



Research paper

Status seeking and perceived similarity: A consideration of homophily in the social servicescape

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ABSTRACT

It is not clear in the extant research whether all consumers respond to the social servicescape in the same way or whether there may be moderators and mediators of the proposed relationships. The purpose of this research is to establish the moderating effect of consumers' need for status and the mediating effect of self-image congruence on the relationship between the perceived similarity to other customers and self-brand congruity in the proposed conceptual framework. Data collected from a sample of restaurant consumers in the United States suggests that perceptions of perceived similarity to other customers can significantly affect both self-image congruence and self-brand congruence. Further, the data indicate that the consumer's need for status is a significant moderator and self-image congruence is a significant mediator of the proposed relationships. Theoretical implications, managerial relevance, and future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Understanding the effects of the physical environment on consumer behavior has been one of the most important streams of research in the service marketing literature in the last quarter century. Bitner's (1992) seminal work in this field sparked a stream of research that is as relevant today as it was at its inception in the early 1990's. However, while the effects of the physical servicescape are widely acknowledged (e.g., Kim and Moon, 2009; Liu and Jang, 2009), researchers have only recently started to formally explore what Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) refer to as the social servicescape. Like the physical servicescape, the notion of the social servicescape implies that the consumption environment can affect both the perceived value of a service experience (e.g., restaurant, hotel, airline, etc.) as well as post consumption evaluations and future behavior. However, unlike Bitner's (1992) tangible-atmospheric approach to the service environment, the social servicescape perspective provides an account of how the mere presence of other consumers in a shared consumption space can impact the service experience.

The contemporary conceptualization of the social servicescape is anchored in the sociological notion of homophily (McPherson

et al., 2001). The homophily principle proposes that individuals prefer to associate with other social actors that are perceived to be similar to themselves in terms of both status and value (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954). Thus, from a consumption standpoint, the concept of homophily suggests that the value of a service experience is enhanced when customers in a given service environment perceive a sense of similarity with the other social actors (i.e., customers) in that environment. In turn, this perceived sense of similarity translates into increased interaction and identification with the service establishment and its brand (Line et al., in press).

Because the social servicescape is instrumental in the formation of consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003), a deeper understanding of the ways in which consumers perceive and process this phenomenon is necessary to advance the knowledge of consumer behavior. However, research of this phenomenon is relatively limited in the hospitality literature; and as such, a number of key questions in this domain remain unanswered. For example, while it has been demonstrated that perceived similarity in the social servicescape affects consumers identification with a service provider (e.g., Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2011; Line et al., in press), it is not clear whether all consumers respond to the social servicescape in the same way or whether there may be intervening factors (i.e., moderators and mediators) that affect these relationships.

In fact, while the current perspectives seem to assume that all consumers react the same way when it comes to the perception of other customers in the service environment, research in the field

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of conspicuous consumption suggests that this may not be the case (Han et al., 2010). Because the desire to engage with perceptually similar social groups is driven by the need to signal one's social status (McPherson et al., 2001), the relationship between the perceived similarity to other customers and customer perceptions of the service firm and/or its brand may be affected by personality level traits such as the need for status and self-image perceptions. Unfortunately, current perspectives cannot account for such possibilities.

In light of this gap in the literature, this study seeks to address the following research questions: To what extent are the established connections between the perceived similarity to other customers and consumer behavior (1) moderated by the need for status and (2) mediated by self-image congruence? These questions are answered from a theoretical exploration of homophily in the social servicescape. Specifically, servicescape-driven perceptions of self-image and self-brand congruence are hypothesized to contribute to more favorable attitudinal evaluations of full-service restaurants, and in turn, behavioral intentions. By testing these relationships on a sample of restaurant consumers in the United States, this research provides meaningful implications for restaurant managers and marketers interested in better understanding consumers and their reactions to the social aspects of the consumption environment.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social servicescape

The servicescape model first proposed by Bitner (1992) provides a useful framework to explain the influence of the physical environment on consumer responses. However, despite its utility, this framework fails to take into account the Human element of the service environment in which the service takes place. To better account for the social aspects of service provision, Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) proposed the concept of the "social servicescape."

The idea of the social servicescape suggests that aspects of the social environment can elicit emotional and psychological responses to the consumption experience on the part of the focal customer (Miao and Mattila, 2013; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Martin and his colleagues (Martin, 1996; Martin and Pranter, 1989; Pranter and Martin, 1991) were among the first to deeply explore the effects of other customer segments on consumption behavior. More recently, researchers have come to refer to the impact of social others in the consumption space as customer-to-customer interaction.

Research on customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) often distinguishes between active CCI and passive CCI (Kim and Lee, 2012). Active CCI, which has received the bulk of the research attention, refers to incidences in which customers interact directly either verbally or physically. More recently, research has shifted to better understand the effects of passive CCI (Kim and Lee, 2012; Miao and Mattila, 2013). While most previous research on passive CCI concerns the impact of customer crowding (e.g., Hui and Bateson, 1991; Machleit et al., 2000), there has been an increasing emphasis on what Kim and Lee (2012) refer to as "mere presence," in which the number, age, appearance or behavior of other patrons can influence the focal customer's service evaluations, even if he or she has not direct interaction with these others.

The concept of mere presence suggests that perceptions of social others in the servicescape can change or affect perceptions of the overall environment, thereby impacting the consumption experience. Unfortunately, while there is evidence of this effect in the literature, the mechanisms through which this process takes place

are less well understood. To better understand such the mere presence effect, this research provides an account of the effects of perceived demographic and psychographic similarity (also known as homophily) among customers in the service environment.

2.2. Homophily

It has long been established that individuals prefer to associate with other social actors whom they perceive as similar to themselves (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954). In alignment with this tradition, this study explores customers' perceptions of perceived similarity to others via the concept of homophily, a word that translates to "love of the same." The concept of homophily suggests that individuals prefer to interact socially with those that they perceive to be most similar to themselves (McPherson et al., 2001). Previous studies have found that when given a choice, people tend to choose friends and associates that are similar to themselves and are reflective of their own self-image (Brown et al., 2007; McPherson et al., 2001).

While this idea is well established in the context of personal social networks, such as friendships and other interpersonal relationships, there is increasing evidence that the underlying "love of sameness" extends to social interaction in other contexts, such as servicescapes, as well. For example, Streukens and Andreassen (2013) demonstrated the importance of perceived self-similarity between customers and front-line employees, and found such similarity to be an important determinant of service provider preferences. Likewise, Line et al. (2012) similarly identified homophily between patrons and employees as a significant element of dining satisfaction in a restaurant context.

However, while such studies have examined the effects of homophily between customers and employees in the servicescape, relatively less research has examined the impact of customer to customer homophily, especially when it comes to the downstream effects on consumers' sense of congruence with a brand. In a notable exception, Wall et al. (2011) found that luxury hotel guests expect fellow consumers to be dressed properly and come from a similar social class. Their results suggest support the mere presence effect, suggesting that the presence of other consumers may interfere with consumption experiences. In light of such findings, the purpose of this study is to better understand the ways in which homophily, or the perceived similarity between a focal customers and other customers, impacts the customers' sense of congruence with the brand and subsequent behaviors.

2.3. Self-brand congruence

In addition to perceiving similarity between themselves and other customers, individuals may also perceive a connection between themselves and a brand (Escalas and Bettman, 2000). Self-brand congruence is the degree to which an individual perceives a relationship between his own identity and the identity of a company or brand. When consumers perceive congruence between themselves and a brand, they incorporate that brand into their self-image in order to help them achieve their identity goals (Huffman et al., 2000). Accordingly, self-brand congruence can be a significant contributor to the customer's perceived self-image (Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Such a connection can be characterized by a feeling that a brand expresses who the customer is and may help him communicate important information about himself others.

Because the characteristics of other customers are an important tangible cue of a service organization, it is possible that perceived similarity to other customers in the servicescape has a significant impact on an individual's level of self-brand congruence. Just as other aspects of the servicescape, such as ambiance, layout, or symbols give customers information about an organization (Bitner,

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