



Circular vs. angular servicescape: “Shaping” customer response to a fast service encounter pace

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ABSTRACT

Although a fast service encounter pace might increase revenues for the service provider, its consequences on customer satisfaction and repatronage can be detrimental. To address this gap, the present study proposes a novel sensory marketing strategy (i.e., using shape cues) to soften customers' negative reactions to a fast-paced service encounter. Specifically, we examine the interplay of physical servicescape cues (shape: circular vs. angular) and social servicescape cues (busyness: non-busy vs. busy) on customer satisfaction. The findings suggest that in busy settings, angular shape cues increase customer satisfaction through perceived competence of the service provider. Conversely, in non-busy settings, circular shape cues enhance customer satisfaction via warmth perceptions. These findings highlight an innovative sensory approach in managing customer evaluations of experiential consumption as well as communicating brand personalities through the servicescape.

1. Introduction

Shapes are fundamental visual elements of design, architecture, and art, widely used in the physical world. Angular and circular shapes dominate commercial service exteriors and interiors, and contribute to the making of iconic design. For example, a tourist exploring landmarks on the New York City's 5th Avenue will snap pictures of the immaculate glass cube of the Apple Store and the famous rotunda that houses the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Likewise, minimalist angular interior of the Four Seasons Restaurant in Seagram sets the atmosphere for state-of-the-art dining, while the Sheraton Huzhou Hot Spring Resort (known as the “doughnut hotel”) has gained an international recognition through its novel geometrical shape (see photos in the Web Appendix). While prior research has begun to show that the curvature/angularity aspect of shapes has an impact on consumer judgments and decision-making (Jiang, Gorn, Galli, & Chattopadhyay, 2016; Maimaran & Wheeler, 2008; Zhang, Feick, & Price, 2006; Zhu & Argo, 2013), it is unclear how shapes might spillover to influence consumers' service encounter evaluations. Extending the growing stream of work on sensory marketing, the current research explores the impact of circular and angular shapes on consumer response to a fast service encounter pace.

All services essentially sell the use of time (Davies, 1994). A sixty-minute massage, a three-night hotel stay, or a one-week car rental—in

these settings, services are sold to the customer for a fixed amount of time. Yet, duration control becomes particularly important in settings where the length of a service encounter is not fixed and can vary substantially, for instance, restaurants, healthcare facilities, and banking (Kimes & Chase, 1998; Kimes & Wirtz, 2003; Noone, Wirtz, & Kimes, 2012). The revenue management literature suggests that reducing the duration of a service encounter, especially during high demand periods, can add considerable revenues for the firm (Kimes, Barrash, & Alexander, 1999; Kimes & Robson, 2004). Indeed, even upscale restaurants rush their guests for a higher table turnover, calling it the “Greet 'em, Seat 'em, Feed 'em—and Delete 'em” service philosophy (Bhatia, 2002). While a faster service pace instantly boosts revenue per available seat hour (RevPASH), research shows that this strategy has a negative impact on customer satisfaction and repatronage (Noone et al., 2012; Noone, Kimes, Mattila, & Wirtz, 2009; Wirtz, Kimes, Theng, & Patterson, 2003).

Despite the increasingly widespread practice of rushing customers (Ferdman, 2015; Katz, 2016; Seim, 2011), the existing service literature provides little guidance on how to preserve customer satisfaction while employing a fast service encounter pace. To address that gap, the present research proposes a novel sensory marketing strategy (i.e., using shape cues) that softens customers' negative reactions to a fast-paced service experience. Specifically, we examine customer satisfaction with such an experience as a function of: (i) circular versus angular shape

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cues embedded in the physical servicescape, and (ii) non-busy versus busy cues in the social servicescape. Moreover, we strive to gain a deeper understanding of customer satisfaction through decoding warmth and competence inferences of the service provider.

The shape symbolism literature suggests that people often associate shapes with meanings, such that circular shapes convey friendliness, softness, and harmony, whereas angular shapes signal strength, hardness, and individuality (Berlyne, 1974; Jiang et al., 2016; Liu, 1997; Zhang et al., 2006). While the role of shape is evident in marketing of material goods through the design of logos or packages (Folkes & Matta, 2004; Hagtvædt, 2011; Jiang et al., 2016; Rahinel & Nelson, 2016; Romero & Craig, 2017), its impact has been overlooked in the context of experiential services. Can service managers utilize environmental cues, such as shape cues, to manage customer perceptions of service encounters? We address this question by mapping circular and angular shapes onto two fundamental dimensions of social judgments—warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005). We propose that a servicescape incorporating circular (angular) cues will activate customers' warmth (competence) associations, which will further “shape” customer response to a fast-paced service encounter.

However, the mere presence of other customers—a social dimension of the servicescape (Tombs & Mccoll-Kennedy, 2003)—has a powerful influence on how customers feel about their own service experience (Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; Jiang, Hoegg, & Dahl, 2013; Liu & Mattila, 2015; McFerran & Argo, 2014). In this research, we further argue that perceived busyness, as conveyed through the mere presence of many/few waiting customers, will moderate the impact of shape cues on customer satisfaction with a fast-paced experience. Specifically, a busy service environment with a long line of waiting customers will direct the focal consumer's attention to competence inferences, whereas a non-busy environment will shift attention to the employee's rapport-building effort and warmth. We thereby expect that a servicescape with angular (circular) shape cues will boost satisfaction in a busy (non-busy) service environment as a result of enhanced competence (warmth) perceptions. Taken together, this research examines the joint impact of environmental shape cues and busyness cues on customer satisfaction through warmth and competence perceptions (see Fig. 1 for a conceptual framework). Findings of this research highlight an innovative sensory marketing strategy in managing customer reactions to a fast service encounter pace as well as communicating brand personality through the servicescape.

2. Background literature

2.1. Selling time, service encounter pace, and customer satisfaction

The revenue management literature distinguishes between the explicit versus implicit selling of time (Kimes & Chase, 1998). Hotels and rental car companies sell time explicitly, as the length of time that a customer can use the service is fixed and set in advance; the customer must leave on schedule to avoid a late checkout fee or additional charges. Conversely, restaurants and hair salons sell time in an implicit

manner with the length of service highly dependent upon the customer's unique needs; when customers stay longer than expected, long wait lines may occur.

Duration control, as a key revenue management tool, is particularly applicable to the latter case. Given that many service settings require a high degree of customer contact (e.g., restaurant, banking, tours, realtor services), the frontline employee has considerable influence over the pace of the service encounter. Pace, defined as the tempo or rate of activity, typically captures the degree to which time is filled (e.g., a great deal of activity taking place) or unfilled (e.g., little is happening) (Noone et al., 2009). For the purpose of maximizing revenue, service providers are motivated to speed up and minimize unfilled time of a service experience (Katz, 2016). To illustrate fast pace in the dining context, the host greets you and immediately takes you to the table. Your waiter comes over without any delay, the entrée arrives while you are only half way through your appetizer, the plates are cleared from table very promptly, and before you realize the meal is over—your check is already on the table.

Recent research on service encounter pace suggests that when perceived control of pace is low, pace has a significant negative impact on customer satisfaction (Noone et al., 2012). In addition, customers have a lower tolerance for fast pace during the pre-process and in-process stages than during the post-process stage of service experience (Noone et al., 2009). Finally, customers are more sensitive to fast pace in the more upscale, as opposed to casual, service settings (Noone, Kimes, Mattila, & Wirtz, 2007). Given the widespread practice of rushing customers (Ferdman, 2015; Seim, 2011), there is an urgent need for innovative strategies that help preserve customer satisfaction with a fast service encounter pace. As a starting point of exploring such a strategy, we seek to understand satisfaction through decoding customers' warmth and competence inferences of the service provider.

2.2. Warmth and competence

People constantly form evaluative impressions of others, and this process manifests spontaneously and effortlessly (Devine, 1989; Schlenker, 1980; Stapel & Blanton, 2004). The social psychology literature suggests two fundamental dimensions of social judgments—warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2007; Judd et al., 2005). Warmth captures traits of being friendly, trustworthy, and caring (i.e., good or ill intents) whereas competence is associated with traits of being competent, efficient, and skillful (i.e., the ability to pursue one's intent) (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Scott, Mende, & Bolton, 2013). Originally, these two dimensions were established to study biases and stereotypes, known as the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002). For example, previous research shows that the rich and the Jews are often perceived to be high in competence but low in warmth, whereas the elderly and the disabled are seen as high in warmth but low in competence (Fiske et al., 2002). However, warmth and competence judgments also influence decision-making in a broad range of business contexts, including employee smiles (Wang, Mao, Li, & Liu, 2017), service failures (Wu, Han, & Mattila, 2016), customer-brand relationships (Valta, 2013), corporate social responsibility

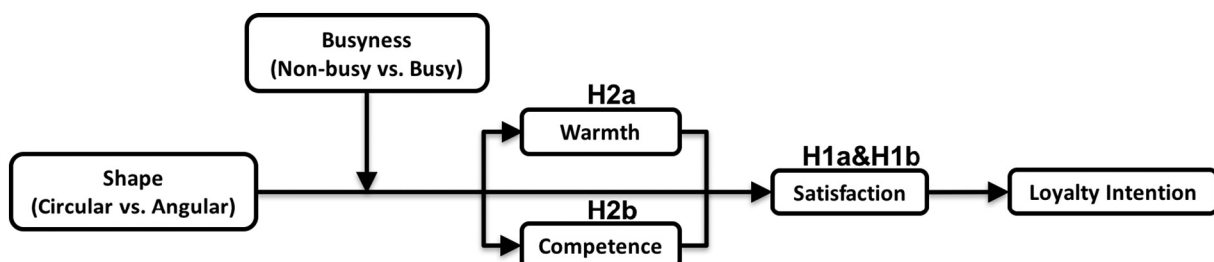


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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