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# An ephemeral point of sale's atmospheric dimensions. A qualitative study

## Abstract:

Although the traditional point of sale's atmospheres has been the subject of several academic research since Baker's identification in 1987, very little research was interested in studying the ephemeral store atmospheres. To fill this gap, this research was interested in understanding whether ephemeral store atmospheres have the same dimensions as those identified for traditional stores. We highlighted new dimensions relative to ephemeral store atmospheres out of 27 semi-structured interviews conducted with French brand managers; these dimensions are conviviality, participation and « *rendez-vous* ».

Keywords: Ephemeral retail, pop-up stores, ephemeral store atmosphere

**Introduction: ephemeral stores around the world and in France**

An interesting aspect is revealed when comparing a traditional point of sale to an ephemeral point of sale (Klépierre & QualiQuanti, 2015): A "pop-up" (ephemeral store) is rare, surprises and entertains thanks to the animations of the entertainment which it proposes, it is convivial because it creates moments of socialization with the brand and the customers (Russo Spena, et al., 2012) (Picot-Coupey, 2014), and is an exclusive event (Schwab, 2014) in which the customer participates and feels privileged; it is then perceived at the cross roads of communications and distributions marketing channels (Taube & Warnaby, 2017). It is suggested that ephemeral store activations are retail exchange events aimed at engendering relationship-driven results (Lowe et al. 2018).

An ephemeral store can also exist in different forms and formats, and can be physical, virtual or a blend of both; digital native brands for instance materialize their concepts through these stores (Boustani, 2020). Previous research describes ephemeral store atmospheres as experiential formats (Niehm, et al., 2007) (Lowe, et al., 2018) that are artistic, theatrical and responsible for delivering passionate experiences (Alexandre, et al., 2018) during a limited period of time (Taube & Warnaby 2017).

A report published in 2014 indicates that a 16% increase in these points of the sale took place between the years 2003 and 2009 in the United States, and this especially in the cities of Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Stockholm, Tokyo and, Shanghai (Nicasio, 2015). Despite the success of ephemeral stores, their use remains mostly limited in the United States and the United Kingdom until the year 2011. Other countries are beginning to adopt this type of retail business (Haas & Schmidt, 2016). In France, the first ephemeral store appeared around the year 2012 (Boussol, 2019) and since that point was considered as being a means of expression for brands (Klépierre & QualiQuanti, 2015).

**1. Conceptual framework:**

*1.1 Traditional store atmospheres and ephemeral store atmosphere:*

The term "atmosphere", defined by Kotler (1973), is defined as the environment that a brand conceives to create certain behavioral customer reactions. Its dimensions are defined as all tactile, sound, taste, olfactory, visual and social factors (Daucé & Rieunier, 2002). It represents all

the intangible elements that surround the intrinsic characteristics of the product. The point-of-sale atmosphere, perceived in a holistic manner (Sánchez Fernández & Iniesta Bonillo, 2009), influences customers, such as the amounts spent by customers (Lemoine, 2005 and Lemoine, 2004). According to Baker 1986, three factors aggregate a point of sale's atmosphere: ambiance, design and social and these dimensions where generalized onto service retailers (Spence, et. Al. 2014). It has also been highlighted that a retail store's environment positively affects customer emotional and behavioral intentions (Wakefield & Baker, 1998).

Ephemeral store atmospheres are renewed with each project and are presented theatrically, with an elaborate staging (De Lassus, 2012), and showing the creativity of design, architecture or presentation of merchandise. (Picot-Coupey, 2013) (Fowler & Bridges, 2010); atmospheres are even imagined as art forms (Picot-Coupey, 2012) designed to involve customers in a series of theatrical, memorable and hedonic experiences (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015). Moreover, ephemeral store atmospheres are temporary experiment and experimentation places allowing customers to actively engage and interact with the brand and with other individuals (Klein, et al., 2016). The space provides individuals with the opportunity of co-creating esthetic and passionate experiences (Alexander, et al., 2018).

*1.2. Customers in touch with traditional store atmospheres and ephemeral store atmospheres:*

Customers are affected by the stimulation emitted by the point of sale. Founding articles on the analysis of the effects of the sensory dimension of the point of sale on customers were advanced by Kotler in 1973 and Russel & Merhrabian in 1976 (Bonnin, 2003 and Lemoine, 2003) to highlight the existence of a relationship, an interaction, between the point of sale and the individual. The elements of the store's atmosphere can be controlled to trigger cognitive or emotional effects in customers (Lemoine, 2004). The different dimensions of the environment are perceived by both the staff and the customer, each responding cognitively, emotionally and psychologically to the environment (Daucé & Rieunier, 2002).

Today's customers are looking for fun, animations and surprises (Influencia, 2015) (Russo Spena, et al., 2012). It is through the design of the ephemeral store, its location, and its interior that the relationship between the brand and the customer is established. The temporal character creates

a sense of urgency leading customers to behaving impulsively during their visit to the ephemeral store. Another aspect, related to the experiential dimension of these stores, is the element of surprise. Ephemeral store atmospheres put forward exclusive offerings and events that customers don't want to miss; they also want to share about their experience during the visit to the store. It is in that context that customers heavily relay on in-store digital platforms as well as social media sites to share about their store visit and exchange with other members (in store and online) (Taube & Warnaby, 2017).

## 2. Methodology:

Although ephemeral stores are defined as points of sale involving customers and allowing them to live or withdraw an experience, there is no evidence of the definition of an ephemeral store atmosphere and its influence on customer reactions. A traditional store atmosphere has been defined as having ambiance, design and social factors and that it affected customer emotions and behaviors. Our study wishes to explore an ephemeral store atmospheric dimensions and whether they are similar to, or differ from those composing a traditional store's atmosphere.

To provide an answer to "what is an ephemeral store's atmosphere? ", we adopt a qualitative study (Frisch, 1999) to collect data on the French market. Semi-structured interviews are best suited to understanding a given subject in greater depth (Lunardo, et al., 2012 and Sabiote & Ballester, 2011). Following a comprehensive approach, semi-structured interviews were chosen to understand the nature of ephemeral stores in France and their atmospheres. Semi-structured interviews are relevant for exploratory studies (Lunardo, et al., 2012, Mencarelli, 2008 and Fosse-Gomez & Ōzçaglar-Toulouse, 2009).

Data collection by interviews started in October 2017 and stopped in February 2019 when the semantic saturation threshold was reached (Poncin & Garnier, 2012, Roederer, 2012, Lunardo, et al., 2012 and Frippiat & Marquis, 2010). The sample surveyed is relatively heterogeneous (Lunardo, et al., 2012) made up of service providers (23%), individual brands developed or in the process of developing (62%) and brand collectives (15%). which equals 27 brands in total. The distribution sectors are also heterogeneous, ranging from high-end specialty stores to the brands of young designers, as well as service sectors.

An interview guide was constructed based on recurring themes in the literature review and helped to guide the discussion of the interview; managers were asked about several themes such as the store atmosphere, design and layout, assortment and collections, communications, consumers and their behaviors and so forth. After taking registration permission, all interviews were recorded.

After fully transcribing the interview's contents, we proceeded with a manual content analysis. A first step consisted of a "horizontal" reading and analysis; this reading looks at each interview and breaks down all major pillars that were evoked by the interviewee. As for the second reading, it consisted of a "vertical" data analysis; it isolates all themes that were evoked during the interviews. Major findings from both readings are then underlined and finally, emerging variables are highlighted.

## 3. Results and discussions:

### 3.1. The vocations of ephemeral stores:

A clear distinction between ephemeral stores with a commercial or event vocation was highlighted; the qualitative research's results explain that the "ephemeral store's vocation" guides atmospheric conceptions, the type and style of the communicated message and the degree of brand engagement with the customer. The brand will think about the ephemeral store's expected goals and the place the store will occupy in the overall distribution and communication strategy. That being said, the ephemeral store could be the final channel as it could be an intermediary or a complement of other distribution channels or communications.

The atmospheric layout of ephemeral stores with a transactional vocation facilitates access to the offering and is organized in a way that facilitates access to products. The brand may also aim to move customers between its different points of contact; the ephemeral store will be in this case only an intermediary that will guide customers and guide them in the directions that the brand would like to bring them. The ephemeral store can also refer customers to other retail channels where they will be able to access products offered and thus perform a transactional action.

On the other hand, ephemeral stores can have an event vocation focusing on the playful and fun aspect aiming at greater customer engagement. In that case, the atmosphere is designed to allow customers to have more points of contact with the brand: decorative elements such as sofas, tables, and chairs or a coffee bar; technological elements such as connected tablets, smart mirrors or screens and human elements that represent the brand as managers, assistants or product managers as well as other visitors or "fans" who come to share their love for the brand and with the others.

*3.2. Atmospheres of ephemeral outlets in France:*

Comparable to traditional store atmospheres, our results show that the ephemeral store atmosphere is a theatrical space and extraordinary and the design depends on the budget that the brand can allocate to the project and is always designed to stimulate the meaning of customers. The aesthetic side is as important as the festive side of ephemeral stores; the atmospheric design must be a place where people feel good, a place where there is a social exchange and where we find a friendly side.

An ephemeral store's atmosphere ties a link with digital platforms with the integration of technological tools that are responsible for sharing and exchanging information. Technological tools are also connecting links between the digital communication sphere, customer interaction and its experience at the point of sale.

An ephemeral point of sale's atmosphere includes an aesthetic dimension and a social dimension and takes advantage of technology to amplify and exchange these two aspects. Besides, it is event-driven, experiential and communicative; an ephemeral store is a permanent place of celebration, engaging the customer and inviting him to build and live a unique experience and then allow him to talk about his experience with his family or on social networks.

*3.3. Dimensions of the atmosphere of an ephemeral store in France:*

Our research's findings underline social dimensions, convivial, meeting and "rendezvous" dimensions that reflect the ephemeral point of sale atmospheres; these dimensions are added to the aesthetic (atmosphere and design) and social dimensions of a traditional store's atmosphere as

mentioned in previous literature. In in comparison to a traditional store's atmosphere that is composed of ambiance, design and social factors, the ephemeral store's atmosphere is characterized not only by the human presence but the dimensions of exchange and participation of customers in the atmosphere.

Brand managers have agreed that there are five dimensions to an ephemeral point of sale's atmosphere as opposed to three dimensions of a traditional store's atmosphere (Baker, 1987; Bitner 1992; Eroglu and Machleit, 1993 & Daucé and Rieunier, 2002):

- Aesthetic dimension (design and layout): The ephemeral store's layout is guided by the brand's strategy, objectives, and vocation. The aesthetic dimension includes all the design variables, the choice of the theme, the products or collections to be presented and the informational, communication or technological tools elements.

- Social dimension (strong human presence): Brand representatives, customers, and other passengers can all be found at the same time in an ephemeral store. Human presence "humanizes" the atmosphere and breaks barriers between the brand, and customers and flattens the relationship at a horizontal level.

- Convivial dimension (exchange and sharing): Once the customer or a simple passenger is in the ephemeral store, he is more comfortable to gather the information he needs, to share his opinion(s) or thoughts, or exchange with the brand. The ephemeral store's atmosphere is reserving a "convivial space" where drinks, cakes or other delicacies are served. The time the customer spends in the atmosphere tends to be longer and his attitude towards the exchange with the brand or other customers is less formal and easier.

- Participative dimension (active participation):  The customer is given the space and freedom to act in his way and at his own pace. He masters his time, his activities and his preferences. The customer also participates in the activities or games that the brand offers at the point of sale.

- Meeting dimension (a one-off appointment): The ephemeral store's lifespan and its unexpected nature means that customers come to meet the brand at a specific time to share, exchange or have a good time with them.

## 4. Research contributions:

*4.1. Theoretical contributions:*

Several authors have identified environmental factors or dimensions of a traditional point-of-sale atmosphere. Baker (1987) identified environmental cues in a store as ambient factors (aesthetic or functional), design factors and social factors. Likewise, Bitner (1992) identified the dimensions of ambiance, space, and artifacts. As for Eroglu and Machleit (1993), the retail atmosphere refers to any physical or non-physical element controlled by the brand. Based on the model of Bitner (1992), Daucé and Rieunier (2002) identified atmospheric components that are presented in terms of "factors"; tactile, sonorous, tasteful, olfactory, visual and social.

The dimensions of an ephemeral store atmosphere add to the aesthetic dimensions and social dimensions of interactive, participative and convivial human dimensions. In a context of "*rendez-vous*" between the brand and the customer and the customers themselves, the atmosphere becomes a place of meeting, exchange, and sharing whose utilities go beyond the commercial purpose and which upset the traditional conceptions of a point of sale and its atmosphere: from a point of sale to a meeting point.

*4.2. Managerial contributions:*

Brand managers are invited to rethink the goals for which an ephemeral store is developed to design an atmosphere that allows them to meet set objectives while considering atmospheric dimensions that are human-oriented and participative; this applies to "native digital" brands, developing brands or brand collectives. Ephemeral store atmospheres have to be designed to meet the brand's identity, respecting aesthetics and putting forward the environment for customers to come in contact with the brand.

Atmospheric conceptions will lead to more dynamic relationships between the brand and customers and will enable the brand to generate customer reactions. A brand-customer exchange is a means of collecting accurate and valuable information. The ephemeral store's atmosphere becomes a source of intentionally shared and customer-driven data collection that will allow brands to rethink their future actions or future market propositions. It is suggested then that brand managers conceive their ephemeral store atmospheres with spaces allowing exchange and giving customers the space to act and participate with the brand through its various touchpoints or with its employees.

Customers play an important and different role from the role he played in traditional stores; they become suppliers and producers of data that matters to them and that brands will exploit to stay relevant on the market. Brand managers are invited to act upon information collected from customers during their visit to the store and to provide them with alternative outlets, such as social media platforms or chat platforms for them to freely exchange and share information.

## 5. Future research paths:

This study, being carried out in the French field may reflect local specificities. It would be interesting to collect data from North American, African or Asian markets to identify similarities or differences related to ephemeral store atmospheric dimensions. Given the exploratory nature of our research, conclusions drawn deserve to be put into perspective. Indeed, our study has limited external validity due to the s Daucé and Rieunier (2002) ize and composition of our sample. The dimensions of the ephemeral store atmospheres that differentiate them from the dimensions of traditional store atmospheres can also be tested to verify the existence of influence on customers' emotional reactions, their intentions or their behavioral responses.

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