

Welcoming the Consumer: a Semiotic Exploration of Coffee Shop Entrances

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Abstract

This conceptual study explores the entrance of coffee shops as a spatial and symbolic threshold shaping the customer experience. Drawing on environmental psychological sociology, we analyze how entrance design contributes to the staging of welcome and the transition from passerby to guest. Through a semiotic square, we identify four distinct configurations based on the interplay between openness, visibility, inclusion, and selectivity. Each configuration conveys specific experiential meanings, influencing the customer's experience and perceived accessibility of the space. This research highlights how spatial design acts as a vector of hospitality, setting the tone for engagement before the consumption experience begins. Beyond its functional role, the entrance emerges as a key moment of symbolic orientation in the customer journey, especially in hybrid and experiential hospitality settings such as coffee shops.

Key Words *Customer experience, Spatial design, Threshold, Semiotic Square, Hospitality*

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Introduction

Coffee shops, with their experiential dimension, are spaces of consumption and socialization offering high levels of sensory and symbolic stimulation. These highly contemporary formats are particularly appreciated by urban consumers and are found in a wide range of environments—from busy train stations and malls to trendy neighborhoods. They range from traditional cafés with seated service, to hybrid spaces blending takeaway counters, limited on-site consumption, and even concept store functions. Customer experience is central to these venues, designed not only to serve beverages but also to offer an inspiring, immersive environment. Yet, while the in-store journey has been studied extensively, little attention has been paid to the threshold itself: what role does the entrance play in these spaces, and how does spatial design contribute to the feeling of being welcomed?

These venues are not always visited with a clear intention to purchase or consume; many customers are drawn by hedonic motivations such as curiosity, sensory pleasure, or a desire for a break from daily routines. The dichotomy between utilitarian and hedonic motivations has been widely explored (Babin & al., 1994 ; Arnold & Reynolds, 2003), showing that while utilitarian motivations focus on task efficiency or the acquisition of products or services, hedonic motivations involve exploration, emotional gratification, and symbolic enrichment.

Coffee shops, especially those that combine high-end design with specialized offerings, attract a diverse clientele—ranging from hurried commuters and remote workers to tourists and local regulars, each bringing different expectations and motivations. Their interior design plays a crucial role in shaping the customer experience,

influencing both movement and perception within the space (Aubert-Gamet, 1996). For instance, task-oriented visitors tend to prefer spacious and efficient layouts, whereas exploratory or recreational-seeking visitors are more responsive to highly stimulating environments (Van Rompay & al., 2011). This suggests that space design does not merely respond to customer motivations, but actively shapes how visitors engage with the environment. Across these diverse visitor journeys, the entrance remains the first point of contact: a physical and symbolic threshold into the coffee shop experience. As hybrid third places, coffee shops bring together a wide spectrum of users and expectations. Whatever their motivations, the entrance acts as the first touchpoint, marking a symbolic and spatial transition into the experience.

This study examines the coffee shop entrance as a liminal space, both physical and symbolic, structured by spatial design and hospitality practices. Rather than focusing on a specific venue, we adopt a broader lens by analyzing examples of contemporary coffee shops located in diverse urban environments (e.g., transport hubs, malls, shopping streets). Drawing on literature from marketing, architecture, and ethnology, we mobilize the conceptual framework of environmental psychological sociology and adopt a qualitative, interpretive approach. Research in marketing has long demonstrated the influence of spatial and atmospheric design on customer perceptions and behaviors (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Our theoretical analysis explores how the entrance to a coffee shop operates as a ritualized space of hospitality. The threshold functions as a symbolic and selective interface, shaping how customers are invited, oriented, or kept at a distance from the interior environment. This paper investigates how entrance design contributes to the staging of welcome, structuring the transition from anonymous passerby to engaged visitor in experiential spaces of everyday consumption.

1. Literature review

The first impression: the role of spatial thresholds in the consumption experience

Building on the experiential perspective of Hirschman & Holbrook (1982), the consumption experience extends beyond the act of purchase to encompass what happens before and after, highlighting the entrance as a key moment in how the experience is framed. In hospitality and retail settings alike, the consumer experience is influenced by the surrounding urban environment (Bloch, Ridgway & Dawson, 1994; Michaud-Trévinal, 2013) and by the store's external aesthetic, particularly the design of the entrance and the storefront (Cornelius, Natter & Faure, 2010; Oh & Petrie, 2012). Depending on whether they are located in indoor or outdoor environments, coffee shops may present very different façades and thresholds, influencing how the first step into the space is perceived. This initial staging can convey either continuity with the outside environment or a marked rupture, signaling a transition into a more intimate, immersive interior. In some cases, the entrance is open and visible, blending into the flow of the street; in others, it is more enclosed or concealed, creating a sense of mystery or exclusivity. This echoes observations made in the context of luxury retail spaces (Ochs & Welté, 2012).

As the first boundary, the entrance plays a critical role in initiating the consumption experience. As architect Victor Gruen famously noted: "*You must make this window-shopper push your door open and make him take a step, the one step, which changes him from a window-shopper into a customer. A good storefront tries to make his step as easy as possible for him, and tries not to let him even notice that he takes such an important step*" (Gruen, 1941). This first step constitutes a symbolic act that precedes and enables any experience of hospitality or inclusion in the commercial environment. Whether in luxury stores, cafés, or hybrid spaces, entrance design plays a scenographic role. It expresses the identity and intention of the space and can invite, include, orient, or even exclude. These entrance-related cues form part of what Berry & al. (2006) define as "experience clues," particularly the category of "mechanic clues," which relate to the physical and sensory aspects of the service environment. As tangible signals, these clues can influence a customer's mood and shape their emotional and behavioral response even before crossing the threshold.

From the threshold to rites of passage and welcome

While the physical layout of the space contributes to the sensory and atmospheric experience, staff behavior also

plays a key role in shaping the perception of welcome. Berry & al. (2006) categorize these behaviors as *humanic clues*. For example, when an employee moves proactively toward a customer rather than waiting passively, it creates a sense of engagement and inclusion, reinforcing the experience of being welcomed.

The threshold can thus be understood as a space that shapes behavior, a notion found across architecture, environmental psychology, and ethnology. It is often described as an interstitial, ambiguous, and complex zone (Bonnin, 2005; Flamand, 2005). Segaud (2010) emphasizes its physical, symbolic, and social dimensions. The threshold marks a boundary between two spaces, where the door may function as an invitation or a barrier. It can send subtle messages of openness or exclusion (Bernardes, 2010). Whether represented by a floor line or a designed entrance, the threshold affects perceptions of accessibility, intimacy, and belonging (de La Soudière, 2000).

Beyond its spatial role, the threshold holds a ritualistic and symbolic function. Van Gennepe's (1909) theory of rites of passage describes transitions as involving three stages: separation, transition (liminality), and reintegration. These concepts align with the design of experiential places like coffee shops, where crossing the threshold marks a shift into a new social and sensory environment. Retail and service spaces also reflect a dramaturgical structure. Building on Goffman's (1973) metaphor of performance, Rook (1985) identifies four components of ritualized experience: artifacts, scripts, roles, and audiences. These elements are co-created through interactions between staff and customers, giving the entrance and its welcoming function a performative and symbolic depth.

The salience of the place: from environmental psychological sociology to experiential marketing

To study the relationship between spatial design and experience, this study mobilizes the conceptual framework of *environmental psychological sociology*. This framework stems from environmental psychology, a field concerned with the interplay between individuals and their surroundings. Environmental psychological sociology emphasizes the idea of a relationship to space, experienced in physical, emotional, symbolic, and social ways, that leads to a sense of co-construction. The experience of space is thus conceptualized in a systemic, holistic, and multidimensional manner.

In marketing research, this conceptual framework draws on the consumption perspective of Holt (1995), the co-production model of Sherry (1998), and the experiential approach of Holbrook (2000). It focuses on the concepts of appropriation and immersion, and on the construction of identity through the consumption experience. In this view, the consumer is not a passive individual who merely reacts to stimuli, but an active participant and producer of their own experiences (Benavent & Evrard, 2002; Filser, 2002). This approach requires attention to how customers interact with, and appropriate, space in ways that shape their engagement with the place. In coffee shops, the entrance—as the first point of contact—not only initiates the spatial relationship but also sets the tone for social interaction, hospitality, and emotional resonance with the place.

In environmental psychological sociology, the appropriation of space is also understood as the division and organization of the environment, leading to a form of territorialization and the privatization of place. This process often creates an opposition between outside and inside, public and private. This conceptualization is particularly relevant to our research, as it highlights the importance of how external space is delimited and how spatial configurations shape social relationships. It also introduces the notion of privacy in public settings—what Altman (1975) describes as the ability to regulate access and interaction within a given environment.

Consumption space and the experience appropriation process

In hospitality and retail environments visitors may enter not with a clear purchase intention, but with motivations linked to discovery, escape, or social interaction (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Research has shown that utilitarian motivations are associated with task-oriented visits, while hedonic motivations drive exploration, emotional gratification, and symbolic pleasure (Babin & al., 1994). However, space is not only passively experienced—it actively structures behavior. As Fischer (2011) notes, commercial environments convey identity cues that guide how individuals act, encouraging them to adopt expected roles and behaviors. This echoes the notion of behavior settings, where spatial contexts generate predictable patterns of action.

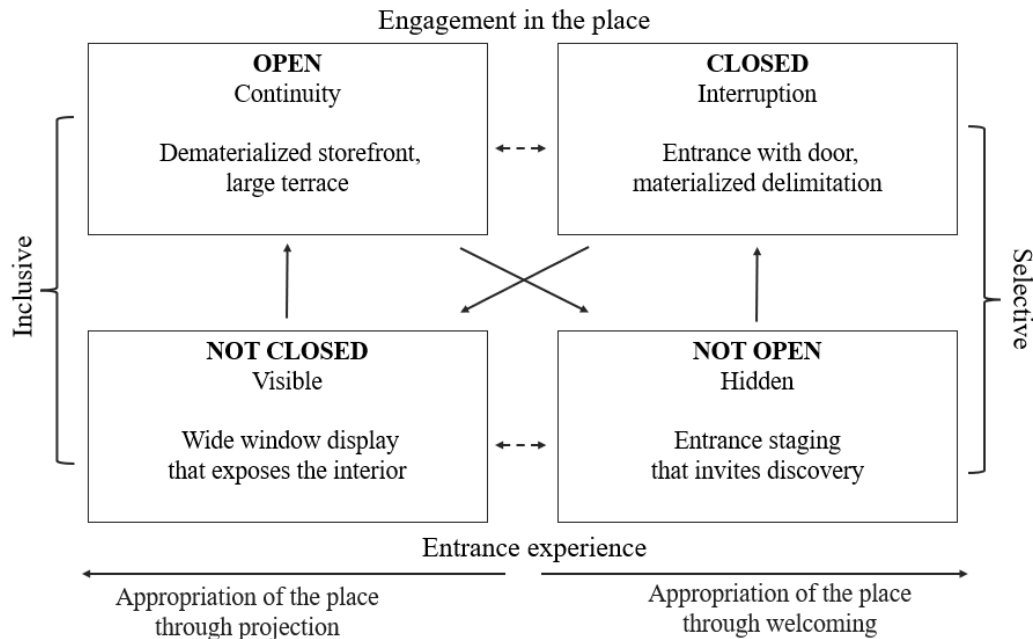
The concept of appropriation (Fischer, 1981) is central to our analysis, as it allows us to examine how individuals engage with space—both by creating meaning through physical interaction and by establishing a sense of inclusion or exclusion. It reflects how spatial design influences consumers’ mobility, postures, and emotional engagement (Aubert-Gamet, 1996), and how individuals may “inhabit” a space, temporarily making it their own (Bonnin, 2003; Bardhi & Askegaard, 2008; Sherry & Bradford, 2012). It also highlights the stages of immersion (Carù & Cova, 2003), which are essential for a memorable experiential encounter (Özçaglar-Toulouse & Cova, 2010). Focusing on the threshold as both a physical and symbolic boundary, we explore how visitors interpret and cross this spatial marker, and how it initiates their engagement with the space. In doing so, we consider how the design and openness of the entrance shape the tone and quality of the experience from the very first step.

2. Methodology and illustrative framework

This study adopts an exploratory and interpretive approach, based on a theoretical analysis of coffee shop entrances using a semiotic square. The semiotic square, introduced by Greimas then Floch (1990) enables us to model the underlying logic of meaning through the articulation of four interrelated positions, defined by contrariety, contradiction, and complementarity. It is particularly effective to understand complex phenomena, such as the customers’ symbolic representations. This tool is applied here to the representation of the coffee shop entrance as a liminal space—a transitional zone between public exterior and intimate interior. Our aim is to identify and conceptualize different entrance configurations and their experiential meanings, as shaped by the relationship between openness and closure, and inclusion and exclusion. Through this semiotic reading, we aim to map out how the design and visibility of entrances—from wide-open storefronts to more enclosed, selective accesses—signal different modes of interaction and welcome. In doing so, we seek to highlight how threshold configurations structure the first moments of customer engagement, shaping whether the space is perceived as open, neutral, or exclusive.

To illustrate the diversity of threshold configurations and their symbolic meaning, we propose a semiotic square based on two axes: openness vs. closure, and inclusion vs. exclusion. This framework helps identify four experiential positions that reflect how customers may interpret the spatial and symbolic stance of a coffee shop entrance. The conceptual framework based on semiotic square is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Semiotic square of coffee shop entrances configurations



3. Results: Semiotic square analysis

The semiotic square reveals four configurations of coffee shop entrances that shape the customer's first encounter with the space. These threshold types express different symbolic and spatial logics of welcome, based on the interplay between openness/closure and inclusion/selection. The open and inclusive configuration is marked by continuity between the outside and inside. Found in cafes with terraces or fully glazed façades, this type of entrance erases physical boundaries and offers full visual and spatial access. Customers can easily project themselves into the space, encouraging spontaneous entry. The atmosphere is socially open, fluid, and aligned with the surrounding urban flow, supporting casual, unplanned consumption. At the opposite end, the closed and selective configuration introduces a clear spatial interruption. The entrance is framed or closed, via doors or thresholds, creating a symbolic boundary that invites reflection or hesitation. Entry may feel more intentional or private, suggesting exclusivity or intimacy. Such spaces may appear to target a specific clientele or offer a more immersive, premium experience.

Two intermediate forms also emerge. The not closed but inclusive configuration describes entrances that are visually accessible, via wide windows or transparent façades, but not fully open. Customers can see the inside but must navigate a subtle transition. This setup creates a soft invitation, blending openness with a hint of narrative or atmospheric depth. It encourages curiosity while preserving a sense of gentle framing. In contrast, the not open but selective configuration refers to entrances that are less visible, perhaps set back, hidden, or partially obstructed, but easily accessed once discovered. Here, the welcome is conveyed through the interior's openness rather than the visibility of the entrance itself. This form encourages discovery and surprise without projecting a sense of exclusivity.

Together, these four configurations influence how customers interpret the atmosphere and social codes of the place. They shape the initial perception of welcome, the level of effort required to enter, and the visitor's emotional stance. The threshold emerges as a symbolic interface that orients the customer's role: guest, passerby, observer, or explorer, even before the consumption experience truly begins.

4. Discussion and Contributions

This exploratory analysis brings new insights into how hospitality is spatially constructed in everyday

consumption settings. By focusing on the coffee shop entrance as a liminal zone, we propose a shift from viewing the threshold as merely functional to understanding it as a vector of meaning, affect, and social orientation. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the growing literature on service environments. It expands previous work on the experiential staging of commercial spaces (e.g., Berry & al., 2006; Holbrook, 2000) by isolating the entrance as a distinct and meaningful micro-moment. Our typology shows how spatial design can mediate between utilitarian and hedonic motivations, shaping the visitor's engagement from the very first contact. Methodologically, this research illustrates the potential of the semiotic square as a tool for modeling service experiences that are difficult to reduce to behavioral categories. It offers a way to visualize symbolic configurations that influence how places are perceived, entered, and appropriated, particularly relevant for hybrid or evolving formats like coffee shops that serve as third places, social hubs, or aestheticized retreats. However, as a conceptual and illustrative approach, this study is not based on empirical observation, but opens avenues for future fieldwork exploring how visitors interpret these spatial markers in context.

Finally, this study offers practical implications for designers and managers of hospitality places. Entrance design is not neutral: it sends strong cues about the type of interaction expected and the kind of customer targeted. Being attentive to how openness, visibility, and symbolic framing work together can help businesses create more coherent, inclusive, or differentiated spaces, depending on their strategic goals. In sum, the threshold is not just a passage but a scene, where the tone of hospitality is set and the guest begins to imagine their role within the experience to come.

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