

Extending the Link Between Ambient Scent, Emotional Brand Attachment, and Brand Loyalty: A Moderated Serial Mediation Model

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Abstract

This study examines the role of ambient scent in forming brand loyalty. This study proposes a moderated serial mediation model to investigate the roles of emotional states, emotional brand attachment, and fear of missing out. Drawing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm, the model suggests that emotional states and emotional brand attachment mediate the effect of ambient scent on brand loyalty. Moreover, fear of missing out moderates the serial mediating effect of emotional states and emotional brand attachment between ambient scent and brand loyalty. This research advances the current understanding of the brand loyalty literature concerning ambient scent, emotional states, emotional brand attachment and fear of missing out. It provides an important ground where marketing managers can use ambient scent to create emotional experiences to foster brand loyalty. Implications for practice and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Ambient Scent, Emotional States, Emotional Brand Attachment, Fear of Missing Out, Brand Loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Marketing managers are keenly interested in providing a good customer experience when customers shop for a product or service. Retailers look to influence customer's purchase behaviour through lighting, colour, music, shelf facings, and in-store displays. Companies focus on creating a multisensory experience by engaging all five of the customer's senses (Krishna, 2012). Firms increasingly use ambient scents in service environments through air conditioning systems of retail stores, hotels, and banks. Customers struggle to escape from ambient scents, as they are powerful and subtle influencers. Since marketers have plenty of pleasant scent options, there are exciting future avenues for research in scent marketing, promising a bright future for this innovative marketing strategy (Herz, 2011).

Marketers use scent marketing strategies to spread pleasant ambient scents in the consumption environment (Roschk & Hosseinpour, 2019; Fong et al., 2022). For instance, Nike stores use scent marketing to increase the sales of shoes (Brooks, 2023), while Mandarin Oriental hotels use scent marketing to make customers recall their brands better (Air-Scent, 2019). These positive effects of ambient scent are expected, as several research studies establish the positive relationship between ambient scent and sales volume (Kechagia & Drichoutris, 2017; Hulten, 2012; Helmfalk & Berndt, 2018). Previous research studies also establish a positive relationship between ambient scent and better customer experiences (Morrin & Chebat, 2005; Bouzaabia, 2014). However, some studies suggest that scent effects are ineffective (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Elmashhara & Soares, 2020; Adams & Douce, 2017; Chebat & Michon, 2003), highlighting the urgent need for an effective strategy in implementing scent marketing practices.

Because of the inconsistent findings on the effectiveness of ambient scent in literature, a solid plan for implementing scent marketing practices is yet to be provided. Despite the vast research in scent marketing, many questions remain unanswered. What impact does ambient scent have on brand loyalty? How do they interact with other variables, like emotional states and emotional brand attachment? How does the fear of missing out (FoMO) affect the above-mentioned variables? These business questions lead to some theoretical questions. While there are many studies on ambient scent (e.g., Madzharov et al., 2015; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Spangenberg et al., 1996) and brand loyalty (e.g., Goyal & Verma, 2024; Atulkar, 2020; Veloutsou, 2015), few studies have examined their relationship extensively (e.g., Gao & Shen, 2024; Shahid et al., 2022). This study aims to address this gap. To the author's knowledge, no research has examined the effect of ambient scent on brand loyalty through the mediating effects of emotional states and emotional brand attachment. Moreover, the hypotheses suggest that FoMO moderates the serial mediating effect of emotional states and emotional brand attachment between ambient scent and brand loyalty. Drawing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm, this study proposes a conceptual model to examine the effect of ambient scent on brand loyalty by examining the mediating effects of emotional states and emotional brand attachment and the moderating effect of FoMO on the above-mentioned variables.

The rest of the article is as follows. First, the study reviews the literature on the important constructs in the model. Second, it presents the reasoning behind the hypotheses and the conceptual model. Finally, it discusses the theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Scent and Consumer Behaviour

A pleasurable consumption environment is paramount for retailers and service providers to succeed (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). If retailers design the store environment well, it might stimulate customers' senses and improve their shopping experience, which results in higher sales (Doucé & Janssens, 2013). For more than 40 years, researchers have investigated the effect of environmental stimuli on customers' shopping behaviour. (Milliman, 1982; Bellizzi et al., 1983; Ludvigson & Rottman, 1989). Specifically, researchers have focused on music, scent, and colour and their influence on consumers' emotional reactions, satisfaction and purchase intention (Sayin et al., 2015; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Bellizzi & Hite, 1992). Companies face the challenge of designing their multisensory atmospherics to ensure they get a good return on their investment. Ambience, design, and atmospherics are the three significant dimensions of atmospherics (Baker et al., 1992). Manipulation of the atmospheric elements could influence shopping behaviours positively and boost sales (Soars, 2009; Tai & Fung, 1997).

2.2 Emotional States - The P-A-D Paradigm

The conceptual basis for this study is the work of Mehrabian and Russell (1974). They are of the view that in the area of environmental psychology, three independent bipolar dimensions, pleasure-unpleasant, arousal-unaroused, and dominant-submissive, can be used to explain human responses to environments. Pleasure (P) describes feelings of pleasantness, enjoyment, fulfilment, and happiness; Arousal (A) represents feelings of alertness, surprise, exhilaration, and excitement; Dominance (D) refers to feelings of power, skill, competence, or mastery (Russell et al., 1981). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) have proposed a stimulus–organism–response paradigm (S-O-R) to study how environmental stimuli affect human behaviour. According to the S-O-R paradigm, environmental stimuli, such as smells, may influence people's affective states, which in turn influence people's behaviour.

2.3 Emotional Brand Attachment

Marketing managers focus on creating emotional brand attachment. Such emotional connections result in high consumer loyalty and increased company financial performance (Babić-Hodović et al., 2023). Marketing academics and practitioners are trying to understand the emotional components of consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998). Attachment emotionally connects the individual to the target object (Bowlby, 1979). If consumers are firmly attached to a particular target object, they are ready to allocate emotional, cognitive, and behavioural resources to it (Holmes, 2000). While psychology literature suggests that people form attachments with individuals, marketing literature believes that consumers can form attachments with places, pets, and brands (Sable, 1995; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). According to Park et al. (2010, p. 14), "Given the uniquely strong effects of

brand attachment...., additional research is needed on how marketers can enhance brand attachment.” Marketing managers need guidance regarding strategies to create high emotional brand attachment.

2.4 Fear of Missing Out

Various social content posted on social media platforms has led to a new phenomenon: Fear of Missing Out (FoMO). FoMO refers to the negative emotions the customers may experience when they think they cannot participate in enjoyable activities other customers engage in (Abel et al., 2016). Though FoMO has existed for several decades, the rise of social media and the internet has helped the phenomenon gain significant recognition. Individuals who experience FoMO undergo feelings of anxiety or fear regarding their nonparticipation in events that other individuals are currently enjoying (Elhai et al., 2016). Anticipated elation and anticipated envy from other people can cause a spike in FoMO, while comforting rationalizations can reduce FoMO.

2.5 Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty refers to the special attachment of a customer towards a particular brand. Though the operationalizations and definitions of brand loyalty vary across studies, it is an important outcome variable in the marketing literature. Some research studies focus on behavioural loyalty (e.g., Romaniuk & Nenycz-Thiel, 2013), while others emphasize attitudinal loyalty (e.g., Kressmann et al., 2006). This research follows a study by Yoo and Donthu (2001), focusing on overall attitudinal loyalty rather than measuring brand purchase behaviour. Attitudinal loyalty refers to a customer's commitment towards the brand and the intention to engage in repurchase behaviour (Russell-Bennett et al., 2007). Service organizations consider brand loyalty significant as loyal customers positively impact sales revenues' current and future flow (Dwivedi, 2015; Dawes, 2023).

3. Research Model and Hypotheses Development

3.1 Ambient Scent and Brand Loyalty

In today's modern world, brands try to be different and build essential customer connections. To achieve this objective, brands strengthen their self-connection with the brand, promoting brand-self connection. Past research studies show that brand experience results in brand loyalty (Kastenholz, 2004; Ishida & Taylor, 2012). When consumers experience a unique and impressive brand experience, they engage in repeat purchasing behaviour to generate brand loyalty. A memorable brand experience enhances brand loyalty (Khan & Rahman, 2015). Past research studies show a positive relationship between sensory brand experience and brand loyalty (Hwang et al., 2021; Beig & Nika, 2022). When the sensory experience is pleasant, consumers experience pleasure and are willing to try the experience again (Gao & Shen, 2024). Using pleasant ambient scent in store environments creates a pleasant olfactory experience, which results in brand loyalty. Consequently,

H1: Ambient Scent is positively associated with Brand Loyalty.

3.2 The Mediating Role of Emotional States

According to Spangenberg et al. (1996), an ambient scent does not emanate from a specific object but is present in the environment. An ambient scent is an affective cue leading to consumer evaluations (Bosmans, 2006). Affect is a mix of moods and emotions (Barrett & Russell, 1998). Since smell is directly connected to emotions, it can affect the affective states before cognitive processes. Smell influences and triggers 75% of emotions, and sense of smell is the fastest way to stimulate consumers' emotions (Lindstrom, 2005). Prior research suggests that scents influence the affective state of consumers (Morrison et al., 2011; Ehrlichman & Halpern, 1988; Lee et al., 2011; Baron, 1997; Berčík et al., 2023). Research studies indicate that restaurants' ambience significantly affects customers' emotions (Kim & Moon, 2009; Jang et al., 2012; Jang & Namkung, 2009). Consequently, sensory experience positively relates to positive emotions. Recent research studies have operationalized the latent construct of emotions by Pleasure and Arousal. Chebat and Michon (2003) establish that ambient scent positively affects pleasure and arousal. Since the 1980s, the relationships between emotions, satisfaction and post-purchase behaviours have gained traction (Westbrook, 1980; Louro et al., 2005; White, 2010). In post-purchase behaviour, brand loyalty is an important variable. Previous research studies suggest that emotions mediate and subsequently affect consumer shopping behaviour (Michon et al., 2005; Morrin & Ratneshwar, 2000; Chebat & Michon, 2003). In service industries, emotions directly influence brand and service loyalty (White & Yu, 2005; White, 2006; Pullman & Gross, 2004; Barsky & Nash, 2002). In retail services, the design elements of a store affect positive emotions, which affect loyalty (Söderlund, 2007; Loureiro & Roschk, 2014). Given the preceding discussion, it is evident that ambient scent and emotional states generate greater brand loyalty. Consequently,

H2: The positive association of Ambient Scent on Brand Loyalty is mediated by Emotional States.

3.3 The Mediating Role of Emotional Brand Attachment

Nowadays, marketers use sensory marketing as an essential tool to reinforce the bond between product and customer by activating all the senses (Krishna, 2012) and triggering emotions. Marketers use customers' senses to emotionally connect them with a particular product or brand (Shimul et al., 2019). The human senses of customers significantly influence their purchase outcomes (Hultén, 2011). Sensory cues significantly affect consumer emotions, which are essential in forming emotional brand attachments (Lindstrom, 2005; Chen & Lin, 2018; Tsaur et al., 2007). An excellent sensory experience helps build a strong emotional attachment to the product or service. As a result, there is a positive effect on the time spent in the store, inclination to buy products, and loyalty of customers (Haase et al., 2020). Emotional brand attachment helps customers stay close to the brands because of their repeat purchasing behaviour (Adam et al., 2018). High attachment levels to brands lead to increased emotional dependence on brands (Thomson et al., 2005). High emotional attachment leads to repeated purchases and a high willingness to spend money and effort to buy products from that brand. This willingness leads to brand loyalty (Lee & Workman, 2015). Thus, consumers' emotional attachment encourages brand loyalty (Hwang & Kandampully, 2012). The preceding discussion shows that ambient scent and emotional brand attachment generate greater brand loyalty. Consequently,

H3: The positive association of Ambient Scent on Brand Loyalty is mediated by Emotional Brand Attachment.

3.4 The relationship between Emotional States and Emotional Brand Attachment

Consumers' affective experiences in the retail environment impact immediate sales and the future relationship between the consumer and the brand. Consumer store-evoked affect is primarily conceptualized as pleasure and arousal (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2000; Chebat & Michon, 2003). Previous research studies show that affect at the time of exposure influences immediate responses and triggers retrieval of memories linked to positive effect (Babin & Attaway, 2000; Foxall & Greenley, 1999; Menon & Kahn, 2002; Baldwin et al., 1996). Brands that trigger memories associated with positive affect should facilitate consumer attachment. Past research examined the impact of store-evoked affect on the consumer's brand attachment and found a positive relationship (Orth et al., 2010). Emotional drivers are conceptualized as antecedents of brand attachment (Hemsley-Brown, 2023). While the ambient scent may activate brand loyalty, the preceding discussion shows that brand loyalty can be amplified by generating emotions and emotional brand attachment. Consequently,

H4: Emotional States and Emotional Brand Attachment act as serial mediating factors in the positive relationship between Ambient Scent and Brand Loyalty.

3.5 The Moderating Role of FoMO

When customers are emotionally attached, they maintain the brand-self relationships by exhibiting loyalty behaviour (e.g. Oliver 1999). Because of brand attachments, customers spend more money, time, and resources to sustain the brand-self relationships. Through brand-self relationships, customers experience security, happiness, and comfort. However, motives that are self-centred or directed towards social outcomes trigger FoMO (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When they experience a high level of FoMO, consumers experiment with new brands to appease their internal and external needs. To avoid FoMO, customers like updated information and look for different brand experiences. To alleviate the anxiety and insecurity associated with FoMO, customers seek more new experiences. FoMO motivates individuals to seek new brand values, especially when they perceive the new values as superior to the old ones. Instead of being faithful to the brand benefits that are already present, consumers seek new brand experiences. In other words, with the activation of FoMO, customers will be insatiable with the current brand (Zhang, 2018; Hayran et al., 2020). Consequently, the solid emotional brand attachment will not lead to brand loyalty when FoMO interferes. Therefore, given the foregoing discussion, the following is hypothesized:

H5: FoMO moderates the positive relationship between Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Loyalty; the higher the FoMO, the less significant the positive influence of Emotional Brand Attachment on Brand Loyalty.

H6: FoMO moderates the mediating association of Emotional Brand Attachment between Ambient Scent and Brand Loyalty; the higher the FoMO, the less significant the mediating association of Emotional Brand Attachment between Ambient Scent and Brand Loyalty.

H7: FoMO moderates the serial mediating association of Emotional States and Emotional Brand Attachment between Emotional Brand Attachment and Brand Loyalty; the higher the FoMO, the less significant the serial mediating association of Emotional States and Emotional Brand Attachment between Ambient Scent and Brand Loyalty.

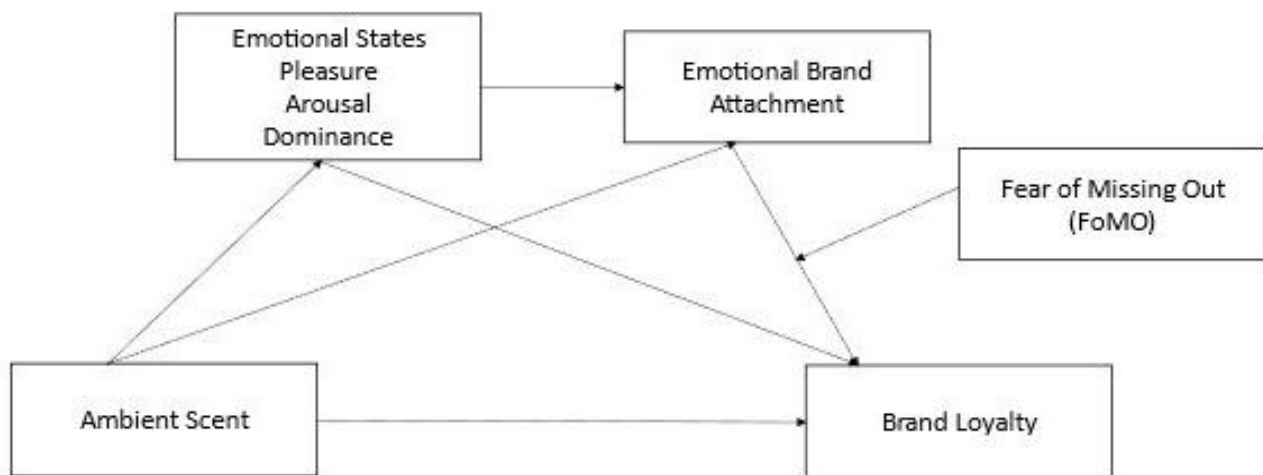


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study makes substantial theoretical contributions to ambient scent and brand loyalty literature. This research is one of the first to reveal that ambient scent significantly affects emotional states, which affects emotional brand attachment and brand loyalty. The study also uncovers the moderating effect of FoMO on the relationship between the above-mentioned variables. Specifically, according to the theoretical framework, ambient scent is essential in determining brand loyalty. Thus, when a firm strategizes to enhance its brand performance, it could focus on providing a pleasant ambient scent to its consumers, which could result in higher Pleasure, Arousal and Dominance. The dimensions of the emotional states could generate higher emotional brand attachment, leading to greater brand loyalty. Thus, if firms successfully build high emotional brand attachment by using ambient scent and P-A-D dimensions, it could increase brand loyalty. Finally, this study proposes that when using ambient scents, marketing managers should avoid inducing FoMO, which hinders the positive effects of emotional states and emotional brand attachment on brand loyalty. Studies could further empirically test the conceptual framework proposed in this research. Structural equation modelling (SEM) could be used to test the proposed model empirically.

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