



Cultural metaphors: Enhancing consumer pleasure in ethnic servicescapes



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how cultural metaphors in ethnic servicescapes enhance consumer pleasure. To date, marketing researchers have mainly explored how consumers respond to ambient conditions, functional layout and signs/symbols within servicescapes. However, few studies are available on consumer pleasure in ethnic servicescapes or the use of cultural metaphors in servicescapes to enhance consumer pleasure. The study here extends extant literature by contributing an additional dimension of pleasure named “ethno-pleasure.” This notion relates to consumer emotional responses to the cultural metaphors in the servicescapes associated with cultural self-construal. The three themes relating to ethno-pleasure include symbolic experience, imaginary experience, and reviving experience. Findings from this study have implications for assisting marketers in developing strategies for multi-cultural marketing.

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An empty piece of land caters to social activities of consumers from different cultures. First, the Taiwanese arrive with cues of umbrellas and stands in national colors, displays of artifacts, etc. to engage in a wine drinking feat using a Linnak cup. The Taiwanese observers clap excitedly knowing that the Linnak is a cup for lovers. They purchase several bottles of wine from the nearby stand and join in the drinking. The next day, the space is ready to become another setting for Germans drinking wine from wine glasses. The Taiwanese observers feel entertained but pleasure is minimal and they do not purchase any wine. The servicescape is the same but the cultural cues prompt a different response (Adapted from [Rapoport, 1990](#)).

1. Introduction

A key concern of global companies is to assess the fit of what they would like to transfer abroad to a new host environment (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1997). This could be a challenging endeavor, considering cultural differences existing in host country environments. In this paper, we propose to look at ethnic immigrant communities, which provide close representations of cultures in foreign environments. In

addition, they maintain characteristics of racial group membership based on commonly shared features (e.g. [Rosenbaum, 2005](#)).

Prominent examples of cultural challenges for global marketers are servicescapes. Ethnic servicescapes can be ideal environments for observing desires, behaviors, and activities of consumers from ethnic communities. The term servicescape refers to a combination of several dimensions of physical facilities in a built environment that influence customers' holistic perception about the service ([Bitner, 1992](#)). These include facility esthetics such as ambient conditions and signs, symbols and artifacts, facility layout and perceived quality ([Bitner, 1992](#); [Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994](#)). Despite its growing importance, marketers neither dedicate enough attention nor sufficient resources to investigate servicescape requirements for consumers belonging to different ethnic cultures.

Consumers recognize, interpret, and are attracted to specific cues of their culture in service environments related to their traditions and background ([Rapoport, 1990](#)). This relation becomes more intense when consumers recognize the existence of cultural metaphors in the environment. Cultural metaphors can be defined as abstract associations related to tangible aspects, and underlying values of a given culture with which members of that culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify ([Gannon, 2002](#)). Cultural metaphors “are instantiated in social action through behavior, speech, organization, artifacts, and thoughts” ([Denny & Sunderland, 2005, p. 1458](#)). Examples of national cultural metaphors include the Japanese garden, the Chinese family altar, and the American Football.

Marketing researchers have investigated servicescape pleasure extensively (e.g. [Bitner, 1992](#); [Donovan & Rossiter, 1982](#); [Mehrabian](#)

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& Russell, 1974). Pleasure is defined as “the condition of consciousness or sensation induced by the enjoyment or anticipation of what is felt or viewed as good or desirable” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 1031). Pleasure in servicescapes is affected by the way that consumers perceive, reason, organize and feel in relation to the world around them (Ryu & Jang, 2008). The experience of pleasure can determine consumer satisfaction and loyalty behaviors (Bitner, 1992; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Despite its importance, there have been minimal studies focusing on the relationships between cultural metaphors in servicescapes and consumer pleasure, an aspect that makes cultural metaphors of particular relevance to marketers.

In this research we propose the notion of ethno-pleasure, and explore its relation to ethnic servicescapes. Moreover, we establish a distinction between ethno-pleasure from other forms of pleasure such as hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia. Hedonic enjoyment is concerned with pleasures of the mind and the body, whilst eudaimonia refers to being true to one's inner self (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). The study suggests that a key factor distinguishing ethno-pleasure from hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonia relates to the cultural self-construal. This notion refers to one's basic value orientation, and how one perceives and represents oneself (e.g. Gardener et al., 1999). Thus, cultural self-construal reflects how the self-concept relates to one's culture.

This study uses in-depth interviews to investigate the research question of how cultural metaphors in ethnic servicescapes elicit consumer pleasure. The context of study is servicescapes in the Pilsen Mexican community. Participants are the cross-generation (second and third generation) Mexican consumers as well as non-Mexican consumers. Due to their steady and fast growth rate, cross-generation Mexicans have a significant representation in the U.S., and were therefore considered ideal for the study. Three main categories of related concepts consistently emerged in the investigation: symbolic experience, imaginative experience, and reviving experience. Respondents closely tie these experiences with their cultural self-construal. The consumer's cultural self-construal or ethnic identification was found to be closely tied to all three sub-categories of ethno-pleasure.

2. Theoretical foundations

Three streams of research dealing with “servicescapes pleasure”, “self-concept” and “visual metaphors” assist in explaining the role of cultural metaphors in enhancing consumer pleasure in ethnic servicescapes. In this section we review academic contributions in these areas. Limitations of prior studies serve to identify critical gaps that this paper attempts to bridge.

2.1. Culture and self-concept

The study of culture includes values, symbols, artifacts, cognitions, meanings, emotions and actions with which a group of people identifies (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000). Various cross-cultural theories were proposed, such as individualists versus collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995), high-context versus low-context (Hall, 1976), and independence versus interdependence (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Cross-cultural researchers present convincing arguments about how the individual's self concept, referred to in this study as the cultural self-construal, influences responses to cues of his/her socio-cultural environment.

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), people in different cultures have different views of their self and the way they interact with others. This determines the nature of the individual experiences maintained in each culture. For example, collectivist cultures such as Mexican, Asian, Latino and African emphasize values that serve the in-group by subordinating personal goals for the sake of the group. The primary goal of the interdependent self is therefore to maintain good relationships and harmony with others in the social

setting (Kitayama & Mesquita, 2004). In contrast, individualist cultures such as American, German and British emphasize the self by making it feel distinguished and independent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such cultural tendencies may find themselves enacted in servicescapes (Pons & Laroche, 2007).

The individual's self-concept is characterized by a set of cognitive processes that enable to identify and differentiate one's self from others (Ekinci & Riley, 2003). Ekinci and Riley (2003) argue that the relationship between self-concept and emotions captures the symbolic aspects of consumption. Consumers respond positively to servicescapes when they can match their self-identity and self-concept with the servicescape (e.g. Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2006).

Rosenbaum (2005) indicates that consumers from collectivist cultures possess a unique symbolic universe that makes them respond to signs, symbols, objects, and artifacts contained within a servicescape. He argues that these symbolic servicescapes serve to evoke similar sensation of history, identity or memory among group members. Although the above studies acknowledge that cultural identification influences consumer emotions and emotional responses, the way that cultural associations in the servicescapes provide pleasure deserves more exploration.

2.2. Servicescapes pleasure and consumer responses

Marketing studies that center on the role of emotion and affect on the purchase behavior of consumers argue that consumers have a general tendency to seek out pleasurable experiences in interacting with servicescapes (Shawar, 2000). According to the cognitive and affective theory of satisfaction (Oliver, 1997), when consumers develop identity ties in the consumption of a service, they fulfill their needs of self-consistency and self-esteem. These evoke positive emotions, higher satisfaction, and some amount of pleasure. The pleasure dimension in servicescapes refers to the extent that a consumer feels good or happy in the servicescape. This differs from arousal, concerned to the degree by which consumers feel excited, or stimulated in the servicescape (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

In his study about consumer pleasure, Jordan (1999) proposes four categories of pleasure dealing with: (i) physio-pleasure (sensory impressions of sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste), (ii) social-pleasure (social relationships and communication that a product or service enables), (iii) psycho-pleasure (felt when a product or service helps the user to establish a task), and (iv) ideo-pleasure (derived from values that a product or service and its use represent). Pleasurable products are considered by Jordan to provide functional, hedonic and emotional benefits. Hedonic enjoyment focuses on happiness, and is defined as the presence of a positive affect, and the absence of a negative affect (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Deci and Ryan contrast hedonic enjoyment with eudaimonia, which refers to living in a full and deeply satisfying way. The eudaimonic approach considers happiness together with meaningfulness, and a set of wellness variables such as self-actualization and vitality. Eudaimonia is reflected in the concept of eudemonia, which is a contented state of being happy, wealthy, and prosperous (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The eudaimonic view also encourages people to live in accordance with their selves (Waterman, Schwartz, & Conti, 2008) and can be therefore related to pleasure derived from servicescapes.

Ryu and Jang (2008) note that visual stimuli in servicescapes influence consumers' affective states. For example, a good design and atmosphere in a servicescape may serve to enhance the positive emotions of consumers (Soo Cheong & Young, 2009). An important consequence of this is that pleasure in servicescapes has a positive correlation with approach/avoidance responses, shopping intentions, spending, quality perceptions, satisfaction, and value (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Donthu & Cherian, 1994). Although these studies roughly demonstrate how servicescapes evoke consumer pleasure

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