Consuming Hyperplaces: Servicescape, Service-Escape, and the Production of the Servicespace

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This study challenges the spatial and ontological conceptualizations that have been taken for granted so far in the marketing literature (e.g., the fact that a servicescape such as a shopping mall is supposed to contain and retain within its walls a shopper’s entire marketplace experience). Based on the literature on hypermodernity, utopian urbanism and existential phenomenology, a new spatial and ontological model is proposed in which the servicescape becomes only the factual, tangible part of a more projective space of consumption (the servicespace). A fieldwork confirmed that shoppers actively produce their servicespace by involving elements located outside of the physical servicescape. Consequences on the liberatory potentials in consumption, and the role of the marketplace as a place of social centrality are also discussed.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

This study develops a new theoretical perspective on the marketplace, one grounded in Ascher’s (2003) model of the hypermodern society. Henri Lefebvre’s (1974/1991) work on space, and existential phenomenology. These views on the concept of space, even though never the object of a comparative analysis, revealed to be complementary.

According to Ascher (2003; 2004), increased mobility and new technologies have led to a “hypermodern society” where “sequences of activities overlap and interweave, a society where social ties are chosen, constructed, formed, but also dissolved more freely. This hypermodern society generates new places—hyperplaces” (Ascher 2003). A hyperplace is a “space of connectivity” (Desportes 2005), not a space of physical, Euclidian contiguity. In hyperplaces, individuals can, if they want, participate in different activities quasi simultaneously in multiple social fields, and with the people they have chosen to be with, whether they are actually or virtually present.

According to existential phenomenology, the Euclidian (i.e., three-dimensional) view on space is a scientific reduction which does not reflect the complexity of the concept. More precisely, Lefebvre (1974/1991) sees space as produced through spatial practices (i.e., the set of actions taken by the space user). Space conceivers (e.g., urbanists, store managers) can influence space consumers’ “production” of space by suggesting specific spatial practices (e.g., pathways in a store). However, the space consumers usually prefer to avoid such guidance, and will try to experience instead a “fully lived space”, i.e., a space emancipated from any spatial practices required or suggested by the space conceivers.

Based on these perspectives on space, a new model of the marketplace was developed, in which the space of retail experienced by the shoppers (referred to as the servicescape) is “produced” by the shoppers themselves. The production of this servicescape is naturally influenced by the three-dimensional servicescape designed by marketers. However the servicespace, as lived by those consuming it (i.e., the shoppers) is also based on elements located beyond the physical walls of the tangible, three-dimensional servicescape (in an “Elsewhere” of the shopping experience so far left unexplored in consumer research). Three different types of spatial practices (labeled “hyperspatial practices”) involving elements located outside of the servicescape (i.e., in what is referred to as the “outscape”) were identified during the fieldwork. Firstly, shoppers may decide to “Reach for Information” -i.e., reach for the outscape in an attempt to bring product- or service-related expertise into the inscape. Secondly, they may connect to the outscape (i.e., to “service-escape” the servicescape) whenever their immediate physical environment does not provide an optimized level of arousal and/or pleasure (a hyperspatial practice labeled “Reaching for Affect”). Thirdly, shoppers may decide to tap into their (physically) distant social contacts (for utilitarian reasons, or simply as a reassuring reminder of their “place” in the social fabric). Lastly, by combining at will these three new types of spatial practices, shoppers can “reach for hyperplaceness”, i.e., for a liminal and intangible space, a servicespace that is much richer, in its social, informational, and affective dimensions than the ordinary servicescape suggested by servicescape conceivers.

Multiple data collection processes were used during the fieldwork – participant and nonparticipant observation, depth interviews, autodriving interviews, and focus group. In total, the fieldwork resulted in 541 pages of single-spaced pages of transcribed interviews, 30 pages of field notes, 1,661 photographs, and 69 hours of videotaped observation. The age of the five informants (four female and one male) ranged from 19 to 32.

The methodology developed for this research, the “Day-In-The-Life” (DITL) protocol, borrows from the Shopping-With-Consumers (SWC) protocol (Outes, McGrath, and Lowrey 1995), but also extends its scope by allowing the researcher to study the shopping experience in its everyday-life context: as the informants went through their entire day (from dawn to dusk), the researcher stayed a couple of feet behind them, so that he could observe and take still photos of the informants’ various activities. In addition, during the follow-up interviews, informants were shown, to prime their memory, a set of photographs taken during the fieldwork. An average of 208 still captions were presented to the informants during each of the depth interviews.

By introducing a new conceptualization of the marketplace, this research sheds a new light on the meaning creation and re-appropriation processes to which shoppers have access: in the proverbial consumer/producer struggle for the domination of the marketplace, with the servicescape finally “de-secluded”, space users can now leverage elements (e.g., flux of information) located in the outscape. Once a “ontological place” (Heidegger 1927), the servicespace has now become a ontical place.

Lastly, this research contributes to the ongoing debate on the type of sociality consumers want to experience in the marketplace, by assessing whether a sense of place and its accompanying sociality is still perceived by shoppers as a valuable element of the servicespace, or is just part of a self-reassuring (and self-deceiving) discourse on “the servicescape as a modern bazaar” or “the servicescape as the new utopia” held by servicescape producers and marketers.

**REFERENCES**


