their behaviors. It should be noted that the study of atmospherics and their impact originates from the environmental psychology which main subject matter is the study of the individuals' reactions to environment stimuli. Lighting (Luckiesh, 1924), noise (Morgan, 1917; Gatewood, 1921) and color (Davison, 1918; Pressy, 1921) are examples of these stimuli. Recently, scholars in services marketing field in particular, devoted a growing interest to the contextual variables role in purchase/consumption environment based on environmental psychology literature. The main objective of these studies is to circumscribe the impact of the atmospherics variables on consumers' reactions. For example, studies by Sibérial (1994); Rieunier (2000) and Ben Dahmane Mouelhi and Touzani, (2003) had addressed the issue of background music. Bellizi and Hite (1992), Rouillet et al., (2003), had focused on the colors impact. Daucé (2000) studied the environment scents impact. The effect of crowd in a commercial context constituted the focal axis for Dion (1999) and Dion and Bonnin (2004) studies.

The results of the undertaken empirical work –particularly in retail store context- support largely the relationship between atmospherics manipulation and consumer behaviour, indicating that consumers do, in fact, respond to stimuli found in these environments (Hoffman and Turley, 2002). Individuals' internal responses to these stimuli range from emotional (pleasure-displeasure, degree of arousal), physiological (physical discomfort) to cognitive ones (beliefs, attributions, and categorization of the service organization). These responses influence how they behave in the environment (approach or avoidance behaviour).

Consumer approach and avoidance behaviours can be exhibited in different ways: (1) a desire to stay (approach) or leave (avoid); (2) a desire to further explore and interact (approach) or a tendency to ignore it (avoidance); (3) a desire to communicate with others (approach) or to ignore (avoid); and (4) feelings of satisfaction (approach) or disappointment (avoidance) with the service experience (Bitner, 1992, Chebat et al, 2001; Chebat and Robicheaux, 2001, Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Milliman, 1986; Turley and Milliman, 2000).

Despite the accumulated body of knowledge on the environment influence on consumers' responses, and the recognition of the need to consider employees in servicescapes

management (Bitner, 1992), this topic is still under researched in marketing literature. It should be noted that human factors design or ergonomics has addressed human physiological responses to ambient conditions (lighting, noise, temperature, ventilation, etc) and equipment design in different contexts (design of computers, automobiles, employee work stations, etc.). Results of experimental studies supported significant effects of these factors on employees' reactions, stimulation level and pleasure (Munsterberg, 1915, Bennett 1977; Osborne 1987; Sanders and McCormick 1987). Bitner (1992) had already recommended building on this research stream to study the effects of design of commercial environments not only on customers but also on employees who coexist and interact in this environment. Consistent with this recommendation and convinced with the important role played by employees satisfaction in the overall service quality perception and consumer satisfaction, the primary purpose of this study is to explore the impact of atmospherics on employees emotional, cognitive, physiological and behavioural responses in service settings. The qualitative study and the results are reported in the following.

### **Research methodology**

Since the objective of this research is to understand employees' responses to atmospherics variables, a qualitative methodology is deemed to be the most appropriate. Consistent with this objective, we used semi-structured interviews, which allow for conversational, two-way communication. More precisely, we conducted interviews with 13 key informants who were sales people working in internationally reputed ready to wear stores (i.e. Sasio, Cellio...). Recording of the interviews was subject to the interview consent. After the interviews, responses were transcribed and analyzed. The average duration of the interviews was 35 minutes. A content analysis was carried out for data scrutiny (Miles and Huberman, 2003). Informants were invited to talk mainly about: 1- the assessment of store environment in general; 2- the range of manipulated atmospherics and what effect they elicit among them 3- the relationship they have with others people (customers, colleagues and the superior) and the factors that can disturb their interactions with others.

### **Results**

Remarkably, data analysis showed that interviewed sales people do not give the same attention to all the store environment factors. It reveals also, that the music and crowd are the environment factors that have the most effect on the informants. Such a result highlighted the importance of these factors in retail store settings. The kind of the relationship between sales peoples and salespeople and their superior has also, an effect on their responses (respectively



9 and 7 informants agreed on that effects). The items sold and their assortments were also considered by 3 informants as being able to affect their attitudinal and behavioural responses. The impact of these elements is reported more in detail in the following based on their importance for the interviewees and also on their nature (physical dimensions impact, social interaction dimensions)

#### ***The music effect on sales people reactions.***

Findings from the study showed a general preference of the interviewees to work in conditions where music is played and a great aversion for silence. Moreover, the music is considered by the majority of the informants as “good companion”. It fulfils several functions in so far that it breaks the routine, helps the salesmen to feel less annoyed when there are no customers, and disguises the noise in the store. It occupies them also, which decreases the number of contact between them. Thus, it permits to avoid, in an indirect way, problems that interactions between employees can generate.

#### ***Effect of music on sales people emotional responses***

There was a large degree of consensus among informants regarding the music influence on the emotional states of salespeople. Eleven sales people reported that the music can contribute to improve their mood state, in particular when played music is familiar to them and when they like it. Music has effects on the sales people, in particular in terms of stimulation and pleasure.

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 and according to some interviewees, a slow rhythm or a soft music affects negatively the arousal level. “The very peaceful music pushes us to sleep”, “I do not like a soft music after midday when consumers begin to come to store, you do not feel at ease, it is not active”. This result is consistent with some findings in environmental psychology and marketing research which gave support to the correlation between the tempo of the music and the individual’s stimulation level (Sears, 1957; Lundin, 1985; Anand and Holbrook, 1986; Kellaris and Kent, 1994, c.f. Rieunier, 2000).

In the other hand, some informants stated that they prefer working accompanied with a peaceful music. They perceive fast tempo and rhythmic music as ambient factors that disturb them. “To some extent, it disturbs, in regard of 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 the individual variables. The people having a high stimulation level seems to react in a very positive way to a music with the fast tempo as underlined by Steenkamp and Baumgartner, 1992, 1995; Steenkamp *et al.*, 1996 (c.f. Rieunier, 2000). This effect seems also to depend on the task to perform and on some surroundings factors (i.e. noise, consumers).

### ***Effect of the music on sales people cognitive responses***

The data analysis reveals that the played music seems to affect sales people time perception. Some informants noted that when there is nothing to do, music makes it possible to spend time.

Additionally, a majority of the interviewed sales people (8/13) consider explicitly or implicitly that the music accelerated rhythm helps them to work in better conditions. They believe that these rhythms affect positively the clients' purchase intention and gives energy to the team work especially in moments of high affluence. All the informants think that the diffusion of the music is a practice which aims helping them to keep an ongoing activity. Some qualify this practice as "necessary", "something essential in a retail store", "you cannot work without music". Others expressed a more moderate opinion. "[...] it is better with music", "preferably". Such a result gives support to the critical importance of music variable in retail stores (Baker *et al.*, 1992 ; Milliman, 1982, 1986; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990).

### ***Music effect on the sales people physiological reactions***

The relation music-physiological manifestations, appears clearly in the sales people interviews. Music influences the way of moving in the store and 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"; "The music makes me move, I move, when I hear music". This result was reported in some previous studies (Smith and Curnow, 1966 cité by Rieunier, 2000; Milliman, 1982 which had sustained that consumer adapts his way of walking to the tempo of the diffused music.

However, a vendor/store manager had noticed that he doesn't permit to diffuse oriental dancing music in the store. "Such music genre "excites" too much sales people. They can even dance on the rhythms and that may have a negative impact on their caring of consumer needs". Therefore, it seems that pleasant music should not generate a stimulation level higher than the desired optimal level for employees. This level can differ than from the one that managers want to evoke among consumers. Thus, it should be of primary importance to take

into account these controversial effects when managing music variable in a retail store environment.

### ***Effect of the music on salespeople behavioral responses***

In the present study, music seems to elicit mainly two reactions: motivation and stimulation. Remarkably for some interviewees, music constitutes an environment component that generates “stress” and “discomfort”. This can be explained by several factors related to the type of the diffused music, its tempo, its style, the duration and the moment of diffusion of this music, but also to the personality of the sales people.

Therefore, a pleasant music procures pleasure, affects positively the perception and the evaluation of the store environment and leads salespeople to adopt an approach behavior. Such behaviour appears clearly, through the desire for perform assigned tasks “content, I do not want to remain doing nothing”, and also through felt affiliation 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 (1992) framework, which suggested that the conclusion of an action represents a demonstration of an approach behavior.

Music can be also a source of stress which affects negatively the employee’s task performance. It seems that the continuous exposure to music they didn’t appreciate is very stressing. “at the end of the day, and when you are tired the music annoys me, I does not support it any more”, “one likes the music generally, but to listen to it during long hours can become stressing [...], 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 sales people. Indeed they find that all the diffused music “is similar” and “all the songs have the same rhythm” and that played CD lack variety.

The study by Filser, (1994), offers a possible explanation to these negative influences. Indeed, psychologists showed that an individual ended by experiencing lassitude when exposed to growing levels of the same stimulus, the marginal utility generated by the stimulus decreases.

The lack of variety added to the sales people attendance time is likely to generate certain monotony, producing then feelings of embarrassment among sales people. This situation is not perceived in the same manner by all the interviewed employees. Thus, other variables can moderate the music effects on sales people responses. For example, and according to workplace psychologists, employees are sensitive to monotony depending of their intelligence, their temperament, their beliefs about the jobs, etc. (Maitour, 1967).

To conclude, the influence of the music on employees' responses in a retail setting appears to be much more complex than for consumer. Indeed, this later spends less time in store, can leave at any moment and seemingly have more control on the situation. This exploratory study shed more light on the conditions that make music as a store environment variable and an auditory cue that motivates and elicits positive responses in behalf sales people. The music diffused in the store must be congruent with the moment of the day, non repetitive, and correspond to the sales people tastes and preferences.

### ***Effect of crowding on salespeople emotional responses***

Crowding is the second most influencing environment factor identified by interviewees. Two major effects of crowding had been identified: 1) the stimulation effect and the pleasure effect.

*Stimulation effect.* Eleven informants acknowledged being stimulated in the presence of crowd. Crowding influences positively the team level arousal. Vendors reported being more dynamic, more ambitious, and “too motivated” under conditions of crowding.

This result corroborates the results of Machleit and al. (2000) that shows the existence of a positive correlation between the individual stimulation level and the perception of consumer density.

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

*Pleasure effect.* Negative and positive effects of crowding on the sales people pleasure were identified. The majority of the people interviewed (11 /13), feels pleasure under crowding condition. “When the store is full, we are satisfied”, “when shopper density is high, I’m content, pleased [...], you are glad to do sales and content that the sales profit increases and at the same time the day passes rapidly while discussing with some customers or socializing with others. ”

Some informants expressed a preference for crowding conditions, to some extent. “I wish that all the time, the store will be stuffed with customers”. Besides, content analysis reveals that a low density conditions disturb vendors. “Almost all of us feel disturbed, bad, when there is no clients, ...”

However, crowding is perceived differently by other salesmen and even by some informants who expressed a preference for high density conditions (4/11). These later expressed too, their discomfort under crowding conditions. “In the presence of a great number of shoppers, in the rush hours, when we are overloaded, we cannot communicate with more than two customers”. This leads to suppose that the presence of crowd is preferred to a certain degree. When exceeded, it can produce cognitive overload among salespeople.

To be noticed, that this psychological effect of crowding has been already identified in a study by Mackintosh et al. (1975). Findings showed that respondents carrying a given task under conditions of high density describe themselves as being tense and confused. Under low density conditions they felt pleasure and relaxation.

The individual characteristics can, thus, explain the divergence in the comfort/discomfort felt by some sales people under crowding conditions. “I do not like crowd”, “I feel suffocated and disturbed”. This result is consistent with Dion (1999) conclusions. According to this author, individual characteristics can moderate the relation crowding conditions-pleasure. Indeed, placed in the same conditions, they expressed different feeling toward people density..

### ***Effect of crowding on sales people cognitive responses***

According to some respondents, crowding affects sales people time perception. They report that under crowding conditions, they didn't realize how time passes and working hours seem to be shorter. “Under crowding conditions, you serve that consumer, you speak with the other, you search for articles in stocks, the day ends unnoticed.”

In other hand, interviewed sales people think that under high affluence conditions – especially during the scheduled on sales period-, they learn to improve their working method, since they find that period the most important.

However, crowding could have a negative effect on vendors store evaluation. Some informants reported that during on sales period, the store is all in disorder, that they feel uncomfortable when looking at the store and merchandise layout not aesthetically appealing. Eroglu and Harrell (1993) found a similar result. According to these authors, the 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 the consumer evaluation of some aspects of store image and shopping experience, but also the sales people evaluation of those aspects.

### ***Effect of crowding on the sales people physiological responses***

Literature in consumer behavior identified some indicators to measure the physiological responses to crowding conditions. Among these : 1) increase in the blood pressure (Epstein et al., 1981), 2) increase in the levels of the skin conductivity (Aiello et al., 1977) and 3 acceleration of the cardiac rhythm (Evans, 1979). The analysis of informants' discourses revealed clearly these manifestations. In this regard, a responded sated: "I feel tired", "I feel suffocated". To cope with this state, sales people behave in different manner. Whereas, some try to hide what they feel and to be more patient, others experience stress and find that the solution is to slacken.

### ***Effect of crowding on the sales people behavioral responses***

Crowding elicits internal responses among the interviewees. These responses in turn lead to approach or avoidance behaviours. Thus, when they feel stimulated, informants tend to devote more effort at work exhibiting then an approach behavior. In this regard, a vendor specified "I become motivated too much, I do not stop moving"

This approach behavior can be explained, by the opportunism which is one of the modes of adaptation to crowding situations (Dion, 1999; Dion and Bonnin, 2003). Thus, in situation of high density, the consumer can adopt an opportunist behavior while seeking to benefit from the occasion. Sales people think that it is necessary to benefit from the presence of the customers to sell more in order to improve the sales turnover and by the way their bonus.

Moreover, the majority of the respondents relate the crowding conditions to the on sales periods and Ramadan month. These two periods are the most important moments of the year for sales. This is why they multiply their efforts in order to achieve the most important sales. They do not hesitate, then, to help each other, and to share tasks in order to handle, at best, this situation. These results differ somewhat from those reported by Dion (1999) in regard to the effects of crowding on consumer behavioural responses. Indeed, whereas some sales people manifest approach behaviour in being more co-operative, Dion (1999) reported that consumers under crowding conditions exhibit less cooperative behaviour.

Deploying more effort at work under crowding conditions was not the case for all the interviewees. Four informants prefer avoiding the customer and to intervene only on request. They adopt consequently an avoidance behavior and sometimes a behavior of withdrawal.

The analysis revealed, in addition, that the nature of the behavioural responses of sales people to crowding conditions, is moderated by the physical density, sales people experience, their

attitude toward the selling job and some personality variables (i.e. the pleasure felt in the presence of crowd).

***Effects of the product sold and their assortments:***

Certain informants noted that they experience pleasure to try new items, if they match their preferences. They believe being able to “sell them more easily”. Moreover, the analysis showed that some respondents are sensitive to the merchandise display in the store. They think that clothes display has an impact on their perceived value.

***Effects of the in store social relationships quality on sales people responses.***

According to our informants, the average time of their presence in the retail store exceeds sometimes 10 hours. Therefore, sales people have developed friendly relationship within the group. One of the interviewee qualified his work team as a family. Another one claimed: “I found an excellent ambiance [...] one would say my brothers”. Such a relationship between the members of the work team is perceived as being necessary for mainly two reasons. An environment where agreement within the group is found is likely to affect positively the emotional states, the behaviors and sales people performance. In the order, Churchill et al. (1997) and Sujana and Weitz (1986) showed that the motivation is a crucial factor for sales people performance.

In addition, it appears that a retail store environment where the social interactions are of a good quality minimizes the employees turn over. All interviewees expressed the desire to stay within the same store sign when asked if they would leave to other store sign under the same economic conditions. The most cited reasons are the accord with their colleagues and the “good ambiance at work.”

Certain 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. In this regard, an interviewee declared: “(...) the existence of a problem in a work team is very obstructing (...), I already see that 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 teams in a team work obstructs too much.” It is necessary then for retail store managers to take the necessary measures to create a climate of respect and friendship between the employees. Trying to have a homogeneous group, in terms of educational level and age, is likely to be a solution. In this regard, the analysis of the



interviewees' discourses revealed that a difference in the educational degrees can be at the origin of problems within the team.

According to one respondent, a new recruited vendor can also create an unfavorable social environment within the retail store: Throughout the interview this vendor showed a negative attitude toward his colleagues. He believes that the retail store manager could have avoided this type of situation by paying more interest to such aspects during the welcome moment of new employees. Maitour (1967) already suggested that a bad welcome can discourage a good will, and can generate even a feeling of hostility toward the foreman or the team that carried out the new recruited welcome.

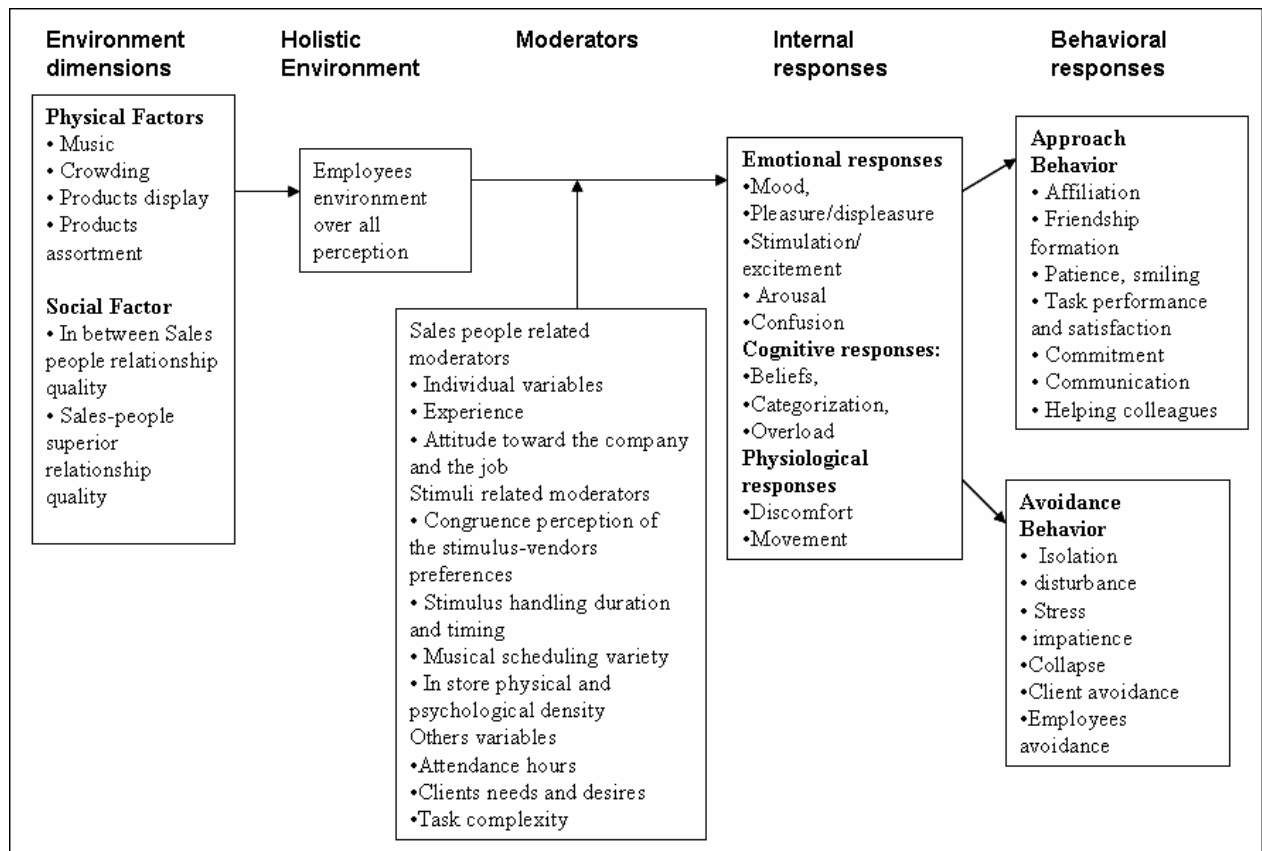
The relationship sales people and their superior deemed to be of great importance for the social climate as a component of the retail store environment. In this regard, informants stated that a good relationship with the owner encourages the team to work better and more. They think that the attention given by the chief to his employees must be rewarded by sincerity and the deployment of more efforts. The sales people perceive positively the chief participation and collaboration with the team work.

To summarize, the social environment appears to have an effect on sales people behavioral responses in the same way than the physical environment. This result seems of a great interest in the prediction of the impact of retail store environment factors on sales people responses and in the modeling of the determinants of these responses.

The results of this research can be summarized within a conceptual framework of sales people responses to environmental factors in a retail setting as follows:



**Figure 1: Framework of the impact of retail store environment on employees' responses in ready to wear stores**



This framework appears to be consistent with Bitner's (1992) suggested servicescapes. Yet it goes a step further to refine this later by identifying more in detail the impact of physical surroundings of the retail store on employees.

On the other hand the framework shed more lights on the stimuli to which the salesmen 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. Moreover, the manifestations of employees behaviors described by Bitner (1992) are not identical to the study findings. The analysis showed that moderating variables could be classified into three categories: moderators related to sales people, moderators relating to the stimulus, and other moderators related to the task complexity, clients desires and needs and the number of working hours.

Bitner (1992) had not identified the moderators associated to the sales people-environment interactions in terms of congruency; company musical choices and scheduling, working hours, merchandise displaying, etc. The identification of these variables constitutes a major

contribution in theoretical and practical term of this study. Indeed, the taking into account of the effect of these variables allows a better understanding of employees' reactions and thus a better management of the environmental conditions of the sales 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 take into account the social factors among the atmospherics likely to have an impact on sales people internal and behavioural responses. In this study, such a dimension is found to have an important weight on sales people responses.

### **Conclusion**

The present study aimed to a better understanding of sales people responses to retail store atmospherics. The case of employees of ready to wear stores has been chosen to explore such responses. The study results show that employees are mainly sensitive to the presence of the music, crowding and the products sold and their display. The social environment factor refers to the nature of relations within the work team and between employees and superior/patron. This factor appears also to have an effect on the sales people internal responses which in turn generate either an approach or avoidance behaviour.

Furthermore, the retail store environment impact on sales people can be twofold. First, the commercial environment could be stimulating, motivating and evoking enthusiasm. This is likely to result in affiliation, a desire to enter in contact with the customer and to offer a better service. Second, under certain conditions, the store environment could be a stressing, irritant factor and confusing which can lead employees to express avoidance behaviors.

This study identified, in addition, some variables that could modify the intensity of the relation between the stimuli and the internal and behavioural responses of sales people. The results point to the need for taking into account the role of moderating variables to better managing them.

Such results appear to be of great help in predicting the employees' responses nature when manipulating controllable atmospherics variables. Managers should make trade-offs between the desired consumers responses and the actual employees responses to environment factors. In addition, they should be sensitive to cognitive and psychological overload that can be generated specially in the short term discount periods when consumer affluence the most important. Preparing sales people to these events, training them and being sensitive to their needs would overcome conflicts and reduced performance.

### **Limitations and future research**

Despite the study results relevance, some limitations should be noted. The first one is related to the complexity of the subject matter. Indeed, not all ready to wear clothes stores manage atmospherics in the same way. Besides, these stores do not use all the atmospherics identified in the services marketing to gain responsiveness among consumers. That may explain why some factors had not been identified by our informants. This can limit the generalization of the study results to other types of services settings.

In another hand, studies addressing the impact of atmospherics on employees' responses are rather rare in services marketing. To overcome this theoretical constraint, other theoretical underpinning has been considered.

Moreover, the cultural effect on the service atmospherics perception was not examined. It will be very insightful if we consider that effect in further studies. Another limitation of this study is related to the informants' characteristics which could have influenced the findings.

Further studies could be carried on notably to empirically assess the proposed framework predictability. Moreover, the atmospherics dimensions in the employee case deserve to be studied more thoroughly. Perhaps should we consider a servicescape for employees that differs fundamentally from the servicescape suggested by Binter (1992) for consumer as well as for employees.

Finally, we consider that only one investigation will not be able to cover all the subject facets. This study can thus constitute a starting point for future investigations aiming to refine and improve the theoretical and empirical approaches relating to understanding of the mechanisms of retail store stimuli influence on sales people.

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