

THE SOCIAL SERVICESCAPE: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that environmental variables can substantially influence consumer behaviour in service settings (cf Turley and Milliman 2000). However, research to date has focused on the effects of the physical elements (“atmospherics”),- the Servicescape (term coined by Bitner 1992). Consequently, the social aspects of the environment have been largely overlooked. In particular, individuals within the physical environment (customers and service providers) have been neglected. Thus, in this paper we propose a new conceptual model the “Social Servicescape”. Specifically, we argue that the social environment dictates the desired social density and that social density is determined by the purchase occasion which influences customers’ affective responses and customers’ cognitive responses, including repurchase intentions. We argue that customers play a key role in influencing the emotions of others either positively or negatively, and this largely determines whether they intend to return to the service setting.

Keywords: servicescape, purchase occasion, social density, emotions

Conceptual Framework

Research has shown that the physical environment (atmospherics) influences sales (Donovan and Rossiter 1982; Milliman 1986; Donovan, Rossiter, Marcolyn and Nesdale 1994), time spent in the store (Grossbart, Hampton, Rammohan and Lapidus 1990; Yalch 2000), perceptions of the service experience (Bitner 1990), satisfaction (Doyle and Broadbridge 1999), dissatisfaction (Morris and Ratneswhar 2000), product choice (Buckley 1991), and customer retention (Babin and Attaway 2000). The physical elements directly influence purchasing behaviour (De Mozota 1990) and as such can either aid or hinder a service organisation from achieving its marketing goals (Bitner 1992). However, no study to date has proposed a conceptual model that incorporates social aspects, specifically people and emotions, in service settings. Rather, Bitner’s (1992) seminal work on the Servicescape focused attention on the physical elements arguing that “managers continually plan, build and change an organisation’s physical surroundings in an attempt to control its influence on patrons, without really knowing the impact of a specific design or atmospheric change on its users” (p.57). Thus, because Turley and Milliman’s (2000) call for additional theory development in this area remains, we propose a conceptual model – the Social Servicescape.

Our conceptual model builds on Behaviour Setting Theory (Barker 1968) to explain customers’ social behaviour within the servicescape and incorporates the concept of emotional contagion to explain the process by which the stimulus of the social environment influences customer emotions (affect). In particular, we extend Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) approach - avoidance model (M-R model) by introducing the notion that the “occasion specific” behaviour setting may set tacit social rules that predetermine customer behaviour during the service encounter. The customers’ behaviour creates part of the servicescape’s atmosphere and so becomes an environmental stimulus. These social aspects of the environment act to facilitate or hinder the customer’s enjoyment of the service experience and in turn the customer’s affective state influences subsequent approach or avoidance behaviours, such as the customer’s intention to return or the customer’s intention not to return.

Focus on Social Aspects

Inclusion of customers in the service environment is supported in social and environmental psychology literature. Indeed, social facilitation theory suggests that the mere presence (or absence) of spectators will have an effect on human behaviour (Zajonc 1965; Platania and Moran 2001). Specifically, the performance of a task is facilitated or hindered by an audience (Geen and Bushman 1989). Moreover, the notion that human behaviour is the result of the interaction between a person and their environment has become the central tenant of environmental psychology (Cassidy 1997) Indeed, "...the influence of physical settings on behaviour is inextricably bound up with social aspects of the setting" (Cassidy 1997 p.3) "the physical environment is as much a social phenomenon as it is a physical one" (Proshansky, Ittelson and Rivlin, 1974 p.5) so that the presence of other customers within the servicescape appears critical to a fuller understanding of the servicescape (Mills and Morris 1986; Martin and Pranter 1989; Gummesson 1996; Martin 1996; Bitner, Faranda, Hubbert and Zeithaml, 1997).

The inclusion of customers is particularly important given that many services are performed in the presence of other customers. In addition, considerable attention has been given to crowding. For instance, most studies of customer crowding in retail environments have found that the presence of other people is seen as having a negative influence on atmospheric perceptions (Bateson and Hui 1987; Eroglu and Machleit 1990; Hui and Bateson 1991; Machliet, Eroglu and Mantel, 2000; Turley and Milliman 2000). However, there are situations, especially in the hospitality industry, tourism and events management, where crowding is viewed as very desirable. For example, a sports event with many spectators is a much more enjoyable experience than one with few spectators. The enjoyment of the event and the experience of being there is related to the interaction with other spectators (Lovelock 1996). The same could be said for bars, cafés, concerts, street markets or nightclubs.

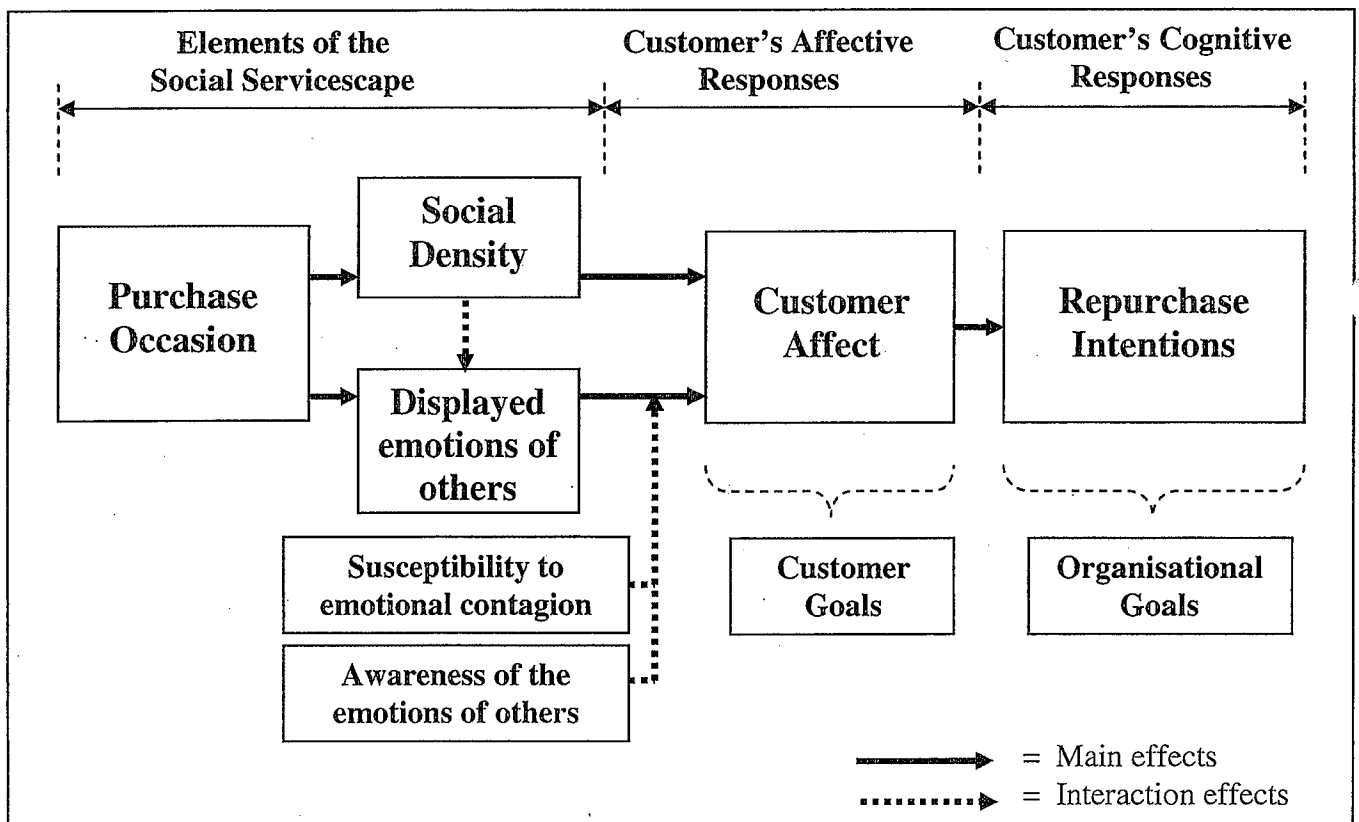
The behaviour setting, defined as "small scale social systems composed of people and physical objects configured in such a way as to carry out a routinised program of activities with specifiable time and place boundaries" (Wicker 1992 p.166), determines individual and interpersonal behaviour of those within it (Barker 1968). For example, a person will still queue quietly in a bank regardless of having an outgoing personality or having had an argument with someone prior to entering the bank. Moreover, the personal nature of this purchase occasion sets an implicit rule that sufficient distance is left between the customer at the counter and the next person in the queue so that the details of the transaction are not overheard. On the other hand, a normally reserved person may jump up with excitement along with the other fans at a sports match. Thus, occasion sets social norms that allow for the close proximity to others and high levels of expressed emotions. Indeed, there are often desirable aspects of watching a live football match and so may indicate an opportunity or desire to share the consumption experience. The place (the bank or sports stadium) and the purchase occasion (dealing with highly personal affairs like depositing and withdrawing money or social activities like watching a live football match) therefore act to determine the customer's behaviour, including social factors such as the display of emotions and the interpersonal distance between customers (social density).

For most service providers the place is fixed. However, the service provider can manipulate the purchase occasion. For example, a restaurateur may set up their restaurant to cater for small intimate groups. The purchase occasion of a romantic dinner for two would call for the tables to be at such a distance that the conversation is not easily heard at other tables (low social density), and the emotions observed by other diners would be subdued. Non-conformity

to this purchase occasion may result in negatively reinforced behaviour (Foxall and Greenley 1999), including management intervention (verbal chastisement or removal from the premises), intervention by other customers (verbal chastisement), or avoidance behaviours on the part of other customers (annoyance and displeasure leading to reducing the duration of the service, no repeat purchasing and negative word of mouth).

On the other hand, if the restaurant is catering for a large birthday party and the meal is served buffet style, then the diners would feel comfortable about moving around the room and talking to many different people. Hence, behaviour that would be considered unacceptable and non compliant in the previous example, becomes the norm in this situation. The social servicescape is a service setting where other customers are present and the purchase occasion has a role in determining the likely behaviour of both the individual customer and the other customers present. Therefore, if the social aspects of the environment (the expressed emotions and social density of the other customers) are consistent with the customer's expectations relative to the purchase occasion then the servicescape will enhance the consumption experience and positively influence approach behaviours. Thus we propose that the purchase occasion will influence the behaviour of a customer through the social density and the expressed emotions of the other customers, which in turn will influence the customer's affective responses eg. customer affect, and the customer's cognitive responses eg. repurchase intentions. Our proposed Social Servicescape Conceptual Model is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Social Servicescape Conceptual Model



Elements of the Social Servicescape Conceptual Model

As shown in Figure 1, we propose that the social servicescape is comprised of five key elements: (1) purchase occasion; (2) social density; (3) displayed emotion of others; (4) customer's affective responses; and (5) customer's cognitive responses. First, the purchase occasion aspect of the behaviour setting is likely to dictate the desired social density for the servicescape to operate efficiently; any deviation from this may result in negative affect. We also suggest that social density in itself affects the emotions of others present. Negative affect may result from situations where others are unwelcome or viewed as intrusive (Baker and Cameron 1996). We expect that personal purchase occasions will fit this situational category. In explaining the effect of social facilitation, Sommer and Sommer (1989) observed that groups stayed longer than individuals in coffee houses, and in situations where others joined the group or individual the stay would be extended. Hence, the voluntary sharing of the purchase occasion is expected to result in positive affect.

Second, if an individual is able to observe the emotions of others, it is possible that these displayed emotions will influence the individual's affective state and these will in turn will result in customer cognitive responses such as having intention to repurchase or not repurchase from that service provider (Levy and Nail 1993; Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson, 1994). For example, Holt (1995) showed that in socially oriented settings the displayed emotions of individuals (baseball spectators) tended to become communal emotions and play a major part in the consumption experience. This is called emotional contagion. Emotional contagion is more likely to occur when the individuals see themselves as interrelated in some way or as part of a larger group with which they identify, as at sporting events (Hatfield et al. 1994). We argue here that the purchase occasion will determine the spatial layout of the customers, their sociability and whether they identify with being part of a larger group (i.e. personal or shared purchase occasions) and as customers interact with each other, their affective state is likely to be influenced by the displayed emotions of others present.

Based on Donovan and Rossiter's (1982) approach behaviours the responses in this framework concentrates on patronage intentions and communication behaviours. First, the desired cognitive responses that relate to patronage intentions will include: to attract customers into the servicescape, to enhance the customer's desire to stay, and to generate an intention to return. The second dimension relates to the communication intentions. These include the desire to associate or be associated with other customers within the servicescape and to tell others of the experience through positive word of mouth.

Even in the most positive outcome situations, where the customer may embrace views with great enthusiasm, they are not likely to be the customer's primary goal in purchasing the service. The customer's goals are more likely to be concerned with gratification, satisfaction and enjoyment of the service experience. However, from the service provider's point of view, part of the motivation for providing the service experience is to elicit affective and cognitive responses, from the customer that will benefit the organization, including repurchase intentions. Therefore, the service organisation should be concerned with enhancing the customers' enjoyment of the service experience to ensure that these cognitive responses will result in approach rather than avoidance behaviours.

In sum, the following hypotheses have been developed for testing:

H1 In a shared (personal) purchase occasion the customer's affective state will be more positive (negative) when the social density is high than when the social density is low.

H2 In a shared (personal) purchase occasion the customer's affective state will be more positive (negative) when other customers display high levels of positive emotions than when their emotions are subdued.

H3 Customer's affect will change with exposure to the displayed emotions of others.

H4 There will be a positive relationship between the customer's affective state and their repurchase intentions.

H5a High social density will be positively associated with exposure to the emotions of others.

H5b Emotional contagion will be higher when social density is high than when social density is low.

H6a Customers with a high susceptibility to emotional contagion will be more affected by the displayed emotions of others than those with a low susceptibility to emotional contagion.

H6b Customers with high levels of awareness of the emotions of others will be more affected by the displayed emotions of others than those with low levels of awareness of the emotions of others.

Conclusion and Implications

Theoretical Contribution In this paper, we have presented a "Social Servicescape" conceptual model, building on Behaviour Setting Theory (Barker 1968), arguing that the concept of atmospherics be broadened to include customers, and thus also extending Bitner's (1992) servicescape. This is a significant departure from the majority of atmospherics literature, which suggests that the service environment be considered only in terms of its physical attributes. Furthermore, we have argued that emotional contagion is an important component so that customers' affective state and their subsequent cognitive responses primarily repurchase intentions are likely to be affected by both the purchase occasion, social density and the displayed emotions of others in the service setting. In doing so we extend Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) classic approach –avoidance model.

Practical Contribution This research potentially offers considerable insights for management. For instance, managers would be interested in knowing how social density and emotional contagion impact on their customers, and how this influences their customers' future repurchase intentions. In some cases this will mean creating a spatial layout that will facilitate greater social interaction while for others the layout should be arranged so as to allow customers to avoid other customers or at least reduce the perception of dysfunctional crowded settings. The idea that a social servicescape exists has implications for staff training. Customer contact staff should understand the effect that social density and the displayed emotions of customers have on other customer's enjoyment of the service experience and subsequent repurchase intentions. To this end staff training should include recognition of the types of displayed customer emotions and how to facilitate the contagion of positive emotions among customers.

Need for Further Research It would appear fruitful for future research to study: (1) the effect that any transfer of emotions between customers within the servicescape, and from customers to employees, has on overall atmosphere within the servicescape; and (2) the implications this has on the organisation's ability to manipulate the atmospherics within the service environment. Further study is recommended using an experimental design that allows each of the five key elements of the proposed Social Servicescape – purchase occasion, social density, displayed emotion of others, customer affective responses, and customer cognitive responses (eg repurchase intentions) – to be manipulated. Such an approach would be appropriate in order to operationalise this conceptual model and test the above hypotheses.

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