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# (Re)thinking place atmospheres in marketing theory

Marketing Theory

1–20

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## Abstract

This article explores consumers' experiences of place atmospheres through a study into football matches, a context in which atmosphere is pertinent. While existing marketing literature concerning atmospherics largely conceptualises atmosphere as controllable, singular, and confined to the consumption environment and experience under investigation, we instead contribute a more spatially and temporally porous theorisation. Drawing insights from both consumer research and geography surrounding affect, embodiment and atmosphere, we unpack the spatial and temporal aspects of atmosphere in relation to consumers' past memories, disrupted routines, and anticipations of future. The article contributes, therefore, to burgeoning literature within marketing and consumer research regarding the consumption in – and of – places.

## Keywords

Atmosphere, atmospherics, football, memory, place, routines, time

Television montages remain full of crazy crowds and foreign pros continue to talk up the atmosphere at Premier League grounds but fans know this does not match up with reality. Most matches at most grounds are not rocked by a cacophony of passionate fans. They are largely quiet, frustrated places,

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enlivened only by goals or perceived malfeasance on the part of referees. Away fans regularly out sing home support but even they are getting tired. “Is this a library?” is the most common chant at grounds I’ve visited this season (MacInnes, 2016; *The Guardian*).

## Introduction

This article critically explores how place atmospheres have been theorised within marketing through a study into football matches – a context in which atmosphere is especially pertinent. We argue for a more spatially and temporally porous notion of place atmospheres, moving beyond extant understandings in retail and services marketing where atmosphere is presented as relatively enclosed, controllable, and singular. On the one hand, atmosphere is a taken-for-granted concept used to capture our embodied experiences within a range of consumption settings; yet, it is also challenging to define and study (Hill et al., 2014), since atmospheres are ‘... uncertain, disordered, shifting...’ (Anderson, 2009: 78–9), ‘... in a certain sense indeterminate’ (Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012: 170) and ‘... the entity-that-cannot-be-named’ (Anderson and Ash, 2015: 37). Nevertheless, it is generally agreed by marketing and geography scholars that atmosphere refers to those affects, emotions and sensations flowing between bodies within places (Edensor, 2015; Hill et al., 2014; Sumartojo and Pink, 2019), resulting in a ‘spatially extended quality of feeling’ (Böhme, 1993: 118).

Over recent decades, ample literature has emerged in retail and services marketing concerned with ‘atmospherics’ (Kotler, 1974), which investigates how a range of atmospheric stimuli, including music, lighting and scent, can be manipulated to impact consumers’ emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses in consumption settings (Spangenberg et al., 2005; Spence et al., 2014). Here, atmosphere has typically been conceptualised as spatially and temporally bounded within the consumption setting and experience being investigated, as a singular entity, and under managerial control. This article questions such literature, building on more recent work in this area, alongside consumer research studies emphasising how atmosphere is dynamic and embodied (Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012; Canniford et al., 2017; Hill et al., 2014). Our article more broadly contributes to growing marketing and consumer research literature on the consumption of places (see Chatzidakis et al., 2018, for a special issue of this journal) by foregrounding the interrelations between place and time.

The article begins by exploring extant literature regarding atmosphere within marketing and consumer research. We then explain the research context of football match atmospheres and our research design. Next, the spatial and temporal porosity of place atmospheres is unpacked in relation to past atmospheres, disrupted match day routines, and anticipations of future. Findings are then discussed in relation to our contributions to marketing understandings of atmosphere, place and time: here, we extend the scope beyond football matches, before offering avenues for future research.

## Retail and service atmospherics

The literature concerning atmosphere in retail and services marketing flourished following Kotler’s (1974: 50) coining of the term atmospherics, referring to ‘... the effort to design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability’. Substantial literature has since emerged regarding retail and ‘servicescape’ (Bitner, 1992)

atmospherics. Often inspired by Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus–Organism–Response paradigm (see Turley and Milliman, 2000), such studies typically conduct experiments into the impact of one or more environmental cues on consumers' emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses in consumption settings. Examples of atmospheric stimuli typically investigated – largely with the purpose of affecting consumers' approach/avoidance behaviours, propensity to purchase, dwell time and perceptions of waiting – include music (Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000), lighting (Baker et al., 1992), scent (Spangenberg et al., 2005) and colour (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992). These insights into physical settings are now being extended to study the atmosphere of online shopping environments (Manganari et al., 2009). Although this literature often focuses on the impact of one sensory stimulus (e.g. music), the multisensory nature of atmosphere is also recognised, alongside the potential for interaction and (in)congruity between sensory stimuli (Hoffman and Turley, 2002; Spangenberg et al., 2005; Spence et al., 2014). This aligns with Bitner's (1992) servicescape model, which considers ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols and artefacts as atmospheric variables influencing consumer behaviour in service environments.

The importance of people to retail and service atmospheres has also been identified. First, the fact that diverse groups of consumers can perceive atmosphere differently has been acknowledged (Kotler, 1974; Turley and Milliman, 2000). In this regard, individual consumers have the potential to respond to atmospheric interventions in different ways according to characteristics such as gender, age or occupation (Dacko, 2012). Second, it has been argued service atmospheres can be affected by consumers' interactions with *each other*, with atmosphere liable to change as a result. This relates to Langeard et al.'s (1981) 'servuction model', which depicts how a given customer's service experience can be influenced by other customers. Such ideas have been developed further in this journal with Tombs and McColl-Kennedy's (2003) 'social-servicescapes model', which considers how customers may be affected by issues of social density and the bodies, behaviour and emotion of others in the service settings. Of particular relevance to our article, they note how a usually reserved person may jump up with excitement along with the other fans at football matches, desiring '... to share the consumption experience in the context of a group situation' (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003: 456), which demonstrates how atmospheres can be collectively generated and experienced.

The above literature, however, typically conceives of atmospheres and atmospheric interventions as occurring within the confines of spatially bounded service environments (e.g. retail stores, restaurants, or even sports stadia). Dacko (2012) acknowledges the importance of temporal flux in service atmospheres, with, for example, the purposeful manipulation of atmospheric interventions (lighting, music, etc.) at different times of day to suit different service customers. Nevertheless, these temporal variations are still presented as occurring within the spatial confines of a given service setting, such as a retail store. Further, Dacko's theorisation is temporally confined, focusing on atmospheric interventions in the context of a present service encounter, rather than considering how past and future experiences might also play a role in atmospheric encounters.

## Experiencing atmospheres

Our article leans towards consumer research literature, which highlights how the production and experience of atmosphere is embodied and dynamic. Atmosphere is sometimes *implicitly* considered in ethnographies of spectacular consumption experiences, such as the 'carnavalesque' atmosphere at rave nights (Goulding et al., 2009), the 'cosy Christmas' atmosphere at the J-Dag

beer festival in Denmark (Kjeldgaard and Bode, 2017), and the ‘convivial’ atmosphere of tailgating events before American football matches (Bradford and Sherry, 2017). However, an emerging area of consumer research more *explicitly* examines atmosphere in relation to non-representational theory and affect, drawing insights from geography scholars (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Thrift, 2007). This work is especially sensitive to embodied experiences of atmospheres, building further on attention given in services marketing to senses and atmospheric stimuli. For instance, Biehl-Missal and Saren (2012: 170) assert ‘... atmospheres touch, invade, and permeate people’s bodies...’, while Hill et al. (2014: 388) contend atmospheres are ‘... the result of collections of affective bodies and spaces through which [those] affects flow’. Yakhlef (2015) further explains how the affective quality of spaces is apprehended through consumers’ bodies, with other people impacting our own embodied experiences in consumption settings, chiming with insights into the social dimensions of service encounters (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Drawing on an empirical example, Sherry et al. (2001: 501) demonstrate ‘... the immersive, embodied nature of consumer experience’ at ESPN Zone by unravelling how consumers’ bodily senses are affected through music, sports videos, cooking and beer smells, and other visitors’ yells and cheers.

Echoing ideas within services marketing about the temporal potential of atmospheric interventions (Dacko, 2012), consumer researchers have additionally considered the temporal dynamism of atmosphere. Goulding et al. (2009), for example, observe how nightclub DJs can alter people’s moods during the course of a night through shifting music choices. This work moves beyond services marketing literature, however, by demonstrating atmospheres not only change over time *in a place* but can also *flow across places*. For instance, in their work into the olfactory aspects of atmosphere, Canniford et al. (2017) discuss how a football supporters’ coach is a space in which multiple smells intermingle over time. Likewise, Kjeldgaard and Bode (2017: 29) note how the J-Dag beer festival party atmosphere disperses over time ‘... from the confines of bars into public space...’ with the city becoming ‘... an interconnected ephemeral party zone...’, as revellers spill in and out of bars during pub crawls. However, despite this article being a notable exception, the idea of how atmosphere outside a given place can be taken inside it (and vice versa) remains underexplored. Furthermore, while Yakhlef (2015: 550) asserts people’s spatial experiences are impacted by ‘prior experience and learning[s], which are sedimented in the body...’, much extant literature explores atmosphere as part of a temporally bounded consumption experience. Hence, little is known about how present atmospheres might be shaped by people’s past experiences – both inside and outside of an environment – as well as by anticipations of the future. We address these lacunae through a study into football match atmospheres.

## Football match atmospheres

While the notion of football spectatorship and fandom as a form of consumption might be considered sacrilege for some aficionados of the game, over recent decades this is apparently how football has ‘progressed’. The transformation of football into a global commercial product (Edensor and Millington, 2008) aligns with concern among supporters about a perceived decline in the quality of atmosphere at top-flight matches (Edensor, 2015). The reconfiguration of sports stadia into multipurpose sports and leisure destinations is partly complicit, with their predictable, uniform and rational design typified by fully seated and bowl-shaped arenas protecting spectators from the elements (Ritzer and Stillman, 2001). These new structures often fail to provoke the affective charge associated with the distinctive qualities of early 20th-century stadia, such as the

idiosyncratic Fenway Park (Boston), Eduardo Torroja's sumptuous La Zarzuela Racetrack (Madrid), or Fulham's homely Craven Cottage.

In a UK context, a typical football stadium historically comprised four separate stands including large standing terraces, many of which acquired notoriety for passionate, raucous and carnivalesque behaviours (e.g. 'The Kop' at Liverpool's Anfield ground or 'The Stretford End' at Manchester United's Old Trafford). This classic stadium design has now largely given way to commercial and regulatory pressures, an example of this in the UK being the 1990 Taylor Report (following the Hillsborough Stadium disaster), which recommended the removal of standing areas to improve fan safety and comfort (Bale, 1993; Hill, 2016). This resulted in many old grounds located in working-class neighbourhoods being demolished (Edensor and Millington, 2010; Wood and Gabie, 2011) and replaced with smooth, homogenised and often subdued environments (Bale, 1993).

These changes, coupled with the introduction of the Premier League in 1992, unprecedented investment in the top-flight game and rising costs of match attendance, have contributed to 'the people's game' – an escape for the 'working man' – shifting towards hyper-commoditised entertainment for the middle classes (Giulianotti, 2002). While crowds at football matches were regularly referred to as the 'the 12th man' in the past, this moniker cannot be so confidently applied today. This is a challenge undermining a key quality that makes football popular worldwide; from a commercial perspective, the contribution of the crowd to football as a televisual spectacle is essential, as nothing detracts more from the product than a game being played in the relative silence of a half-empty stadium. Clubs and football authorities, therefore, are becoming increasingly concerned about atmosphere.

While the transformation of English football detailed above has been for the most part gradual, for Manchester City Football Club (MCFC), change has occurred more rapidly. In 2003, having spent 80 years at their previous home of Maine Road (located in Moss Side, south of central Manchester), the club moved to the newly built City of Manchester Stadium (now the Etihad Stadium), east of the city centre (Edensor and Millington, 2010). Such spatial relocations can be detrimental in their rupturing of people's 'geographical memories' (Hague and Mercer, 1998: 107) and match day routines (Edensor and Millington, 2010) that can help generate atmosphere. This is especially problematic for clubs with rich histories at former stadia like MCFC at Maine Road (Wood and Gabie, 2011). Further, in 2008, the club was subject to a takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group, leading to it becoming one of the richest and most successful clubs in world football. For a fan base unaccustomed to such heady heights, this transition has been abrupt, potentially blunting stadium atmosphere even further by inflating expectation levels of team performance. Interventions to intensify atmosphere at the Etihad have been implemented over recent years, such as creating the *City Square* fan zone, along with a singing stand to recreate the 'spirit of the Kippax' (an iconic Maine Road stand), and broadcasting nostalgic songs in the stadium to welcome players onto the pitch (Edensor, 2015). Despite this, the Etihad has attracted media scrutiny regarding its perceived lack of atmosphere, reflected in the commonplace slur 'The Emptihad'. Yet, while focus here is on the stadium itself, we emphasise how place atmospheres can sprawl spatially and temporally beyond these perceived material boundaries.

## Research design

Atmospheres are difficult to research (Anderson and Ash, 2015; Hill et al., 2014); we therefore drew on a range of methods sensitive to their 'in-between' status that blur the collective and

individual, affective and emotional, and precognitive and reflective (Böhme, 1993; Edensor, 2012). The chosen methods also attend to the knowing *in* and *about* atmosphere, which Sumartojo and Pink (2019) identify as important when researching in this area.

First, reflective of knowing *in* atmosphere, three of the authors (one an MCFC season ticket holder for over 40 years) have experienced football matches at the Etihad, as well as taking part in fans' match day routines, involving pubs near the ground, the *City Square* fan zone, and public transport. These experiences are important for attaining first-hand embodied encounters of atmosphere formation and disruption, as well as the dynamic 'onflow of the everyday' (Hill et al., 2014: 384). They have added to our data in the form of fieldnotes, which capture reflexive observations of individual experiences and their role in producing the atmospheres under study, as well as documenting how such atmospheres are co-produced and shared among fans (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019). Photographs and videos were also taken to capture the sensory aspects of atmosphere, and these functioned as useful *aide memoires*.

Second, to facilitate knowing *about* atmosphere (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019), discussions were conducted at the Etihad Stadium with three groups of MCFC fans: male fans who had visited both Maine Road and the Etihad (seven participants, group discussion 1), female fans who had attended matches at both places (six participants, group discussion 2), and a mixed gender group of fans who had never visited the former ground (five participants, group discussion 3). This helped to explore how past experiences of atmospheres might shape the formation and reception of those in the present-day, as well as potential gender differences (which we found no evidence of). Discussions – created to mimic the storytelling fans routinely have within social networks (Hague and Mercer, 1998) – were themed around participants' experiences of good/bad atmospheres at the Etihad, whether atmosphere at the Etihad has changed over time, and factors impacting match atmospheres, either positively or negatively. Participants were then taken into the place of the stadium to provoke further insights about its atmosphere.

Third, since much fan discussion about football takes place online (Hill et al., 2016), 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010) was conducted to enrich and theme group discussions. We collected approximately 10,000 public posts, spanning 2014–2019, regarding atmosphere during football matches at the Etihad drawn from three online MCFC fan forums (*BlueMoon*, *ManCityFans.net* and *ManCityForum*), Twitter, Facebook (e.g. *Official Man City* page) and news article discussions. To capture the temporal aspects of atmospheres (Anderson, 2009), we also observed tweets about 'Etihad atmosphere' over a four-hour period for two matches in 2017, covering the time just before kick-off to a couple of hours' after a match had ended. During netnography, we functioned as 'unobtrusive lurkers' to access naturally occurring discussions and minimise disruption to online communities (Kozinets, 2010).

Taking an iterative hermeneutic approach (Arnold and Fischer, 1994), key themes in the data were identified by each author independently and then shared between authors as an interpretive group until thematic consensus was reached. Throughout this process, we oscillated back and forth between data and existing literatures and debates, contextualising findings in light of modern football discourses, alongside marketing and geography literatures on atmosphere, place and time. In the ensuing discussion of findings, pseudonyms are used to protect participants' anonymity.

## **(Re)thinking place atmospheres: Spatial and temporal porosity**

Our findings reveal place atmospheres have a spatial and temporal porosity, which is neglected in marketing. Specifically, extending complementary geographical insights into the fluidity of place

atmospheres (e.g. Degen and Lewis, 2019; Edensor, 2012) into the marketing field, we find football atmospheres are shaped by people's experiences, both inside and outside of the stadium, spanning years before kick-off to sometime after the final whistle. This confirms how any (consumption) moment encapsulates reverberations of past and future (Russell and Levy, 2012), with '...cracks in the surface of the present...' (Crang and Travlou, 2001: 175). It also echoes Husserlian notions of how present consciousness holds *retentions* from the immediate past and anticipations – or *protentions* – of what is just about to occur (Husserl, 1964). For the emotional and affective consumption of atmosphere at football matches, however, any retentions and protentions are arguably spatially and temporally extended, with atmosphere spilling out beyond the place of the football stadium, as well as the porous layer of time that might be regarded as 'the present'. We now unpack such ideas in relation to past atmospheres, disrupted match day routines, and future anticipations.

### *Memories of past atmospheres*

Memories and experiences of past atmospheres can shape the formation and reception of those in the present. While some places lack obvious historical associations, such as temporary pop-up retailers (Warnaby and Shi, 2017), or encourage immersion in the present moment like a rave club (Goulding et al., 2009), other places provide '... a *mise en scene* for remembered events' (Casey, 2000: 189; original emphasis). This includes spaces and places associated with periods and events in the collective memory, such as ruins (Anderson et al., 2017), museums (Goulding, 2001), and sites of past deaths and tragedies (Medway and Warnaby, 2008), as well as places capturing personal memories like a childhood home (Bachelard, 1964) or, in this case, a football club's home ground. Indeed, football grounds function as architectural repositories of history, holding '... the power to stir hearts and minds and to evoke and anchor strong visual and social memories' (Wood and Gabie, 2011: 1199).

As discussed above, in 2003, MCFC relocated from Maine Road to the Etihad Stadium and, although demolished in 2004, the former stadium is still widely considered the 'spiritual home' of the club (Edensor and Millington, 2010). Hence, although the material stadium itself has gone, memories of Maine Road atmospheres are sedimented into consumers' material bodies (Yakhlef, 2015), given the body is '... itself a "place" of memories...' (Casey, 2000: 178). Thus, as one fan online remarked, Maine Road will 'always be in my heart'. Rather than place 'holding' memories into '... its self-delimiting perimeters' (Casey, 2000: 189), therefore, we find those of Maine Road regularly spill out into the new home of the Etihad and beyond. Fans who have attended matches at both stadia often consider atmosphere at the new ground more negatively than those with no embodied experiences at the former; as Phil (group discussion 1) remarked, 'the games here are nothing like the old atmosphere'. As Katy (group discussion 2) similarly observes, 'It's just so much quieter than it was at Maine Road. I think noise contributes a lot to the atmosphere. You don't hear the same singing, the same chanting'.

These unfavourable comparisons appear fuelled by feelings of a lost community from Maine Road, reinforcing ideas that football stadia are spatial sources of generational continuity for supporters (Wood and Gabie, 2011). One fan online noted stadium moves are 'traumatic' and lead to a sense of 'dislocation', whereby the intergenerational traditions that contribute to atmosphere (Edensor and Millington, 2010) can be broken. Elizabeth (group discussion 2) fondly discussed the 'close community' at Maine Road, at which she attended games with her father as a child. Akin to urban explorers mourning obsolete buildings holding past memories (Anderson et al., 2017), she





**Figure 1.** Maine Road memories at the Etihad Stadium.

was ‘... very sad to leave Maine Road and cried lots on the last day of the season’. Similarly, another fan online commented that going to the Etihad was strange at first because ‘it almost felt like you were away when at home’. Clearly, long-standing supporters have formed strong, affective and ‘topophillic’ (Tuan, 1974) bonds with Maine Road, built on memories of its livelier atmospheres of community.

Memory, however, is continuously reconstructed (Steadman et al., 2019), with the past reappearing ‘... through a veil’ (Husserl, 1964: 72), and consumers’ storytelling around past matches can contribute to mythic notions of prior footballing experiences (Hague and Mercer, 1998). The club partakes in this myth-making process by transporting memories of the old ground into the Etihad with large historical images placed inside and outside of the new stadium (Figure 1), alongside creating a memorial garden. As Bachelard (1964: 6) explains, ‘... it is because our memories of former dwelling-places are relived as daydreams that these dwelling-places of the past remain in us for all time’. Fans sometimes confess, therefore, that they might be viewing Maine Road atmospheres through ‘rose-tinted spectacles’. And, while ideas of a mythic past can engender a sense of escapism for some consumers (Belk and Costa, 1998), as revealed above, for MCFC, this can contribute to atmospheric dilution in the club’s new home.

Alongside these temporally extended Maine Road comparisons, memories of more recent atmospheres at the Etihad also impact the perception and creation of those in the present-day. For instance, during a weekday night match against a lower league team, which Manchester City was comfortably winning, the first author experienced what she believed to be a lively first-half atmosphere with people shouting, singing and clapping. Yet, these perceptions contrasted

sharply with those of fans who had attended a tense match the previous week against a Premier League title rival:

At half time, *Author 4* asks me what I think of the match, and I tell him I think the atmosphere's been pretty good... He seems surprised and says that it's worse than last week during the Liverpool match because there was a lot more tension and excitement when City finally won, with more people standing up... We bump into a couple of City fans he knows... They also remark it was much better at the Liverpool game last week... (Fieldnotes, Author 1).

Here, it is evident that fans standing up can generate a more exciting ambience; hence, memories of past atmospheres do not just impact on *perceptions* of those in the here-and-now but may also have consequences for atmospheric *creation*. Atmospheres represent relational and affective flows between bodies (Böhme, 1993; Hill et al., 2014), with affects both experienced as particular 'feeling states' and fostering embodied action states (Duff, 2010); in this case, less collective energy being put into creating and spreading atmosphere during the latter match because it lacks the 'tension and excitement' of the previous week.

### *Disrupted match day routines*

Many regular football fans' match day consumption practices are rooted in routines, which unfold within spatial and temporal networks, for example, taking the same bus to and from the stadium, visiting the same pub before and after the match, and singing the same songs once in the stadium (Edensor and Millington, 2010; Hague and Mercer, 1998). These routines are passed between fan generations, and they contributed to an atmosphere of homeliness at Maine Road (Edensor, 2015). But consumers' routines can be disrupted (Cheetham et al., 2018; Phipps and Ozanne, 2017; Woermann and Rokka, 2015), potentially rupturing the flow of atmosphere. The match day routines of MFC fans were widely unsettled following the stadium move from Maine Road (Edensor and Millington, 2010). However, atmospheric disruption is not just the result of this broad spatial upheaval; it also links to events occurring both inside and outside of the Etihad, spanning a period before a match to after the final whistle. These events – with their attendant affects, emotions and sensations – *intermingle* through time forming ever-transient topographies of atmospheric experience.

As well as atmospheres being eroded by fans regularly leaving matches early to avoid traffic and tram queues (Figure 2), participants often express annoyances at cancelled or overcrowded public transport getting to the match (Figure 3) and the disruptive impact of this on match day routines and rhythms that lead to atmospheric generation. Elizabeth (group discussion 2), for example, remarks that getting to the match by tram can be 'frightening' '...because literally everybody is pushed...'; an experience shared by the first author below:

As the tram approaches, I sigh in disappointment. It's already packed... As I try to get into the tram, I'm being bashed by loads of people... I'm feeling worried the tram doors will close before I can even get on. I finally manage to push myself on... and surprisingly find a seat. However, this does not provide much relief. Heavily wrapped up in anticipation of a freezing cold match ahead, I'm now starting to overheat and feel a bit sick. I open my coat. People are crammed down the aisles and so I continue to be bashed... (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

Further atmospheric disruptions are created by turnstile queuing and security checks before entry into the stadium (Figure 4). Three of the authors, for instance, visited Mary D's – a notorious



**Figure 2.** Fans leaving matches early.

City fan pub – for a prematch pint before a late afternoon game. Contrasting with the managed environment of the stadium (Bale, 1993; Hill, 2016), Mary D’s combines multisensory elements to form a chaotic party atmosphere: old faded photos of Maine Road in mismatched frames; a sparkling disco ball; iconic team shirts draped from the ceiling; the smells of burgers, chips and beer; and the sounds of fans’ animated chatter and singing of songs by famous Manchester bands, which grows ever louder as kick-off draws closer. Yet, in the short walk from Mary D’s to the Etihad, this atmosphere can rapidly become eroded:

As we walk to the ground there’s a continuing buzz amongst the fans carrying over from the Mary D’s party atmosphere; but as we get to the point of entering the stadium this soon starts to deflate with queues, security checks and, bizarrely, a busker in a gazebo who is one of several contracted by the club to try and lift the atmosphere whilst people are queueing. She is singing slow-moving jazz pop numbers which contrast sharply with the upbeat Manchester anthems played at full volume in Mary D’s. (Fieldnotes, Author 3)

In this instance, a number of disruptions immediately outside the stadium thwart the momentum of atmospheric build up for fans arriving to the match in high spirits and with raised levels of anticipation. Queues, checks by security staff, and even the tempo of music slow down their actual and perceived pace of progress into the ground, the latter of these disruptions echoing insights into music tempo and customer behaviour in service settings (Milliman, 1982). As a result, many fans arrive into the stadium after kick-off, impeding the experience of those already seated. This forms a flow of disruption from outside the stadium into whatever atmospheric tension and excitement is starting to build inside – a steady and cooling trickle of water into an already simmering cauldron. To illustrate, Greg (group discussion 3) comments ‘even in



**Figure 3.** Crowded tram to the match.



**Figure 4.** Fans queuing to get into the Etihad.

the first three minutes, you can be up and down . . . letting people in and out . . . it just changes focus . . .'; indeed, the first author identifies herself as an atmospheric disruption when arriving late:

Before finding my seat, I . . . buy some chips . . . I realise the match has already started, and I have no idea how the seats are arranged in the stadium. Feeling a bit unsure, I show my ticket to the steward . . . He motions me to head to the bottom [of the stairs] and go left . . . Several guys stand up to let me in, looking slightly annoyed that I'm now in the way of their view of the match. I awkwardly apologise and squeeze past into the first spare seat I find . . . (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

Such accounts reveal how social interactions are integral to producing or changing atmosphere within the stadium (Edensor, 2015), with 'porous boundaries' (Hill et al., 2014: 387) between people (e.g. fans, security staff, hospitality workers) and spaces, both outside and inside the venue. This porosity also surfaces the potential for others to contribute positively as well as negatively to our affective engagement within a place (Cheetham et al., 2018; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Yakhlef, 2015). In this regard, Durkheim explored how social groupings can experience 'collective effervescence', whereby persons bond together over shared emotions (Cronin and Cocker, 2019). For example, the spreading of elated moods can sometimes be witnessed between fans in the stadium during matches:

. . . As soon as *Author 4* and I approach the top of the stairs in our stand, a roaring cheer goes up all around the stadium. A City goal has already been scored. He beams and punches the air in excitement . . . I feel the euphoric atmosphere fire into my body like an electric charge, increasing my heart rate, causing my skin to tingle, and the hairs on my arms to stand on end. (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

Conversely, tensions between diverse fan groups can hinder collective effervescence emerging during games, with the club's ticketing practices partly complicit in this. As one fan online notes, in the past you could 'pay your money at the turnstile and you were in', whereas now there are 'too many obstacles'. There are also difficulties around relocating seats during the season; as Greg (group discussion 3) notes, ' . . . you just can't ever relocate if we want to stay together. You can do one by one . . . but then you wouldn't be sitting together . . .' Alongside the move to all-seater stadia (Bale, 1993; Hill, 2016), this causes social groups to be 'broken off' in the stadium, as observed by Annie (group discussion 2), thereby diminishing the capacity for atmosphere to collectively build and spread during matches.

Long-standing supporters – or 'true blues' – also frequently express animosity towards tourists and persons in corporate hospitality, often referring to the latter as 'the prawn sandwich brigade' – a pejorative term coined by ex-Manchester United Footballer Roy Keane. Reflecting the growing gentrification of football (Giulianotti, 2002), a supporter/spectator dichotomy thus emerged in our data:

. . . People who don't really have the passion for the club, who just come here for a day out. That's the 'un-real' fans . . . Selfie sticks and spend two hundred pounds in the shop and . . . then fly off wherever . . . The club is pandering for those types of fans. (John, group discussion 1)

The first author's fieldnotes further illustrate this tension between loyal supporters and disconnected spectators, emerging here through awkward and unspoken interaction:



Each time City score, all the fans around me get up to cheer, sometimes embracing . . . I usually remain sitting down, occasionally briefly standing up to politely clap . . . The guy sitting next to me is very vocal, shouting advice to the players . . . “tidy up now; man on; play it; come on blues!” I’m beginning to feel a bit anxious about not shouting like the people around me . . . (Fieldnotes, Author 1)

Much marketing literature considers atmosphere a singular entity (Kotler, 1974; Turley and Chebat, 2002); yet places are ‘polyrhythmic’ (Lefebvre, 2004), and the Etihad comprises multiple pockets of atmosphere, which sometimes interact and unify into one tribal mass of noise to create the feel of a ‘12th man’. For instance, during one unseasonably warm autumnal match following an unexpected loss the week before, fans appeared energised for prolonged periods. Thunderous renditions of the club anthem Blue Moon and songs about players flowed across the stadium like a Mexican wave, with team members sometimes smirking in appreciation. By contrast, we also observed how multiple pockets of atmosphere can subsume or cancel each other out (Anderson and Ash, 2015; Canniford et al., 2017). On one November night match, the atmosphere appeared disparate, creating little synergistic effect; at points, the crowd was so quiet you could hear the players shouting to each other, and outbreaks of songs and chanting from different parts of the stadium could be discerned only as an isolated rendition. In a retail or service context, the segmentation of consumer groups is typically geared towards a careful targeting of their experience, which can enhance profit (Bitner, 1992; Kotler, 1974). For a football match, however, it seems that such manipulations (e.g. differentially priced seating) can fragment atmosphere by hindering its free circulation around a stadium, resulting in ‘splintered collectives’ (Bissell, 2010: 276), and thereby lessening the affective intensity of the experience for many people.

### *Anticipations of future*

People’s anticipations of what is to come can have important implications for atmospheres, reflecting ideas that a sense of future can motivate human behaviour within places (Hirschman et al., 2012; Roux et al., 2017). Our future anticipations are inevitably shaped by past affective encounters or, as Edensor (2012: 1115) puts it, ‘. . . a “looking forward” based on a looking back’. While anticipations of consumer experience can sometimes be more temporally extended, as in the case of an annual music festival (Skandalis et al., 2019), that ‘looking back’ can also be focused on something that was only moments ago part of the present. For example, the third author observes below a febrile prematch atmosphere rapidly building and spreading around Mary D’s pub before an MCFC match, as fans realise rivals Manchester United are drawing in an earlier fixture:

. . . The sense of excitement seems to be heightened by the fact that Southampton are playing Manchester United in an early kick off, which is being watched on big screens all around . . . When Southampton score, a massive cheer goes up and the DJ breaks off the music to chant “You’re shit, and you know you are”. City fans jubilantly join in. Another cheer erupts when the full-time whistle is blown and you can feel fans’ anticipation for the match go up a notch. Everyone is buzzing . . . (Fieldnotes, Author 3)

Football match atmospheres can also be elevated in the present because of the perceived toughness or ease of future remaining fixtures, alongside the stakes of winning leagues, beating records, and getting through rounds of competitions. During a League Cup semi-final match, the first author witnessed growing tension around the ground as fans started to believe in the possibility of an upcoming Wembley final. Equally, anticipation of some upcoming fixtures can result in fans

arriving to matches with a mood of indifference, or – in some cases – not showing up at all. This, in turn, can have a negative impact on the stadium atmosphere; as Robbie (group discussion 3) notes, ‘If you get early draws against someone like Barnsley, you know it’s going to be a game what nobody’s going to be up for’.

Some participants also felt the Etihad’s atmosphere has become diluted due to the anticipation of easily winning future matches, with a sense of apathy spreading across the fan base. As Andy (group discussion 1) remarks, ‘... we’ve become victims of our own success’; meanwhile, a fan online chimes, ‘... success often brings apathy and expectancy of continued success’. Conversely, participants observe how there was a louder atmosphere at home games in the past when the team lost more frequently; as Annie (group discussion 2) stated, ‘... we’ve watched them through thin and thin’, while a fan online similarly commented how ‘the atmosphere is always better when we’re losing’. The collective expectation of winning has, according to participants, led to more subdued atmospheres within the Etihad, since it has ‘... killed a lot of that fun side of it...’ (Liam, group discussion 3). This flow of apathy and atmospheric deflation was witnessed by the third author:

Fans are enthusiastic at the start after a City goal in the first couple of minutes. But this seems to quickly lead to a sense of things being routinely easy, and by around 26 minutes the atmosphere’s gone really flat... Fans are happier, it seems, when there is more at risk. And at this point, one nil up, against weak opposition with no history of inter-fan animosity with the club, and so early in the season, there is less to be excited about. (Fieldnotes, Author 3)

These accounts of atmospheric erosion reflect wider discourses of falling out of love with modern football (Giulianotti, 2002); indeed, fans reflect online about how issues with atmosphere might be ‘a sign of the times’. More positively, however, participants discussed a range of potential interventions which they imagine could be made in the future to enhance match atmospheres, echoing Bachelard’s (1964) reflections on humans’ daydreaming about places. The most common suggestions include standing during matches, cheaper on-the-day tickets, reduced beer prices, and creating a wall of passionate home supporters. According to Mike (group discussion 1), this would lead to the noise in the ground being ‘thunderous’.

However, as Edensor (2015: 6) observes, football fans possess ‘... an agency and reflexivity that resists forms of affective management that seem contrived or superficial’. Indeed, study participants reject more heavy-handed forms of atmospheric manipulation; as Phil (group discussion 1) asserted, ‘atmosphere has to come from the fans... It has to be the club just doing things to make atmosphere easy’. By contrast, the atmospheric literature argues managers should manipulate sensory cues in consumption environments to influence consumers’ experiences (Hoffman and Turley, 2002; Kotler, 1974; Turley and Chebat, 2002) and hence manufacture ‘atmospheres of seduction’ to encourage enhanced consumption levels (Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012). Yet, reflecting the dialectical interplays between consumer agencies and marketers’ sensory interventions in experiential consumption environments (Kozinets et al., 2004; Sherry et al., 2001), we find atmospheres are inherently fragile, delicately co-constructed, and liable to burst at any moment.

## **Conclusions: Atmospheric porosity, place and time**

Much existing research in retail and services marketing presents atmosphere as a relatively static, bounded, and managerially controllable entity (Kotler, 1974; Turley and Chebat, 2002). This

draws, in part, on Aristotelian ideas around place-as-container, which suggests ‘... place tends to hold its contents steadily within its own embrace’ (Casey, 2000: 186). Despite growing interest in affect and atmosphere within consumer research, which reveals its dynamic and embodied quality (Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012; Hill et al., 2014), less is known about how atmosphere within a given consumption setting might be shaped by consumers’ experiences both inside and *outside* of a place and during and *beyond* the confines of a consumption encounter. In this article, therefore, we have contributed a more spatially and temporally porous understanding of place atmospheres within marketing. We revealed how atmospheres – and their associated affects, moods, sensations, memories and anticipations – flow through and across football stadia and fans in the build up to, during, and after a match. This demonstrates how places of consumption have porous or leaky boundaries that are permeable to other spatialities and temporalities, with the image of place-as-colander thus more clearly emerging. This is something briefly hinted at in Bradford and Sherry’s (2017) study of tailgating events, where they observe how strangers can freely wander in and out of such environments, sometimes forming friendships. It also reveals a potential dynamism in consumption environments, such that a place’s boundaries might be seen as being ‘constantly formed and re-formed’ (Cheetham et al., 2018: 475).

We argue consumers’ pasts and potential futures can flood into any consumption experience and environment – both mundane and spectacular – moving insights into atmospheric porosity beyond our focus on football matches, to places traditionally explored in the atmospherics literature, such as retail stores. Take, for instance, the experience of Christmas shopping. While retail managers might introduce Christmas music, scents (Spangenberg et al., 2005) and illuminations into retail settings, their atmospheres can also be impacted by events taking place before the consumer even arrives. For example, difficulties parking and poor weather could result in shoppers harbouring bad moods and spreading these among others within stores. Equally, while some people may have favourable memories of previous Christmas shopping trips, others may recall undesirable aspects involving queuing and overcrowding, with such past experiences impacting present-day atmospheres, with the potential for pockets of frustration, boredom, and impatience to emerge and sprawl. Turning to future anticipations, imagining family members cheerfully opening Christmas gifts, or excitement around an upcoming work break, might lead to jovial atmospheres among shoppers. Alternatively, concerns over future terrorist attacks on Christmas shopping areas could cause uneasy atmospheres in the here-and-now.

While many of these factors lie outside of direct managerial control, our findings indicate the need to engage with potential atmospheric influencers beyond the perceived boundaries of identified consumption settings and encounters. This could involve retail/service/place managers’ considerations of how consumers’ atmospheric experiences emerge from broad and constantly interweaving webs of spatial, temporal, and multisensory interactions (e.g. home life, public transport, outdoor events and festivals, street markets and retail store settings), across which atmospheres can seethe, surge and swirl.

In this case, our article further contributes to growing marketing literature on the consumption in – and of – places (see Chatzidakis et al., 2018), by bringing insights into place and time closer together. Beyond the consumption of atmospheres, marketing theory has more broadly explored place–time interactions in relation to various consumer contexts. Such work has examined the mnemonic qualities of garages (Hirschman et al., 2012), museums (Goulding, 2001), and ruins (Anderson et al., 2017); how rave clubs (Goulding et al., 2009) and spectacular shopping environments (Kozinets et al., 2004; Sherry et al., 2001) can immerse consumers in the present moment, and the dynamic rhythms witnessed in football supporters’ coaches (Canniford et al., 2017), on



Paris sidewalks (Roux et al., 2017), and in parks (Cheetham et al., 2018). Equally, Castilhos and Dolbec (2017: 161) acknowledge how what they term ‘emancipating spaces’ involve ‘... temporary liberation from the social order’, as well as how spaces can shift between types, although a temporal dimension is not explicitly included in their spatial typology. Indeed, theorising the temporalised aspects of places is *rarely* the explicit concern of such literature (for exceptions, see Cheetham et al., 2018; Roux et al., 2017). We, however, put place–time interrelations front and centre by exploring how past memories and future anticipations impact present-day atmospheres, which, in turn, flow through and across places over time.

Our article also reveals how the development of atmospheres at football matches may require a delicate balance being struck between maintaining fan routines that generate feelings of community (Edensor, 2015), while injecting novel encounters to stimulate excitement. This reflects work identifying that consumer experiences can involve a series of spatio-temporal tensions between ordinary and escapist, immersion and communing, and antistructure and structure (Husemann et al., 2016; Skandalis et al., 2019). Many participants, for instance, mentioned a memorably atmospheric night at the Etihad when the lights were unexpectedly dimmed and a blue moon was projected onto stadium screens. But it was also identified this was only effective as a one-off intervention, as when used again it seemed artificial. However, many fans like songs with long-standing club associations being routinely played in the prematch build-up to help generate atmospheric excitement. This suggests that any atmospheric manipulations may benefit from an intricate ebb and flow of intensities to create their desired affective and emotional charges.

While our study largely focused on the more routinised aspects of football matches experienced by long-standing local supporters, future research could explore the porosity of place atmospheres during more extraordinary consumption experiences – for instance, football tourism and ‘pilgrimages’ to stadia by geographically dispersed fans – building on existing work in this area (e.g. Husemann et al., 2016; Skandalis et al., 2019), but with a more explicit focus on atmosphere. The fragmented nature of atmosphere could also be further explored – hence, how multiple pockets of atmosphere may interact within a given consumption environment – as atmosphere is typically theorised as being singular (for exceptions, see Anderson and Ash, 2015; Canniford et al., 2017); example contexts might include theme parks, pubs, and gyms. We also encourage researchers in the field to further develop understandings of place–time interrelations by studying their interactions within time-limited environments, such as pay-by-the-hour cafes, pop-up events, and transport hubs.

On a concluding note, acknowledging Cresswell’s (2004) caution that humans can both make and break places, we suggest any atmospheric interventions in consumption environments should not be heavy-handed or solely tied to notions of a consumption–place–time bubble manufactured for maximising profitability. Instead, they should facilitate consumers – whether reflexively or habitually – to form and curate atmospheres in a more negotiated manner.

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