

Boston Hospitality Review

www.bu.edu/bhr

Published by the Boston University School of Hospitality Administration

The Restaurant Social Servicescape: Current Perspectives and Future Considerations

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Consumer Behavior - October 2021

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The Restaurant Social Servicescape: Current Perspectives and Future Considerations



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Managers of service organizations have long understood the importance of creating a service environment that is both aesthetically appealing and conveniently functional. The design of consumption space is especially important in the hospitality industry where the duration of the consumption experience may last from hours, in the case of a restaurant meal, to days or weeks in the case of a summer visit to a resort. Yet whatever the context/duration of the experience, the service environment is an essential aspect of the consumption process and can significantly affect consumer perceptions of the experience as well as their post-purchase behavior.

In technical terms, the hospitality consumption environment is often referred to as the servicescape (Bitner, 1992). Similar to a “landscape” or a “tablescape,” a “servicescape” reflects the purposeful design of a defined space (in this case a consumption environment) to maximize both the utility of the space as well as its aesthetic appeal. Classically, the hospitality servicescape has emphasized the importance of three different design elements to achieve these goals: the physical layout of the space (e.g., the size, type, and layout of the furniture, directional signage, etc.); the ambiance of the space (e.g., lighting, temperature, scent, music, etc.); and the décor of the space (e.g., art, tangible branding elements, themed decoration, etc.). Over the last 30 years,

hundreds of studies have been conducted that demonstrate the various ways that these types of tangible and physical (though inanimate) aspects within the consumption environment can affect hospitality consumption behavior including emotional responses to the experience, satisfaction, repatronage intentions, and word of mouth behavior.

While academic research of the servicescape has been instrumental in driving the hospitality industry forward in terms of space design, recent perspectives on the servicescape have argued that a more comprehensive approach is needed when it comes to the design and management of consumption spaces. Proponents of such an approach argue that layout, ambience, and décor reflect only the physical aspects of the servicescape, and that while the physical/tangible aspects of the consumption environment remain essential, considerations of the overall servicescape should also include an account of the social actors that bring the consumption space to life. In other words, contemporary perspectives on consumption environments emphasize a thoughtful account not only of the physical servicescape, but also of the social servicescape.

The social servicescape has been defined in different ways. However, most authors agree that the social servicescape includes aspects of both the other customers as well as the front line employees that share a given service environment with a focal customer. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that the social servicescape focuses primarily on the *mere presence* of (as opposed to active engagement with) these social others (Kim and Lee, 2012). Accordingly, considerations of the social servicescape can be seen as distinct from other streams of research that focus on direct/active interactions between and among consumers. Instead, the social servicescape reflects indirect and passive types of interaction. Existing research of the social servicescape, as defined in these terms, has identified significant effects of both other customers as well as service employees in a variety of consumption contexts, including restaurants, bars, coffee shops, casinos, hotels, and even entire destinations.

In sum, the social servicescape has been increasingly recognized as an important component of the overall servicescape, distinct from its more traditionally recognized physical counterpart. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to review the existing research of the social servicescape and its known effects on consumer behavior. In addition, this article puts forth a brief future research agenda for the continued consideration of the social servicescape in the post-Covid-19 hospitality environment.



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The Social Servicescape

Researchers and service professionals have long been aware of the effects of “the other customer” in the service experience (e.g., Martin and Pranter, 1989). Indeed, many consumers can recount stories of an obnoxious “other diner” who detracted from their meal by talking too loudly (or drinking too much) or an irritating “other passenger” on a long flight. On the other hand, there are also many instances of positive customer interactions. For example, interactions between customers on cruise ships and in bed and breakfast accommodations have resulted in enhanced service experiences, and in some cases, lifelong friendships

In the academic literature, the examples described above are discussed under the auspices of customer-to-customer interaction and typically involve some level of direct interaction between customers and/or some critical incident of which a specified number of customer parties were a part. The social servicescape is different from customer-to-customer interaction. Specifically, the social servicescape emphasizes the mere presence of (as opposed to interaction with) the other customers in the consumption environment (Kim and Lee, 2012). Accordingly, those that study the social servicescape maintain that other customers can significantly affect a variety of consumption experiences, even in the absence of critical incidents and direct

interactions. Actors in the social servicescape (customers and employees) affect the experience simply because they are there.

In general, the concept of the social servicescape is built on the sociological notion of homophily (defined as “love of that which is the same”) and the attendant conventional wisdom that “birds of a feather flock together” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). Given the emphasis on the mere presence of other people, the first two dimensions of the social servicescape are defined in terms of (1) the appearance and behavior of the other customers, and (2) the employees that share the consumption space with a focal customer (Line and Hanks, 2019). Additionally, a third dimension of the social servicescape focuses on the extent to which other customers/employees are perceived as similar to the focal customer in terms of psychographic variables such as beliefs, values, etc. (Line and Hanks, 2019). Finally, some authors have argued that density (or crowding) should be considered an important part of the social servicescape in situations where consumption norms dictate an expectation of how many (or few) other people should share a similar service experience (e.g., Jang, Ro, and Kim, 2015). For example, it would be desirable to watch an important sporting event in a densely packed sports bar; however, the norms of fine dining experiences often dictate a far less dense social servicescape.

The Social Servicescape in Hospitality

The social servicescape has been shown to affect many different areas of hospitality and tourism consumption behavior. A majority of this research has been conducted in the restaurant industry where the social servicescape has been identified as an important driver of word of mouth in full service restaurants (Line, Hanks, and Kim, 2018) as well as in fast casual restaurants (Lin, Gursoy, and Zhang, 2020). The effects of these positive relationships have been attributed to status seeking behavior and conspicuous consumption tendencies among dining patrons (Hanks, Line, and Yang, 2017). In addition to affecting purchasing behavior, the social servicescape has also been shown to affect how customers participate in restaurant-sponsored, cause-related marketing initiatives (Line, Hanks, and Zhang, 2018). With respect to service employees (as opposed to the restaurants themselves), Kim and Baker (2019) found that customers who observe appropriate employee responses to other customers’ misbehavior can result in increased gratitude and better tips to the employee.

In addition to general dining contexts, the social servicescape has also been identified as an important determinant of consumer behavior in several specialty food and beverage contexts. For example, Rosenbaum and Massiah (2007) identified local coffee

shops as an important source of social support for patrons that rely on the communal aspects of the social servicescape as a significant part of their social interaction. Tran, Dang, and Tourinois (2021) identified a similar phenomenon in coffee shops in Vietnam. In a different context, Olson and Park (2019) identified the importance of age on consumers' reactions to the social servicescape in gay bars.

The effects of the social servicescape have also been demonstrated in the lodging industry. In a hotel context, Line and Hanks (2019) found that perceptions of other customers/employees' similarity, appearance, and behavior can affect satisfaction with the hotel experience and intentions to spread positive word of mouth about the experience. Other researchers have extended these findings to luxury and limited service hotels (Garmaroudi, King, & Lu, 2021). Similarly, Chiang (2018) found that perceptions of the social servicescape can influence the experiential value derived from capsule hotels with similar effects on patrons' electronic word-of-mouth promotion.



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The Future of the Social Servicescape

The Covid-19 pandemic reshaped the hospitality landscape and with it, the social servicescape. At least three aspects of the pandemic have impacted how consumers interpret the social servicescape: social distancing, masking, and an increase in the consumption of take-out food. Each of these is discussed as follows in the context of the restaurant industry with an emphasis on implications for practical restaurant management and future research of the social servicescape.

The first, and perhaps most obvious, issue affecting the restaurant social servicescape during the pandemic is social distancing. The widespread practice of social distancing has likely had important effects on how customers engage in hospitality environments both during and after the pandemic (Zhang et al., 2021). Social distancing requirements forced many restaurants to decrease the number of available dining spaces. Given the importance of density as an evaluative aspect of the social servicescape, it is likely that consumer perceptions of restaurant experiences were affected by these changes. In the case of upscale/fine dining, consumers likely appreciated the decreased density, as these contexts typically are associated with quieter and more intimate dining experiences. However, for restaurants typically associated with high energy and lively crowds, social distancing likely decreased the positive effect of the social servicescape. This would likely be particularly true in sports bars, night clubs, and venues that are known for live music.

The second pandemic-related phenomenon that has affected the social servicescape is mask-wearing. When all customers and employees in a given restaurant have a large portion of their face covered, it becomes more difficult to gauge similarity, assess appearances, and judge behavior. The practice of masking has likely decreased customers' abilities to make subjective judgements on the appearances/similarities of other customers/employees. While research is needed to identify these effects, masking has potentially had a similar effect on the social servicescape as taking down physical decorations would have on the physical servicescape.

Finally, the switch to take-out service in restaurants has also changed the nature of the social servicescape in restaurant consumption. It would be possible to argue that take-out experiences render the social servicescape a relatively unimportant determinant of the consumption experience. That argument would be difficult to defend, however, given that (1) employees (in addition to other customers) are an essential part of the social servicescape, and (2) social impressions can still be made even if food is not consumed in a dining room. Regarding the first point, take-out experiences are facilitated by employees that can have an effect on perceptions of the social servicescape (though this effect may be muted by mask-wearing). Second, the mere presence of other customers does not completely go away when food is taken out from a restaurant. Other customers can be seen going in and out of the restaurant and/or waiting in pick up lines in their vehicles. Given these possibilities, additional research is needed to better understand how such aspects of the social servicescape affect the consumption experience outside of the restaurant.



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Conclusion

Like the physical servicescape, the social servicescape can have important effects on consumer behavior. The social servicescape is particularly important in restaurants where the appearance, behavior, and perceived similarity of other customers and service employees represent a significant part of the consumption atmosphere. Accordingly, restauranteurs and other service managers must consider the effects of the social servicescape in their operational models. However, these considerations must be made in the context of the changing social dynamics facilitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, previous findings on the effects of density will likely change as many consumers have become wary of highly dense consumption environments such as those found in sports bars and many fast-casual operations. In such environments, shifting social norms may lead to a new baseline expectation for the acceptable number of others in the consumption space. Likewise, given the increasing political polarization of various market segments regarding mask usage, restauranteurs should be cognizant of the effect that mask-wearing behavior in their establishments may have on perceptions of similarity in their social servicescapes. These examples highlight the importance of the restaurant servicescape and the types of considerations that restaurant managers must attend to in the short to medium-term aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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