A Study on Consumer Perception of Servicescape in Shopping Malls

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1. Servicescape
2. Ambience
3. Consumer perception
4. Behavioural intentions

Abstract

Service offerings are often considered as experiences which are created and delivered in 'service factories'. Customer seek for 'experiences' in many settings such as restaurants, movies, hotel stays, sports, vacations, amusement parks, etc. Modern retailers especially shopping malls are expected to provide wholesome shopping experiences to their customers by offering large variety of products in a luxury ambience clubbed with entertainment and food options. In this regard servicescape has been widely adopted in providing excellent customer experiences. This paper attempts to understand the consumer perception of servicescape and its dimensions in shopping malls context. A survey has been conducted at selected shopping malls in Bangalore. Major findings indicate that customers have average perceptions of servicescape in all the dimensions such as ambience, aesthetics, layout, variety, cleanliness, signs, symbols & artifacts and social factors indicating considerable improvements. Further gender and shopping frequency significantly influences the perception of servicescape quality which is believed to affect customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions.
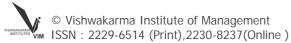
INTRODUCTION

Service offerings are often considered as experiences which are created and delivered in 'service factories'. While receiving services customers interact with number of 'touch points' which finally shapes in to the service experiences. Customer seek for 'experiences' in many settings such as restaurants, movies, hotel stays, sports, vacations, amusement parks, etc. For example a customer shopping at shopping malls may experience an all new way of shopping with variety of products in an ambience of a luxury hotel clubbed with entertainment and food, all under one roof. Managers have been giving importance to service consumption experiences ever since Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) presented work on hedonic consumption. They suggested that "hedonic experience generated from the service consumption has a strong propensity to induce heightened levels of enjoyment, fantasies and feelings of pleasure". In providing excellent customer experiences often marketers use many experiential marketing tools. One such well recognized tool is servicescape which provides differentiated service experience so that customer feels satisfied and stays loyal.

Servicescape (coined by Bitner, 1992) includes all those elements in the physical facility of service organisations where service is performed, delivered and consumed. Servicescape comprises of both tangible (building exterior, equipments, furnishings, layout, colours, lighting, décor, and uniforms) and intangible (music, scent, noise, air quality, temperature) elements which are capable of influencing customer service experiences to a greater extent. As services are intangible in nature, often consumers look for physical cues (tangibles) while evaluating service options (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1985). Servicescape which is rich in such physical cues therefore helps in both creating service expectations and assessing service perceptions. The influence of servicescape is more obvious in services such as hotels, retail stores, hospitals, amusement parks, where customers spend extended periods of time in the physical surroundings of the service provider. Further depending on the nature of service, servicescapes may influence employees or customers or their interactions. Therefore servicescape of interpersonal services such as shopping malls may influence behaviors of both customers and employees, and also enhance the service experience by facilitating the interaction between them (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1985). Recent empirical research has revealed that the very design of a store may translate in to happier customers, longer stays, higher spending, and faster and efficient service, all of which may have considerable effect on organization's bottom line. This paper attempts to understand consumer perception of servicescape and its dimensions in Indian shopping malls context.

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SERVICESCAPE : LITERATURE REVIEW

Ever since Mehrabian and Russell (1974) showed that environmental stimuli can substantially influence consumer behaviours and emotions in physical environments, several authors have attempted to study servicescape in various service settings (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996; Lin, 2004). Kotler (1974) used a term 'atmospherics' to explain how 'artificial environments' (or place) significantly influences purchase decisions in the 'total product' evaluation. Servicescape has both direct and an indirect effect on perceived service quality wherein tangible service quality influences the perception of intangible service quality (Reimer and Kuehn, 2005). Further servicescape may have greatest impact on customer perceived value in shopping malls (Kumar, Garg, and Rahman, 2010). Andreu et al., (2006) showed that perceptions of a retail servicescape positively influence emotions, repatronage intentions, and desire to remain longer in the shopping centers. Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) and Michaelia (2008) showed positive effects of servicescape on satisfaction, length of time customers desired to stay and repatronage intentions. Tripathi and Siddiqui (2007, 2008) found positive relationships among perceived quality of servicescape, satisfaction and revisit intentions in shopping malls. Similarly Chen (2011), found positive relations among servicescape, overall service quality and behavioral intentions. Environment of shopping malls is said to positively affect the consumer behavior or loyalty (Fatima & Rasheed, 2012).

Servicscape Dimensions

Over a period of time many dimensions of servicescape have been explored by various authors. Baker et. al., (1986) included the "non-built" environment in their definition of the store environment as consisting of three sets of factors; ambient factors, design factors, and social factors. Bitner (1992) identified three primary dimensions of the servicescape that influence consumers' holistic perceptions of the servicescape (i.e., perceived quality) and their subsequent internal (satisfaction) and external responses (approach/avoidance behaviour). The three dimensions are (1) ambient conditions; (2) spatial layout and functionality; and (3) signs, symbols, and artifacts. Lin (2004) classified the dimensions of servicescape into three major groups of 'cues': (i) visual cues: colour, lighting, space and function, personal artifacts, layout and design; (ii) auditory cues: music and noise; and (iii) olfactory cues: odors and scents. Further Rosenbaum and Massiah (2010) proposed that servicescape is not only comprised of managerially controllable physical stimuli but also managerially uncontrollable social, symbolic, and restorative stimuli,

which all influence customer approach/avoidance decisions and social interaction behaviors. Tripathi and Siddiqui (2007, 2008) identified and prioritized four dimensions of shopping mall servicescape: general interiors as most important followed by social dimensions, internal display and exterior facilities.

Shopping Mall Servicescape

The important servicescape dimensions of a shopping mall are given below.

Ambient Factors -Ambient factors include background variables such as lighting, aroma, noise, music, air quality and temperature which affect the non-visual senses. Though these variables are not part of the primary service but their absence may make customers feel uncomfortable.

Music -Atmospheric music (tempo, volume and preference) is known to have tremendous impact on consumer responses. Customers have specific preferences towards music and its evaluation can influence the overall satisfaction. Under slow music people tend to move slowly, explore more, stay for long and end up paying more (Milliman, 1982; 1986). Customers spent more on food and drink when slow music was playing than when fast music was playing (Caldwell and Hibbert, 1999). Also customers selected more expensive merchandise when classical music was played in the background (Areni and Kim, 1993). Moreover shopping time and expenditures were observed to increase with the level of preference for the background music (Herrington, 1996).

Aroma - Pleasant ambient odor has significant effects on consumer perceived value (Kumar, Garg, and Rahman, 2010,) and the amount of time spent in the store (Mitchell, Kahn and Knasko, 1995). Pleasant scents increased the amount of time a consumer spent in the store (Vaccaro, et al., 2009). Also shoppers in the scented condition perceived that they had spent less time in the store than shoppers in the no-scent condition (Spangenberg, Crowley, and Henderson, 1996). Further in-store aroma influences consumer emotions of pleasure and arousal (Walsh, et al., 2009).

Lighting - lighting makes a significant contribution on how a guest experiences a space and the lighting design within the restaurant setting adds to the guest's overall dining experience (Ciani, 2010). Brighter lighting influenced shoppers to examine and handle more products (Areni and Kim, 1994). Further customers engaged in general communication in bright environments, whereas more intimate conversation occurred in softer light (Gifford, 1988). In addition, higher levels of illumination are associated with increased physiological arousal (Kumari &

Venkatramaiah, 1974).

Temperature - The tactile factors such as temperature and air quality may help in creating a holistic atmosphere in a retail store. These cues signal store's merchandize quality, clientele, comfort, and have significant and positive impact on store image. Store temperature (air conditioning) potentially increases customers' value due to personal comfort and aesthetic values (Kumar, Garg, and Rahman, 2010). These factors increase customers' exploratory tendencies and sensation seeking behavior and can potentially alter emotional experiences.

Aesthetic factors-Aesthetics refers to a function of architectural style, along with interior décor, colour scheme, pictures/paintings, plants/flowers, ceiling/wall decorations all of which customers can see and use to evaluate the aesthetic quality of the servicescape (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994). Aesthetic factors are important because they influence ambience. Other aesthetic factors include the surrounding external environment, the parking and visibility of the facility. Architectural design and interior décor of a shopping mall positively affects desire to stay (Wakefield and Baker, 1998) and higher levels of spending (Garvin, 2009). Store colour is said to influence the trust and store choice. Blue ambient color generates more trust in subjects than green ambient color which in turn significantly affects store choice (Lee and Rao, 2010). Also consumers reacted more favorably to a blue environment in retail settings, where in "blue stores" had higher simulated purchase rates (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992). Colors also influenced emotional pleasure.

Layout - Spatial layout and functionality refers to the way in which machinery, equipment, and furnishings, seats, aisles, hallways and walkways, restrooms, and the entrance and exits are designed and arranged in service settings. These factors are important in many services (e.g., theaters, retail stores, concerts, upscale restaurants) because these can affect the comfort of the customer. Layout that makes people feel constricted may have a direct effect on customer quality perceptions, excitement levels, and indirectly on their desire to return (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994).

Variety - Shopping mall that offers variety in tenant occupancy and product variety both in individual store and across competing stores is likely attracts more shoppers because of the excitement it generates. Tenant mix is said to influence mall selection, frequency of shopping and shopping centre image. Further mall variety measured on food service, stores and entertainment options has the strongest influence on customer excitement and desire to

stay in the mall (Wakefield and Baker, 1998). Variety of products has a significant influence on shoppers' satisfaction in shopping malls (Ahmad, 2012).

Sign, symbols, and artifacts - Signs, symbols, and artifacts include signage and décor used to communicate and enhance a certain image or mood, or to direct customers to desired destinations. It was found that signs, symbols and artifacts were positively associated with customer patronage (Simpeh, et. al., 2011). Indeed, a service setting with legible (clear signage) arrangements may result in positive consumer moods, thus impacting on the relative spend during lunch (Newman, 2007).

Cleanliness - Cleanliness has been found to exert a strong influence on consumers' perceptions of retail stores and services. Cleanliness is important especially in those situations in which customers must spend several hours in the service setting and many consumers implicitly associate cleanliness with the quality of the servicescape. Cleanliness significantly affected the servicescape satisfaction of a slot floor in casino (Lucas, 2003). Further the cleanliness issues were most reported problems in servicescape failures in food service industry (Hoffman, et. al., 2003; Lia et. al., 2009).

Social Factors - Social elements are the employees and customers in the service setting (Baker, 1987). These cues include physical appearance, number, gender and attire of employees and of other customers. Presence of more social cues in store environment may lead to higher levels of arousal (Baker, Levy, and Grewal, 1992). Bitner (1992) found that environment featuring an employee in less than professional attire could influence a customer's attribution and satisfaction when a service failure occurred. Further, more number of sales personnel with professional attire, and greeting customers at the entrance of the store made customers perceive higher service quality (Baker et al., 1994). Even the gender of the service provider influences perceptions of service quality in fast food restaurants, hair cutting salons, and dental offices where men believed that male servers provide higher quality while women believed female servers did (Fischer et al., 1997). Additionally in an open service encounter sites (e.g., retail outlets, banks, restaurants) where consumers could observe service delivery to other consumers, the way services delivered influenced not only the opinions of the consumers who received the service, but also the opinions of other consumers who observed service delivery (Chebat et al., 1995).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Indian retail space has changed tremendously ever since

modern retailing in the form of sprawling shopping centers, multi-storied malls and huge complexes has entered. Being the fifth largest in the world, Indian retail sector is one of the sunrise sectors accounting for 14-15% of the country's GDP. Though modern retail is only 7%, it has redefined the way Indians are shopping by offering shopping, entertainment and food all under one roof. It has been observed that malls are growing at a blistering pace, with malls space that was 2 million sq.ft. in 2002, is estimated to be 90 million square feet by the end of 2015. The number of malls in India, which is presently 300, is expected to be 500 by 2015. It is expected that several malls will be coming up is the tier II and Tier III cities of the country and large investments are estimated. The country's largest realty player DLF Ltd. is planning to invest up to Rs. 3,000 crore over the next five years to develop shopping malls (Business Line, 2011). Global investment firm Xander Group will pump in about Rs. 3,300 crore to develop and operate about 12 luxury shopping malls by 2017 (The Economic Times, 2012). Shopping malls are not only considered as retail destinations, but also to provide congregational space and are among the few entertainment options available in cities. Air-conditioned spaces along with options to eat, hangout and shop below a single roof are a major draw which brings crowds to the atriums and food-courts, primarily during the weekend. Another important benefit is the safety and security provided within the premises, where parents are more relaxed with their children. The amenities provided by malls in the form of parking and clean toilets add to the experience.

However, according to recent reports malls are now being abandoned by retailers and consumers alike. Vacancy levels in malls across the country are growing at an alarming rate, says property consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle. Further shopping malls face multifaceted competition in India. Against the argument that the entry of malls will wipe out traditional formats – specifically the neighborhood stores or kiranas, these are continuing to be successful. The flexibility, convenience, personal and customized service, with retail density of 15 shops per 1000 population makes kirana shops hard to match. Moreover the e-tailing revolution has picked up steam in India lured by price discounts. High speed Internet access via broadband or mobile networks, the penetration of affordable smart phones and tablets makes online shopping a promising future phenomenon threatening brick-and-mortar formats. One edge malls possess is the unique servicescape offering wholesome shopping experience which is missing in these two formats. Also excellent servicescape plays strategic role

in successfully positioning the malls against competition. Therefore shopping malls must use this weapon effectively to increase the footfalls and retain the customers in the long run.

Though there is enormous evidence to show that servicescape influences customer satisfaction and behaviors, there is acute lack of empirical studies in Indian context. Very few authors have attempted to analyse partial effect of servicescape on shopping behavior (Kumar, et. al., 2010; Tripathi and Siddiqui, 2007, 2008) without considering the holistic perception. Therefore an in-depth study of servicescape particularly in shopping malls context is need of the hour. It is vital that mall developers understand how consumers evaluate servicescape and its dimensions relatively, and its effects on purchase and consumption related decisions. They should know whether the facility is attractive to consumers, whether consumers like to stay longer and spend more and whether they would like to come back to such facilities or not. These insights will surely help tham to create and manage pleasant servicscapes which provide extraordinary shopping experiences while allocating the resources more judiciously.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study objectives include;

To measure the perceived quality of servicescape in selected shopping malls.

To understand the importance of dimensions of servicescape in shopping malls.

To analyse the effect of consumer characteristics on the perception of servicescape in shopping malls.

Data Collection

The data were collected through field survey by means of a self-administered questionnaire adopting store intercept-type interviews. Questionnaire has two parts: first part measuring servicescape perceptions and second part measuring the demographic details of the respondents. All the constructs were measured using multi-item scales adopted from the previous studies on seven-point Likert-type scales (1- strongly disagree to 7 - strongly agree).

The population for the study was defined as visitors of shopping malls in Bangalore. Total of 120 shoppers in selected shopping malls were interviewed inside the malls as they were experiencing the servicescape. The demographic profile of sample is given in Table 1.1

Analysis and Interpretations

The data were analyzed using SPSS software 17.0 version. Reliability test, descriptive analyses and ANOVA were

performed.

Reliability Statistics

To assess the internal consistency of the scale items, reliability statistics were computed for all the constructs and the same is presented in table 1.2. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are quiet high (ranging from 0.732 – 0.909) for all the constructs.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics is computed for all the dimensions of servicescape and shown in the table 1.3. Mean values range from 5.2 to 5.5, and standard deviation from 0.71 to 0.89. All the variables fall in permissible limit and no outliers are found in the data.

All the servicescape dimensions have mean scores ranging from 5.2 to 5.5 on 7 point scale, showing average

Table 1.1: Reliability Statistics

Characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male		8167.5
	Female	39	32.5
Age	18 - 25yrs	58	48.3
	26 - 35yrs	29	24.2
	36 - 45yrs	29	24.2
	46 - 55yrs	4	3.3
Marital Status	Married	64	53.3
	Single	56	46.7
Monthly Income	Below 20k	55	45.8
	20 - 40k	36	30.0
	40 - 60k	27	22.5
	Above 60k	2	1.7
Occupational Status	Self-employed	25	20.8
	Employed	42	35.0
	Student	51	42.5
	Homemaker	2	1.7
Shopping Frequency	Once a week	47	39.2
	Fortnightly	31	25.8
	Once a month	15	12.5
	Occasionally	27	22.5

Table 1.2: Reliability Statistics

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Ambient Factors	.823	8
Aesthetics	.854	9
Spatial Layout	.783	7
Variety	.732	4
Cleanliness	.791	5
Signs, Symbols and Artifacts	.811	6
Social Factors	.909	15

perception of servicescape quality. In general shopping malls in Bangalore are underperforming at present and

there is enough room for improvement in each of the dimensions. 'Ambient factors' have least mean of 5.2,

Table 1.3: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ambient	120	2.75	7.00	5.2385	.73568
Aesthetics	120	2.56	7.00	5.4185	.76422
Layout	120	1.43	6.71	5.4048	.71232
Variety	120	1.50	6.75	5.3438	.89763
Cleanliness	120	2.20	6.60	5.3683	.72460
Sign, symbols & artifacts	120	1.67	7.00	5.5306	.74566
Social factors	120	2.27	7.00	5.3550	.77617
Valid N (listwise)	120				

followed by 'variety' with 5.34, 'social factors' with 5.35 and 'cleanliness' with 5.36. Therefore special attention needs to be given on these dimensions. 'Aesthetics' and 'Layout' have mean scores of 5.41 and 5.40 respectively. Sign, symbols & artifacts dimension has highest mean scores of 5.53 indicating shopping malls doing fairly well in this dimension. The above results show that customers have average perceptions of servicescape quality of shopping malls at present.

ANOVA

Further series of ANOVA were conducted to know if the consumer characteristics such as gender, age, job, monthly income, marital status and shopping frequency had any significant influences on their perceptions of servicescape quality. Gender had significant difference only in two of the dimensions; layout (at 90% confidence level) and social factors (at 99% confidence level). In both the dimensions male respondents had higher perception than female respondents indicating women shoppers being more disappointed with the layout and crowd at malls. These two elements must be modified in way to satisfy these shoppers. However age, marital status and monthly income did not show any significant differences. With regard to job, the significant differences exist only in cleanliness dimension (at 90% confidence level). Shopping frequency had significant influence on the perception of Aesthetics, Variety and Cleanliness dimensions (at 90% and 99% confidence levels).

Discussion

The creation of pleasant servicescape has become a competitive retailing strategy to enhance consumer experience and to attract consumers. This study showed

average perceptions of all the dimensions of servicescape in shopping malls. Ambient factors measured on variables such as music, odour, lighting, temperature and air quality had lowest perceived quality. As Ambience is one of the common and important factors affecting selection of shopping malls, customers may have higher expectations in this area. Therefore malls must give special attention to these elements and bring in more favorable changes. Further shopping malls need to work considerably on their tenant mix, multiple brands at various price points, excellent food and entertainment options. Facility upkeep is another issue where cleanliness must be maintained in walkways, exit points, food service areas, parking and restrooms. Cleanliness in food service areas is more important as customers have been highly associating this with servicescape failures in food service industry (Hoffman, et. al., 2003; Lia et. al., 2009). Aesthetic value of shopping malls can be improved further both in exteriors and interiors. Good location, adequate parking, easy accessibility and high visibility would add value to the mall exteriors. Unique architectural design, attractive colour schemes and fashionable décor are highly appreciated by today's customers. At the same time spatial layout inside the mall needs to be improved so that customers feel comfortable in moving around and can easily get wherever they want to go. Social factor measured on number, appearance and friendliness of employees and other customers also need attention. Efficient employee training and better targeting strategies may help in improving this dimension. Relatively higher perceptions of signs, symbols & artifacts show that shopping malls are using sufficient signage which is large enough and easy to understand. However there is enough room for improvement and desirable too as these are directly related with higher

spending and patronage intentions (Newman, 2007; Simpeh, et. al., 2011). Also using meaningful artifacts and point of purchase displays will further improve this dimension.

Further key demographic variables have shown significant differences in the perception of servicescape quality in various dimensions. Men had generally high perceptions on all dimensions than women. And these differences were significant in layout and social factors. There is a need to work on making the shopping malls more women friendly. Age, marital status and monthly income did not show any significant differences. Job showed significant difference only in cleanliness dimension. Shopping frequency had significant influence on the perception of aesthetics, variety and cleanliness, wherein frequent shoppers had higher perceptions of these dimensions than shoppers visiting shopping malls rarely. However further examination is required before generalizing the results.

CONCLUSIONS

Servicescapes are increasingly gaining importance in the service business decisions recently. Especially in shopping malls perceived servicescape quality significantly affects consumer satisfaction and their intentions to remain loyal. Superior quality servicescapes result in customers willing to stay for longer time, explore the mall, and spend more impulsively. Further pleasant servicescape also make customers visit the malls more often and develop a kind of emotional bonding. Therefore malls must invest in designing the servicecsape based on consumer perspectives, and also the relative importance of servicescape dimensions. More research is called for in understanding the expectations of varied visitors such as male and female, young and old shoppers etc. Periodic feedbacks on these elements and bringing in more favourable changes as and when required may go long way in increasing the traffic as well as business both for mall developers and individual shops. Also resources must be allocated based on the relative importance of different servicescape elements in enhancing customer shopping experiences.

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