Journal of Services Mar

Editorial: Investigating the Effect of the Physical Context on Customer Experience

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Editorial: Investigating the Effect of the Physical Context on Customer Experience

Purpose: This editorial introduces a special issue of the Journal of Services Marketing, dedicated to articles discussing the effect of the physical context on customer experience. The editorial identifies diverse areas of extant knowledge which researchers might draw upon when investigating the effect of the physical context on customer experience. to inform future research agendas.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on available literature, the authors argue that, as prior studies in diverse scholarly fields have explored the physical context, these bodies of knowledge may offer theories and constructs that meaningfully inform explorations of the effect of the physical context on customer experience.

Findings: We identify five marketing sub-disciplines and six non-marketing disciplines, each offering theories, constructs and perspectives which researchers might draw upon in future studies of the effects of the physical context on customer experience.

Originality: We develop a novel map which depicts the field of study of the effects of the physical context on customer experience which scholars might use to inform future research design. In addition, we suggest several directions for future research.

Key words: Physical Context, Customer Experience, Services Marketing, Cross-Disciplinary Research

Paper type: Viewpoint

Editorial: Investigating the Effect of the Physical Context on Customer Experience

Services marketing scholars and practitioners within the contemporary services landscape acknowledge that facilitating superior customer experiences is fundamental to organizational success (Gahler et al., 2022; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). How to effectively manage customer experiences across multiple channels, and via diverse interactions and touchpoints within the customer journey, presents a key research priority (Stead et al., 2022; Ostrom et al., 2021) as firms seek a sustainable competitive advantage (Gahler et al., 2022).

The customer experience research field offers a depth and breadth of insight. High quality conceptual papers synthesize extant knowledge, define the customer experience construct, relate it to other marketing constructs and models, and offer informed future research trajectories (e.g. Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Keiningham et al., 2020; Keiningham et al., 2017; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) while empirical works have explored and measured customer experiences and customer experience quality in diverse contexts (e.g. Gahler et al., 2022; Klaus and Maklan, 2013; Lemke et al., 2010). However, despite the rich stream of research exploring service customer experiences, the effect of the *physical context* – that is, the offline environment in which customers interact with a service firm or its offering – is rarely the focus.

This editorial is a prelude to a special issue of the Journal of Services Marketing, dedicated to articles discussing the effect of the physical context on customer experience. The purpose of the editorial is to identify and discuss diverse areas of extant knowledge which researchers might draw upon when investigating the effect of the physical context on customer experience. In so doing, our goal is to inform future research agendas and support the development of insights around customer experience in general, and more specifically, in relation to the effects of the physical context on customer experience.

The remainder of this editorial is structured as follows. First, we discuss the rationale behind the instigation and publication of this special issue. Next, we provide a brief description of the customer experience context and its associated dimensions. We then discuss five sub-disciplines of marketing research that offer theories, constructs, and knowledge with the potential to inform research into the effects of the physical context on customer experience. Then, we highlight six non-marketing fields of study upon which customer experience scholars might draw in cross-disciplinary studies. Finally, we develop a novel map that depicts the field of study of the effects of the physical context on customer experience and propose several future research directions before introducing the contents of the special issue.

Rationale for Exploring the Effect of the Physical Context on Customer Experience

The way we view the physical environment's impact on customer experience has evolved since the early studies of place in marketing. Kotler (1973, p. 50) recognized atmospherics ("the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in buyers") as an important marketing tool. Nearly twenty years later, Bitner (1992) defined the servicescape as a complex mix of environmental factors which impact human (customer and employee) behavior in service environments. Early customer experience literature has noted the escapist, aesthetic, educational and entertainment potential of physical contexts such as shopping malls, theatres, and restaurants to stage experiences that sell (Pine and Gilmore, 1998). However, the role of the physical context in the customer experience has changed and there is, therefore, a need for new explorations into this phenomenon. We have identified four contemporary issues which underpin the relevance and timeliness of this special issue.

First, digitalization has changed the role, value, impact and meaning of the physical context in the customer experience. The physical environment has become part of the omnichannel context (Alexander and Cano, 2020; Gao et al., 2021) and service marketers need

to consider customer experiences within the 'phygital' reality of customer worlds. Recent literature asserts that digital tools, such as VR, AI, AR can enhance and improve the physical environment (Canhoto et al., 2023; Dini et al., 2022). However, there is a need to redress the balance and consider what the physical context brings to customer experience in a world where we increasingly spend more time in the digital space. The physical has not become obsolete; online retailers still recognize the value of physical multi-sensory experiences to their customers (Zhang et al., 2022). Nonetheless, as the boundaries of these worlds continue to blur, successfully delivering meaningful customer experiences will become contingent on the seamless integration of the physical and the digital.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic created lasting changes in how customers view the physical environment, creating a need for refreshed understandings of customers' needs to support the identification of new opportunities in the services marketplace (Russell-Bennett and Rosenbaum, 2022). Many service industries which were unable to offer a full customer experience during the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have noticed a change in what customers value pre- and post-COVID-19 (Bonfanti et al., 2023), such as opportunities for social interaction and recreational experiences (Vilnai-Yavetz et al., 2022).

Third, recent literature has emphasized the importance of the human body as central to the customer experience. For instance, Kuuru and Närvänen (2019, p. 1242) assert that "Customer experience is the sum of the customer's interpretations through the lived body". Mooy and Robben (2002) suggest that the most direct experience occurs when consumers are present in the actual environment, having sensory contact and fully interacting with the environment. Physical presence and embodiment hold different meanings for different customer segments. Heritage and cultural sites can provide value in shared social interactions for customers with disabilities (Cerdan Chiscano and Darcy, 2021) but physical contexts can also provide barriers which exclude customers from accessing services (Dodds and

Palakshappa, 2022). Studies also show differences in customer preferences for physical closeness since the COVID-19 pandemic (Otterbring, 2022) and the importance of considering consumption-related proxemics for customer experiences in service settings.

Fourth, the influence of the physical context on physical and mental health and wellbeing has been highlighted in recent studies (e.g., Carpiano, 2009). The services marketing literature differentiates between the natural environment (green and blue spaces) and the built environment. Traditionally, temporary escapist spaces such as festivals and spa and wellness tourism locations have been associated with providing opportunities for respite but more recently, transformative health-related benefits have been identified in retail and other consumption settings (Rosenbaum et al., 2020).

Customer Experience: A Multi-Dimensional Construct

Drawing on the works of Lemke et al. (2010), Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Gahler et al. (2022) we define customer experience as *a customer's accumulated, multi-dimensional responses to their interactions with a firm or its offering*. While the customer experience construct is defined as multi-dimensional (see e.g., Schmitt, 1999; Gentile et al., 2007; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) conceptualizations vary in the exact dimensions assumed to comprise customer experience. Following Becker and Jaakkola (2020) however, we incorporate the dimensions most used in extant research, namely cognitive, affective, sensorial, physical, and relational. We also include the symbolic dimension, proposed by Gahler et al. (2022) following their review of customer experience literature that integrated knowledge from the philosophy of mind dialogue, and in recognition of the subjective and individual nature of each customers' experience (Verhoef et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Schmitt, 1999).

The cognitive dimension of customer experience captures people's conscious, higher mental processes in response to their interaction with a firm or its offering (Keiningham et al.,

2017; Gentile et al., 2007). Such processes include analytical and imaginative thinking (Brakus et al., 2009), problem solving (Gentile et al., 2007), learning (Gahler et al., 2022), evaluations of quality and whether expectations have been confirmed (Lemke et al., 2010; Keiningham et al., 2017) and the re-evaluation of previously held ideas (Gentile et al., 2007). The affective dimension of a customer experience involves the customers' affective system (Gentile et al., 2007) and their emotions, feelings, and moods in response to their interactions with a firm or its offering (Gahler et al., 2022; Brakus et al., 2009; Keiningham et al., 2020).

The sensorial dimension captures the sensory qualities of a customer's interaction with a firm or its offering (Gahler et al., 2022); that is, what a customer sees, hears, smells, tastes, or touches (Keiningham et al., 2020). Within customer experience research field, the sensorial dimension is notably underexplored (Keiningham et al., 2017). The physical dimension of the customer experience refers to people's physical, bodily, or motor actions in response to their interaction with a firm or its offering (Gahler et al., 2022; Brakus et al., 2009). The relational dimension encompasses the social aspects of an experience and the influence of other people on an individual's interaction with a firm or its offering. Pertinent factors include customers' perceptions of their relationships with other parties during interactions, such as staff, other customers, and reference groups (Verhoef et al., 2009; Brakus et al., 2009; Gahler et al., 2022), and the impact of interactions on customers' social identities (Gentile et al., 2007). Finally, the symbolic dimension encapsulates a customers' perceived self-identity congruence, self-affirmation and self-expression that results from their interaction with a firm or its offering (Gahler et al., 2022; Gentile et al., 2007).

Developing Future Research into the Effects of the Physical Context on Customer Experience

While the effect of the physical context on customer experience is under-studied, a diversity of research has explored the role of the physical context, as an aspect of an organization or

institution's offering, in influencing consumer behaviour and driving value. Intuitively, researchers might draw upon these marketing research studies, and their associated theories and constructs, to inform explorations of the effect of the physical context on customer experience.

Within the services marketing field, the concept of the servicescape provides a logical foundation. Derived by Bitner (1992) and couched in environmental psychology, the term 'servicescape' refers to the firm-controlled, man-made environment in which a service is consumed. Bitner (1992) proposed that servicescape elements comprise ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols and artifacts, which serve as stimuli that evoke various responses in consumers. Indeed, research has identified how customer interactions with a servicescape may drive satisfaction, positive word of mouth behaviour, and purchase intention (see Keiningham et al., 2017, for a review). More recently, services marketing scholars have challenged the notion of the servicescape as entirely firm-controllable, adopting a more customer-centric approach in the development of enriched frameworks. For example, Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) incorporate physical, social, socially-symbolic, and natural dimensions in their 'perceived servicescape' framework.

Intuitively, applying a servicescape lens to studies of the effects of the physical context on customer experience has the potential to yield insights across several customer experience dimensions. For instance, ambient conditions may impact the sensorial dimension, while spatial layout and functionality might affect the physical customer experience (Keiningham et al., 2017). The social dimension of the perceived servicescape may impact relational customer experiences while the socially-symbolic elements could drive affective or symbolic dimensions of customer experience (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). It perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that several of the papers in this special issue (see the works of Erdogan and Enginkaya, Kearney et al., Furrer et al., and Krisjanous et al., all this issue) apply a servicescape

perspective. However, the bounded nature of the servicescape means that it may not fully capture the breadth of physical contexts within which services are experienced. For example, national parks, waterways, cities, towns, and high streets all represent offline environments within which people might interact with providers of a diversity of services.

In addition to the servicescape, the concept of resource integration, which derives from the wider service dominant logic narrative, provides a promising lens for exploring the impact of the physical context on customer experience. The term resource integration refers to the combination and application by consumers of diverse resources in the co-creation of value (Bruce et al., 2019; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The resources integrated may be owned or possessed by consumers or provided by a firm, and may be tangible or intangible (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2012). Therefore, consumers may draw upon resources within a physical context in pursuit of value creation, and studies that explore the relevant resource integration activities that take place within a physical context may therefore shed light on cognitive, relational, and physical dimensions of consumer experience.

Beyond the services marketing field, other sub-disciplines of marketing research offer theories, constructs, and knowledge with the potential to inform research into the effects of the physical context on customer experience. We identify the sub-disciplines of place marketing, sensory marketing, relationship marketing, and service consumer behaviour as offering useful foundations for future studies. The following sections discuss each sub-discipline in turn.

Place Marketing

The place marketing subdiscipline treats places (typically towns and cities) as marketable commodities; that is, they are viewed as products or offerings, around which a narrative or image can be created to allow strategic marketing activities directed at target visitors or residents (Warnaby and Medway, 2013; Colomb and Kalandides, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2004).

When compared to studies of servicescapes, place marketing research broadens the field of enquiry beyond a specific provider's environment to encompass the more complex service ecosystems within a town or city. We identify two constructs within the place marketing discipline as being potentially useful in exploring the effect of the physical context on customer experience: place attachment and place identity.

Place attachment is a process through which a person attributes meaning to, and therefore forms an emotional bond with a specific place (Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001; Low and Altman, 1992). The affective nature of the resultant bond suggests that place attachment might reflect a measurable outcome of the effect of the physical context on the effective dimension of customer experience. Moreover, since the process of place attachment involves "the interplay of emotions, cognitions and behaviours" (Hutchison, 2011, p. 230), studies of place attachment might also shed light on the cognitive and physical customer experience dimensions as they are driven by interactions within a specific physical context. Place identity, in contrast, refers to "the merger of place and self" (Hutchison, 2011); that is, a process through which a person's interactions with a specific place results in a sense of belonging to that place (Florek, 2011). Exploring place identity, then, may illuminate the symbolic dimension of customer experiences within a physical context.

More broadly, the place marketing research field is informed by a variety of disciplines, such as geography and urban studies (Warnaby and Medway, 2013). Consequently, applying a place marketing perspective to customer experience research offers a cross-disciplinary approach with the potential to generate novel and valuable insights (Bartunek, 2007).

Sensory Marketing

Sensory marketing deploys tactics designed to stimulate people's senses in a manner that affects perceptions, evaluations, and behaviors (Krishna, 2012). Accordingly, applying a

sensory marketing research lens to studies of customer experience could uncover the effect of sensory aspects of a physical context, be it a servicescape or a wider, less clearly bounded open space, on sensorial, cognitive, and physical customer experience dimensions. Despite the maturity of the sensory marketing field (Stead et al., 2022), studies typically lack holism and focus on one or two, rather than all senses (Keiningham et al., 2017; Stead et al., 2022). However, sensory marketing research tools and techniques could be employed in studies of the effect of the physical context on customer experience in environments designed to stimulate (or not) a specific sense; For instance, quiet spaces on public transport or quiet periods in supermarkets (de la Fuente and Walsh, 2022). Moreover, as sensory marketing is underpinned by multiple other disciplines, such as neuroscience, psychology, and food science (Stead et al., 2022), like place marketing, its application to customer experience research offers a cross-disciplinary approach.

Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing research is an established field of study, focused on the development of knowledge of how firms might initiate, maintain, and enhance mutually beneficial relationships with customers (Gummerus et al., 2017). The outcomes of successful relationship marketing activity, which include customer loyalty and co-operation, are potentially mediated by numerous constructs, including customer trust, commitment, and relationship satisfaction (Palmatier et al., 2006). Trust is defined as a customer's confidence in a firm's reliability and integrity (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), commitment captures a customer's desire to remain a customer of the firm (Deshpande et al., 1993), and relationship satisfaction refers to a customer's cumulative appraisal of the state of the relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006).

More recent commentary around relationship marketing research has challenged the traditional notion of relationship marketing as a firm-managed activity, targeted at the passive

customer, and has called for a more customer-centric view that recognizes customers' agency in relationships (O'Malley, 2014). Rooney et al. (2021) argue that customer experiences underlie customers' perceived relationships with firms as such relationships are effectively comprised of customers' interactions with, and resultant responses to, a firm or its offering. Trust, therefore, might represent a measurable outcome of the effects of the physical context on the cognitive customer experience dimension, while exploring commitment and satisfaction could shed light on the affective dimension (Keiningham et al., 2017). Moreover, the physical service context is a place in which firm employees can communicate brand values and build relationships with customers (Jocevski, 2020). Consequently, exploring the outcomes of relationships building activities could shed light on the effect of the physical context on the relational customer experience dimension.

Intuitively, the adoption of a relationship marketing perspective might inform studies of the effect of the physical context on customer experience in two ways. First, scholars might explore how customers' interactions with the physical context engender trust in, commitment to, and satisfaction with the firm. Alternatively, customers' trust in, commitment to, and satisfaction with the physical context itself might be explored, thus suggesting an integration of relationship marketing with place marketing. In addition, due to the often-extended nature of customer-firm relationships and the resultant longitudinal perspective of much relationship marketing research (e.g., Huang et al., 2017), integrating a relationship marketing perspective with customer experience research has the potential to support studies of the holistic and enduring nature of customer experiences, and the relevant effects of the physical context.

Service Consumer Behavior

Turning now to the consumer behavior research field, we identify four theoretical domains that explore constructs and concepts that might be applied to inform studies of the effects of the

physical context on customer experience: customer information processing, customer-to-customer interactions, self and social identity, and customer emotion. Within services, there is a need to further understand these elements of, and influences on, consumer behaviour.

Customer Information Processing

Services marketing researchers have argued that consumers are likely to face greater challenges in accessing, and subsequently processing, information relating to services than products (Gabbott and Hogg, 1994). However, physical service environments are likely to provide numerous diverse cues and sources of information. Within the consumer behavior field, a wealth of insight exists in relation to the strategies deployed by people when attending to and processing information from various cues in diverse contexts, and the resultant customer persuasion, attitude formation, decision-making, and behavioral change (Wei et al., 2016; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Myers-Levy, 1989). The literature on customer information processing includes several models of information processing strategies, which broadly distinguish approaches to processing information based on the extent of customer effort deployed. For example, the heuristic systematic model of social information processing (Todorov et al., 2002) differentiates between heuristic (superficial) and systematic (effortful) modes (Wei et al., 2016), with each mode triggered under certain conditions relating, for example, to the customers' cognitive capacity, and by variables such as task importance and personal relevance (Todorov et al., 2002). Similarly, Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) elaboration likelihood model distinguishes customers' central and peripheral routes when attending to advertising messages, and the selectivity model (Myers-Levy, 1989) differentiates approaches to information processing based on gender, proposing that men are more selective, attend to, and process fewer informational cues, and rely on heuristics to a greater extent than women (Myers et al., 2018).

Models of customer information processing strategies might be applied to studies of the effect of the physical context on customer experience, to gain greater understanding of how people interact with and respond to diverse cues within the physical context. Such cues might include signage or information specific to the context, such as where to wait or to hang coats, or could be of an aesthetic nature, such as furnishings designed to create a specific ambience or to display opulence. In addition to enriching research into servicescapes by exploring how customers process the information provided by the various cues and observing their resultant attitudes, decision-making and behaviours, studies applying a customer information process perspective might elicit the effect of the physical context on cognitive and physical customer experience dimensions.

Customer-to-Customer Interactions

Scholars have investigated customer-to-customer interactions (CCI) within service environments, exploring why people wish to interact with others (e.g., a need for information or recognition of shared interests), how such interactions take place (e.g., via casual conversation), and the resultant impacts on customer emotion, self-affirmation, perceived status, and satisfaction (Heinonen et al., 2018; Gruen et al., 2007). Consequently, by applying a CCI lens to studies of the physical context by, for instance, exploring how the context stimulates or facilitates CCI, scholars may reveal the effect of the physical context on relational and affective customer experience dimensions.

Self- and Social-Identity

Research within the services marketing domain has proposed that services marketers can use service environments to enhance consumers' identification with the service, and thus build brand equity (Underwood et al., 2001). A person's concept of self is defined as the "totality of

the individual's thoughts and feelings, having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg 1979, p.7). People are motivated to develop and maintain a self-identity that they perceive to desirable and characterized by positive attributes (Ahuvia, 2005). Consequently, people typically favor services and service consumption environments that have images congruent with their desired identity, thus enabling consumers to meet self-consistency and self-enhancement goals (Sirgy et al., 2000; Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Therefore, by exploring whether and how consumers perceive a physical service context as congruent (or incongruent) with their desired self-identity, scholars may derive insights into the effect of the physical context on the symbolic dimension of customer experience. Moreover, consumption constitutes an ongoing expression of desired identity (Holt and Thompson, 2004) as people's identity goals evolve and their identity takes the form of a continuing narrative (Liu and Kozinets, 2021). Therefore, by examining consumers' self-identity narratives and the evolving role of physical contexts in stimulating symbolic customer experiences, researchers might build upon extant knowledge of the holistic nature of customer experiences.

Rooted in social psychology, an individual's social identity refers to the aspects of self-identity that derive from their membership of groups (Ellemers and Haslam, 2012), such as religious, professional, socioeconomic, or those comprising sports fanatics (see e.g., Mishra and Bakry, 2021; Lintumäk and Koll, 2023). Social identities guide consumer behaviours, as the social group with which a person identifies when they interact with a firm or its offering influences their responses to their interactions (Champniss et al., 2015). Studies applying social identity theory have explored the circumstances in which social identities become salient and have highlighted how, in some scenarios, people's perceived membership of a collective exerts a greater influence on perceptions and behaviours than any individual motivations (Ellemers and Haslam, 2012). Therefore, studies exploring the social identities triggered by physical

contexts might yield valuable insights into the effect of the physical context on relational and symbolic customer experience dimensions.

Service Consumer Emotions

Prior research has provided knowledge of the role of emotions in service consumer behavior and the resultant effect on individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Huang, 2001). Studies of the emotions people experience in service consumption environments have applied a range of existing frameworks; for example, Borghi and Mariani (2022) apply Plutchik's (1980) wheel of emotions to explore how hotel guests feel when interacting with social robots within the physical service context; Koenig-Lewis and Palmer (2014) draw upon Richins (1997) consumption emotions set to study the role of emotions in satisfaction with graduation ceremonies; and Pantano and Scarpi (2022) apply the multi-dimensional emotion questionnaire (Klonsky et al., 2019) to research emotional responses to AI interactions during offline shopping experiences. Other studies, in contrast, have sought to derive suitable models and measures of service consumer emotions in specific service contexts. For example, Yoo et al., (1998) derive a model of emotional responses to retail store environments.

The tools and techniques deployed in studies of service consumer emotions could be employed in studies of the effect of the physical context on customer experience; for instance, research might explore the range of emotions stimulated by a physical context (or specific aspects of that context), the intensity, and the valence of the felt emotions. Moreover, as the theory of consumer emotions is underpinned by psychology (Huang, 2001), its application to customer experience research offers a potentially cross-disciplinary approach.

Further Cross-Disciplinary Research Opportunities

The discussion of marketing sub-disciplines highlights the influence of several non-marketing

fields, such as environmental psychology (services marketing), geography (place marketing), and food science (sensory marketing). Consequently, integrating perspectives from these sub-disciplines introduces an indirect cross-disciplinary approach. However, drawing directly on non-marketing fields of study might bring new insights into and extend our conceptualization of the customer experience. Adopting a cross-disciplinary perspective enables service marketers to move beyond a purely marketing view of the physical context to one which more broadly embraces the importance of the physical environment in human life and behavior. Indeed, there is evidence of researchers drawing on multiple disciplines in theory-building (e.g., Nehme et al.'s (2020) Spatial User Experience framework) to bring insights into this area. Examples of non-marketing fields upon which researchers might draw in future studies of the effect of the physical context on customer experience include environmental psychology, design, neuroscience, behavioral science, urban ecology, and health and wellbeing.

The field of environmental psychology provides the SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) and PAD (Pleasure-Arousal-Dominance) frameworks (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). The SOR framework underpins the servicescape model (Bitner, 1992) and has been directly applied in studies of customers' shopping behavior (e.g., Han et al., 2022) on the basis that approach/avoidance behaviors by customers (R) are largely determined by individual internal (cognitive, emotional, and physiological) responses (O) to the store environment (S). The PAD framework represents the human emotional states experienced within a physical environment (Elliot et al., 2021). The SOR and PAD frameworks might be applied to studies of the effects of the physical context on customer experience to develop insights into multiple customer experience dimensions.

The design literature recognizes that a physical setting can be designed to facilitate a positive experience for different types of users: the customer, resident, employee, or tourist, depending on the context (Nehme et al., 2020). Design can favor certain demographics and

researchers have highlighted the contrasting experiences of different groups in physical settings; physical spaces can be gendered (Adams, 2004; Kern, 2020) and racialized (Tuttle, 2022). Design-thinking has also been used to improve food consumption experience in settings such as shopping malls and restaurants (Batat and Addis, 2021). Consequently, adopting a design perspective to studies of physical contexts has the potential to reveal novel insights into the resultant customer experience.

Neuroscientific research offers insights into people's cognitive responses to their physical environment and the adoption of a neuroscientific approach could therefore shed light on the effect of the physical context on the cognitive dimension of customer experience. Studies within the neuroscience domain have generated recommendations for the design of healthcare centers, with the goal of optimizing the care provided for people suffering from poor mental health (Liddicoat et al., 2020; Eberhard, 2009). Neurologic data from smartwatches worn by Disneyland visitors helped to identify pain points such as queuing, so their Imagineering Team was able to reduce frustration through design of attraction entrances and improve customer experience (Zak, 2022).

Behavioral scientists have explored the impact of sites and settings on individual and groups behaviors (Scott, 2005), identifying diverse responses, such as privacy seeking and territoriality (Brown and Zhu, 2016; Kaya and Weber, 2003). The concept of psychological ownership can explain how people behave when environments change (Brown and Zhu, 2016). For example, in a study of territoriality in a shared accommodation setting, culture and gender were found to play a significant role in sharing behavior and boundary setting and influenced how space is personalized and considered part of one's identity (Kaya and Weber, 2003). A behavioral science perspective, therefore, has the potential to uncover the effect of the physical context on cognitive, affective, physical, relational, and symbolic customer experience dimensions.

The field of urban ecology focuses on urban locations (Niemalä, 1999) and explores interactions between humans and ecological processes using lenses such as niche theory (Alberti, et al., 2008). Consequently, by exploring physical contexts through an urban ecological lens, customer experience researchers may shed new light on the effects on the behavioral customer experience dimension. Finally, research into the drivers of individuals' health and wellbeing evidence the role of the physical environment as the site for structured activities that benefit individuals and public health (Burls, 2007). Health and wellbeing might, therefore, reflect measurable outcomes of the effect of the physical context on the affective dimension of customer experience.

Future Research Directions

The discussion in this editorial highlights five marketing sub-disciplines, informed to varying degrees by diverse non-marketing disciplines, which researchers might draw upon in future studies of the effects of the physical context on customer experience. In addition, we identify six non-marketing disciplines, upon which researchers might draw directly in future studies of this topic. Figure 1 presents a summary of our discussion and represents an initial map of the field of research into the effects of the physical on customer experience. When using the framework to inform future research, researchers might begin in the middle by identifying specific research objectives, and work their way outwards, considering first which marketing sub-disciplines are most appropriate and then whether any non-marketing domains are relevant.

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To conclude this editorial, we offer some potential research directions. Given the diversity of physical context, the complexity of the customer experience context and its enduring nature which spans the entire customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) the following

recommendations are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they mean to stimulate ideation around research agenda development.

First, scholars might explore customer experience in different types of context, such as smart cities, third places, or in dramatized service environments where employees adopt the role of interactive performers. Researchers might adopt methodological approaches infrequently applied to studies of customer experience, such as storytelling and narrative methods. Moreover, research could investigate collective or shared customer experiences in addition to those of individuals. Research endeavours could also support key movements within marketing fields, such as transformative service research and transformative consumer research. Finally, scholars might explore the effect of customer experience on the physical context, thus truly adopting a customer-centric perspective.

Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue of the Journal of Services Marketing comprises a commentary and six articles, all of which discuss the effect of the physical context on customer experience. As a collection of articles, they explore the impact on customer experience of a variety of physical contexts, from healthcare settings to luxury tourism facilities to places of work. Across the papers, insights are derived from the integration of a diversity of constructs, drawn from the wider marketing domain and from other fields, such as midwifery and heritage studies.

The special issue begins with an expert commentary from Professor Phil Klaus, in which he reflects upon extant customer experience research and provides informative visual depictions of two core streams of study and associated seminal works: the first stream focuses on customer experience in extraordinary settings; while the second explores customer experience management. Prof. Klaus then reminds us of the need for research that generates managerially relevant insights by capturing relationships between customer experience and key

customer behaviours, such as loyalty, and notes the challenges around achieving the required generalizability which arise in customer experience research that typically adopts a context specific, bottom-up approach to investigation. In concluding his commentary, Prof. Klaus provides a research agenda and highlights two key challenges to the advancement of customer experience knowledge: the need for holism in examining the customer experience construct and the requirement for studies in unextraordinary, mundane and day-to-day contexts. The articles in this special issue represent progress towards addressing the second of these challenges by exploring customer experiences of urban transport services (Mogaji and Nguyen, this issue) and examining the experiences of employees in the workplace (Kearney, Coughlan and Kennedy, this issue).

Of the six articles in this special issue, four explore the effect of the physical context through a servicescape lens. In the first of these articles, Erdogan and Enginkaya describe how they measure the impact of aspects of diverse museum servicescapes on customer experience and the resultant positive word of mouth intentions. In developing their study, Erdogan and Enginkaya usefully draw upon insights from the fields of museum curatorship, heritage research, and hospitality management, thus bringing a cross-disciplinary element to their work. Their findings emphasise the impact on customer experience of spatial considerations and design factors within a servicescape, usefully highlighting the opportunity for future cross-disciplinary customer experience research that draws upon the fields of architecture and design.

In the second article, exploring servicescapes as the physical context, Kearney, Coughlan and Kennedy's research applies an internal marketing perspective to a study of customer experience. Building on the concept of the service profit chain, they explore retail grocery store employees' experiences within their workplace. In so doing, they adopt the S-O-R framework and measure employees' emotional and behavioral responses to stimuli within the servicescape that constitutes their place of work. Their findings include an observation that employees

appraise their work environment as a single holistic construct, rather than as distinct aspects of a servicescape. Kearney, Coughlan and Kennedy's paper expands the rich field of servicescape research by siting the employee, rather than the customer or consumer, as the unit of analysis, and provides insights of managerial relevance to employers.

In the third article exploring the effect of servicescapes on customer experience, Furrer, Landry, Baillod and Kerguignas also apply the S-O-R framework and unpack the 'stimulus' element of the model by exploring the interplay between aspects of the servicescape and the behavior of other customers within the service environment. Focusing specifically on negative customer-to-customer interactions, and using the Critical Incident Technique, Furrer et al. delineate three forms of interplay between the servicescape and the conduct of other customers, which have a detrimental impact on a focal customers' experience. The authors also show that focal customers may attribute responsibility for these negative customer experiences to the service provider and, in accordance with the need for clear managerial relevance, outline a series of countermeasures that firms might adopt.

Krisjanous, Davey, Heywood and Bradford provide the fourth article with a focus on servicecapes. Their cross-disciplinary conceptual paper skilfully integrates theories from the fields of midwifery and healthcare research in the development of a Co-Curated Transformative Place (CCTP) framework. Grounded in an analysis of three distinct birthing environments, the CCTP embodies four steps through which service actors can co-curate physical resources within the servicescape in an agile and adaptive manner, to maximize the wellbeing of mothers and babies and enrich the value for all actors. The work of Krisjanous et al. contributes to the transformative service research (TSR) field and the authors provide an extensive and detailed research agenda, likely to provide inspiration for multiple future studies.

Krisjanous and co-authors' contribution to the TSR movement provides a neat segue into the next special issue article, written by Mogaji and Nguyen, which examines the customer

experiences of commuters with a range of disabilities as they use public transport services in Lagos, Nigeria. Using an ethnographic approach, Mogaji and Nguyen highlight how the physical environment associated with public transport creates challenges to service usage with detrimental impacts on customer experience. Moreover, Mogaji and Nguyen identify barriers to enhancing service accessibility, created by the conflicting priorities of services providers who, due to the unregulated nature of the service industry, are likely to experience vulnerabilities in relation to income and wellbeing should they adapt their service offering or address the physical constraints.

The final paper in this special issue focuses on a luxury tourism destination as the physical context of interest. Johns, Walsh, and Dale study customer experiences in an immersive, 5-star location on site at a zoo. They explore customer absorption in the experience, a subdimension of the broader customer engagement construct. Moreover, they adopt a quasi-experimental methodology and examine how interacting with personal networks via social media while immersed in the physical context impacts customer absorption, engagement, and experience. In addition to usefully linking the narratives associated with the physical context, customer experience, and customer engagement, Johns, Walsh and Dale's paper responds to calls within the wider services marketing field for research into the 'constantly connected' consumer.

No special issue is complete without acknowledging those who supported it. Our thanks go to all the authors for their contributions; we believe that these papers offer meaningful contributions to knowledge of customer experience and offer clear direction for future scholarly research into the customer experience and associated impacts of the physical context. We are also extremely grateful to all the reviewers for their invaluable and constructive feedback which enabled this special issue to achieve its final form. Finally, we would like to sincerely thank Professor Rebekah Russell-Bennett and Professor Mark Rosenbaum, Editors-

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Figure 1: Map of the Field of Study of the Effects of the Physical Context on Customer Experience.

Behavioral Science

Place Marketing

Urban Ecology

Design

Services Marketing

Research into effects of the Physical Context on Customer Experience

Sensory Marketing

Health &Wellbeing

Consumer Behavior

Relationship Marketing

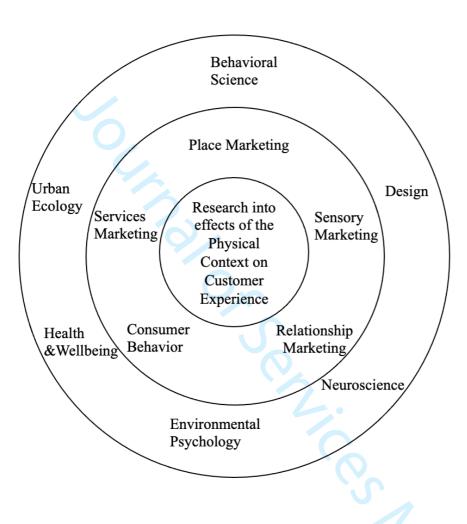Neuroscience

Environmental Psychology

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Figure 1: Map of the Field of Study of the Effects of the Physical Context on Customer Experience.

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Behavioral
Science

Place
Marketing

Urban
Ecology

Design

Services
Marketing

Research into
effects of the
Physical
Context on
Customer
Experience

Sensory
Marketing

Health
&Wellbeing

Consumer
Behavior

Relationship
Marketing

Neuroscience

Environmental
Psychology