



An expanded servicescape perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to put forth an expanded servicescape framework that shows that a perceived servicescape comprises physical, social, socially symbolic, and natural environmental dimensions.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper offers an in-depth literature review on servicescape topics from a variety of disciplines, both inside and outside marketing, to advance a logical framework built on Bitner's seminal article (1992).

Findings – A servicescape comprises not only objective, measureable, and managerially controllable stimuli but also subjective, immeasurable, and often managerially uncontrollable social, symbolic, and natural stimuli, which all influence customer approach/avoidance decisions and social interaction behaviors. Furthermore, customer responses to social, symbolic, and natural stimuli are often the drivers of profound person-place attachments.

Research limitations/implications – The framework supports a servicescape paradigm that links marketing, environmental/natural psychology, humanistic geography, and sociology.

Practical implications – Although managers can easily control a service firm's physical stimuli, they need to understand how other critical environmental stimuli influence consumer behavior and which stimuli might overweigh a customer's response to a firm's physical dimensions.

Social implications – The paper shows how a servicescape's naturally restorative dimension can promote relief from mental fatigue and improve customer health and well-being. Thus, government institutions (e.g. schools, hospitals) can improve people's lives by creating natural servicescapes that have restorative potential.

Originality/value – The framework organizes more than 25 years of servicescape research in a cogent framework that has cross-disciplinary implications.

Keywords Servicescape, Attention restoration theory, Service design, Environmental psychology, Atmospherics, Marketing, Consumer behaviour, Decision making

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Bitner (1992) coined the term “servicescape” to denote a physical setting in which a marketplace exchange is performed, delivered, and consumed within a service organization (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009). In addition, Bitner conceptualized the existence of three types of objective, physical, and measureable stimuli that constitute a servicescape. These stimuli are characterized as being organizationally controllable and able to enhance or constrain employee and customer approach/avoidance decisions and to facilitate or hinder employee/customer social interaction (Parish *et al.*, 2008). Bitner consolidated these environmental stimuli into three dimensions:



- (1) ambient conditions;
- (2) spatial layout and functionality; and
- (3) signs, symbols, and artifacts (Brady and Cronin, 2001a, b; Hightower *et al.*, 2002; Kotler, 1973; Lin, 2004).

Although Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework remains invaluable to marketers, it contains a possible shortcoming. Namely, the servicescape framework originates from research conducted in environmental psychology (Barker, 1968), which itself emulates from ecology and is the source of theoretical weakness. Encouraged by Darwin, biologists began developing ecological theory in the early 1900s by investigating how organisms respond in unison to objective stimuli that are present in a spatially bounded area (Stokols, 1977). Barker (1968) and other researchers (Grayson and McNeil, 2009; Kotler, 1973) later applied these perspectives to stimulus-organism-response theories by exploring how people respond to objective stimuli in spatially bounded consumption settings, primarily department stores.

Although all service settings, including physical and virtual servicescapes, cyberscapes (Williams and Dargel, 2004), shipscales (Kwortnik, 2008), sportscales (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2009), and experience rooms (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005, 2010), comprise objective, managerially controllable stimuli that influence consumers in a collective way, they also comprise stimuli that are subjective, difficult to measure objectively, and managerially uncontrollable and that influence consumers and employee approach and social interaction decisions in different ways (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2010; Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010).

Along these lines, Bitner (1992) acknowledged that though her focus was to conceptualize the manufactured and physical stimuli that constitute servicescapes, both customers and employees are also affected by social and natural stimuli, which are also housed within servicescapes. As Bitner (1992, p. 60, italics in original) stated, "Here it is *assumed* that dimensions of the organization's physical surroundings influence important customer and employee behaviors"; yet, she noted that a consumption setting also comprises social and natural stimuli. Indeed, Bitner went as far as to propose that a customer's favorable response to a servicescape's natural dimension would enhance his or her response to a locale's physical dimension. Yet she left the exploration of the impact of natural and social stimuli within servicescapes to future researchers.

Many researchers have heeded Bitner's (1992) request to move beyond a consumption setting's physical dimension to less palpable dimensions, including its social, social-/group-influenced symbolic, and natural dimensions, and to conceptualize an array of servicescape stimuli. By doing so, this research stream buttresses the existence of a cross-disciplinary servicescape paradigm, which draws on a wide variety of disciplinary research and affects several disciplines, including environmental/natural/human psychology, humanistic geography, recreational sciences, public health, and sociology. Given that much of this research has not been cohesively linked to Bitner's framework, researchers and managers may fail to understand the confluence of several environmental stimuli and their dimensions that influence customer behavior and social interaction.

This article addresses this void by expanding Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework and organizing a range of disparate servicescape papers that support her premise of a servicescape possessing physical, social, and natural stimuli. As such, we put forth an expanded servicescape framework that illustrates four environmental

dimensions of the servicescape (Figure 1). Figure 1 shows the physical, social, socially symbolic, and natural stimuli that may be contained in a servicescape and that may enhance or constrain employee and customer approach/avoidance decisions and social interaction behaviors.

These four dimensions are the physical (Bitner, 1992), the social (Berry *et al.*, 2002; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003; Wall and Berry, 2007), the socially symbolic (Rosenbaum, 2005), and the restorative (Rosenbaum, 2009a, b; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2009) dimensions. Thus, the proposed framework completes Bitner's (1992) assumptions regarding servicescapes and, in doing so, presents researchers and managers with a thorough understanding of the complexity of environmental stimuli on consumer and employee responses and behaviors, as well as potential moderators, within service settings. In addition, we offer a new conceptualization of the servicescape term based on the expanded framework and argue that a conceptualization setting actually comprises several different perceived servicescapes that are influenced by a customer's intention of place usage.

The plan for this paper is as follows: in the following sections, we develop and define each of the framework's four dimensions by drawing on extant research across disciplines specific to each particular dimension. Note that this research focuses exclusively on expanding our understanding of the holistic stimuli that constitute service settings, or the "perceived servicescape" (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009, p. 331).

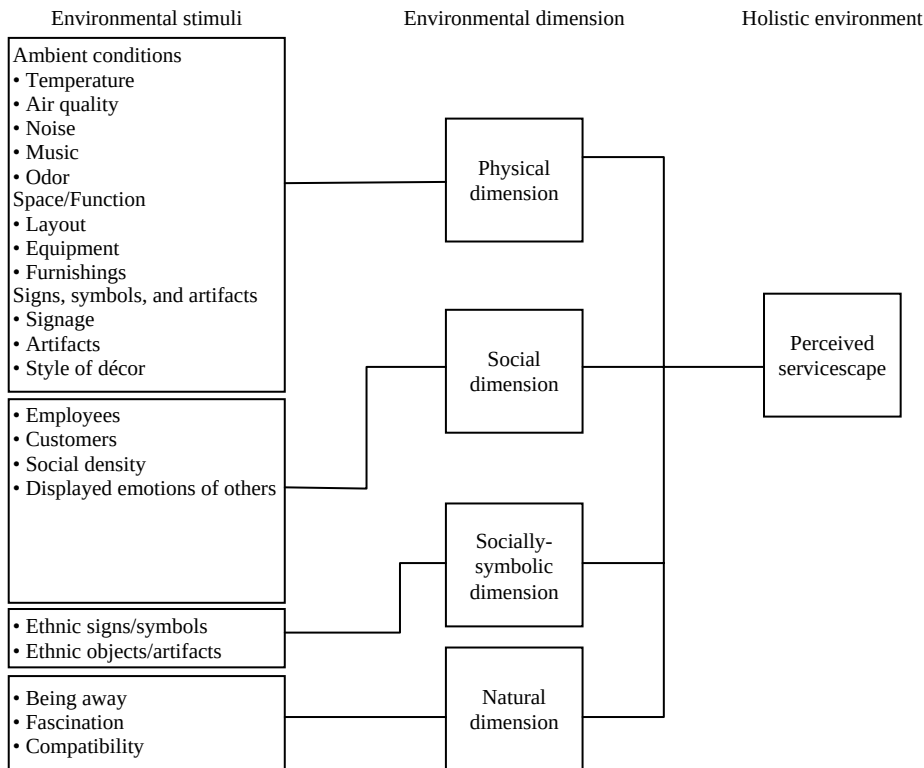


Figure 1.
A framework for
understanding four
environmental dimensions
of the servicescape

Next, we offer a discussion of how the proposed framework extends the servicescape paradigm. Then, we offer managerial, theoretical, and societal implications as well as future research directives and research limitations.

The physical dimension

The physical dimension is the easiest for managers to comprehend because it encompasses manufactured, observable, or measurable stimuli that are controllable by the firm to enhance (or constrain) employee and customer actions (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009). For example, ambient conditions represent background environmental stimuli, or atmospherics (Grayson and McNeil, 2009; Kotler, 1973; Turley and Milliman, 2000), that affect human sensations. These stimuli comprise visual (e.g. lighting, colors, brightness, shapes (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2008), aesthetic cleanliness, olfactory (scent, air quality, fragrance; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001), ambient (e.g. temperature (Reimer and Kuehn, 2005)), and auditory (e.g. music, noises (Morin *et al.*, 2007; Oakes and North, 2008)) elements.

Space refers to the manner in which physical machinery, equipment (e.g. electronic, technology (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2010), furnishings, and their arrangement, as well as the lesser observable furnishings of comfort, layout, and accessibility (Bloch, 1995; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996), influence consumer approach/avoidance decisions. Functionality denotes the ability of all these physical items to facilitate the service exchange process (Ng, 2003) and to improve and innovate consumer support in an ergonomic manner (Aubert-Gamet, 1997).

When viewed as a dimension, both space and function can be considered a designscape, which is a loosely coherent, hegemonic network of physical items that include both realistic (e.g. manufactured) and abstract (e.g. subjective) meanings (Julier, 2005). That is, consumers evaluate a designscape to understand a locale's place meaning or identity. By doing so, they are able to answer internal questions, such as "what is this place?" and "will I be able to fulfill my goals in this locale?" (Hall, 2008). Thus, firms can manipulate designscales to "tell stories"; however, how consumers interpret and respond to these stories is less controllable and often quite different from managerial intent (Aubert-Gamet, 1997). For example, although some consumers may applaud the designscales that characterize tourists meccas, such as Las Vegas, other people may consider these servicescape "stories" culturally or racially offensive (Reisberg and Han, 2009; Rosenbaum and Wong, 2007).

Along these lines, the sign, symbols, and artifacts dimension refers to physical signals that managers employ in servicescales to communicate general meaning about the place to consumers. For example, generic signs, such as those demarcating departments (e.g. shoes, children's), directions (e.g. enter/exit), rest rooms, caution (e.g. wet floors), and rules of behavior (e.g. no smoking), facilitate a customer's movement through a servicescape.

Firms also use symbols, such as national flags, and artifacts, including artwork and decorative items, to create aesthetic impressions (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009) and to help consumers understand the place's meaning. For example, by using reproduction Italian-themed artifacts, the Olive Garden chain of restaurants tries to enhance customers' feelings of entering an Italian restaurant and momentarily experiencing Italy. When hotels in Hawaii employ reproduction Polynesian-themed artifacts, based on long-gone cultural or imaginary cultural practices, they do so to help guests escape reality and enter an ersatz world of pleasure. O'Dell and Billing (2005, p. 16) coined the term

“experiencescapes” to denote the extent to which the surroundings people encounter in the course of their lives “take the form of physical as well as imagined landscapes of experience.” Finally, firms may employ signs to demarcate a servicescape with corporate brands, logos, and monikers, creating “brandsapes” (Thompson and Arsel, 2004).

The common linkage across all these stimuli is that their presence in a consumption setting is purposively planned and they remain under managerial control during their duration within a setting. Yet, even within this realm, research shows that though managers may control a setting’s designscape and attempt to influence consumer meanings strategically, ultimately consumers subjectively imbue a complete servicescape with personal meanings based on their “lifeworlds” (Seamon, 1979), which directly influence their approach/avoidance decisions.

We now move beyond a servicescape’s physical dimensions and examine its humanistic dimension. As a result, we show that though managers may control employment decisions, they are often unable to fully control the humanistic elements that also constitute servicescapes.

The social dimension

Bagozzi (1975) noted that most marketplace exchanges are mixed exchanges, in which consumers fulfill not only their utilitarian needs but also their social and psychological needs. Thus, customer approach/avoidance decisions are influenced not only by physical stimuli but also by social, humanistic stimuli. Rosenbaum and Montoya (2007) conceptualize a “social servicescape” as comprising customer and employee elements that are encapsulated in a consumption setting, and Edvardsson *et al.* (2010) suggest that three social elements – customer placement, customer involvement, and interaction with employees – each represent a social dimension that influences a customer’s experience in a service setting. Furthermore, they define a servicescape’s social dimension as containing the following stimuli: employees, customers, social density, and displayed emotions of others.

Employees

Stone (1954) concludes that housewives often form friendships with company employees to help them remedy loneliness; more important, he argued that a consumer’s need to assuage loneliness often drives consumption. Thus, Stone’s research revealed that contrary to popular beliefs, the marketplace is not entirely devoid of providing care to consumers. Indeed, contemporary researchers indicate that frontline employees may often connect with customers on a personal, emotional level; however, whether this evocative relationship can be managed or is a by-product of a natural relationship remains unclear (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010).

Cowen (1982) argued that hair dressers, bartenders, doctors, and divorce lawyers are often integral to mental health and represent a *de facto* helping mechanism that provides people with informal but highly effective support in their time of need. Other researchers have shown that consumers often patronize establishments, such as beauty salons (Price and Arnould, 1999), dating services (Adelman and Ahuvia, 1995), retail shops (Day, 2000), and diners (Rosenbaum, 2006), partly because of the life-enhancing, social supportive benefits they often receive from employees in these firms.

Research concludes that consumers consider their social relationship with focal employees a relational benefit that affects both their perceptions of overall firm quality

(Baker *et al.*, 1992) and their behavioral intentions, in terms of future patronage and word of mouth (Gwinner *et al.*, 1998; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, this discussion supports our contention that employees should be considered part of the environmental stimuli that influence a customer's approach/avoidance decision and social interaction in a servicescape (Baker *et al.*, 1994).

This does not mean that every employee willingly doles out relational benefits to every customer or that managers can even control their propensity to do so. Furthermore, Danaher *et al.* (2008) urge firms to consider the importance of nurturing customized customer relationship programs, as many customers do not value opportunities to maintain a relationship with their service providers. Thus, employee-customer support seems to be a "type of glue" that adheres customers to establishments when customers actively desire it (Rosenbaum, 2009a) but is worthless when it is forced on customers (Danaher *et al.*, 2008).

Customers

Sociologists have long explored the role of relationships between customers and service establishments, such as pubs, laundromats, second-hand clothing stores, and coffee shops, in people's lives (Lofland, 1998). Oldenburg (1999, p. 16) coined the term "third places" to denote "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work." Third places are usually locally owned, independent, small-scale firms that are operated by people who seem to know everyone in the neighborhood. In addition, third places are usually patronized by "regular" customers who often transform them into their home away from home.

Third-place research in the commercial (Rosenbaum, 2008) and not-for-profit (Glover and Parry, 2009) domains reveals that patrons often patronize these establishments because they can obtain social supportive resources from other customers. Researchers have shown that consumers who experience the loss of social support due to negative life events, such as bereavement, divorce, and retirement, may counterbalance lost support by forming supportive relationships with third-place customers (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007). Likewise, consumers who themselves experience illness, such as those diagnosed with cancer, may also seek solace in third places simply by being among like others (Glover and Parry, 2009). Notably, social support is most effective when it is delivered not from a single source, but rather from a network of people who are "in the same boat" (Gentry and Goodwin, 1995).

Beyond having the potential to fulfill a customer's psychological needs, positive customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) at any level possesses the ability to simultaneously enhance a customer's perceived satisfaction with the setting and neutralize any negative service experiences in the setting (Nicholls, 2010). In addition, a sense of *communitas* among a service firm's customers, referring to the customers' ability to engage in pure sociability in the firm despite different backgrounds and social classes, positively enhances their perceived involvement in a service setting, which promotes long-term patronage and loyalty (McGinnis *et al.*, 2008). Although these examples focus on CCI in physical service settings, an emerging area in the service domain represents virtual CCI. Indeed, customers who remain "virtually engaged" with a service organization through online commentaries, blogs, chat, and so forth, are perceived as valuable organizational assets and linked to positive firm value (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010).

Given the lucrative potential of even modicum traces of CCI in physical and virtual service settings, Nicholls (2010) urged marketing managers to manage CCI creation and sustenance instead of simply allowing it to emerge as a natural occurrence among a group of customers.

Thus, sociologists, such as Putnam (2000), who claim that the marketplace is an anathema of community are somewhat mistaken. Small consumer groups that gather in places that promote customer connectedness and that are bonded by social contracts that represent the weakest of personal obligations often provide their members with relational benefits, including social support, which many believed was only available from traditional relationships (e.g. families, friends, coworkers). As consumers find that place patronage becomes cathartic, they are increasingly likely to develop a “sense of place” and to patronize the place on a daily or near-daily basis (Hay, 1998; Iso-Ahola and Park, 1996; Lewicka, 2010).

This does not mean that all CCIs are constructive marketplace niceties. Unfortunately, history is replete with recounts of customers who have been physically assaulted and harmed by other customers. For example, although security officers safeguard many shopping areas across the USA, which should promote feelings of safety among consumers, many women still remained concerned about their physical safety in and around malls, which promotes mall avoidance (Tye, 2005).

Overall, the extant research supports the notion of customers as environmental stimuli that are housed in a servicescape’s social dimension and that significantly influence other customers’ approach/avoidance decisions and social interaction in a service establishment. Customer environmental stimuli may represent the “glue” that attaches other customers to a servicescape and, as such, are essentially outside managerial control.

Social density

In addition to being influenced by genuine social actors, consumers are influenced by the perceived social density of a servicescape. Recently, the majority of empirical studies on servicescape social density have shown that high densities of customers (i.e. crowding) negatively affect approach decisions (Harrell *et al.*, 1980) because of the loss of perceived control (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). However, the converse is also true; there are many situations in which high densities of customers induce positive customer responses (Eroglu *et al.*, 2005; Foxall and Greenley, 1999; Lovelock, 1996; Turley and Milliman, 2000).

Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) clarify this apparent discrepancy in the social density paradigm by positing that a customer’s approach/avoidance behavior toward a servicescape’s crowding level is influenced by whether the customer wants private or group consumption. For example, diners sharing a romantic meal at a restaurant relish some privacy. However, customers may feel peculiar being alone in a health club or shopping mall, when being among others is considered a positive aspect of the consumption experience.

In many instances, customers are attracted to a high social density servicescape when the possibility of entering into enjoyable, light-hearted associations with others is part of their goal in the consumption setting. For example, consumers often enjoy patronizing farmers markets not only to purchase fresh produce but also to engage in impromptu conversations at these markets (McGrath *et al.*, 1993).

Displayed emotions of others

As previously discussed, ethnic and marginalized customers often respond to negative cues and glances from employees and other customers in consumption settings. Although managers may be able to control these stimuli, they have less ability to control another social stimulus, namely, a servicescape's emotional contagion. This concept refers to the displayed emotions of others within a servicescape.

Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) propose that a customer's consumption experience, either private or group related, influences the extent to which the displayed emotions of others cause him or her to enter into an approach/avoidance decision. That is, when customers engage in private consumption, such as using self-service technologies, they are unlikely to interpret or even care about the displayed emotions of other people in a servicescape. However, when consumers engage in group consumption, such as exercising, dining, or shopping, they might respond to the displayed emotions of others in the servicescape, both positively and negatively.

The socially symbolic dimension

Bitner (1992) indicates that signs, symbols, and artifacts represent an integral servicescape dimension. Here, Bitner conceptualizes this dimension in terms of commonly employed "general" signs (e.g. company and department signs, directional signs) and architectural designs (e.g. Italian and Mexican décor) that customers and employees tend to interpret in the same way. Furthermore, Bitner postulated that a customer's ethnicity could moderate his or her internal response to a servicescape's signs, symbols, and artifacts. For example, an American traveling in Europe may view a McDonald's logo with nostalgia and want to approach the firm; in contrast, another tourist may view the logo with disdain and purposefully seek to avoid the firm. However, from a corporate perspective, the McDonald's logo is a moniker that the firm strategically manages to evoke common sensations among all potential customers (e.g. "I'm lovin' it") rather than sensations among groups of customers based on potential moderators, such as age, gender, or ethnicity.

Yet, some service organizations may purposefully employ signs, symbols, and artifacts that are laden with socio-collective meanings to influence approach behaviors among groups of customers with a unique ethnic, sub-cultural, or marginalized societal status. That is, organizations may strategically manipulate this socially symbolic servicescape (Rosenbaum, 2005) specifically to influence approach and/or avoidance behaviors. Although managers are powerless to influence symbolic meanings because they are created, maintained, and altered by social groups (Durkheim, [1912] 1995), they can tap into an ethnic group's symbolic universe (Berger and Luckman, 1966), especially those that denote "ethnic honor" (Weber, 1978), to encourage approach and return behaviors. Customers' consciousness is unknown to management, and thus symbols are tangible intermediaries that help customers realize that they are with fellow ethnic group members and in a welcoming servicescape. These socially symbolic dimensions serve to notify ethnic group members that they are in unison with like others – that is, among members who shout the same cry, say the same words, perform the same actions, and share the same culture and historical experiences.

For example, among gay men and lesbians, the rainbow pride flag and pink triangle evoke familiarity and emotional connections, and among Jews, photos of traditional delicatessens, with kosher signs, hanging salamis, and traditional sweets,

evoke memories of family. Indeed, socially symbolic symbols encourage approach behaviors by evoking feelings of comfort and inclusiveness (Rosenbaum, 2005). Thus, service organizations that want to target ethnic customers who maintain distinct symbolic universes should consider developing a socially symbolic servicescape that transmits a welcoming message to these customers through design.

Thus, far, the discussion has explored how servicescape stimuli influence customers within a consumption setting at a macro or group level. In the next section, we turn attention to uncovering how servicescape stimuli may also influence approach/avoidance decisions at an individual level.

The natural dimension

The biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) suggests that an innate bond exists between humans and other living systems, including nature and wildlife. Wilson (1984) suggests that biophilia represents a driver that encourages humans to subconsciously seek connection with “the rest of life,” perhaps encouraging patronage to commercial third places. Clarke and Schmidt (1995) considered that many service encounters represent “natural encounters” that affect consumers unequally and at a personal, psychological level.

Recently, research on natural stimuli in customer-environmental behaviors has resided in psychology and medical sciences regarding the impact of nature on human health. For example, health researchers have explored the impact of hospital gardens on patient well-being (Whitehouse *et al.*, 2001). Within services, Arnould *et al.* (1998) noted that “wilderness servicescapes” contain life-enhancing, restorative qualities. Although some researchers may debate whether commercialized wilderness servicescapes, such as the Rainforest Café restaurant chain or the Disney Wilderness Camp, represent “frightening examples of consumer capitalism” (Reisberg and Han, 2009), they should consider the health potential of commercial servicescapes that could mimic the therapeutic natural stimuli (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Marketing researchers are only beginning to empirically explore a servicescape’s natural stimuli in commercially based physical settings and its influence on outcomes such as approach/avoidance, customer health, and subjective well-being (Rosenbaum, 2009b; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2009). In doing so, service researchers are propelling Bitner’s (1992) servicescape framework into public health by showing how commercial establishments can contribute to societal health and well-being (Frumkin, 2003).

Rosenbaum (2009b) draws on attention restoration theory (ART) (Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; see also Berto, 2005) to explore a servicescape’s natural dimension and its corresponding stimuli. According to ART, a person’s ability to direct attention in thought and perception to challenging or unpleasant, but nonetheless important, environmental stimuli is a biological mechanism that becomes fatigued with use.

ART is based on the premise that humans do not inherently possess an ability to expend concentrated effort on strenuous tasks for extended periods. People tend to become mentally fatigued, or “burned out,” after working for hours, listening to a boring lecture, or even caring for a loved one. Regardless of how mentally taxing these tasks actually might be, people’s everyday lives often require that these tasks be performed on a regular basis. To address this seemingly contradictory reality, directed attention fatigue transpires when this mechanism becomes impaired. As a result

of directed attention fatigue, a person experiences lower mental competence, increased risk for accidents, higher incidences of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), difficulties with planning, and irritability.

ART posits that the symptoms associated with directed attention fatigue can be remedied when people restore their ability to focus on unpleasant stimuli for extended periods. This personal restoration typically occurs when people spend time in natural settings, such as parks, beach areas, gardens, or grassy areas. For example, natural psychological research shows that children as young as five report decreased symptoms of ADHD after playing in green landscapes, backyards, and parks (Kuo and Taylor, 2004; Wells, 2000; Wells and Evans, 2003). University students whose dormitory rooms have natural views perform better on academic and attention measures than students who face manufactured settings (Iwasaki, 2003; Tennessen and Cimprich, 1995). Finally, research findings show that hospital patients recover more quickly and feel less stressed when they are exposed to visually appealing landscapes during the healing process (Velarde *et al.*, 2007).

Not every green space offers restoration to mentally fatigued people. Research shows that natural restorative environments possess three restorative stimuli; these include being away, fascination, and compatibility (Han, 2007).

The first stimulus, being away, gives people a break from day-after-day concerns by helping them feel, albeit temporarily, as if they are escaping to a different place. Natural settings are often the preferred destinations for extended restorative opportunities; the seaside, botanical gardens, the mountains, lakes, grassy areas, and parks are all idyllic places for “getting away” (Kaplan, 1995). The sense of being away does not require distance; however, it does require that a person feel as though he or she is momentarily in another world.

The second stimulus, fascination, refers to a setting’s ability to hold a person’s attention effortlessly; the person wants to be in the setting because something in it easily captures his or her attention (Kaplan, 1995). For example, groups of senior citizens routinely gather at McDonald’s to engage in ever-changing light-hearted banter (Cheang, 2002), and cancer patients like to “hang out” at Gilda’s Club because they can meet different people who are “all in the same boat” (Glover and Parry, 2009). A fascinating servicescape is an engaging servicescape where people can escape to hear the noise and banter of others and can join others when they opt to do so.

The third stimulus, compatibility, refers to a setting’s ability to provide a person with a sense of belonging (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2007) or a person-place congruency (Morrin and Chebat, 2005). A compatible environment is one in which people carry out their activities smoothly, without struggle, and without embarrassment (Kaplan, 1995). When people are in compatible environments, they can engage in sociability that is free from the constraints that often hinder human interaction, such as their occupational role or socio-economic status (Oldenburg, 1999). Thus, cancer patients can find solace socializing at Gilda’s Club because they are free from embarrassment about their hair loss (Glover and Parry, 2009), and Jews may find kosher delicatessens compatible when they can engage in loud conversations that they might believe are unacceptable at non-Jewish-oriented restaurants (Rosenbaum, 2005).

Commercial servicescape that can offer customers these three types of restorative stimuli may be able to help them alleviate their mental fatigue symptoms through patronage. By working within this premise, Rosenbaum (2009b) shows that some

teenage patrons of a video arcade experienced the establishment's natural servicescape dimension, along with its restorative stimuli, including feelings of being away, fascination, and coherence. Furthermore, customers who sensed the arcade's restorative stimuli showed fewer symptoms associated with ADHD than other arcade customers. In another study, Rosenbaum *et al.* (2009) confirm the existence of healthy servicescapes and the effectiveness of restorative stimuli within commercial establishments. They explored the influence of restorative stimuli on senior and elderly customers of a foundationally supported café located in Chicago, which offers breakfast, lunch, and social activities (e.g. exercise classes, computer classes, blood pressure). They concluded that a positive relationship exists between customers who sense the café's natural dimension and their well-being. Although café patronage might not have been solely responsible for the customers' well-being, this "natural" servicescape offered customers the opportunity to engage in therapeutic consumption by relieving mental fatigue.

Conclusion

An updated servicescape conceptualization and propositions

This paper moves the servicescape paradigm forward and supports an expanded conceptualization of the term, which remains in line with Bitner's (1992) original speculation. Previously, a servicescape was conceptualized in the service domain as representing the physical elements in a consumption setting. However, from the proposed framework herein, we posit that a servicescape represents a consumption setting's built (i.e. manufactured, physical), social (i.e. human), socially symbolic, and natural (environments) dimensions that affect both consumers and employees in service organizations.

The physical dimension represents Bitner's (1992) framework, which postulates that all consumption settings comprise managerially controllable, objective, and material stimuli.

The social dimension expands on the framework by showing that among some customers, their approach/avoidance behaviors are also influenced by a consumption setting's humanistic elements. These elements primarily represent other customers and employees, along with their density in the setting and their expressed emotions. The socially symbolic dimension extends Bitner's work by suggesting that a consumption setting also contains signs, symbols, and artifacts that are part of an ethnic group's symbolic universe and possess specific, often evocative meanings for group members, which in turn influence customers differently depending on their group memberships. The natural dimension moves Bitner's work into public health by showing how a servicescape may possess restorative qualities, which help customers assuage negative symptoms associated with fatigue, including burnout, stress, depression, and ADHD.

Theoretical implications

The environmental psychologist Proshansky (1978, p. 150) stated that "there is no physical setting that is not also a social, cultural, and psychological setting." In reality, our proposed framework is in line with Proshansky's perspective; this paper moves beyond a setting's physical dimension to show that consumption settings also comprise social, socially symbolic, and natural dimensions that act in unison to influence customer behavior. Furthermore, the connectivity between the proposed framework and environmental and natural psychology, respectively, shows that

further cross-disciplinary research regarding the impact of environmental stimuli on customer approach/avoidance behaviors in commercial and not-for-profit consumption settings is well warranted.

Along these lines, researchers are encouraged to explore how customers' and employees' personality traits (e.g. arousal seeking) and situational factors (e.g. plan or purpose for being in the service setting) moderate their internal responses to each of the four servicescape dimensions. For example, cancer patients who regard Gilda's Club as an escape from the stressors of home and hospital and a place where they can meet others living with cancer are probably interested in the club's social dimension (Glover and Parry, 2009). Yet, older adults and senior citizens, who are experiencing loneliness and depression as a result of losing their spouses, may patronize a café that offers them a place to eat and partake in several activities, such as Pilates and yoga. These patrons may be especially responsive to the place's natural dimension (Sassen and Windhorst, 2008). Thus, consumer researchers are encouraged to explore how consumers' ethnic identification (Donthu and Cherian, 2006) or desire to retain a connection to an ethnic identity (Halter, 2000) moderates their response to a symbolic servicescape (Donthu and Cherian, 2006).

Researchers should consider empirically exploring how and why various customers in the same service firm respond to environmental stimuli. From Zomerdijk and Voss's (2010) research, services could be classified into consumption-centric, social-centric, and experience-centric categories, and a customer's response to a setting's aesthetics and design might depend on how he or she plans to use the setting. For example, a customer who uses a consumption-centric service, such as an automated teller machine, may react to the setting's physical dimensions, while a customer who uses an experience-centric category, such as a church, may respond to the setting's social, socially symbolic, and natural dimensions.

By exploring the influence of a service establishment's physical, social, and natural dimensions on customer behavior and social interaction, we can also better understand how consumers immerse places into their daily lives or how they vivify built environments (Sherry, 2000). We encourage researchers not only to study the four servicescape dimensions in tandem on customer behavior but also to draw on place studies in architecture, natural psychology, humanistic geography, sociology, religion, and public health to explore the existence of other customer responses beyond approach/avoidance. Researchers could explore how a perceived servicescape encourages customers and employees to form a "sense of place" (Hay, 1998; Sherry, 2000), which denotes the spirit and personality that humans imbue on a locale and the personal connection that a person maintains with a place (Mattila, 1999; Tuan, 1974). Researchers could also explore how customers fuse places into their sense of self, or place identity (Proshansky *et al.*, 1983); how a place becomes part of a customer's "place ballet" (Seamon, 1979); and how customers sense a place attachment to a particular service establishment (Hernández *et al.*, 2007). We encourage researchers to explore the extent to which a customer's perceived similarity among unknown customers and employees breeds connections (McPherson *et al.*, 2001) and acts as a moderator that encourages "birds of a feather to flock together" in particular consumption settings.

Managerial implications

This expanded definition of a servicescape results in new managerial implications. That is, from a customer's perspective, an ideal servicescape would be one that

is physically appealing, socially supportive, symbolically welcoming, and naturally pleasing. Yet, not all customers will perceive all four servicescape dimensions or consider them equally important. That is, researchers have found that customers' interpretations of a servicescape's subjective stimuli vary (Zomerdiijk and Voss, 2010). Therefore, beyond a consumption setting's objective and subjective stimuli, the consumption setting comprises several different perceived servicescapes, albeit from a customer's perspective. Consequently, managers are challenged to manipulate four servicescape stimuli according to their target markets' unfulfilled consumption, emotional, and psychological needs. For example, customers who patronize a service firm primarily to fulfill their consumption needs for goods and services are apt to base their approach/avoidance behaviors on a firm's physical dimensions. Customers who patronize an establishment because of unfilled companionship needs should also respond to a firm's social and symbolically social servicescape. Finally, customers who seek a psychological escape from their everyday lives might also be influenced by a servicescape's natural dimension. Therefore, in terms of servicescape design, managers need to realize not only the target customers they service but also these customers' unfulfilled consumption needs and how to communicate their firms' ability to satisfy these needs by employing a vast array of servicescape stimuli.

Social implications

We encourage health, natural psychology, and service marketing researchers to further explore the health potential of commercial servicescapes. According to Frumkin (2001, p. 234), more than half a century ago, the World Health Organization defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." This statement suggests that evocative servicescapes are those that are physically appealing, socially engaging, symbolically welcoming, and naturally restorative. Yet, is it possible for managers to create consumption settings that effectively encompass these four dimensions? Are all four dimensions equally important? Do customers view the dimensions equally? Research opportunities that attempt to answer these questions clearly abound.

By moving beyond a place's physical realm, perhaps we can begin to understand Relph's (1976, p. 141) definition of places as "fusions of human and natural order [that] are the significant centers of our immediate experiences of the world" and why Oldenburg (1999) claims that commercial third places are linked to the rise of great civilizations and great societies. For too long, marketers have considered commercial places mere homogeneous zones of exchange comprised of objective stimuli that appeal equally to members of a specific target market. Novel insights are emerging regarding the influence of social supportive relationships, which are housed in commercial places, on customers' well-being. Consumer researchers are uncovering how ethnic and sub-cultural consumers possess a symbolic universe that transmits messages to group members; however, knowledge regarding servicescape symbolic universes that evoke similar sensations of history or utopia, danger or security, and identity or memory among ethnic and sub-cultural group members remains lacking. Last, service researchers are now finding that commercial places possess natural characteristics that may help people remedy symptoms associated with mental fatigue, including stress and ADHD.

Given knowledge that service firms may possess natural stimuli that are restorative to human well-being, we might surmise the extent to which a commercial structure has

the potential to alter the lives of those relegated to physical structures, such schools, nursing homes, institutions, and rehabilitation centers. We encourage public health researchers to explore how the qualities constituting quintessential third places can be strategically employed in institutional service settings to benefit organizational civility and customer health and well-being.

For example, inner-city youth who lack easy access to green spaces and who are at high risk for experiencing negative symptoms related to mental fatigue may be able to remedy some of these negative symptoms by having access to subsidized restorative service establishments, such as video arcades or Starbucks (Rosenbaum, 2008). Furthermore, homosexual youth, who are at elevated risk for suicide because of feelings of ostracism from family and classmates, may find solace by coming together in a welcoming locale, such as a community center or local café. The cost of subsidizing service establishments that can serve as fields of care for their patrons is less than the cost associated with teenage loitering, malfeasance, and mental health problems.

Research limitations

This paper organizes a disparate set of servicescape-related research and expands understanding of Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework. The proposed framework suggests that much pioneering theoretical and empirical work remains to be explored regarding the influence of physical, social, symbolic, and natural stimuli on consumer and employee approach/avoidance decisions and social interaction within consumption settings. We encourage researchers to engage in longitudinal studies to understand how a customer's attraction to a perceived servicescape alters over time. For example, Oldenburg's (1999) third-place research suggests that an establishment's physical stimuli become increasingly less important as a customer becomes attracted to a place's social stimuli; however, this contention remains to be empirically proved. Furthermore, although this work aids researchers in understanding four servicescape dimensions, it is possible that additional, under-unexplored servicescape elements exist, such as educational, entertainment, or spiritual dimensions (Zomerdijsk and Voss, 2010). Despite these limitations, we believe that this work aids researchers in understanding a complete servicescape framework that encompasses the physical, social, and natural stimuli that Bitner conceived of as components of a consumption setting. In addition, the framework shows that a servicescape is no longer a singular concept applicable only to marketers; rather, it represents a multi-disciplinary paradigm that focuses on an array of person-place relationships.

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Further reading

Rosenbaum, M.S. and Massiah, C. (2007), "When customers receive support from other customers: exploring the influence of intercustomer social support on customer voluntary performance", *Journal of Service Research*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 257-70.

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