



The restaurant social servicescape: Establishing a nomological framework

Lydia Hanks, Nathaniel D. Line*

Florida State University, Dedman School of Hospitality, B4114 University Center, 288 Champions Way, Tallahassee, FL 32306, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social servicescape
Other customers
Restaurants
Consumer behavior
Nomological framework

ABSTRACT

Understanding the effects of the service environment on consumption behavior has become an important topic of research in the hospitality literature in recent years. While much of the initial research in this stream has focused on the effects of the physical aspects of the consumption space (e.g., décor, layout, lighting, etc.), a number of more recent studies have proposed that, like these physical factors, social phenomena may exert a significant effect on consumer behavior. The purpose of this research is to test these propositions. Defined as the social servicescape, social aspects of the consumption environment including customer/employee behavior, appearance, and perceived similarity, are hypothesized to exert a meaningful effect on evaluations of the full-service dining experience. The results support the proposed framework, demonstrating the social servicescape as a robust predictor of attitude, satisfaction, and post-consumption behavioral intentions, including return intention and word of mouth.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a significant amount of knowledge has accumulated concerning the effect of atmospherics on consumer behavior (Mari and Poggesi, 2013). This is especially true when it comes to restaurant patronage. For example, various aspects of the physical environment/servicescape have been demonstrated to significantly affect consumer perceptions of restaurant experiences, including attitudes and emotions toward the restaurant (e.g., Jang et al., 2011; Kim and Moon, 2009) and satisfaction with the dining experience (e.g., Namkung and Jang, 2008; Ryu and Han, 2011). In addition to affecting perceptual constructs, the servicescape has also been found to significantly influence behaviorally based variables such as loyalty (e.g., Harris and Ezeh, 2008; Ryu and Han, 2011), patronage intention (e.g., Kim and Moon, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2007), and word of mouth intention (e.g., Kim et al., 2009; Liu and Jang, 2009). As a result of such endeavors, a rich theoretical tradition has developed concerning the role of the physical environment in restaurant patronage. In turn, the tenets emanating from this framework have played an important role in practical hospitality management (Wakefield and Blodgett, 2016).

The contemporary understanding of the role of atmospherics in consumption behavior is attributable to Bitner's (1992) conceptual identification of consumption servicescapes as a function of physical phenomena such as ambient conditions, space/function, and signs, symbols, and artifacts. However, while Bitner's framework has dominated servicescape research from a theoretical perspective, others have proposed that in addition to physical phenomena, social actors may

play an equally important role in the customer's perception of the servicescape (e.g., Baker, 1987; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). These perspectives suggest that like the physical environment, social phenomena such as perceived similarity, appearance, and the behavior of other actors in the consumption space (i.e., customers and employees) might also be a significant determinant of consumer behavior. Unfortunately, there is far less known about this socially-based servicescape construct than about its more tangible counterpart.

In acknowledgement of this research gap, a number of studies have started to consider the possibility that, like the physical servicescape, the social servicescape may also exert influence on constructs like attitude, satisfaction, loyalty, and behavior. For example, Jang et al. (2015) found evidence that individual aspects of the social servicescape can affect the image of a restaurant as well as general behavioral intentions. Yet, while such research has been helpful in identifying the social servicescape as an empirically observable phenomenon, this stream has not moved past preliminary operational issues and nomological connections.

Thus, while scholars seem to be coming to an agreement regarding the existence of a salient social servicescape construct (Hanks et al., 2017a; Harris and Ezeh, 2008; Jang et al., 2015; Line et al., 2018; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003, 2010), it remains unclear how this construct fits into the traditionally established models of servicescape-driven behavior. To address this gap in the literature, the purpose of the present research is to determine the effects of the social servicescape on consumption behavior in the restaurant industry and to demonstrate that, like the physical environment, the social environment can exert a

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lhanks@dedman.fsu.edu (L. Hanks), nline@dedman.fsu.edu (N.D. Line).

similarly positive effect on (1) perceptions of the dining experience (i.e., attitude and satisfaction) and (2) post consumption behavior (loyalty, word of mouth intention, and return intention). To achieve this goal, this research proposes that the social servicescape acts a significant driver of a number of relationships that are commonly attributed to the physical servicescape in the restaurant industry. Upon establishing empirical support for the proposed framework, the primary implications of the established relationship between the social servicescape and restaurant patronage are discussed from both a theoretical and a practical perspective.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. The social servicescape

The conceptualization of the social servicescape is necessarily predicated upon the aspects of the service environment that relate to people. In most service settings, customers share the consumption space with service employees and other customers (Jani and Han, 2013), and aspects of these others, such as their appearance, characteristics, and behaviors, contribute to the overall assessment of the customer's experience. Much as the elements of the physical servicescape impact the customer experience merely by being present in the consumption environment (Bitner, 1992), other customers and employees can influence perceptions and behaviors by their mere presence in the shared consumption space, even in the absence of direct interaction (Kim and Lee, 2012; Miao and Mattila, 2013).

An understanding of the effect of the presence of others is particularly important in a restaurant context, as restaurant dining is, by definition, an experience in which one is surrounded by others. The presence of others is a critical element of the restaurant servicescape; and simply by coexisting in the same environment, others become a *de facto* point of evaluation for the focal consumer (Kim and Hardin, 2010). For example, when consumers form links with each other and the service environment through shared consumption activity, these connections can facilitate a sense of place attachment and loyalty to the location (even in the absence of direct interaction) (Johnstone, 2012). Thus, the mere presence of others can create a sense of connection to the place and fulfill social needs. This effect is independent of the service quality or product quality, and in some cases, serves as a motivator for the visit over and above the fulfillment of practical needs (Johnstone, 2012). Notably, Nguyen et al. (2012) found that this effect varies across contexts, depending upon the purpose of the customer's visit. These researchers found that the social servicescape had a differential effect across a utilitarian retail environment and a hedonic concert experience, with the social aspects of the experience having greater influence in the hedonic setting.

Much prior research in the hospitality literature has examined various aspects of the social environment in restaurants, including factors such as the psychographics and demographics of others, the density and perceived crowdedness, and the appearance and behavior of others. For example, Kim and Lee (2012) found that various demographic and behavioral aspects of the others present impacted the focal customer's evaluations, but did so differentially depending on the context and purpose of the visit. The behavior of the service staff and the other customers in the restaurant has also been shown to influence the focal customer's emotions, satisfaction, and approach/avoidance behavior (Lin and Mattila, 2010), particularly when the focal customer has expectations of appropriate behavior (Miao and Mattila, 2013). As an example, Tse et al. (2002) examined the density of the social environment in restaurants and found that the perceived crowdedness of a restaurant impacts service evaluations.

Such elements of the social servicescape have been demonstrated to have direct effects on multiple consumer outcomes. For example, prior research has demonstrated that the mere presence of others has a direct impact on attitudes, satisfaction, and loyalty behaviors (Bitner, 1990;

Kim and Lee, 2012; Martin and Pranter, 1989; Yang and Mattila, 2014). In a study of hotel restaurant consumers, Wu and Liang (2009) found that the social factors in the restaurant influenced both customer satisfaction and experiential value. Likewise, Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007) found that the social aspect of a restaurant environment can be so important that it may lead to extreme loyalty behaviors, such as making voluntary contributions to the organization. The characteristics of others can also impact the duration of the focal customer's stay (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010). For example, Kim and Hardin (2010) found that the social servicescape was an important determinant of the likelihood to spread word of mouth.

While this body of literature collectively makes a strong case for the effect of the social servicescape on consumer outcomes, no prior study has conceptualized an overall model of the effects of the social servicescape on consumer evaluations and behaviors in a restaurant context. To this end, the present research proposes a nomological framework linking aspects of the social servicescape with consumer outcomes. To test this model, the social servicescape is conceptualized based on a framework developed by Brocato et al. (2012) in which customers assess others in the service environment in terms of perceived similarity, physical appearance, and appropriate behavior. Brocato et al. (2012) tested these three elements of the social servicescape in a restaurant context and found support for the notion that consumers used these factors to evaluate their service experience. As the perceived similarity, physical appearance, and appropriate behavior of others in the restaurant are all readily apparent to a focal customer (even when there is no direct interaction with others), this framework is especially useful for research in a restaurant context.

2.2. Perceived similarity

Perceived similarity to other customers can be defined as "the degree to which a customer feels that he is similar to and can identify with the other customers in the service environment" (Brocato et al., 2012). Social identity theory posits that membership in groups forms a significant part of an individual's self-identity (Tajfel, 1982), and as suggested by the classic adage, "birds of a feather flock together," people tend to engage with others who are similar to themselves (McPherson et al., 2001). When translated into a service context, this theory would suggest that (1) customers prefer to share consumption space with other customers to whom they are similar and with whom they can identify and (2) doing so leads to a high likelihood of evaluating those customers positively (Brocato et al., 2012). This tendency suggests that customers tend to gravitate toward consumption environments where they feel that they are compatible with the others in the space and where they feel most at home (Hanks et al., 2017b; Line & Hanks, in press; Line et al., 2018; Martin and Pranter, 1989).

In addition to the perceived similarity between customers, the perception of similarity to employees plays an important role in the evaluation of the service experience, even when there is no direct interaction. Research in psychology and business demonstrates that congruence between customers and employees can lead to positive outcomes for both the customer and the company (e.g., Tsui et al., 1992). For example, when customers feel that employees are similar to themselves, they may perceive that such similarity will result in an inherent understanding of their needs and preferences (Cox, 1993). Thus, employees who are similar to a focal customer in terms of lifestyle and social background may be thought to better understand the demands, needs and preferences of that customer better than employees who do not share such similarities. In addition, social identity theory suggests that customers prefer employees with whom they feel some similarity, as this helps foster a sense of identity (Tajfel, 1982), resulting in a preference for service environments in which there is a high level of similarity between employees and the customer (Martin and Pranter, 1989).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7418972>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7418972>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)