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The Power of the Threshold

Vikram Kapoor, Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin, and Russell W. Belk

Synopsis

While liminality (the transitional phase within rites of passage) has been widely studied in marketing and consumer research, the related idea of the threshold (the fleeting point of crossing) has received far less attention. Thresholds have distinct affective qualities that shape individual experience. This bulletin presents insights from a recent *Marketing Theory* article that introduces the concept of *threshold atmospheres*. The article identifies four key affective qualities that shape these atmospheres: *modulation*, which primes individuals emotionally for what follows; *suspension*, a temporary pause that heightens awareness of transition; *hauntology*, where multiple temporalities momentarily converge to produce lingering affects; and *transformation*, the initiation of subtle shifts in *self-understanding*. Our findings offer practical implications of threshold atmospheres across disciplines, and we identify several potential avenues for future research.

Introduction and Background

Like Janus, the two-faced Roman god of doors and crossings, thresholds look backward and forward simultaneously, condensing past and future into a charged present moment. Yet despite this richness, the threshold itself remains something of a mystery. The conceptualisation of threshold atmospheres we use draws on two key bodies of literature—liminality, and affects and atmospheres—and unfolds in three phases.

First, we summarize existing marketing and consumer research on liminality. Prior research has examined liminality across a wide range of contexts, including lifestage transitions, the negotiation of sexual identity, and the restoration or reconstruction of bodies. Recent studies have also highlighted more enduring or recurrent forms of liminality associated with economic precarity, ongoing self-transformation, and repeated transitions. However, the field's dominant focus on liminality has overshadowed a related but distinct concept: the threshold as a site of consumption and with it, the question of what the crossing point itself does to those who traverse it.

There is a difference between liminality and a threshold. While liminality denotes an extended phase of transition, thresholds mark a singular point of crossing between two states. Threshold moments are typically brief and fleeting, whereas liminality involves a more sustained process of change. Building on these distinctions, we argue that thresholds are generative sites and deserve focused analytical attention. By shifting the lens toward thresholds, we also direct attention to their atmospheres—the affective qualities of spaces that subtly shape social interactions and everyday experiences. In highlighting their affective qualities, the article positions thresholds as rich and valuable sites for further marketing and consumer research.

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Issues and Questions Considered

As transitional zones, thresholds have their own distinctive atmospheres. Threshold atmospheres provoke affective feelings that emerge from, or are shaped by, "moments of inflection"— critical points of transformation that may be material, architectural, analytical, spiritual, or imaginative. Whether consciously registered or not, these atmospheric qualities can be mood changers, eliciting responses ranging from awe and reverence to fear or unease. For marketers and consumer researchers, these threshold atmospheres matter because they operate as dynamic, multisensory fields that evoke emotional and physical responses, and can be activated, shaped, and experienced across a variety of threshold settings.

It is worth noting, too, that threshold atmospheres do not remain neatly contained at the threshold itself; they can leak into surrounding spaces, beckoning or repelling through their affective charge. Nor is this charge always welcoming: as Dante's inscription over the gates of Hell reminds us — *'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here'* — the atmosphere of a threshold can be foreboding as readily as it is celebratory. This has implications for how retailers design store entrances, how event planners curate arrivals and departures, and how architects think about transitions between public and private spaces.

We address the following research question in our work:

• What are the affective qualities of threshold atmospheres?

We identify four main qualities of threshold atmospheres: modulation, suspension, hauntology, and transformation.

Modulation: Thresholds shape emotional experience by modulating affect—alerting individuals for what comes next, mediating transitions between different realms, regulating emotional states, and helping people navigate shifts in experience. In liminality, modulation unfolds gradually over an extended period, whereas threshold modulation is sharper, more concentrated, and occurs precisely at the moment of crossing.

Suspension: Threshold atmospheres evoke a momentary pause—an interruption in the ongoing flow of emotions and experiences that temporarily sets aside existing emotional states. At points of crossing or transition, individuals often feel suspended, neither fully in one place nor the other, but held in a transient in-between state. Liminal suspension tends to sustain this feeling, creating a prolonged sense of being "betwixt and between". In contrast, threshold suspension produces a brief pause that sharpens awareness of the boundary being approached or crossed. Such emotional states can be intentionally extended or compressed by those shaping or curating threshold atmospheres.

Hauntology: Threshold atmospheres may also take on a hauntological dimension, offering fleeting glimpses into other spheres or alternative ways of knowing and being. In the moment of crossing, multiple temporalities briefly converge, allowing past, present, and possible futures to surface at once. Because this moment is so brief and concentrated, it creates an impression that can linger afterward. Unlike liminal spaces, which unfold over time, thresholds compress experience into intense instants that may continue to haunt through sensory echoes or emotional traces of the point of transition.

Transformation: Threshold atmospheres can catalyse change by reshaping one's sense of self, initiating preliminary shifts that may eventually lead to long-term identity transformation. While liminal transformation develops gradually through an extended process of becoming, threshold transformation takes place in the brief moment of transition between states.

Conclusion

The concept of *threshold atmospheres* has wide-ranging practical significance across multiple disciplines: from retailing and consumer behaviour, digital interface design, and event and experience design, to healthcare, tourism and hospitality, architecture, urban planning and even border control. The article highlights several promising avenues for future research, such as examining threshold atmospheres within physical and digital retail contexts; emerging virtual thresholds found in streaming services and communication platforms; experiences of consumer migration and acculturation; liquid societies; festivals, clubs, and rituals; dynamics of power and agency; sacred spaces; and tourism settings.

Taken together, this conceptualisation invites scholars - and practitioners - to attend more carefully to the charged moment of crossing, and to recognise that what happens at the threshold shapes, in consequential ways, what happens on the other side.

The underlying article is entitled "Threshold atmospheres: Conjuring the Affective in Inflection" and was published in a special issue on "Atmospheres of Consumption: Exploring Embodiment, Place and Affect" in Marketing Theory, 2025. A full copy can be obtained at https://doi.org/10.1177/14705931251392293

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Forthcoming Research Bulletin
Title:
Employee or not employee? That is (still) the question for workers in the gig economy Open Access

Authors:
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