The Value of Atmosphere  
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Providing consumers with a sense of atmosphere is regarded as a competitive advantage in marketing. This paper makes an empirical and theoretical contribution by showing and analyzing how atmosphere arises in both homes and commercial venues, and theorizing why it provides an experience of pleasure.

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Making Places: Sensemaking and Sensegiving in Domestic, Communal and Retail Settings

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Paper #4: Creating Home and Community in Public Spaces: Vestaval in Tailgating
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SESSION OVERVIEW

Physical spaces become places when we ascribe meanings to them (Williams et al 1992). Following Sherry’s (2000) call to researchers to further investigate the issue, we propose to bring together a session that explores how a sense of place is constructed. The ways consumers attach meanings to their environment has primarily been studied in branded servicescapes such as malls (Haytko and Baker 2004; Maclaran and Brown 2005; Sandikci and Holt 1998) or flagship stores (Borghini et al. 2009; Kozinets et al. 2002), or extraordinary retail spectacles (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2008; Kozinets et al. 2004). Yet, we argue that these studies focus more on how consumers interact with these settings than the act of place making. In other words the ways spaces become places, via sensemaking by marketers and sensegiving by consumers, has been relatively understudied. We suggest that consumer researchers need to better explore these processes.

Our session aims to contribute to consumer research by looking at how marketplace practices imprint a setting with a sense of place. Ranging from the experience of atmosphere in homes (Linnet), to the establishment of a sense of place in servicescapes (Linnet, Larsen and Bean; Arsel, Debenedetti, and Mérigot), or constructing interiority via outdoor rituals (Sherry and Bradford), all four presentations in the session aim to unpack how places are constructed in marketplace and how consumers make sense of these places. All presentations also deal with the stability and dynamics of sensegiving and sensemaking activities in the marketplace. Whether a sense of place is built with a specific cosmopolitan ideology in mind (Larsen and Bean), or is imbued with a culturally specific sense of atmosphere (Linnet), or interrupted with servicescape discontinuities (Arsel, Debenedetti, and Mérigot), or even just temporally constituted through encampments (Sherry and Bradford), places are dynamic entities that are contextualized into a network of marketplace activities.

Linnet will start the session with a broader discussion of interiority in the marketplace and how marketplace sensemaking enables the subjective experience of hygge—the Danish equivalent of cosiness. Larsen and Bean will follow up this with their study of the commercial emplacement of cosmopolitanism in two New York restaurants. Arsel, Debenedetti and Mérigot will then discuss interruption and change by their work on a defunct Parisian restaurant and its two spatially, symbolically and socially connected spinoffs. Finally, Sherry and Bradford will discuss the case of a transient place through their analysis of tailgating.

This session will appeal to a broad range of ACR members. The presentations should attract those scholars that are interested in culturally grounded and interpretivist work in general. However, we also aim to attract an interdisciplinary set of researchers investigating retail and retail atmospherics, rituals, domestic consumption, and food. The session also aims to contribute to the conference mission of appreciating diversity in multiple ways. First of all, we explore the diversity in the ways the sense of place can be constructed, emphasizing the role of mundane marketplace experiences: rituals, strategic emplacements, atmospherics, and social connections.

Second, our researchers investigate a diverse range of cultural and geographical contexts: Small college towns, metropolitan cities, USA, Denmark, and France. Third we incorporate a diverse range of scholars: consumer researchers, sociologists, anthropologists and design scholars. Fourth, we study places where diverse people gather and share experiences.

All four projects are at the advanced stage, with complete data sets and substantial theoretical development. However, none of the papers have been accepted for publication elsewhere.

The Value of Atmosphere

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Providing consumers with a sense of atmosphere is regarded as a competitive advantage in marketing. An added value that distinguishes, in the experience of consumers, a provider from competitors, even if products or services are in themselves quite similar. Atmosphere is seen as a subjective consumer experience that arises through a network-effect among a wide range of factors: Sensory, interactional and symbolic (Kotler 1973). In these two ways, atmosphere as it was first described in marketing research bears a close resemblance to another concept that has later received a great deal of attention in attempts to analyze and control the complex field of factors that constitute consumer experience: The brand. In spite of these conceptual similarities, at the level of everyday experience atmosphere differs from brand in being inherently site-bound.

The value of atmosphere is undeniable, but seems to figure in marketing literature on atmosphere as a commonplace observation in need of no further explanation; a black box assumption unopened by theory. Yet the constitution of perceived atmosphere is, from a theoretical viewpoint, a contested issue that invites very different and mutually contradictory explanations which ultimately rest on different ontological assumptions about how man relates to his surrounding world. Can material settings be seen as having inherent qualities that afford a certain experience, or should the factors that constitute the latter be sought in human subjectivity? On the side of subjectivity, should we look to culture and social group for an explanation, or to the human species’ sensory apparatus and neurological wiring? This paper brings those discussions into the arena of consumer research, asking why the experience of atmosphere is valuable. Suggesting an answer demands connecting atmosphere to what we know both about human faculties of sensory appreciation, ways of cultural interpretation, and existential needs. The paper presents empirical examples
of how atmosphere comes about, drawn from several years of ethnographic research into the Danish cultural phenomenon of hygge, a form of atmosphere that will be referred to here as simply coziness.

The perception of atmosphere arises through a subtle interaction between subject and object (Böhme 1992). In a consumption perspective “subject” refers to those subjective psychological and cultural factors that prime the consumer for seeking, perceiving and appreciating a certain type of atmosphere. “Object” refers to those material and symbolic conditions that impinge upon the consumer’s experience of a specific site, mainly those experienced there, which marketers try to control, although memories or anticipations of factors not immediately present (e.g. a stressful working day) can also exert influence. This perspective resonates with Kotler’s (1973) classic on the subject. Using the subject – object distinction, this paper presents empirical examples of how atmosphere arises in both homes and commercial venues like 3rd places and retail sites. The analytical goal is to isolate certain principles, across these different realms, for the creation of atmosphere, hereby shedding light on the issue of why the experience of atmosphere is valuable.

Based on empirical findings the discussion revolves around two main principles: Interiority and authenticity. Interiority concerns the experience of being sheltered, of being allowed to turn one’s back on discipline, sharing the here and now with others co-present (McCarthy 2005). It has to do with concrete arrangements of spaces, light, sounds etc. as well as symbols that communicate to people what this scene is about, what it allows and what kind of behavior it suggests. Authenticity concerns the singularity and rootedness of products or services that defies serial production and purely economic transactions. The paper argues that atmosphere essentially denotes the experience of being present at a site, through an awareness of its boundaries and of balanced interactions across those boundaries with the social and material world that surrounds the site. Such aspects are characteristic of the concept of interiority, of which atmosphere can be seen as an example, and which is useful in conceptualizing the fact that while atmosphere constitutes an inward-turning dynamic, it also relies upon a subjective awareness of spatial, temporal and symbolic contrasts to external realms, at least when we consider pleasurable forms of atmosphere like coziness. The subjective awareness of a spatial, temporal or symbolic contrast to the outside world facilitates the experience of pausing in a pleasurable, safe and invigorating environment. Authenticity is part and parcel of this dynamic since it further effects a localization of the experience, a rooting in the biographies of the site and the people present, including owners and those delivering the service.

The value of atmosphere then is predicated upon the symbolic needs of modern men and women who seek a temporary refuge from the control and discipline of work and gym, as well as the encounter with authenticity. However it also speaks to the preference of our neurological system for spaces that offer symbols of prospect and refuge, and amounts of visual information that can be decoded with a speed that pleases the brain, as neuro-architectural research shows (Rostrup 2011).

In the final instance of the interpretation offered in this paper, the value that is created for the subject (e.g. a consumer) of atmosphere is that in social and cultural terms it facilitates a focus on the here and now. This experience is shared with others and reliefs for its effect upon their co-presence, but to a balanced extent, or else the atmosphere becomes claustrophobic. This interpretation may suggest what propels consumers to seek 3rd place sociality in places like cafés as a repetitive, ritual consumption act e.g. on Friday afternoon. The atmospheric immersion into a here and now is effective as a marker of transition, e.g. from the working week to the weekend. Atmospheric establishments therefore afford the successful execution of certain consumer rituals (Rook 1985).

The Atmosphere of Cosmopolitanism: Mono- or Multi-cultural?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze two new restaurants in New York City: The Red Rooster, Harlem, and Aamanns Copenhagen, located in Tribeca. The Red Rooster, owned by celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson, is post-national, while Aamanns, backed by Sanne Ytting, a Dane residing in New York, strongly references Denmark. These restaurants were chosen for their opposing approach to cosmopolitanism. Both are trying to transcend the category of mere eateries by positioning their spaces as “community centers.” We develop the concept of consumer-friendly cosmopolitanism by referencing the way this type of enterprise unproblematically serves up ideas of culture, ethnicity, and heritage. Through interviews, participant observation, and visual analysis of these two spaces, we develop the idea that cosmopolitanism can be expressed in the commercial sphere in at least two ways: either through mono- or multi-culturalism.

Restaurants are a constituent part of the genre of servicescapes (Bittner 1992, Sherry 1998) and are loaded with meanings useful to the study of place (Sherry 2000). They are valuable sites for research because they function as the nexus for sociality. As Kirschenblatt-Gimblett notes, “entire scenes form around a particular food… or beverage…. These scenes are distinguished by their architecture, décor, ambiance, social style, equipage, schedule, music, fashion, and cuisine, and by the close attention paid to the details of the provisioning, preparation, presentation, and consumption of the defining food or drink” (2007: 78). Furthermore, in the US, food often becomes the medium used to engage with one’s cultural roots or those of others while providing a way to gloss over differences. This mode of ethnicity is connected with middleclass North America, a segment of society to whom engagement with ethnic identity tends to be voluntary and associated with positive connotations (Alba 1990, Waters 1990). By disconnecting ethnicity from discrimination, it becomes a mode of enjoyment for the privileged (Larsen and Österlund-Pötzsch forthcoming). In addition to these ideas, the concept of American Plus is a useful way to underline the element of flexibility in the context in which this ethnic identity is performed. American Plus includes all the advantages (and disadvantages) of American identity, plus the potential advantages presented by the ethnic identity. This particular approach to ethnic identity emphasizes the aspect of choice and suppresses many problematic aspects connected with ethnicity. (Österlund-Pötzsch 2003).

We build on the idea of American Plus to suggest that restaurants such as the two we study are primary spaces in which people partake in consumable cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism, as defined by Hannertz, is “a stance towards diversity itself, toward the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience… cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity” (1990, 237). Whereas Thompson and Tambyah (1999) highlight the tension between cosmopolitan identity and local culture, our work illuminates the construction of a local culture designed to make cosmopolitans feel at home. Recent work builds on Hannertz’s thesis and theoretical tools from actor-network theory to distinguish different kinds of cosmopolitanism and to better understand the role objects play in cosmopolitanism (Saito 2011).
In our case studies we detect two very different kinds of consumable cosmopolitanism, namely that of mono- and multi-culturalism, which are differentiated by the consumption of only one other culture or by an assemblage of many others. Samuelsson’s approach is multi-cultural. A business writer attributes Samuelsson’s success to his multi-ethnic background, claiming that “Samuelsson’s background hits on almost every point of cultural diversification researchers say helps open a person to unusual associations” (Johansson 2006). Upon the opening of the Red Rooster Harlem the New York Times reviewer nodded to the food but effused about the cosmopolitan scene:

The racial and ethnic variety in the vast bar and loft-like dining room are virtually unrivaled. The restaurant may not be the best to open in New York City this year (though the food is good). But it will surely be counted as among the most important. It is that rarest of cultural enterprises, one that supports not just the idea or promise of diversity, but diversity itself. (Sifton 2011)

This review and other similar media representations of Samuelsson and his restaurant raise the question of how an atmosphere catering to a cosmopolitan audience is consciously constructed. Samuelsson weaves his own identity and multi-ethnic background into the environment of the restaurant, which includes a bar made of three colors of wood meant to denote skin color, a series of curated, but anonymous vintage photos of multicultural families, and wallpaper custom-printed with family recipes illustrating his culinary heritage.

In contrast, Sanne Yting, the Danish entrepreneur opening a franchise of Aamanns Copenhagen in New York, has chosen to include only the Danish reference. In her mono-cultural project everything from food to utensils needs to be Danish. The chef explained the decision to stick with rugbied, the Danish word for the restaurant’s signature dish, because he thinks something gets lost in the translation to “open faced sandwiches,” and stands behind this decision to keep an “unpronounceable word unpronounceable” (Eater 2011). The all-white interior of Aamanns, designed by a Danish designer living in Denmark, is filled with potent symbols of Danish culture that have been provided by leading Danish design interests, including Anne Black ceramics, Bang and Olufsen speakers, and Arne Jacobsen chairs (Ollgaard 2001).

These two examples illuminate two different kinds of cosmopolitanism. At Aamanns established ideas of Danishness are being retold through place and the composition of this particular consumer narrative is kept tight. The Red Rooster reflects only Samuelsson’s ideas about multiculturalism, whereas Yting’s role is akin to a curator organizing an exhibition of all things Danish. One is expansive and multicultural. It draws others in and refigures them into a new and coherent total experience. The other is exclusive and monocultural. It draws only one kind of other in and re-configures an existing category of atmosphere in a new place. This work contributes to knowledge on the relationship between cosmopolitanism and consumption within the field of consumer research.

The Dynamics and Continuity of Place Attachment: Cues from a Parisian Wine Bar

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Place attachment corresponds to the emotional aspect of a sense of place (Hummon 1992; Jorgensen and Sedman 2001) which includes meaning systems, experiences, and social interactions with a spatial setting. Existing research on place attachment mainly focuses on either residential settings (e.g. Fried 1963) or outdoor recreation places (e.g. Williams and al. 1992) but not commercial spaces. While research on retail frequently touch on the notion of place, these scholars either treat one dimension of retailscapes, such as the social (e.g. Price and Arnold 1999; Rosenbaum et al. 2007), as the central point of investigation, or consider place holistically (e.g. Maclaran and Brown 2005) without explicating how these different elements come together. Building on Altman and Low (1992) who suggest that a combination of different elements contributes to establishing an emotional sense of place, we argue that it is important for researchers to better explicate the dynamics between these elements.

Furthermore, existing consumer research hasn’t looked at the continuity of attachment through time and space. Kleine and Baker (2004) show the similarities between attachment to possessions and place attachment, yet acknowledge that material possessions are portable whereas places are immovable due to the unique characteristics of spatial settings. Places are embedded in a geographical landscape: moving an establishment disconnects it from its original spatial context. Yet, in the context of multi-outlet stores—where the original setting may contain specific meanings (for example brand history and legacy)—successful continuity of a brand across new branches seems to prove that place attachment could be transferred to some extent. Understanding the elements of continuity is also crucial to manage transitions such as moves, transfers of ownership, or dissolutions that are recurrent in small business servicescapes. We argue that constraining place to one specific dimension, considering it only as a non-separable entity, or ignoring the changes in these elements through time and space oversimplify the complex retail dynamics and the attachment processes.

With this paper, we aim to unpack two issues: 1. What are the servicescape elements that contribute to the attachment that consumers develop towards a commercial setting? 2. To what extent this attachment is maintained in case any of these elements change?

We address these questions using a longitudinal ethnographic approach, based on the investigation of one defunct Parisian wine bar—Le Coin de Verre—and the two interrelated institutions that emerged after the bar’s closure. The first one, Café Epicerie, has only kept the physical envelope of the original wine bar even though the new owners claim the legacy of Le Coin de Verre on their website. The location, as well as the path that leads to the setting (address and phone number), remain the same, but the place has been physically (through rebuilding, decoration) and socially (managers, employees, new customer profile) changed. Furthermore symbolic activities and rituals (e.g. ringing a bell to get access to the setting) as well as differentiating offerings (e.g. recipes) that once made the place special are no longer present. The second spinoff is Coin de Table, which opened one block away from original setting. It is managed by a former waitress of Le Coin de Verre and claims the heritage of the original setting through the consultancy and recurrent presence of former manager of the original place. In contrast to Le Café Epicerie, this setting has tried to keep the spirit of Le Coin de Verre through atmosphere, social elements and activities, while many physical elements changed.

We conducted 20 interviews with customers of Le Coin de Verre, some of which now frequent the spinoff establishments. We also conducted three interviews with managers of these institutions. The interview data amounts to a total of 26 hours of recordings. In addition, we made extended participant observation recording diaries, fieldnotes and photos. These were supplemented by secondary data from gastronomy chronicles in newspapers and customer reviews gathered from the Internet.

In our findings, we discuss three main servicescape dimensions that establish place attachment: social, physical and activity-based. Social elements are the staff, other customers, and the relationships...
consumers build within these spaces. Physical elements relate to the aesthetics of the place as well as the spatial belongingness such as terroir and locale. We also argue the physical trajectory, the geographic path that a consumer takes to reach the place is relevant. Lastly, activity based elements include product and service assortment, and specific procedures—rituals, scripts and norms—that are embedded in these activities.

Our next set of findings concerns the transfer and continuity of place attachment. Our informants, who were originally attached to Le Coin de Verre, indicate a sense of detachment from Café Epicerie, claiming that “the soul has been lost” because of many reasons: the spatial environment has been altered through rebuilding, and the commercial proposal is quite different from Le Coin de Verre where only artisanal products were sold. Most importantly, the social relationship has been altered and customers of the original setting lost their social connections. Conversely, in Coin de Table, even though the spatial setting is not the same (new locale, new trajectory to reach the place, new decor), some key differentiating elements have been kept: the social atmosphere (the waiters, the bell, the special welcome, the lack of table settings); the service concept and the commercial proposal are also similar to those of Le Coin de Verre. As a result, loyal Coin de Verre customers feel like they have found their home again.

Preserving the emotional attachment to a service establishment goes beyond claiming the same heritage, and needs to be orchestrated using multiple servicescape dimensions. Even though physical elements are easier to preserve (location, trajectories, or elements like the fireplace in the case of Café Epicerie), this does not result in the same sense of place. On the contrary, while places are theoretically impossible to move, when spatial elements are altered but social elements and activities are kept, consumers experience the same sense of place in a different setting. Thus we argue that while it is impossible to completely replicate places due to their ontology, place attachment can be preserved with careful management of servicescapes.

Creating Home and Community in Public Spaces: Vestaval in Tailgating

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumption encampments are ephemeral phenomena of varying duration and composition, whose closest commercial analogs are periodic markets such as swap meets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry 1990), farmers’ markets (McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley 1993), and art fairs. Consumption encampments have been the focus of previous inquiry into dwelling sites such as Wrigley Field (Holt 1988; Sherry 1990), and Mountain Man Rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998). Tailgates are consumption encampments that occur in conjunction with sporting events or music concerts, and provide a stage for the convergence of such American cy-nosures as automobility, overindulgence and voluntary association. Tailgates, with one notable exception (St. John 2005), have gone largely unexamined, and are the context we explore to explain public enactments of consumer chorography.

Consumption encampments share a “dwelling” aspect that is different from the simpler “visiting” aspect attaching to most of their commercial cousins. Themed flagship brandstores (Diamond et al. 2009), coffee shops (Simon 2009) and brandfests (McAlexander and Schouten 1996; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002) have occasionally sought to tap the dwelling ethos. However, a sense of dwelling is largely confined to populist constructions unfolding at a site of consumption, whether private or public, where managerial intention may guide rather than direct consumer agency. In a very tangible sense, in the duration of a tailgate, a city is raised (and ultimately razed), replete with ersatz homes, a grid of streets with ingenious address coordinates, playing fields, and channels of information exchange.

Place making at the tailgate begins with the deployment of material culture. The stuff of tailgating is distributed in a way that defines macro and micro zones of consumption. Discrete places are constructed for the performance of particular activities and the enactment of the genres of tailgating. Generally speaking, we find three kinds of place established by tailgaters in their deployment of material objects: personal, tribal, and commercial. The most common and deeply appreciated place is close and personal. Nomads establish a minimalist home on the grounds of the larger encampment. This is a domestic place, configured like its counterparts in the everyday world. Within this place, we can discern kitchens, dining rooms, family rooms, and living rooms. Bars and patios are also in evidence. Yards are a figurative presence, detectable n the play spaces between tailgates. It is as if the walls of the domicile have been removed, leaving many of the household’s everyday practices exposed to the surrounding world. This public performance of domesticity is a hallmark of the tailgate.

The structure and dynamics of tailgating reveal an interesting interaction between the hestial and hermetic dimensions of experience (Sherry 2001; Sherry et al. 2001). The quintessentially domestic activities of the household are put on public display, giving the polity a collective opportunity to examine the interior world of the household, even as that display contributes to the emergence of that polity in real time. A community of tailgaters arises through the many public performances of domestic practice which encourage interaction within and across individual tailgates. This performance in plain sight of thousands of individual acts of hospitality, the public enactment of generosity (as well as such dark side behaviors as invidious comparison and theft), and the forging of community through the sacred-celebratory vehicle of the party (Kozinets 2003) brings hestial and hermetic into intimate association. As household dramas unfold in the agora of lots and fields, against the backdrop of the gridiron drama staged in the agon of the stadium, the ethos of tailgating is manifested. On the one hand, even if males do not completely appropriate quintessentially female space, their vigorous participation is blessed by women. On the other, to the extent that tailgating is construed as “extreme picnicking” or “camping lite,” women are welcomed onto the masculine terrain of living rough. Either way, males are domesticated, and publicly valorize their taming.

Tailgating is a ritual act of eversion that turns the household inside out, putting its interior workings on public display. While it shares elements of the carnivalesque, carnival is more properly a ritual act of inversion, which turns social conventions upside down. Similarly, tailgating incorporates elements of the festival, but festival is more clearly a ritual act of obversion, which reveals a ludic dimension to quotidian life, turning the outside in. Finally, tailgating enjoys some contiguity with the spectacular, but spectacle is better considered a ritual of subversion, which saps authentic participatory agency in the service of political pacification, and structures social relations hegemonomically, right-side up. Carnival, festival and spectacle are recognized social forms to which we would add “vestaval,” (Vesta + levāre), after the goddess of the hearth. To the literature, we contribute a description of how a vestaval celebrates household values, dramatizing them in hermetic space, publicly proclaiming the importance of a shared sense of domesticity to the life of a culture. In terms of the semiotic square, the vestaval is in a relation of contradiction to spectacle, of contrariety to carnival, and complementarity to festival.