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Service quality: Mediating role in servicescape and word-of-mouth

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Abstract

The store atmosphere of servicescape has influenced customer decision-making regarding products and services. Servicescape communicates to customers through sensory perceptions that effect their beliefs, attitudes, satisfaction, loyalty, and word of mouth (WOM) about products, services, or service providers. As such, the objectives of the study were: (1) to examine the effect of servicescape on the service quality and word-of-mouth in Thailand, and (2) to investigate the role of service quality on the effect of servicescape on the word-of-mouth in Thailand. This paper was mainly embedded in the quantitative method. The research largely involved a survey design. The data were collected via questionnaire interviews from 720 samples comprising customers of retail stores in Thailand. Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale, their agreement or disagreement on the servicescape, service quality, and WOM indicators. Structural equation modeling was used for data analysis due to the proposed model being a simultaneous system of equations having latent constructs and multiple indicators. It was found that there was a significant effect of servicescape on the service quality and WOM in the retailing sector in Thailand. Also, the relationship between servicescape and WOM was partially mediated by the service quality.

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Introduction

Word of mouth (WOM) has generated benefit for retailing stores (Soderlund & Mattsson, 2015). Several marketing scholars suggested that WOM is related to a firm's profitability (Kumar, Petersen, & Leone, 2007). Although WOM communication has been studied as a consequence of variables of other constructs such as satisfaction and trust, less attention has been given to an antecedent and the mediation of WOM when considering WOM as a central construct (Matos & Rossi, 2008; White, 2010). The store atmosphere of servicescape communicates to customers through sensory perceptions that effect their belief, attitude, satisfaction, loyalty, and WOM about products, services, or service providers. This impacts not only customers but also the

employees, leading to increased productivity and positive interactions between employees and customers. In addition, the customers are most likely to refer this store to other customers. Thus, the service quality and WOM play primary roles in retailing decisions (Anderson, 1998; Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005). The term referral as used herein relates to informal decision communications between customers. Previous research on marketing in the retailing industry has focused mainly on management issues of the organization rather than the customer.

A number of studies on several aspects of servicescape, such as color and light, background music, odors as well as staff (Bitner, 1992; Teller & Dennis, 2012; Turley & Milliman, 2000) show behavioral effects, but primarily refer to the retail industry and examine only single components. Only a few more general studies have sought to consider the store atmosphere of servicescape for its overall effect (e.g. Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 2002; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The issue of service quality has received considerable attention in marketing literature. As a result and understandably, the delivery of higher levels of service quality is the strategy

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that is increasingly being offered as a key to retailers to position themselves more effectively in the marketplace. However, several scholars have identified a problem inherent in the implementation of such strategy: service quality in that it is an elusive and abstract construct that is difficult to define and measure (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). In recent times, research on these constructs has flourished and no doubt this trend will continue, as globalization and information technology redefine the way traditional marketing constructs are viewed. The search for deeper understanding of the formation and management of such constructs has led some scholars to the area of WOM communication. Therefore, the research problem for the current research was what are the antecedents of WOM communication, and their relationships of these constructs in the Thai context. Specifically, the purposes of this study were to examine the effect of servicescape on WOM, and to investigate the mediating effect of the service quality in the relationship between servicescape and WOM communication in upper northeast Thailand.

Literature Review

WOM Communication

Having widespread access via the Internet, customers are regularly able to exchange information with each other about the store name, service quality, or product quality (Meuter, MacKenzie, & Olshavsky, 2013). Thus WOM communications or referrals have significant importance for the retailing industry. Research confirms how essential WOM is as an exchange of thoughts, ideas, or comments between two or more customers, none of whom is a marketing source in the retailing sector (Mazzarol, Sweeney, & Soutar, 2007; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008, 2012; Wirtz & Chew, 2002). Customers use WOM referrals to ensure that they are making a right decision, such as ‘what retailers do you think is best?’. Referrals provide information that can reduce risk. The key idea behind WOM is that the information about a product, service, companies, stores, and so on can spread from one consumer to another (Berger & Schwartz, 2011; Brown et al., 2005). For a meta-analytic review of the antecedents in WOM communications in marketing, it has been shown that satisfaction, loyalty, quality, commitment, trust, and perceived valued are the causes of WOM activity (Matos & Rossi, 2008). Non-interpersonal and interpersonal factors have influenced WOM and service purchase decisions. Specifically, sender and receiver expertise, their relationship, and perceived risk impact on both WOM and the service purchase decision (Bansal & Voyer, 2000). Likewise, Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown (2001) pointed out that the interpersonal bonds between employees and customers such as care, rapport, familiarity, and trusts positively affected the WOM communication.

Servicescape and Perceived Service Quality

Servicescape refers to the environment in which services are delivered, and where service providers and customers interact (Hoffman, Kelley, & Chung, 2003). Bitner (1992)

identified three types of servicescapes as facility exterior, facility interior, and other tangibles. The store atmosphere of servicescape is considerable as a cue of service quality (Kotler, 1973; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005). Ward, Bitner, & Barnes (1992) and Sirgy, Grewal, & Mangleburg (2000) only examined the importance of the exterior and interior servicescape as cues for categorizing services and forming impressions about prototypicality. In addition, Baker and Levy (1992) referred to retail store atmospherics as being three dimensional—ambient, design, and social. They also suggested that the ambient factors interact with the social factors to influence consumers’ pleasure and the social factors influence arousal in the store environment. Additionally, they noted that the pleasure and arousal states have, in turn, a positive relationship with consumers’ willingness to buy.

One of the most important factors is perceived service quality, which has been studied worldwide in the marketing field, including retailing. Gronroos (1990)’s concerns about the dimensions of service quality covered the what and how. ‘What’ the service delivers is evaluated after performance. This dimension is called outcome quality by Parasuraman et al. (1988), a technical quality from Gronroos. ‘How’ the service is delivered is evaluated during delivery. This dimension is called process quality by Parasuraman et al. and functional quality by Gronroos. Gronroos suggested there were six determinants of good service quality—professionalism and skill, attitude and behavior, accessibility and flexibility, reliability and trustworthiness, recovery, and reputation and credibility. Alternatively, Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL scale to measure perceived service quality. This scale consists of five dimensions—reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness—associated with 22 items (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996). Still, Brady and Cronin (2001) developed and tested a third-order factor model that allowed service quality perceptions to take into account distinct and actionable dimensions including outcome, interaction, and environmental qualities. Subsequently, they argued that service quality is a multidimensional hierarchical construct. In summary, the customers’ perceived service quality influences consumer decision-making behavior.

Development of Hypotheses

Effects of the Servicescape on Perceived Service Quality

There have been a number of studies on the effect of servicescape on service quality and consumer behavior. Ha and Jang (2012) suggested that the service environment plays an important role in inducing the quality of service provided by retailers (Sharma & Stafford, 2000; Untachai, 2013), being used as a cue for evaluating the quality of services or products. Reimer and Kuehn (2005) examined the effect of servicescape on quality perception, namely reliability, empathy, assurance, and response in two service industries—retail banking and restaurants (Klemz & Boshoff, 2001). They also found that the tangible aspect of the physical surroundings has a causal relation with empathy and assurance aspects. Another study on the topic by Broekemier, Marquardt, & Gentry (2008) asserted that happy and liked music affected

shopping intentions in a women's clothing store service setting. Additionally, Sweeney and Wyber (2002) suggested that the genre and tempo of music influence not only cognitions and emotions but also behavior. Furthermore, both ambient scent and music servicescapes have been related to store attitude and intention to visit. Wakefield and Blodgett (1994)'s study of servicescape in leisure services showed higher levels of satisfaction indicated willingness to attend future games and the high quality of servicescape increase the level of excitement as well. Therefore, the physical environment of leisure service includes the atmosphere of the place, which impacts on the level of excitement and satisfaction of the respondents (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). On the basis of the literature discussed above, I will test the following hypotheses:

H1. There is an effect of servicescape on the perceived service quality in the retailing sector in Thailand (See Figure 1).

H2. There is an effect of servicescape on the WOM communication in the retailing sector in Thailand (See Figure 1).

Effects of the Perceived Service Quality on WOM Communication

There have been empirical studies of the effects of service quality, satisfaction, and commitment on WOM communication which have shown that satisfaction, loyalty, quality, commitment, trust, and perceived value are the causes of WOM activity (Gremler et al., 2001; White, 2010). Another study on the topic by Brown et al. (2005) showed that satisfaction related to consumers' positive WOM intentions and behaviors through their commitment in a retail context. Several studies indicated that perceived service quality is a critical impact on future purchase or loyalty in the retailing sector. Zeithaml et al. (1996) pointed out that perceived service quality is a significant predictor of WOM (Babin, Lee, Kim, & Griffin, 2005; Harrison-Walker, 2001). Parasuraman et al. (1988) identified the positive linkage between the perceived service quality and post-consumption behavior. Caruana (2002) also reported the direct effect of the perceived service quality on WOM intention (Spreng, Shi, & Page, 2005). Similarly, Wein and Olsen (2012) found that customer satisfaction and customer perceived service quality were highly correlated with positive WOM intention. Thus, this study proposed the following hypothesis:

H3. There is an effect of the perceived service quality on the WOM communication in the retailing sector in Thailand (See Figure 1).

Mediating the Effect of Perceived Service Quality

The author has extended the literature by suggesting that perceived service quality is the antecedent of the WOM communication, and that it also mediates the relationship between servicescape and the WOM communication. This proposition was formed based on evidence from previous studies that servicescape is the predictor of both purchase intention and the perceived service quality (Reimer & Kuehn, 2005; White, 2010). To this point, the author assumed that servicescape has impacted on the WOM directly and indirectly through perceived service quality. Based on this rationale, the following hypothesis is suggested (Figure 1):

H4. The relationship between the perception of servicescape and WOM communication is mediated by the perceived service quality.

The conceptual framework, shown in Figure 1, integrates theories from cognitive, social, and environmental psychology (Bitner, 1992; Brown et al., 2005) with Parasuraman et al. (1988). Figure 1 shows the structural relations among the three constructs of including servicescape, service quality, and WOM communication.

Methodology

Research Design

The research mainly involved a survey design. It included a pilot test using undergraduate students at Udon Thani Rajabhat University, for pretesting of the questionnaire items. In addition, this investigation into servicescape, service quality, and intention to purchase attributes necessitated uncovering variables of interest and this involved a large-scale field study. The sample was drawn from the customers of the four Thai retailers—Big C, Central, Tesco Lotus, and Tang Ngeesun. The sample of 720 was based on systematic random sampling. The data were collected via personal questionnaires. Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert scale their agreement or disagreement on servicescape, service quality, and WOM communication dimensions.

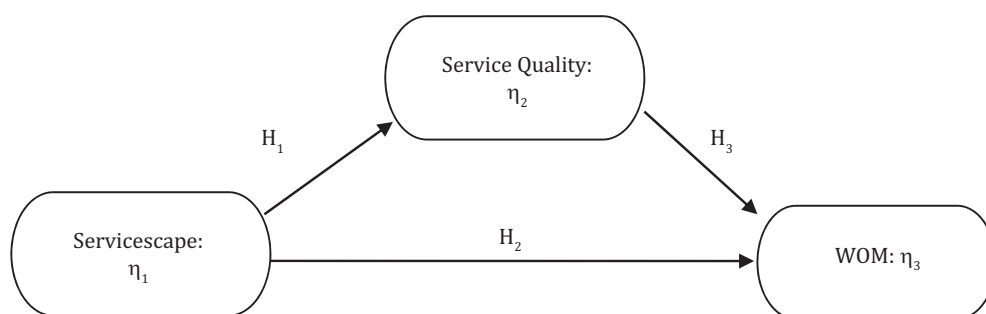


Figure 1 The WOM model

Measure Development

The author developed measurement items following the process recommended by Churchill (1979) and Gerbing and Anderson (1988). All variables were measured by a well-established multiple-item seven-point scale (with 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree). The measurement consisted of three components—the service quality, servicescape, and WOM communication. First, the service quality was measured using four items extracted from Parasuraman et al. (1988): performing the services right the first time, giving a customer individual attention, having the customer's best interests at heart, and understanding customer-specific needs. Second, servicescape was measured using four items extracted from Turley and Milliman (2000): location, music, color, and interior design. Finally, the WOM communication was measured using three items extracted from Harrison-Walker (2001) and Ranaweera and Menon (2013): willingness to revisit intention, recommending retailers to acquaintances, and recommending retailers to others.

The process of the development on the measurement scale consisted of four stages. First, the 77 items and 11 dimensions were generated from previously developed scales (Babin et al., 2005; Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Sweeney et al., 2008). Then 68 items were selected from the item pool based on the criteria of uniqueness and the ability to convey different meanings to respondents through content and face validity tests. Second, the 68 selected items were submitted for review by three academic experts in the field of retailing and service management. They were asked to review the survey for domain representativeness, item specificity, clarity of construct, and readability (content and face validity). Drawing on their inputs, 12 items were eliminated, and five items were added. Third, the resultant survey instrument was pre-tested using 10 graduate students at the Udon Thani Rajabhat University, Thailand. They were asked to complete a survey and indicate any ambiguity or other difficulties they experienced in responding to the items. Their feedback and suggestions were used to modify the questionnaire. These completed responses were also analyzed using SPSS (Table 1). An exploratory factor analysis using Varimax rotation and Principal Component Extraction indicated that 22 items loaded on expected factors with the loading weights ranging from 0.76 to 0.89. Construct reliability tests with Cronbach's alpha also yielded satisfactory results ranging from 0.55 to 0.89. Finally, item purification was done with confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.30 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1996). After the iterative process of item refinement and purification, the battery of items was reduced to the final set of 11 items to measure the three proposed integration-related constructs of servicescape, service quality, and WOM. The 11 structured items were anchored strongly.

Scale Validity

Before testing the proposed hypotheses, the author evaluated the psychometric properties of the measurement scales through confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The model was a close fit to the data at $\chi^2 = 70.15$; significance 0.0031; $df = 41$; SRMR = 0.03;

CFI=0.99; GFI=0.97; AGFI=0.96; RMSEA=0.04. Consequently, the WOM model could be acceptable (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hu & Bentler, 1999).

The composite reliability values for servicescape, service quality, and WOM dimensions are shown in Table 1. The composite reliability score for each dimension was slightly moderate (0.81, 0.73, and 0.71). In addition, the Cronbach's alpha values for each of the service quality dimensions are shown in Table I, which were greater than 0.60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that variance extracted estimates (AVE) for the construct should be .50 or larger, whereas the results showed that the variance extracted estimates constructs were almost all lower than .50 (0.51, 0.41, and 0.45). However, very often variance extracted estimates are below .50, even when reliabilities are acceptable. Besides the reliability test, convergent validity is demonstrated when different instruments are used to measure the same construct, and scores from these different instruments are strongly correlated. The convergent validity could be assessed by reviewing the t-test for the factor loadings (greater than twice their standard error). The t-test for each indicator loading is shown in Table 1. The result was that the construct demonstrated a high convergent validity because all t-values were significant at the .01 level. Additionally, the discriminant validity could be assessed by the AVE exceeding the square of the correlation between the two factors (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The AVE of $(0.51 + 0.41)/2 = 0.46$ exceeded the square of the correlation between servicescape and service quality (0.65²), which suggests that servicescape and service quality are distinct. Also, the AVE of $(0.41 + 0.45)/2 = 0.43$ exceeded the square of the correlation between service quality and WOM (0.65²), which suggested that service quality and WOM are distinct. Additionally, the AVE of $(0.51 + 0.45)/2 = 0.48$ exceeded the square of the correlation between servicescape and WOM (0.60²), which suggested that servicescape and WOM are distinct.

Results

As the model consisted of three constructs with 11 items, this paper utilized structural equation modeling. For this evaluation, the results were $\chi^2 = 65.40$; significance 0.0068; $df = 40$; SRMR = 0.033; CFI = 0.99; GFI = 0.97; AGFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.037. Therefore, the WOM model could be considered acceptable.

Effects of Servicescape on WOM

The results of the hypothesis testing are provided in Table 2, along with parameter estimates, their corresponding t values, and the fit statistics. As shown in Table 2, H1, H2, and H3 were supported. Specifically, H1 and H2 suggested that there are effects of servicescape on service quality and WOM communication ($\beta_{21} = 0.65, p < .01$; $\beta_{31} = 0.30, p < .01$). Additionally, H3 suggested that there is an effect of service quality on WOM communication ($\beta_{32} = 0.43, p < .01$). On the basis of these findings, the author concluded that servicescape does have significant effects on both service quality and WOM communication.

Table 1 Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Construct indicator	Standardized loading	t-value	R ²	CR	AVE	Cronbach's alpha
Servicescape				0.81	0.51	.83
Location	0.44	8.80	0.19			
Music	0.75	16.38	0.56			
Color	0.66	14.16	0.44			
Interior design	0.67	14.26	0.45			
Service quality				0.73	0.41	.88
Performing the services right the first time	0.65	-	0.42			
Giving customer individual attention,	0.71	12.11	0.51			
Having customer's best interests at heart	0.76	12.64	0.58			
Understanding customer-specific needs	0.73	12.27	0.53			
WOM communication				0.71	0.45	.80
Willingness to revisit intention	0.75	-	0.57			
Recommend retailers to acquaintances	0.70	11.55	0.50			
Recommend retailers to others	0.54	9.53	0.29			

Table 2 Hypothesis testing of WOM model

Hypothesized Path	Expected Sign ^a	Std. Coefficient	t-value	p-value
H1: Servicescape→ Service Quality	+	0.65	6.89	.000
H2: Servicescape→WOM communication	+	0.30	3.57	.001
H3: Service Quality→WOM communication	+	0.43	5.10	.000

Notes: ^aHypothetical signs of the relation, $p < .05$ and $t > 1.96$; $p < .01$ and $t > 2.58$

Mediating the Effect of Perceived Service Quality

To further validate the model, the author tested for mediation effects by applying Zhao, Lynch, & Chen (2010)'s recommendations, which posit the key condition in showing mediation is that the indirect effect is significant. The paper employed bootstrapping procedures, which facilitate the exploration of the mediation in the association between the focal independent variable (servicescape) and the dependent variable (WOM). Thus, 5,000 bootstrap samples at the 95 percent confidence level were employed.

Table 3 presents the output file that details the estimated specific mediation effects, along with their BC bootstrap confidence intervals indicating that the 95 percent BC confidence interval for the mediation effect $\beta_{21}\beta_{32}$ does not contain zero (lower 2.5% limit = 0.132; upper 2.5% limit = 0.442), which indicates that the mediation effect is significantly different from zero (Lau & Cheung, 2010). Thus, these supported H4. Consumer perceptions of servicescape indirectly affected their WOM communication. Additionally, servicescape was able to influence the WOM communication of enhancing service quality in the consumption context. Hence, the mediation effect from servicescape via service quality is significantly different from zero.

Discussion

This paper developed and empirically tested the conceptual framework to learn how customers judge the service quality of retailing in Thailand. It showed that the service quality mediates servicescape and the WOM communication. This finding confirms the research of Brown et al. (2005), Turley and Milliman (2000), Baker et al. (2002) and Bitner (1992). The results indicate that that hypotheses are more likely supported. There were positive linkages between servicescape, service quality, and the WOM communication in the retailing sector. Thus, these hypotheses confirmed the results of Parasuraman et al. (1988), Kang and James (2004), and Ranaweera and Menon (2013). One explanation for the findings may be that servicescape is a cue that effects the evaluation of service quality (e.g., Baker et al., 2002). For example, Ward et al. (1992) as well as Sirgy et al. (2000) suggested the importance of the exterior and interior servicescape as cues for categorizing services and forming impressions about prototypicality.

There were positive linkages between the service quality, and the WOM in the retailing sector in Thailand. The findings

Table 3 Bias-corrected confidence intervals for specific mediation effects

Confidence intervals of total, total indirect, specific indirect, and direct effects							
Effects from Servicescape to WOM	Lower 0.5%	Lower 2.5%	Lower 5%	Estimate	Upper 5%	Upper 2.5%	Upper 0.5%
Sum of indirect	0.084	0.132	0.157	0.287	0.418	0.442	0.491
Specific indirect WOM							
Service quality							
Servicescape	0.084	0.132	0.157	0.287	0.418	0.442	0.491

were consistent with the works of Klemz and Boshoff (2001), Ladhari, 2007 and Harrison-Walker (2001) who considered that the small downtown retailer primarily uses empathy to influence WOM intention, while the largest national one-stop chains in the small town primarily use assurance to influence WOM intention. Also, there was an indirect effect of service quality through the linkage of servicescape and WOM communication, which was greater than the direct effect of the store atmosphere. This finding was also consistent with the work of Bebeko (2000) that showed customers have higher expectations for services which are more intangible than for services with more tangible features (Caruana, 2002). The power of WOM is recognized as having a relationship to advertising, and it is often mentioned in literature. If WOM is more powerful than advertising, then WOM and advertising should be integrated.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of this study was to test the mediating role of service quality in the retailing in Thailand. The author argued that the relationship between servicescape and WOM communication is mediated by the service quality. Specifically, the author argued that the relationship between servicescape and WOM communication is partially mediated by the service quality. Specifically, music is the most important attribute for the servicescape dimension. Additionally, having the customer's best interests at heart is the most important attribute for service quality. Finally, willingness to revisit intention is the most important attribute for WOM communication.

Research Implications

The findings of this study suggested that servicescape is positively related to not only perceived service quality but also to WOM communication such as willingness to revisit intention, recommending retailers to acquaintances, and recommending retailers to others. From a theoretical viewpoint, this study refined the linkages among servicescape, service quality, and WOM communication. Previous studies addressed store atmosphere as the predictor of consumption behavior. However, this study extended the literature by suggesting that the relationship between servicescape and WOM communication is mediated by consumers' perceived service quality. Servicescape is the most important element of marketing strategies for inducing more positive behavior. It is also a critical factor for perceived service quality that positively influences WOM communication.

Managerial Implications

Having been verified both in this study and previous studies, service quality has positive impact on WOM in the retail setting. This study provides some guidelines for retailers handling service quality structures across the country. For example, the retailers should pay attention to both servicescape and service quality. In particular, the music, color, interior design, and giving a customer individual attention are important components. Also, the Thai retailers

should have a marketing manager who can continuously monitor customer' WOM activities and competitors' strategies to propose integrated servicescape and service quality strategies in a timely manner in the market.

Limitations and Future Study

Although this paper has provided relevant and interesting insights into the understanding of the mediation of service quality in the Thai retailing industry, it should be clearly recognized there are limitations associated with this study. First, cross-sectional data were used in the paper. Subsequently, the time sequence of WOM communication and the service quality structure cannot be determined unambiguously. Therefore, the development of a time-series database and testing of WOM communication and service quality in a structural relationship with a longitudinal framework would provide more insight into probable causation. Second, the conceptualization of servicescape, service quality, and WOM in retailing may be somewhat limited. Future researchers should examine in terms of both negative and positive WOM. Third, the LISREL methodology may be construed as a limitation because the results presented here are based on the analysis of a causal, non-experimental design. Future research should be conducted in terms of experimental approaches. Finally, this study has been limited to one service sector only namely retailing. Future research should examine similar research objectives across different sectors of hospitality, namely restaurants, tour operators, car hire services, travel agencies, clubs, hotels among others. Care is required in determining how to sample and defining sampling sizes within any sociodemographic variable so that the sample is sufficiently large to have predictive validity.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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