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Karen H. Hyllegard  
*Colorado State University*, karen.hyllegard@colostate.edu

Jennifer Paff Ogle  
*Colorado State University*, jennifer.ogle@colostate.edu

Ruoh-Nan Yan  
*Colorado State University*, ruoh-nan.yan@colostate.edu

Kevin Kissell  
*Colorado State University*, kevi.kissell@colostate.edu

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## Consumer Response to Exterior Atmospherics at a University-Branded Merchandise Store

Karen H. Hyllegard, Jennifer Paff Ogle, Ruoh-Nan Yan, and Kevin Kissell

Colorado State University, USA

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The influence of store atmospherics upon consumer behavior provides ample evidence that the physical retail environment has the potential to attract the attention of specific target markets. An emerging body of work has considered consumer response to exterior store atmospherics, which might be characterized as a store's "curb appeal." The manipulation of exterior atmospherics may represent a viable differentiation strategy in a competitive retail environment (Cornelius, Natter, & Faure, 2010), especially for independent retailers operating in downtown shopping districts (Mower, Kim, & Childs, 2012), who may lack the visual brand recognition of national retailers. This work contributes to understanding of the influence of exterior atmospherics upon consumer behavior by examining storefront elements that have received little or no attention within the literature; to date, most work in this area has focused upon store window displays. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of landscaping, a store greeter, and an electronic kiosk upon college students' responses to a university-branded and owned merchandise store located in a downtown shopping district. The research was informed by the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which proposes that consumers' emotional responses to a physical store environment mediate how the environment shapes their patronage behaviors.

Drawing upon the literature reviewed herein, five hypotheses were developed:

- H1: Landscaping will have a positive effect on consumers' pleasure, arousal, and liking.
- H2: The store greeter will have a positive effect on consumers' pleasure, arousal, and liking.
- H3: The electronic kiosk will have a positive effect on consumers' pleasure, arousal, and liking.
- H4: Pleasure, arousal, and liking will predict consumers' patronage intentions.
- H5: Pleasure, arousal, liking, preferences for store atmospherics, university involvement, past university-branded merchandise consumption behavior, and gender will predict consumers' patronage intentions.

An online survey with a 2 x 2 x 2 experimental design component was implemented to explore the influence of three aspects of exterior store atmospherics (landscaping, store greeter, and electronic kiosk) upon consumer emotional state (pleasure/arousal), consumer liking of the store exterior, and patronage intentions. Participants viewed and evaluated a storefront image for a university-branded and owned store, which was embedded into the online survey. The sample included 336 college students ( $M = 20.5$  years, 53.7% female, 46% male, and 0.3% transgendered). College students were identified as an appropriate sample for this study because they represent a core target market for university-branded merchandise.

MANCOVA was conducted to examine the effects of landscaping, store greeter, and electronic kiosk on consumers' emotional states elicited by the storefront and consumers' liking of the storefront. Gender, preference for retail atmospherics, and university involvement were

included as covariates. Landscaping did not impact consumers' pleasure, arousal, or liking (Wilks' Lambda = 0.98,  $F = 1.45$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), and, as such, H1 was not supported. The store greeter impacted consumers' responses to the storefront (Wilks' Lambda = 0.97,  $F = 3.09$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Specifically, participants liked the storefront more when there was no greeter present ( $M_{\text{none}} = 4.88$  vs.  $M_{\text{greeter}} = 4.41$ ,  $F = 7.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The relationship between store greeter and liking was opposite of what was predicted, thus, H2 was not supported. The electronic kiosk did not affect pleasure, arousal, or liking (Wilks' Lambda = 1.00,  $F = 0.52$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). H3 was not supported. All covariates were significant and thus were retained in the model.

MANCOVA also revealed an interaction effect between landscaping and store greeter (Wilks' Lambda = 0.97,  $F = 2.92$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The interaction of landscaping and store greeter ( $F = 4.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) produced a higher level of arousal among participants ( $M = 4.64$ ) than did the single effect of store greeter ( $M = 4.48$ ) or landscaping ( $M = 4.19$ ). The interaction of store greeter and electronic kiosk ( $F = 4.41$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) produced a lower level of liking ( $M = 4.24$ ) than did the single effect of store greeter ( $M = 4.57$ ) or electronic kiosk ( $M = 5.09$ ).

Multiple regression was conducted to examine the effects of emotional states (i.e., pleasure and arousal) elicited by the storefront and liking of the storefront on participants' patronage intentions. The overall model was significant ( $R^2 = 0.51$ ,  $F = 109.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Pleasure ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $t = 6.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and liking of storefront ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $t = 6.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) positively predicted participants' patronage intentions toward the store. Thus, H4 was partially supported. Multiple regression also was conducted to explore the effects of emotional states, liking of the storefront, preferences for store atmospherics, university involvement, past university-branded merchandise consumption behavior, and gender on patronage intentions. The overall model was significant ( $R^2 = 0.58$ ,  $F = 59.77$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Pleasure ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $t = 4.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), liking of the storefront ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $t = 7.00$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), university involvement ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $t = 2.63$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and past university-branded merchandise consumption behavior ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $t = 4.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) positively predicted participant's patronage intentions. As such, H5 was partially supported. The F-ratio test indicated that the inclusion of additional variables in the second model better predicted participants' patronage intentions ( $F_{(4, 328)} = 13.66$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Analyses provide support for the S-O-R model; collectively, findings are consistent with the premise that pleasure and liking of the storefront exterior shape patronage intentions at a university-branded and owned merchandise store. The exterior store atmospherics manipulated in the present study, however, did not positively influence consumers' pleasure or liking, thereby suggesting that these atmospherics may contribute in a minor way to the consumer decision-making process. Specifically, contrary to prior work, findings provide evidence that, in some retail contexts, store greeters may generate negative responses from consumers.

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