CHRISTMAS – FROM RELIGIOUS TO LAIC.
THE STIMULI THAT "SELL" CHRISTMAS

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Abstract: *Romania has been a country with a strong cultural background since ancient times. The Romanian people, born Christian, cherished holy days as part of its daily life, Christmas included. From a religious viewpoint, Christmas is one of the twelve holy days celebrated by the rulers of Byzantine Churches, being considered the third great holy day after Easter and Pentecost. However, in relation to the field of marketing, Christmas is a popular holy day, hence an occasion to increase sales. At the level of financial advantages provided, this holy day is the most important one, not only for retailers, but also for the other categories of merchandisers. There are various ways to celebrate this feast: parties, family gatherings, going to church and gifts. Christmas is a religious feast, supported by some people and rejected by others for having been turned into an occasion to spend money and party, thus ignoring its sacred character.*

Based on the aspects above as premises, this paper aims at shaping the buyer's behaviour during Christmas time. Therefore, our aims are the identification of those in-store stimuli that create the atmospherics desired by customers when they take the decision to shop in a Christmas context. Another aim is to shape the buyer's behaviour in choosing Christmas gifts, considering two variables: gender and age. Last but not least, we aim at highlighting the period in which in-store Christmas stimuli have been perceived, whether this coincides with the one when first gifts are bought or not, which was the average budget allocated or the moment people became aware they had to do the shopping for this holy day.

The methodological approach includes both a qualitative approach, by using the structured interview and a quantitative approach by conducting a survey based on the snowball sampling method. The population investigated is aged between 25 and 65, lives in the urban area, is married and it was compulsory for the respondents to be part of the families that actually shop for Christmas. The conclusions drawn from this research lead to a lay environment of Christmas holidays and are useful to all retailers interested in maintaining a good relationship with their customers, build consumer goodwill and boost sales during Christmas time.

Keywords: Christmas gift; in-store stimuli; Christmas in stores; gender differences in choosing a gift.
JEL Classification: D12.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is a component of the macro environment of a society which strongly influences buyer's decisions. Every one of us grows in a society (Kotler et al., 1999) within a system of values, perceptions, wishes and ways of behaviour acquired from family or other institutions. The period in which these characteristics are acquired and developed is childhood and the process is achieved through socialising (Solomon et al., 2006). Religion and language have been bridges over centuries that contributed to the consolidation of the Romanian people. The holy days of our people are

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mainly religious ones, the religious thus being intertwined with the lay. Lay feasts bear a part of the religious sacred vein which is impregnated in the life of people. Thus, our mainly lay character has prospered in its intermingling with the religious for centuries.

These religious feasts give merchants an occasion to make a profit; however, since competition is fierce, differentiation needs to be achieved through less popular methods used insofar. One of them could be a stimulation of the senses during the shopping experience by bringing into play elements such as specific scents of pine or cinnamon, playing Christmas carols and songs or using decorations with a strong impact on the store's customers. The experience at the selling point has to make the customer feel the desire of coming back there or influence customers' decisions, to arouse the feelings of wealth and generosity that come along with the holiday. Christmas is a unique occasion for consumption which is strongly related to the habit of offering gifts as part of the hedonic character. In its simplest form, a gift is generally an object transferred from a person to another. The tradition of making gifts is universal, yet it becomes particular from a culture to another one according to specific rituals. The importance of this habit consists of four elements (Laroche et al., 2000) which differentiates it from other opportunities to make gifts. First of all, Christmas has strong significances from a cultural viewpoint. Second, it is more promoted by mass media than any other holy day. Furthermore, strong marketing is brought into play and, last but not least, reciprocity is expected under the circumstances.

A study carried out by Michel Laroche et al. (2000) on the buyers' behaviour of Christmas gifts showed that this differs according to gender. Thus, men have the tendency to take the shoppers' advice and ask for information, whereas women pay more attention to product specifications and general aspects of the store. In addition, by its nature, a woman is more sensitive to external stimuli, especially those that are meant to awake the senses, hence the marketing strategies during winter holidays which need to be tailored to each customer's needs, as much as possible.

In America (McNary, 1999), Christmas is brought into stores since the beginning of September or even August, most of the stores starting to put on their decorations and exhibit articles on sale from this period. But their decision is most often not approved by customers. They would rather enjoy the holiday when it comes in December. But on the other hand, American retailers claim that sales are good even in September. This tendency seems to slowly influence Romanian marketers that have brought the Christmas spirit earlier and earlier in their shops for the past years.

1. PERCEPTION OF CHRISTMAS STIMULI

Perception is the build-up of several stages such as information gathering, its organisation and interpretation. The selection of information is based on the five senses, either isolated or in combination. For instance, we visit a store before Christmas and when we enter it we feel a strong scent, we hear music, we notice the special decorations and feel the excitement preceding this holiday.

Then, all this information is organized according to the principle of long-term memory to find other categories of stimuli to fit the ones they have just been subjected to. In the example above, once the scent attributes – pine, cinnamon, orange – and sound – carols are identified, we compare the experience in the shop with the one we had in the previous years.

Then interpretation is brought into play to help us establish whether the information we received gave us a nice feeling and the extent to which it is relevant to us. Thus, we may conclude, in our example, that the shop atmospherics is alluring and we love it more than the one from another shop we visited but that we do not like the carols playing.

As previously mentioned, despite our desire to be rational in the act of shopping, we often fall prey to emotions. This happens especially during Christmas, a time of many feelings. Peter Clarke's study (2007) pointed out the fact that celebrating Christmas and the habit of making gifts render this holiday a unique occasion for consumption led by feelings such as excitement, happiness, pride or nostalgia.

Generally speaking, people have positive feelings all the time, they put their Christmas feelings on a positive-negative continuum. While children get excited during this holiday as they benefit materially from gifts, parents' feelings are more moderate, considering their previous experiences, moral, cultural and ethical values on the way of celebrating or financial capacity. An overall vision of celebrating Christmas suggests that this period is a mix of traditions, rituals and shopping.

Good will, generosity, altruism and devotion are the terms employed by sociological literature to generally describe the Christmas spirit. Moreover, these feelings are often used as an 'excuse' for consumption activities during the winter holidays. An essential Christmas trait is to offer gifts to children and not only to them and took shape along time as a true ritual. The feelings that accompany winter holidays will contribute to an increasing sensitivity in consumers to the numerous marketing stimuli they will be exposed to. Retailers have to be aware of these details and use as many elements as possible to draw customers' attention and influence their decision for

buying from the selling point. But they have to avoid the other extreme, that of using a too larger number of stimuli as they may create confusion and discomfort.

From a commercial viewpoint, the most important activities that contribute to an increase in retailers' revenues are buying expensive gifts and products for the Christmas dinner. Firstly, it will be harder to take a decision as seeking a gift may take longer, and the use of stimuli could make the shopping experience pleasant. Despite all these, the way of choosing a Christmas gift differs according to certain variables such as buyers' age or gender.

2. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

In a Christmas context, the use of sensorial stimuli such as scent, music, decorations, having the possibility to taste products and implicitly touch them, may prove extremely efficient in inducing hedonic shopping. From the multitude of stimuli that invade us when we enter a shop, it is necessary to research the ones that awake our senses and are considered when the decision of what to buy from a store is made.

At the same time, another key problem is the behaviour of those who buy these gifts as integrating part of celebrating Christmas, and for retailers it is important to understand it, so as to apply an appropriate marketing strategy for each segment in part. Further to the analysis of literature and previous research, the objectives of this paper are the following:

Objective 1: Identification of Christmas stimuli that make up in-store atmospherics and are considered in the buying decision;

Objective 2: Relevation of the effects of sensorial stimuli in shops on buyers;

Objective 3: Understanding the buying behaviour of Christmas gifts according to people's age and gender;

Objective 4: Deciphering other elements of buying behaviour during Christmas (the moment we feel the need to shop, the time we need to brief ourselves on the matter or the time frame in which the first Christmas gifts were bought);

Objective 5: Identification of the budget allocated to Christmas shopping for 2013 and the extent to which it was respected.

Turley and Milliman's study (2000) which brought together the results of over 60 pieces of research conducted on in-store atmospherics pointed out that sensorial stimuli influence buying behaviour. Even though there are many categories of variables which lead to a decision in the store, the way atmospherics is built by means of stimuli may have its effects. As a result, the hypothesis to be tested is the following:

H₁: sensorial stimuli (music, scent, setting, touch and product tasting) influence the buying decision;

Positive effects on the buying process created by sensorial stimuli and presented in the work of these authors, as well, are various: spending more time, a larger amount of money, creating a favourable image of the store, the wish to explore the shop and return to it. Most research started from the stimulus organism response theory that leads to two types of behaviour, be it attraction or rejection from a certain in-store stimulus. The resulting hypotheses are the following:

H₂: in-store sensorial stimuli make us spend more time and money than intended and have a more favourable attitude towards the store; (Turley and Milliman, 2000)

H₃: in-store stimuli have a significant influence in evaluating performance from the selling point in the desire to come back and explore the store. (Turley and Milliman, 2000)

For these two hypotheses, we assumed that the answers I would receive from the questioned ones would be similar to those revealed by previous research. The assumption is that the effects mentioned above will show more on women than men as the former are more sensitive to marketing stimuli than the latter.

With respect to the buying behaviour of Christmas presents, Michel Laroche et al. (2000) conducted a study which revealed that there were three categories of information that buyers used to take a decision. This is general information, specific information and the one coming from the sellers.

His research showed that men used to take sellers' advice when they looked for gifts, whereas women were willing to take more time before making a choice. Thus, they pay more attention to product specifications, store display, rarely asking the personnel for help. As a result, the hypothesis to start with is the following:

H₄: women pay more attention to the process of looking for a Christmas gift than men who use to ask the sellers about it. (Laroche et al., 2000)

Also, another study on the buying behaviour of gifts conducted in 2003 (Laroche and Cleveland, 2003) showed that older people were more likely to take the advice of store employees than younger ones. Our sample comprises four age intervals, hence the possibility to check whether there are differences between these categories of people. Thus, another hypothesis to be tested in this research is the following:

H₅: the older the person, the higher the chance to ask for help from the store personnel to look for a gift.

This research did not only start from previous hypotheses, but also aims at revealing any relevant data that could be used as premises for other research. In this way, I wanted to check the

extent to which the period we become aware of Christmas's coming to shops coincides to the one in which the first gifts were bought for this occasion. Moreover, given the present economic context, the budget allocated to Christmas shopping is important especially since the average dropped considerably in 2009 and, as a result, marketers need to know the extent to which it was respected and the main categories of people who are offered gifts on this occasion.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a descriptive piece of research which checks the hypotheses established. It is also exploratory in nature since it will analyse the buying behaviour during Christmas without starting from previously tested hypotheses. The behaviour analysed may differ from the one people show during the rest of the year from several points of view: motivation, emotions, allocated budget, sensitivity to store stimuli, etc.

Research methods: The ways previous research has been conducted ranged from laboratory experiments that stimulated the buying experience in the stores to research conducted in certain selling points. Moreover, self-administered questionnaires have also been carried out, not to mention qualitative techniques such as focus groups or in-depth interviews. Starting from previously employed research methods correlated with the restrictions of this research, we chose two methods: a qualitative one based on structured in-depth interview and a qualitative one, through survey. Each of them had different purposes: the former was used for a better understanding of the respondents' preferences and opinions and to contribute to the drafting of questionnaire for the second stage. Quantitative research will serve the checking of established hypotheses and provision of relevant numerical data.

Prior to the investigation, a secondary piece of research has been conducted by using various information sources such as Anelis databases available at "Mihai Eminescu" Central University Library of Iași and the ones at The National Institute of Statistics. The keywords in the search were the following: *atmospherics, retail environment, effects of music, scent, display, colours in retail, Christmas gift, in-store stimuli, gift search, Christmas in stores, gender differences in choosing a gift.* After the analysis of these secondary data, the primary research method has been chosen to meet the intended aims.

Population investigated: The population selected to conduct primary research is represented by the inhabitants of the city of Piatra Neamț. According to The National Institute of Statistics, the results of the census organised at the end of 2011 point out that the number of households in Piatra

Neamț is of 34.209. The current research took family as a survey unit and the respondent was the person in the family that bought gifts for Christmas.

The variable we are interested in, as far as this survey is concerned, is the respondent's age which should be between 25 and 65. The persons were divided into four categories, each of them being equally represented. Gender was not considered to be variable for the sampling process as by means of this survey, it was intended to speak to the person that made shopping for Christmas and was implicitly subjected to in-store stimuli. As a result, the number of women and men depended on the meeting of this condition.

Sampling: In the lack of data to show the division of the population of Piatra Neamț according to age categories, we chose the snowball sampling method. Thus, we selected a person for each age category and they pointed us another two having similar characteristics from the viewpoint of age, appurtenance to a family, the procedure continuing until the 152 people sample was reached. Even if, for a start, the people recommended bear a resemblance, we started to create a bigger sample to avoid subjectivity.

Since we choose the snowball technique, the refusal rate is lower than in the case of field investigation by means of the path of recommendation that we preferred. Despite all these, the method largely depends on the availability of possible respondents and the validity of answers to questions. To reach the sample of 152 interviewed, we contacted 178 persons, and 26 of them refused from various reasons; as a result, the refusal rate was of approximately 14%. Further to the analysis of the table, we can state that most people that did the shopping were women which points out that the task of Christmas shopping was mainly entrusted to them. Consequently, from the viewpoint of the decisions taken in the family, we are dealing with the dominating wife and syncretic decisions. As far as monthly family revenues are concerned, most of the people spent between 2001 and 3000 RON and regarding children, almost half of the respondents had a single child. Age categories were divided equally, this being one of the conditions for sampling.

Type of investigation: For a start, we conducted qualitative research under the shape of structured interviews. This was carried out based on an interview guide. The role of qualitative research was not only to find out various information, beliefs and opinions referring to the theme approached, but also to define the questionnaire answers better. The interview was in writing so the answers were written down one by one. They contribute to the shaping of a viewpoint with arguments to justify the results of quantitative research.

Thus, a number of 30 in-depth interviews were carried out during 10-20 December 2013, and their results led to a complete questionnaire to include multiple choice questions in agreement with the respondents' opinions.

After processing the data obtained further to the interviews, the questionnaire was drafted. The investigation was carried out after Christmas so that the respondents have the memory of the gifts bought fresh. Field investigation took place between 1 and 20 February.

One of the reasons that led to this type of survey is the weather which did not allow outdoor research.

Research instruments: The research instruments used are the interview guide and questionnaire. The former consisted both of open and closed questions. The latter was structured because we considered that the theme of Christmas shopping was a complex subject which might generate varied answers in case a discussion theme would simply be launched.

As far as the investigation is concerned, a questionnaire consisting of 19 questions was used. Within a family there are several roles to be played and for the research to be valid, it was necessary to have the respondent as buyer, that is the person subjected to in-store marketing stimuli. As a result, the filter question of the questionnaire refers to this idea. Questions in the questionnaire include all types of scales, mainly the continuous ones to carry out inferential analyses. Open and closed multiple choice questions are also included.

4. STUDY RESULTS

According to the first aim, we wanted to identify the extent to which certain marketing stimuli contribute to the evaluation of store performance. For this purpose, eight independent variables were introduced in the equation, those with the higher frequency after in-depth interviews, out of which only four (scent, display, music and promotion) proved to be significant. For a start, we analysed Person coefficients that did not go beyond 0.7 since there was no multicollinearity. Furthermore, VIF values were lower than 10 which was another condition for the test to be valid.

For one of the variables introduced to be significant for the model, we need to respect the condition that p value which is the probability for the result to be accidental, not to go beyond the risk degree, α=0.05. The results of the multiple regression analysis allow the following observations: smaller p values than 0.05 correspond to the four aforementioned variables so that another regression analysis was carried out to include only these variables.

The results of the second analysis show that 20.4% of the note variation for store performance is explained by note variation for display, small, music and items on sale at the selling point. The equation of multiple linear regression is the following:

NAM= 3,133 + 0,147 * NM + 0,168 * ND + 0,179 * NFS + 0,136 * NP, where:

NAM – grade for store aspect

NM – grade for scent

ND – grade for setting

NFS – grade for music

NP – grade for items on sale

In order to analyse which of these variables is the most significant in the equation model, β values need observing. They point out to the fact that setting had the greatest contribution, followed by scent, items on sale and music which was the last one. The conclusion we may reach is that one of the variables that make up the atmosphere of a store, setting, scent, and music have the greatest impact. They contribute to the evaluation of a selling point, hence marketers need to pay attention to these stimuli that awake people's senses.

The percentage of 20.4% corresponding to the determination coefficient points out that the 4 variables have a significant influence on the evaluation of a store where shopping is made but there are other criteria, as well. When the buying decision is made, the main elements to be considered are related to the product itself: price, quality, packaging, etc., therefore the percentage obtained is justified in the context in which the research theme consists only of the atmospherics created at the selling point.

As far as the correlation between the respondents' sex and the grades awarded to various categories of stimuli are concerned, the only significant relation was obtained in the case of music. The results of the bivariate correlation test based on Pearson coefficient pointed out that there was a positive relation between gender and the grade awarded to silent music (r=0.161; p=0.047). A more thorough analysis carried out by an Independent Sample t test showed that the only significant difference between the average of the grades awarded by men and women was recorded in the case of music.

Men awarded higher grades to music for the possibility to taste products, for the extremely crowded atmosphere and Christmas items on sale. As a result, we may say that they are more tolerant as far as the crowd is concerned and more interested in the gastronomic side of the matter than women, which involves the tasting of certain products more than women.

From a different angle, stimuli that did not bring satisfaction were equally important, that is those that corresponded to what buyers imagined they would find. They may serve the improvement of the activity carried out at store level. The most annoying in-store aspects could be: too few items

on sale for Christmas (19%), foul smell (17%), lack of decorations (14%) or employees' behaviour (12%).

According to the secondary objective based on two hypotheses, one of the questionnaire questions gave the possibility to choose a series of effects resulting from in-depth interviews, those that corresponded to the influence of in-store Christmas spirit. The results point out that the strongest effect was to create the pleasure to buy (98 selections), followed by the spending of a higher amount of money than intended (81 selections) and last, the spending of a longer time in stores (75 selections). Two persons chose the variant which indicated that in-store atmospherics did not have any effect on them which means that there are also buyers that do not care about a selling point's display.

Marketing elements to contribute to the atmosphere of a store are brought into play to induce hedonic shopping and improve the experience at the selling point. There are two categories of buyers, the utilitarian and the hedonic ones which emphasize the experience of buying. The results obtained reveal that Christmas atmospherics at the selling point may have a positive influence on people's attitude with implications on sales and the image buyers have of the store.

The third objective has in view the identification of buyers' behaviour of Christmas gifts taking into account three categories of stimuli: general, specific and human. The research conducted by Michel Laroche [2003] pointed out that men use to ask store employees for help when they are looking for a Christmas gift, ignoring aspects related to the product itself or general information. But on the other hand, women make greater efforts to find the right gift. To check if there is an association between gender and the tendency to ask store employees for help, we carried out a λ^2 independence test.

Its validity is given by meeting the condition that the number of cells with a lower value than 5 does not reach 20%. The test pointed out that there was a significant, weak relation between gender and the tendency to ask sellers for help: λ^2 (df=4, n=152)=12,044, p=0,017, Phi=0,281. As a result, the hypothesis initially established is confirmed. This shows that women are more involved in the buying process during Christmas time, hence their availability for a general search and a more thorough, specific one. (Laroche et al., 2000)

Despite all these, within this type of analysis, another connection that proved to be significant and, not included in the work of the author mentioned, is between gender and the habit of analysing the product's tag and specifications. λ^2 independence test pointed out to a significant, weak relation between the two variables: λ^2 (df=4, n=152)=12.58, p=0.014, Phi=0.288.

In the hypothesis initially established, only the interaction with the sellers was considered. Despite all these, the present study showed that men were also interested in the tag or other

specifications of the products purchased. First of all, the differences are explained by the fact that the study was conducted in another country and the behaviours' behaviour is distinct there.

Moreover, as far as age is concerned, a correlation test revealed that there is a significant, reversed, weak relation between the person's age and the tendency to ask for the sellers' help. As a result, the older they grow, the more important the shop employees become in giving advice to buy Christmas gifts. The relation is a reversed one since age categories were ordered increasingly, whereas the agreement and disagreement degree ordered decreasingly when codified in SPSS software. Each statement referring to the buying behaviour of Christmas gifts was measured on a Likert scale so the score of each statement can be calculated. As each of them was revealed by previous research, we granted +2 for "total agreement" and so on, decreasingly, up to "total disagreement" that received -2. The scores are as follows:

We asked the sellers' advice = 40*2+43*1-26*1-19*2=59

We went over budget if necessary = 37*2+50*1-21*1-2*19=65

We compared prices between them = 44*2+59-17-6*2=118

We analysed the tag and product specifications = 39*2+59-17-12*2=96

I was influenced by the packaging = 82+54-21-18=97

As can be seen, the highest score was encountered when prices were compared which means that people are led by reason during their shopping and are looking for useful gifts and good prices. The lowest score can be found when employees are asked for help. This may be explained by the fact that men do it more often, yet their number in the sample is smaller than women's, hence the lower points awarded.

The fourth objective refers to a more thorough analysis of buying behaviour during Christmas. The first stage in the decision process is needs ascertainment, resentment of a lack between the desired state and the existing one. The main purpose of retailers should be represented by the buyers' conviction that the former's products are needed. It seems that 53% of the respondents claim that they became aware of the need the moment they were doing shopping, hence inside the stores and only 35% at home, the remaining ones being influenced by third parties.

With respect to the period in which in-store marketing stimuli were seized based on the answers to in-depth interviews, we assigned four time frames. The results show that the first and the second half of November were periods when almost three quarters of the respondents felt the presence of Christmas stimuli in stores. As a result, retailers are advantaged by the fact that their marketing efforts are mainly perceived since November which means that people get used to Christmas coming to shops more quickly every year.

From the viewpoint of the moment shopping was made, we may notice that first gifts were bought between December 1-15, closely followed by November 16-30. The percentage of those that made their shopping for the first time the week before Christmas is of 25%, a percentage high enough to conclude that the habit of leaving things to the last minute is still in the pipeline.

In view of testing the relation between the period these stimuli have been sensed and the one in which the first gifts were bought, we applied a test of bivariate correlation Spearman based on which the following conclusions can be reached: between the two variables there is a significant relation of average intensity ($p=0$, $r=0.429$). This result highlights the idea that as the period of sensing stimuli is closer to Christmas, it coincides to the first gifts bought. For instance, even if 28% of the respondents felt the presence of Christmas in stores by means of various elements, during November 1-15, only 5% bought gifts.

The results of this correlation analysis show that marketing actions during Christmas time did not always have the effects desired. Thus, despite the fact that retailers introduce stimuli that call the Christmas spirit much before December 25 and are perceived by buyers, the latter do not proceed to shopping immediately. From the viewpoint of sale stimulations and awakening interest for Christmas products, this result is not a favourable one but to a certain extent is justified by the impossibility to convince all to start making shopping in the same period.

As far as the budget allocated to Christmas gifts for 2013 is concerned, the average of the present research is 784.87 RON. Since standard deviation is big, the median is more significant in this case, having a value of 700 RON. This value shows that half of the respondents spent less than 700 RON for this Christmas and the other half allocated a budget beyond this amount. Most of the questioned one allocated the amount of 600 RON.

As far as the way in which the 2013 budget was divided for Christmas, each respondent had 100 points to allocate for Christmas for certain destinations. The greatest part of the budget was allocated for the products necessary to the Christmas dinner, followed by the budget for gifts. This is an advantage for retailers who have to stimulate sales for these categories of products.

Out of the respondents, 68.4% declared that they went over the budget they allocated for this Christmas, as a result of the in-store stimuli that created the atmospherics; with respect to Christmas coming into store 47.4% consider that it was brought too early, whereas the rest claim the opposite. Close percentages do not afford us to reach a conclusion on this matter although, according to other studies, most buyers are not satisfied with the fact that marketers insist to bring the Christmas spirit to stores as soon as possible.

Since the budget allocated for Christmas shopping decreases every year, marketers have to find new methods to determine people to spend more money. Arousing their sensorial stimuli could be efficient.

Limits of research: Even though positive results were obtained for retailers, results that could be used in the future for their activity to be improve, this research has its flaws. First, the sampling method was a subjective one based on the snowball technique so the results cannot be generalized at the level of the entire population. This is because the research could only explore and not reach a verdict due to an unguaranteed representativeness.

Since only a certain target public was considered, i.e. people aged between 25 and 65, the other age categories cannot be included in the results of research. As a result, the decision-making process with respect to Christmas shopping is a family one. Moreover, they cannot be valid for people in the rural area since the investigation took place in the urban area.

Another limit of this research pertains to the period in which it took place because it was an unfavourable one due to the bad weather that did not allow any field investigation. Also, since we are speaking about Christmas we have to assume that people are busier and less likely to answer questions. In addition, we had problems establishing meetings with respondents for in-depth interviews that took place before Christmas which should have been conducted in a more relaxed, stress-free environment. Furthermore, we did not have enough time to conduct quantitative research properly and find available respondents, hence the longer time we took to make the investigation.

Another limit which should be considered is the fact that the research was conducted on shopping during Christmas time, a period of strong emotions in which hedonic shopping could be stronger than during any other time of the year. Thus, there is a chance that these results do not apply to regular shopping.

CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays there are two important phenomena that need to be considered. The former is the financial crisis, less powerful than it used to be. The latter refers to the impact the internet has on certain businesses. In the field of retailing, online shopping grew steadily in the past years and its main benefit is that of saving people's time as they no longer have to go to store to do shopping. More and more people prefer to shop online either because they do not have time to do otherwise or they are simply idle. As a result, marketers are forced to employ various techniques to persuade people not to give up going to stores.

In the case of a shop, there are two types of factors: those that can be controlled and those that cannot. If marketers cannot do anything to change the latter, the former may be manipulated so that they produce the effects desired. Instances of such factors are: goods, price, items on sale, advertisements, sale force, atmospherics, placement and store policy. Our research was conducted on the variables that make up a store's atmospherics. During the past years, it was discovered that certain stimuli were used to awake the senses. A nice song playing silently, an attractive scent or display may get you a step ahead of your competitors. The wide range of products and the existence of several shops with the same scope of activity make the selection of a particular store difficult. Building consumer goodwill is essential for the success of a business.

The most profitable time of the year is definitely Christmas. Most retailers know the importance of this holiday and try to exploit it in a positive manner. Impregnated with rituals and tradition, the emotions accompanying it lead to a change in the buying behaviour. Sensitivity to certain marketing stimuli being higher, it is the right time to employ more ways of attraction to build consumer goodwill.

As a result, the research started from the premise that the buying decision taken in the store also considered sensorial stimuli, along the specifications expected from a product pertaining to quality, price, promotion, packaging, etc. Although it cannot replace product quality, the atmospherics created in a selling point has a certain influence on the buying process.

Further to in-depth interviews, the main features considered in the buying process and implicitly in the choice of a store were revealed. Respondents were asked to mention factors that make up the atmosphere of a store they wish to find during Christmas, ignoring the specific elements they expect from a product. During the winter holidays, the way the store is decorated, the carols playing, the specific scents and the possibility to taste certain products are the aspects considered.

The regression analysis conducted in which the most important variables were introduced in interviews pointed out that in the evaluation of the store's performance and implicitly in taking the buying decision, the most significant factors for the model are display, scent, music and items on sale. As a result, out of the stimuli meant to awake the customers' senses and make up a store's environment, the visual, olfactory and auditory ones are brought into play.

Previous research on the theme of the atmospherics created in stores revealed that any of these variables can be manipulated so as to induce certain states of mind. They require certain features such as the rhythm of the music, the presence or absence of verses. This study did not aim at analysing the tolerance threshold for each of the stimuli, but the extent to which they were considered when the decision to do shopping was made. The results will serve all retailers interested

in improving the way in which the store is perceived by buyers. As a result, during Christmas they may use specific music for the musical background, scent of pine, cinnamon or orange (studies showed that the scent of pine, cinnamon and orange were the most familiar ones during Christmas time, being associated with this holiday) and even invest in decorating the store as attractively as possible. Along the traditional marketing activities, employing these methods involves certain costs that drift the retailers away so they choose not to use them.

With respect to the effects created by a store with sensorial stimuli, they are mostly similar to the ones illustrated by previous research. They are reflected in the desire to spend as much time in the store as possible and come back for other shopping, but also to spend a larger amount of money than the one initially had in mind. Also, buyers consider the respective store to be a good one, hence the positive image of the store and the state of mind during the shopping experience is one of pleasure. In addition, the interviewed ones also mentioned that they were more willing to socialize with the ones around them and were more indulgent to the aspects that did not satisfy them inside the store.

The theoretical framework of in-store stimuli effects is the theory launched by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) who claim that when entering a store, a buyer is invaded by a multitude of stimuli. They will be processed according to their features drawing on the buyers' personality, motivation, state of mind, etc. and will generate a certain behavior, be it of attraction or rejection of the respective stimuli. Based on in-depth interviews, we noticed that very few people had negative attitudes towards in-store sensorial stimuli. This happens when they are bothered by their excessive presence or even do not consider at all the way in which the store is decorated. Thus, the hypothesis according to which in-store stimuli create positive effects that improve the shopping experience and end by satisfying customers' needs is confirmed.

One of the most important components of celebrating Christmas is buying gifts for the ones close to us. Besides the sacred significance, this holiday is an important occasion for consumption that brings solid revenues to retailers. The habit of making gifts is a universal phenomenon which becomes particular according to the cultural aspects of each nation. The way gifts are looked for may differ from women to men, age or other variables. Research points out that men are more likely to take the sellers' advice than women, as well as analyse the general and specific aspects of the store or product. These bear on the selling point's aspect, the way in which it is built to reach the product desired and other elements of the product itself, i.e. tag, packaging and other characteristics such as limiting oneself to one's budget. As far as the buyers' age is concerned, as they grow old, they are more willing to ask for the sellers' help. The hypotheses were confirmed in this study as there was a small, yet significant intensity relation between the age and gender of the interviewed

ones. Thus, marketers will know better the customers' buying habits for a particular shop and train their personnel to give help to men and senior citizens, above all.

An interesting aspect revealed by this study is the fact that the presence of in-store marketing stimuli for Christmas becomes to be noted long before the holiday. In this sense, 3 out of 4 people noticed the marketers' efforts to bring the Christmas spirit in November, but even fewer bought the first gifts at that time (approximately 40%). As a result, the presence of certain marketing stimuli does not lead to immediate shopping which is not an advantage for retailers.

Also, to the question on the time merchandisers start to bring the Christmas spirit in stores, 47.8% of the people interviewed answered that it happened too early. And, since the percentages are so close, no conclusion can be reached for any of the variants. Yet, due to store atmospherics 70% of the respondents spent a larger amount of money than they intended, thus going over budget, leading to a favourable result for retailers whose main purpose was to make a profit.

An aspect revealed by this research is the budget allocated for the Christmas last year which is significantly different from the one mentioned in other studies previously conducted before the holy day came. The difference may stand in the fact that New Year shopping was not considered, which would have increased the value.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH

One of the results of the present research shows that when a buying decision is made, of the factors that make up a shop atmospherics, music, scent and display are considered. Therefore, future research could have as theme the identification of particular aspects of each stimulus and the buyers' preferences for in-store stimuli, respectively. Even if studies on the intensity and characteristics of a stimulus have previously been carried out, they do not hold true for the Romanian buyer. This is because they have been conducted in other countries with different cultural values (Čábyová et al., 2014). Moreover, not much research has been conducted on the theme of Christmas shopping and in-store stimuli (Kusá et al., 2014) hence a thorough investigation of this subject is recommended since Christmas time brings substantial profits to retailers (Nedelcu, 2013).

Moreover, the research has been conducted with respect to Christmas shopping and future studies could approach the issue of in-store stimuli that make up the atmospherics for another time of the year, as well. A new direction of research could be the understanding of the way a gift is bought according to gender, age or any other variable considered to be important, more thoroughly than in this research.

Furthermore, new research could be conducted to insist on the period in which retailers bring Christmas to stores, on the moment the first gifts are bought. There is the possibility for too insistent marketing efforts meant to bring us Christmas earlier and earlier to bother us or even not be noticed by buyers (Solík et al., 2013). Since winter holidays are the most profitable time of the year, several pieces of research could be conducted on the theme so as to account for buyers' preferences – the nucleus of any successful business.

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