Chapter 3
The Sensory Dimension of Sustainable Retailing:
Analysing In-Store Green Atmospherics

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ABSTRACT

The chapter contributes to recent debate on retailing and sustainability, addressing the role of atmospherics in affecting consumer perceptions. First, after reviewing the relevant literature about sustainable retailing, this research addresses some practices oriented towards sustainability that can be implemented by a retailer, and how they can be communicated to consumers. Then, using an experimental design, the authors test the impact of sustainability-oriented visual atmospherics on consumer perceptions and intentions. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of past and current sustainability research in retailing, with a particular emphasis on store atmospherics. Future research should try to integrate the findings by investigating other sensory stimuli, such as tactile or auditory ones.

INTRODUCTION

Challenges and concerns related to environmental sustainability issues are assuming a central role in both academic research and practice. Recent literature has analysed environmental sustainability issues from various angles, and focusing on multiple contexts including retailing. Indeed, retailers play a central role in communicating sustainable practices to consumers, given their close relationship with end consumers.

Environmental concerns are increasingly receiving scholarly attention, in response to the relevance of the topic from the perspective of both firms and consumers (Newton et al., 2015). To align themselves with this trend, retailers are facing the need to communicate their sustainable orientation effectively to consumers, in both offline (Tjärnemo & Södahl, 2015) and online (Kang & Kim, 2017) settings. Notably, a store assumes the role of a "central node" between retailers and consumers (Lehner, 2015) where sustainability-related elements can be effectively communicated to consumers. This is the reason why the majority of sustainability-related marketing activities are carried out in store and exploit the multiple cognitive and sensory stimuli to which consumers can be exposed in a store (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). The previous literature has addressed atmospherics as the controllable characteristics of retail space which entice customers to enter the store, shop, and purchase (Foster & McLelland, 2015). Although prior research has thoroughly discussed the relevant effects of store atmospherics in general, no research has addressed their role in conveying sustainability-related associations. This is not a trivial issue, since research has shown that environmental concern is a multi-faceted construct (Magnier & Schooermans, 2015) that builds on both inferences drawn from situational elements (Ertz, Karakas &Sarigollu,, 2016) and individual dispositional attitudes (Brick & Lewis, 2016; Kim et al., 2017). Attitude is explained as the amount of feeling for or against a stimulus or, in other words, an affect or a general evaluative reaction (Bagozzi, 1978).

Although research in the field of retailing has highlighted the fact that retailers' actions are capable of shaping the sustainability-related perceptions, choices and consumption practices of consumers, the analysis of the specific tools that can be adopted by retailers to convey sustainability-related messages has received scant academic attention in the past (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016). In this vein, store atmospherics play a pivotal role, in that they might both contribute to creating a consistent overall store image (Baker, Grewal & Parasuraman,1994) and spill over into the evaluation of the products on the shelves of the retailer (Turley & Milliman, 2000). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, the effect of sustainability-related store atmospherics on consumers' evaluations is still an underexplored topic in the literature.

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