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Derek Lai Teik Ong & Wei Xin Yap

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The Impact of Fitness Center Servicescape on Individual Behavior: The Mediating Role of Emotional Response

Derek Lai Teik Ong  and Wei Xin Yap

Department of Marketing, Sunway University Business School, Sunway University, Bandar Sunway, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study assesses the impact of fitness centers' servicescape on individual behavior, exploring the mediating role of the Emotional Response between servicescape dimensions and individual behavior amongst customers of the Malaysian fitness industry. Consumers place great emphasis on the surrounding environmental stimuli which facilitates engagement during active fitness activity. 200 samples were collected from six different Malaysian fitness franchises and questions focused mainly on members' perceptions of servicescape and how this affects behavior. Multiple linear regression and mediation model analysis reveals positive direct effects of the Physical and Natural dimensions of servicescape on individual behaviour, whilst mediating effects of Emotional Response are present for indirect relationships of Social and Natural dimension on individual behaviour. The results of this study serve to help the management of the fitness centers' servicescape which will encourage more members' engagement during their fitness regime while improving word of mouth marketing through their increased satisfaction.

健身中心服务场景对于个体行为的影响: 情感反应的调节作用
本研究评估了健身中心服务场景对个人行为的影响, 探究了马来西亚健身行业消费者的情感反应在他们的个人行为与服务场景维度间的中介角色。现代消费者更加重视周边环境刺激, 这种刺激是一种以感受驱动的体验, 使消费者能够保持投入和积极性。本次研究从马来西亚六家不同的健身行业特许经营商中收集了200份样本。收集的数据主要关注消费者对健身中心服务场景的看法, 以及这些看法是如何影响健身中心消费者行为的。多元线性分析及中介模型分析显示, 服务场景是服务环境中一项重要的营销变量。服务场景的物理及自然维度直接影响个人行为, 而社会维度则是通过情感反应产生间接影响。虽然不是所有关系中都有情感反应这一中介角色的参与, 但是除了社交符号维度外, 每一个维度都直接影响着人们的行为。本次研究的结果旨在对健身行业特许经营经理在健身中心服务场景的管理方面有所助益, 更好的管理将鼓励更多的消费者对其健身计划更加投入, 最终通过他们对健身中心服务体验满意度的提升, 来促进口碑营销。

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社会维度; 社交符号维度

1. Introduction

Malaysians are quickly becoming aware of the need to stay healthy in an increasingly stressful environment which may in the long run can cause harm to their productivity and health (Ong, 2015). Therefore, more Malaysians are incorporating a fitness regime into their daily lifestyle with majority of them spending on gym memberships. However, fitness consumers are continuously in search of excitement and experience, thus, they therefore value the importance of external stimuli in triggering responses (Daire, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2013). The lure of modern fitness trend stems from the successful marketing of the gym servicescape meeting the consumers' physical environment needs (Ong, 2015). Much research has shown the ability of a physical environment in influencing behaviors, creating images and even inducing loyalty intentions (Harris & Ezeh, 2008; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2013; Kotler, 1973; Shostack, 1977; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985). However, within the sport management literature, very little has been done with regards to the servicescape of fitness centers and where most fitness enthusiasts, who sacrifice at least RM 100-200 a month on membership fees, would spend a bulk of their time. Hence, with such a lucrative industry booming in Malaysia, consumer loyalty is affected by consumption satisfaction (Lee, Sirgy, Larsen, & Wright, 2002), which results from the use of goods and services. This means that for fitness centers, being a service provider with high involvement of interpersonal interaction, would require a medium (a fitting servicescape) to exist for both consumption (use of facilities) and production (equipment provided, classes carried out) to occur simultaneously. The conceptualization of servicescape represents the environment in which consumers inhabit and interact with, which encompasses physical, social, natural and symbolic dimensions of the environment. As such, this study seeks to examine the direct relationship between servicescape dimensions proposed by Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) and Behavioral Intention and how Emotional Response plays a mediating role in these relationships. In the case of Malaysia, the fitness industry is becoming more competitive with the rising demand for commercial fitness centers and it requires better understanding of the needs of consumers as the government continues to push for a healthier lifestyle agenda (Ong, 2015).

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical background

Behavior setting theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. It explains the relationship between individuals and the environment in a small-scale social system by testing the subject's behavior in real situations, i.e. the milieu (Barker, 1968). To illustrate the operating mechanism of this concept, Rosenbaum and Massiah's servicescape model (2011) and Mehrabian-Russell Stimulus-Response Model (1974) were integrated. The former explains the various dimensions of a servicescape – Physical, Social, Socially Symbolic and Natural Dimensions and thus represents the environment of a fitness center (Independent variable). The latter describes that the impact of environmental settings on behavior is mediated by emotions, which then lead to behavioral responses; hence representing Emotional Response (Mediating variable) and Behavioral Intention (Dependent variable). Within this setting, sequences of person-environment interactions (behavior episodes) play out coherently,

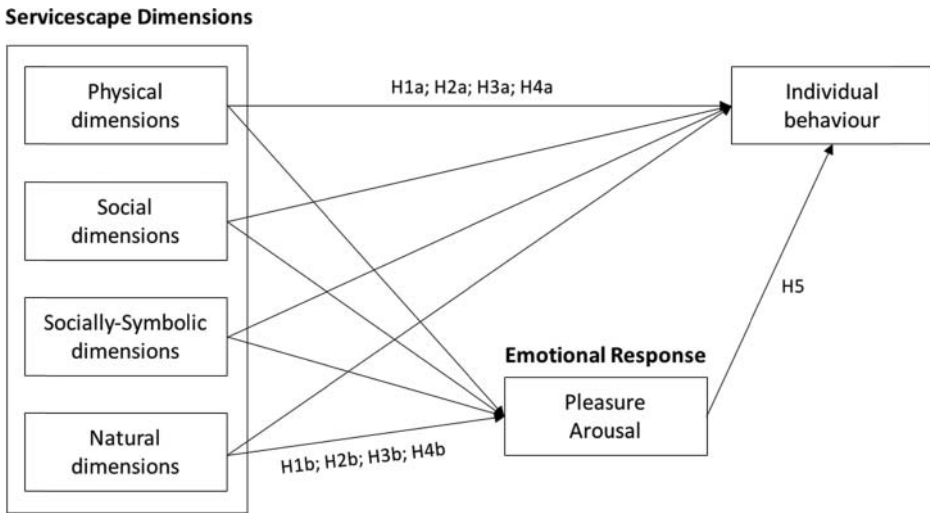


Figure 1. Research theoretical framework.

which forms the essential functions of the setting. Barker's theory of behavior settings is, therefore, employed in this research in an attempt to understand the psychology of human behavior (Luke, Rappaport, & Seidman, 2002). A proposed framework through the integration of both models is, therefore, outlined in Figure 1.

2.2. Servicescape dimensions and behavior

There is a general consensus that the dimensions of servicescape have a strong influence on consumer behavior throughout diverse streams of research (Baker, Levy, & Grewal, 1992; Nyer, 1998; Roy & Tai, 2003). Originally termed by Bitner (1992), servicescape has the propensity to evoke emotional feelings and shape a customer's perception of that service, which eventually affects his or her response during the consumption process (Baker & Cameron, 1996; Hall & Mitchell, 2008). Furthermore, past studies have verified that servicescape also impacts customers' purchase decisions (Milliman, 1982, 1986; Smith & Curnow, 1966), patronage probability (John, Adiele, & Nkoro, 2013; Simpeh, Simpeh, Abdul-Nasiru, & Amponsah-Tawiah, 2011), loyalty intentions (Chen, Peng, & Hung, 2015; Foxall & Greenley, 1999; Lovelock, 2001) and satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Harrell, Hutt, & Anderson, 1980). The continuous study of servicescape has evolved to gradually include a variety of possible stimuli. To categorize them, Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011), based on Bitner's (1992) conceptual servicescape model, expanded the original construct and introduced a more holistic view of servicescape framework. This newly constructed framework consists of four major dimensions, namely Physical, Social, Socially Symbolic and Natural Dimension.

2.2.1. Physical Dimension

The Physical Dimension is easy for managers to control as it encompasses stimuli that are observable and measurable (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009). It is the biggest dimension and is further divided into three sub-categories: ambient conditions, spatial layout

and functionality, and signs, symbols and artifacts. Characteristics of an environment are thought to determine how pleasing or arousing the environment is (Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996). Elements such as light, music and display of equipment can affect consumers' decision making process (Underhill, 1999). For example, Bruner (1990) suggested that fast tempo music is associated with happiness, while slow tempo music leads to feelings of sadness. Bright store color such as red excites and warms people's moods (Bellizzi, Crowley, & Hasty, 1983). A study by Lee and Kim (2014) on cleanliness shows that customers emotionally reject spots or facilities that are unhygienic, and tend to avoid using them. Assessment of the physical environment is instantaneous for first timers as it does not need prolonged engagement (Ong, 2015). Hence, this postulates the hypotheses:

- H1a:** Physical Dimension of Malaysian fitness center's servicescape has a positive impact on Behavioral Intention.
- H1b:** Emotional Response mediates the relationship between Physical Dimension and Behavioral Intention.

2.2.2. *Social Dimension*

Social stimuli of a servicescape include employees, customers, social density and displayed emotions of others (Edvardsson, Enquist, & Johnston, 2010; Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007). Solomon (1983) stated that a great consumption experience is largely shaped by consumers' social activities. The main reason for this is attributed to the awareness of the social aspects within an environment, the mere presence of others and the monitoring of those others' social behaviors influence the observer's behavior (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Zajonc, 1965). A positive customer-to-customer interaction is able to neutralize existing negative emotions while simultaneously motivate or cheer a person (Nicholls, 2010). Similarly, Cova (1997) noted that the bond formed between consumers is a significant reason why consumers choose to stay longer in an environment. High density of customers is shown to produce annoyance and hinder customer movement (Harrell et al., 1980). However, several studies also pointed that high density places could excite customers. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

- H2a:** Social Dimension of Malaysian fitness center's servicescape has a positive impact on Behavioral Intention.
- H2b:** Emotional Response mediates the relationship between Social Dimension and Behavioral Intention.

2.2.3. *Socially Symbolic Dimension*

Here, socially symbolic items include commonly employed signs (e.g. company logo) and architectural design (e.g. style of décor) that consumers tend to interpret the same way. However, unlike signs, symbols and artifacts which serve to passively communicate meanings of a place to customers and facilitate their movements (Buchanan & Huczynski, 1997), socially symbolic stimuli are strategically operationalised to purposefully enhance positive behavior and restrain negative ones (Rosenbaum, 2005). To some extent this dimension shares similar characteristics with Physical Dimension; however, symbolic stimuli serve to uniquely convey the company's identity, represent who they are and synthesize the company's culture with consumers' sub-cultural and societal statuses. Despite managerial

control, symbolic communication remains complex in nature and may lead to different interpretations, which may lead to intended or unintended consequences (Becker, 1977; Davis, 1984). As this dimension is not given much attention, it is reasonable to presume that testing these stimuli could be difficult as different labels, directional marks or signs on rules of behavior are used in different environments. Nevertheless, socially-symbolic stimuli are still suggested conceptually to impact emotions and behaviors. Thus, based on these discussions, the hypotheses are postulated as:

H3a: Socially Symbolic dimension of Malaysian fitness center's servicescape has a positive impact on Behavioral Intention.

H3b: Emotional Response mediates the relationship between Socially Symbolic Dimension and Behavioral Intention.

2.2.4. Natural Dimension

The Natural Dimension is constructed to help customers assuage negative symptoms such as stress, fatigue and depression (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011). A natural environment comprises of three restorative stimuli: being away, fascination and compatibility (Han, 2007). Being away helps people feel as if they are breaking free to a different place or experiencing a "getting away" moment in another world. Fascination refers to a setting's ability to hold a person's attention effortlessly. A person would want to be in a fascinating servicescape because something in it greatly captures his or her attention (Kaplan, 1995). Compatibility refers to a person's sense of belongingness or even attachment with the environment (Han, 2007; Kaplan, 1995; Rosenbaum et al., 2007). A compatible environment is a pleasing environment such that customers are able to carry out activities smoothly, without struggle and without embarrassment to achieve their consumption goal. Inferring from past studies conducted in a video arcade (Rosenbaum, 2009) and senior centers (Rosenbaum, Sweeney, & Massiah, 2014), the Natural Dimension hence can be hypothesized in the fitness center as

H4a: Natural Dimension of Malaysian fitness center's servicescape has a positive impact on Behavioral Intention.

H4b: Emotional Response mediates the relationship between Natural Dimension and Behavioral Intention.

2.3. Emotional Response and Behavioral Intention

Emotions can affect consumers' behavior, choice or purchase decision (Barsky & Nash, 2002). Studies have revealed that positive emotions resulting from exposure to store environment influence spending amount, lingering time and revisit intentions (Sherman, Mathur, & Smith, 1997; Swinyard, 1993). Similarly, research in the restaurant management context have concluded that transient emotional states prompted by an environment ultimately make consumers spend higher amounts and stay longer (Ha & Jang, 2012; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Wu & Liang, 2009). As fitness centers share homogeneous characteristics in terms of service environment, the hypothesis is hence postulated as:

H5: Emotional Response has a positive impact on Behavioral Intention.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants of this research consist of gym members between the ages of 18 to 60 years old, with a majority of them (83.5%) being 18–35 years old. Respondents are fairly evenly distributed between males and females, despite the former (54%) slightly outweighing the latter (46%). A total of 200 respondents with eligible gym membership and substantial amount of experience (at least 6 months) with their respective gyms were selected. New joiners were excluded from the sample as they are deemed unfamiliar with the fitness center's environment and thus would not be able to give a fair assessment. All genders, races and ages were surveyed to the best available convenience to avoid biasness of data.

3.2. Instruments

A questionnaire survey method was used as it facilitates the gauging of insightful information, including beliefs, viewpoints and assessments (Aaker, Kumar, Day, & Leone, 2011). The questionnaire consisted of six major sections adapted from several quantitative papers which has conducted research in the servicescape area (i.e. Physical Dimension, Social Dimension, Socially Symbolic Dimension (Hightower & Shariat, 2009), Natural Dimension (Rosenbaum et al., 2014), Emotional Response (Roy & Tai, 2003) and Behavioral Intention (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Jang & Namkung, 2009). In assessing Emotional Response, only pleasure and arousal were chosen as the emotions to be tested; dominance however, was disregarded as it proves little significance in associating with a person's emotion (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Graa & Daniel-Kebir, 2012; Russell & Pratt, 1980). As for Behavioral Intention, a variety of behaviours were examined, such as word-of-mouth, future patronage, behaviors during consumption process and approach/avoidance behaviors towards the environment. These items were adapted from Donovan and Rossiter's (1982), Roy and Tai's (2003) and Jang and Namkung's (2009) papers. All dimensions were measured on 5-point Likert scale (1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree) along with several general questions and demographic information. For this study, all indicator items have loading of above 0.6 and thus are retained (as given in Table 1). Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the reliability of the items in terms of unidimensionality of a set of scale items following Nunnally's (1978, p. 245) offered a rule of thumb of above 0.7 to suggest reliability. The reliability and number of items (for each construct) used for this study are as follows; Physical Dimension (5 items; $\alpha = .85$); Social Dimension (5 items; $\alpha = .92$); Socially Symbolic Dimension (5 items; $\alpha = .83$); Natural Dimension (5 items; $\alpha = .86$); Emotional Response (4 items; $\alpha = .75$); Behavioral Intention (5 items; $\alpha = .87$). Example of items used to measure each of the constructs are as follows:

Table 1. Sources of instruments and Cronbach's alpha.

Variable	Source	Items	Alpha
Physical Dimension	Hightower and Shariat (2009)	5	.85
Social Dimension	Hightower and Shariat (2009)	5	.92
Socially Symbolic Dimension	Hightower and Shariat (2009)	5	.83
Natural Dimension	Rosenbaum et al. (2014)	5	.86
Emotional Response	Roy and Tai (2003)	4	.75
Behavioral Intention	Donovan and Rossiter (1982); Jang and Namkung (2009)	5	.87

Physical Dimension (color scheme, temperature and cleanliness); Social Dimension (employee grooming, employee friendliness and employee helpfulness); Socially Symbolic Dimension (attractive architecture, pleasing interior layout and helpful signs); Natural Dimension (good facilities, enjoyment of space and time well spent); Emotional Response (pleasure, satisfaction and excitement) and Behavioral Intention (positivity, recommendation and future patronage).

3.3. Data collection

Data was collected from six different fitness franchise clubs in Malaysia, namely Fitness First, Celebrity Fitness, True Fitness, CHI Fitness, Jatomi Fitness and Gorgeous Fitness. Manual data collection, i.e. paper-pencil survey was conducted so that respondents can be assisted if they were unclear with the questions. The researchers visited each fitness center to better administer the sample with the intention to increase the response rate. The survey was conducted during low periods (weekdays working hours 9 am–5 pm), peak periods (weeknights after office hours) and on weekends (Saturday and Sunday) to capture a good sample representation. All respondents were asked to sign a consent form before filling in the questionnaire and were given the right to terminate halfway during the questionnaire completion process.

3.4. Data analysis

This study employed quantitative analysis in which the conceptual framework and hypotheses were tested through assessments of numerical data (Bryman, 2012). The average summated scales of the items measuring each construct were obtained and the values are as follows: Physical Dimension (4.05), Social Dimension (4.15), Socially-symbolic Dimension (3.95), Natural Dimension (3.49), Emotional Response (3.68) and Behavioral Intention (4.13). Multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis was then conducted to examine the casual relationships (H1a, H2a, H3a, H4a and H5) while mediation effect (H1b, H2b, H3b and H4b) was tested using SPSS PROCESS by Andrew F. Hayes (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). The corresponding p -value was recorded (two-tailed test) to determine the significance of each hypothesis.

4. Findings

In this study, the un-rotated factor analysis showed that the one factor accounted for only 38.2% of the total variance and thus the common method bias was not a serious threat. According to Podsakoff and Organ (1986), common method bias is problematic if a single latent factor accounts for the majority of the explained variance; in this case it would be more than 50%. Results of the MLR analyses given in Table 2 indicate that the predictors explained 22.9% of the variance, $R^2 = .23$, $F(5,194) = 11.56$, $p < .01$ in Behavioral Intention. As predicted, it was found that Physical Dimension (H1a) and Natural Dimension (H4a) have significant positive relationships with Behavioral Intention, $\beta = .19$, $p < .01$ and $\beta = .19$, $p < .05$, respectively. Emotional Response (H5) appears to have the strongest positive relationship with Behavioral Intention, $\beta = .21$, $p < .01$, indicating that consumers who are aroused and pleased exhibit positive behaviors in the gym. However, it

Table 2. Results of hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Relationship	<i>b</i> (SE)	β	<i>t</i>	Results
H1a	Physical Dimension → Behavioral Intention	.19 (.07)	.19	2.78**	Supported
H1b	Physical Dimension → Emotional Response → Behavioral Intention	.02 (.03)	–	.74	Not supported
H2a	Social Dimension → Behavioral Intention	.07 (.09)	.06	.75	Not supported
H2b	Social Dimension → Emotional Response → Behavioral Intention	.09 (.03)	–	4.07**	Supported
H3a	Socially Symbolic Dimension → Behavioral Intention	.06 (.06)	.07	1.04	Not supported
H3b	Socially Symbolic Dimension → Emotional Response → Behavioral Intention	.01 (.02)	–	.08	Not supported
H4a	Natural Dimension → Behavioral Intention	.19 (.08)	.18	2.29*	Supported
H4b	Natural Dimension → Emotional Response → Behavioral Intention	.05 (.02)	–	2.91**	Supported
H5	Emotional Response → Behavioral Intention	.21 (.05)	.27	4.03**	Supported

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$; $R^2 = .23$; $F(5, 194) = 11.56$.

appears that the relationship between Social Dimension (H2a) and Behavioral Intention, and the relationship between Socially-Symbolic Dimension (H3a) and Behavioral Intention are both insignificant, $\beta = .07, p > .05$ and $\beta = .06, p > .05$, respectively. In summary, findings suggest that Physical Dimension, Natural Dimension and Emotional Response positively affect Behavioral Intention; while Social Dimension and Socially Symbolic Dimension do not influence Behavioral Intention.

The results of mediation analyses show that Emotional Response did not mediate the relationship between Physical Dimension and Behavioral Intention (H1b), $b = .02, SE = .03, 95\% CI = [-.03, .06]$, and the relationship between Socially Symbolic Dimension and Behavioral Intention (H3b), $b = .01, SE = .02, 95\% CI = [-.04, .05]$, as the bootstrapping results both contain zero within the 95% CI ranges. However, it appears that Emotional Response significantly mediates the relationship between Social Dimension and Behavioral Intention (H2b), $b = .09, SE = .03; 95\% CI = [.03, .15]$ and the relationship between Natural Dimension and Behavioral Intention (H4b), $b = .05, SE = .02; 95\% CI = [.02, .11]$ as indicated by the significant bootstrapping results.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implication

The results show interesting theoretical implications based on the Rosenbaum and Mas-siah’s (2011) servicescape model and Mehrabian and Russell’s (1974) Stimulus-Response Model as follow.

5.1.1. Physical Dimension

Based on the results obtained, the Physical Dimension is concluded to have a direct positive effect on an individual’s behavior. In the case of fitness centers, physical stimuli are relatively more perceptible and tangible than any other environmental factors (Smith & Burns, 1996); and that people tend to react quicker to explicit factors as compared to implicit ones. As such, influence caused by these stimuli have the tendency to directly affect one’s workout process. Several papers excluded Emotional Response as the mediator and instead examined the direct relationship between physical settings of environment and behavior (Ha & Jang, 2012; Hooper et al., 2013). These direct relationships include

responses/behavior such as loyalty intention (Harris & Ezeh, 2008), patronage (John et al., 2013; Simpoh et al., 2011) and satisfaction (Lee & Kim, 2014; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). A paying member who encounters a malfunctioning machine or exposed to unhygienic space would divert his/her attention towards another machine or move away from that space with minimal emotional thought.

The significant relationship supports findings by past researches. Physical stimuli such as ambient conditions, visual design, functionality of equipment and audio volume are proved to have an impact on consumer response or behavior (Kumar, Purani, & Sahadev, 2013; Oakes & North, 2008; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). The supported hypothesis further aligns with behavior setting theory, which proposes that there is an interactional relationship between individuals and the environment.

5.1.2. Social dimension

Social stimuli do not always directly influence a person's behavior as human interactions are a complex process and often involve emotions. As suggested by Uhrich and Benkenstein (2012), behavioral patterns of other customers exert influence on affective responses, which in turn can impact customer's spending and word-of-mouth actions. Customers who experience a good connection with a company's employees on a personal, emotional level, will reciprocate with positive behaviors (Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010).

Moreover, interaction between customers has the potential to fulfill a customer's psychological needs (Lofland, 1998). Social supportive resources obtained from other customers have shown to be capable of counterbalancing the loss of social support caused by negative life events such as bereavement and divorce (Rosenbaum, Ward, Walker, & Ostrom, 2007). Notably, social support is not only limited to be received from a single source. As such, gym members interact with a network of people in which these interactions can effectively motivate, relieve, activate or encourage each other (Gentry & Goodwin, 1995). Beyond the attainment of mental needs, favorable customer-to-customer interaction holds the ability to simultaneously enhance a person's satisfaction and consumption experience (Nicholls, 2010).

Interaction between humans often causes emotional states to be induced in a person. As it involves stimulating cognitive responses and feelings, the influence of social dimension on behavior is seen to operate via Emotional Response.

5.1.3. Socially Symbolic Dimension

Despite each fitness center displaying its own unique way of employing signs and symbols to influence approach behaviors, general signs such as company logos and directional signage are still very much likely to be interpreted by customers in the same way. Unless the fitness center possesses extremely unique symbols which are exclusive to them, customers would probably not be very much affected by its symbolic universe.

Although several studies show the potential impact that a company's symbolic service-scape has on consumers (Peters, 1978; Wener & Kaminoff, 1982), the symbolic servicescape of a gym does not seem to substantially affect members' emotions and behaviors in terms of evoking pleasurable feelings, increasing participation, promoting favorable word-of-mouth or even delivering satisfaction. Instead, the logos, labels, symbols and artifacts provide more of a directional guidance, conveying rules of behavior and positioning the gym's image. The results indicate that emotions and behaviors are not affected by the ambiguous nature of the

symbolic cues of a setting, which is a problem that often leads to multiple interpretations, and intended or unintended consequences (Davis, 1984). This is further supported by Rosenbaum's study (2005) which suggested that the extent to which individuals react to symbolic universe of an environment is dependent on the extent of their ethnic identification. Since the symbolic components hold neutral meanings and are similar in purpose across most gyms, customers therefore are not drawn to these stimuli. It is thus justified that socially-symbolic dimension has little relevance to gym members' emotions and behaviors.

5.1.4. Natural Dimension

Natural Dimension is able to form an innate bond between humans and their living systems (Wilson, 1984). The emission of "natural aura" at an up-close psychological level is the reason why it has an impact on emotion and behavior (Clarke & Schmidt, 1995). Natural servicescape possesses emotion stimuli – being away, fascination and compatibility instead of object -stimuli as it exists in an intangible form (Han, 2007). Studies have shown that these restorative stimuli have the potential to revitalize a mentally fatigued person (Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Wells, 2000). For instance, Rosenbaum and Smallwood's (2011) and Rosenbaum, Sweeney, and Smallwood's (2011) paper reveal that natural stimuli play an essential role in the improvement and recovery of a person's physical and mental wellbeing.

Similarly, fitness centers naturally possess a certain level of restorative stimuli that can affect members' Emotional Response and behaviors. First, gym members are able to feel a sense of being away when they engage in various activities, additionally giving them a temporary psychological short escape while shutting away negative concerns such as stress and anxiety. Secondly, fascinating elements in the gym capture members' attention and make them want to stay in that place. Some members like to linger around for a longer time because they are attracted by the environment's delightful atmosphere. Thirdly, members have the tendency to formulate compatible bond and stay loyal with their respective gyms because of the intangible benefits they received, in addition to the sense of belongingness that has been developed.

Along these lines, Cumes (1998) described natural environment as having an indefinable "wilderness effect" that acts as a power mechanism in restoring personal health when people engage in restorative events. This wilderness effect explains why there are people who are enthusiastic about fitness. Much of the stimuli in a natural servicescape deeply connect with a person's inner instincts. As such, the Natural Dimension here is the only dimension that has both a direct and indirect relationship with a person's behavior.

5.2. Practical implication

Reviews on the relationship between servicescape dimensions and individual behavior have several practical implications. First, managers could enhance the gym's Physical Dimension by adopting attractive designs, maintaining proper functionality of facilities, adjusting to pleasing ambient conditions and providing enough space for movement to ensure gym members can carry out their fitness activities purposely and enjoyably. Moreover, managers could also train their employees to be more customer-interactive, impose appropriate attire rules, introduce collaborative fitness programs and set up cozy lounge areas as a means to promote interaction and communication among members and employees, concurrently reinforcing social support and fulfilling companionship for the

members. For customers who wish to seek for a short psychological “getaway” from their everyday lives via a hedonic consumption experience, managers could improve their symbolic and natural servicescape by incorporating more meaningful artifacts and symbols that are able to resonate with the diverse ethnic identities, while reducing unnecessary interferences and negative essences as possible. A vast array of environmental stimuli exist in a servicescape, therefore, the key to a successful servicescape depends largely on how managers organize them to cater to the ever changing customer needs. From a customer’s perspective, an ideal servicescape would be one that is physically alluring, socially encouraging, symbolically welcoming and naturally soothing.

5.3. Limitation and future research

There were several limitations in this study. Firstly, the coverage area and sampling number were limited, thus incorporating other smaller community gyms and increasing the sample size could provide a better representation of Malaysian fitness industry. In addition, marketing scholars could further investigate the relationship of servicescape beyond Behavioral Intention which may include the different aspects of loyalty. Each dimension studied in this paper could further be developed and expanded into a more comprehensive construct as consumer’s attraction to a perceived servicescape changes over time. Another limitation of this study addresses the possibility different servicescape experiences (i.e. the different fitness franchise resulting in different gym settings and experiences) which may reflect biasness in the samples responses. It is therefore suggested that future researchers could focus the study on one franchise to test this hypothesis of standardized servicescape stimuli, which was not the focus of present study. Since this study was carried out within a short period of time, a longitudinal study is suggested for future investigation of the fitness industry for more insightful results to evaluate if these behaviors and perceptions change over time. Qualitative inquiry is also encouraged to serve as a complementary enrichment to the current quantitative findings.

6. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to provide an understanding of the impact of servicescape dimensions of fitness centers on individual behavior. Of the four dimensions assessed, three have a positive relationship with consumer behavior, i.e. the Physical Dimension, Social Dimension and Natural Dimension. It is worthy to note that within the Malaysian Fitness industry context, the Socially Symbolic Dimension did not play a significant role in determining the mediating role of arousal to individual behavior. This is in part a new finding for the context of Malaysian fitness industry which does not support the finding by Wener and Kaminoff (1982).

These dimensions, whether they reside beneath a consumers’ consciousness or appear at the forefront their vision and awareness, eventually have an effect on their behavior. In viewing the importance of these manageable stimuli, managers of fitness centers are therefore advised to thoroughly plan and construct an appropriate setting for customers leveraging on these three dimensions.

Environmental psychologist Proshansky (1978) stated that the physical setting is not only merely physical, but also exists simultaneously as a social, cultural and psychological

setting. Theoretical implications derived from this study are not only limited to applied management and marketing domains. This study encourages researchers to also draw on studies from other disciplines such as architecture, geography, psychology, public health and religion to explore other human responses beyond just the approach/avoidance decision. The complex connection between humans and their surroundings allows for more research to be conducted to further understand the nature of this connection, not only in the form of consumption setting, but also to improve quality of life. These findings will ultimately help managers in the fitness industry to understand the positive satisfaction stimuli of consumers which builds word of mouth marketing, hence reducing marketing cost as the servicescape itself becomes the company's marketing tool.

Disclosure statement


No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Derek Lai Teik Ong (PhD, Multimedia University, Malaysia) is a Senior Lecturer in marketing in the Department of Marketing at Sunway University Business in Malaysia. His research interests include sport marketing and management, marketing research and research methodology. His work has appeared in such journals as the *Journal of Sport Management*, *Journal of Global Scholars of Marketing Science*, and *Public Library of Science One*, among others. He is also a Chartered Statistician with the Royal Statistical Society, UK since 2012.

Wei Xin Yapin (Bachelors (Hons) in Business Studies, Lancaster University) currently holds the title of Business Development Executive in Worldgate Express Service in Malaysia. His interest includes idealistic collective presence of human, nature, science, art and business, blended hassle-free in a living environment. Areas of interest include architecture, cosmology, servicescape and built environment.

ORCID

Derek Lai Teik Ong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5899-9975>

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