

Consumer Behaviour w.r.t. Innovative Sensory Marketing Strategies

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ABSTRACT: Researchers have suggested that marketers should incorporate as many senses as possible in order for sensory marketing to be effective. To investigate the influence of selected senses – sight, sound and smell – on consumers’ experience, specifically in terms of the tastiness of brandy. Even though the use of the senses such as sight, sound and smell is a popular sensory marketing tool in the field of experiential marketing, applying such marketing techniques is a challenging and costly exercise for marketers, and researchers have called for more studies on senses and consumer experience. A full factorial laboratory experiment (2 x 2 x 2) conducted where 240 spirits consumers indicated the tastiness of a brandy sample under certain conditions. Results revealed that, within a laboratory setting, consumers recorded lower levels of tastiness under conditions where more senses manipulated than in conditions where less senses manipulated. The results of the study coincided with previous results, which indicated that, within certain product categories, sensory marketing could actually decrease the consumer’s experience as sensory overload could occur. In the endeavour to reduce possible sensory overload in the alcohol industry, the findings suggest that marketers should not apply sensory marketing indiscriminately to all product categories. For example, on a retail level, where experimental marketing might be too costly or even too complex to apply to some product categories, marketers should rather rethink the use of sensory marketing strategies within certain industries and focus on other marketing strategies, such a brand building.

Keywords: Traditional Marketing, Consumer Behaviour, Branding, CEM

Date of Submission: 11 -11-2017

Date of acceptance: 26-12-2017

I. CONTEXT

Traditional marketing views consumers as rational decision makers who are interested in functional features and benefits, whereas experiential marketing views consumers as rational and emotional beings who are interested in achieving pleasurable experiences (Schmitt 1999). McCole (2004) stated that the concept of experiential marketing would rise in importance, as marketing in the twenty-first century is more challenging than ever before as a result of fragmented media and clever, articulated and ‘free-thinking’ consumers. Customer experience relates to a set of interactions between the customer and a product and implies the customer’s involvement at different levels (i.e. rational, emotional, sensorial, physical and spiritual), where the involvement is strictly personal (Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007; Schmitt 1999). Schmitt (1999) investigated how companies can create different types of experiences for consumers by focusing on so-called experiential modules, namely creative cognitive experiences (thinking), physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (acting), social-identity experiences resulting from relating to a reference or cultural group (relating), affective experiences (feeling) and, lastly, sensory experiences (sensing). Many products project important nonverbal cues that must be seen, heard, tasted, felt or smelled to be appreciated properly (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982). The sense module, also referred to as sense or sensory marketing, therefore appeals to the senses, with the objective of creating sensory experiences by means of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. Sensory marketing can be used to differentiate companies and products, motivate consumers, add value to products and enhance customer experiences (for example, by means of aesthetics or excitement) (Schmitt 1999). In terms of alcohol consumption, a report published by Datamonitor (2008), a leading provider of online data, indicated that alcohol consumers are increasingly looking for enhanced sensory experiences. Datamonitor’s study comprised a detailed quantitative analysis of on-trade alcohol consumption covering nine core developed countries across Europe, North America and Australasia: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK, the USA and Australia. This fact that consumers are increasingly seeking enhanced sensory experiences was highlighted by Bruwer, Saliba and Miller (2011), who argued that firms competing in, for example, the wine industry need to increase investigations into the sensory preferences of wine-drinking consumers. Also, in Southern Africa, little research has been conducted into the sensory experiences and/or preferences of consumers. The present study aimed to contribute to the field of experiential marketing, specifically in terms of the alcohol industry in a

developing market (South Africa) and with specific focus on the experiential module of sensory marketing. To further narrow down the research and provide information to a leading distributor of spirits in South Africa, brandy was selected as the alcoholic product, with the purpose of investigating whether certain selected senses have an influence on the perceptions of South African consumers in terms of the perceived tastiness¹ of an alcoholic brand. Only the senses of smell, sound and sight were selected for purposes of this study. These senses were selected because Wright (2006) argued that they could be classified as the main human senses. The results of this study could be useful for South African marketers of brandy in the development of effective sensory marketing strategies that could be appealing to brandy consumers and result in increased sales. In the field of marketing, there is much debate around the reassessment of ideas and concepts that have been tried and tested through the years (Hultén, Broweus & Van Dijk 2009). A major challenge faced by all marketers is to understand how the purchase behaviour of consumers can be influenced in favour of the products or services being offered to them (Belch and Belch 2012). As human minds have limits on the amount of stimulation that can be handled, information is usually screened from the environment (Semenik 2002). Before data can therefore be perceived, it passes through perceptual screens that protect humans from unwanted messages. These screens act as subconscious filters and can be either physiological or psychological in nature (Arens 2006). Psychological screens assess data in terms of the consumer's needs, motives, expectations and personality, whilst physiological screens involve the five senses that are used to detect incoming data and measure the dimension and strength of physical stimuli (Arens 2006). The argument can be made that as consumers are subjected on a daily basis to high volumes of marketing communication, unconscious triggers that appeal to the basic senses of consumers (i.e. sensory marketing) might be a more effective way than traditional marketing methods in appealing to consumers (Krishna 2012). It is also believed that even though marketers have always been aware of the significance of the human senses on consumer behaviour, the senses have for many years been neglected or ignored in marketing strategies (Hultén *et al.* 2009; Hultén 2011).

As far as the concept of sensation is concerned, this can be defined as 'the immediate and direct response of the sensory organs to stimuli' (Schiffman & Kanuk 2010:175). According to Schiffman and Kanuk (2010), a stimulus (such as a product, package, brand name or advertisement) is any unit of input to any of the senses, whilst sensory receptors (the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin) are the human organs that receive sensory inputs. In short, it can be argued that perception is the *awareness or receipt* of sensory information, whilst sensation is the *response* to such information. The conclusion can therefore be made that, as sensation and perception are stages of processing the senses (Krishna 2012), marketers could attempt to apply techniques to stimulate consumers' senses so that consumer experiences could be enhanced. According to Bruwer *et al.* (2011), a large number of cues such as product, atmospheric and sensory cues could influence, for example, wine consumers in various ways. The research on which this article is based, focused on sensory marketing, and aimed to examine the effect that (selected) senses have on consumer experiences (specifically the tastiness of a brandy).

The sense of sight is probably the most developed and prominent human sense (Hultén *et al.* 2009; Krishna 2012; Wright 2006). Hultén (2011) also states that sight can be regarded as the most powerful sense for discovering changes and differences in the environment, and it is also the most common sense in detecting goods or services. Of all five human senses, the sense of sight is then also the sense that has been focused on mostly by marketing practitioners (Elder *et al.* 2010; Hultén *et al.* 2009). According to Arnould *et al.* (2004), most past research on vision in consumer research has examined colour or more complex visual stimuli, such as words and pictures. Results of previous studies, for example, indicated that human exposure to warm hues (red-orange-yellow) raises blood pressure, heart rate and perspiration, whereas exposure to cool hues (green-blue) has the opposite effect. In applying these findings to commercial environments, results of studies showed that yellow telephone booths increase the speed of phone calls, yellow walls and fixtures result in people moving through stores at a faster pace, and orange fixtures in fast-food restaurants stimulate hunger. Colour can therefore play an important role in the success of marketing stimuli, such as the colour used in advertising or colours used for package design (Arnould *et al.* 2004; Wolfe, Kluener & Levi 2006).

It is believed that the human smelling ability develops and reaches a plateau at about the age of eight and then declines as humans grow older. The sense of smell is the only sense that cannot be turned off (Suhonen & Tengvall 2009). This sense is the most direct of all senses, and odour can affect significantly an individual's evaluation of things and other people (Aitamer & Zhou 2011; Arnould *et al.* 2004). The sense of smell can also be related to pleasure and happiness and is believed to be correlated closely to emotions and memories (Hultén 2011). It should, however, be noted that, even though the sense of smell is less important for humans than for many other animals, odours have a persistent and omnipresent quality that may be difficult to escape (Arnould *et al.* 2004). Evidence seems to suggest that good or bad feelings generated by smells in humans are being associated with upbringing, culture, learning, emotion and psychology (Wright 2006). For scent to be used as a marketing tool to attract attention to a specific product, it is vital that the scent corresponds

with the product (Suhonen&Tengvall 2009). Teller and Dennis (2012), however, argue that the effect of ambient scent on consumer-related reactions has received relatively little attention from marketing researchers in the past.

Even though hearing is largely considered to be secondary in terms of perceptual power when compared with the sense of sight, the auditory system (ears) is capable of picking up and conveying various kinds of information to the brain (Wright 2006). Arnould *et al.* (2004) argue that sound patterns can create a mood of relaxation or stimulation, and point out that religions and cults have been using music for many years to induce trances or other mood states. According to Assael (1995), advertisers frequently make use of music through jingles or as background themes to create positive associations with brands, whilst Hultén (2011) points out that the sense of sound can be linked to emotions and feelings and can impact brand experiences and interpretations. Marketers are, however, advised to pretest such stimuli to ensure that positive associations with a brand will indeed be created (Assael 1995).

Touch or tactile perception is a sense that is different from sight and hearing in that it is not localised to one area of the body. Humans can therefore 'feel' through the skin with any part of their bodies, be it through the hands, fingers, feet, toes, arms, legs, head, face, chest or bottom (Wright 2006). According to Arnould *et al.* (2004) there are various complex sensations that constitute the sense of touch, and many parts of the human body are much more sensitive than others. Arnould *et al.* (2004) also point out that numerous studies have highlighted the vital effects of touch. Studies have, for example, shown that babies that were massaged gained weight as much as 50% faster than unmassaged babies, that touch is critical in the psychological as well as the physical development of children and that sustained touching can reduce a human's heart rate and can have a calming effect on a person (Arnould *et al.* 2004). Assael (1995) noted that consumers also use 'feel' as a means of determining quality by, for example, using the feel of textile fabrics, clothing, carpeting or furniture to evaluate the quality of the specific product.

According to Wright (2006) the average adult person has approximately 10 000 taste buds that are able to detect the chemical constituents of food and beverages. Taste buds are grouped according to themes (salt, sour, sweet and bitter) at various locations inside the mouth. People use the tip of the tongue to taste sweet things, the back of the tongue to taste bitter things and the sides to taste bitter things, whilst salty things are tasted up front and along the surface (Arnould *et al.* 2004). Assael (1995) pointed out that taste can be an elusive perception.

Creating customer experience seems to be one of the central objectives in retail environments (Verhoef *et al.* 2009). Achrol and Kotler (2012) make the point that consumers satisfy their needs by means of a complex of experiences that are filtered through their senses. Experiential marketing has therefore become a popular marketing technique used by marketers in promotions. More specifically, sensory marketing has been applied in various ways in below-the-line promotions. According to research, marketers need to incorporate all the senses in sensory marketing as senses rarely operate in isolation (Krishna 2012; Wright 2006). In the field of marketing, incorporating consumers' senses of sight, smell and sound is a popular sensory marketing tool as these senses are classified as the main senses in humans (Wright 2006). Incorporating senses such as touch and taste remains a challenge for marketers as certain products such as expensive alcohols and computer software do not necessarily lend themselves to be promoted by means of touch and taste in a retail setting. Bruwer *et al.* (2011), for example, argued that when wine is sold in a retail setting, the focus is mainly on tangible product cues such as the grape variety and the bottle shape and size, rather than on the wine itself, as consumers cannot necessarily touch or taste the product at the retailer.

Even though the use of the senses such as sight, sound and smell is a popular sensory marketing tool in experiential marketing, applying such marketing techniques remains challenging and costly for marketers. Consequently, there has been a call from researchers for more studies on senses and consumer experience (Krishna 2012; Orth 2005). Therefore, the aim of the study being reported here was to examine the effect of senses on consumers' experiences.

II. METHODS

To determine whether sight, sound and smell have an impact on consumer experience, treatment effects had to be considered carefully. Since the chosen brandy had a distinctive honey smell, the impact of smell on perceived quality was investigated by giving respondents a leaflet with an enhanced honey smell. Respondents were instructed to smell the leaflet and then to taste the brandy. Sight was controlled by removing the product colour by means of a red light in each respective tasting booth. This applies to all experiments where sight is not manipulated by the product colour. Finally, the effect of sound was investigated by playing a pouring sound in the booth whilst the respondent tasted the brandy. Table 1 summarises the experimental design followed in the study. For the purposes of the research on which this article is based, a laboratory experiment was conducted as researchers have a higher degree of control over variables in laboratory experiments because the environment can be monitored (Zikmund&Babin 2010). Also, laboratory experiments tend to produce the same results if

repeated with similar subjects, leading to high internal validity. Generalisation of the results obtained in a laboratory should, however, be interpreted with caution. According to Malhotra (2007), if aspects of the laboratory experiment differ from the situation for which generalisations are made, external validity will be reduced. In this article, the influence of selected senses on the tastiness of a brandy was investigated. As only sight, sound and smell were investigated one can assume that in a field environment more artifacts will be present that could influence consumers' senses. Therefore, the generalisations made from results obtained in this laboratory experiment should be viewed in the context of reduced sensory experiences. According to Assael (1995), the sense of taste can be an elusive perception. Results of a study by Allison and Uhl (1964) revealed that when consumers were asked to taste three unlabelled brands of beer, all three brands were rated similarly, and most respondents could also not identify their regular brand. When the labels were shown, however, respondents indicated a strong preference for their regular brand. These results suggest that taste is not an objective criterion, but that it is linked inextricably to the image of a brand in the consumer's mind (Assael 1995). Krishna (2012) also states, 'tasty may have nothing to do with the sense of taste but may be largely dependent on the other senses'. Research has shown that tastiness is based on perception and not on the taste sense. For this reason, the researchers used a measurement scale to measure the tastiness of the brandy. More specifically, the nine-point (i.e. like extremely, like very much, like moderately, like slightly, neither like or dislike, dislike slightly, dislike moderately, dislike very much, dislike extremely) hedonic scale was used. The hedonic scale is the most widely used scale for assessing the liking of food (Schutz & Cardello 2001). For the purposes of this research, respondents were prompted to indicate which term best described the tastiness of the sample that was in front of them using the hedonic scale. Thus, for the purposes of this article, the following hypotheses were postulated:

- H₁: Smell influences the tastiness of a brandy.
- H₂: Sound influences the tastiness of a brandy.
- H₃: Sight influences the tastiness of a brandy.
- H₄: Smell and sound influence the tastiness of a brandy.
- H₅: Smell and sight influence the tastiness of a brandy.
- H₆: Sound and sight influence the tastiness of a brandy.
- H₇: Smell, sound and sight influence the tastiness of a brandy.

As 48 respondents were required for each of the eight conditions, plus one extra cell which served as a control group, 240 randomly-selected spirit consumers participated in the study. Of these, 43% were men and 36% were women. Almost a third of the respondents were between the ages of 27 and 35 (29.6%), about one third were between 35 and 50, and one third were older than 50. Just under half of the respondents (45%) indicated that they were primarily brandy drinkers, and that they consumed brandy at least once a week.

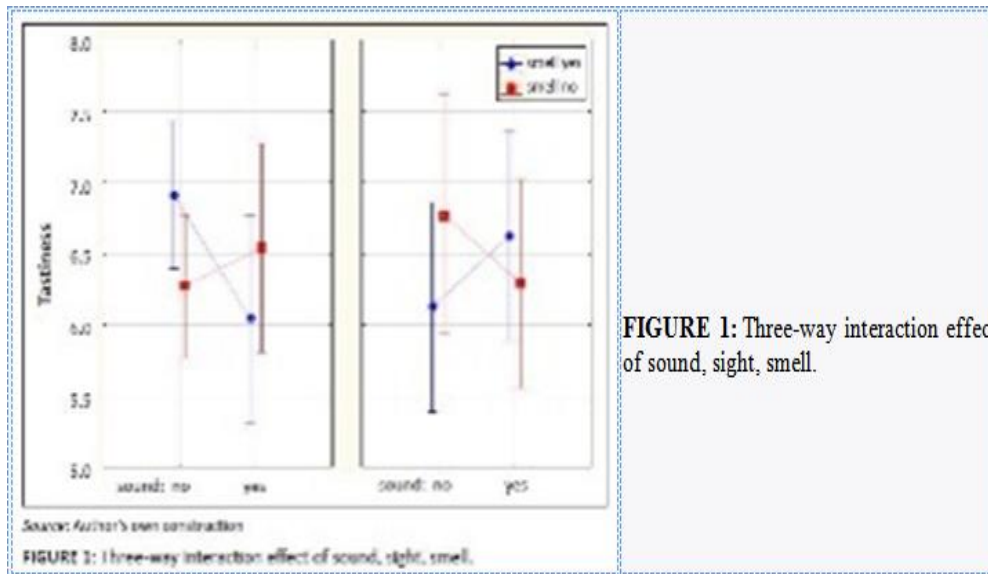
Empirical Factors

Klemz (2008) proposes that data reliability in experimental marketing can be scrutinised by repeating one experimental group and correlating the repeated group with the original group. In this study, a repeat group was selected randomly (enhanced smell) and the results obtained from the repeated group correlated with the results of the original experimental group ($p < 0.05$). The data obtained from the experiments was therefore deemed reliable and valid. Levene's test of equality of error variances revealed that the error variance of the dependent variable across the eight experimental groups was equal ($F [7] = 0.640$; $p > 0.05$) and, therefore, an Anova (analysis of variance) could be conducted. Table 2 depicts the results of the main and interaction effects. As depicted in Table 2, the results revealed no significant main effects differences. H₁, H₂ and H₃ were therefore not corroborated. From this, one can conclude that no significant differences in the tastiness of the brandy were noted with regard to smell ($F [1] = 0.031$, $p > 0.05$), sight ($F [1] = 0.002$, $p > 0.05$) and sound ($F [1] = 0.350$, $p > 0.05$). Therefore, sight, smell and sound in isolation did not have any effect on the tastiness of the brandy.

Effect on Senses

A full factorial experimental design allows researchers to draw conclusions regarding the interaction effect of variables (Montgomery 2009). In this article, the interaction of sound and smell, sound and sight, sight and smell, as well as the combination of sound, sight and smell on the consumer experience was examined. From Table 2, one can conclude that the results revealed no two-way interaction effects. H₄, H₅ and H₆ were therefore not supported. As also depicted in Table 2, however, the results revealed a significant three-way interaction effect ($F [1] = 4.490$, $p < 0.05$). H₇ was, therefore, supported. To understand the three-way effect an LSD (least significant difference) post-hoc test was conducted (Anderson, Sweeney & Williams 2012). The results are depicted in Figure 1. The results revealed that, in the case where respondents were not required to smell a honey leaflet, no pouring sounds were playing in the background, and the colour of the brandy was not visible to the respondents, the highest level of tastiness was recorded (mean = 6.917). In other words, the three-

way interaction between sight, sound and smell revealed that within a laboratory setting, respondents recorded higher levels of tastiness under conditions where the booth was quiet, no smelling of a leaflet was required and the colour of the brandy was not visible. In other words, in the instance where no senses cues were given, respondents recorded higher tastiness levels. It would seem that in the endeavour to incorporate all the senses, respondents could have had a sensory overload, which resulted in a reduced consumer experience.



To conduct the research in an appropriate facility, approval was granted by a leading alcohol manufacturer to use their laboratory facilities. The research on which this article is based was classified as holding low risk for potential respondents. In other words, ‘the probability or magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research (was) not greater in itself than that ordinarily encountered in daily life’ (Business Research 2013). Respondents were informed about the nature of the research study and anonymity was guaranteed. Informed consent was obtained by the respondents and these respondents participated voluntarily in the experiment.

III. DISCUSSION

Researchers have called for more research to investigate the connection between the senses (Krishna 2012; Puccinelli *et al.* 2009). Wright (2006) and Krishna (2012) concur that senses rarely operate in isolation. The results of the study being reported here coincide with these findings, as sight, sound and smell by themselves did not reveal any significant differences in the tastiness of the brandy. The results revealed further that consumers recorded higher levels of tastiness when little disruptions were present. Suhonon and Tengvall (2009) noted that the type of product has significant importance on the effect that the senses have on the consumer experience, specifically in the case of the alcohol industry. Therefore, with regard to the research conducted in this study, one should keep in mind that consumers might have experienced sensory overload. Krishna (2012) confirms this notion by stating that marketers could overload consumers’ senses. Managers have become increasingly aware of the need to create value for their customers in the form of experiences. Applying sensory marketing seem to be an easy, effortless way of doing so. However, research revealed that marketers need to incorporate all the senses to actually enhance consumers’ experiences. Incorporating all the senses is not always possible and, if it is possible, is usually costly. The results of the current study revealed that, in their endeavour to incorporate all the senses, marketers could overload consumers’ senses and, as a result, actually reduce the consumer experience. The study on which this article is based aimed to examine the influence of senses on consumer experience. Only the senses of sight, smell and sound were investigated, and tastiness, specifically, was used to measure the consumer experience. Future research could focus on incorporating all the senses. Furthermore, as this experimental study was conducted in a laboratory investigating the influence of selected senses on brandy, future research could be conducted in retail settings where consumers are exposed to more sensory experiences. Researchers could then focus on other product types, such as wine, where consumers might have less strong opinions (Suhonon&Tengvall 2009). Wright (2006) argued that it is important to note that the senses rarely operate in isolation. A consumer’s entire understanding of the world is defined through his or her senses, which are directly linked to his or her emotions: ‘the more senses you appeal to, the stronger the message’. People see and hear at the same time, or they touch and see or smell and taste or see, touch and taste (Wright 2006). Lindstrom (2005) suggested that the more positive the synergy between the senses, the stronger

the connection between sender and receiver. It was also argued by Pine II and Gilmore (1998) that the more senses a certain experience engages the more effective and memorable the experience could be. The current study, however, revealed that, for specific product categories, consumers can experience sensory overloads which, and as a result, reduce consumer experience. Therefore, within the field of sensory marketing, marketers should rethink the use of sensory marketing strategies within certain industries and might rather have to focus on other marketing strategies (such as brand building) to positively influence the sales of their products.

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Dr. Aparna Goyal. "Consumer Behaviour w.R.t. Innovative Sensory Marketing Strategies." *International Journal Of Engineering Research And Development* , vol. 13, no. 12, 2017, pp. 24-30.