Am I welcome here? Exploring how ethnic consumers assess their place identity ☆

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Abstract

Bitner's [Bitner, M.J. Servicescapes: the impact of physical surroundings on customers and employees, J Mark 1992;56(April):57–72.] and Tombs and McColl-Kennedy's [Tombs A, McColl-Kennedy JR. Social-servicescape conceptual model. Mark Theory 2003; 3(4):447–475.] servicescape frameworks serve as models for illustrating how consumers perceive physical and social elements in consumption settings. This study builds on these frameworks by suggesting that consumers respond to additional elements in a social servicescape to assess their place identity. Place identity refers to the congruency between a consumer's self-identity and a place. On the basis of data collected from ethnic consumers, we posit that consumers assess their place identity by evaluating the ethnicity of employees and customers in a setting, a process termed "place likening," and by responding to verbal and nonverbal cues in a consumption setting. We demonstrate how physical and place identity elements influence responses among Hispanic and homosexual consumers.
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1. Introduction

Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework illustrates the role of physical elements, which comprise a consumption setting's built environment (or servicescape), in influencing a consumer's approach/avoidance behavior (Turley and Milliman, 2000). Bitner posits that these elements can be classified under three categories: ambient conditions; space/function; and signs, symbols, and artifacts. In contrast to Bitner, who focuses on the collective influence of environmental stimuli, other researchers have explored how consumers respond to specific environmental stimuli, such as crowding, lighting, music, scent, and temperature.

A limitation of Bitner's (1992) framework is that it does not incorporate social elements that consumers may also interpret to formulate approach decisions. Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) address this chasm by arguing that consumption settings feature a social servicescape, which is composed of other customers, and that customers respond to the displayed emotions of other customers. In contrast to a customer-centric focus, other researchers consider that consumers formulate approach decisions on the basis of the perceived quality of their interactions with employees (Baker et al., 1992; Beatty et al., 1996), which are in a setting's social realm.

This research suggests that a social servicescape can be defined as customer and employee elements that are found in a consumption setting. However, this conceptualization fails to consider that places are not only socially constituted but also composed of the social, such that questions of "who we are" are often intimately related to questions of "where we are" (Dixon and Durrheim, 2004). In environmental psychology, the place identity paradigm represents a vehicle for discussing the manner in which individuals use physical environments to build or to maintain their self-identities (Bonnes and Secchiaroli, 1995).

It is intuitive that consumers respond to general physical and social elements in a consumption setting. Thus, it may be difficult to consider that some consumers are cognizant about whether a consumption setting, for example, a department store, actually supports their self-identities. Yet we put forth that ethnic consumers are aware of a balance between their sense of self and the place.

The U.S. marketplace has a history of discriminating against ethnic consumers, such as African Americans (Crockett et al., 2003; Milton, 2005), Jews (Bravin, 2001), Hispanics (Herbig and Yelkur, 1997; Tharp, 2001), and homosexuals (Johnson, 2004; Walters and Curran, 1996; Walters and Moore, 2002). However, although the days when establishments placed placards in their windows touting "whites only" and "no Jews allowed" are gone, establishments still communicate bigoted cues to disfavored consumers through social elements. For example, security may follow African Americans shoppers, or employees may provide inferior service to ethnic customers.

We argue that ethnic consumers have learned how to interpret cues in an establishment's social servicescape, which permits them to assess whether the place is congruent with their self-identities. However, the nature of these cues, which are essential for assessing a place identity, remains undefined. Thus, the objectives of this article are to (1) uncover how ethnic consumers assess their place identity, (2) demonstrate how ethnic consumers respond to a physical and social servicescape, and (3) explore the influence of place identity on ethnic consumers' behavioral intentions and satisfaction towards a retail establishment.

We organize the article in the following way: first, we offer a framework that illustrates the article's theoretical contribution. Second, we discuss the literature to place the article in extant paradigms. Third, we offer and then empirically test research propositions. The article concludes with managerial and researches implications.

2. Theoretical background

Fig. 1 represents a framework that illustrates how consumers may perceive a servicescape. The framework contributes to the discipline by expanding on the servicescape paradigm (Baker et al., 1994; Bitner, 1992; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003) and by conceptualizing the cues that consumers use to evaluate their place identity. Place identity refers to the congruency between a consumer's self-identity and a consumption setting. The framework suggests that ethnic consumers evaluate their place identity by assessing both the ethnicity of employees and customers and employees' and customers' verbal and nonverbal cues in a consumption setting. A congruent place identity is believed to encourage approach behavior, while an incompatible identity is believed to drive avoidance.

The model incorporates marketing into the environmental psychology literature by considering that consumers may enter places not only for what they sell but also for what they mean in relation to consumers' self-identities. In the following section, we define and develop the place identity concept.

3. Literature review

3.1. Ethnicity as a consumption driver

Before we proceed further, it is necessary to conceptualize the terms "ethnic" and "ethnicity." "Ethnic" refers to any group of individuals that claims a distinct peoplehood or an identity that sets them apart from others (Hirschman, 2001). The word "ethnic" originates from the Greek word "ethnos," which originally meant heathen or pagan (Eriksen, 2002). Eriksen (2002) points out that the term was used in this manner until the mid-nineteenth century. In the United States, "ethnic" came to be used around World War II as a polite term that referred to Jews, Italians, the Irish, and others considered inferior to the Anglos.

The term "ethnicity" still connotes minority issues; however, it also refers to aspects of relationships between groups that consider themselves and are regarded by others as culturally distinct (Hirschman, 2001). Thus, dominant groups are by no means less ethnic than minority groups. However, unlike members of dominant groups, members of minority groups often experience negative consequences due to their group membership. In this article, ethnic consumers are deemed as members of minority groups in their residential and local surrounding areas.
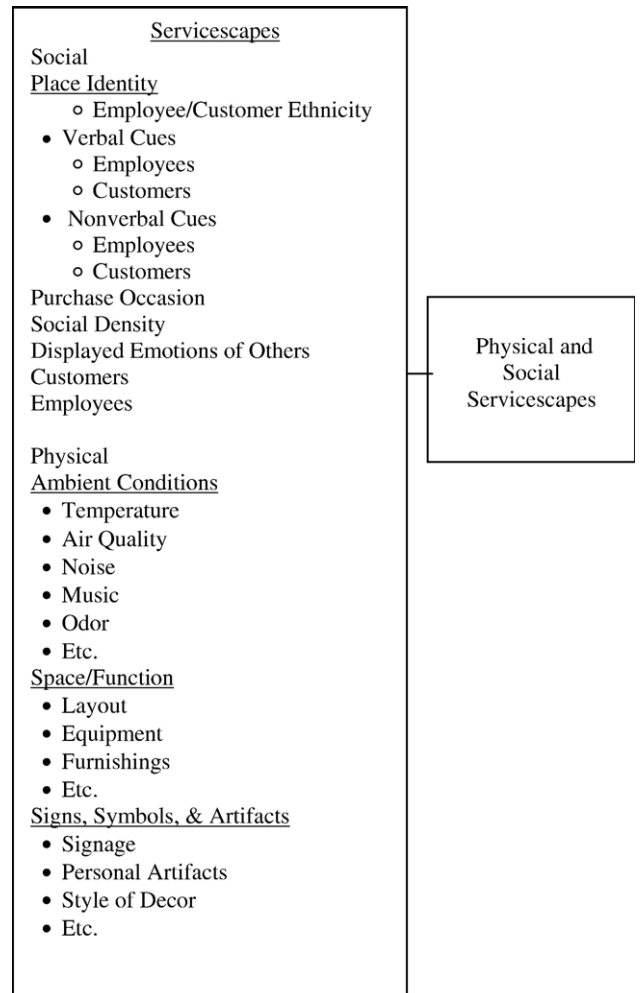
Servicescapes

Social
Place Identity
- ○ Employee/Customer Ethnicity
- • Verbal Cues
  - ○ Employees
  - ○ Customers
- • Nonverbal Cues
  - ○ Employees
  - ○ Customers
Purchase Occasion
Social Density
Displayed Emotions of Others
Customers
Employees

Physical
Ambient Conditions
- • Temperature
- • Air Quality
- • Noise
- • Music
- • Odor
- • Etc.
Space/Function
- • Layout
- • Equipment
- • Furnishings
- • Etc.
Signs, Symbols, & Artifacts
- • Signage
- • Personal Artifacts
- • Style of Decor
- • Etc.

Physical and Social Servicescapes

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.