

GIVING MEANING TO MUNDANE SERVICE SUPPORT OBJECTS

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Abstract:

This paper relates an ongoing research project that focuses on service support objects. The objective is to examine the changing nature of support objects, with an emphasis on how consumers interact with these objects outside of the consumption encounter. Specifically, we strive to shed light on how consumers interact with the mundane objects of the service experience that are paid for by the firm but used outside of the consumption encounter. First, we examine service support objects and the strategies employed to maximize their effectiveness. Second, using an ethnographic approach, we present findings with respect to preliminary data. Finally, we conclude with implications of how to manage services objects and offer a framework for this discussion.

Key words: service, objects, consumers practices, introspection

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There is a common agreement that service settings are the "physical evidences" (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991) that managers should control. Physical evidence is assumed to be important because, in the absence of a material product, consumers use tangible cues to assess the quality of the service provided. Thus, it is claimed the more intangible a service is the greater the need to provide tangible, physical evidence (Shostack, 1982).

Physical evidence is often referred to as the environment that facilitates the performance and the communication of the service. The physical environment itself is considered to play an instrumental role in the customer's assessment of the quality, expected level of service, and patronage intentions (Baker et al., 2002). Consequently, physical environment is crucial in customer satisfaction in service business such as restaurants, retail stores and banks (Gummesson, 1993). In the factory, the customer experiences the total service within the firm's physical facilities.

Numerous authors have made valuable contributions to our understanding of the impact that physical elements have on customer behaviors and attitudes, but none has tackled the mundane object. In fact, consumers of services are surrounded with objects whose purpose is to support service processes. These objects can be used not only during the service experience itself but also before and/or after the service encounter. For example, when traveling by plane, the consumer can handle the ticket or the airline's magazine before and after the flight. Moreover, these manipulations can occur outside of the physical environment of the actual service encounter (e.g., at the consumer's home, in the office, etc.), even if the ticket and the magazine are part of physical service elements.

In addition to the lack of research exploring service support objects, the specific marketing context of today is characterized by three facts: 1) The concept of experiential consumption has flooded recent marketing research; 2) Marketing has increasingly embraced the notion that consumers play an active role as co-producers of the consumption experience; and 3) The explosion of new technologies has allowed managers to rethink physical cues. Below we examine each phenomenon in more detail.

Experiential consumption

Consumption is now viewed as an activity that involves a production of meaning, as well as a field of symbolic exchanges. Consumer behavior researchers (Addis and Holbrook, 2001) have tried to re-balance the functional and utilitarian vision of consumption by applying a so-called experiential perspective that focuses on hedonistic values and individual subjectivity. From the experiential perspective, consumers are less interested in maximizing their benefits and more focused on hedonistic gratification within a given social context. Consumption here provokes sensations and emotions that do much more than merely respond to an individual's own needs, since they also touch upon the consumer's identity.

An experiential approach leads both to a global vision of the physical setting as opposed to an isolated focus on one variable (e.g., light, color, music, furniture, etc.) and to an emotional consideration of the consumption experience. In this way, experiential approaches are inclined to focus on intangible dimensions of the physical surroundings: the ambiance, meanings, and affects.

Consumption experience is spread over a period of time which, according to Arnould et al. (2002), can be divided into four major stages:

- The 'pre-consumption experience', which involves searching for, planning, day-dreaming about, and foreseeing or imagining the experience;
- The 'purchase experience' which derives from choice, payment, packaging, and the encounter with the service and the environment;
- The 'core consumption experience' including the sensation, the fulfillment, the satisfaction/dissatisfaction, the irritation/flow, and the transformation;
- The 'remembered consumption experience' and the nostalgia experience, which activate photographs to re-live a past experience based on accounts of stories and on arguments with friends about the past, and which advance the classification of memories.

Incorporating the experiential consumption literature with the services literature shows that at each phase of the consumption experience, consumers can be in contact with tangible service support objects. Examples of such mundane objects might include a trade catalogue during the pre-consumption experience, an entrance ticket during the purchase experience, a caddie

during the core consumption service experience, or a cardboard box for removal during the remembered consumption experience.

Consumers as active co-producers of their consumption experience

From the experiential perspective, consumers are not passive agents reacting to stimuli but are, instead, the actors and the producers of their own consumption experiences. Normann and Ramirez (1993, p.69) state that, "the key to creating value is to coproduce offerings that mobilize customers." Lusch et al. (1992) provide a general model to explain how much of the co-production or service provision the customer will perform. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) note that the market has become a venue for proactive customer involvement. They argue for co-opting customer involvement in the value-creation process. Vargo and Lusch (2004) conclude that the customer becomes primarily an operand resource (co-producer) rather than an operand resource ("target") and can be involved in the entire value and service chain in acting on operand resources. Clients may be considered as "partial" employees of the service provider when the consumption experience involves knowledge-based outcomes (Mills and Morris, 1986). Firms are trying to develop stronger partnerships with their customers and to help them be better co-producers.

Physical settings can be conceptualized as being experienced by an autonomous consumer who seeks to design and actively produce his own service experience. The consumer can oppose the creation and uses of support service objects that have been organized and planned by the firm, giving these objects uses and meanings that are very different in nature from those intended by the firm, ones that can be described as the art of living since it they are characterized by the art of diverting and tinkering with commercial offerings (de Certeau, 1984). The consumer, acting alone or in a group, diverts the service support object away from its original intention (as determined by the existing market system) in an attempt to re-appropriate it in accordance with his own rules.

The explosion of new technologies

During the past decade, the growth in service delivery options based on technology has been explosive (e.g., online banking, internet shopping, etc.) (Bitner et al., 2000; Meuter et al., 2005). Service companies are rapidly employing various kinds of new technologies to

streamline the workplace and to encourage consumers to perform services for themselves. As online transactions in service industries increase, material objects that support the service process are decreasing. In other words, owing to new technologies, the use of self-service technologies such as internet banking, automated hotel checkout, online investment trading, e-trade, online booking, etc., increases constantly and allows customers to produce services for themselves without assistance from firm employees. Service objects are becoming increasingly virtual: online bank statements, online reservation notices, e-tickets, etc. In the case of e-objects, customers become more than co-producers; by printing e-objects, they transform an idea into something tangible. In this case, customers who materialize the e-object are *the* lone producers.

These marketing trends lead to our interest in addressing a curious, recent phenomenon: physical elements now tend to be perceived as burdensome components of service encounters that managers reluctantly have to control. Put another way, firms are inclined to dematerialize – even to suppress – physical support elements and transform them into virtual supports, and to extend and redefine their concerns in a new scope where control is exerted by the consumer through his own competencies, even beyond the purchase experience. There is a fundamental shift in emphasis from firm driven performance to customer driven experience, from experience consumed within the service firm’s established location to experience outside the service place (e.g., in the customer’s home), from physical settings to virtual elements, from tangible, material cues to intangible, emotional cues. This lopsided situation leads a set of questions about managers’ strategies with respect to physical/non-physical elements in contact with the consumer in and out of the service place.

As noted by Brewer and Porter (1993, p.1), “*Our lives today are dominated by the material objects that proliferate all around us, including the prospects and problems they afford.*” In services activities, objects take a singular place and constitute a unique area of consideration because:

- they are material, concrete elements that support the service delivery (e.g., theatre tickets, the pen at the post office, etc.);
- in some cases, firms now virtualize them (e.g., airline e-tickets, online registration forms) or merely deprive consumers of them (e.g.: plastic bags in supermarkets, etc.);
- they are supplied by the company but used and manipulated by the consumer outside of the core service location (e.g., the tour operator magazine perused in one’s home,

the public telephone card in one's purse, the hotel shampoo sample brought back home, etc.).

This research examines service objects that are physical support elements which the consumer removes from the servicescape and utilizes outside of it. What exactly does the consumer do with these objects? Are these practices in line with the firm's intentions and strategies and, if so, how?

The objective of this article is to examine the changing nature of service support objects, with an emphasis on what happens with these objects when consumers remove them from the place of core service consumption. We strive to shed light on consumers' uses of mundane objects paid for by the firm and used outside the firm. These objects are often an important aspect of services activities that can constitute a hefty firm expenditure. As opposed to physical settings and spatial layouts, these items have a limited life and can be changed or transformed easily.

This paper presents the initial, exploratory phase of an ongoing research study. First, we examine service support objects and the strategies employed to maximize their effectiveness. Second, using an ethnographic approach, we present findings with respect to preliminary data. Finally, we conclude with a framework, research propositions, and managerial implications regarding the management of service support objects.

1/- Background

1.1/- What is an object?

In service marketing, objects are considered physical factors. Baker (1987) developed a useful model to illustrate the nature of physical facilities in services activities. Her framework breaks the physical environment into three basic categories:

- Ambient factors, which are background conditions that exist below the level of immediate awareness and typically draw attention only when they are absent or unpleasant, for example, at temperature and noise levels.
- Design factors which are visual stimuli that are far more likely to be apparent to customers than ambient factors. They can be classified as either aesthetic (e.g. architecture, style, color) or functional (e.g. layout, comfort, signage). Although

aesthetic and functional factors are closely related, the former promotes sensory pleasure in the service experience, whereas the latter facilitates the customers' behavior.

- Social factors which refer to the human component of the physical environment, that is to say, customers and service personnel. The number, appearance, and behavior of customers and employees in the service environment can induce either approach or avoidance behavior, depending on the service expectations of a given customer.

Bitner (1992) defined the physical environment – the so-called servicescape – as the scene in which the service encounter takes place. She identified three composite dimensions: ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols, and artifacts:

- Ambient conditions include background characteristics of the environment such as temperature, lighting, color, noise, music, and scent.
- Spatial layout refers to the ways in which machinery, equipment, and furnishings are arranged, the size and shape of those items, and the spatial relationships among them. Functionality refers to the ability of the same items to facilitate performance and the accomplishment of goals.
- Signage and environmental objects that may communicate, quality of materials used in construction, artwork, presence of certificates and photographs on walls, floor coverings, and personal objects displayed in the environment.

Since services are performed 'inside the factory', servicescape can impact both employee and consumer behavior and the degree to which a service transaction is successfully conducted.

According to both of these definitions, there is nothing remarkable about service support objects. They are included as part of the functional cues of design factors for Baker and as signage for Bitner. The lack of specific literature about service support objects leaves many questions open for further investigation.

What is an object? Robert's Dictionary defines an object as, "*A tangible, material and visible entity that can cast a shadow, something that is within the grasp of the senses.*" This definition sets up objects as being on the other end of the spectrum from ideas: An idea is a specific thought which arises in the mind. It refers to subjective contents. We live in two worlds: (1) the sensible world of the common perceptual objects that we move around and use in various ways and (2) the intelligible world of ideas, the common objects of thought that we

cannot touch with our bodies or perceive with our senses, but that, as thinking individuals, we can discuss with one another. Objects are material while ideas are intangible. Objects occupy space at a point in time while ideas are abstract. The location of an object is predictably associated with particular social contexts; for example, books and journals are often found in an academic's office; dark lights, candles, and flowers are often found in a romantic French restaurant (Kay et al., 2004).

This definition ignores that fact that objects can be given meaning and turned into expressions or communications of ideas, as well as the fact that ideas can benefit from objects as a way to be represented and better understood. Ideas and objects are not wholly independent, each benefits from the existence of the other.

An etymological view adds another dimension to the definition. The word 'object' is derived from the latin word *objectum*, a noun form of *objectus*, which in turn comes from *obicere*, which means to throw or put something before someone. These origins reveal a second dichotomy – object versus subject – to add to the dichotomy of idea versus object.

An object is what is noticeable from the subject. An object exists outside oneself, while a being thinks for oneself. Human reality is full of physical objects but how humans perceive these objects is completely subjective, depending on the person and their senses, experiences, etc. Perception of physical objects cannot occur without other objects that allow one to perceive these manifestations in the first place. Acknowledging that one "exists in a world of physical objects" also confirms that sensory perception functions to an extent that allows one to reason, even to a small degree, their physical existence. Since Plato, the distinction between the objective and the subjective has been put to many uses in various areas of philosophy. However the epistemological debate about what is objective or what is responsible to subjectivity is still unsettled.

In an Aristotelian tradition, what an object is can be understood in terms of its own properties. For example, we can state the fact that being made of glass is a property of an object; its transparency is a property; its size and matter are properties. But where the glass is located, its being on the table is not a property but a relation to other objects. The glass' relations may include "on the table", "in the room", and "being bigger than other glasses". So, the only way we can talk about an object is by describing its properties and how it stands in relation to

other things (Sidelle, 2002). But, are objects just a collection of properties, or are objects different from their properties?

To overcome these dichotomizations and to get beyond the debate between idea vs. object and between object vs. subject, we turn to an object's functions to further expand our definition. Objects may have multiple functions—some more obvious than others. The primary function of an object is that for which it was originally made and used. Additional uses, however, may have been invented. A chair made for sitting could be used to reach a high object. A chair could also have a symbolic function, such as a throne. In the chair's use as furniture, its design could have social significance in the interior decoration of a house. So a functional approach differentiates the use versus the meaning of an object. In this vein, Baudrillard (1968) developed four categories for the value of objects:

- The functional value of an object is its instrumental purpose. (A pen writes. A diamond ring adorns an otherwise empty hand.) This is what Marx referred to as the 'use-value'.
- The exchange value of an object is its economic value. (A pen is worth three pencils. A diamond ring is worth three months' salary.)
- The symbolic exchange value of an object is its arbitrarily assigned and agreed upon value in relation to another subject. (A pen represents a graduation present or a speaker's gift. A diamond ring symbolizes a public declaration of love between two individuals.)
- The sign exchange value of an object represents its value in a system of objects. (A pen is part of a desk set, or a particular pen confers social status. A diamond ring has sign exchange value in relation to other diamond rings, conferring social status to the person with the biggest or prettiest ring.)

To complete this standpoint, the social approach (Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1998) focuses on the relationship between objects and culture. Material objects hold representations and meanings beyond their physical shapes and functions. Things, both natural and man-made, are appropriated into human culture in such a way that they represent the social relations of culture, standing in for other human beings, carrying values, ideas, and emotions.

This exploration leads us to several questions regarding service support objects:

- On the scale of ideas vs. objects, where do virtual object fall (e.g., e-ticket or online bank statements)?
- On the scale of subject vs. object, what facets do we manage between the objective attributes (i.e., the shape and matter) and/or the subjective side (i.e., the interpretation)?
- Is 'function' or 'use' a sufficient dimension of the service support object or does it need to have a sensory dimension?
- How can we consider a service support object on an international level if its interpretation depends on social and cultural norms?

In fact, we realize that responses to these questions depend on who is doing the answering:

- for a functionalist, the core point is the usability; an object is borne as a function;
- for a psychologist, an object can be assessed in its ability to extended self identity; an object is borne as a identity marker;
- for a semiotist, an object communicates; it is a sign;
- for a formalist, the shape is central;
- for a philosopher, the relevance is to get beyond its material side and to investigate the substance theory and ontology of objecthood;
- for a sociologist, an object proves a social status; it is a point for distinction;
- for an ethnologist, an object reveals a culture; it is a culture fixer;
- for a technologist, an object has its own mechanism; it works; it is a machine;
- ... etc. and for a marketer?

The marketing literature addresses these questions with two theoretical approaches: materialism theory and self-efficacy theory. The first is more appropriate for product rather than service activities since it develops some issues about possession which can enlighten our research. The second theory has been discussed in the literature on services activities to better understand self-service systems. As discussed above, the marketing literature also addresses firm strategies in dealing with tangible elements of the service experience. However, the specific tangibles subset of service support objects is under-explored and warrants further examination. In the sections that follow we examine each area of these three areas of the marketing literature.

1.2/- Materialism theory

The central issue in consumer research is the nature of the relationship between consumers and the objects they own and consume. Of particular interest is the relationship between material objects and consumer well-being. Consumers may enjoy material objects for the value of possession that they provide. This value was examined through the role of possessions in defining the self and creating a sense of identity (Belk, 1988). Social scientists found that individuals who focus on the acquisition of material objects exhibit reduced life satisfaction (Richins and Dawson, 1992), diminished levels of happiness (Belk 1985), and higher levels of depression (Kasser and Ryan, 1993). Therefore, possession can be seen as the dark side of consumer behavior (Hirschman, 1991). Possession frames the topic of materialism.

Materialism is generally viewed as the value placed on the acquisition of material objects. Previous research finds that high levels of material values are negatively associated with subjective well-being. Richins and Dawson (1992, p.308) define materialism as a “*set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life.*” In other words, materialism can be viewed as the value a consumer places on the acquisition and possession of material objects. A defining characteristic of highly materialistic individuals is a belief that well-being can be enhanced through one's relationships with objects.

Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) suggest that the self-centered nature of materialism is in inherent opposition to collective-oriented values such as religious values and family values. They propose that materialism is opposed to collective-oriented values, that materialism is associated with heightened psychological tension among those with high levels of collective-oriented values, and that this tension lowers well-being. Materialism is not just a selfish pursuit of self-gratification (Belk, 1985) but also a demonstration of mastery and control over the material world: “*Materialistic individuals appear to be not only hedonistic pleasure seekers but also power-hungry control seekers*” (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002, p.365). Individuals also seek material possessions in order to provide physical evidence of their identity. Identity is a root construct that addresses the very meaning and character of an entity, its “*internalized cognitive structure of what [it] stands for,*” and its “*distinctiveness and oneness*” (Albert et al., p. 13).

An anthropological perspective (McCracken, 1986) attacks the traditional view of consumer as 'economic man' upon whom cultural factors only rarely impinge. From this viewpoint, consumer goods are 'vehicles of cultural meanings', culture is meaning, and meaning is constantly in transit. Goods are an instance of material culture. However, *“there are certain goods that the consumer never successfully claims because he never successfully claims their symbolic properties”* (McCracken, 1986, p.79). So to appropriate the object and to feel it is one's possession, an individual will deploy possession rituals, through the act of personalizing, which confers the meaningful properties. Using possession rituals, individuals move cultural meaning out of their goods and into their lives.

For certain consumers, economic value is not the most important form of value. The possession is valued not so much in the owner's status but rather in memories and experiences which have no market price. *“The meaning that advertising transfers to goods is the meaning of collectivity. The meaning that personal gestures transfer to goods is the meaning of collectivity as this meaning has been inflected by the particular experience of the individual consumer”* (McCracken, 1986, p79). Such objects, moreover, are thought to serve as conveyors of ritualized behavior, helping those who share a material culture to know how to behave “appropriately” in a given context. In other words, familiar objects and the meaning systems they activate may help to define and clarify potentially ambiguous situations, thereby providing people both with common psychological interpretations and with overlapping behavioral inclinations.

In this sense, possession is more than the simple acceptance of a pre-packaged good designed by the firm. Possession calls for a vacant space of meanings. To admit user's meanings, a good must also be left unorganized so that it can become appropriable. In the same way that a consumer may appropriate service space (Aubert-Gamet, 1997), a consumer can possess the support service object while he appropriates it, does his "own thing", etc., on two levels: uses and meanings. The consumer might own a service support object at a mental level and give personal meanings and specific senses to the object according his experience, as if it was his private property. He also might develop some creative behaviors and personal uses for the object, and may divert and twist the object from its planned function.

Twist refers to positive and negative ways in which consumers restructure meanings, usages and practices. *“Users may rebel against planned functions and meanings. This rejection of*

ready-made practices and images leads the user to interpret them differently, to add meaning to them, to divert them from their original purpose. In doing so, the user is potentially liberated in the sense that to escape dominant meanings and practices is to construct his own subjective approach of the physical environment” (Aubert-Gamet, 1997, p.35). Carrying diversion processes to an extreme, there is the subversion mode: the consumer acts as an outlaw or deviant. He breaks the law, transgresses and violates the norm. It is exactly the case all too often when a consumer steals a service support object.

Materialism theory and the related notions raise some interesting questions for our research:

- The link between ‘possession’ and ‘well-being’: Does the consumer feel possession of the service support object? Does the service support object given to the consumer contribute to his well-being?
- The value of possession: Does the service support object have a private value in addition to its economic value?
- The possession rituals: Does the consumer develop some ritualized practices using the service support object?
- The appropriation process: Does the consumer appropriate, even twist the service support object and, if yes, how?

Each of these questions extends from the literature. Collectively, they lead to the idea that perhaps service support objects need to be evaluated and considered apart from the study of others objects (as goods).

1.3/- Use and self-efficacy theory

Shih and Venkatesh (2004) conceptualize usage as comprising two distinct dimensions: variety of use and rate of use. Variety of use refers to the different ways the support is used. Usage rate refers to the time a person spends using the support during a designated period. Variety and rate appear to be the suitable dimensions of usage. For service support objects, however, the variety dimension seems not to be relevant. Generally, each object has only one determined use: for example, a sample of shampoo in a hotel is used to clean hair, an entrance ticket is used to enter the service environment, a coat hanger from the dry cleaner is used to hang up clothes, etc. The rate of use for a service support object is more appropriate. There are some objects used several times (e.g., the telephone card, the credit card, the soap) and others for only one shot (e.g., the movies ticket). Each time the consumer interacts with the

object he or she enhances his usage competencies, so consumption becomes easier over time. Self-efficacy theory completes the use issue.

Self-efficacy is similar to perceived ease of use as defined by Davis (1989, p.320): *“The degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort.”* The importance of perceived ease of use is supported by Bandura's (1982) extensive research on self-efficacy, defined as, *“judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations”* (p. 122).

Self-efficacy beliefs are theorized to function as formidable determinants of behavior. Bandura's theory distinguishes self-efficacy proximate judgments from outcome judgments, the latter being concerned with the extent to which a behavior, once successfully executed, is believed to be linked to valued outcomes. Bandura's "outcome judgment" variable is similar to perceived usefulness. Bandura argues that self-efficacy and outcome beliefs have differing antecedents and that, *“In any given instance, behavior would be best predicted by considering both self-efficacy and outcome belief”* (p. 140). Davis (1989) reveals that *“ease of use,” “usefulness,”* and *“enjoyment”* are important determinants of attitude in the technology acceptance model.

Dabholkar (2000) notes that two of these three dimensions, *“ease of use”* and *“fun (or enjoyment),”* are also relevant for technology-based self-service. The third relevant dimension in Dabholkar's study was *“performance,”* extracted from qualitative work in that study and defined as encompassing the reliability and accuracy of the technology-based self-service, as perceived by the consumer. The concept is similar to the *“did its job”* dimension. Dabholkar and Bagozzi (2002) propose that perceptions of these three dimensions (ease of use, performance, and fun) will act as determinants of attitudes toward using technology based self-service.

For services activities, self-efficacy has been discussed in the theme of self-service and the impact of technology. Reflecting the changing landscape of service encounters, Parasuraman (1996) proposed an enhancement to the Services Marketing Triangle. The traditional triangle (customers-employees-company) has been modified to form a pyramid with technology representing the very important fourth end point. The customer is now seen as the dynamic

relationship between employees, company, and technology. This approach sets the question of self-efficacy by the use of technology.

Technology supports customers who provide the service for themselves, without employee involvement (e.g., automated teller machines [ATMs], E*Trade, or online ticketing). These types of self-service processes are increasingly implemented across services industries (Meuter et al. 2000). Using self-service technologies, customers can access services when and where they want without some of the complications of interpersonal exchanges. Technology enables customers to produce their own customized services. Customer use of technology-based services “*allows customers to define the service more clearly and deliver it in a manner that suits their own needs*” (Dabholkar, 2000, p.534). Bitner and al (2000) examine the ability of technology to effectively customize service offerings, recover from service failure, and spontaneously delight customers. The infusion of technology is examined as an enabler of both employees and customers in efforts to achieve these three goals. Although the infusion of technology can lead to negative outcomes and may not be embraced by all customers, the focus of this research is on the benefits of thoughtfully managed and effectively implemented technology applications.

Meuter et al. (2005) explore key factors that influence the initial self-service technology trial decision, specifically focusing on actual behavior in situations in which the consumer has a choice among delivery modes. The authors show that the consumer readiness variables of role clarity, motivation, and ability are key mediators between established adoption constructs (innovation characteristics and individual differences) and the likelihood of trial.

The use and self-efficacy theory has been applied to physical support and technologies but never with regard to support service objects. Meanwhile, some firms have developed technology to substitute for the material object. Biometrics technology is significant. For example, SIA and Changi launched a six-month pilot test of Fully Automated Seamless Travel (FAST) involving 9,000 SIA frequent fliers. Each received a smart card encoded with fingerprint and facial data. At check-in, these travelers simply walk through a separate gateway, slide their cards through a reader, and have their fingerprints and faces scanned. If the card data match the holders' features, the system clears security, recommends preferred seats, and prints boarding passes. Another example is the case of visitors to the Statue of Liberty: a fingerprint scan is use to open a locker. It is not fundamentally different from (or

easier than) using a key, but it is just a conjuring trick in changing a material object to virtual fact: from an entrance ticket to a fingerprint scan.

Not all customers are enthused about the increasing role of technology in service experiences. Some consumers may prefer the material aspects of interacting closely with the physical objects, which provide them with tangible evidence of the intangible service experience. It may prove a dangerous strategy to force customers to use technology in virtualizing objects without other material options. However, it may be as harmful to fail to offer technologically oriented service options, forcing customers to rely exclusively on material cues.

The literature reveals that the service support object can be investigated in various ways depending on the lens through which it is viewed. A marketing view could adopt a specific perspective that mixes the value of possession - connected with the ability to construct uses and meanings- and self-efficacy – referring to the competencies of the consumer. This outlook seems to be in sync with today's consumption realities (experiential consumption, consumer's competencies and new technology). This leads to our research questions. What exactly does the customer do with service support object outside of the service encounter? How are these practices in line with firm strategies? We explore these questions through the ethnographic study described in the next section.

1.4/- Strategic approaches to management of service support objects

Despite the service marketing literature's rich examination of the role of the tangible elements of the service experience, the vast majority of attention is focused on the servicescape. As noted earlier, service support objects are included as part of the functional cues of design factors for Baker and as signage for Bitner, but previous studies have not focused exclusive attention on the more mundane objects that support the service transaction and experience. Santos (2002) studied perspectives of both service providers and consumers regarding the importance of tangibles to the service experience and concluded that firm perceptions are not typically commensurate with customer perceptions when it comes to tangibles. Similar to Frost and Kumar's (2000) observation of three strategies practiced by airlines – cost-cutting, lower fares, or better service quality -- we observe three distinct firm strategies with respect to management of service support objects: disinvestment, a minima strategy, and a maxima strategy. In this section we detail each strategy.

The first strategy appears to be one of disinvestment. Some firms make the strategic decision to eliminate removable, tangible service support objects. This takes one of two general forms. One form of disinvestment is the pure elimination of removable objects, whether that be failure to provide the support (e.g., no more pens at the post or plastic bags at several supermarkets), or transformation of the removable service support object into part of the fixed physical setting (e.g., replacing sample soaps with a fixed soap dispenser). A second form of disinvestment is the technological virtualization of the support object. In this case, the firm de-materializes the service object. For example, the record locator number that serves as a substitute for a physical ticket in airline travel; the biometrics technology that allows fingerprint scanners to take the place of vouchers; the travel web site that replaces the tour operator catalog. We acknowledge that consumers have the option of re-materializing de-materialized virtual objects should they decide to print them out in hard copy. In both cases, however, the firm decides to eliminate the service objects in order to reduce charges and/or to develop a sustainable strategy for reducing waste.

The second approach to management of service support objects is a *minima* strategy.

In this case, the object is present during the service process in a simple and suitable fashion. It fits *a minima* in terms of basic functionality and symbolism, barely drawing attention to its existence. This modest strategy shows a comparative interest for the service object as a marketing tool.

Lastly, firms can employ a *maxima* strategy in connection with a service support object, attempting to draw attention to the uniqueness of the object and to use it for marketing purposes. This can take one of two general forms. In the first case, the service support object incorporates high quality design elements in order to make it aesthetically appealing and easily identifiable; for example, napkin rings for a gastronomic restaurant (“La reserve” at the Sofitel Marseille) or a Eurodisney pass. The second type of *maxima* strategy occurs when the service object is converted into a product for sale. The service support object is elevated to a status worthy of independent consumer attention and is an add-on to the service offering. For example the Ikea purchased bag or the bath robe and Turkish slippers from a high-end hotel.

The firm strategies are summarized in table 1.

Table 1 : firm strategies with respect to management of service support objects

Strategy	Tactic	Object Status
Disinvestment strategy	Removal: eliminate support or blend it with the physical setting	No object
	De-materialization	Virtual object
Minima strategy	Simple materialization	Basic object
Maxima strategy	Semantization	Promotional object
	Over materialization	Product object

Firms will choose amongst the strategies in relation to their financial constraints ('Removal' or 'Over-materialization'), their image strategy ('Semantization'), or in order to respond to either technological developments ('Dematerialization') or a sense of ecological responsibility ('Removal' or 'Dematerialization').

2/- The Study

2.1/- Method

Ethnographic methods are well-suited to the study of consumers' production of cultural meanings and social relations, given their attention to narratives and behavior, as previously noted (Arnould and Wallendorf 1995; Belk et al. 1988). *"Ethnographers observe actual people's behavior in real time; and rather than asking respondents to generalize about their behavior as in survey research, ethnographers record the particulars of naturally occurring behaviors and conversations"* (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994, p.486). Data were collected via the ethnographic methods of guided introspection. To get a real sense of how service support objects are utilized, recording naturalistic behavior with photographs without becoming a part of unfolding events is the methodology we use. In guided introspection, *"people introspect or think aloud about themselves and their actions"* (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p. 341) and write up their report without the researcher being present.

We used two major forms of data sources: written reports and photographs. We asked to participants to describe what happens with the service support object outside of the core service location, asking them to reflect on a mundane object they have saved at home. To

guide the respondents, we listed a non-exhaustive inventory of objects (see appendix 1). They were asked to write a narrative autobiography and to take photographs to illustrate their purpose. Photographs were mainly collected outside of the servicescapes; in other words, one's home.

2.2/- Object taxonomy

To categorize service support objects, participants ("introspectors") were provided initial information about what they should consider. The first criterion is necessity: some service objects are essential to support the service process while others are ancillary. For example, a credit card is essential to e-shopping; without it, the service cannot be performed. By contrast, a towelette offered in an airplane is secondary. Some service support objects are more difficult to classify as being clearly essential or non-essential. Objects such as the supermarket plastic bag would benefit from additional criteria.

Another approach uses the physical view of the material object to classify the object using two major dimensions: space and time. There are service support objects that can be moved and carried out of the service place and others that cannot. There also are service support objects that can or cannot be re-used. This second dimension refers to the rate of use as previously noted (Shih and Venkatesh, 2004). However, it is well known that, in subversion mode, consumers remove – in other words steal -- some service support objects they should not. In fact, nearly every object can be carried out (e.g., hotel towels, ashtrays, light bulbs, televisions, toilet paper, or books; a restaurant's forks, spoons, or plates). This devious behavior compels the firm to affix, to the extent possible, the object to the physical setting. An ethnographic approach takes into account the odd practices of the consumer. It is important to note that, from the customer's perspective, every object is reusable and from the perspective of management, every object has a single, unique use.

We designed a specific classification for support service objects that the consumer carries out of the service setting: the objects that support access and control, and the objects that support service delivery. The former are placed before the performance, in what Arnould et al. (2002) would term the pre-consumption and purchase experiences; they grant accessibility and allow the service to be consumed. In this category we include all access tickets: travel tickets (e.g., bus, plane, train, metro), entrance tickets (e.g., theater, museum, cinema, sporting events),

pass and by-pass (e.g., entertainment parks, discount hotels), contracts (e.g., skiing contracts, sport contracts), cards (e.g., pre-payment cards, telephone cards), and season tickets (e.g., to movies, to swimming pools). Catalogues also belong to this category (e.g., travel catalogues, insurance catalogues, bills of fare, scheduling programs). The second category represents support service objects that are placed during the core service performance to facilitate the service delivery. They can be more or less essential to the core service and they are provided by the firm to the customer who can bring them back home. In this second category we include all containers (e.g., supermarket plastic bags, IKEA bags, cardboard boxes and cartons, fast-food boxes, bank folder, disposable dishes), convenience objects (e.g., in-flight magazines, towelettes, slippers, toothpick, various bathroom samples, dry cleaner coat hangers). We term these two support object categories, respectively, as follows: Support Access and Control Objects (noted SACO) and Support Service Delivery Objects (noted SSDO).

3/- Results

In total, we contacted 42 individuals (28 French and 14 American) chosen among colleagues, students and personal friends. All did not participate and some reports were unexplainable. Some participants provided introspection on several objects. The final data consist of 60 pages of introspection report from 26 'introspectors' (16 French and 10 American) and 122 photographs. The objects reported on by the introspectors are allocated between SACO and SSDO in Appendix 2.

Our first step was to classify the objects based on their narrated uses and meanings and on introspectors' photos. We observed that some objects are saved at home for re-use (e.g., bags or shampoo samples), some are saved for no purpose (5 reports lead up nothing), and some are not re-used but rather saved for collections or for the memories or associations that they conjure (e.g., concert ticket introspections that focused on an unusual/memorable experience). Surprisingly, several respondents reported a re-design of the object in a creative and original manner, typically in a craft style (e.g., a metro ticket used for origami, drinking straws made into a doll). In summary, the first step confirmed that some consumers do indeed use mundane service objects removed from the service place for a variety of purposes.

The first step also offered evidence of consumer strategies that mirror those of firms' three strategic approaches to managing service support objects: disinvestment, minima and superinvestment (i.e. enhanced investment) consumer approaches. When the object is neglected (e.g., a ticket saved in a pocket, forgotten and unfortunately washed; a catalog littered somewhere or put in the back of a drawer), the individual has disinvested. The fact that the object has not yet been thrown away is of little importance. This strategy is supported with comments such as, "I don't know why I saved it," and, "It's just useless junk." Some data denote minima practices. For example, a ticket is sometimes saved as a receipt for tax deduction purposes and shopping bags are saved to be re-used as containers. Several introspections reflected a comment similar to this: "I use plastic bags from retailers to line my small trash can under the sink, they're the right size." When individuals consider the object sacred and ascribe to it personal symbolic values, they differentiate it from other, similar service support objects. For example, a train ticket framed under glass ("It was the first time I went to Paris. I was so exiting! Now, I'm proud of that."), a concert ticket saved as a trophy or for collection ("I hoard all movies tickets in a treasure box. Sometimes I take them out and I observe them. It reminds me of some feelings, some images I have forgotten. I like this."), and even photos clips from a travel catalog, pinned on the wall for decoration or stuck in one's agenda or on the cover of a notebook, there to inspire future travel.

A second result concerns the frequent disconnect between firm intentions and consumer response, supporting Santos' (2002) findings. Examples abound. Firms approach a disinvestment strategy with de-materialization, and then consumers re-materialize the object by printing the ticket or the catalog. There is a conversion from a virtual object to a basic object, or even a celebrated object (e.g., the framed train ticket described above). A firm's minima strategy can be met with a superinvestment approach by the customer. The consumer sanctifies or consecrates the mundane object. At times, a firm's minima strategy results in a basic object that is not given elevated status by the consumer but is, nevertheless, re-used by the customer for purposes unintended by the firm. For example, introspectors reported numerous instances of basic objects being saved and given to a child as a toy: a travel catalog ("I give it to my little girl and she loves scrawling images, tearing up and crumpling pieces of paper. She spends hours playing with it."), shampoo samples ("the best bath toys!"), and cardboard ("It is to construct a hut in the children's room"!)). From the child's perspective, he/she is playing with a toy, not a service support object. A firm's maxima strategy frequently results in costly promotional objects or products that are neglected by the

consumer. Furthermore, the consumer can twist the differentiated object it in a deviant manner, distorting its role as brand-enhancer the firm; for example, a logo-emblazoned Turkish slipper from a high-end hotel can be re-employed as a cleaning pad for wood floors.

4/- Discussion

As described above, we identified three broad categories of customer interaction with service support objects outside of the core service encounter: re-use, transformation, and association. With re-use, customers either recycle the object per its original intended use (e.g., a plastic (supermarket) bag recycled as a plastic (trash) bag) or they salvage the item for a use different from that originally intended, with varying degrees of object modification (e.g., a plastic supermarket bag used as a basketball basket or a hanger transformed into a bubble wand). Transformation occurs when the object is manipulated in some manner to create a new object that serves an aesthetic rather than functional purpose (e.g., a metro ticket used for origami or a doll made out of used drinking straws). Consumers also save items for the cognitive or affective associations that they trigger. These can take a variety of forms: a simple reminder (e.g., an entry badge saved as a reminder to file the entry receipt for tax purposes or a ski pass saved as a reminder to purchase the pass again next year), a trigger of nostalgia and memories (e.g., the entry wristband for a winning sporting event or the train ticket from a first solo voyage), or stimuli for future action (e.g., an in-flight magazine saved as inspiration to follow advice provided in one of its articles or a travel brochure saved to inspire exotic travel). These are non-exclusive categories. For example, an individual might cut out a travel brochure photo and mount it on the cover of their weekly planner, thereby transforming the object into a craft while using it for purposes of association.

Another relevant approach to categorization of the data employs incorporation of the dimensions described in the literature. From the two theoretical approaches of materialism and self-efficacy, we draw out two dimensions: 1) the ability to transform and create value (or not) from the object; 2) the ability to re-use (or not) the object.

- The first dimension addresses materialism theory and its examination of the role of possession in defining the self and creating a sense of identity. Individuals ascribe functional and symbolic values to the service support object in order to enhance their well-being, to provide physical evidence of their identity and to deploy possession rituals through

customization. At home, the object acquires a new meaning which extends beyond that intended by the firm and individuals exert their competencies through craft and re-design.

- With regard to the second dimension, self-efficacy theory differentiates ‘ease of use’, ‘usefulness’ and ‘enjoyment’. Our data reveal that recycling of service support objects reflects an increase in rate of use beyond that initially intended by the firm. Furthermore, in some cases, individuals increase their variety of use as they re-use the object to their liking, transforming and exploiting it in an efficient manner and doing so to their enjoyment.

This leads us to a 2 x 2 matrix which frames four types of extended consumer interaction with mundane service objects, organized around two axes: 1) when there is /or not re-use of the saved object, and 2) when there is /or not transformation of the saved object

Table 2: Categorization of consumer practices of the mundane service objects

Transformation \ Use	Yes	No
	Yes	Re-design
No	Re-use	Association

- Re-design corresponds to situations where the consumer reframes the object and re-uses it in a manner unintended by the firm. He/she re-appropriates it. For example, the consumer makes a picture frame with the wire of a dry cleaner hanger.
- Craft corresponds to situation where the consumer exercises his/her creativity to transform the service support object into something aesthetically pleasing but non-functional. He/she models the service object as origami or as an artistic object. It is not for use, only for decoration.
- Re-use corresponds to situation where the functionality of service object is exploited to a maximum without any material alteration. The re-use can be simple (e.g., a shopping bag used as a bag for other items, or a shampoo sample used at home rather

than at the hotel) or twisted (e.g., a phone card used as book mark, a movie ticket used as a scribble pad, or a bag used as a basketball basket).

- Association corresponds to the three situations previously described: as a reminder, a memory trigger, or as stimulus for future action.

Further analysis of the introspections revealed that consumers' type of extended interaction with service support objects tends to depend upon the object type:

- The SACO are important to consumers who keep the physical evidence to trigger association, whether they be memories of the service experience, reminders or the desire to consume the service in the future.
- The SSDO are important to consumers who re-use the physical evidence, whether transformed for other use, re-designed or simply re-used.

The fact that the SACO pertain in most cases to 'Association' and the SSDO to 'Re-use' holds important managerial implications. To make all SACO virtual would risk eliminating an important part of the experience, that of the memories or affective responses evoked by the physical evidence and their potential to inspire future action. The service experience continues for the consumer even after the service itself is completed and the SACO serve as important lynchpins for those extended associations. One of the important dimensions of the SSDO for consumers is continued manipulation of the object, whether through simple re-use, re-design and re-use, or transformation of the object for purely aesthetic purposes. Although these extended uses may not be consistent with those intended by the firm, they are nonetheless important to consumers who want the opportunity to exercise self-efficacy.

5/- Conclusion

In summary, results suggest that consumers employ mundane service objects in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons, some ordinary, others unexpected. These practices are by no means uniformly aligned with either the firm's intended use of the object or its strategy. Consumers re-use service support objects outside of the service context in traditional and non-traditional ways. They transform the objects and assign meaning to them. Consumers can convert what began as minima mundane objects into primers for a host of cognitive and affective associations and judgments. As Kay et al. (2004, p. 3) state, "...inanimate objects can serve as "material primes" that exert automatic, unconscious, and even unwanted effects

on relevant behavioral choices and judgments.” When firms attempt to assign meaning to these objects with a maxima strategy, consumers can misinterpret or change that meaning to suit their purposes. Even when firms attempt to de-materialize support objects by offering them exclusively on a virtual basis, consumers can re-materialize the objects and construe their own object meanings. Furthermore, failure to provide service support objects may represent a lost opportunity for positive associations created by the consumer between the object and the firm.

At a time when service elimination decisions are being given more attention in the literature (e.g., Gournaris et al., 2006), closer attention to the importance consumers place on service support objects – as part of the overall offer -- is warranted. The services literature has long debated the importance of the tangible elements or dimensions of the service experience to overall customer satisfaction. More data are needed to confirm and extend our results with a larger body of consumers, and to compare firm strategies with consumer practices with respect to specific objects.

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Appendix 1

Indications for the respondents:

“Please reflect on a mundane service object that you have had for a while (maybe years) and saved, or recently saved. It doesn’t matter when you brought it home. Please write a little history around this object: how, where and why you saved it, what are you doing with it, your feelings and uses. Please take 10-15 minutes and write a few paragraphs (no more than 2 pages).

To illustrate yours words, you are welcome to take some photos showing the object in its place and what it has become. To help you, here is a non-exhaustive list of mundane object. You can choose inside it or not; as you want! Don’t worry and don’t make this report difficult for yourself. The only thing is to be sincere and simple”.

Some mundane service object:

- access tickets :
 - travel ticket (e.g., bus, plane, train, metro),
 - entrance tickets (e.g., museum, cinema),
 - pass and by-pass (e.g., entertainment parks, discount hotel),
 - contracts (e.g., skiing contract, sport contract),
 - cards (e.g., pre-payment cards, telephone cards),
 - season tickets (e.g., to movies, to swimming pools).
 - Etc...
- Catalogues:
 - travel catalogues,
 - insurance catalogues,
 - bills of fare,
 - scheduling programs
 - etc...
- all containers :
 - supermarket plastic bags,
 - IKEA bags,
 - cardboard boxes for removal,
 - fast-food boxes,
 - bank folder,
 - disposable dishes, mugs, cups,
 - etc...
- convenience objects:
 - in-flight magazines,
 - eye masks (sleep eye set)
 - towelettes,
 - slippers,
 - toothpicks,
 - various bathroom samples, a shower cap, etc...
 - mini sewing set
 - door hangers (do not disturb)
 - dry cleaner coat hangers
 - drinking straws
 - ...etc

Appendix 2

Data: Reported objects

SACO	SSDO
Movie ticket	Casino bucket
Ski pass	Phone card
SNCF Ticket	Purchased bag
Concert ticket	TGV magazine
Metro ticket	Shopping bag
Travel brochure	Straw
Museum entry badge	Shampoo samples
Sporting event entry wristband	Shower cap
Sporting event ticket	Hanger
	Cardboard boxes for removal
	Airline magazine
	Coffee mug