

MASCULINE SERVICESCAPES: MEN'S IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN BUILT COMMERCIAL ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

In this research, we examine how servicescapes, built commercial environments partake in the process of masculine identity construction. Using men's recreational training at the Mixed Martial Arts dojos/gyms, we demonstrate how a physical space of a dojo/gym contains and constructs a specific identity project, the fighter ideal, that would be difficult to realize elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

In this research, we seek to answer the question: How do servicescapes, the built commercial environments partake in the process of men's identity construction? We seek to answer this question in the context of men's recreational training at the Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) dojos/gyms. In marketing and consumer research, examination of servicescapes has been conceptualized through the lens of emplacement, enabling consumers to transport themselves into places of their imaginations [1], at times facilitated by close relationships with service personnel [10]. Existing work in this area has also highlighted the commercial environments in gendering practices played out at a barber shop/hair salon, an ESPN Zone, or the American Girl Place [3] [4] [7] [11]. Masculinity has largely not been the specific focus of these studies. We build on prior literatures in marketing, consumer research, and service scholarships to examine how commercial environments, particularly the MMA dojo/gym can foster men's identity project of becoming a fighter.

METHOD & FINDINGS

This is a multi-year ethnographic marketing study [2] that entails deep immersion in the context, including participant and non-participant observations, archival and media analyses, and long interviews. The long interviews [9] were conducted with 16 heterosexual men, who were members of MMA dojos/gyms located in the major west coast metropolitan area of the United States. The interviews lasted between 90-180 minutes.

We purposefully sampled mainly younger, single men, who practiced MMA recreationally and were current members of an MMA gym/dojo because this type of involvement exposed them to the shaping influence of a myriad of inter-customer relationships as well as relationships with service providers (the MMA instructor/trainer).

Prior research indicates that involvement in MMA is a more salient activity for men, interspersing the Western and Eastern cultural models of masculinity [5]. The preliminary interview findings point to how the MMA dojo as a physical space represents not just the masculine playground—it is the critical environment for orchestrating a particular type of masculinity, the fighter identity. The dojo is where this masculine identity construction process unfolds, guided by a multi-layered relational process between our informants and their sparring partners and the trainer/instructor. Fraternal-type bonds with co-trainers and paternal-like bonds with instructors forged within the dojo guide the initiation, formation, enactment, and maintenance of the martial masculine identity.

DISCUSSION & CONTRIBUTIONS

Our contribution lies in offering insights to marketing scholarship on the intersections among servicescapes, masculine identity, and socialization of gender identity. The current research shows that a physical environment, the dojo/gym can contain and construct a specific identity project, the fighter ideal, that would be difficult to realize elsewhere. Indeed, we find that it is the spatial confines of the dojo that enable young men to adopt and perform a fighter identity. This contrasts with the way gender construction in servicescapes is portrayed in prior marketing and consumer behavior studies as a mere setting where pre-existing gender identities are either rehearsed, or perhaps socially disapproved aspects of a gender identity can be performed [3] [6] [7].

Our study also informs theorizing on masculinity and consumption by revealing how institutional forces of martial arts traditions and the dojo system can facilitate the construction of a male identity. Finally, this research informs studies on the socialization of masculine identities [8]. In complement to the generational and familial thrust in identity socialization, we find how the relationships that unfold inside the dojo/gym system can act as socializing agents, capable of inculcating men with the ideas about their masculine identity rooted in martial ideals.

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