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An Investigation into the Influence of Situational Components in Hospitality Retailing

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Abstract

Although the importance of situational influences on consumer behaviour has been recognised for some time, little research has been conducted into their effects in hospitality retailing. Over the past decade the Irish theme pub sector has enjoyed extensive growth, which recent studies attribute to the situational components inherent within the environment. This study sought to identify and evaluate the situational components that influence consumers within Irish theme pubs and to gauge the influence of each of the dimensions of an established situational model on customer behaviour among gender and age cohorts. A three phase, mixed method research design was used and respondents were selected from six Irish theme pubs in Melbourne. The study found that both physical and social situational components have a significant influence in attracting, serving and satisfying the needs of consumers.

Keywords

Situational influences, atmospherics, theme pubs, inanimate environment, contact personnel.

Introduction and research tradition

The impact of situational components on consumer choice has long been recognised as an important aspect of retail marketing. Indeed, the theoretical foundation of situational influences dates back to Lewin's field theory (Lewin 1935, 1936, 1938, 1951), which concluded that human motivations, intentions, and behaviour are a function of the interaction between consumers and situations. In Lewin's view, situation was a dual construct comprised of the 'objective' world outside of the individual, which could be described in terms of physical and social variables, and the 'subjective' world or psychological environment, which referred to the individual's perception, and constructions of the physical environment described in terms of psychological variables.

Consumer perceptions also feature in Barker's (1968) work, which proposes that situation involves a behaviour setting that urges people to perceive some situational needs. Frederiksen (1972) argues, however, that since not all aspects of the situation affect behaviour, it is pertinent to focus only on those aspects of the situation that do influence behaviour. Consequently, he defined consumption situations as social surroundings, physical surroundings and task definition.

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Belk (1974) refined situation to include a temporal dimension defining situation as a discrete time and place occupied by one or more persons. More recent studies also give credence to time proposing that situation entails all of those factors particular to a time and place of observation that have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behaviour (Lai 1991; Quester et al. 1998).

The research reported by Foxall (1983, 1990, 1996; 1997a; 1997b), Foxall and Greenley (1998; 1999) and Leek, Maddock and Foxall (2000) extends our understanding of situation, concluding that situational influences on consumer behaviour can be comprehended in terms of the consumer behaviour setting, consumption history, utilitarian reinforcement, informational reinforcement and aversive consequences. Indeed, Leek, Maddock and Foxall (2000) include all of these dimensions in their summary of situation, indicating that the consumer situation is the point in time and space at which a particular consumption history and a specific consumer setting intersect, providing opportunities for the individual to gain from purchasing, consuming or avoiding either or both of these actions and their consequences. In their discussion, the consumer's consumption history refers to previous buying behaviour for the product concerned, and its positive (rewarding or reinforcing) and negative (punishing or costly) outcomes. Thus the consumer behaviour setting, experience and its consequences, transform the social and physical stimuli that comprise the setting into environmental cues.

Three types of situations are relevant to marketing strategy: the communication situation, the purchase situation, and the consumption situation (Hansen 1972, Belk 1979, Lai 1991). A review of literature has found that there is an extensive body of research that utilises these variables to evaluate consumers' attitudes towards products. These include investigations of the effects of situational variation on consumer purchase intentions (Richins & Bloch 1986) and brand choice (Chow et al. 1990) as well as the promotion and consumption of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages (Sandell 1968; Belk 1974; Bearden and Woodside 1977; Woodside and Clokey 1977; Lai 1991; Quester & Smart 1998; Hall and Lockshin 2000, Olsen et al. 2001; Hall et al. 2002)

The review found, however, that although some studies have been conducted into the effects of situational components within the service sector, the majority of these studies focus on physical issues such as the design of shopping precincts and store layout (Donovan and Rossiter 1982, McGoldrick & Pieros 1998, Turley and Millman 2000 Turley and Furgate 1992) or on financial services (Srivastava 1980; Zeithaml et al. 1990). As a result, a research gap exists in that the influence of situation on consumption within a pub setting has not been adequately investigated.

Over the past decade, Irish theme pubs have been exceedingly popular and profitable entities within the leisure and hospitality sector both at national and international levels (Goldsmith 1996; Walkup 1997; Brown and Patterson 2000, West 2001). Moreover, a recent UK based study proposes that the phenomenal success of Irish theme pubs can be attributed to the added value experience that is provided by the environment in which the product is sold (Knowles & Howley 2000).

Having discussed the research tradition, this paper will provide a brief background to the conceptual frameworks of situational research. The aims and research questions are then presented and the research methodology is described. The results are then presented and discussed and the implications of the research for marketing practitioners and for further research are highlighted.

Research orientation

As noted in the introduction, no previous studies have been conducted into the influence of situation within Irish theme pubs. Consequently a research framework that could incorporate both physical and social aspects as well as consumer perceptions of the theme pub environment was sought. Bitner's "servicescape" model was one possible approach. In

Bitner's evaluation of service encounters (1992, p.58) she coined the term "servicescape" to describe the '... built environment (i.e. the manmade, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment)'.

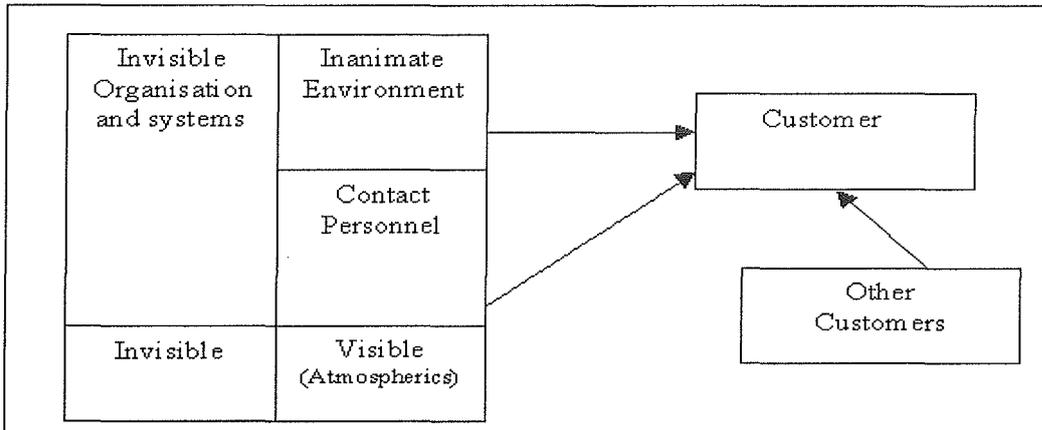
However, research by Brown and Patterson (2000, p.658) concludes that theme pubs are all about 'capturing the essence of the represented phenomenon' in both a physical and socio-cultural sense. Their study highlights the strong social dimension of theme pubs, a feature that is commensurate with the nature of leisure services in general. A major feature of this social dimension is the interaction between various entities including employees and customers as well as customers with other customers (O'Mahony 2002). This type of consumer interaction is accounted for in the Servuction model, a services marketing framework that is comprised of two principal components, the invisible aspects of service that occur backstage and the visible or frontstage dimensions (Langeard, et al 1981).

In 1995 Berman and Evans (1995) incorporated the dimensions of servicescape and servuction in a model developed to investigate service based retail encounters. Hoffman and Turley (2002) subsequently modified this framework to incorporate a number of theoretical aspects of situation that can influence the consumer experience. The model which Hoffman and Turley entitled the *atmospherics* model (See figure 1) was deemed appropriate to guide this study because many of the dimensions incorporated in the model have a significant influence on attracting, serving and satisfying the needs of on premises consumers (Hoffman and Turley 2002) which is an important aspect of hospitality retailing.

Components of the Hoffman and Turley model

The principal components of the Hoffman and Turley model are the visible and invisible situational components also referred to as *atmospherics*. An outline of these dimensions is provided below.

Figure 1: Atmospheric Influence on the Consumer Experience (Hoffman & Turley 2002, p.40).



Invisible atmospherics

In the Hoffman and Turley model, the term “invisible atmospherics” incorporates two elements. Firstly, there is the invisible organisation and systems, which involves managing the environment, the provision of goods and services and the selection, training and management of personnel. This encompasses various management styles as well as the, often extensive, documented management procedures that form part of the system of management. These procedures can vary greatly between different entities within the hospitality retail sector, especially in the provision of food and alcoholic beverages. At McDonalds restaurants, for example, the major management focus is on implementing a rigid set of management principles; recipes and guidelines in order to ensure that both the product and service are uniform and consistent. It is important to note, however, that consumers are often not aware of this controlling influence.

The second element of the invisible environment includes intangible situational influences, such as perceptions of service quality, friendliness of staff and general atmosphere. These dimensions have also been found to be influential in the service quality literature where they are associated with the willingness of staff to respond to customers needs as well as product knowledge and competency (Zeithaml et al. 1990).

Visible atmospherics

Visible atmospherics include the inanimate environment as well as contact personnel. In themed environments this can include colours such as known national colours (e.g. the green, white and orange associated with Ireland) posters, artefacts, and other theme-related decorations. The pint-sized glasses used for beer in pubs in Ireland for example, are currently used to reinforce the theme in Irish theme pubs in Melbourne, a practice that does not normally occur in pubs in Australia.

Inanimate environment

The inanimate environment includes both the exterior and the interior of the sales environment. The exterior environment in the atmospherics model operates on two levels. The first of these relates to the location of the outlet, the provision of parking, windows, colours and signage. The second is concerned with the macro environment of the venue including issues like whether the sales environment is located within a shopping centre and what kind of other businesses are in the vicinity.

The interior environment includes the overall interior environment as a whole (image), music and sounds, ambient colours, lighting, design and layout, product displays, internal signage, decorative style and provision for patron comfort. Within Irish theme pubs each of these components is strongly connected to the notion of authenticity (O'Mahony 2002).

Contact personnel

The term "contact personnel" includes the number of service providers, their appearance, and skill level or ability to perform the retail task. There are recognised links between this dimension of the atmospherics model and the "tangible" dimension of service quality outlined by Zeithaml et al. (1990). In the hospitality industry, in general, tangible aspects of the environment can include uniform and personal grooming with a strong emphasis on those aspects of employee presentation that relate to hygiene such as hair, makeup and the amount of jewellery worn by contact personnel.

Customer

A central part of the model is customers and their interaction with other components of the model including the environment and the nature and level of interaction with other customers.

Other customers

The manner in which customers' interact as well as issues such as crowding or the lack of customer numbers is a key aspect of the hospitality retail experience.

Aims of the study

The aim of the study was to identify and evaluate the situational components that influence consumers within Irish theme pubs in Melbourne and to gauge the influence of each of the dimensions of the Hoffman and Turley model (Figure 1) on customer behaviour among gender and age cohorts.

Methodology

Since little research has been conducted within Irish theme pubs, a 'sequential mixed method design' approach was employed (Tashakori and Teddlie 1989). When using 'sequential mixed method designs, the researcher conducts a qualitative phase of a study and then a separate quantitative phase, or vice versa' (Tashakkori & Teddlie 1989, p.46). This study began with a quantitative survey of Irish theme pub customers, which was designed to identify the physical and social atmospheric variables that might have an impact on attracting customers to Irish theme pubs. Using a convenience sampling method, a quantitative questionnaire was distributed to customers in six Irish theme pubs, in Melbourne. The main focus of the investigation was the relatively new Irish theme pubs because these pubs were perceived to have set a particular trend in terms of situational influences. Five of these pubs were selected for the study, however, for the purpose of comparison, one of the older, established Irish pubs was also included. An important aspect of the collection of data was that customers had to be there during their leisure time. Consequently, the surveys were conducted at specific times on Friday and Saturday nights.

A further sampling consideration was that some Irish theme pubs are located in the city of Melbourne while others are in the suburbs. In this study three pubs were chosen from within the city of Melbourne and the other three were suburban. A non-probability quota sample of 320 respondents was obtained from the six Irish theme pubs. The quantitative data was used to build a profile of Irish theme pub customers and to solicit information about the reasons why those respondents were attracted to Irish theme pubs. It was further used to gain a demographic profile of Irish theme pub customers; to collect data on age, gender, average spend and frequency of visitation and to select a broad-based, inclusive sample of respondents for a more in depth, qualitative study.

The inclusion of qualitative methods was important because few studies have been conducted into Irish theme pubs, and according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) 'qualitative methods can be used to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little yet is known' (p.19). Following the analysis of the questionnaire data, four respondents from each pub were selected to take part in an in-depth interview. The sample comprised a range of age groups and occupational types and was gender-balanced.

At interview the variables of the atmospheric construct were further explored and elaborated upon and a culturally aligned code name was given to each respondent. This meant that if a respondent's name was Michael Murphy, an obvious Irish name, a similarly Irish name was given as the code name, for example, Patrick O'Brien. This allowed for some tracking to occur during the analysis so that those of Irish heritage could be grouped if necessary. Although the sample was a purposeful, non-probability quota sample, Table 1 shows some of the characteristics of respondents highlighting the gender balance, range of age groups and occupational status.

Finally, in order to corroborate the findings of the customer-oriented research, interviews were also conducted with the owners or managers of the six theme pubs. Using a semi-structured interview format, this involved presenting the various themes identified as important by customers and soliciting the owners views on the importance of these issues to the theme pub product.

Table 1: List of respondents including their culturally aligned code names

Code Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Name of Pub
Anne Brennan	Female	34	Entertainer	Finbar's
Chris Brennan	Male	36	Entertainer	Finbar's
Katrina Womax	Female	20	Secretary	Bridie O'Reilly's
Daniella Rhodes	Female	19	Student	Pugg Mahone's
Jane Williams	Female	19	Students	Bridie O'Reilly's
Jonathon Harvey	Male	20	Barman	The Dan O'Connell.
Trevor Edwards	Male	20	Service station attendant	The Dan O'Connell.
Anthea Stuart	Female	26	Employment consultant	Pugg Mahone's
Robert Hill	Male	20	Bar manager	P. J. O'Brien's.
David Phillips	Male	39	Business consultant.	Bridie O'Reilly's
Kevin Richards	Male	37	Tour operator	Bridie O'Reilly's.
Lawrence Hopkins	Male	34	Economist	Finbar's
Liz Steiner	Female	41	Office administrator	P. J. O'Brien's
Stephanie McEvoy	Female	34	Social worker	The Dan O'Connell
Lauren Davison	Female	33	Public servant	The Quiet Man
Jack Parker	Male	55	Lecturer	P. J. O'Brien's
Paul Murphy	Male	23	Retail manager	Pugg Mahone's.
Rosemary Martens	Female	47	Teacher	P. J. O'Brien's.
Ben Davison		30	Plumber	The Quiet Man
Ron McIntosh	Male	41	Business Manager	Finbar's
Deirdre O'Sullivan	Female	36	Home Duties	The Quiet Man.
Vincent Flood	Male	19	Student	Pugg Mahone's.
Richard Ellis	Male	28	Manager	Bridie O'Reilly's
Patricia Jones	Female	24	Student	The Quiet Man

Analysis and results

From the quantitative study a sample of 320 respondents were surveyed, of which 298 usable questionnaires were obtained. This comprised of 44.3% male and 55.7% females of which 87% visit a “pub” at least once a month with 75% visiting an “Irish pub” at least once per month. Approximately 77% of respondents raised *atmospherics* or situational components as an important characteristic in relation to their choice to visit an Irish pub. The major emphasis was on social aspects, for example, friendliness (21%), people (21%), fun (9%), culture (7%), staff (6%), welcome (4%), and accents (4%). The average amount spent per visit for respondents was \$44, with 70% of respondents spending at least \$25 per visit.

Atmosphere and Gender

While atmosphere is important for both genders it was found to be far more important for females, as 85.0% of females believed *atmosphere* to be important, compared with 70.1% of males (Chi Square Sig. Diff. @0.05).

Age and Atmosphere

Atmosphere is important for all age groups with a somewhat decreasing trend with age (See Table 2).

Table 2: Importance of atmosphere to age cohorts.

Age range (yrs)	18-20	21-25	26-30	31-40	41+
Percentage	82.4	81.8	80.8	71.8	69.4

Influence of atmosphere across age and gender cohorts

Atmosphere is very important for females of all age groups; it is significantly less for males with a somewhat decreasing emphasis with older age groups, but nevertheless, still an important consideration for males also (Table 3).

Table 3: Importance of atmosphere to gender and age cohorts.

Age range (yrs)	18-20		21-25		26-30		31-40		41+	
Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Percentage	75.0	88.9	74.2	88.6	77.1	86.7	66.7	80.8	57.6	82.8

Chi Square Sig. Diff. @0.05

Having demonstrated the importance of *atmospherics* from a quantitative perspective, further insights are provided using the qualitative data. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed and a summary is presented under the individual constructs proposed in the Hoffman and Turley model. Selected quotations from respondents' are included using the code names presented earlier in Table 1. These are highlighted in italics in order to distinguish them from the rest of the narrative. Qualitative quotes from the owners or managers of the Irish theme pubs are also presented in this format. In this instance, however, the pub owners and managers have been named with their consent.

Invisible organisation and systems

The invisible organisation and systems includes the way the environment is managed. While all of the respondents were positive about the Irish theme pub environment, authenticity was raised as an important theme in this study and also permeated a number of

other themes. One respondent, code named Ron, offered a view on Bridie O'Reilly's, a large Irish theme pub in Melbourne that is licensed to cater to up to 700 customers. Ron observed that it was bright and clean but not new looking which he believed was a deliberate attempt to make it look old. *It's like an artifice of what these pubs are expected to be but at the same time appealing to peoples sensibilities* he asserted. Ron was one of a number of respondents who compared Bridie O'Reilly's to McDonald's asserting that it was contrived as a marketing exercise rather than an effort to share Irish culture. Several other respondents also felt that Bridie O'Reilly's was overdone leading them to conclude that it is not authentically Irish. It was curious that the majority of these respondents had never been to Ireland and so they were expressing their perceptions of what an authentic Irish pub might be like. Like Ron, however, they believed that Irish theme pubs should be vectors for the sharing of Irish culture.

Nevertheless, all of the respondents expressed the view that Irish theme pub owners have created a point of difference from other pubs that is recognisable to customers. Indeed, Jack reported that there are a number of visible distinguishing features about these pubs that identify them as distinctly Irish. He went on to say:

I think if I were blind folded and taken into a pub and it's revealed to me I could tell immediately that it is an Irish pub. So in saying that I think that, yes, I think that they have tapped into something that's recognisable. Whether it is fair dinkum Irish or not is a bit hard to say.

Invisible

The invisible environment is different from the invisible organisations and systems in that it includes intangible situational components such as friendliness. When questioned about the reasons for the popularity of Irish theme pubs all of the respondents stated that a major attraction was the atmosphere. This invisible aspect was perceived to be positive and was summarised by Robert who reported that *there was no trouble [which he believes was] probably because of the atmosphere that was generated. It's happy, there's no negativity in there whatsoever.* Liz concurred stating *I have never been in a situation in an Irish pub where I felt uncomfortable or have seen any problems. I'm sure that they have their problems but it's never been obvious to me.* Rosemary agreed but also noted a cultural element advising; that *going to an Irish pub from outside the culture is a different kind of experience than going to a pub within your own culture.*

Robert also believes that the positive atmosphere in Irish theme pubs is created and enhanced by the interaction between customers and the bar staff. *... If they [the staff] see someone sitting there they'll go up and they'll most likely talk to them, they'll chat to them ...* he reported, asserting that there is something unique or special about the way Irish people interact with others. Jack was also impressed with the interaction he had with a non-Irish staff member when he visited an Irish theme pub. When he asked what the word *shībīn*, written on the waitresses apron, meant she replied *"it's an illegal drinking house, if you hear the police coming run out this door"*. He had enjoyed the joke and remarked how this kind of humour adds to the Irish atmosphere.

Inanimate environment

In this study, the external environment was not rated as important by respondents, however, they placed a great deal of emphasis on the interior décor, especially the fabrics, tones and materials used, the design and positioning of the seating and the artefacts and memorabilia that are incorporated. When asked about décor Anne advised *... that each pub that I have seen, so far, has been quite unique, to a degree.* Despite her Irish background, she was impressed by the decor in a number of city and suburban Irish theme pubs noting that one had a printing press and all sorts of books while another seemed to concentrate on agricultural implements. The major similarity between them, she felt, was the antiquity of the items that were on display. She firmly believes that this is a sharing of Irish culture. She

also felt that the open display of Irish culture in the form of historical artefacts provides an insight into Irish history.

Lauren also reported that the Irish theme pubs that she has visited ... *have all been quite different*. The major attraction, in terms of design, for Trevor was the booths or nooks, as he referred to them, which he liked because they offer ... *a little privacy for your own conversations and a sense that "this is my area" and you can invite people into that little area*.

Another aspect was the music and the majority of respondents expressed the view that the music that they wanted to hear in Irish theme pubs is authentic Irish music. They specifically noted, however, that they did not want token Irish jigs and reels insisting that they wanted to hear both traditional and contemporary Irish music especially that which is currently available in Ireland. This would seem to suggest that, at least with respect to music, respondents are seeking authenticity rather than some romantic notion of Irishness contrived purely for their benefit.

Contact personnel

As previously noted, contact personnel includes the number of service providers, their appearance and their ability to perform the retail task. In this study, all of the respondents reported that the service personnel were an important aspect of the Irish theme pub especially in terms of the creation of a positive, friendly atmosphere. This was seen as different to other entertainment venues. As Jonathan noted *its different—you can chat to the security guys at the door and they're friendly—not like at the clubs*. Robert also advised that the atmosphere is *mainly due to the staff. The staff there they're always friendly, always bubbly, always wanting to have a joke and that's just part of the service that I'd go back for ...*

Jack was adamant that *in an Irish pub you have to have Irish staff or you lose everything you've tried to set up*. Several other respondents shared this view and identified Irish accents as an attractive component of Irish theme pubs. This was linked to the issue of authenticity and led to the question of whether the staff in Irish theme pubs should be Irish. According to the Irish Pub Company (2000, p.1) 'friendly, efficient, Irish bar staff ...' are among the success factors in the creation of an authentic Irish theme pub. This was confirmed in this study. Indeed, many respondents expressed the view that at least some Irish staff ought to be present to complement the theme. For example, Liz reflected, *I think Bridie O'Reilly's must have some policy where they only appoint people with an Irish accent and that certainly adds to the atmosphere ...*. Rosemary supported this view asserting that the Irish accent ... *is a very highly valued attraction*. Siobhan, who is Irish, was more direct advising that it is vital to have Irish bar staff. She explained that:

very often it's the bar staff who set the tone of the pub itself, be they male or female. You know, the welcome that you get from them is crucial and I think that the Irish have a very particular way of welcoming, particularly strangers. They seem to know how much to give and how much to reserve so there's a welcoming but they're not totally 'in your face'. There's an invitation to friendliness but it's not overpowering ...

Customer

In this study, the behaviour and disposition of customers was also linked to a notion of Irishness. Lauren believes, for example, that part of the attraction of Irish theme pubs is the Irish attitude to life. When asked what she perceived this to be she stated that ... *it is a "such is life" attitude, "I'm here to have a good time, if I have one beer, I have one beer, if I end up under the table, well that's life"*. Most respondents felt that Irish people know how to have fun and those respondents who had either been to Ireland or had some experience of Irish culture used the Gaelic term *Craic* when describing their reasons for going to, or their experiences at, Irish theme pubs. Siobhan believes that people have fun at Irish theme pubs because:

there is an unwritten code amongst Irish people that when you are in the pub you're there to have a good time. She explained that when you go into a pub ... you take everything in with you, you know, you take your problems and everything but there's a certain kind of expectation that you'll have a relaxed sort of jovial time.

One thing that can quickly transform a fun atmosphere, however, is drunkenness. One of the most significant themes that emerged during the interviews was a perceived lack of drunkenness in Irish theme pubs. Katrina attempted to articulate this stating that *there wasn't any drunk, I mean they were drunk but they weren't like, do you know what I mean?* This statement seems contradictory, however, Katrina explained that Irish theme pubs didn't seem to have customers who were drunk or sleazy or drowning their sorrows in a drunken depression. *People were there to have a good time she stated. I don't like pubs [she continued], the whole pub atmosphere does nothing for me but this is not your typical average corner pub.* Daniella agreed and suggested that security is unnecessary at Irish theme pubs because *you just never really see anybody getting feisty about anything, everybody's pretty happy-go-lucky.* Like Katrina she felt that people didn't go there to get drunk.

Other customers

Several respondents identified other customers as important especially in the creation of atmosphere. Lawrence noted for example, that *everybody's up and moving and talking and laughing out loud, so it's got that pub atmosphere where you know people are more likely to mix and move through the room.* Lauren also believes that *... it's the attraction of the clientele—it's drawing a crowd that actually just want to go and have a conversation and a drink.*

This begins with the welcome, which respondents' opined creates an atmosphere in which one can relax and have fun. Jonathon explained that there is a level of inclusiveness about the atmosphere in Irish theme pubs. He reported that the atmosphere at the Dan O'Connell *... is just unreal. Its not like your classy pub crowd where it's "who are you" [he continued] it's sort of "hey come on", it doesn't matter who you are, if you're 60 or 18 ...* Inclusiveness was important to Liz as well. She advised, for example, that *you don't have to feel like you're a member of a club or that you come from a particular country, to feel comfortable there.* In contrast, she felt that some other pubs and clubs in Melbourne were a bit more exclusive and she feels that this openness and inclusiveness was one of the most attractive aspects of Irish theme pubs.

Pub owners' views

Most pub owners were aware that customers and, more importantly, the kinds of customer, that frequent Irish theme pubs are in fact an essential ingredient in these pubs. They also recognised the value of Irish accents in enhancing the authenticity of the venue. When asked if it is important to customers to be served by Irish bar staff, for example, one publican stated that *in a perfect World we'd have all Irish staff but unfortunately it's not a perfect World.* By this he meant that the current Equal Opportunities Legislation was restrictive because *you need to get the staff that relate to the country that its from [the theme pub].* He asserted that *... if you can't get them it looks a bit silly. If you have 99% Australians in an Irish bar, it might as well be just another bar.* One pub manager reported that he was currently employing 80% Australian bar staff because he was not allowed to advertise for Irish born staff.

As noted earlier, an important aspect of Irish theme pubs is the manner in which they are designed. On behalf of Bridie O'Reilly's, the manager, Des Healy, asserted that creating an authentic, recognisable environment was vital *... so that when they [the customers] come in, it is recognised as an Irish pub.* Authenticity in the design of the pub was also seen as an important feature. At Finbar's Irish theme pub in Brighton, for example, Paul Morgan, the bar manager, explained that:

it's just the way they're done and the owner of this place has done a really good job, I think, in the way that he's actually set it out. 90% of the Irish pubs that are in Melbourne have got that old feeling, I mean all the old bric a brac and stuff, I mean it's got to be put in the right way to have effect and it does.

He went on to caution that *you can't just open an Irish pub and put stickers up and flags up and think you've got an Irish pub*

This issue was also explored with Kevin Webb, owner of the Dan O'Connell, an established Irish pub. Kevin stated that he doesn't need to rely on artefacts because the long and rich history of that establishment resonates within it creating a vibe that is almost tangible. He reported that he has seen some of the toughest of men who are known in the local community for their violent tendencies, become calm and respectful because the atmosphere in the pub is pervasive. He went on to say that each night is targeted towards a community of people in the city that is diverse in age range and professions. *In here the "Wharfie" rubs hands with the labourer, the doctor and the lawyer.* Finally, Kevin was asked why the atmosphere in the Dan O'Connell was so spellbinding. Revealing a spiritual dimension he answered 'I just believe that there's been a lot of souls in this place that have been very well respected and very well judged by their creator.

Implications

Three-quarters of those surveyed identified the atmosphere of the retail setting as influential in their decision to visit an Irish pub. The survey also indicated that all age groups and both genders shared this attitude, although females tended to place more importance on the physical setting. In addition, the level of inclusiveness and the manner in which customers interact with each other was found to be an extremely important factor and is an aspect that has tended to be overlooked in consumer behaviour, especially in terms of age and gender.

The rapport between customers and employees was also extremely important as was the overall décor and ambience. This suggests that the disposition of staff and indeed landlords, as well as the creation of a comfortable leisure environment is highly valued by pub patrons. In this study, the behaviour of customers was also linked to a perception of Irishness to which customers felt that they ought to conform. To these respondents, Irishness represented a happy-go-lucky attitude to life which they believe is reflected in the atmosphere created within Irish theme pubs. This intangible dimension was most obvious at the Dan O'Connell where the owner, Kevin Webb asserted that the establishment resonates with a pervasive calming atmosphere.

One unexpected finding of the research was that Irish theme pub operators were perceived to be custodians of Irish culture. There was also a dominant view that Irish theme pubs needed to conform to a perceived level of authenticity a feature that several respondents associated with pub size as well as other physical situational components.

The results and implications of this study should be of interest to both marketing theorists and practitioners. Firstly, Lewin's theory, which identified the 'subjective' world or psychological environment, is still valid albeit in a revised form. There is also evidence that the Hoffman and Turley framework is a useful tool to predict, identify and evaluate the situational influences that are important to customers of Irish theme pubs. Further research is required, however, in order to enhance the literature and to provide opportune strategic advice to those that are considering investing in theme related venues. Moreover, the limited local focus of this study, coupled with the sampling criteria and sample size indicates that ongoing research should be undertaken particularly in relation to age and gender. There is an opportunity, for example, to look at issues of security and gender within the Irish theme pub environment and to compare the findings with similar research in non-Irish pubs. The issue of authenticity of themed hospitality venues is also worthy of further, in-depth study.

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