Birds of a feather donate together: Understanding the relationship between the social servicescape and CSR participation

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the social servicescape has recently gained traction in the hospitality literature as a significant driver of consumption behavior. The purpose of the present research is to extend the framework of the social servicescape to the domain of corporate social responsibility participation. It is proposed that perceptions of similarity in the social servicescape (i.e., the extent to which a customer identifies with others in the consumption environment) can affect restaurant customers' decisions to participate in donation-based CSR programs. Importantly, this relationship is proposed to occur via the mediating effect of place attachment. Based on attachment theory, a framework is developed to test these hypotheses. The findings indicate that perceived similarity in the social servicescape positively influences willingness to donate and that this relationship is mediated by place attachment. Accordingly, this research extends both the social servicescape and CSR literature in the domain of hospitality consumption behavior.

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs have become a pillar of nearly every large company's strategic mission. These corporate-sponsored philanthropic initiatives are intended to demonstrate to the public that the company cares about issues beyond profit generation and is a contributing member of the community or society (Lii and Lee, 2012). CSR programs can take many forms and champion many causes, including animal welfare, environmental concerns, fair labor conditions, and responsible product sourcing, among others (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Vlachos et al., 2009). For example, Arby's – a fast food restaurant chain – is actively engaged in a series of initiatives. In 2015, their water consumption initiative reduced companywide water use by more than 7.4 million gallons and was named Project of the Year by *Environmental Leader* magazine. Additionally, the Arby's Foundation raised $3.7 million for youth-related causes (Arby's, 2016).

CSR programs are central to a company's brand positioning and reputation and can be used to communicate the values of the company to current and potential customers (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2003), resulting in positive outcomes such as customer satisfaction, higher revenues, willingness to pay a premium, positive word of mouth, increased loyalty to the company, and resilience to negative information about the company (e.g., Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Customer involvement

and participation in such initiatives reinforces the idea that the company and the customer share a set of values. Further, customer support of CSR campaigns strengthens the tie between the customer and the company (Du et al., 2007).

Customers can participate in CSR initiatives in different ways such as volunteering time or participating in waste reduction programs; however, research has shown that the most common customer-based CSR initiatives feature monetary donations (e.g., White and Peloza, 2009; Wu et al., 2017). The prevalence of donation-based initiatives in the marketplace is evidenced by a significant increase in annual spending on this form of CSR, from roughly $100 million in 1990 to more than $60 billion in 2016 (IEG, 2017). Interestingly however, while most consumers report that they would switch to a brand that supports a cause when it is equal to other brands in terms of price and quality, less than 20% indicate that they are willing to pay more to support a cause, suggesting that many consumers still hesitate when faced with a donation request (Winterich and Barone, 2011).

Given the growth in donation-based CSR programs and the importance of these programs both to the sponsoring company as well as to the cause it supports, hospitality research has recently started to explore the underlying motivations for CSR participation (e.g., Mattila et al., 2016; Winterich et al., 2013; Wu et al., 2017). However, such research has typically been concerned with the effect of the offer itself

(e.g., Zhang, 2014), characteristics of the offer (e.g., Mattila and Hanks, 2012), or the presence of dining companions (e.g., Hanks et al., 2016). While such studies have been essential to furthering the research stream, comparatively fewer studies (e.g., Wu et al., 2017) have considered the effects of the passive social factors that may influence donation behavior.

Unlike active customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) where customers directly interact with each other, research on passive CCI focuses on the mere presence of other patrons in an establishment (Kim and Lee, 2012). Understanding passive CCI is important as prior research suggests that even when there is no direct interaction between a focal customer and the other customers in the consumption environment, their behaviors can still significantly influence the focal customer's perceptions of his or her service experience (e.g., Hanks et al., 2017a). For example, Hanks et al. (2017a) examined the effect of density in the servicescape on customers' evaluations of service quality finding that the density of a restaurant impacts three interpersonal dimensions of customers' perception of service quality (responsiveness, assurance, and empathy). Similarly, Line and Hanks (2016) investigated how the characteristics of the other customers in a restaurant impact identity congruence. Their results indicate that other customers have an impact on either the actual self-image or the ideal self-image of the focal customers, which further influences commitment to the restaurant.

Because many hospitality consumption experiences (e.g., dining in a restaurant) involve the mere presence of other customers (Miao et al., 2011), it is important to understand how the social environment influences customer experiences and behavior. Unfortunately, research on the passive effects of other customers in service encounters has received limited attention (Miao and Mattila, 2013). To bridge the gap, this research sets out to consider the role of one such passive factor, the social servicescape, in driving customer participation in donation-based CSR initiatives.

Specifically, this research proposes that perceptions of similarity in the social servicescape, can affect a customer's willingness to participate in a donation-based CSR program. Importantly, this relationship is proposed to become manifest via the mediating effect of place attachment. The framework suggests that the more customers identify with the passive actors in the shared consumption space, the more attached they will become to the restaurant. This attachment is then proposed to translate into a more favorable attitude toward the participation offer and, in turn, a greater likelihood of participation (i.e., donation).

2. Literature review

2.1. The social servicescape

The concept of the social servicescape has its roots in the classic conceptualization of the physical elements of the service environment, widely known in consumer behavior literature as "the servicescape" (Bitner, 1992). The servicescape has traditionally been described as consisting of three reflective elements: ambient conditions, such as lighting, scent, and music; spatial layout, which encompasses furniture layout and navigability; and signs, symbols, and artifacts, which includes décor and signage (Bitner, 1992). While this construct has been robustly demonstrated to have predictive power on the customer experience, it stops short of considering the human element of the service environment.

In response to this shortcoming, the notion of the social servicescape and its impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors has recently gained traction in the hospitality and tourism literature (Hanks et al., 2017b; Line et al., in press; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). The social servicescape is defined in terms of the social aspects of the service environment, such as the presence, appearance, and behavior of the passive actors in the consumption space, particularly the other customers with whom no direct interaction takes place. More recent studies have expanded upon this idea, demonstrating that the social

servicescape is a key part of the overall service encounter and strongly influences various emotions, attitudes, and behaviors of the focal customer, such as pleasure, delight, anticipated satisfaction, place attachment, and word of mouth (e.g., Hanks et al., 2017a; Line et al., in press; Miao and Mattila, 2013).

This conceptualization of the servicescape builds upon several previous streams of research, including the idea of inter-customer compatibility (Martin, 1996; Martin and Pranter, 1989), customer-to-customer interaction (see Nicholls, 2010), and Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) S-O-R framework. Previous research on customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) suggests that CCI has both active and passive components (Kim and Lee, 2012). Active CCI occurs when customers directly interact with each other either verbally or physically, while passive CCI centers on what Kim and Lee (2012) term "mere presence" (p. 27). The concept of mere presence suggests that other patrons in an establishment can have a significant effect on the way in which the focal customer perceives the service experience, even when there is no direct interaction between patrons. While extant research has demonstrated this effect, the underlying mechanisms that drive this relationship are less well understood. However, Line, Hanks, and associates have recently found that the focal customer's perception of the similarity between himself and the other customers in the service environment (also referred to as customer-to-customer homogeneity) significantly influences his perceptions of the service experience (Hanks et al., 2017a; Hanks et al., 2017b; Line et al., in press).

Notably, the social servicescape can also be considered in the context of the S-O-R paradigm (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). This framework suggests that elements of the service environment, including stimuli (S) such as color, light, and sound, influence an organism's (O) internal states of pleasure and arousal, which in turn impact his response (R) to the situation. Previous research has found that the high levels of pleasure and arousal that occur as a result of positive stimuli in the service environment have a positive impact on customer attitudes and behaviors (Babin and Babin, 2001; Eroglu et al., 2003). In terms of the current study, it is proposed that the social servicescape acts as yet another stimulus that has downstream effects on the customer's evaluation of the service environment as well as his willingness to donate to the organization's CSR initiative. A summary figure of the hypotheses inherent to the proposed framework can be seen in Fig. 1.

2.2. Customer homogeneity

Customer-to-customer homogeneity can be defined as the extent to which the focal customer's social identity is similar to the social identity of another customer or group of customers (Jani and Han, 2013). In other words, it is a measurement of how similar or dissimilar the other customers are to the focal customer in various categories of comparison including psychographic traits such as values, opinions, and worldviews (Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that people prefer to socialize with others who are most like them, as it serves to reinforce their own self-image and self-concept. The old adage, "birds of a feather flock together," reflects the idea that individuals prefer to engage socially with similar others (McPherson et al., 2001).

Because other customers in the service environment are a key component of the overall image of the company (Line and Hanks, 2016; Lovelock, 1994), it is expected that when the other patrons in the establishment are similar to the focal customer, this will reinforce the focal customer's affinity for (and attachment to) the company or brand. In other words, the perceived similarity between the characteristics of the other customers and the focal customer will facilitate a sense of attachment and the perception that he is in the right environment with similar others.