

COMMENTARY ON CONCEPTUALIZING THE SERVICESCAPE CONSTRUCT IN ‘A STUDY OF THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER IN EIGHT COUNTRIES’

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This commentary identifies and discusses several key shortcomings relating to conceptualizing the servicescape construct. Two mainstream marketing articles are used to exemplify the sometime overlooked and accepted oversights regarding accurately conceptualizing the servicescape construct. The manuscript also provides the foundation for advancing international services marketing thought by suggesting an International Servicescape Construct Conceptualization that has a comprehensive three dimension hierarchical factor structure.

*“...To address the aforementioned research voids, we first propose a conceptual framework that incorporates the effects of three distinct store environment dimensions: design, social, and ambient.”¹
(Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002)*

INTRODUCTION

Though Baker, Grewal, and Voss (2002) conceptualized a three dimensional store environment (i.e., servicescape) that focused on the domestic marketing environment solely, the need to expand this discussion (i.e., enhancing the apparent mainstream marketing academicians’ servicescape conceptualization) to the global marketplace is critical, relevant, and more importantly long overdue. Other prominent researchers such as, Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) started an international marketing focus on conceptualizing the servicescape; but we purport that the extant literature now provides a more generally applicable, advanced, reliable, valid, and robust conceptualization of a service firm’s physical environment than used in their 2004 article. Baker, Grewal, and Voss (2002) stated that the actual retail store environment conceptualization “...research voids...” (p. 120) are broad in the marketing literature, and

we agree. However, this commentary addresses the servicescape construct’s conceptualization questions definitively.

The data collected by Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004), in its own right, is tremendous with respect to exploring global business (i.e., collecting usable data from the People’s Republic of China alone is a feat). The countries contained in the 2004 study (Australia, China, Germany, India, Morocco, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the US) are geographically as well as culturally diverse, and thus make their assessment (i.e., physical goods quality, service quality, servicescape, and behavioral intentions) harder to accomplish. As more societies continue to globalize, the examination of service encounters on an international basis is becoming increasingly more important to both practitioners and academicians (cf., Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir 2004; Lovelock and Yip 1996). Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) state that no one had examined “...the relative importance of physical goods quality, service quality, and servicescape on behavioral intentions...” in a single study prior to their project. We applaud and agree with the study’s use of a comprehensive services research model that included consumer behavioral intentions. However, we would like to share some additional thoughts on the servicescape’s conceptualization in order to improve our ability to utilize the construct more effectively

both domestically and abroad in future comprehensive services models.

The servicescape is defined as everything that is physically present to the consumer during the service encounter (cf., Hightower 1997). This commentary focuses primarily on identifying and discussing an enhanced servicescape construct conceptualization that significantly clarifies and expands Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) as well as Baker, Grewal, and Voss' (2002) results regarding the service firms' physical environment.

SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

It is assumed that the readers have a substantive background and knowledge in the following literature areas: atmospherics, retail store environment, servicescape, environmental psychology, and services marketing. We open the commentary with Baker, Grewal, and Voss' (2002) assertion to demonstrate the highly complex servicescape construct. Some, after a first read, may think that there is a general agreement in the marketing literature on the actual servicescape construct's conceptualization. However, we suggest that there is distinct disagreement and/or misunderstanding of how to actually 'best' conceptualize the servicescape construct.

This manuscript uses the same conceptualization for the servicescape construct that the most cited mainstream marketing 'servicescape researcher' to date, Mary Jo Bitner, referred to as "...promising" in 2000 (p. 45). Footnote (1) is taken directly from Baker, Grewal, and Voss' (2002) *Journal of Marketing (JM)* article for illustrative effect. This footnote was offered and accepted as appropriate support for the authors' three dimension store environment construct. Similarly, there is no room here to provide an extensive multi-area literature review section that some may require in order to fully appreciate the commentary. If additional theoretical and empirical background is needed, see the following publications: Bitner (1992); Bitner (2000); Brady and Cronin (2001); Baker,

Grewal, and Voss (2002); Hightower, Brady, and Baker (2002); Hightower (2003); Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004); Hightower, Brand, and Bordeau (2006); Hightower and Shariat (2009).

Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) investigated several key services constructs' influence on consumers' behavioral intentions from an eight-country perspective, and answered the pervasive call for further empirical investigation of comprehensive services research models that included consumer behavioral intentions (cf., Cronin, Hightower, and Hult 1998; Bitner 2000; Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002; Hightower, Brady, and Baker 2002; Hightower 2003; Hightower, Brand, and Bordeau 2006; Rosenbaum 2005; Hightower and Shariat 2009).

At first glance, Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) use of Baker and Cameron's (1996) servicescape conceptualization appears straightforward, however, when their approach is coupled with their interpretation of the Nordic School of Service Marketing (NSSM) evaluating service encounters "...along two dimensions..." (p. 11), the servicescape construct appears to become limited to no more than two dimensions at best. It is suggested that Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) reliance on Baker and Cameron (1996) along with incompletely incorporating the NSSM's body of work into their servicescape construct, created a significant gap in the construct's conceptualization.

The servicescape construct is best conceptualized to have three dimensions (cf., Bitner 1992; Bitner 2000; Brady and Cronin 2001; Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002; Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir 2004). The services marketing literature has a number of detailed investigations/discussions about the "technical" and/or "functional" qualities of service encounters in general, (cf., Brady and Cronin 2001; Gronroos 1984, 1982; Gronroos and Gussmesson 1985) and we concur with the literature depicted in the above citation. However, while placing a strong emphasis on

the extant literature, we suggest that additional consideration be given to the servicescape construct's conceptualization to include three dimensions as depicted in Figure 1. The figure includes three distinct hierarchical factor levels: overall, dimensional, and subdimensional.

COMMENTARY

Herein, the servicescape is posited to have a hierarchical factor structure. It is further suggested that consumers think of the servicescape at three different levels simultaneously: 1) an overall level, 2) a dimension level, and 3) a subdimension level (cf., Hightower and Shariat 2009; Hightower, Brand, and Bourdeau 2006; Hightower 2003; Hightower, Brady, and Baker 2002; Hightower 1997). We assert that Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) do not include this servicescape hierarchical factor structure because they only partially address the components identified in (B). However, Figure 1 includes an overall servicescape level (A) and a subdimension level for the design and social factors (C and D respectively- also not identified, discussed, or included in Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002). Figures 1, A, C, and D are counter intuitive in nature, yet when fully understood, they provide necessary information that enables a more complete and comprehensive assessment of the service firm's entire physical environment. The omission of the content represented by Figures 1, A, C, and D may contribute to the disparate empirical results reported in Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) study. We suggest that researchers use the more comprehensive servicescape conceptualization depicted here in future servicescape assessments (domestic and abroad) across multiple industries, i.e., auto service, theme parks, video rentals, banking services, electronics retailers, restaurants, theaters, discount stores, and sports stadiums (i.e., Hightower and Shariat 2009) or in more socially controversial service settings. For example, Rosenbaum (2005) investigated whether or not homosexuals and or Jews are "welcomed" in certain establishments.

Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir link the servicescape (p. 12) with the NSSM's two dimensional technical and functional service quality outcome discussion (this relationship is not in dispute here), but they never fully and or completely operationalize the construct in its true hierarchical three-dimensional factor structure. They utilize what appears to be a visually intuitive version of the servicescape construct. It appears that only second order factors were used to conceptualize the servicescape construct (i.e., the lay 'verbal' or 'spoken' components of the physical environment, namely ambient, design, and social dimensions –Note: these are also utilized in Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002). Ambient, design, and social servicescape dimensions together only account for one of the three hierarchical factor levels that exist for the complete servicescape construct (see Figure 1, B). In our opinion, Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) inappropriately use Baker and Cameron (1996) as a basis for a seemingly enlightening servicescape discussion (p. 12 and 18). They suggest that by using the three items shown below, the study identifies the servicescape construct's essence. We posit that they were unsuccessful in conceptualizing and operationalizing the complete servicescape construct.

8. *They have attractive facilities.*

9. *The layout of their facilities makes it easy to use them.*

10. *Their facilities are comfortable.*

(Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir 2004, p.31)

The extant conceptual and now empirical servicescape literature confirms that this three-item servicescape construct operationalization is incomplete (cf., Hightower 2003; Hightower, Brady, Brand 2002; Hightower, Brand, and Bourdeau 2006; Hightower and Shariat 2009). By using items 8, 9, and 10 above only as the consumers' servicescape perception operationalization, Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) results for India and Sweden become troublesome at best. The three-item measure used is incapable of appropriately capturing the *entire* servicescape environment as well as empirically indicating

Figure 1
International Servicescape Construct Conceptualization

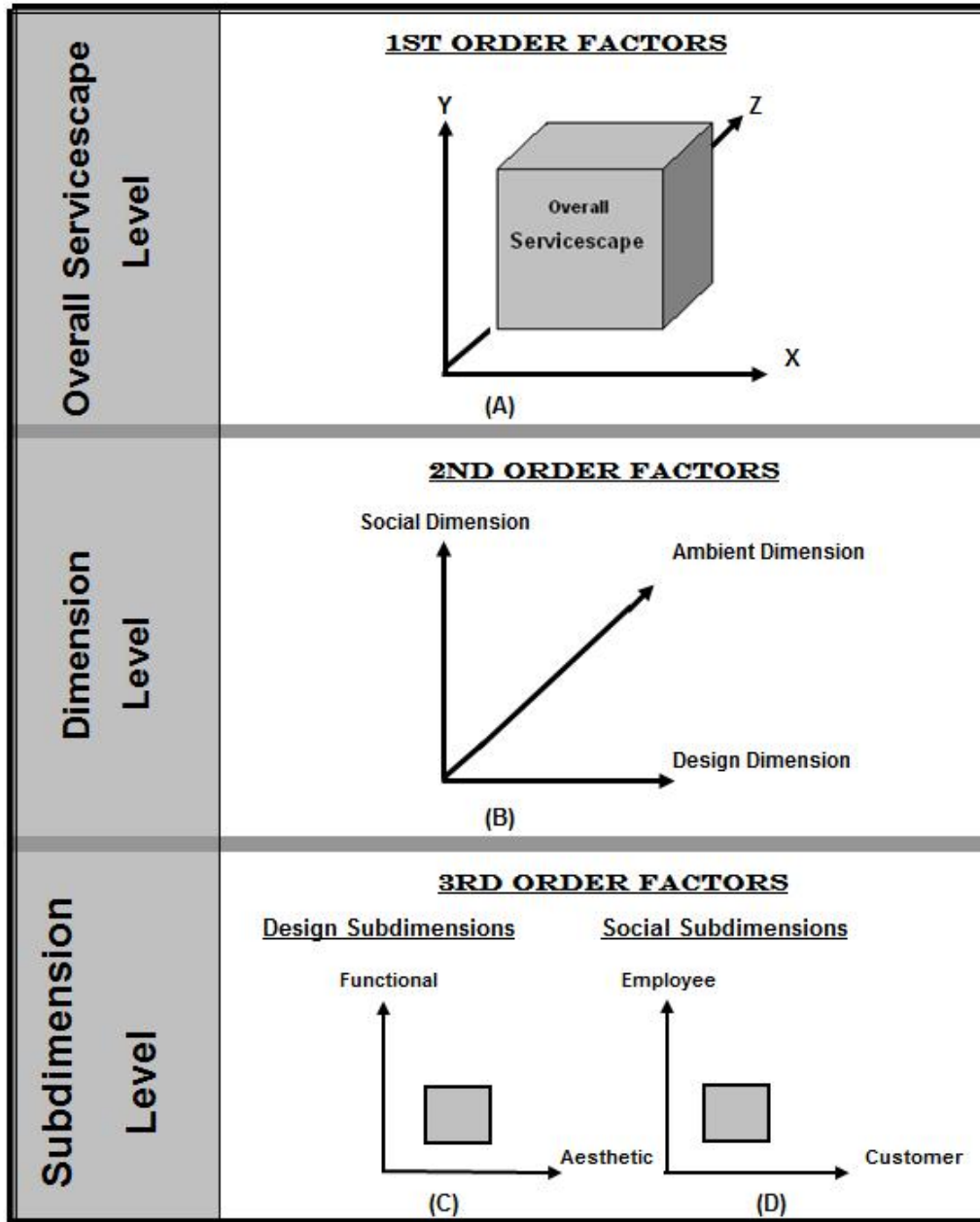
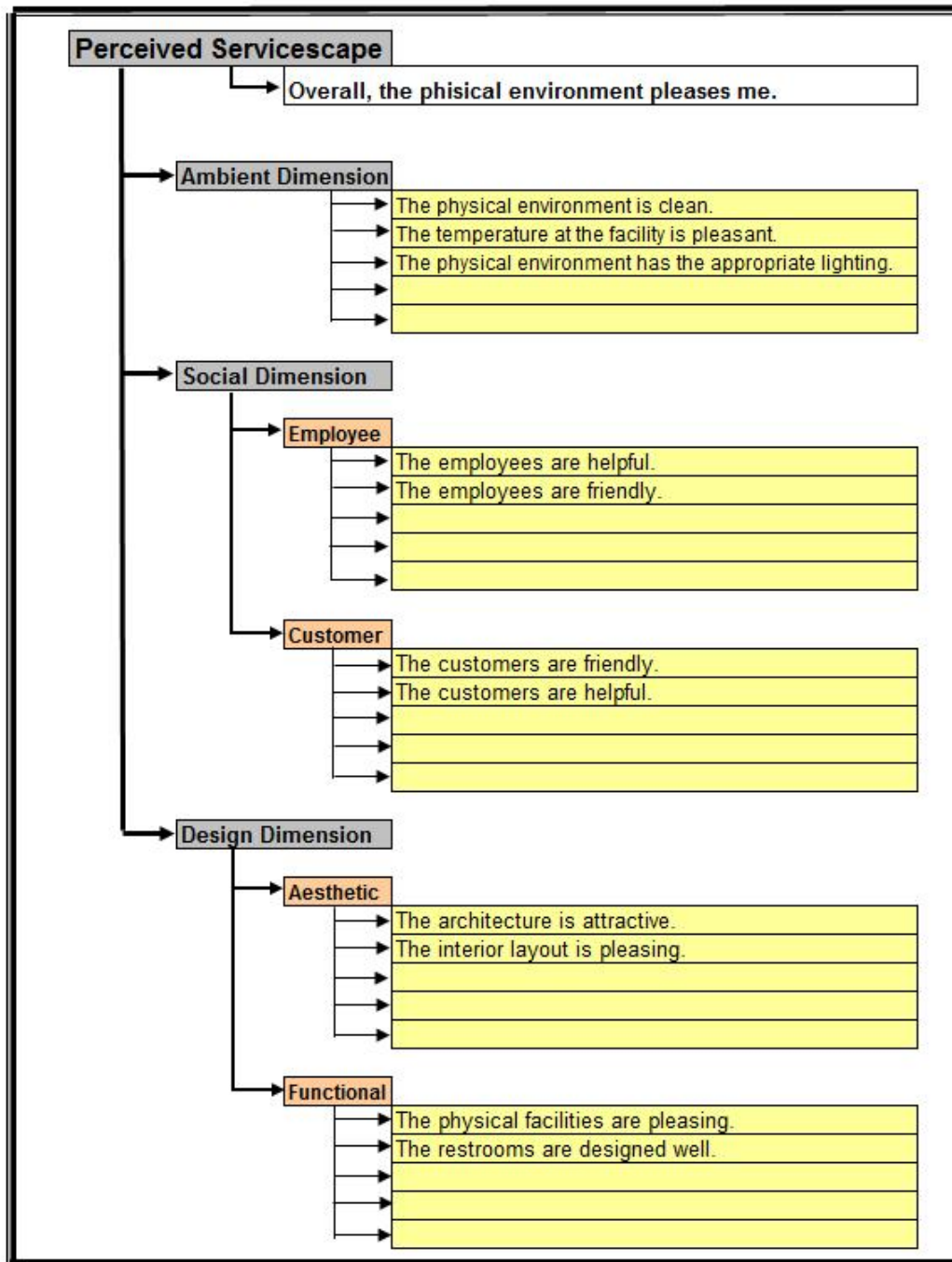


Figure 2
Proposed International Servicescape Scale-Base Items



its proper influence on consumer behavioral intentions.

Main Stream Marketing Results' Discussion

Their results may appear to support the servicescape's influence on behavioral intentions for the grocery store and fast-food industries; however, these results were not substantiated in Australia, China, Germany, Morocco, the Netherlands, and US markets. We suggest that some servicescape dimensions are more complex and have more than one component as identified in Figure 1. These dimensions (i.e., design and social second order factors) have subdimensions that combine related attributes into subgroups. The hierarchical first, second, and third order factors are not adequately represented in the Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) three-item scale (i.e., that contains second order factor items only) used to imply complete servicescape measurement. Similarly, it is unclear as to how Baker, Grewal, and Voss' (2002) items directly relate to their design, social, and ambient store conditions. Baker, Grewal, and Voss (2002) contradict their own explication of the 'store environment' dimensions with the heavy usage of music attributes alone to operationalize their ambient factor.

Note, that this failure to include these additional factor levels does not completely diminish Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) contributions to the literature. However, it may significantly limit their ability to advance the emerging view of the servicescape's influence on consumer behavioral intentions, especially with international data. Again, this gap (i.e., the lack of including at least the minimum three factor levels necessary to appropriately operationalize the servicescape construct) highlights the need for this commentary and further investigation of this crucial point. Figure 1 suggests that the ambient factor has no subdimension (meaning attributes that depict the ambient factor are in one group only), the design factor has two subdimensions—functional and aesthetic, and the social factor has two subdimensions—employee and

customer (cf., Hightower and Shariat, 2009; Hightower, Brand, and Bourdeau 2006; Hightower 2003; Hightower, Brady, Brand 2002).

Furthermore, Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) completely omit the servicescape construct's first (i.e., overall) and third level factors (i.e., the subdimensions), and that may confound and confuse the assessment of the entire physical environment, especially across industries and internationally. For example, they provide heavily mixed servicescape results observed in Australia, China, Morocco, the Netherlands, and the US markets. These heavily mixed results, we suspect, stem primarily from the authors using an incomplete measurement tool, especially in a multinational multicultural multi-industry setting.

Their assessment tool could also have been improved by investigating the possibility that the consumer may have an "overall" assessment of the physical environment. Thus, we suggest that the three-item scale used in Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) may have difficulty assessing the overall consumer response, especially in a global setting. It appears that the three-items may capture a part of the servicescape's essence; however, we believe that future international researchers should include all three factor order levels as depicted in the International Servicescape Scale (see Figure 2).

Ambient Factors

Ambient factors generally exist below the level of customers' immediate awareness, so customers may be less totally cognizant of these conditions in the environment. Some common examples of ambient environmental attributes are lighting, temperature, aural, scent, and cleanliness. Consumers expect a certain level of ambient environmental conditions to exist and may be unaware of these background components unless the attributes are absent or unfavorable. For discussion purposes note that Figure 2 does not include, according to some mainstream marketing academics, the

seemingly intuitive ambient music and/or scent items. We understand that aural and scent attributes may be extremely useful in some specific service settings; however, recent empirical research (i.e., Hightower and Shariat 2009) suggests that aural and scent attributes are not necessarily required to obtain valid servicescape assessments in diverse multi-industry service settings. Thus, aural and scent attributes are not *perfunctorily* included in the parsimonious yet complete International Servicescape Conceptualization model.

Certainly, one would add aural and/or scent attributes to the core ambient attributes in a specific servicescape model for venues similar to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee; Carnegie Hall in New York City; Main Street Disney World Orlando, or San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf. However, as stated earlier, Figure 2 captures the core (i.e., minimally required) servicescape attributes common across multiple venues, industries, and countries. Thus, some items 'included' or 'not included' in Figure 2 may appear to be counter intuitive on first read to some academicians (cf., Hightower and Shariat 2009). Baker, Grewal, and Voss (2002) admit that "...music, is relatively easy and inexpensive from a retailer's standpoint, represented the ambient dimension in our study" (p. 129). They go on to further acknowledge that "Although the ambient dimension includes elements other than music (e.g., scent, temperature), we could not vary those elements in the videotaped scenarios." This is a significant methodological shortcoming that cannot, in our opinion, be controlled for in their case as purported in the article.

The "manipulation checks" used by Baker, Grewal, and Voss (2002) do not account for the lack of validity in what their own definition states that the entire "ambient" dimension includes. Thus, it appears that based on "convenience", several historical aural studies, and opinion, 'music' is included initially (i.e., study 1) and is kept in the model (i.e., after marginal empirical results were reported in study 2) in this methodologically superior *JM*

study. It is suggested that the authors' ambient dimension as described (p. 129-130) in the 2002 study does not capture the entire ambient dimension of the store environment based on their own description, the literature, and the earlier discussion. In other words for the purposes of this study, does the "ambient" dimension of the servicescape equate to "music" only attributes? Further research will provide the answer to this question; however, given the seriousness of this oversight, Baker, Grewal, and Voss' (2002) results may not represent the actual retail store environment's ambient dimension as depicted in their Figure 1 (see p. 121) and Figure 2 (see p. 134). If this oversight is relevant, then how are the other relationships tested in their structural equation model impacted by this potential change to the exogenous variable (i.e. labeled ambient factors)?

Design Factors

Design factors can be thought of as visual cues that make one think verbally of what is seen. The functional subdimension can include but is not limited to common components such as layout, comfort, privacy, and ingress/egress ability (Hightower and Shariat 2009). The aesthetic subdimension can include but is not limited to common components such as architecture, color, style, materials, and fixtures (Hightower and Shariat 2009). Another key point here is that the aesthetic attributes are more tangible than ambient attributes and may have a stronger impact on the perceived servicescape, and thus we posit a similarly strong impact on behavioral intentions for some cultures around the world. It is posited that the consumers' culture may cause specific similarities and or differences in the behavioral intentions as evidenced by (c.f., Hightower, 2003; Hightower, Brand, and Bordeau, 2006) Haitian-Americans' negative reaction to the color 'red' when included in a funeral home service environment. "Generationally" Haitian-Americans appear to have a strong aversion to the color red in a funeral home setting; be it an animate or inanimate item. Based on cultural traditions and beliefs, the color 'red' does not

work well in a funeral home for Haitian-Americans that are generation Y and older. The color 'red' is considered "evil" and or associated with the "Devil" by Haitian-Americans regarding the funeral service environment. Thus, a funeral home owner or manager that targets Haitian-Americans should be aware of how 'colors' may impact the firm's targeted market behavioral intentions.

Social Factors

The social factor is defined as the people component of the physical environment. The customer component can include but is not limited to attributes such as crowding, dress code, and general behavior (Hightower and Shariat 2009). In some venues the customers themselves are more important than in other venues. World Cup soccer matches can place a general uneasiness and or stress on a number of fans that contemplate attending certain games between rival clubs based on a variety of personal reasons (i.e., security in World Cup soccer matches). For example, what is the likelihood of fan rowdiness or violence? Especially, if the fan is considering taking his or her family to the match that may include small children.

The employee component can include but is not limited to attributes such as the employee's appearance, behavior, and accessibility (Hightower and Shariat 2009). Returning to the World Cup example, employees (i.e., security guards, police) may play a key role in determining if, when, or how a soccer fan will participate in the event. For example, the number of both uniformed and plain clothes police present, available, and accessible to a "needy" fan at the game, their demeanor and overall attempt or lack thereof to enforce the laws, as well as their treatment of the respective fans can influence fan behavioral intentions. The extant literature (cf., Bitner 1992; Bitner 2000; Hightower 2003; Hightower, Brady, Brand 2002; Rosenbaum 2005; Hightower, Brand, and Bourdeau 2006; Hightower and Shariat 2009) suggests that the servicescape can make the consumer respond both cognitively

and emotionally. This is decidedly different from Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) conceptualization of the servicescape as being a "...more subjective aspect of the service encounter..." (p. 12). Their approach limits the construct to being merely a part (i.e., a one level factor, see Figure 1, B) of the actual services setting reality during a service encounter, rather than depicting the *entire* construct. The researchers may have investigated a small portion of a single dimension (i.e., possibly addressing the affect component), but they completely omitted two entire levels of the servicescape construct's hierarchical factor structure.

International Research Implications

We agree with Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) call for the use of a simplistic and parsimonious assessment tool when gathering data in eight vastly different countries based on the obvious numerous translation, culture, and ethnic diversity issues involved. Using the *Journal of International Marketing (JIM)* as a quality indicator, one would believe that the authors used the appropriate methodological approach to simplify the items included. However, their initial conceptualization and subsequent operationalization of the servicescape construct may have limited the instrument's ability to reliably and validly capture the entire physical environment's measure (i.e., the servicescape) and its relationship to consumers' behavioral intentions in those eight countries. Therefore, the results and or findings based on their limited measured construct may become problematic for other academicians and practitioners that attempt to utilize them, regardless the publishing journal's status. Thus, we call for additional international servicescape measurement research using the generalizable, parsimonious, and comprehensive International Servicescape Scale.

The mainstream marketing literature has long suggested that the physical environment (i.e., servicescape) influences the customers' behavior. Consumers rely on environmental

cues in much the same way they rely on packaging to categorize and form their initial beliefs about consumer goods (cf., Baker 1987; Baker, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988; Kotler 1973; Markin, Lilis, and Narayaman 1976; Shostack 1977). The same literature also historically suggests that "...because services are intangible, customers often rely on *tangible cues*, or *physical evidence*, to evaluate the service before its purchase and to assess their satisfaction with the service during and after consumption..." (i.e., Zeithaml and Bitner 1996, p. 519, *italics* not added). The relationship between the service environment and consumer behavioral intentions has also been supported empirically (cf., Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir 2004; Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002; Wakefield and Blodgett 1994; Wakefield, Blodgett, and Sloan 1996; Hightower 1997; Hightower, Brady, and Baker 2002).

Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) attempted to internationally test a new and significant hypothesis that was an intuitive intellectual progression from Hightower's (1997) original hypotheses and results. The new hypothesis was formally stated as:

H₃: The servicescape is positively associated with customers' behavioral intentions.

H₃ was strongly supported in India and Sweden; marginally supported in Australia, China, Morocco, the Netherlands, and the US. The results from Germany, however, did not support H₃ at all. Normally, this is a significant point for some researchers.

What happened to H₃ in Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004)? The lack of strong consistent support for H₃ across industries and countries is quite interesting (especially for high quality publications such as *JIM*), and suggests that the instrument used does not account for, nor capture the complete physical environment as does the comprehensive servicescape model conceptualized in Figure 1 and its operationalization depicted in Figure 2. Given the conceptual and empirical background in conjunction with the manuscript herein, we

posit that the International Servicescape Construct Scale shown in Figure 2 outperforms the three-item servicescape measure used by Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004).

CONCLUSIONS

The best means of conceptualizing an international service firm's physical environment is to use Figure 1. In other words, the researcher (especially in international service settings) should account for the possibility that the consumer may think of the servicescape in multiple levels, simultaneously: 1) an overall assessment level of the physical environment, 2) at the dimension level (i.e., design, ambient, and social factors), and 3) at the subdimension level (i.e., functional, aesthetic, customers, and employees) Hightower and Shariat (2009). It is posited that the items used in Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir's (2004) study address only one level (at best) of the three level servicescape construct (see Figure 1). As stated earlier, this mainstream marketing oversight (i.e., the omission of two entire servicescape factor levels) may help explain some of the significant variations in their results.

Figure 2 depicts 12 items representing the most parsimonious and complete international servicescape assessment instrument in the marketing literature. We posit that servicescape's hierarchical factor structure model can be used across many different service industries and countries. Figure 2's conceptualization is robust, and thus we assert that different industries, as well as companies within these industries can alter the "base" items of interest (i.e., by including additional items with the "base" required items as shown in Figure 2) for each level of the model in order to optimize the International Servicescape Scale for their respective country, industry, and business. We also suggest that, as firms become more global, there will be an increased need for a reliable and valid "base" means to compare servicescapes domestically and abroad. We offer the International Servicescape Scale as an initial step in gaining

consensus within the many different marketing research academic groups on the most appropriate servicescape conceptualization. The servicescape scale as depicted in Figure 2 displays good reliability and validity results across ten service industries in the US (cf., Hightower and Shariat 2009). We call for interested parties to use the scale and publish their empirical results such that the services marketing literature as whole can advance.

In summary, the global nature of the Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) study is substantial from the international assessment perspective; the number of diverse countries included, data set size, and should be commended as such. We agree with their position that the physical environment has a positive influence on consumers' behavior intentions in service encounters around the world and across many industries. This commentary is offered as a means to frame several common oversights associated with the servicescape construct's conceptualization and its potential influence on consumer behavioral intentions. We also suggest that researchers and practitioners utilize the instrument depicted in Figure 2 to develop a customized tool relative to their firm, industry, and country. We call for more in-depth empirical servicescape scale development and testing, especially in comprehensive services models that include servicescape's influence on consumer behavioral intentions across multiple services industries and countries. In other words, compare Hightower and Shariat (2009) scale's performance with other published, multi-industry, comprehensive, yet parsimonious, and empirically sound servicescape measurement tools.

The publication of this commentary demonstrates an interest by some scholars in actually advancing the marketing literature regardless of the affiliations involved. It also expands academic and practitioner collective knowledge regarding the notably broad "... research voids..." in mainstream marketing's depiction of an extremely complex, important, yet seldom fully understood services construct (i.e., Baker, Grewal, and Voss 2002, p. 120).

We agree with Keillor, Hult, and Kandemir (2004) in that continued exploration of the servicescape could provide "...a more complete understanding of phenomena that are important in different countries..." (p. 30). This commentary is theoretically and empirically supported in the literature, relevant to current research topics, critically insightful, and more importantly long overdue.

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¹⁴These dimensions, discussed by Baker (1987), are consistent with the ones Bitner (1992) uses in describing "servicescapes." Bitner's three dimensions are ambient; space/function (similar to design); and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Whereas marketing researchers traditionally have approached the design and ambient cues under the umbrella construct of store atmospherics, researchers in the field of environmental psychology distinguish between them for two fundamental reasons. First, ambient cues tend to affect nonvisual senses, whereas design cues are more visual in nature. Second, ambient cues tend to be processed at a more subconscious level than are design cues. There is some empirical evidence that design and ambient elements have differential effects on consumer responses (Wakefield and Baker 1998)." Entire footnote taken directly from Baker, Grewal, and Voss (2002), *Journal of Marketing (JM)* for effect.