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The role of aesthetics and design in hotelscape: A phenomenological investigation of cosmopolitan consumers[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Should aesthetics and design be viewed as strategic marketing tools? We argue in this paper there are currently limited frameworks and empirical evidence to help - should this be the ambition of marketers? We propose a *hotelscape* as a holistic evolution of the servicescape concept, which is developed to reflect the role that aesthetics and design can play in influencing consumer behavior within moments of consumption. The study is based on 37 interviews with cosmopolitan type customers. An interpretive phenomenological approach is deployed to explore the lived experiences of art and design in a hotelscape. We conclude that aesthetics and design can support marketing aspirations in hedonistic consumer groups. Further, that it influences customer experience and directly impacts spend, word of mouth, repatronage and loyalty.

1. Introduction

Clay suggests that the responses and feelings of all individuals' towards aesthetic beauty is a vital part of the lived experience where art is the natural outcome of their love and desire for beauty (Clay, 1908). Design, "art with a purpose" (West & Purvis, 1992:15), can be used as a way to differentiate products and services (Reimann, Zaichkowsky, Neuhaus, Bender, & Weber, 2010). Esslinger (2009) recommends that designers and business leaders should join forces to build strategies that will offer a more sustainable, aesthetically pleasing and, whether directly or indirectly, a more profitable future.

We propose that academics and managers should respond to Esslinger's call. However, the position of work on art, design and aesthetics in the marketing discipline is not immediately apparent to those wishing to engage with it. At best, the work discussing these elements is limited in scope, fragmented and mostly conceptual. One perspective would be to place this discussion under product design - the "P" of *product*. The tangible product or rendered service is one part of the total consumption experience, as customers respond to the total, holistic offering when making purchase decisions (Kotler, 1973). However, in the "4Ps" context, *place* as a physical environment is seen as an influential feature of the total consumption experience (Bitner, 1992; Kotler, 1973). Within these two intertwined streams of research, first "atmospherics" (Kotler, 1973) and second, "servicescape" (Bitner, 1992)

provide an understanding of the various effects of *designed* environments on consumption behavior. Both offer scope for deeper research exploring aesthetics. Customers perceive servicescape differently from service designers and creators, which embeds the importance of understanding phenomena from a customer's point of view when designing aesthetically pleasing servicescapes (Torres & Kline, 2013). Servicescape is a concept which forms the nexus of the aesthetic design, and aesthetics as experienced in the *moment of consumption* - the subjective consumption response to perceived beauty. We focus on hotels as one of the most globalized business sectors (Yu, Byun, & Lee, 2013). They are highly competitive and constantly seeking ways to differentiate their products and services (McNeill, 2008). At the luxury end of the hotel sector, consumption patterns are more hedonistic rather than utilitarian, with aesthetically pleasing design increasing in significance (Wang, Cruthirds, Axinn, & Guo, 2013). An area conceptually underexplored is the role that design and aesthetics plays in creating competitive advantage. We focus this paper on cosmopolitan consumers in Saudi Arabia. Cosmopolitan consumers rely on imagery, are highly conscious of global trends and are discriminating consumers looking for what is "cool" and distinctive (Funk & Oly Ndubisi, 2006).

To bring together notions of design, aesthetics and consumption, we deploy a phenomenological lens to extrapolate the moment of consumption where these concepts come together. Lin and Lin (2016) suggest that little is known about what accounts for an individual's

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comprehension, appreciation or relationship with a specific servicescape in the moment of consumption. Focusing on the phenomenological experiences of cosmopolitan individuals we introduce and append a concept of the *hotelscape* to the body of work considering *servicescapes* and move to a better position of this as a holistic conceptualization gained from the perspective of individual consumers. In line with Orth, Wirtz, and McKinney (2016) we regard the perception of a consumer of a holistic servicescape as entropic. We offer the *hotelscape* concept as a distinctive development of the servicescape that embeds both the design and individual consumption in an aesthetically pleasing service atmosphere.

Our aims are 1) identify the *hotelscape* as a lived experience (phenomenon) of cosmopolitan consumers, 2) identify the dimensions of the *hotelscape* from the perspective of cosmopolitan consumers, and 3) identify the effect of the *hotelscape* on the consumer and therefore to inform hotels' strategic decision makers.

The paper is structured as follows: First we review the theoretical literature for our contribution of servicescape and design which has deployed a phenomenological lens to marketing phenomena. We then describe our methods and introduce *hotelscape* as a lived experience. We conclude with limitations and further research directions.

2. Literature review

This section provides a discussion of aesthetics and design from multiple disciplines, outlining the servicescape concept and the contribution to the marketing discipline.

2.1. Aesthetics and design

A growing body of literature is exploring the role of design, aesthetics and atmosphere in the hotel context. This is in response to the hotel sector innovating in the use of “form and function” to create products with segment specific appeal, perhaps best exemplified in the growth of boutique style hotels with “room-by-room distinctiveness” and “architectural spaces” where a “disproportionality large chunk of the design budget is allocated to the lobby and public areas” (McNeill, 2008:387). Design and art helps to strategically position the hotel making it part of the organization's marketing activity (West & Purvis, 1992), leading to improved occupancy rates and increased average daily room rates (Countryman & Jang, 2006).

West and Hughes (1991:364) stated “design in hotels is concerned with the construction of tangible attributes that can be shown to and seen by potential customers: thus relaying information to them about how the hotel views itself”. Design is about applying human creativity to create products, services, and environments to satisfy the needs of people (Yin, Qin, & Holland, 2011). To more fully understand the role of design requires insight into atmospheric, aesthetics, and servicescape and the position of *art* within each of these elements. Design defines and shapes the appearance of the material and immaterial and provides the logic that underpins form and expression (Woelfel, Krzyński, & Drechsel, 2013). Form describes look, functionality and interface with users. Expression concerns decisions about colour, texture, sound and behavior that help users gain an impression of the artefact. Functionality is important to consumption by facilitating “joy and excitement, pleasure and fun, and yes, beauty, to people's lives” (Norman, 2004:311). Whilst agreement on what is covered within the concept of *industrial* design is lacking, common is that it provides “tangible form to human ideas” by creating something new (Candi & Gemser, 2010:68). Emergent from this discourse is the need to holistically consider design and consumption of aesthetically pleasing service objects.

Atmospheric elements and interior design influence customers' desire to stay in a service setting and their re-patronage intention (Joseph-Mathews, Bonn, & Snepenger, 2009). Johnson, Mayer, and Champaner (2004) echo Kotler (1973:50), describing atmospheric as “the effort to

design buying environments to produce specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance his purchase probability”. Kotler (1973) describes four customer assessed dimensions of the physical environment: *visual*, *aural*, *olfactory* and *tactile*. These dimensions and how they are perceived by consumers has evolved into eight distinct forms: ambient conditions, space, layout, furniture, lighting, style, artefacts, and colour. Ambient conditions are environment background stimuli that impact human sensors (Kotler, 1973; Turley & Milliman, 2000) that are visual or non-visual, for example colours, auditory, scents (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprout, 2005), and temperature (Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). Whilst interest in creating *ambient* conditions in the tourism industry has increased, how different ambient dimensions combine to influence buyer behavior remains under researched (Heide, Lardal, & Gronhaug, 2009).

Space is the spatial relationship between different objects (e.g. furniture) in a bounded environment (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). *Layout* is the spatial relationship of equipment and furnishings within a service area. *Furnishing* encompasses look, comfort and availability of furniture (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). *Lighting* affects cognitive ability e.g. memories, mood, and controls the appearance of colour (Singh, 2006) and influences the perception of quality (Ching, 1996). *Signs, symbols and artefacts* provide important physical dimensions employed to communicate with customers and send different messages about service expectations (Bitner, 1992; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011). Eiseman (1998) argues that colour is critical in physical interior settings to differentiate offerings, influence appetite, and create negative or positive feelings and moods that help form attitudes. Each dimension reflects the outcome of product design decisions that seek to influence consumer behavior and ostensibly should form an integral part of the “servicescape framework” originally conceptualized by Bitner (1992).

2.2. The servicescape

Servicescape is described as “the physical surrounding or the physical facility where the service is produced, delivered and consumed” (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003:306), and impacts on customer's perception of the service experience (Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). By focusing attention on how the physical environment stimulates consumers to formulate approach/avoidance decisions, servicescape bridges marketing and environmental psychology concepts (Rosenbaum, 2005). Servicescape captures the interplay between *ambient conditions*, *spatial layout* and *functionality*, with *signs, symbols*, and *artefacts* and is used to evaluate retail environments and their atmospheres (Turley & Milliman, 2000; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). The impact of single servicescape elements on buying behavior has been investigated; specifically colour (Funk & Oly Ndubisi, 2006), music (Milliman, 1986), olfaction (Spangenberg et al., 2005), and lighting (Areni & Kim, 1994). However, few studies have combined these stimuli, and other servicescape dimensions have emerged e.g. social, socially symbolic, and natural environment (Fisk, Patrício, Rosenbaum, & Massiah, 2011).

Importantly for our study, servicescape has been adapted to fit specific *hedonistic* service sector characteristics. *Sportscape* (Wakefield & Sloan, 2010) focused on dimensions such as stadium access, facilities, aesthetics, and crowding. *Shipscape* (Kwortnik, 2008), reflects that cruise ships combine being a hotel, retailer, theme park, and vacation environment with residing guests. In both examples a common emphasis in the discussion is design. However, in the hotel industry, we argue no current study adequately provides holistic insight into aesthetics and design (during consumption), causing problems for managers when targeting specific hedonistic consumer groups. Theoretically, such a framework requires synthesis between the servicescapes marketing literature, marketing discipline literature and design, art and aesthetics. We propose such a synthesis in the next section.

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