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Clarifying the Ambiguities between the Servicescape and Service Quality: A Field Study

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Service quality is commonly described as a multi-dimensional concept under which a range of dimensions are subsumed. The number of these dimensions can vary widely with no consensus as to what should be considered as a service quality sub-construct. The American stream of thought has drawn heavily on Parasuraman (1991; 1985; 1988) and his colleagues' SERVQUAL model which consists of five key dimensions. While replications of the dimensional structure have proven difficult (Babakus and Boller 1992; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Finn and Lamb 1991; Gagliano and Hathcote 1994) the tangibles dimension has appeared repeatedly in service quality studies and almost always is found to be highly independent of the remaining factors. The continued inclusion of tangible cues in service quality studies implicitly reflects the importance that is placed on this dimension by researchers. In fact, tangible cues, also known as servicescapes, have developed their own unique body of knowledge within which various servicescape typologies have been advocated. These frameworks generally focus on how the servicescape impacts upon emotional responses and behaviours, and in doing so have side-stepped how the servicescape relates to service quality perceptions. This has resulted in a grey area between the two constructs with considerable ambiguities surrounding whether the servicescape and its tangible cues should be classified as a service quality dimension.

Within this paper an attempt is made to resolve some of the conceptual uncertainties between these two constructs. Unlike service quality theorists, it is proposed here that the servicescape is a unique construct in itself whereby it serves as an antecedent to service quality. Describing the relationship between the servicescape and service quality in this way proposes that servicescape perceptions have a direct impact on how consumers evaluate employee service quality and outcome service quality. Using data collected from a field study, the hypothesised model is tested using structural equation modelling. The model fits the data well (Chi-Square = 256.46, df = 97, P-value = 0.00000, RMSEA = 0.068, CFI = .95, SRMR = .055) and supports the notion that the servicescape is a separate construct which independently influences service quality

perceptions and subsequent behavioural intentions. Support was also found for a direct path between the servicescape and behavioural intentions which further exemplifies the relative importance of tangible cues to service experiences.

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