A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON OF TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HOTEL LOBBIES

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Abstract

This study examines cultural differences in the perception of hotel lobbies. It aims to determine the differences/similarities within spatial preferences in hotel lobbies by focusing on three aspects of space: physical appearance, configuration, and usage and privacy arrangements. To measure the differences, a survey is conducted in Sultanahmet, Istanbul with tourists within two focus groups from Asian and European countries (n= 30 each). They are asked to rate their agreement with each statement about the spatial features on a 5-point Likert scale. As a result, both differences and similarities in the perception of the tourists from different cultures are found. It can be noted that there are statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of configurational features and usage and privacy arrangement of lobbies. The results provide designers some data to create a space for similar user profiles.

Keywords

Cultural differences, spatial perception, tourist behaviour, user preferences.

Introduction

Architecture has emerged from the interaction between humans and the environment. In this context, environmental psychology provides data for designers by developing these links, as well as questioning and explaining them (Bell et al., 2001; Bonnes & Secchiaroli, 1995; Altman & Chemers, 1980). Environmental perception, an expression of how humans understand, grasp and interpret their environment, is a term used to comprehend how humans understand and interpret spaces within the framework of environmental psychology. Users' perspectives are significant, since spaces designed by architects are used by them. Moreover, the users' point of view is not objective, as the perception of humans is shaped by many personal and social factors. Within the scope of this study, "culture", one of the subjective factors shaping perception, is analyzed.

For the design of spaces that are used by people from different cultures (as in hotel lobbies), a significant issue to consider is whether users have different perceptions of the space due to their cultures, because this condition directly affects spatial preferences

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as well as the interactions of people within the space. This study is developed to question whether the perception of space changes according to the culture of the user. Analyzing the users' perception of touristic spaces offering cross-cultural services might be beneficial in providing data necessary for design studies.

The objectives of this study are as follows:
1. To determine the differences in the perceptions of Asian and European tourists regarding spatial preferences.
2. To define the preferences of Asian and European tourists concerning the spatial features of hotel lobbies.

Tourist Behavior, Tourism Environment, and Culture

When personal factors are considered, culture has a significant role. The role of cultural differences in determining tourist behaviour in spatial environments has not been given enough attention in tourism research. Cultural differences specifically pertain to the tourism industry. The tourism industry is gradually becoming more globalized. Moreover, cultural features represent the attractive aspects of tourism products, as tourism is a service industry in which people from different cultures meet (Pizam & Mansfeld, 2000; Reisinger & Turner, 2003:29).

Significant differences were reported among people from different countries or towns in their touristic behaviors (like shopping, buying gifts, or photographing) (Pizam & Reichel, 1996); destination images (Mackay & Fesenmaier, 2000; Lee & Lee, 2009); satisfaction levels of their travel experience with tourist attractions,

facilities, services, and prices (Kozak, 2001; Yu & Golden, 2006; Tsang & Ap, 2007); service quality expectation dimensions (Mok & Armstrong, 1998; Kvist & Klefsjo, 2006; Witkowski & Wolfinbarger, 2002); complaint behavior (DeFranco et, al, 2005; Yuksel et. al., 2006); and switching behavior (Lin & Mattila, 2006).

Tsang & Ap (2007) found that among the Asian and Western tourists visiting Hong Kong, Asian tourists were significantly less satisfied with the relational quality of service attributes compared to their Western counterparts. In the study of hotel atmospherics, Mok & Armstrong (1998) found that there were significant differences in service quality expectation dimensions among tourists from the UK, USA, Australia, Japan, and Taiwan. In a study conducted by Kvist & Klefsjo (2006), many similarities were identified between the needs and expectations of the service quality dimensions of Italian and British tourists, although some differences also emerge. Witkowski & Wolfinbarger (2002) compared service expectations of German and American customers. Results showed that German respondents had lower service expectations than American subjects. In terms of atmospherics, there were significant differences in the perception of atmospheric attributes between the Hong Kong and Houston samples. The differences were about "cleanliness", "restaurant temparature", and "restaurant decorations".

There is a rising trend in tourism literature to measure service quality and tangible elements, which seem the closest issues to examining spatial features in commercial areas of hotels. However, these studies cannot go beyond examining spatial environment as a medium for

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a servicing facility (Wall & Berry, 2007; Bell, 2008; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2004). For example, DeFranco et al.'s study (2005) distinguished atmospheric (environmental) attributes into six categories: level of cleanliness, level of noise, level of comfort, restaurant's temperature, restaurant's lighting, restaurant's decoration. Bitner (1992) listed three environmental dimensions: ambient conditions that include temperature, air quality, noise, music, and odor; space/function that is formed by layout, equipment, and furnishings; signs & symbols & artifacts that comprise signage, personal artifacts, and style of decor.

Spatial Perception

Perception is a mental process in which an individual chooses, organizes and interprets a stimulant as a meaningful and distinctive picture of the world (Rapoport, 1977; Sartain et al., 1967). It can be defined as "how we perceive the world around us" (Schiffman & Kanuk, 1987). The perceptual process by which we apply meaning to the world is a cognitive fact (Woodside et al., 2000:195). Environmental perception is one of the psychological processes that occur as a result of the interaction of humans with their environment.

Studies related to environmental perception, image and preferences in tourism differ in terms of scale. For example, some studies deal with this issue using the resort scale (Pearce, 2005; Tran & Ralston, 2006; Ryan & Mo, 2002; Vieregge et al., 2007; Awaritefe, 2004; Yuksel & Yuksel, 2001; Awaritefe, 2003). Tourism literature argues that the mental images of tourists concerning resorts are crucial in their decision-making process (Woodside et al., 2000). Similarly, a group of

authors emphasize the significance of positive perceptions by consumers in their selection of holiday resorts (Goodrich, 1978; Gartner, 1989; Woodside et al., 2000:193).

In addition to the resort scale, studies in the inner-space scale have been conducted in the tourism field as well, but the number of such studies is relatively few. In studies related to hotels as accommodation facilities, the focus is usually directed toward topics such as service quality and management (Ramsaran-Fowdar, 2007; Shanahan & Hyman, 2007; Mason, et al., 2006). In these studies, spatial features and their impact on preferences are very indirectly mentioned (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2003; Chan & Wong, 2006).

Thus, there is a gap in comparing tourists' perceptions of spatial features in hotel lobbies. This study aims to fill this gap by choosing definite and detailed spatial variables.

Methodology

The study aims to determine how tourists from different cultures perceive hotel lobbies. The people to whom the questions were posed were not expected to be staying at a hotel, since lobbies are spaces that are used not only by residents of a hotel but also by people from outside. They make use of the sitting areas for taking a rest, meanwhile, people can have something to drink, read a newspaper or have meetings there. Therefore, the lobby, which is mostly constructed as an integrated space with the entrance hall, hosts an intensive series of acts and happenings.

Lobbies are major common-usage spaces where different users meet and interact socially,

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as their functions and services are offered not only to the residents of the hotel but also to users from outside. This is the primary reason for the choice of lobbies as a field of practice.

Survey Design and Hypotheses

A survey is conducted to measure the perceptual differences of tourists. The survey questions were posed nonrandomly to tourists in Sultanahmet, Istanbul by using the convenience-sampling approach. Before proceeding with the questions related to the space, information on the subject of the study was given by explaining that the study was designed specifically in relation to the lobby of a city hotel planned to be built in Istanbul. The questions were given in a few sections. The first section contains demographic questions regarding gender, age, place of residence and education level. The answer options for these questions are arranged in categories. In the following sections, questions on space are given. These questions consist of three parts. In addition, to avoid any influence, the questions are not grouped into different parts but are arranged consecutively on the survey form.

The questions in the first part are on the physical features of the space:
1. I want a widely-glassed lobby.
2. I want a lobby with a high ceiling.
3. I want a dynamic lobby which is decorated with bright colours.
4. I want a lobby which is decorated in a modern style.
5. I want a lobby which has a traditional style.

Those in the second part are about the configuration and location of the space:
6. I want a lobby that has different levels on the floor (which means a few steps).
7. I want a lobby which can be seen by some other spaces, by galleries, etc.
8. I want a lobby which is directly connected to an entry hall and reception.
9. I want a lobby which is designed with a few small saloons.
10. I want an organic formed space.

In the third part, questions on features of usage and privacy are given:
11. I prefer sitting in small seating clusters which do not have a relation to the other clusters.
12. I enjoy meeting different people; I may sit near a stranger in the lobby.
13. I prefer sitting by the wall in the lobby.
14. I prefer sitting by a window in the lobby.
15. I prefer sitting in the middle part of the lobby.
16. I prefer sitting in a way that I can see the whole place.
17. I prefer sitting nearer to the elevators and stairs.
18. I prefer sitting nearer to the bar.
19. I prefer sitting nearer to the reception.

The survey questions are arranged as close-ended questions. The Likert scale is used to determine the relationship between the perceptions of people from two continents (Europe and Asia), which is one of the main objectives of this study. The scale is also used to measure the attitudes and tendencies of individuals. Attitudes, on the other hand, are developed through culture and perception. Therefore, scales for attitudes are widely used for measuring perceptions as well. According to the Likert scale, the options for answers are rated between the expressions, "I agree-I do not agree". Then, each expression is given

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Figure 1: Sample examples of lobbies to the physical features of the space as research variables (Source: Authors).

Figure 2: Sample examples of lobbies to the configurational features of the space as research variables. (Source: Authors).

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a score, and in this way, oral expressions are transformed into a quantitative state.

In the following phase of the study, the data obtained through the Likert scale are transferred into a computer. At this stage, SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), which is a statistical data analysis software, is used.

The basic hypothesis to be measured in the study is as follows:
"There is a difference between the spatial preferences of Asian and European tourists."

In addition to this, the other issues to be measured are as follows:
1. Whether the user would prefer a space to be both modern and culturally traditional
2. Whether the scope of the concept of privacy changes according to the culture of the tourist

Results

Participants
In total, 60 people participated in the survey; 30 of these were from Europe and the remaining 30 were from Asia. All the participants answered the questions completely.

Out of the 60 participants, 35 (58.3%) were women and 25 (41.7%) were men. There were 25 participants (41.7%) aged between 15 and 30, 22 (36.7%) between 31 and 50 and 13 (21.7%) were aged 51 and over. Of the 60 participants, 13 (21.6%) were high school graduates while 47 (78.3%) were university graduates or had a higher degree.

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative
Sexuality			
Female	35	58.3	58.3
Male	25	41.7	100
Total	60	100	
Age			
15-30	25	41.7	41.7
31-50	22	36.7	78.3
51-upper	13	21.6	100
Total	60	100	
Education			
High school	13	21.7	21.7
College-upper	47	78.3	100
Total	60	100	
Country			
Germany	9	15	15
Austria	4	6.7	21.7
Spain	1	1.7	23.3
Italy	1	1.7	25
Switzerland	2	3,3	28.3
Denmark	1	1.7	30
Holland	8	13.3	43.3
Portugal	1	1.7	45
Belgium	3	5	50
Malaysia	2	3.3	53.3
Singapore	2	3.3	56.7
Japan	8	13.3	70
China	4	6.7	76.7
Pakistan	1	1.7	78.3
Iran	3	5	83.3
Syria	2	3.3	86.7
Bangladesh	1	1.7	88.3
Yemen	1	1.7	90
Korea	5	8.3	98.3
Philippines	1	1.7	100
Total	60	100	

Table 1: Respondents (Source: Authors).

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Cross-Cultural Differences

Table 2 presents the p-value scores of the independent t-test results. P-values for "I'd prefer a lobby having an organic form" (0.043 with 95% reliability) and "I'd prefer to sit by a window" (0.064 with 90% reliability) showed statistically significant differences between the two cultural groups. Accordingly, the significant differences between the preferences of the two groups were based on the configurational and usage & privacy features of lobbies respectively. Mean values showed that Asian tourists' ratings were higher (3.90 and 4.13) than the Europeans' (3.47 and 3.77) for organic form and sitting near the window.

Preferences concerning "steps on the floor" differ between Europeans and Asians. The mean value of Asians for this item (3.17) was higher than that of Europeans (2.83). The mean value of the European group for "a few small spaces" was under 3 (2.90), whereas the mean value of the Asian group for the same statement was found to be higher than 3 (3.27). Similarly, regarding sitting near the wall variable, the mean score of the t-test for European tourists was under 3 (2.97), although the mean score for this statement of Asian tourists was higher than 3 (3.07). These results show an opposite direction for the preferences, despite the fact that they did not reveal statistically significant differences.

According to the mean values shown in Table 3, the top-rated physical items for the European respondents were "high ceiling" (3.97), "widely glassed lobby" (3.60), and "a traditional style" (3.53); and for the Asian group, "a traditional style" (393), "widely glassed lobby" (3.90), and "high ceiling" (3.83) were the top-rated physical features. Regarding the lowest rated item, it was the same attribute for the two respondent groups: "a modern style" (3.13 for Europeans and 3.20 for Asians).

The largest difference in terms of gap mean score (-0.40) was found in the attribute "a traditional style" with the highest mean score of 3.93 for Asian tourists and the third-highest mean score of 3.53 for European tourists.

In terms of configurational features, the two cultural groups shared the first and second top-rated items: "connection with reception" (3.83 for European group and 4.07 for Asian group) and "organic form" (3.47 for European tourists and 3.90 for Asian tourists) respectively. The lowest-rated item was the same for both groups: "steps on the floor" (2.83 for Europeans and 3.17 for Asians).

The largest difference in the mean gap score (-0.43) was found in the attribute "organic form" with the second highest mean score for both groups (3.47 for Europeans and 3.90 for Asians) (see table 2). This gap explains and supports the significant difference between the two groups in p-value for this item (see table 3).

Regarding usage and privacy arrangement, the top rated items for the European respondents were "sitting where the whole place can be seen" (4.07), "sitting by a window" (3.77), "sitting near a stranger" (3.60), and sitting in small seating clusters" (3.47); on the other hand, for the Asian tourists, "sitting by a window" (4.13), "sitting where the whole place can be seen" (4.00), sitting in small seating clusters" (3.73), and "sitting near a stranger" (3.57) were the top-rated features. The lowest-rated item was shared by the two groups: "sitting near elevators

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and stairs" (2.17 for the European tourists and 2.20 for the Asian tourists).

The largest difference in the mean gap score was in the attribute "sitting by a window" with highest score for the Asians (4.13) and the second highest mean score for the Europeans (3.77). Once again, this result supports the significant difference between the two cultural groups in p-value regarding this item (see table 3).

Accordingly, our main hypothesis, which stated that there is a difference among the spatial preferences of Asian and European tourists, is confirmed.

Correlations

Table 4 shows the correlations among three pairs of variables. The first pair was from physical attributes and the second and the third pairs were from privacy & usage attributes.

Independent t-test results		p-value	Mean
Physical features	Widely glassed	0.258	-0.3
	With a high ceiling	0.592	0.13
	Decorated with bright colours	0.356	-0.27
	Having a modern style	0.823	-0.06
	Having a traditional style	0.174	-0.4
Configurational features	Steps on the floor	0.3	-0.33
	Having a relationship with other spaces	0.697	-0.1
	Having a connection with reception	0.311	-0.2
	A few small spaces	0.126	-0.37
	Having an organic form	0.043**	-0.43
Usage and privacy arrangement	Sitting in small groups	0.303	-0.27
	Sitting near a stranger	0.871	0.03
	Sitting by a wall	0.715	-0.1
	Sitting by a window	0.064*	-0.37
	Sitting in the middle part	0.24	-0.27
	Sitting where all places can be seen	0.75	0.06
	Sitting near elevators and stairs	0.881	-0.03
	Sitting near the bar	0.118	0.4
	Sitting near the reception	0.665	0.1

* = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05

* = p<0.1; ** = p<0.05

Table 2: Independent t-test results (Source: Authors).

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Mean values		Group	M	St.
Physical features	Widely glassed	Europe	3.60	-0.30
		Asia	3.90	
	With a high ceiling	Europe	3.97	0.13
		Asia	3.83	
	Decorated with bright colours	Europe	3.27	-0.27
		Asia	3.53	
	Having a modern style	Europe	3.13	-0.06
		Asia	3.20	
	Having a traditional style	Europe	3.53	-0.40
		Asia	3.93	
Configurational features	Steps on the floor	Europe	2.83	-0.33
		Asia	3.17	
	Having a relationship with other spaces	Europe	3.47	-0.10
		Asia	3.57	
	Having a connection with reception	Europe	3.87	-0.20
		Asia	4.07	
	A few small spaces	Europe	2.90	-0.37
		Asia	3.27	
	Having an organic form	Europe	3.47	-0.43
		Asia	3.90	
Usage and privacy arrangement	Sitting in small seating clusters	Europe	3.47	-0.27
		Asia	3.73	
	Sitting near a stranger	Europe	3.60	0.03
		Asia	3.57	
	Sitting by a wall	Europe	2.97	-0.10
		Asia	3.07	
	Sitting by a window	Europe	3.77	-0.37
		Asia	4.13	
	Sitting in the middle part	Europe	2.37	-0.27
		Asia	2.63	
	Sitting where the whole place can be seen	Europe	4.07	0.06
		Asia	4.00	
	Sitting near elevators and stairs	Europe	2.17	-0.03
		Asia	2.20	
	Sitting near the bar	Europe	2.93	0.40
		Asia	2.53	
	Sitting near the reception	Europe	2.43	0.10
		Asia	2.33	

Table 3: Mean values of European and Asian tourists' perceptions (Source: Authors).

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Modernity and traditionality are two concepts related to architectural styles. They can be assumed to be opposite each other conceptually. Correlation analysis was applied to measure the relation between these two concepts. Table 4 shows that the correlation between modernity and tradtionality was negative for Asians, Europeans, and the total (-0.277 for Europeans, -0.285 for Asians, and -0.267 for the total which was also significant at the 0.05 level). As the trend for preference of traditional style increases, the trend for preferring modernity decreases, or vice versa.

"Sitting in small seating clusters" and "Sitting near a stranger" attributes are are about privacy conception. "Sitting in small seating clusters" may be a sign of a high degree of privacy or being open to communication with other people, whereas "sitting near a stranger" may show a lower degree of privacy. The negative but statistically insignificant correlation between "sitting in small seating clusters" and "sitting near a stranger" attributes showed that as the trend for sitting in small seating clusters increased, the trend for sitting near a stranger decreases, or vice versa. This relation is suitable in terms of the foresights on privacy conception.

As for the third pair, "sitting in the middle" and "sitting in a place where the whole place can be seen" seem to be similar behavior patterns in terms of privacy conception, as they represent being open to communication and contact with other people in the space. The correlation between "sitting in the middle part" and "sitting in a place where all places can be seen" was negative for Europeans (-0.409 and significant at the 0.05 level) but positive for Asians (0.566 and significant at the 0.05 level) with a total of 0.048.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

	R	p	Group
Having a modern style &	-0.277	0.138	Europe
	-0.285	0.127	Asia
Having a traditional style	-0.267	0.039*	**Total**
Sitting in small seating clusters & Sitting	-0.162	0.393	Europa
	0.023	0.906	Asia
near a stranger	-0.065	0.622	**Total**
Sitting in the middle part & Sitting in a	-0.409	0.025*	Europe
	0.566	0.001*	Asia
place where the whole place can be seen	0.048	0.713	**Total**

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 4: Correlation analysis for some spatial variables (Source: Authors).

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Conclusion

Lobbies are like the display windows of hotels; moreover, they are significant and functionally rich spaces since they host many forms of activities. If lobbies with common spatial elements and features are established, the individual will not experience a feeling of discomfort due to foreign elements, whichever country they visit. This argument seems to be the positive aspect of the convergence theory.

This study aimed to draw a new framework for the perceptions of tourists of a lobby space. The main research question was whether there were differences between the perceptions of the tourists from European countries and Asian countries. Independent samples, the t-test and mean values were used to measure the differences.

As confirmed in the t-test results for our main hypothesis, tourists from different cultural backgrounds have different perceptions of spatial attributes of lobby spaces. The differences in the perceptions of European and Asian tourists were about configurational spatial attributes and privacy & usage attributes. These findings support the view of past studies (Altman & Chemers, 1980; Hall, 1966; Rapoport, 1977) that made systematic observations about the relationship of human culture and built environment, and determined that built environment was shaped and affected by culture. This study differs from previous architectural studies with its specific descriptions of interior spatial variables and with its choice of a special tourist interior environment: lobby space.

The results of the study reveal that the negative correlation between modernity and traditionality for both groups proves that they are opposite concepts in terms of architectural style and are also perceived by tourists as opposite concepts. Mean values showed that traditionality got higher ratings from all the tourists in the study when compared to modernity. This result shows that although globalization has brought sameness to spaces and minimized the local and traditional attributes, tourists still prefer to experience traditional and local features of the places they visit. This is consistent with the results of Suh & Gartner's study (2004) who found that travellers from distant origins or countries evaluated local culture as most valuable.

The results of the correlation-analysis-related privacy items showed that behaviour patterns like "sitting in small seating clusters" and "sitting near a stranger" are perceived by Europeans and Asians as items representing the same degree (low degree) of privacy. The correlation of "sitting in the middle part" and "sitting in a place where all places can be seen" was negative for Europeans, which meant Europeans did not form a relation between this pair of items; whereas the correlation for Asians was positive, which can be associated with their having a low degree of privacy and being from a high-contact culture. This is consistant with what Hall (1966) indicated in his study about comparison of Asian and European cultures. Asian people are used to close proximity, and they are seen as members of a high-contact culture.

Studies on spatial perception are significant in terms of comprehending how spaces acquire a reality within the inner worlds of the users. Such

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studies have become the subject of sociology, psychology, social anthropology and tourism research. However, these studies should also be given emphasis in the field of architecture, as they enhance spatial quality in accordance with the preferences of users. Researchers could conduct more specific studies related to spatial perception and the impact of culture on spatial perception by limiting the demographic features of the users and having different user profiles.

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