

MODELING VISUAL SERVICESCAPE AESTHETICS AND CONSUMER RESPONSE RELATIONSHIPS

ABSTRACT

In today's media-saturated world, marketers have increasingly started relying on delivering superior human experience to differentiate their offerings and influence consumers. Physical surrounding or atmosphere is one such element of engaging consumers. It is known that consumers may enjoy spending more time and money in environments in which they feel more pleasure and high arousal. Further, research has also indicated that small changes in aesthetics of physical surroundings may influence consumers' mood and emotional responses.

Owing to its intangibility, service environment (henceforth "servicescape" (Bitner, 1992)) as a physical evidence forms an important element in a service marketing mix and is quite critical in differentiating the service offerings for marketers. Consumers often rely on servicescape cues to evaluate the quality of services. The visual elements are the most dominant aspects of physical evidences in servicescapes and have the greatest impact on behavioural intentions of the consumers. However, it can be argued that objective criteria such as colour, lighting, shape, space that the expert designers use may not be the most appropriate as individual elements in designing servicescapes from marketing viewpoint. The consumers' perception of various visual stimuli in a servicescape is subjective and holistic in nature rather than objective and uni-dimensional. This makes evaluation of servicescape design and selection of appropriate servicescape challenging for various service offerings. Based on comprehensive review of aesthetics in marketing, servicescapes and environmental psychology studies, this research identifies a critical gap in marketing literature – that of understanding of visual servicescape aesthetics that take a consumers' view point in a holistic manner. Applying five variables; legibility, mystery, coherence, complexity and novelty, borrowed from established theories in environmental psychology, namely, Kaplan's Information Processing model (Kaplan, 1987); Mehrabian & Russell S-O-R Model (Russell & Pratt, 1980) this study conceptualizes a set of relationships with the dependent variables - affective responses and preferences, to address the following research questions: (1) how do visual aesthetic dimensions of servicescapes influence consumer responses? and (2) how do such influences vary with service contexts – utilitarian and hedonic?

A laboratory like experimental design, with one shot treatment using photographic surrogates of servicescapes in 4 different service contexts (a bank, a hospital, a spa and an upscale restaurant), identified through a pre-testing is employed. The stimuli photographs are selected through a 2 level assessments process by expert panellists. Data is collected from 350 respondents in 5 Indian cities. Each respondent provided responses for 4 different stimuli, making a total of 1400 cases available for analysis. The conceptual model is tested with these data using Partial Least Square (PLS) – SEM analysis for 3 different models, one base model, one for utilitarian and one for hedonic service context.

Results indicate that overall, five dimensions of perceived visual servicescape aesthetics viz., legibility, mystery, coherence, complexity and novelty significantly and positively influence consumers' affective states of arousal and pleasure. Further, these affective responses directly influence consumers' preference to the servicescape. Results also identify that the service context- utilitarian or hedonic - moderates the relationship between servicescape aesthetics and affective responses. As for utilitarian services, only legibility and coherence are found to be significant dimensions of servicescape aesthetics for utilitarian services, whereas mystery, coherence, complexity and novelty are more significant in case hedonic services.

The study contributes to theory by introducing more appropriate holistic servicescape aesthetics variables borrowed from landscape studies in environment psychology and empirically establishes relationships between them, consumers' affective responses and preference to the servicescape. Findings provide marketing practitioners insights into servicescape design, evaluation and selection decisions to improve return on such investments.