

## **The Role of Third Places in Reduction of Mental Fatigue**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the role of restorative servicescapes on the reduction of mental fatigue and the personal and managerial benefits associated with this effect. Specifically, we base our arguments on Kaplan's Attention Restorative Theory (ART) and Oldenburg's Third Place discourse. We argue that commercial third places have restorative properties that reduce mental fatigue, also known as directed attention fatigue (DAF), a relationship that has been found in natural environments but has not been tested in commercial settings. We also explore how reduced mental fatigue impacts individual and organisation outcomes such as satisfaction with and loyalty to the organisation. If the results support our concept, this would suggest that commercial third places offer consumers relief or restoration from the intensity of busy work or home life, through a reduction in mental fatigue. In this way, both the individual and organisation benefit from what they respectively receive and offer. Specifically, we develop a conceptual model to represent our hypotheses, and plan research in two different third places, cafés and gyms. Data collection is expected to take place later in the year.

### **Introduction**

Following Sherry (2000)'s call to explore the holistic role of place beyond the functional, a recent stream of research investigates the role of third places, that is the place beyond the home and work, in terms of social linking. Oldenburg (1999 p16) defines these third places as "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work". Research on third places has shown that social support provided in commercial third places results in several consumer and organisational benefits such as increased loyalty and commitment to the place (Rosenbaum 2006, Rosenbaum et al. 2007) increased well-being (Rosenbaum 2008), increased customer voluntary performance (Rosenbaum and Massiah 2007) and perceived restoration (Rosenbaum 2009).

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan 1995) can be used to explain the link between third places and restoration. The theory proposes that time in a restorative environment that does not require directed attention - yet enables indirect attention which is resistant to fatigue - allows the attentionally fatigued individual to recover. Hence ART is concerned with the recovery from mental fatigue or directed attention fatigue (DAF). While the reduction of mental fatigue has been supported in the context of the natural environment (e.g. Berto 2005), the role of a third place commercial setting in reducing mental fatigue has not been examined. This is of interest to marketers, if positive outcomes result from reduced mental fatigue.

The purpose of the study is therefore twofold:

- To examine the role of third place commercial environments in reducing mental fatigue;
- To identify and assess benefits of reduced mental fatigue on consumer and organisational outcomes.

## **Literature Review**

### **Mental fatigue**

Mental fatigue is a psychobiological state that people may experience after or during prolonged periods of cognitive effort. It is characterised by subjective feelings of “tiredness” and “lack of energy” (Boksem and Tops 2008).

Research over the years has shown that mental fatigue impairs task performance, in for example requiring longer planning time for required tasks, and that this is exaggerated as task time increases (e.g. Lorist et al 2000; Van der Linden et al. 2003). Results show that that attention is specifically affected by mental fatigue (Boksem et al. 2005).

Attention is core to dynamic human behaviour: as it enables us to a) manage the processing of incoming information (e.g., Doshier and Lu 2000) so that we can focus on the information that is relevant for achieving the current goals and b) to filter out irrelevant information that might potentially interfere with or distract from those goals (Boksem et al 2005). Thus managing fatigue to enable attention is a critical factor in our day to day lives. A discussion of how attention can be restored follows in the next section.

### **Attention Restorative Theory**

Attention Restorative Theory is a cognitive framework which concerns recovery from mental fatigue or directed attention fatigue (DAF) (Kaplan 1995). While the outcome of mental fatigue is impaired performance, this results from a reduced ability of the individual to ward off distractions (Cohen and Spakapan 1987). Thus the focus of ART is recovering from mental fatigue or in other words recovering the ability to focus attention.

Kaplan (1995) distinguishes between directed attention and non-directed attention, following the work of James (1892). James describes the former type of attention as ‘voluntary’, effortful, and often tiring, and to be used when some task or object requires attention but does not naturally generate attention. This type of attention requires a form of willpower. James (1982) suggested that the only way to support action with respect to such a task is to inhibit all distractions, that is, protecting the rather weak intention from competing thoughts. Kaplan (1995) subsequently theorised that such a mechanism is subject to fatigue. Clinical neurologists have addressed a similar mechanism that they term ‘directed attention’ (Kaplan 1995). They identify that problems with directed attention relate to the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that has an inhibitory role in mental functioning. An important realisation of directed attention is that it is fragile and subject to fatigue, resulting in DAF. Directed attention then is a finite resource within a given time period.

The other form of attention, involuntary attention, in contrast, is effortless and allows the attentional system to recover (Berto 2005; Kaplan 1995). Kaplan associates this form of

attention with ‘fascination’ (p172b). Thus ART proposes that when a person is mentally fatigued or has DAF, then a stay in an environment that does not depend on directed attention allows the person to rest the inhibitory mechanism on which effective directed attention depends and thus recover the ability to direct attention again (Staats and Hartig 2004). In this sense the person is replenishing their ‘directed attention tank’.

Kaplan (1995) identifies several characteristics of a restorative environment. Three of these are recognised as aiding DAF recovery: ‘Fascination’, the core of restoration refers to a setting’s ability to hold a person’s attention effortlessly; ‘being away’ which provides people with respite from daily concerns or a feeling, albeit temporarily, of escaping to a different place; and compatibility which concerns a match between the environment and one’s purpose and inclinations thus lessening or nullifying the need for directed attention. Thus, according to ART, a restorative environment offers an opportunity to reduce DAF.

### **Types of Restorative Environments**

As identified earlier, the natural environment has been shown to have a positive effect on mental health (e.g. Berto 2005; Hartig et al. 1991; Pretty 2005). However, to what extent does a commercial environment, a servicescape offer similar benefits? Research on servicescapes has investigated largely utilitarian aspects of the environments, such as ambient attributes, space and function and signs, symbols and artefacts (Bitner 1992). However, the role of servicescapes on people’s lives is also critical (Sherry 2000). Rosenbaum (2009) has explored the restorative role of commercial third places, particularly focussing on video arcades for younger people, finding that restorative characteristics are associated with loyalty, word of mouth, expenditure and visitation. However, it is also important to focus on health and well-being outcomes for customers. In the next section we describe third places and how such places can be seen as restorative.

### **Third places**

Third places are distinguished in particular by their contrast to the first two places – work and home (Oldenburg 1999).

First they offer **neutral ground**. People can meet, without letting others get uncomfortably tangled in their lives. Thus a third place offers friendships which are beyond one’s private life.

Second, there is **no class structure**; the environment is a leveller and a democratic place at that. A visitor leaves behind his status, worldly problems and mood on entering a third place. The atmosphere is upbeat.

These first two aspects pave the way for the core focus of a third place, that is **conversation**. The conversation must be better in a third place, that is each person must be able to speak, so that conversation is roughly equal, they must be respected, the conversation is lively and the topic is of general interest.

Fourth, there is **accessibility and accommodation**. The place must be open for long periods of time, such that access is not too restricted. Further, the activities do not follow a strict format and allow for brief or long visits and do not penalise for missed visits.

Fifth, many customers are **regulars**, underpinning the character of the place, and offering a welcoming atmosphere.

Sixth, the place offers a **low profile**, that is it is unpretentious and non-threatening.

Seventh, the mood is **playful**, long serious conversations are not the norm. Joy and acceptance rule over anxiety and alienation.

Eighth, the place is a **home away from home**. A person feels comfortable, at ease, and welcome. The third place offers warmth and is ideally suited to the regeneration of the spirit.

Finally, the place generates the **habit of association** which is so necessary for the organization of society and a means of keeping people in tune with the social world around them.

Based on this we argue that a third place allows the individual to immerse themselves in another world, to escape their external role and enter into associations with others not dependent on their social status (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982). Third places are environments that stimulate interest and fascination that does not require directed attention; thus third places possess the restorative qualities described within Attention Restorative Theory discussed earlier that is a 'being away' quality, fascination, and by virtue of repeat visitation, compatibility. Hence we argue that third places are an ideal context to test the effect of restorative qualities on the reduction of mental fatigue or DAF, as predicted by ART. While the effect of the environment on reducing DAF and improving directed attentions had been examined extensively in the natural environment (e.g. Berto 2005; Hartig et al 1991; Tennessen and Cimprich 1995) it has not been in the context of commercial third places. We therefore propose that:

H1: The restorative properties of third places reduce directed attention fatigue (DAF)

Further, we suggest that the result of reduced DAF derived from third places results in favourable outcomes, such as improved quality of life (Cimprich 1993). Reduced mental fatigue has also been shown in the domain of health research to improve self-esteem and mood (Pretty et al. 2005). We argue that such a reaction results in more favourable evaluations of the third place environment. Such a view is supported by a range of literature including the field of positive psychology, which supports the role of optimism, hope and self efficacy on wellbeing, satisfaction and quality of life (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000); and mood congruency models such as that discussed by Mayer et al. (1992). These models reflect the desire, often unconscious, for cognitive consistency (Abelson et al. 1968; Johansson-Stenman, and Svedsäter 2008). Secondly, we view that a reduction in mental fatigue has therapeutic health and performance benefits (Lethbridge et al. 2005) which suggests that consumers would react favourably to the environment offering such benefits. This is also consistent with Bitner's (1992) Servicescape conceptualisation. We suggest:

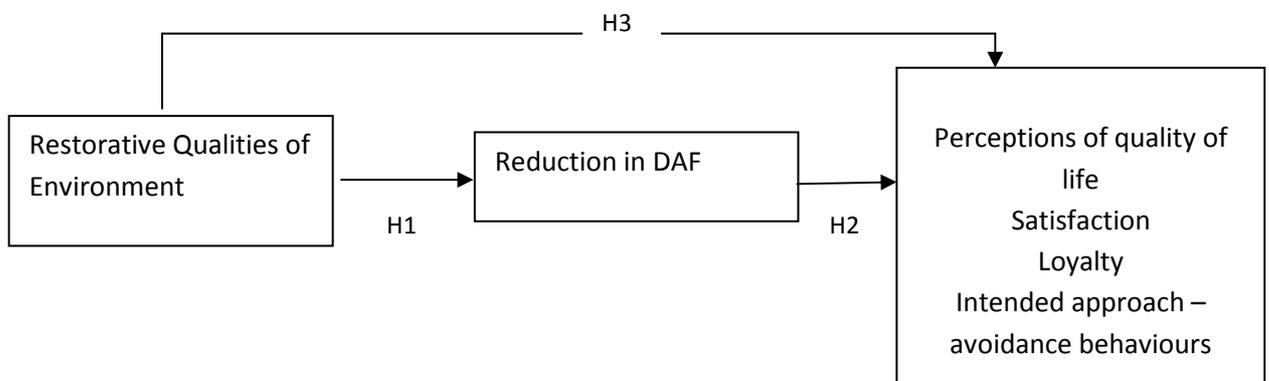
H2: The reduction of DAF is associated with perceptions of a) quality of life; and b) positive evaluations and intentions with respect to the third place environment

Korpela and Hartig (1996) show that the restorative qualities of an environment (being away, fascination and compatibility) have a significant effect on people's desire to spend time there.

Following this research direction, Rosenbaum (2009) has shown that restorative experiences in a third place (largely video arcades) enhance satisfaction with the environment and loyalty behaviours such as expenditure and word of mouth with respect to the environment. Based on this discussion we propose that perceived restoration has a positive effect on the evaluation of the third place environment. Thus we also propose a direct relationship between perceived restorativeness with respect to the environment and quality of life and place evaluative outcomes.

H3: The restorative properties of third places associated with a) perceptions of quality of life; and b) evaluation of the third place environment

The model summarising these propositions is shown below.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**

## Method

### Study context

We propose to study two quite different commercial third places, namely cafés, and gyms.

As identified by Rosenbaum (2009, p.177) “Service establishments, such as diners, coffeehouses, arcades, gyms, and bars, have an extensive history of providing informal settings or contexts that encourage and facilitate conversation, camaraderie, and the exchange of social support among patrons”. Third places are described by Oldenburg as representing the “core settings of informal life” (Oldenburg 1999; Oldenburg 2001) thus extending their commercial goal.

We thus argue that these two environments are third places that potentially provide contrasting attributes in terms of their service product, the demographic profiles of users and other utilitarian purposes besides social activity.

### Data collection

Approximately 200 responses will be sought from customers/members of each of the above contexts. Respondents will report on a single visit to the venue and will respond to their

assessment of the environment, their change in mental fatigue in the environment compared to before entering the environment and their intended response with respect to the service environment (e.g. intended loyalty) via a survey form. The data collection will take place as soon as possible after the focal visit by means of an online survey.

A random sample will be obtained from an Australian online consumer panel. The panel agency has more than 300,000 members who complete online surveys in exchange for small incentives in the form of points. The current study approach will involve recruiting respondents in advance and screening according to whether they have a café (or gym) that they visit frequently, and whether they view the venue as having at least some level of third place or restorative properties (a place that they are attracted to, feel comfortable in and feel some sense of escape). Respondents will be asked to log in to the survey immediately after their next visit (within a month of the invitation and screening) and complete the survey.

## **Measures**

Perceived restorativeness: Han's (2007) 12-item Perceived Restorativeness Scale, which was designed to evaluate a respondent's perception of being-away (2 items), fascination (5 items) and compatibility (5 items).

Reduction in mental fatigue (DAF): We adapt the 11-item Iowa mental Fatigue Scale (<http://www.healthcare.uiowa.edu/familymedicine/fpinfo/Docs/Iowa%20Fatigue%20Scale.pdf>)

Quality of life: We use a short form (4-item) of the perceived quality of life scale developed by Fox (2004).

Measures of loyalty, satisfaction and approach avoidance will be taken from established measures such as Cronin et al, (2000), Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Sweeney and Wyber (2002).

## **Summary**

This article follows Sherry's (2000) call to reconsider the role of place in people's lives. In particular we study the role of third places in reducing mental fatigue, a link supported by Attention Restorative Theory. While this link has been widely tested and supported in the context of a natural environment, it has not been in the context of commercial third places. Thus our study is the first to test this link in the commercial service environment context.

We also examine the relevance of reducing mental fatigue from both the customer viewpoint and managerial viewpoint by identifying the impact of reduced mental fatigue on perceptual outcomes relating to the individual (quality of life) and the organisation (e.g., loyalty). We test these relationships in two different third place contexts.

Results, if available, will be presented at the conference.

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