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# Consuming Atmospheres

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Designing, Experiencing, and Researching  
Atmospheres in Consumption Spaces

Edited by Chloe Steadman and  
Jack Coffin

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## Chapter 1

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### **Consuming atmospheres**

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# Consuming atmospheres

A journey through the past, present, and future of atmospheres in marketing

*Chloe Steadman and Jack Coffin*

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### Introduction: Why consuming atmospheres?

Atmosphere is a term often used in daily life to describe experiences of consumption spaces; as Anderson (2009: 78) notes, atmosphere is variously interchanged with ‘mood, feeling, ambience, [and] tone’ when describing how a space or place feels to us. The etymology of atmosphere lies in *atmos* (vapour or steam) and *sphere* (globe or ball) (Buser, 2014). For Böhme (1993: 114), therefore, atmospheres ‘seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze’; whilst Anderson (2009: 80) similarly describes atmospheres as ‘spatially discharged affective qualities’. Atmospheres move us affectively, corporeally, and sensorially as we spend time in consumption spaces; as Kotler (1974: 50) recognised, ‘atmosphere is always present as a quality of surrounding space’. Atmospheres are everywhere: from inhaling a pungent and overwhelming concoction of perfumes, wandering bleary-eyed, half-asleep through the garishly lit Duty Free section of an airport, cloaked in a drowsy atmosphere with other sleepy passengers waiting to catch an early morning flight; to loop-de-looping around screaming in unison with fellow thrill-seekers, hands in the air and wind in the hair riding on a theme park roller-coaster, enveloped in an exhilarating atmosphere.

Given it has such a central presence in our consumption experiences, atmosphere has long been a topic of interest in marketing. However, it was Kotler’s (1974) coining of the term ‘atmospherics’ that encouraged marketers to think of atmospheres as something that could be managed. Kotler (1974: 50) described atmospherics as ‘the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in buyers’ through the multi-sensory design of retail and service settings. And it is arguably becoming increasingly important to understand consumers’ experiences of atmospheres. This is partly against the backdrop of the ‘experience economy’, where for businesses ‘the next competitive battleground lies in staging experiences’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1998: 98). Indeed, as consumers are increasingly encouraged to rent cars, holiday homes, and even fashion items (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017), experiences are not simply an addition to the core product but often today the central source of value

that consumers search for (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Similarly, in order to attract consumers back to physical stores on the high street or downtown when online shopping is on the rise (ONS, 2023), businesses must provide memorable and multi-sensory experiences not replicable in the digital world to remain competitive (White et al., 2023). Efforts are being made around the world to ‘turnaround’ towns facing the hardships of economic crisis, empty stores, and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic, through innovative place-making interventions to foster more atmospheric experiences of place (Kelly, 2016; Parker et al., 2017). It is therefore becoming even more imperative to learn how to design welcoming, inclusive, and enjoyable atmospheres in consumption environments today.

Atmosphere is thus a powerful concept for marketing theorists and practitioners alike. Unfortunately, atmospheres are often powerful because they are seemingly ineffable, inexplicable, and uncontrollable. Other disciplines have tried to engage with the complex and multifaceted concept of atmosphere, from human geography (e.g. Anderson, 2009), through sociology (e.g. May and Lewis, 2022) and tourism (e.g. Goulding, 2023; Volgger and Pfister, 2019), to philosophy (e.g. Böhme, 1993) and architecture (e.g. Pallasmaa, 2014). Whilst some marketing researchers have drawn on insights into atmosphere from other fields such as human geography (e.g. Steadman et al., 2021), feminist theory (e.g. Preece et al., 2022), and philosophy (e.g. Biehl-Missal and Saren, 2012), often research into atmosphere remains confined in disciplinary silos. Almost a decade ago, Hill et al. (2014) called for novel methods or theorisations that could capture the difficult-to-describe qualities of atmosphere. Innovative methodological and (non)representational techniques have been forthcoming in the years hence, but much more work is still arguably needed (Coffin and Hill, 2023).

These forces of change and enduring challenges, when taken together, coalesce into the impetus behind this edited collection. Our ambition as editors was to unsettle disciplinary boundaries by bringing together an interdisciplinary collection of cutting-edge work with a shared interest in atmospheres and consumption, broadly defined. In doing so, we created one convenient place for interested academics, students, and practitioners to access knowledge about this topic. The chapters weave together atmospheric insights from researchers working in the fields of marketing, consumer research, geography, sociology, youth studies, art and design, place management, and law. They explore atmospheres in a wide range of consumption contexts and spaces, including pop-up stores, music festivals, tourist spaces, town centres, sports stadia, amusement arcades, food and drink, urban squats, and seaside piers across England, Scotland, Denmark, and Slovenia. These chapters stand together under the aegis of a single (but not singularising or standardising) appellation: *Consuming Atmospheres*. Each chapter conceives these two concepts differently, but all enter into conversation with these entwined terms, as well as each other and other existing research.

We will now take readers on a journey with us through the past, present, and future of atmospheres in marketing. In doing so, we will also introduce you to the chapters forming our atmospheric collection within the three thematic areas organising the book: *Part I: Designing Atmospheres*, *Part II: Experiencing Atmospheres*, and *Part III: Researching Atmospheres*.

## Designing atmospheres

The first section of this collection is called *Designing Atmospheres*. The origin of scholarship on designing atmospheres within marketing lies in Kotler's (1974) ideas around atmospherics as a 'marketing tool'. Kotler (1974: 51) argues businesses can gain competitive advantage through the atmospheric design of buying environments, including through visual (e.g. colour), aural (e.g. volume), olfactory (e.g. scent), and tactile (e.g. temperature) managerial interventions. Kotler (1974: 51) further suggests atmospheric design not only applies to retail stores (he provides examples of shoe, furniture, bargain basement, and antique retailing) but also service environments, such as funeral parlours, discotheques, restaurants, airports, psychiatric offices, and advertising agencies. Bitner (1992) further applied such ideas to service settings through introducing the 'servicescapes model', which illustrates how the 'physical surroundings' of a service environment, including ambient conditions (e.g. temperature, music, odour, etc.), spatial function (e.g. layout, furnishings, etc.), and signs, symbols, and artifacts (e.g. signage, décor style, etc.), impact employees' and consumers' cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioural responses.

Following Kotler's (1974) paper on atmospherics, a large stream of atmospherics research has since flooded into the field. This work often adopts the 'S-O-R paradigm' from environmental psychology (Turley and Milliman, 2000) to investigate the impact of sensory stimuli (S) (e.g. music, lighting, scent) on consumers' emotions and evaluations of the consumption setting (O) (e.g. pleasure or dominance) and subsequent behavioural responses (R) (e.g. spend and dwell time). To give a flavour of this literature, consider the following two examples. Milliman (1986) found that playing slower-paced music in a restaurant encourages consumers to dwell for longer and spend more money on drinks. Meanwhile, Areni and Kim (1994) highlighted how brighter lighting in a wine store motivates consumers to handle more merchandise, though not necessarily purchase more wine. In both cases, the focus was on comparing how input stimuli result in output behavioural responses.

Thus, whilst useful, S-O-R-inspired literature can be critiqued for often focusing too narrowly on relationships formed between a singular sensory stimulus (e.g. music tempo) and an accompanying behaviour (Spence et al., 2014). This approach arguably overlooks the rich multi-sensory experience that people often associate with the term atmosphere, not to mention wider forces (culture, ideology, etc.) that shape atmospheres and are reproduced

(or subverted) by atmospheres (Hill et al. 2014). Recent attention, therefore, has been given to how multiple senses should be considered in atmospheric design. Spence et al. (2014: 472) suggest ‘the senses operate in concert’ and ‘multisensory atmospherics are potentially stronger than focusing on a single sensory atmospheric cue’ (ibid.: 483). Some had already been taking this into account. Spangenberg et al. (2005), for instance, revealed combining Christmas smells and songs can encourage more favourable store attitudes; whereas, Morrin and Chebat (2005) found slow tempo background music combined with citrus scents led to shopping mall consumers spending less money, potentially due to sensory overload or incongruence. However, Spence (2022: 665) has again more recently emphasised how ‘atmospherics is nothing if not multi-sensory’ and cross-modal influences on consumers should be ‘the rule, rather than the exception’ (ibid.: 667), thereby signalling there is more work to be done.

Whilst conventionally atmospheres were associated with embodied experiences of physical settings (Kotler, 1974), ideas around atmospheric design are now being adapted to online stores, considering factors such as colours, white space, fonts, and sounds (e.g. Manganari et al., 2009). Although most atmospherics literature continues to concentrate on fixed retail settings – whether online or offline – in Chapter 2 of this collection, Warnaby and Shi focus on atmospheric design of pop-up stores – a highly experiential retail environment seeking to enhance consumers’ brand engagement, create a ‘buzz’, and is available for a temporary time to stimulate purchases. The authors introduce readers to an underpinning framework for understanding temporary (pop-up) retail atmospheres, comprising materiality (e.g. fixtures and fittings and store layout), spatiality (e.g. online or offline, shopping malls or shipping containers), and temporality (e.g. pre pop-up, pop-up experience, and post pop-up stages). In doing so, the chapter moves attention away from the atmospheres of fixed retail formats and demonstrates the potential usefulness of the Deleuzoguattarian concept of ‘milieux’ for theorising the temporary retail atmospheres increasingly being designed by businesses today.

Traditionally, atmospherics research tends to be managerial, reflecting the management orientation of marketing more broadly, where sensory stimuli are considered a controllable marketing tool (Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021). For instance, Kotler (1974: 62) argues ‘management must... identify the major atmospheric variables that are available, to produce the desired customer awareness and reaction’; whilst Turley and Chebat (2002: 130) contend there is need for ‘increased centralized control over the retail environment’. However, as some of the chapters in this collection reveal, atmospheres are not always so easily controlled. In Chapter 3, Woodward and Swartjes draw attention to the non-human features shaping music festival atmospheres, which organisers do not always have direct control over. Drawing on the case of Karrusel – an electronic music festival in a small forest in Copenhagen, Denmark – the authors suggest felt atmospheres are entangled with the

physical gaseous atmosphere surrounding us. Taking readers on a tour through the festival space, Woodward and Swartjes illustrate how its natural features (e.g. weather, dirt paths, forest trees, rustling leaves), alongside design features introduced by festival organisers (e.g. seating, fences, stages, food/drinks stalls, decorative elements) intermingle to create the music festival's enchanted atmosphere. For the authors, therefore, music festival atmospheres are relationally made through interactions between people, things, and nature. Similarly, in Chapter 4, Edensor discusses how tourist spaces are often carefully designed by tourist operators to meet tourists' desires for a temporary shift in feeling. He observes some of these tourist settings are intensively designed to create the familiar holiday atmospheres sought by tourists as an escape from the everyday (e.g. a luxury hotel); whilst other tourist atmospheres are more loosely designed, with non-human features playing a more prevalent role (e.g. trips into nature). However, Edensor also reveals how tourist atmospheres are co-produced by tourists themselves and can develop in ways that those designing tourist settings did not originally anticipate (e.g. bad weather events). In short, atmospheres are co-designed by many different humans and non-humans, not simply those who describe themselves as designers.

Within consumer culture research (see Arnould and Thompson, 2005), a more critical view of atmospheric design has been taken. Biehl-Missal and Saren (2012) highlight how 'atmospheres of seduction' are produced in Starbucks coffee shops, with large windows, soft furnishings, warm lighting, and coffee bean odours intermingling to produce a homely and cosy atmosphere. As the authors argue, such deliberate manufacturing of Starbucks's atmospheres encourages consumers to spend more time and money there; atmospheres therefore 'do not only create aesthetic pleasure but also aesthetic manipulation' (*ibid.*: 175). Moreover, as issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion become spotlighted in the public agenda (Arsel et al., 2022), attention has turned to belonging and atmospheric design. Kuruoğlu and Woodward (2021: 123) explore the 'atmospheric conditioning' of Danish coffee shops designed to welcome certain social groups, whilst people deemed 'out of place' can be 'flushed out by affects of discomfort'. In one café they studied the minimalistic design (e.g. white cups, planters, and walls, and specialist coffee beans prominently for sale) foreground appreciation of coffee, with those not holding such cultural capital potentially feeling excluded (*ibid.*). Similarly, Steadman and de Jong (2022) reveal how 'ambient power' can make certain people feel excluded at craft beer festivals, with the labyrinthine layout, obvious brewery branding, and rustic beer list chalkboards at one of the beer festivals they studied, creating a serious and segregated atmosphere those without craft beer knowledge can feel uncomfortable in. They therefore suggest the co-design of consumption spaces between consumers and management is conducive to generating more inclusive atmospheres (*ibid.*).

In Chapter 5 of this collection, French and McLean take heed of this advice as they take readers through the collaborative design of a museum exhibition: *Two Centuries of Stink: Smell Mapping Widnes Past and Present*. The authors focus on the town of Widnes in England, which has long been perceived as ‘smelly’ due to associations with chemical factories. To showcase the changing olfactory atmosphere of Widnes, French and McLean invited residents to share and map their ‘smell memories’ of the town, which were incorporated into the exhibition’s design. Visitors were also given the opportunity to select smells of Widnes to archive for the future. This chapter, therefore, further highlights the power of co-designing consumption environments so their attendant atmospheres generate greater feelings of belonging, for a wider range of social groups.

### **Experiencing atmospheres**

The second section of this collection is called *Experiencing Atmospheres*. Sparked by the interweaving of the ‘affective turn’ (Preece et al., 2022), ‘sensory turn’ (Pink, 2015), and ‘turn of the body’ (Turner, 2012) currently infusing the social sciences, focus has shifted towards people’s atmospheric experiences, which moves attention away from the managerialist origins in marketing scholarship on atmospherics. Indeed, Sumartojo and Pink (2019: 8) argue ‘the key to making sense of atmosphere... is to orientate ourselves in the experiential world’. Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) treatise on the ‘experience economy’ was mentioned in the introduction, but this remains largely in the managerialist vein of research. Other marketing scholars have considered consumer experience a valuable object of study, even if it does not adhere to managerial objectives (Thompson et al., 1989). Notable work in this broader research around consumer experience is Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1982) study of experiential consumption, stressing the importance of fantasies, feelings, and fun. Whilst they also acknowledged how studying consumer experience could augment the work of marketing managers, their research suggested the study of consumer experience should not be restricted to spaces or times that managers can control (ibid.).

Following this watershed research, a number of studies burst forth like a deluge: some investigated consumers’ multi-sensory experiences of retail spaces like ESPN Zone (Sherry et al., 2001), Nike Town (Peñaloza, 1998), or American Girl Place (Borghini et al., 2009), whilst others escaped to the desert (Kozinets, 2002), the river (Arnould and Price, 1993), or the mountains (Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Whilst these articles did not explicitly focus on atmospheres, they abound (implicitly) amidst the empirical details of these diverse studies of consumer experience. For example, in their ethnography of illicit pleasure at rave clubs, Goulding et al. (2009: 764) observe how ravers queuing to enter the clubs, with any ingested drugs starting to take hold, wait in anticipation sometimes for hours to see if they will be let in



by the patrolling security staff, which fuels ‘a carnival atmosphere’. Whilst, in research into brand community and tailgating events before American football matches, Bradford and Sherry (2017: 8) reveal how hosting such events involves providing food and drinks for guests, facilitating conversations between people, and integrating strangers into the group, with this ‘facework of bridging and bonding... essential to the establishment of a convivial atmosphere’. Finally, in their study of brandfests and the Danish J-dag event (where breweries release their new Christmas beer on the first Friday of November), Kjeldgaard and Bode (2017) document how staff and drinkers dressing up in Christmas outfits, breweries giving out festive merchandise, and bars playing Christmas music combine to create a ‘Christmas atmosphere’ in Danish cities. Although the atmospheres the above studies describe vary, they are united by a phenomenological approach which attends to the first-person experience of consumers (Thompson et al., 1989).

More recently, atmospheric experience has been foregrounded across a range of consumption spaces, including football stadia (Hill et al., 2022; Steadman et al., 2021), craft beer festivals (Steadman and de Jong, 2022), coffee shops (Kuruoğlu and Woodward, 2021), parks (Cheetham et al., 2018), and spiritual settings (Preece et al., 2022). This literature has revealed how, despite marketers’ intentions to design well-crafted consumption environments, atmospheric experience can unfold in unexpected – and sometimes undesirable – ways. For instance, in their study of Manchester City football matches, Steadman et al. (2021) identify a series of ‘atmospheric disruptions’ football fans might encounter before, during, and after matches, which can deflate the atmosphere. Such disruptions include overcrowded public transport, people arriving late to their seats, and being separated from family and friends in the stadium. As the authors explain, ‘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’ (ibid.: 144). Likewise, Hill et al. (2022) demonstrate how football match atmospheres can ‘fail’ for Liverpool FC fans if disrupted by less-enthused tourist spectators, stadium moves/renovations, overly manufactured atmospheric interventions, heavy-handed security measures, and being segregated from family and friends. Meanwhile, Cheetham et al. (2018) illustrate how atmospheres of ‘quiet’ and ‘peace’ can become disrupted for visitors to urban parks by barking dogs, birds fighting, and loud groups. The authors detail how ‘the steady spits of rain, together with the overhead battle cries between birds skirmishing over bread... interrupts and permeates the atmosphere of our shared space’ (ibid.: 484).

Building on these insights, in Chapter 8 of this collection, Falconer explores how people’s experiences of eating foods can be shaped by ‘accidental atmospheres’, those atmospheres leaking beyond the margins of intended corporate design. With a focus on tasting Tunnock’s food products (classic Scottish

confectionary items), Falconer illustrates how people's experiences of consuming this food can deviate from depictions of food in the Scottish *Food Tourism Strategy* and the culinary atmospheres such promotional images and narratives can evoke. As Falconer's chapter highlights, atmospheres of food spaces are co-created by people's embodied memories of consuming nostalgic food of the past. Moreover, in Chapter 9, Kanellopoulou and Ntounis reveal how attempts to carefully design orderly urban environments by city decision-makers can dampen urban atmospheres. Taking readers on a walk through two urban squats in Ljubljana, Slovenia – Autonomous Rog and Metelkova – they demonstrate how atmospheric tensions can emerge for visitors to these illicit spaces, which are situated within the wider spaces of the green, clean, and predictable city of Ljubljana. In Rog, there was an unruly atmosphere produced through its rundown appearance, graffiti, and safety hazard signs; however, it was demolished in 2021 and replaced with a city-mandated arts and technology centre. Whilst Metelkova, once a hub for alternative arts, is becoming increasingly gentrified, with its atmosphere of experimentation steadily becoming diluted and overly similar to the atmospheres circulating in the wider city.

Research into atmospheric experience also considers atmospheres as 'porous'; hence that present-day atmospheres are punctuated by past memories and future anticipations, and also by events taking place outside of a consumption space (Steadman et al., 2021). For example, in sharing their first-hand journeys of 'landing' in the affective atmospheres of spiritual settings in Brazil, Preece et al. (2022: 361) illustrate how consumers' experiences of atmospheres are not homogenous, as 'landing is impregnated with our own (micro) personal affective biographies'. They reveal how, even when sharing certain feelings within an unfamiliar setting, no two people will experience the atmosphere the exact same way due to different embodied histories. Preece et al. (2022: 376) therefore argue that arriving in atmospheres is 'shaped by what comes before and in turn, shapes what comes after'. Similarly, Steadman et al. (2021: 141) document how football match atmospheres are

shaped by people's experiences... spanning years before kick-off to sometime after the final whistle... 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'.

With a focus on Manchester City's Etihad Stadium, they explore how memories of past matches and anticipations of how future matches might unfold, inform the atmosphere experienced during present-day games.

Equally, in an ethnographic study of Liverpool FC's Anfield Stadium, Hill et al. (2022) explore how lively 'social atmospheres' are collectively generated between fans through four stages of an 'interaction ritual chain'

(Preparation, Activation, Climax, and Recovery) – some of which take place before and after kick-off and outside of the stadium itself. For instance, in the Preparation and Activation stages, a pre-match atmosphere can build and intensify between smaller groups of fans through rehearsing songs and chants, creating flags, and meeting in pubs, before this atmosphere is then taken into the stadium and circulated amongst larger groups of fans during matches. Hill et al. (2022: 134) thereby conclude that, ‘at concerts, sports fixtures, carnivals, and festivals, atmospheres are often activated prior to, and outside of, the places where these events occur’. Building on this earlier work, in Chapter 6 of this collection, Hill, Canniford, and Eckhardt examine the conditions required to produce an *intense* atmosphere. Rather than focusing on the four stages of the ritual chain discussed earlier, this time they explore the *links* between the stages. The authors explain how intense atmospheres are formed within ‘dense’ ritual chains; for this to happen, ‘spatially and temporally concentrated’ social interactions need to take place between each stage of the chain. For example, links between the Preparation and Activation stages are often dense for Liverpool fans, since the stadium is located close to the city centre. This means a large number of fans can quickly congregate in a small space together when moving towards the stadium on public transport or by foot, creating a sense of Liverpool fans taking over the city. Their chapter thus provides insights into how more intense atmospheres might be produced and consumed.

Finally, research into consumer experience is beginning to give more attention to the influence of non-humans, who co-create but can also potentially experience atmospheres (Coffin, 2021). In the earlier examples we can see how non-human actors co-produce atmospheres with consumers, whether music, food, drink, flags, signage, public transport, animals, or weather. Prior work has shown how objects, technologies, and other non-humans shape the sensory and physical conditions that humans then interpret as atmospheres, often in subtle and subconscious ways (Coffin, 2021). This suggests marketers should study beneath, between, and beyond moments of conscious reflection to fully understand consumers’ atmospheric experiences, whilst critical researchers can look to these as moments of change, escape, and transformation (Coffin, 2020). In Chapter 7 of this collection, Lineham foregrounds the influence of light and dark on the atmospheres of amusement arcades. With a focus on the seaside resort of Blackpool, UK, Lineham provides a poetic account of the lighting techniques informing the atmospheres of its seaside amusement arcades. The chapter reveals how the lighting experienced in these consumption spaces, such as inviting lit-up entrances, glitter, and the flickering colourful lights of games machines, has an ‘action potential’, which can elicit moods of intrigue, wonder, delight, comfort, or boredom in visitors. In doing so, Lineham repositions the seaside amusement arcade from being a site of deviance to a space providing rich, immersive, and multi-sensory experience.

## Researching atmospheres

The third section of this collection is called *Researching Atmospheres*. Due to being ‘determinate and indeterminate, present and absent, singular and vague’ (Anderson, 2009: 80), atmospheres are often considered difficult to research. For Preece et al. (2022: 374), atmosphere presents a ‘methodological conundrum’ as it involves studying ‘movement, forces and bodies... sometimes below the threshold of representation’. Michels (2015: 255) likewise suggests that although ‘we are constantly affected by this fleeting and fragile phenomenon, it is extremely difficult to be analytically precise when empirically researching atmospheres’. Anderson and Ash (2015) further highlight four key problematics associated with researching atmospheres: how can we name an ephemeral phenomenon, how do we separate multiple atmospheres in a space, how can we assign causality to an atmosphere, and how can we pinpoint changes in atmosphere over time? Discussions are thus beginning to emerge around how best to research atmospheres.

Atmospherics literature typically employs an experimental research design (see Turley and Milliman, 2000 for an overview of the experimental evidence), but more traditional qualitative methods have also been widely adopted in marketing to research atmospheres, such as interviews (Hill et al., 2022), focus groups (Steadman et al., 2021), and, most commonly, ethnographic observation (Cheetham et al., 2018; Hill et al., 2022; Kuruoğlu and Woodward, 2021; Steadman et al., 2021; Steadman and de Jong, 2022). For instance, Hill et al. (2022) conducted 60 in-depth interviews with Liverpool FC supporters, football stadium architects, police, crowd safety experts, journalists, and sports marketers to access information about atmospheric design, experience, and management at Anfield Stadium. Meanwhile, Steadman et al. (2021: 140) conducted three focus groups with Manchester City fans to attain their reflections about ‘experiences of good/bad atmospheres at the Etihad, whether atmosphere at the Etihad has changed over time, and factors impacting match atmospheres’. Accordingly, Hill et al. (2014: 388) argue ‘traditional interviews can gain access to emic descriptions of the power of atmospheres’, and hence interviewing techniques can enable researchers to know *about* an atmosphere (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019).

However, it can be difficult to put the intensity of an atmosphere into words during an interview (Hill et al., 2014). Subsequently, ethnographic observation, which enables researchers to know *in* atmosphere (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019) has also been used in marketing. To study the atmospheres of Danish coffee shops, Kuruoğlu and Woodward (2021: 116) adopted ethnographic observation in two cafes, which involved analysing and comparing ‘the objects and surfaces in each space: colour, material, light, texture, tastes, smells, and spatial arrangements’. Equally, when researching ambient power at craft beer festivals, Steadman and de Jong (2022: 115–116) spent time at two festivals in Manchester, UK, observing the ‘music; chatter; food

and drink smells and tastes; lighting; architecture and spatial layout; objects, signage and furnishings, embodied performances, density and social interactions; reflections and emotions'. In Chapter 10 of this collection, Sumartojo further highlights the value of ethnographic techniques for studying atmospheres and considers this through three conceptual entry points: attunement, emergence, and materiality. In doing so, the chapter discusses the benefits of using the researcher's own body as a research instrument and in adopting methods which attend to the emergent, dynamic, and unpredictable quality of atmosphere. Through drawing together examples from both her own and others' past work on light and collective identity, Sumartojo suggests methods such as autoethnography, participatory design, sensory ethnography, and digital ethnography are particularly useful for exploring atmospheres.

As inspired by non- or more-than-representational theory emanating from geography (Thrift, 2008), some marketing researchers have developed innovative and creative research methods and modes of dissemination. As Hill et al. (2014: 384) explain, non-representational work seeks to provide detailed descriptions of those aspects of life 'seldom valued, quickly forgotten or that remain uncaptured altogether'. It also shifts focus from the representational idea of 'the consumer as a self-reflexive agent' who is able to recall their consumption experiences to be presented through written accounts (ibid.: 381). To exemplify, Coffin and Hill's (2023) special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* highlights a range of examples of 'presenting marketing differently' through poetry, visual methods, collages, music, walking tours, interactive narratives and apps, and therapeutic art. Similarly, the revamped *Journal of Customer Behaviour* has featured poems, photo essays, manifestos, stories, and artworks in its endeavours to become 'the home of readable, radical research'.

It is thought such non-representational approaches could also be fruitful for researching atmospheres (Anderson and Ash, 2015; Hill et al., 2014). Preece et al. (2022) used 'poetic affective attunement' to produce written and audiovisual poetic accounts of their experiences of the atmospheres of spiritual settings. This technique enabled the authors to attend to affective forces which 'are not easily seen or heard' or 'could go unnoticed and could not be articulated' (ibid.: 364). Meanwhile, Hill et al. (2022) conducted four 'audiencing interviews' with Liverpool FC supporters, which involved playing video footage of recent football matches interviewees had attended, to provoke embodied reactions and discussions of atmospheric experience. As Hill et al. (2014: 389) explain, 'when we view film footage of ourselves, we often feel embodied responses similar to those originally experienced'. In Chapter 12 of this collection, Steadman draws attention to the potential value of sensory ethnography for researching atmospheres. Drawing on sensory ethnography of the North Pier in Blackpool, UK, involving sensory participation, soundwalks, and videowalks, the chapter highlights how this approach is beneficial for attending to multi-sensory experiences of place, sensory

features which may ordinarily go unnoticed, and people's affective responses. Yet, Steadman also reveals the challenges a researcher may encounter when using multi-sensory techniques – especially if for the first time – including feeling awkward, pressured to curate polished accounts of atmospheres, and having to adapt such methods over time to the ever-shifting research setting. Ultimately, the chapter encourages others to openly share the 'behind-the-scenes' twists and turns of their research journeys.

However, Hill et al. (2014: 385) stress non-representational theory 'is not anti-representational as if seeking to supplant representationalist lines of inquiry'. And thus, the earlier examples actually combine a range of qualitative techniques. For example, to create their poetic accounts, Preece et al. (2022) draw on interviews, participant observation, videography, and photography as data; whereas, alongside conducting audiencing interviews, Hill et al. (2022) utilised in-depth interviews, participant observation, photography, videography, archival, and online data. In Chapter 11 of this collection, Wilkinson and Wilkinson further demonstrate the merits of combining multiple methods for researching atmospheres. In their study of young people's drinking practices, they adopted participant observation and interviews as part of an 'atmospheric assemblages' approach. Participant observation involved drinking with participants on nights out and in, including spending time in, and moving through, homes, pubs, bars, car parks, and streets. Interviews were also conducted with young people about early experiences of alcohol, present-day practices of alcohol consumption, and attitudes towards alcohol. The combination of these methods enabled the authors to foreground the multi-sensory and non-human features of drinksapes that interrelate with young people to generate atmospheres (e.g. lighting, smells, music, drinks, glasses, candles, etc.) Subsequently, their chapter reiterates that research projects are 'hybrid objects, open to both representational and non-representational sensibilities' (Hill et al., 2014: 390), with a combination of both traditional and innovative methods often useful for attending to – and communicating about – the diffuse and slippery concept of atmosphere.

### **Conclusion: The future of consuming atmospheres**

In this introductory chapter to the *Consuming Atmospheres* book, we have so far taken readers on a journey through the past and present of the topic of consumption and atmosphere in marketing; travelling from Kotler's (1974) managerial forays into atmospherics as a marketing tool, through to more recent explorations into the 'porosity' of atmospheric experience (Steadman et al., 2021), and the methodological challenges of researching atmospheres (Hill et al., 2014). The journey has also involved readers sojourning the cutting-edge research into consumption and atmosphere that forms this edited collection, drifting from more regularly traversed consumption contexts such as sports stadia and music festivals to the less commonly trodden spaces of

the seaside amusement arcade and urban squats. In this chapter conclusion, we will next move our journey into the future of consuming atmospheres by suggesting several avenues for future research.

First, whilst theoretical conversations and conceptual interrogations into atmosphere are flourishing (e.g. Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021; Hill et al., 2014), there is a paucity of practical advice for practitioners seeking to produce more attractive atmospheres to reinvigorate consumption spaces. Yet, Sumartojo and Pink (2019) suggest atmosphere is also a useful concept to know *through*; and hence investigating atmospheres can unlock insights into other notions and broader societal issues. One arena which could benefit from this more practical orientation is the revitalisation of the high street – or downtown – which is a ‘wicked problem’ plaguing policymakers and communities since the 1980s (Steadman and Millington, 2022). Competition from out-of-town retailing, the rise in online shopping, economic crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic have together posed challenges for high streets (ibid.; Parker et al., 2017). In UK policy, there is emphasis on ‘levelling up’ deprived areas (HM Government, 2022) through restoring ‘a sense of community, local pride and belonging’ (Dobson, 2022: 170). Research into high street success has identified ‘experience’ as an important priority intervention for improving the high street (Parker et al., 2017); however, this research does not provide guidance about enhancing high street atmospheres, as a crucial dimension of high street experience. Subsequently, future research on this topic conducted *with* – and not on – a range of high street stakeholders (e.g. local authorities, businesses, community groups, and residents) (Steadman and Millington, 2022), could lead to a practical toolkit for enhancing high street atmospheres and, in turn, experience. There are growing calls for marketing research to get out of the ‘ivory tower’ and contribute to societal impact (ibid.). It is therefore crucial to ensure marketing outputs on atmosphere, as well as being theoretically sound, are also actionable in practice so they avoid becoming ‘predestined for the dusty shelves and disused digital archives of university libraries’ (Coffin and Hill, 2023: 1613), which this future suggested research could help to avoid.

Second, accounts that connect the immediate, first-person experience of atmospheres with wider forces like ideology remain relatively rare (Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021). Future research could thus explore the dynamics of politicising and depoliticising atmospheres. From protest marches through political rallies to election night results parties, atmospheres are certainly present in politics. Politicians may seek to generate a national atmosphere of moral panic or promote their constituency by generating a more positive atmosphere at the local or regional level. It is clear that marketing intersects with politics in these moments of promotion, whether marketing is used to promote an individual, a party, a policy, or ideology using more or less abstracted atmospheres. Moreover, critical marketing scholars have contended the market is never politically neutral; at the very least, markets and



marketing promote ideologies of consumerism and capitalism – that buying more is the route to a happier life (Schmitt et al., 2022). More research is subsequently needed to understand the role of atmospherics and atmospheres in political processes. For instance, how might atmospherics, as a set of discourses and practices, operate under the radar of salient politicisation? Conversely, how might critical marketing scholars and other stakeholders make these politics more plain? These questions and their answers would be highly valuable in future research centred on the politicisation of atmospheres.

Third, atmospheres are considered difficult to research due to their ephemeral qualities (Anderson and Ash, 2015), but, as noted earlier, some researchers have been experimenting with more innovative methods to study atmospheres (e.g. Anderson and Ash, 2015; Gómez Cruz and Sumartojo, 2018; Preece et al., 2022). However, in Chapter 12 of this collection, Steadman reveals how it can be challenging to adopt novel data collection methods to research atmospheres. Indeed, after surveying numerous experimental approaches in their special issue, Coffin and Hill (2023: 1615) identify three tensions more-than-representational studies must negotiate: ‘knowledge versus sensation; objective distance versus subjective depth; closure of interpretation versus interpretive openness’. They propose the best position is the ‘high tension zone’ between these three forces, where non-representational and representational thinking counterbalance one another (ibid.: 1616). Arguably, therefore, more practical advice needs to be produced about how to effectively research the atmospheres of consumption spaces, with further methodological research on this topic required. For instance, the *Methods for Change* project sought to devise creative social science methods to enact real-world change, such as photo go-alongs, participatory mapping, playing games, participatory film-making, and participant packs (Barron et al., 2021). The researchers produced readable and practical how-to guides about each of the methods showcased in the project, detailing what the method is, underpinning theory, why the method is useful, and how to use it, alongside case study examples of the method in action (ibid.). Inspiration could be drawn from this project when creating and sharing advice about researching atmospheres.

Finally, in drawing this chapter to a close, we do not wish to close off future conversations about consumption and atmospheres. Instead, we hope the chapters forming the *Consuming Atmospheres* collection, as well as the future research directions provided earlier, together stimulate an ongoing – and importantly interdisciplinary – set of exchanges about designing, experiencing, and researching atmospheres in consumption spaces. Fifty years have passed since Kotler (1974) coined the term atmospherics. We have since learned a lot about atmosphere – as recently as the chapters included in this collection – but there is still so much more to learn. We look forward to consuming atmospheres over the next 50 years.



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