

ADVANCES IN HOSPITALITY AND LEISURE

Edited by Joseph S. Chen

ADVANCES IN HOSPITALITY
AND LEISURE

VOLUME 17

**ADVANCES IN HOSPITALITY AND
LEISURE**

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EDITED BY

JOSEPH S. CHEN

Indiana University Bloomington, USA



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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Paulina N. Adzoyi</i>	Ho Technical University, Ghana
<i>Dilmurad Bekjanov</i>	Urgench State University, Uzbekistan
<i>Robert J. Blomme</i>	Nyenrode Business Universiteit, The Netherlands
<i>Yu-Jen Chiang</i>	National Taitung University, Taiwan
<i>Ching Chuang</i>	National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan
<i>Francisco J. Conejo</i>	University of Colorado Denver, USA
<i>Helen M. Dah</i>	Ho Technical University, Ghana
<i>Jonathon Day</i>	Purdue University, USA
<i>Rose Delgado-Krebs</i>	IU International University of Applied Sciences, Germany
<i>Enrique A. Gamboa</i>	National University, Costa Rica
<i>Elbek Hodjanliyazov</i>	Urgench State University, Uzbekistan
<i>Ben Q. Honyenuga</i>	Ho Technical University, Ghana
<i>Fangli Hu</i>	Fudan University, China
<i>Ergash Ibadullaev</i>	Urgench State University, Uzbekistan
<i>Andrea Insch</i>	University of Otago, New Zealand
<i>Colin Johnson</i>	San Francisco State University, USA
<i>Ad Kil</i>	Nyenrode Business Universiteit, The Netherlands
<i>Blaise Larpin</i>	University of Applied Sciences Western Switzerland, HES-SO Valais-Wallis, Switzerland
<i>Willy Legrand</i>	IU International University of Applied Sciences, Germany
<i>Wan-Yu Liu</i>	National Chung Hsing University, Taiwan
<i>Elizaveta Lohninger</i>	IU International University of Applied Sciences, Germany
<i>Peter Marty</i>	Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland
<i>Murodjon Matniyozov</i>	Urgench State University, Uzbekistan
<i>Umidjon Matyakubov</i>	Urgench State University, Uzbekistan
<i>Bunyod Matyusupov</i>	Urgench State University, Uzbekistan

Olimjon Saidmamatov

Miriam Scaglione

Han Shen

Urgench State University, Uzbekistan

University of Applied Sciences Western

Switzerland, HES-SO Valais-Wallis, Switzerland

Fudan University, China

AIMS AND SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Advances in Hospitality and Leisure (AHL), a double-blind peer-reviewed journal published annually since 2004, attempts to promote seminal and innovative research outputs pertaining to hospitality, leisure, tourism, and lifestyle. Specifically, this journal encourages researchers to investigate new research issues and problems that are critical but have been largely ignored while providing a forum that will disseminate singular thoughts advancing empirical undertakings both theoretically and methodologically.

This 17th annual volume includes seven full papers and two research notes. As for data collection, the articles deploy either a quantitative or qualitative approach. The contributors to the present issue come from 10 nations/regions entailing China, Costa Rica, Germany, Ghana, Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, and the United States of America.

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Layout of Manuscript: First page: title of paper and author contact information; second page: title of paper, an abstract of 120–140 words, and keywords; third page and beyond: main text, appendix, references, figures, and tables.

Text of Manuscript: For literature review articles, please include introduction, critical literature review, problems in past research, and suggestions for future research. For empirical research papers, please include introduction, methods, findings and discussions, and conclusion.

AHL requires electronic submission. Please send an email attachment with a Word format to the editor Dr. Joseph Chen (joechen@indiana.edu) or send a CD to Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, Department of Health and Wellness Design, School of Public Health Building #133, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47405-7109, USA.

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FULL PAPERS

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IT'S ULTIMATELY SOCIAL: EXPLORING THE COSTA RICAN BAR SERVICESCAPE

Francisco J. Conejo, Enrique A. Gamboa
and Andrea Insch

ABSTRACT

This study provides insights into the most salient elements of the Costa Rican bar servicescape/barscape (atmosphere). This is done qualitatively via six focus groups, six expert interviews, and six on-site observations. Results indicate that servicescape elements traditionally covered by the literature are of secondary importance. Participants instead emphasized social elements (other patrons, staff), supplemented by ambience elements (music, lighting, colors, noise, air, odors, scents). Moreover, the underlying socialization interest steered ambience preferences. Results support the increasingly important social servicescape notion. Generalizing traditionally studied servicescape elements across cultures and hospitality settings, as conventionally done, may result suboptimal. Commonalities might exist. However, research should be specifically contextualized to gain more nuanced servicescape understandings. Relating servicescape preferences to macro, meso, and micro considerations further enhances how servicescapes are understood. This study is the first to explore Latin-American barscapes. Notably, it expressly links servicescape preferences to patronage motives. It thereby uncovers why certain servicescape elements become important.

Keywords: Hospitality; leisure; social; servicescape; bar; barscape; atmosphere; Costa Rica; Latin America

INTRODUCTION

Much research addresses the effects of servicescapes (atmospheres, ambiance) upon consumers. According to reviews by [Turley and Milliman \(2000\)](#), [Ezeh and Harris \(2007\)](#), and [Mari and Poggesi \(2013\)](#), servicescapes have been found to increase establishment visits, time spent within them, and purchases, among others. [Roschk, Correia-Loureiro, and Breitsohl's \(2017\)](#) more recent metaanalysis confirms and qualifies the above authors' findings. Hospitality, in particular, is a service-oriented industry. It strives for satisfactory, ideally superb patron experiences. Servicescapes are, thus, increasingly deployed to enhance perceived quality. They engage consumers and thereby induce repeat patronage and positive word of mouth. Servicescape research is, thus, growingly important to the field of hospitality ([Åström, 2017](#)).

The above notwithstanding, perusal of the literature also reveals how servicescape research remains skewed. On the one hand, it addresses mostly retail contexts. When assessing hospitality settings, studies focus on mainstream establishments like restaurants or hotels. Less prominent, albeit potentially insightful venues remain neglected. On the other hand, research focuses on a few recurrent servicescape elements like music or color. Other, likely relevant elements lack attention. Finally, research pertains mainly to Europe and United States. However, culture moderates servicescape perceptions ([Muñoz, Wood, & Solomon, 2006](#)). Findings from these oft-studied locales are, thus, unlikely universal.

These imbalances limit servicescape theory and practice. Resolving them is important as the hospitality sector becomes progressively global, competitive, and nuanced. [Mari and Poggesi \(2013\)](#) invite researchers to study less common servicescape settings and variables. [Line and Hanks \(2020\)](#) invite researchers to explore hospitality servicescapes in different countries. This study heeds those requests. It addresses the Costa Rican bar servicescape, i.e., barscape.

Specifically, this study sets out to: (1) identify the most salient servicescape elements within Costa Rican bars and (2) provide an overview of the elements identified. The rationale being that before measuring any effects, the most relevant servicescape elements within a culture/hospitality setting must be ascertained. The reasons for elements' salience must also be first understood. Researching commonly studied, though perhaps contextually irrelevant elements, might instead lead theory astray. Hence the present study, which identifies and preliminarily understands the most salient Costa Rican barscape elements.

In doing the above, this study contributes to hospitality theory and practice in three main ways. First, via a rarely studied location. [Shen et al.'s \(2018\)](#) bibliometric analysis found nearly 90% of tourism/hospitality articles to cover only three world regions: Asia-Pacific, Europe, and North America. The authors lament the geographical imbalance and call to research underrepresented regions to enrich theory and practice. This study does so through an unusual context: culturally, by Costa Rica (CR) being a Latin-American country, and developmentally, by it being an emerging economy. Countries have long served as cultural proxies, as done by, e.g., [Kim, Park, and Suzuki \(1990\)](#). CR might seem like a Latin-American outlier. It has no army, experienced few wars, and was, thus,

able to develop better (Florek & Conejo, 2007). However, it is not unlike neighboring countries (Palmer & Molina, 2004). Present findings are, thus, deemed representative of the region.

Second, through an unusual servicescape setting. Early twentieth-century cocktail culture profoundly changed drinking. Bars went mainstream and became part of everyday life (Lender & Martin, 1987). Winery and brewery servicescapes have already been studied, as, e.g., by Terziyska and Damyanova (2020) and Carr, Shin, and Severt (2019), respectively. However, and despite their salience, research on ordinary bar servicescapes remains sparse (Grayson & McNeill, 2009; Martin, Jerrard, & Wright, 2019). This study addresses that gap. Bars were explicitly chosen for their cultural relevance and strong servicescape use. Bars are furthermore complex consumption environments. They combine functional, hedonic, and symbolic aspects. Studying bars also helps address the limited research on nightlife settings (Nghiem-Phu, 2020), insights possibly applicable to other hospitality arenas.

Third, via a qualitative approach. Servicescape research is heavily quantitative. Studies focus on how much servicescape elements affect the various consumer outcomes. However, the sensory inputs themselves, and their relative importance, remain neglected (Joseph-Mathews, Bonn, & Snepenger, 2009; Nghiem-Phu, 2020). Moreover, and despite being holistically perceived, few studies investigate servicescape elements concurrently (Line & Hanks, 2020). Especially absent are studies addressing servicescapes as a whole (Grayson & McNeill, 2009). The present study uses focus groups (FGs), interviews, and in situ observations to gain a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the CR barscape.

This study addresses an uncommon cultural context and hospitality setting via an unusual servicescape research technique. In doing so, this study contributes to servicescape theory. It also serves as a stepping-stone toward several future research opportunities. However, the insights offered not only aid students and academics but also help practitioners, especially less experienced ones, to develop more effective venues.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Asides from location, consumers use product and price cues to select the establishments they visit. However, further criteria become necessary in sectors beset by parity. Especially relevant when consumption occurs on-site, as in hospitality settings, are servicescapes. These are the environments in which goods and services are provided. In some instances, servicescapes are as relevant as other choice criteria. In other cases, they become the prime decision factor (Kotler, 1973). Servicescapes are essential to service delivery. Given services' intangible, fleeting nature, deploying palpable environmental cues helps positively influence customer perceptions. Cues may also enhance the consumption experience via different forms of added value (Bitner, 1992).

The notion of servicescapes impacting consumer behavior stems from environmental psychology's stimulus-response theory; see, e.g., Mehrabian and Russell (1974).

Establishments, like any other environment, contain abundant nonverbal stimuli. Upon entering these spaces, patrons sense their stimuli via sight, sound, smell, and tact (Nghiem-Phu, 2020). Perceptions influence patrons cognitively and affectively. They then trigger behavioral responses along approach–avoidance continua; patrons first evaluate whether venues are conducive to their personal goals. They then decide whether to stay and explore the venue or not. These responses translate into more-specific consumption behaviors. Examples would be ordering drinks or interacting with other patrons (Mehrabian, 1976).

Patron perceptions are subjective. They are also prone to attention, distortion, and retention biases. Personal and situational variables intervene as well. However, the stimulus–response model has been long validated across consumption settings, including hospitality ones. To mention but one early example, Milliman (1986) found that slower background music relaxed restaurant patrons. It thereby generated approach behaviors like longer stays and higher purchases.

Effective servicescapes are not easily achieved given the many elements they might comprise. Based on the literature, Table 1, below, compiles some servicescape elements applicable to bars. While partly overlapping, groupings illustrate servicescapes' extent and complexity. Though elements are not dichotomous, say having music or not. Each operates along continua of novelty, valence, intensity, and complexity (Mehrabian, 1976). These continua, and the many interacting elements possible, reveal how complex researching servicescapes might actually be.

Servicescape research has flourished over the past decades. However, studies focus on how much servicescape elements affect the various consumer outcomes. The sensory inputs themselves, and their relative importance, remain neglected (Joseph-Mathews et al., 2009; Nghiem-Phu, 2020). Before measuring their effect, the most relevant servicescape elements within the particular cultural/hospitality setting studied must be ascertained. The reasons for elements' salience must also be understood. Researching commonly studied, though perhaps contextually irrelevant elements, might instead lead theory astray. Hence this study, which identifies and preliminarily understands the most salient CR barscape elements.

METHODOLOGY

A three-stage qualitative design yielded the data on which the present findings are based. Data primarily comprised bar patron perceptions obtained via six FGs. Patron data were then corroborated/complemented by insights obtained from six bar expert interviews and insights obtained via six in situ observation sessions.

This study acknowledges informants' subjective reality. It, thus, meets interpretivist assumptions; see e.g., Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011). However, the researchers adopted a more moderate epistemology, *realism*. The latter accepts social phenomena's inherent fuzziness, though it also assumes that a single reality exists independently of how it is variously perceived. While informant perspectives might differ, they eventually converge on what is likely true (Healy & Perry, 2000).

Table 1. Some Servicescape Elements Applicable to Bars.

Exterior Elements	Internal Layout	Internal Fixed Elements
Building width, height, size Building style, materials, shape Building color combinations Wall textures, designs, decorations Terraces, balconies, windows Entrances, primary/secondary Parking on-/off-street, valet Security, doorkeepers, guards, parking attendants Lawns, gardens, landscaping, other outdoor features Marquee, frontage, signs, displays Crowds/lines waiting to enter	Space quantity Overall layout (open/partitioned, aesthetics/function) Size and location of patron areas (entrance, vestibule, reception, coat check, tables/booths/suites, dance floor, stage, bar, games, toilets, etc.) Size and locations of staff areas (bar, cashier, security, kitchen, bussing, office, etc.) Isles/spacing between all above areas (function/aesthetics). Patron/staff flows	For each area: Floors/floor coverings Walls, partitions (solid, semisolid, see-through) Skylights, windows, window coverings Ceilings Lighting (natural/artificial, intensity, colors, movement) For all above: materials, colors, textures, designs, patterns, cleanliness, condition
Internal Movable Elements	Other Internal Elements	Social Interaction
Size, shape, color, texture, design, comfort, recency, cleanliness, maintenance, condition, operation, appearance of: Booths, tables, chairs, other furniture Pictures, artwork, decor, plants Artifacts, signs, symbols, supporting themes Screens, PA, lighting, other entertainment equipment Desks, coolers, bars, taps, other service equipment Indoor signage, displays Awards, certificates, licenses, press clippings, business cards, flyers, brochures, stationery, menus, bills/receipts Food, beverage, tableware presentation Merchandise, souvenirs, displays, signage	Nature, type, variety, dynamics, recency, prevalence, quality, intensity of: Music/sound Video/imagery Games, entertainment Background noise Scents and odors Lighting Air quality Temperature/humidity Security, checks, bouncers, surveillance equipment Lines for toilets, drinks, games, etc.	Employee number/density Employee personal characteristics (age, gender, etc.) Employee appearance (uniforms, aprons, tidiness, etc.) Employee technical competence/efficiency Employee attitude (friendly, service-oriented) Other patron quantity/density (venue crowded/empty) Other patron quality (demo/psycho/behavioral characteristics) Privacy/identity concealment Personal/group space Personal/financial safety

Note: Broader servicescape aspects include the desirability of the neighborhood and street, whether the venue is on- or off-street, its ease of access via public and private transportation, and the desirability and compatibility of surrounding businesses, among others.

Patron insights were gathered via six FGs. This design choice derived from several factors. Among others, FGs simultaneously capture multiple perspectives, allow responses to build on each other organically, and allow data patterns to emerge faster. The group setting also helps cultural aspects manifest. All the above resulted in more relevant insights (Hennink, 2007).

Each FG lasted 90 minutes, took place at a CR state university, and followed generally accepted guidelines, like those suggested by Stewart and Shamdasani (2015). The servicescape literature informed a semistructured protocol. Broad

discussion questions were posed, supported by visuals to stimulate input. Questions included “Is a bar’s atmosphere important?”, “Which elements contribute most to a bar’s atmosphere?”, and “Why is the mentioned element important to a bar’s atmosphere?”. Discussions were allowed to develop organically to not steer findings. Only when more information was required or when discussions stalled or veered off-topic did the moderator intervene.

Sampling was purposive. As suggested by [Lune and Berg \(2017\)](#), participants were variously prequalified. First, as actual patrons, having visited a bar at least once a month during the year prior. This enhanced familiarity and insights. Second, geographically. CR’s Greater Metro Area (GAM) contains four major cities. To reduce location effects, FGs had at least one participant from each GAM city. Third, socioeconomically. GAM residents are primarily middle class. To reflect this, FGs had at least one participant from the second to fourth income quintiles, per [INEC \(2018\)](#). Fourth, by age. CR’s drinking age is 18. To increase bar experience, FG participation age was raised to 20. However, bar patronage decreases markedly by the mid-30s as people focus on their careers and families ([Zaldivar, 2019](#)). Participation was, thus, capped at 38.

Discussants were placed into three age groups: 20–25, 26–31, and 32–38. Age groups reflected students, early professionals, and advancing professionals. Two six-participant FGs covered each age group. One FG was male-only, the other female-only. Mixing ages and genders in the same FG would have otherwise altered discussion dynamics, muddling results. Notably, the four FGs that addressed older age groups comprised nonstudents. Doing so yielded more realistic insights. Including students in them would have otherwise skewed informants away from representing average adults.

Analysis followed [Lune and Berg’s \(2017\)](#) guidelines. FGs were recorded and transcribed. A research assistant did the transcriptions, and their accuracy verified against the recordings. The written data were then independently analyzed by the researchers. These inductively categorized the data into hierarchical themes. Identified themes were then discussed until reaching a consensus. *Saturation*, i.e., informational redundancy/sufficiency (see [Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)), occurred toward the mid-FG stage. Participants increasingly repeated what had already been mentioned. However, saturation lent credibility to findings. It also made findings somewhat generalizable, allowing preliminary theorizing ([Boddy, 2016](#); [Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006](#)).

What discussants claim oft differs from what they do. Observation reveals how individuals actually behave and how environments shape this behavior ([Boote & Mathews, 1999](#)). Six bars were, thus, visited: two were large, for dancing/events; two medium-sized, for hanging out/fun; and two small, for intimate conversation. Observations lasted 60 minutes each. They followed classic canons (covert/noninteractive) to preserve natural dynamics ([Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2011](#)). Researchers placed themselves in discreet vantage points noting barscape features and patron behaviors. Subsequent discussion of observations validated and refined FG findings. Visits also allowed researchers to experience barscapes directly, yielding *thicker* understandings (see [Hudson & Ozanne, 1988](#)).