THE IMPACT OF THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT ON THE CONSUMER'S EMOTIONAL REACTIONS AND BEHAVIOR: THE ROLE OF DIGITAL STIMULI

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A B S T R A C T

Shopping is not just about obtaining tangible products but also enjoyment and pleasure valuable benefits reflected in consumers' spending. Practical and theoretical concerns to examine how the experiential context features of retail stores stimulate consumers' enjoyment and pleasure. Previous studies examine the effects of physical and social environments on shoppers' responses and behavior. However, these studies focus on a limited number of atmospheric variables (e.g., scent, lighting, background music) in order to examine the extent to which consumers react affectively or cognitively.

The development of new technologies and the web advent have led distributors to use digital stimuli. They can be considered as the main levers for manipulating emotional states and triggering purchases.

This article aims to conceptualize the new digital aids used by retailers in order to facilitate the choice and enrich the customers' experience by providing them with information, reassuring them, saving them time, or entertaining them.

K E Y W O R D S
Digital, shopping experience, consumer behavior

INTRODUCTION

The development of new technologies and the web advent have led to a change in consumer behavior in stores and consumption habits.

By using their mobile, consumer makes his journey more complex and end up with a sort of ubiquity, allowing him to connect wherever and whenever he wishes. He can be in a store and simultaneously compare the price of a product with those offered in other brands. Likewise, he can instantly read reviews on a product, watch a video, etc.

Now permanently connected, consumers no longer like a traditional store. Retailers, as they are dealing with a more liquid consumer, they are obliged to reinvent their selves by taking into account the omnipresence of digital and then create a new form of store in order to offer innovative experiences to appeal their customers, especially those from Generation Z on the lookout for the latest innovations. Thus, the "omnichannel retailing" becomes essential (Ailawadi and Farris, 2017). The link between the different channels must respond to an approach of coherence, convergence, synchronization and integration (Vanheems, 2009). With a consumer-centric vision, we can define omnichannel as a strategy that allows the company to offer consumers the use of different channels constantly, simultaneously, and interchangeably, to facilitate and optimize its overall experience (Verhoef and al., 2015).

Faced with this new way of consuming, retail is forced to reinvent itself by considering the omnipresence of digital. For their part, companies must create connected points of sale and offer innovative experiences to appeal to their customers, especially those from Generation Z on the lookout for the latest innovations.

Indeed, many brands seem, in recent years, to have turned away from their physical sales spaces in favor of an almost 100% digital strategy. The trend today advocates a humanization of the business-consumer relationship. This has become easier with the development of digital tools. These new generations of digital technologies have favored the evolution of points of sale. They have become a key element allowing stores to differentiate themselves from their competitors and thus create a real competitive advantage. For example, Galeries Lafayette acquires La Redoute "making internet a priority", Monoprix acquires Sarenza, while Amazon opens physical stores and buys Whole Foods.

At McDonald's, digital has made its way into all stages of the customer journey. Interactive terminals have been set up in restaurants allowing customers to discover the entire offer without time constraints, and through the possibility of ordering online, thus limiting waiting time, stress and discomfort for clients and team members. Digital has also made it possible to develop "geolocated table service", the team member bringing the order directly to the customer's table, which streamlines the journey and enriches the customer's experience. This example shows that digitization offers a new configuration of points of sale (Pantano, Priporas, 2016), making it possible to create a direct link between the physical environment and the digital environment (Ingarao, 2013). These new digital technologies have become facilitating means allowing consumers to express themselves, share, interact with each other and with the company and thus co-create value (Neuhofer et al., 2013; Saarijarvi et al., 2014; Abbes and Hallem, 2016). This interactivity, ubiquity and connectivity allow a valuation of the customer's consumption experience by arousing emotions such as joy and the feeling of control (Zhou and Lu, 2011). Thanks to the use of these technologies, the customer controls his experience to be able to better appropriate it, this would make it possible to create different

experiences and therefore favorable to co-creation (Shankar et al, 2016). These devices are often seen as new sales and purchasing aids (NAVA).

We can say that the physical and the digital become one, giving birth to phygital, a neologism resulting from the contraction of the word physical and the word digital. The phygital shopping experience consists in blending and hybridizing physical dimensions (the point of sale's architecture, its products, employees, etc.) and digital components (touch screens, connected mirrors, NFC cards, etc.) at the same time and in the same place.

While studies have made it possible to better understand the customer's lived experience in the real sphere (Bonnin, 2003; Filser, 2002; Hetzel, 2002; etc.) or in the virtual sphere (Kim et al., 2013), the understanding of this experience remains insufficient when it is lived within these two spheres. Today, however, shopping journeys have changed with the digitalization of the purchasing process: they are more and more hybrid. In response to this, our theoretical interest is therefore to conceptualize the new sales and purchasing aids and to understand the cross-channel shopping experience and the consumer's emotions when he uses simultaneously or successively at least one physical channel and one virtual channel of the same sign during the same purchase occasion.

And so, we summarize our problem in the following central question:

What is the impact of the phygital context on purchasing behavior?

This article aims to highlight two main concepts, namely: the consumer experience and the experiential context through a literature review and then present a theoretical model.

The consumer experience

To better understand the experience, we will distinguish two approaches to the notion of shopping experience: the classical behaviorist approach and the social psychology approach.

The first approach (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974; Bitner, 1992; Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994; Van Kenhove and Desrumaux, 1997) delimits and defines the shopping experience as simple emotional or affective reactions, induced by a set of physical stimuli emitted by an environment deliberately dramatized by the company, an environment that conveys meaning, but also a source of value and satisfaction for the consumer. Indeed, the experience is constituted by the emotions and sensations felt (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982), by a high degree of emotional intensity (Arnould and Price, 1993) and the value attached to it (Holbrook, 1994, 1996).

However, the concept of a shopping experience is much more complex than a simple emotional or cognitive reaction. This concept will only take on its full meaning and create a consensus around the research community, with the social psychology of the environment approach. In fact, according to this approach, the shopping experience is not simply a response to environmental stimuli, but an interactive and dynamic process, during which the consumer, of course, experiences immediate sensations during his reciprocal interaction with the store. Environment, but totally appropriates this space in order to build his personal experience. Indeed, the experience lived by the customer in a point of sale is intrinsic to the individual himself, "this experience being lived as a personal and subjective moment lived by the individual, which makes it possible to construct it and to transform it. (Arnould and Thomson, 2005"). The work of Punj and Stewart in 1983 is consistent with this approach. They see the shopping experience as an individual experience that emphasizes personal experience by sometimes obscuring the relationship between the object and the consumption

situation, elements introduced by Punj and Stewart (1983) in their paradigm "Person x Object x Situation".

Our article takes the approach of social psychology. We will also be based on the work of Collin-Lachaud and Vanheems (2016). These researchers have produced a synthesis of the cross-channel shopping experience combining physical and virtual from the same brand, which can be summed up in the following points:

- According to Roederer (2008, p.101), "the consumption experience arises from an experiential context made up of a set of stimuli and results in a set of interactions between the individual and the product consumed". The product would correspond to the "extended brand", that is to say "the use of an existing brand to label a mode of distribution different from the original mode of distribution" (Vanheems, 1995: 172). The interactions between the individual and the "extended brand" because it has several channels, are multiplied, complex, both virtual and physical.

- The consumption experience (Roederer, 2012) comprises the following four dimensions: hedonic-sensory (pleasure / dis- pleasure), praxeological (interactions with the object consumed and / or other people present during the experience), rhetoric (symbolic value of an element of the context or more global meaning of the story told by experience) and temporal (relation to time). These dimensions of experience which, according to the author, are decontextualized, should therefore be identified whatever the experience, including when the experience is lived in contact with virtual and real channels.

- The consumption experience has four phases (Arnould et al., 2002), namely; the experience of anticipation which consists in researching, dreaming, budgeting or fantasizing, the purchasing experience which depends on the choice, the payment, the service encounter or the atmosphere of the place of sale, the experience of consumption proper which corresponds to the use and enjoyment of a product or service, the experience of remembering which makes it possible to relive the experience from stories or classifications and to share it with others. When it comes to the consumption of a distribution service, these phases combine with the consumption of one or more product (s). Thus, during the actual consumption phase of the distribution service, the anticipation and purchase phases of the product can take place. According to this author, these stages are sequential, individual, and little shared. While in the face of digital development, the different phases of the experience can be shared and made available to other consumers. Thus, with this technological advent, sharing becomes generous and can take two forms: an active form where the consumer deliberately shares his opinion, his experience, his photos, and videos, etc., and a passive form when he involuntarily shares information. For example the use of an application which transmits its location.

The experiential context

It is defined as "an assembly of stimuli (products, services but also environment, activities) suitable for bringing about an experience" (Carù and Cova, 2007; p. 44). When it wants to produce experiences, the company only organizes experiential contexts in which it hopes the consumer will immerse themselves (Carù and Cova, 2003). Filser (2001) defines the experiential context according to three pillars: the setting (dramatization), the plot (the story of the product) and the action (of the consumers towards the product). According to Roederer (2008), the experiential context is a source of the consumption experience. As for Carù and Cova (2006), define it as an assembly of stimuli linked

to the product and the environment, capable of bringing about an experience. In addition, the lived experience can be orchestrated by the company, by the individual himself or through collaboration between the company and the consumer. However, Caru and Cova (2007) identify three categories of experiential contexts:

- Consumer-driven experiences: consumer-driven experiences taking place in environments not controlled by the company and leaving the consumer a significant degree of autonomy.
- Company-driven experiences: experiences driven by companies, in which the consumer finds himself immersed in hyper real contexts, themed, and controlled by the company.
- Co-driven experiences: experiences co-driven by the company and the consumer. The enterprise provides the elements and conditions necessary to produce the experience, the consumer shapes and produces his own experience from his active participation. This article will focus more on this third category.

- *Physical stimuli*

According to Kotler (1973) the atmosphere is assimilated to "the creation of a purchasing environment producing specific emotional effects in the individual, such as pleasure or excitement, likely to increase his probability of purchase». Favoring the same point of view, Derbaix (1987), for his part, defines it as "an organization of space with an affective orientation which aims to create impressions of well-being, welcome, joy, discount, etc. ". From these two approaches, it is possible to consider the atmosphere as a concept that refers both to the structure of the store and to the atmosphere created by the presence of other customers and staff in contact. In this sense, it can be considered as having a multidimensional character. This is how Baker (1986), Grewal and Parasuraman (1994) and Greenland and Mc Goldrick (1994) fundamentally broke with Kotler's sensory approach and defined the atmosphere from the following three dimensions: the environment atmosphere (music, light, etc.), the design or architectural environment (size of the point of sale, layout, access to products, etc.) and the social environment (friendliness, availability, helpfulness of employees). As for Bitner (1992), he considers that the atmosphere can be conceptualized according to a holistic perception of the environment (ambient conditions, spatial organization and functionality, signs, symbols and artefacts). Thus, we will be interested in the holistic approach which takes into consideration the impact of all environmental stimuli, both physical and not the atomized approach which is limited to the isolated impact of a stimulus.

- *Digital stimuli*

The literature defines digital stimuli as techniques or supports that can be interactive, dematerialized, ubiquitous, collaborative, made available to the seller (NAV) and / or the customer (NAA) in order to facilitate the choice and enrich the customer experience by providing them with information, reassuring them, saving them time or entertaining them, arousing their different senses in isolation or concomitantly, and / or by facilitating their payment, taking possession of the goods or the performance of the service. So, we are talking about the new sales and purchasing aids (NAVA). To conceptualize them, we base ourselves on the definition of Häubl and Murray (2003) who adopt a holistic vision by proposing to define these supports as "tools that have the potential to assist the consumer in his purchasing decision making. Improving the quality of its choice and simultaneously reducing the effort required to make that decision". Studies have shown that NAVAs are an integral part of the point-of-sale environment (Redmond, 2002; Lemoine and Notebaert, 2011). Thus, they can be considered as the main levers for manipulating emotional states and triggering purchases.

New sales and purchasing aids called NAVA have grown significantly recently. They are present in different media and techniques such as interactive catalogs, QR Codes, virtual fitting rooms, etc. NAVAs can have different objectives including attracting the customer, improving the convenience of purchasing, facilitating the choice, reassuring the customer, and enriching his consumption experience, (Intelligent Virtual Agents). But only one purpose is common to these media: to trigger or encourage purchasing (Beck and Crié, 2015). In addition, the media used by the NAVA are also differentiating elements. We find the smartphone, the tablet, the computer, the fixed terminal in stores, and glasses in augmented reality.

- *Classification of NAVA*

The first classification of NAVAs is based on their characteristics what "they are" (their nature) of these tools. These led to the identification of four groups of NAVA. The first two groups illustrate the playful aspect, they are "leisure NAVA" and "recreational NAVA" while the other two meet the speed criterion, and they are "practical NAVA" and "efficient NAVA". The second classification helps differentiate NAVAs based on what "they do" (their function). Thus, thanks to the technology employed, two groups can be distinguished: the NAVA in augmented or virtual reality (AR / VR) and the animated characters such as the Intelligent Virtual Agents (AVI) or the Avatars. The first group mobilizes NAVAs who play on the convenience of purchase, use and experience with the product. Thus, he highlights the praxeological approach that promotes product appropriation and improves the individual's experience (Carù and Cova, 2003). Indeed, by touching or manipulating the product virtually, the consumer takes more ownership of the product. For example, a consumer using a virtual dressing room for a garment will tend to appropriate the garment more easily in question. The second group is called the social order. It brings together the NAVAs which promote reinsurance, and which bring a social factor to a site or a point of sale, such as the AVI (Viot and Bressolles, 2012). According to McGoldrick, Keeling and Beatty (2008), the functions assigned to NAVAs can be divided into two groups: hedonic functions and utility functions. In this article, we will mainly use this second classification to measure the NAVA in a point of sale.

Research model

Our research model is based on the SOR model (Mehrabian & Russel, 1974). The central hypothesis of the SOR model is that environmental variables exert their influence on the behavior of the individual through his affective states in a point of sale. Although we have adopted the psychological approach, we still will not reject the behaviorist approach, which advocates the direct action of stimuli on behavioral reactions.
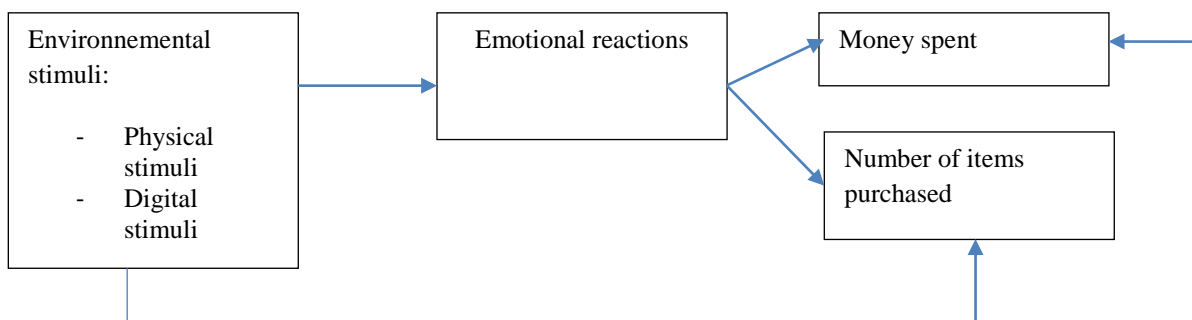
In their recent article, Inman and Nikolova (2017) emphasize the relevance of technologies for success in retailing. Similarly, Willems et al. (2017) offer a comprehensive overview of opportunities to implement digital technologies throughout the entire retail process.

Digital tools are an effective, controllable in-store experience provider. They work by evoking specific experiences. Therefore, studies provide an explanation of the effectiveness of digital tools in retailing by considering them as an experience provider and by incorporating the type of the evoked experience as a key construct of the brand experience suggested by Brakus et al. (2009).

The objective of this article is to propose a draft of a theoretical research model relating the experiential context, emotions and purchasing behavior while highlighting digital stimuli.

Future studies should contextualize the scales of the variables. Second future studies could validate the relationships between the different variables of the model.

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