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The evoking power of servicescapes: Consumers' inferences of manipulative intent following service environment-driven evocations

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ABSTRACT

Interactions between consumers and the servicescape favor value creation. To this regard, the potential influence of the servicescape on consumer service experience is of most importance. While consumers have been perceived as active and willing to co-create value, this research shows that this is not the case when the servicescape triggers inferences of manipulative intent (IMI) and consumers consequently exhibit lower shopping intentions. In particular, in a context where the literature has overlooked how incongruency may affect IMI, this research focuses on how consumers react when the evocations driven from the servicescape contradict product properties. More specifically, this research investigates how discrepancies between (1) the actual properties of the merchandise and (2) those that are driven by the servicescape lead to IMI and subsequent shopping intentions. Results from an experiment demonstrate that when the evoked and actual properties of the merchandise are incongruent, consumers tend to infer that the servicescape is manipulative, resulting in a decrease in shopping intentions.

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1. Introduction

Recent service research considers the interactive process of value co-creation as one of the key priority areas to enhance extant knowledge of the field of services (Ostrom, Parasuraman, Bowen, Patricio, & Voss, 2015; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008). In the service provision process, value is fundamentally co-created by multiple actors – always including the beneficiary – which all combine to produce and enhance the service experience. Within this process, consumers are no longer considered as passive; rather, they are conceptualized as beneficiaries and resource integrators, as proposed in the service-dominant logic literature (Lusch & Vargo, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016).

This fundamental change in perspective, however, raises the issue of the consumers' participation in the co-creation process or, as Ostrom et al. (2015, p. 139) put it, another question: what happens if they "resist performing their expected co-production roles"? Though such concerns have been envisioned in the context of business-to-business (B2B) service systems (Breidbach & Maglio, 2016; Santos & Spring, 2015), or in B2C employee- and technology-related issues (Ostrom et al., 2015), research priorities must address how the coordination efforts (that the co-creation process requires) should be achieved, and how the necessary resources to enhance the service experience should be integrated.

Among the resources for value co-creation, servicescapes – i.e., environments that form the particular setting and atmosphere where the service experience is produced and consumed (Bitner, 1992) – play a crucial role (Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014; Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014). Within various forms of servicescapes and despite the growing number of possibilities to engage relationships with consumers (Ostrom et al., 2015), stores remain the privileged physical locations where services are offered and delivered (Dagger & Danaher, 2014). Hence, in the light of a goods-centered view, previous literature shows how retailers pay great attention to design in-store environments aimed at providing pleasant shopping experiences, at inducing positive mood, and enhancing consumers' emotions, evaluations, and purchasing behavior (Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Donovan, Rossiter, Marcoolyn, & Nesdale, 1994; Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006; Spence et al., 2014). Therefore, servicescape variables – tangible and intangible ambient elements such as lighting, music, scent, and temperature – can be conceptualized as resources that participate in value

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propositions for specific segments of beneficiaries (Chandler & Lusch, 2015). So doing, a service-providing actor is able to exchange resources with specific consumer segments and, in turn, to draw from this exchange a "strategic benefit" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 7).

Yet, in spite of the ability of servicescapes to co-create value with and generate positive outcomes for the consumer, some studies challenge such systematic benefits. For example, Mattila and Wirtz (2006) show that the degree to which a servicescape is perceived as pleasant (vs. unpleasant) varies depending on its capacity to match the customers' target-arousal level. In other words, since being "always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 6), value may not be clearly perceived in some cases. From a more cognitive perspective, Lunardo and Roux (2015) stress how highly arousing servicescapes can trigger inferences of manipulative intent (IMI), thus negatively affecting pleasure and approach behavior. These IMI are reflexive processes by which consumers think that a market agent "is attempting to persuade [them] by incongruent, unfair, or manipulative means" (Campbell, 1995, p. 228), here a pleasant servicescape. By giving meaning to their experiences (Wentzel, Tomczak, & Herrmann, 2010), consumers feel that ambient elements such as lighting, music, scent, and temperature may be used by retailers purposely and primarily for their own benefit (Lunardo & Roux, 2015), thus compromising the value co-creation. In the same vein, and far from the ideal view that underlies a service-centered view of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), Lunardo and Mbengue (2013) suggest that incongruency – and specifically, the discrepancies between the evoked and actual properties of the in-store merchandise – may lead to IMI, and subsequently to negative consequences on trust and attitude. For example, a garage using a new-car smell to increase the perceived quality of second-hand cars may prompt customers to think that the garage owner is manipulative, leading to a decrease in their trust toward that service provider.

Although the servicescape may affect consumer behavior and value assessment, a limitation in the literature lies in that Lunardo and Mbengue (2013) only focus on the impact of IMI on shopping intentions, thus failing to explain the role of incongruency in the mechanism of inference formation. As incongruency is likely to affect the service experience and to jeopardize the value creation process, this research aims to address this gap. More precisely, this research examines how incongruency creates disfluency, i.e., the metacognitive experience of arduously performing a mental action (Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003), which then leads to IMI and lower shopping intentions.

To this end, and in line with prior conceptualizations, the paper first builds on the congruity theory (Mandler, 1982) and the role of disfluency in the relationship between incongruency and IMI. Section 2 concludes with the resulting formal hypotheses. In Section 3, the experiment is presented and the relationships are tested. Results confirm that servicescape-driven evocations that are not supported by the merchandise properties lead to incongruency. This incongruency then causes disfluency, resulting in an increase in IMI and a decrease in subsequent shopping intentions. Findings also support the mediating role of disfluency between incongruency and IMI. Overall, these results advance service management decision-making whose implications for value creation in marketing research and practice are finally discussed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Servicescapes and congruency

Servicescapes exert positive effects on consumers' responses (e.g., Brüggen, Foubert, & Gremler, 2011; Michon, Chebat, & Turley, 2005; Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014; Turley & Milliman, 2000). These effects result from a holistic perception of the environment whereby consumers process all discrete stimuli in the servicescape as a whole. Hence, an important variable that comes into play regarding consumers' perception of servicescapes is the degree of fit or congruency between their different components (e.g., Beverland, Lim, Morrison, & Terziovski, 2006; Eroglu, Machleit, & Chebat, 2005; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996; Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprott, 2005).

Though congruency exerts positive effects (unlike incongruency that is supposed to cause negative effects), three kinds of congruency can be distinguished. The first refers to the match (versus mismatch) between the components of the servicescape. For example, Mattila and Wirtz (2001) show that the congruency between the arousal levels of scent and music exerts a positive impact on consumers' reactions: pleasure, satisfaction, and impulse purchases. The second type of congruency pertains to the match (versus mismatch) between stimuli from the servicescape and consumers' characteristics. For instance, Morrin and Chebat (2005) argue that ambient cues that are (vs. are not) congruent with consumers' affectively or cognitively oriented shopping styles are more effective at enhancing their subsequent responses. The third type of congruency refers to the degree of fit between stimuli and merchandise (Areni & Kim, 1993; Mitchell, Kahn, & Knasko, 1995; North, Hargreaves, & McKendrick, 1999; Schlosser, 1998; Spangenberg, Sprott, Grohmann, & Tracy, 2006; Spangenberg et al., 1996). Relying on the power of servicescapes to drive evocations, Orth and Bourrain (2008) indicate that the congruency between the servicescape-driven evocations and the merchandise properties has positive outcomes, while incongruency leads to negative consequences. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (1995) demonstrate that ambient olfactory cues influence consumers' information processing and product choice, such that congruent (vs. incongruent) scents enhance consumer judgments about the merchandise.

Overall, previous research emphasizes the positive effects of congruency and the negative influence of incongruency on consumer behavior. Yet, the potential underlying mechanisms of the negative effects of incongruency remain understudied (North et al., 1999; Spangenberg et al., 2006).

2.2. Incongruency, cognitive elaboration, and disfluency

Mandler's (1982) theory of congruity provides an appropriate framework for hypothesizing the positive effects of congruency between stimuli from the servicescape and the merchandise. Widely used in research on servicescapes (e.g., Eroglu et al., 2005; Meyers-Levy & Zhu, 2010; Peck & Childers, 2008; Spangenberg et al., 2006), this theory posits that congruity – or congruency (Kressmann et al., 2006) – leads to favorable responses because individuals prefer objects that conform to their expectations and require low levels of cognitive elaboration. In line with this theorization, congruent servicescapes induce positive responses by providing shoppers with environments easy to process.

By contrast, incongruency may prompt attention, need for understanding, and increased cognitive elaboration, which are likely to negatively affect evaluations (Heckler & Childers, 1992; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Therefore, incongruent servicescapes, even unintentionally produced by retailers, might raise consumers' attention and prompt corrective mechanisms. For example, Bosmans (2006) shows that in-store ambient scents that are congruent with the merchandise positively affect consumers' evaluations. Conversely, when incongruent, ambient scents become more salient and have a negative effect because they result in cognitive elaboration and lead consumers to engage in a conscious process to correct for their influence. Thus, when there is some discrepancy between the actual merchandise properties and the evocations driven by the servicescape, consumers may question the latter. Based on the literature, we argue that such a discrepancy may, respectively, affect (1) incongruency, or the perceived lack of fit between merchandise

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