WALKING into a supermarket or departmental store, your nose is suddenly assaulted by the delightful smells of baking bread or the caramelising sugar of honey-baked chicken wings.

The proximity of the food hall to the store entrance, or the wafting smell of ham or soup samples is a common sight in Singapore shopping malls.

It may not be deliberate, but these smells that whet your appetite may make you spend more impulsively on "items that give instant gratification", new research from the National University of Singapore (NUS) shows.

Assistant professor Li Xiuping, 31, from NUS' business school, told my paper that, when showed pictures of desserts, subjects were more likely to choose "hedonistic products that provide immediate pleasures", over utilitarian ones with long-term benefits, she said.

People who were shown equally pleasing pictures of nature or scenery did not exhibit such behaviour.

In another experiment, when subjects were exposed to the continual smell of a cookie-scented candle, they were also more likely to splurge on items, like a beautiful, pricey sweater, even if they were strapped for cash.

What this means for businesses is that "it may not be simply enough to provide a pleasant environment for shoppers".

"Shoppers may only just look around but not buy," she said.

John Davis, associate professor of marketing, Singapore Management University, said that "what (Dr Li) has found is interesting because it reinforces some theories about marketing that has been going on for a long time".

He said that stores such as Ikea or Tangs or supermarkets may have put their food halls or cafes in-store as a way of better serving their customers' needs.

"But if (smells) can induce customers to buy more or stay longer, that may be a nice side-effect."

Department store Tangs' spokesman Lin Pei Hua said that the store already creates "conducive shopping environments" for shoppers, which "includes appealing to their five senses".

"Certain concepts within the store have their own music, and merchandise is invitingly displayed to encourage shoppers to touch, feel and experience them," she said.

"As for the olfactory sense, we are definitely open to explore this if it goes towards giving our customers a more satisfying shopping experience."

serl@sph.com.sg