



Servicescape elements, customer predispositions and service experience: The case of theme park visitors

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H I G H L I G H T S

- ▶ We examine the antecedents and consequences of customer service experience for theme park visitors.
- ▶ Theme park visitors' perceptions toward servicescape elements positively predict their service experience evaluation.
- ▶ Customer predisposition characteristics moderate the above effects.

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A B S T R A C T

As the demand grows for customized services, so too the management of those experiences becomes more important. This study examines the relationship between service environment, customer predisposition and service experience evaluation. Based on data derived from 366 visitors to two theme parks in Hong Kong, a link was found between the servicescape and tourist evaluation through the moderating effects of customer predispositions. Consequently, both the substantive and communicative aspects of the servicescape reliably predicted visitors' evaluations. In addition, a visitor's predisposition to fantasize and/or participate was found to influence the ability of servicescape elements to shape a favorable service experience. Theoretical contributions of this research are elucidated. Moreover, managerial implications related to servicescape design, promotion strategies and service experience enhancement are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Previous tourism studies have highlighted the role of service quality in determining visitors' satisfaction with the tourism services. However, tourism researchers and practitioners have not paid equal attention to another related and critical factor, namely the customer's service experience (Otto & Ritchie, 2000). Service experience is a customer's subjective cognitive and affective response to a particular service encounter (Verhoef et al., 2009). Tailoring and enhancing the consumer's service experience has become an important component in the development of better service, particularly in the context of experiential services.

The tourism industry is a major pillar of the world economy, and in some economies theme parks make a major contribution. The

United States amusement park industry provides jobs for approximately 500,000 year-round and seasonal employees and generated \$12 billion in revenues in 2007 (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions [IAAPA], 2012). In Hong Kong, the two major theme parks (Disneyland Resort Hong Kong and Hong Kong Ocean Park) brought about HK\$15 billion (approximately US\$ 2 billion) of value added to Hong Kong in fiscal year 2011, which is equivalent to around 0.9% of Hong Kong's GDP (The Government of Hong Kong Website [GovHK], 2011). Milman (2001) predicts that attractions such as theme parks will continue to prosper, as they are associated with new and diverse vacation experiences and offer the convenience of on-site accommodation, food services, recreation, shopping and other tourist services in addition to their core recreational and entertainment activities.

In response to this trend, recent research has discussed the theoretical underpinnings of the customer experience (Edvardsson, Enquist, & Johnson, 2005; Patrício, Fisk, Cunha, & Constantine, 2011) and empirically examined the effect of experiential value on customer satisfaction in service encounters (Ding, Hu, Verma, & Wardell, 2010). Service researchers generally define the service

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experience as “all aspects of the production, delivery, and creation of value considered from the customer’s perspective” (Ostrom et al., 2010). But researchers’ conceptualizations of the customer service experience have been inconsistent (Ostrom et al., 2010; Verhoef et al., 2009) and, more importantly, how customers’ predispositions influence their evaluations of a service experience has not yet been elucidated. This despite the fact that many firms providing tourism services in, for example, heritage tourism are putting the management of the customer service experience at the top of their agenda (Chen & Chen, 2010; Rojas & Camarero, 2008).

The present study was designed to examine empirically the customer service experience at a theme park. It tested a conceptual model of the service experience which incorporates both service-scape elements and customer predispositions to explain customers’ evaluations of a service experience and the subsequent consequences. It explored the following questions: (1) How does the substantive and communicative staging of a servicescape influence visitors’ evaluations of the service experience? (2) How do customer predispositions influence the relationship between servicescape elements and those evaluations? and (3) How do the evaluations influence visitors’ behavior?

2. Literature review

2.1. Service experience evaluation

The term “experience” is often used in marketing to refer to product offerings in fields such as travel, restaurants, hotels and the arts. At their core, such services are related to hedonic consumption (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). The experience concept is seldom used in relation to traditional goods or functional services such as withdrawing money from a bank. As the theme park industry becomes more service oriented, offering less passive and more interactive experiences (Milman, 2001), understanding the antecedents and consequences of the customer’s experience becomes more important.

Previous research has attempted to explain what a service experience consists of (Grace & O’Cass, 2004), but the results are still far from unequivocal. As early as 1991, Tucker offered a useful list of factors that could influence a customer’s impression of their service experience, including speed of service delivery, convenience, lifestyle connotations, value adding, the level of technology, quality and others (Tucker, 1991). Tu and Jones (2003) examined the psychological recognition a customer obtains by experiencing the quality of a service, and they interpreted it through the lens of expectation and under the influence of emotions. More recently, Grewal, Levy, and Kumar (2009) illustrated how firm-controlled and other factors influence customers’ service experiences in retailing. Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) have argued that service firms are increasingly managing customer experiences to promote differentiation and enhance customer loyalty. Helkkula, Kelleher, and Pihlström (2012) have recently suggested that visitors’ current service experiences are in fact influenced by both previous and anticipated experiences. They characterized value in an experience as an ongoing, iterative and circular process for each individual, and emphasized cumulative customer sense making as opposed to a linear, cognitive process restricted to isolated service encounters.

In the current study, a customer’s service experience evaluation was the individual’s unique cognitive and affective impressions about an experience based on their interactions with substantive as well as communicative elements of the servicescape. The evaluation was assumed to encompass their evaluation of the entire service process, the outcome (enjoyment or otherwise), and their positive or negative memories of aspects of the service experience.

A favorable evaluation of a service experience should delight visitors by creating feelings of fun and leaving favorable subjective memories. A poor service experience disappoints the visitor and may even move them consider leaving the service provider, whereas a favorable one encourages customer loyalty and repeat visits. This paper proposes an integrative model and tests both the antecedents (i.e., servicescape elements and customer dispositional characteristics) and consequences (i.e., experience intensification and extension) of service experience evaluation in the theme park context. The determinants and influences of service experience evaluation are discussed in the following sections.

2.2. The servicescape

Producing a favorable service experience evaluation begins with designing and constructing an attractive setting for visitors. Research in environmental psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) has suggested that people respond holistically to elements of the environment. Servicescapes are sites for commercial exchanges and are produced with attention to both substantive and communicative staging (Arnould, Price, & Tierney, 1998). Berry, Wall, and Carbone (2006) proposed to measure the quality of a servicescape using clues embedded in visitors’ experiences with its service systems. Berry et al. (2006) have explained how a service system can be categorized as containing such functional, mechanical or human clues. Service experience evaluation then reflects a customer’s perceptions of and feelings about their entire service encounter.

In this study, therefore, service experience evaluation was assumed to be influenced by both the substantive staging of the servicescape (its functional and mechanical clues) and its communicative aspects (its human clues). Considering staging and communication simultaneously was intended to better capture the dynamics of the environment and the entire service context.

2.2.1. Substantive staging of the servicescape

A servicescape’s substantive staging refers to the physical creations of the service environment (Arnould et al., 1998). Bitner (1992) applied environment psychology to study service marketing and highlighted the importance of ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, as well as signs, symbols and artifacts. Subsequent research has confirmed relationships in retailing between the physical environment and outcome measures such as firm performance, behavioral intentions, and consumers’ emotional responses (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001), and similar relationships have been confirmed as well in other service industries (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). Reimer and Kuehn (2005) have shown that the servicescape is of greater importance in determining visitors’ quality evaluations of a hedonic service compared with a utilitarian service.

Visitors’ satisfaction with the substantive staging of a servicescape should therefore positively predict their evaluation of the service experience, since servicescape elements have been shown strongly to influence their cognitive and affective responses toward a service encounter (Lin, 2004; Mason & Paggiaro, 2012).

H1. Visitors’ satisfaction with the substantive staging of a servicescape is positively related to their service experience evaluation.

2.2.2. Communicative staging of the servicescape

Communicative staging of the servicescape refers to how the service environment is presented and interpreted. It involves the transmission both of meaning directly related to service delivery and of meaning transcending the instrumental context (Arnould et al., 1998). When visitors enter a service setting, or even before,

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