

PERCEIVED MALL EXPERIENCE AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING CUSTOMER ATTITUDE: A STUDY OF URBAN SHOPPERS IN TAMIL NADU

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Abstract

In today's competitive marketplace, customer attitudes are shaped by perception and experience in a particular mall. It has evolved from a mere point of purchase to a center for lifestyle retailing offering a multitude of services like socializing, entertainment, and emotional bonding. This study investigates 'mall atmospherics and their impact on customer attitude of urban shoppers in Tamil Nadu with special focus on mediation of emotional response. The S-O-R model serves to explore the triadic relationship between a stimulus in the form of mall atmospherics, consisting of 'ambient,' 'design and layout,' and 'social' sub-systems, the emotional response of the customer comprising of 'pleasure,' 'arousal,' and 'relaxation,' and attitude consisting of 'cognitive,' 'affective,' and 'conative' response. The customers in the malls of all major towns and cities of Tamil Nadu, namely Chennai, Coimbatore, and Madurai, are the focus of a structured questionnaire survey conducted on 400 respondents. Hypotheses are tested using correlation and regression analysis. In research, correlation analysis has shown a high proportion of positive impact of mall atmospherics on customer emotions, $r = 0.78$, and customer emotions toward overall attitude, $r = 0.72$. Regression models of the study indicate that positive attitudes are driven from the customer by the ambient conditions, $\beta = 0.61$, and the social environment of the mall, $\beta = 0.58$. The research proves that the emotional reactions affect the relationship of the mall experience with the attitude of the customer which emphasizes the role of the mall's sensory and social design in enhancing customer engagement and loyalty.

Keywords: Retail mall experience, customer psychology, empathic responses, emotive atmospherics, Tamil Nadu, Retailing.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the retail industry in India has undergone a transformation with the emergence of large-scale shopping malls that offer not only products but also leisure, entertainment, and social experiences. Particularly in Tamil Nadu, the proliferation of malls in urban centers such as Chennai, Coimbatore, Madurai, and Tiruchirappalli reflects changing lifestyles, higher disposable incomes, and increased consumer expectations. Malls are no longer perceived merely as shopping destinations but as experiential spaces that influence consumer perceptions, emotions, and attitudes. The concept of mall atmospherics—which encompasses lighting, scent, temperature, design, layout, music, and social interactions—plays a critical role in shaping customer perceptions and behavioral intentions (Kotler, 1973). Consumers respond not only to tangible factors such as product variety and pricing but also to intangible cues like ambiance, comfort, and emotional satisfaction (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). Hence, understanding how these environmental elements influence customer attitudes provides valuable insights for retail management. In the Tamil Nadu context, cultural factors such as socialization patterns, family-oriented shopping, and preference for entertainment-driven retail environments amplify the importance of mall experience. Despite the growing number of malls in the state, there remains a lack of empirical research examining how mall atmospherics influence customer emotions and attitudes in this regional context. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how perceived mall experience affects customer attitudes among urban shoppers in Tamil Nadu. Specifically, it explores how emotional responses mediate the relationship between mall atmospherics and the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of customer attitude.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Perceived Mall Atmospherics

The concept of atmospherics was first introduced by Kotler (1973) to explain the arrangement of selling locations that makes consumers emotional and therefore increases the chances of buying. In a shopping mall setting, atmospherics

include ambient (music, temperature, odour), structural (aesthetics, signage, space), and social (crowding, staff, and social interaction) dimensions. According to Turley and Milliman (2000) and Wakefield and Blodgett (1996), well thought-of atmospherics of a mall can greatly increase customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. In the context of India, Das and Varshneya (2017) found that atmospherics of a mall positively influenced perceived value and enjoyment, and Sinha and Banerjee (2004) found that cultural factors do shape consumers' interpretations of sensory stimuli. This suggests that areas like Tamil Nadu, where socialisation and comfort are integral elements, require specific research on mall atmospherics. Furthermore, Spangenberg et al. (2005) found that background music, scent, and lighting can shorten the time a shopper spends in a store, as well as increase impulse purchases. The shape and beauty of the mall are designed to encourage the customers to go to more areas of the mall enhancing their exposure to the products and services. Staff civility, crowd size, and visible security make up the social environment and affect the feelings of comfort and safety, contributing heavily to overall happiness. They create a multimodal environment and shape both the feelings and thoughts about the mall. Therefore, the perceived mall atmospherics, which encompass all the relative attributes of the perceived atmosphere and the functions of the mall, constitute the primary mall stimuli, which determine the emotional and attitudinal responses.

2.2 Emotional Responses

For pleasure, arousal, and relaxation, emotions function at an internal psychological level to respond to stimuli. Per Mehrabian & Russell's (1974) S-O-R model, emotions. Pleasurable. Phenomenon includes the delights and pleasures one obtains from the atmosphere of the mall and the visit. Arousal is the excitement and stimulation of the visit. Relaxation is the mental state free from stress and the mental tranquillity achieved. Donovan et al. (1994) confirms that due to arousal and pleasure, stimulating and enjoyable, an atmosphere encourages approach behaviours, like higher time and money spent shopping. Other than the physical, emotional engagement is used due to social factors, like staff friendliness and crowd. These emotional states, with evidence, strengthen brand assessment and improve retail perception (Babin et al., 1994). Considering the weather, those markets, with the shopping in Tamil Nadu which is mostly for leisure, emotions in such markets are important for sustaining favourable first impressions. Emotional reactions anchor the boundaries of sensory perceptions to the customer attitudes and behavioural intents and serve as psychological attainments.

2.3 Customer Attitude

Customer attitude is operationally defined in terms of evaluative consideration by a consumer of a product, a service, or an environment (situation), and it is a fusion of the cognitive, affective, and conative domain. Every attitude has a cognitive and mental component, such as regarding the mall's quality, how approachable it is, and the assortment of its goods. The affective component measures the mall's emotional evaluation, and the conative component measures the objective of the behaviour, such as wanting to revisit and support the mall. According to Oliver (1997), positive experiences and emotional satisfaction instantaneously enhance the customer attitude, as a customer subsequently becomes an advocate and loyal. Baker et al. (2002) stated that emotional reactions are enhanced by pleasant mall environments, which in turn increases the likelihood of the person having positive attitudes. In addition, Lin and Liang (2011) found that in service contexts, emotive attitudes are the strongest predictors of repeat patronage. In the Indian context, consumer attitudes are greatly influenced by social interaction, family, and culture. Shoppers in Tamil Nadu, for example, emphasise relaxation and the social and recreational aspects of shopping, which elevates emotional and conative attitude. For this reason, to appreciate the formation of attitudinal behaviour, one must study emotion in an ecological and cultural context.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This portion of the study relies on multiple interrelated theories regarding the relationship between mall atmospherics, emotions, and customer attitudes. The foundational framework is The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which asserts that a stimulus (S) from the environment is active during some internal processes of emotion (O), and the person eventually shows some behaviour or attitude (R). This framework accounts for the social and other stimuli in a mall that can lead to pleasant feelings, some arousal, and eventually relaxation to change customer attitudes and intentions. In addition, Bitner's Servicescape Theory (1992) argues that perceptions of services and experiences arise from the physical features of the space in which a service is delivered that includes design, spatial arrangement, and other ambient factors. The Hedonic Consumption Theory (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) argues that, during the buying processes, customers are seeking more emotional and sensory gratification other than just fulfilling a functional need. The Cognitive-Affective-Conative Model of Attitude (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) provides the framework for the multi-dimensional measurement of customer attitudes which is employed in this study. These theories, in addition to bridging the gaps between the different disciplines of psychology and consumer behaviour, explain how Tamil Nadu urban shoppers' emotion and attitude is affected by the experiences they perceive from the mall.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Model and Hypotheses

Mall atmospherics (ambient elements, architecture and layout, the social surrounding) and customer emotions (pleasure, arousal, relaxation) customer attitudes (cognitive, affective, conative) emotions and customer attitudes, which are the emotional responses and customer attitudes, in his or her thinking, are a positive impact.

Hypotheses:

- **H1:** The elements in the mall atmospherics positively affect customer emotions.
- **H2:** Customers' emotions positively impact customer attitudes.
- **H3:** Mall atmospherics directly and indirectly (via emotions) influence customer attitudes.

3.2 Data Collection and Sampling

A statistical technique was used to calculate the sample size for this study based on the active mall customers in metropolitan areas of Tamil Nadu, which include Chennai, Coimbatore, and Madurai. According to estimates from the data of mall management and retail associations, the active mall visitors are approximately 48,600, which serves as the foundation for this research. In order to obtain the representative sample, Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination method was used. In the equation below, the sample size S operates as the S for this sample size filtration method.

$$S = \frac{\chi^2 \times N \times P(1 - P)}{d^2(N - 1) + \chi^2 \times P(1 - P)}$$

Where:

- **S** = required sample size
- **N** = total population (48,600)
- χ^2 = chi-square value (3.841 for a 95% confidence level)
- **P** = population proportion (assumed to be 0.5 to maximize sample representativeness)
- **d²** = margin of error squared (0.05²)

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Stratified random sampling was the sampling technique utilised, whereby respondents were organised by age, level of income, and number of visits to the mall. This technique ensured adequate representation of the different types of shoppers, which included young workers and family shoppers. In order to increase the response rate, data were collected by conducting physical questionnaires and distributing the questionnaire online using Google Forms. The responses were checked for validity, and a final data set of 390 respondents was used for analysis. The analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis to shed more light on the relationships among mall atmospherics, emotional responses, and customer attitudes. The chosen methods were adequate to capture the strength and direction of the relationships among the variables, and were adequate to assess the mediating role of emotions in the proposed framework.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	210	52.5
	Female	190	47.5
Age	18–25	90	22.5
	26–35	140	35.0
	36–45	110	27.5
	46 and above	60	15.0
Monthly Income (₹)	Below 25,000	80	20.0
	25,001–50,000	140	35.0

	50,001–75,000	100	25.0
	Above 75,000	80	20.0
Visit Frequency	Once a week	110	27.5
	Twice a month	150	37.5
	Once a month	100	25.0
	Rarely	40	10.0

The respondents had nearly equal representation for both genders and were predominantly aged 26 to 45, typical of active consumers in cities. Most respondents visited malls at least a monthly, indicating consistent interaction with mall environments.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mall Atmospherics	Emotions	Customer Attitude
Mall Atmospherics	1	0.78**	0.69**
Emotions	0.78**	1	0.72**
Customer Attitude	0.69**	0.72**	1

($p < 0.01$)

The data suggest significant positive associations among mall atmospherics, sentiments and consumer attitudes. Malls have positive associations with sentiments ($r = 0.78$) and consumer attitudes ($r = 0.69$) which means positive mall conditions will allow for positive feelings and disposition.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Customer Attitude (β)	p-value
Ambient Conditions	0.61**	0.000
Design & Layout	0.54**	0.001
Social Environment	0.58**	0.000
Emotions (Mediator)	0.63**	0.000
Adjusted R²	0.52	

($p < 0.01$)

Overall, it appears that all three components of mall atmospherics have a strong impact on customer attitude. The most notable elements were soft ($\beta = 0.61$) and social climate ($\beta = 0.58$) that suggest acute comfort and social bonding are pivotal in achieving a positive customer attitude. The inclusion of emotional or feeling components substantially added to the predictability of the model (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.52$) that suggests emotions, in part, mediate the link between attitude and the experience of a mall.

5. DISCUSSION

This research supports and tests the application of the S–O–R model within a mall context. The evidence supports the contention that the mall environment—light, scent, sound, architectural design, and even the tuning of the mall's sounds—induces emotions that shape consumer attitudes. The strong influence of exterior and interior social factors signifies the need to make the mall environment as pleasurable as possible. In Tamil Nadu, urban buyers pay attention to product range and the shopping environment. This partially explains the emerging consumer culture in which shopping malls are social and recreational facilities. The positive and relaxing emotions enhance the positive affective and conative attitudes that lead to revisit intention and positive word-of-mouth referrals. These outcomes resonate with the findings of Baker et al. (2002) and Das (2017) who argue that the emotional mediation of consumer satisfaction and loyalty to a mall is substantially influenced by mall atmospherics. Furthermore, the findings expand Bitner's service scape framework by proving its applicability to Indian urban retailing.

6. CONCLUSION

On the basis of psychographic and emotional responses, this particular part i.e. The visceral perception of the mall experience influences behaviour and attitude towards customers. Out of the three, atmosphere, the most significant dimension of the favourable customer view is the ambient and the social atmosphere. The customer's emotions of pleasure, arousal, and relaxation serve as the psychological bridges that connect the physical environment to the perception and the probable behaviour of the customers towards the mall. The findings of the current study confirm the need for mall managers to design and build mall environments that satisfy emotional and sensory needs. The control of light, crowding, staff behaviour, temperature, comfortable seating, and the arrangement of the mall structures will elevate emotional engagement and the level of consumer satisfaction. This study applies the S–O–R model and servicescape theory to retailing in developing countries which contributes to the literature.

7. Future Research Directions

Within the framework of this study, these insights in particular, are important but also restricted to the urban areas of Tamil Nadu. The focus of future studies may explore the working theory for differences in mall shopping behaviour between the metropolitan and semi-urban areas, or the inter-state comparison of Tamil Nadu and other states of India. Brand image, internet culture, and other cultural aspects may be integrated to strengthen the model. Research on the impact of changes in the design and technology used in the mall on the long-term attitude of the customers, is an example of a longitudinal study.

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