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Ontological (in)security in servicescapes: Consuming the Christmas market experience

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Abstract
This interpretive, qualitative study explores ontological (in)security within the servicescape of Manchester's Christmas Market. We scrutinise this temporary setting, revealing evidence of paradoxes which create uncertainty and ontological (in)security for consumers. Specifically, we identify a social paradox, encompassing crowds and the conduct of 'others' within the space; a safety paradox, including material paraphernalia of security and security actors present; and a sensorial paradox, involving stimuli such as light, scent, and sound. We provide a critical context for unpacking consumers' cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses to wider servicescape settings with implications which reach beyond our temporary context. In doing so, we contribute to the marketing theory of servicescapes, where the paradoxes of ontological (in)security are not yet well understood.

Keywords
Christmas, markets, ontological security, space, servicescape, temporary

Introduction

This article explores how consumers' sense of ontological (in)security is moderated in temporary servicescapes. Servicescapes are environments where services are performed, delivered, and experienced in highly routinised ways (Bitner, 1992). Giddens (1984:64) defines ontological security as 'autonomy of bodily control within predictable routines and encounters', with a sense of order instilling a feeling of ontological security among consumers (Bauman, 1988; Giddens, 1984). In other words, the presence of routine and the predictable rhythm of everyday life helps consumers feel secure. Routine in *temporary* servicescapes is, however, more irregular, which warrants further

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exploration. We do this through examining fluid articulations of ontological security (e.g. its paradoxical/continuous nature) in a temporary setting (Bondi 2014). Our study offers a new exploration of the *temporary* servicescape, using Manchester's Christmas market as an exemplar. We argue that ontological security is weakened in such temporal contexts because of consumers' lack of lived experience with this servicescape type. Here, related concepts of safety and (material or ontological) security become salient (Krahmann, 2018; Siguaw et al., 2019). To elaborate, it is the perception of 'safety' (i.e. the risk from hazards) (Fan and Yang, 2022) which render perceived disruption to daily life invisible, yet conversely the presence of material 'security' measures (e.g. barriers, security personnel) often leads to concern. These issues become of growing relevance as temporary servicescapes become ever more common. Christmas markets, for example, operate in most UK cities alongside other 'pop-up' events (e.g. food festivals) highlighting the increased marketisation of urban spaces (Warnaby and Medway, 2022).

In this paper, we contribute to marketing theory by analysing the potential of temporary servicescapes to moderate perceptions of ontological (in)security. We show how manifestations of ontological (in)security are heightened in temporary spaces and for pop-up activities which are often highly experimental (Warnaby and Shi, 2018), due to a lack of regular visitation and expected routines, questioning the idea that material consumption provides an unwavering sense of ontological security (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Thus, while many servicescape elements induce positive cognitive, emotional, or physiological reactions among consumers (Bitner, 1992), when they involve irregular or disrupted consumption routines the resultant ontological states may be altered (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017). In such circumstances, ontological insecurity can be heightened by challenging 'consumers' deep-seated assumptions about the predictability of contexts' (Robinson and Arnould, 2020: 4).

While extant frameworks for servicescapes identify their constituent dimensions (Bitner, 1992; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011), safety and security concerns are neglected 'despite the striking relevance of safety in virtually every servicescape' (Siguaw et al., 2019: 123). This is surprising given increasing levels of threat in consumption spaces (Campbell et al., 2020), evidenced by terrorist attacks in shopping malls/streets in Sydney (2024), Copenhagen (2022), and Barcelona (2017) and at Christmas markets in Berlin (2016), Strasbourg (2018), and Magdeburg (2024). While modern servicescape designers invariably take preventative security measures to assuage ontological insecurity, they are mindful that this 'restricts the ideal of a freely accessible and unfettered lived experience' (Broeckerhoff and Galalae, 2022: 87). The city of Manchester has experienced notable examples of 'episodic disruption' (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017: 367) following the IRA bombing (1996) and Manchester Arena attack (2017). Such horrific events leave an indelible impression on the consumer psyche yet provide an appropriate context to re-examine notions of (in) security as embedded in consumers' subconscious experiences (Closs Stephens et al., 2021).

We begin by reviewing literature on servicescape security and the paradoxes therein. The context of Manchester's temporary Christmas market, and our research design, is then outlined. Findings are organised around three key themes – *the social paradox*, *the safety paradox,* and *the sensorial paradox* – which contribute to understandings around the reactions of consumers to ontological (in) security in temporary spaces. We conclude by outlining wider theoretical contributions, practical implications, and future research directions.

From servicescapes to 'security-scapes'

It is helpful to begin by examining the concept of security in servicescapes and those security dimensions which resonate with a temporary setting. Servicescapes in general, are characterised

by their heavily designed and controlled physical/tangible aspects (Bitner, 1992), signposting an expected (and often unquestionably safe) experience (Aubert-Gamet, 1999). However, following critiques of Bitner's (1992) framework, this perspective adopts the narrow assumption that consumers respond only to objective physical stimuli (e.g. furniture, signage). More recent work shows how servicescapes also comprise subjective stimuli (e.g. social aspects, such as perceived crowding) which may not be fully controllable (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011). Ontological security, we argue, is a servicescape dimension influenced by both objective and subjective stimuli. For the 'lone consumer', for example, this often depends on their perceptions of the various objective and social dimensions of the servicescape in cultivating their own personal sense of safety and ease (McCamley and Morland, 2021). Yet this process can generate mixed reactions from consumers 'not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore' (Mitzen, 2006: 345). A crowd, for example, can be perceived as both convivial, and simultaneously as a potential threat. This type of opposing tension informs our use of paradoxes of ontological (in)security throughout our article.

While the servicescape framework has been expanded, moving toward the inclusion of additional elements such as social, symbolic, and natural environmental dimensions (see Arnould and Price, 1993; Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011), security and safety remain largely absent from analyses (Siguaw et al., 2019). Further, many studies focus on permanent spaces, such as themed shops and restaurants (Figueiredo et al., 2021), coffee shops (McCamley and Morland, 2021), and hotels (Lockwood and Pyun, 2019), largely ignoring implications for temporary spaces.

Airports (although permanent and managed environments) are somewhat analogous to these temporary settings due to their liminality and the transient relationship they afford to consumers (Huang et al., 2018). Jeon and Kim (2012) identify safety and social factors as key determinants of positive emotions towards airport servicescapes, finding social factors affect both positive and negative emotions according to the number, appearance, and behaviour of others, but stopping short of making an overt link to security. Sandberg et al.'s (2022) research, exploring the servicescape of vulnerable nursing home residents, highlights how security penetrates all servicescape dimensions, emphasising the balance needed between providing security and diminishing residents' autonomy. Interventions meant to enhance security had the opposite effect (e.g. automatic lighting evoked fear in some residents). Social dimensions of security were pertinent, as residents worried about unwanted 'others' entering their private space. Thus, security is not a separate dimension of the servicescape but something permeating all dimensions.

By contrast, Siguaw et al. (2019), examining the 'nested' servicescape of a university campus and adjacent town, call for 'safety' dimensions to be explicitly incorporated into servicescape frameworks. They found crowding mediated consumer affect towards the servicescape, although links to security were not overtly made. There has also been a recent focus on wellbeing in servicescapes – including the therapeutic (Higgins and Hamilton, 2019) and nature-utopic (Apaolaza et al., 2020). This work recognises the importance of positioning servicescapes as welcoming, non-threatening places (subtly hinting towards a recognition of ontological security in influencing consumer reactions).

Overall, however, there has been little focus on the relevance of ontological security within servicescapes, and especially in temporary servicescapes in urban space, such as street markets, festivals, or pop-up food/drink spaces. Furthermore, existing research uses 'security' and 'safety' interchangeably, with limited consideration of the ontological implications, which we now discuss in terms of various paradoxes that exist.

Paradoxes of ontological (in)security within the servicescape

Definitions of ontological security have traditionally been articulated in the fields of sociology (see Giddens, 1984; Laing 1960) and international relations (see Krahmann 2018; Mitzen 2006), but rarely in marketing scholarship. The idea of the existence of *paradoxes* of ontological (in)security in urban consumption settings is, therefore, underexplored. Various paradoxes of ontological (in) security exist in the literature in a latent fashion; however, they are not fully or systematically mapped and analysed. We draw on Giddens (1984) to suggest that a paradox of ontological (in) security refers to the contradictory outcomes that can arise in the pursuit of stability and continuity of the self, generating instability and anxiety. This definition emphasises the idea that ontological security is deeply embedded in the routines of daily life which help individuals feel secure, yet the pursuit of this stability can sometimes undermine its strength.

An underlying *social paradox* can be found in the servicescapes literature concerning the number and nature of people who interact in consumption spaces. Servicescapes are conceptualised as social places of togetherness and societal ritualisation (Aubert-Gamet, 1999) where individuals gather to feel existentially secure (Mead and Schubert, 1934). Indeed, collectivity in consumption contexts, via brand communities or consumer tribes, is value creating (Schau et al., 2009). Conversely togetherness, often examined through crowding, affords tension, and can negatively impact consumer satisfaction (Eroglu and Machleit, 1990). Crowds, marked as unpredictable and destabilising (Lopes et al., 2021), represent a potentially disruptive force due to their affective flows and contagious nature. A servicescape without sufficient people, however, arguably presents a sterile environment as the importance of social density and community to generate convivial atmospheres is frequently recognised (Steadman et al., 2021; Toombs and McColl-Kennedy 2003). Hill et al. (2021: 7) find that 'social atmospheres intensify as crowds gather and move toward an event space together'. They find a 'collective effervescence' in being part of a crowd yet the desired social atmospheres are disrupted if there is a lack of homogeneity.

This concept of a social paradox also encompasses the notion of the 'other' (Sibley, 1995). Often perceived as deviant or undesirable persons who do not 'belong', such 'imperfect' individuals threaten the dominant group, bringing into question assumptions surrounding what a normative citizen looks like and who has right to urban public spaces (Anjaria, 2009). Existing servicescape research explores the potential threats 'others' pose through, for example, drunk, disorderly, or aggressive behaviour, which may disrupt service delivery, through to those committing terrorist acts (Guttmann et al., 2021). Servicescapes can thus be deliberately exclusionary in attempts to maintain ontological security. Shopping malls, for example, are purposefully designed to attract families and the affluent (Sibley, 1995); meanwhile those without economic means are often targeted by security personnel, and excluded (Hutton, 2019). Such 'repression' is implemented as a means of 'disciplining' unwanted 'others' through security measures such as policing, surveillance, and defensive architecture (Castilhos, 2024).

Moreover, the servicescape literature also identifies a *safety paradox*, where consumer anxiety about risk is managed through simultaneous reliance on physical security and symbolic reassurance offered by security personnel (Krahmann, 2018). Servicescapes are often patrolled by police/security personnel to enhance perceptions of ontological security, particularly in less familiar, routinised spaces. This works to mitigate consumers' negative emotional and physiological reactions to the servicescape, reflective of Sandberg et al.'s (2022) nursing home servicescape research, where a balance between the provision of security and consumer autonomy was identified as central.

Security personnel can fuel this paradox. Their perceived need (to keep consumers safe) can lead to questions and fears surrounding their necessity because they emphasise the fact that risk is

present. Equally, police officers are ultimately 'empowered by governments to enforce their laws and maintain social order' (Yarwood, 2007: 448), but they can also generate collective insecurity for certain groups (particularly ethnic minorities) by using exclusionary tactics and eroding civil and spatial liberties through anti-terror policing (Yarwood, 2007). In addition, the material paraphernalia of security, such as concrete barriers and body scanners, are visible props of border ma(r)king and control (Christensen and Albrecht, 2020) but are also display of 'othering' and ordering (Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). While a sense of order and control can be perceived as empowering, it can also be experienced as dystopian and threatening (Benton-Short, 2007).

The final paradox present in the literature – the *sensorial paradox* – pertains to consumers' (mixed) reactions to lighting, scent, and sound. Previous work has highlighted the 'sensory rush' and 'hyper stimulation' felt by consumers through visuals, sounds, and smells experienced within servicescapes (Penaloza, 1998; Sherry et al., 2001). Nike Town/the ESPN zone are centred in these studies to illustrate how the deliberate sensory manipulation of the servicescape is used to shape the consumer experience. This induces meaning making, using retail as theatre, narrative and theming, and creating a sense of connection through multisensory techniques (Borghini et al., 2009; Diamond et al., 2009). Sensorial paradoxes are evidenced here in a more latent fashion, that is, the consumer's role in interpreting sensory servicescape dimensions is central in determining whether it is perceived as positive or negative.

In contrast to the highly controlled setting of Nike Town and the ESPN zone, a temporary context such as a Christmas market is less predictable, making it more challenging to control consumer reactions to sensory stimuli. In urban contexts in particular, the visual stimulus of lighting has been examined as playing a role in engendering feelings of ontological security, and lighting is regularly used by local authorities in this regard to provide a sense of security and inclusivity (Dunn and Edensor, 2020; Ebbensgaard and Edensor, 2021). The paradox here is evident as dangerous 'others' may be automatically perceived to hide in any unlit, shadowy, dark corners. The use of other sensory stimuli (e.g. temperature, smells, and sound) has also been shown to promote convivial feelings in outdoor settings, where the festive atmosphere would otherwise be lost (Jensen and Fusté-Forné, 2023). Yet where sensory stimuli are perceived as 'too much' ontological security may be lessened, particularly for neurodiverse consumers who can easily experience hyperstimulation in retail contexts (Shin and Alexander, 2023).

Thus, the relevance of ontological security to servicescape theory is evident. Various servicescape dimensions engender feelings of ontological (in)security, including the social, safety, and sensorial paradoxes which surround crowding, the 'other', police and security personnel, physical security interventions (i.e. the material paraphernalia of security), and sensory stimuli such as lighting and sound. We now investigate the relevance of these ideas via our empirical case where we attempt to unveil consumers' ontological dispositions to security in a temporary servicescape setting.

Context and research design

This paper draws on a quasi-ethnographic study of Manchester's Christmas market, held annually at various city-centre locations. Operating for many years with few obvious security measures, visible signs of fortification (e.g. concrete barriers, armed police) were introduced following the Manchester Arena bombing (2017), in addition to less overt surveillance mechanisms (e.g. CCTV, stewarding). This *temporary* context was chosen as a non-routinised context (Arnould Ej Price and Moisio, 2006) to explore ontological (in)security within a servicescape, following the rationale that our observations in this setting might be more pronounced and would thereby reveal 'opportunities

for uncovering the boundaries of how, when, where, and under what conditions our theories apply' (Arnould Ej Price and Moisio, 2006: 110). We draw on interview and focus group data collected from 23 participants, recruited via personal contacts and social media. These were combined with ethnographic insights from observational fieldnotes and sensory materials (i.e. video recordings, photos, and sound recordings).

Ten in-depth, go-along, walking interviews were initially conducted in phase one of data collection. Each interview lasted 1–2 hours, with respondents (aged 19–70) evenly split by gender. Recognising the importance of movement, each interview captured a participant's routes to/from the Christmas market and their experiences therein, with respondents accompanied as they paused and sometimes consumed at the various stalls and outlets. This approach allowed for an improvised form of questioning, with interviews discretely audio-recorded with prior consent. No preconceived framework was used to guide the line of enquiry, meaning the approach took the form of informal conversations where participants could discuss other pertinent issues. The topic of security was not mentioned to respondents in advance so as not to influence the conversational agenda; indeed, it emerged organically and without prompt.

We also utilised participant and non-participant observation, via a hybrid ethnographic approach (Stewart, 1998), immersing ourselves in the locale and spending considerable time (individually and collectively) observing the market. This involved 16 site visits at different times of the day across 6-weeks. Data from this first phase of research were transcribed and analysed thematically.

To allow for retrospection, phase two of data collection involved two focus groups (comprising nine and four participants of varying age/gender, all of whom had recently visited the market). Each focus group lasted approximately 1 hour and followed a semi-structured format, further exploring themes that emerged from the go-along walking interviews. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data from both phases were subject to thematic analysis (Spiggle, 1994), undertaken in an iterative manner across the research team to maintain sensitivity towards issues of inter-coder reliability and agreement, consistent with Denzin's (1978) notion of 'investigator triangulation'.

Findings

Our findings highlight three paradoxes within this temporary servicescape which can negatively affect consumers' sense of ontological security, as informed by our literature review: (i) the *social paradox* (reaction to crowds and the 'other'); (ii) the *safety paradox* (the material/personnel markers of security); and (iii) the *sensorial paradox* (perceptions of light, sound, and scent). While we categorise these influences on ontological (in)security using our three named paradoxes, we highlight that some of the key findings overlap (recognising fluidity across categorisations). For example, the notion of the 'other' appears primarily in the social paradox but can, as will become apparent, be a material marker of the safety paradox, too. We interweave a picture of the overlapping and intersubjective relationships that consumers built with this temporary servicescape demonstrating how such temporal spaces are viewed paradoxically by consumers as either too much or too little, foregrounding the notion of ontological security. In doing so, we develop our main area of theoretical contribution; to show the relevance of ontological (in)security within temporary servicescapes.

The social paradox

The social paradox revolves around two dimensions, which influenced participants' sense of ontological security: (1) the overall number; and (2) the type of people occupying the space.

Specifically, the paradox rests in the desire to socialise amongst a large group of convivial others which holds potential to enhance stability; yet fears emerged surrounding the potential of instability from the very same crowd of largely unknown others given the nature of their composition. To illustrate, respondents described a tension regarding the optimal number of people necessary to foster an enjoyable, sociable market experience, as Isla (interview) comments:

> It [crowding] almost does make the atmosphere a little bit more Christmassy…It's like everybody is there for a reason, so you want to be, at times, a part of that. Even though you are there, you also think it is too busy.

Crowding generated feelings of communality, where socialisation was a positive force, enhancing a sense of place through the togetherness of 'territorial bodies' (Aubert-Gamet, 1999; Kärrholm, 2008). However, participants also felt 'crammed in together' with 'lots of madness going on everywhere' (Arnold, interview), and expressed frustration when discussing crowding as 'just a nightmare' (Ben, focus group).

Consumers' sense of ontological security was undermined when they felt unable to control those around them or their own bodily movements, as they were 'shuffled down the alleyways' (Elizabeth, interview), indicative of the disruption to individuals' routines and planned ways of navigating these temporary spaces. Participants preferred to skirt around the edges of the market, avoiding any congestion or 'trouble'. The temporality of the markets impacted consumers' sense of ease, particularly at busy times (e.g. weekends). Doug states:

> I think I'd think twice about bringing a young family here, only because when people can bring a family it's generally the weekend and I think it might be too busy.

Doug also outlines a distinction between interacting with people as part of 'everyday', routine work encounters as opposed to more temporary and crowded settings such as the market, suggesting how his sense of ontological security is reduced for the latter:

> If you are…retired, you don't get the everyday association with people that you probably did when you worked. So, coming to things like this gets you back to that social end of things. But they [people] can also work the other way where you get too much of [them] and you get stressed by it…crowds can often stress people.

Doug's account recognises ontological security as a spectrum which is more threatened at certain times (Bondi, 2014). We witnessed how the existence of 'ritual interaction chains' in crowds can result in a 'collective effervescence' whereby the servicescape becomes climatic as people act in similar ways and their behaviours align (Hill et al., 2022: 2). Equally, when crowds mobilise in more negative ways, visitors' sense of ontological security becomes threatened.

There was a persistent yearning from participants for a perceived 'social' image of what an idealised Christmas scene should look like – people together, families having fun (Miller, 2017) – tempered by a discomfort with the busyness which slowly permeated the experience. Respondents had a perception of the optimum number of people necessary for an enjoyable visit, but once that number was exceeded, negative effects emerged:

> A few people now appear to be disturbed by the growing crowds and want to make an escape. I also feel like if it were to get much busier, I too would feel uneasy. It's interesting how the atmosphere

> can change from one of fun to one of anxiety with a simple shift in the number and proximity of people (Fieldnotes).

Crowds can give rise to moments of disorder which then dissipate, exemplifying an uncertainty created by crowding and its temporal flux (Eroglu and Machleit, 1990). Participants also referred to the increased likelihood of being pickpocketed in crowds, as Tanya (interview) explains: 'at night, it doesn't feel as safe because of pickpocketing, so I prefer it when there's less crowds'. This further emphasises the impact of the temporal fluctuation of crowding on ontological security, with the massing and proximity of bodies affording the potential to unwittingly camouflage deviant acts of maleficent others.

For many respondents, it was inconceivable to visit the markets alone, highlighting co-created experiential value in being with familiar others to feel safe in crowded environments:

> Oh no, we wouldn't come on our own. No…I think it's just so we can bounce off each other and we feel safe together. I wouldn't want my wife to come on her own particularly and I don't suppose she'd want me to come on my own (Doug, interview).

Female respondents felt their sense of ontological security could be protected by the presence and immediate company of likeminded others. Tanya (interview) similarly emphasises the importance of social interaction in visiting the markets: 'I don't know if it's because it's a festive thing. I'd feel a bit lonely if I came on my own'. This is significant, as respondents commented on how people 'make' the experience (Johnstone, 2012).

While the presence of an optimal number of people was deemed important, there was concern about 'other' visitors occupying the space, the second element to our social paradox. Participants worried whether a person amongst the Christmas market throng could be a terrorist, a drunk, or capable of other deviant acts. As Finn (interview) noted fearfully, referring to the notion of the 'other' as a potential terrorist: 'it's a bit of a focal point, so could be a target for terrorism. Actually, yes, shall we go? I'm a bit scared'. This resonates with Hill et al. (2022) who argue that the existence of a mass of people by itself does not necessarily result in congruent emotions/actions if the group are not homogeneous.

The notion of the threatening 'other' was a worry for almost all participants, who acknowledged recency and 'affect' working together, whereby the market atmosphere could be impacted by recent events which remained prominent in respondents' minds. One focus group discussion began with a dramatic account of Peggy's visit to the markets when somebody detonated a firecracker and everybody 'hit the deck' given this 'very, very frightening' experience. Peggy described her fear that there had been a terrorist attack, as people around her attempted to escape: 'you couldn't walk one way or another. If you wanted to run, you couldn't…a very nasty experience…people were crawling under there to get out of this situation'. Consequently, the leisurely atmosphere of the market shifted from a synchronised, rhythmic movement of consumers (Kärrholm, 2008), to one that was disorganised and frightening. The intensity of feeling around security thus varied depending on participants' past memories and experiences (Steadman et al., 2021), as Annie (focus group) explains: 'you're constantly reminded of it [the Arena attack] now, particularly at Albert Square, it's got those big concrete entrances'. This impacted visitors' willingness to stay and consume the Christmas market experience – evidence of the 'disorienting, destabilizing, and disruptive experience of capitalism' caused by affective relations between people (Lopes et al., 2021: 17).

The safety paradox

We identify two dimensions of the 'safety paradox': (1) the personnel present to enforce and enable safety; and (2) the material dimensions contributing to safety (e.g. concrete barriers, body scanners). Explicitly, the paradox here lies in the dual feelings of ontological security and insecurity regarding both personnel, such as armed police officers, and the material dimensions of safety. The deliberate presence of security actors problematised respondents' feelings of ontological security. The sight of armed police officers (a visible marker of security) simultaneously invoked feelings of being 'at-risk' by their very presence. We witnessed lingering glances and sharp intakes of breath from participants upon encountering police officers with 'machine guns across their chests…you definitely notice it' (Greg, focus group). This triggered concern as to *why* police officers were needed, and whether their presence signalled a heightened probability of a malicious event unfolding. This safety paradox, therefore, involved consumers' reflections of previous events which had circumvented order and security, as Arnold (interview) explains: 'You see police knocking around, nothing's happened for a while, but a couple of years ago, yeah it [terrorism] has crossed my mind…Again, the police just remind you of it'. Given the years which had passed without a 'troubling event' in Manchester city centre, there was a sense among participants (however inaccurate) of the heightened probability of something bad happening soon.

Although armed police conjured initial feelings of unease and (in)security, paradoxically, participants revealed how their absence would also create concern. We observed the dual role of police officers in controlling crowds, acting simultaneously as a 'show of force' and as a mechanism to soften the mood, providing reassurance (Wall, 2019). The contemporary urban condition, as Doug (interview) describes, supports this need for protection:

> Armed police are here. They wouldn't be here a few years ago, I'm sure…As long as the police act in the right way and aren't heavy-handed…but I think they've got to take everything into account these days. You know…there was the market thing, was it in Germany last year? Where somebody drove through the market.

At the same time, participants acknowledged a wider consideration of police as aggressors and a force for exclusion (Sibley, 1994). The police presence can be, therefore, both destabilising and reassuring, as Vanessa (interview) recounts:

> Suddenly [I saw] loads of like, proper armed police…and they all had really serious faces. I thought something was happening, and I got a bit stressed out. But they weren't, they were just walking around…Sometimes it's a good police presence. Being visible is good.

In summary, there was a widespread perception amongst respondents that the sight of police, especially when armed, 'definitely changes the atmosphere' and 'put [s] you on edge a little bit' (Holly, focus group). This may be more marked in a *temporary* servicescape where consumers are less likely to have prior experiences that prepare them for the unexpected nature of this somewhat unusual servicescape feature. Perhaps to try and counter this, we observed the police smiling and interacting with visitors, as if deliberately attempting to alleviate any anxieties that might arise from their presence. In this sense, they were enforcing rules of behaviour but also attempting to provide an atmospheric sense of stabilisation (Wall, 2019).

Regarding the second part of the safety paradox, we observed that while consumers can respond to material servicescape security interventions in positive ways, the reactions of our participants

were more nuanced. For example, concrete barriers that helped protect the space from vehicular assault also left visitors feeling trapped, as Annie (focus group) acknowledges: 'I kind of feel secure that they've got those big barriers, so something can't drive into it. But equally, it's a big visual reminder that this is probably not a safe place'. Respondents were undoubtedly attuned to the physical markers of security by virtue of their purposeful visibility – to ward off troublemakers and counter deviant acts of the 'other' (Castilhos, 2024). Nevertheless, concrete barriers and walk-through body scanners triggered security concerns, as the lead author's fieldnotes identify:

> I approach the entrance to the market and what strikes me is the barriers which surround the site and the security guard stood there. I wonder whether they are there to prevent danger coming in, or to stop people coming out with drinks etc?...What a shame it is to have to think of all the possible dangers and bad things that could happen before embarking on something that is supposed to be fun and enjoyable.

Many participants preferred to adopt a narrative that the barriers were present simply to stop drunk people from entering the market where their inebriated behaviour might negatively impact visitors. Others presented a greater sense of foreboding, with some considering worst case scenarios such as the risk of terrorist attacks, and the fact the barriers were there to prevent this:

> Well, I think it's an attempt to keep people that have probably had too much alcohol [out] and from interfering with the general public [in] the market. I think it's fair enough really…I think it's a bit of an eyesore in that you can't just walk in, but I see it as, you know, present day, almost a necessity. It might not be just from alcohol, it might be a terrorist, you know, somebody trying to drive a truck through here or something (Doug, interview).

As Doug's account exemplifies, there is an accepted understanding that the barriers have an exclusionary purpose in protecting those within the market from those outside. This reflects previous work showing how consumption spaces can often debar certain groups from entry to promote the hegemonies of more dominant groups within them (Castilhos, 2024; Sibley, 1995).

The presence of barriers also contributed to the market's spatiality and site navigation. Respondents perceived there was a centre or 'heart' to the market, surrounded by aisles and funnels. However, the same barriers meant that it was not easy to quickly escape should something untoward happen, creating feelings of concern and claustrophobia. Elizabeth (interview) recounts memories of the concrete barriers and expressed other darker thoughts regarding confinement during one of her recent visits:

> Part of it says to me, well they're keeping you safe, they're keeping you secure. The other part of it is…if there was an incident in the markets, you're really quite hemmed in, which is sometimes a bit worrying isn't it? Especially these days.

Elizabeth's comment, 'especially these days', reinforces perceptions of the temporal dimension of the market as a space which has evolved in its meaning over time, perhaps seeming more insecure today than in the past with physical barriers a symbolic manifestation of this.

Overall, the presence of barriers, and the sense of anxiety they provoke, resonated with most respondents: 'you see the extra barriers, I think that's not what you expect, so it does put you on edge a little bit' (Jean, focus group). This supports Jones et al.'s (2020) contention that even perceived or imagined 'surrealist disruption' to consumers' common-sense worlds can lead to ontological discontinuities. Such markers were, on the one hand, perceived as threatening and restricting; but,

on the other, they 'stabilised' the territory (Kärrholm, 2008), simultaneously mediating participants' sense of ontological security.

The sensorial paradox

The sensorial paradox relates to how light, scent, and sound are perceived, with participants identifying lighting as having most impact on ontological (in)security. The sensorial paradox rests in the ability of these sensorial elements to foster a sense of ontological security, while their incongruence or overwhelming intensity had potential to simultaneously evoke negative feelings of insecurity and discomfort. While lighting, for example, created ambiance, it was also interpreted in oppositional ways. Respondents described how the initial sight of festive lights ignited their keenness to enjoy the festivities: 'it's probably one of those things that draws me to it...it's quite nice to come somewhere and see some Christmassy lights' (Finn, interview). Finn's perception exemplifies how lighting augments space, altering his normative use of the market, and generating a sense of inclusion (Ebbensgaard and Edensor, 2021). Festive lighting also enhanced respondents' sense of ontological security, consistent with the use of illumination by local authorities to enhance feelings of visibility/security in public spaces (Dunn and Edensor, 2020). Conversely, echoing the idea that 'dominant conceptions of darkness have been associated with the primitive, evil and dangerous' (Edensor, 2013: 447), 'dark spots', away from the central hubbub of the market, afforded visitors with 'pockets of quiet which almost feel eerie' (fieldnotes). This suggests that such interstitial spaces are differentially experienced and, for some, actively diminished ontological security.

Despite the unease that some respondents felt in the dark corners/edges of the market, they also recognised that 'once the night comes out, the lights come' (Adam, interview), and that without this there isn't 'the instant magic upon seeing them [the lights] that you feel when it's dark' (fieldnotes). Artificial light, however, magical and secure it made respondents feel, also had the capacity to contribute to sensory overload and could be experienced as if 'Christmas has hit you in the face' (Peggy, focus group). Respondents described a 'turning point' and feeling 'kind of overwhelmed with the lights' (Claire, focus group). The markets can thus be viewed as 'a dark and treacherous netherworld' or 'a glittering multi-coloured wonderland' (Nasaw, 1999: 6–8) leading to 'very different attunements and moods' (Ebbensgaard and Edensor, 2021: 389). This demonstrates how consumers' experiences of ontological (in)security can be mediated by the role of artificial lighting.

Scent was also identified by participants, who all mentioned festive smells in some way, highlighting 'the lovely foody smells' (Elizabeth, interview); 'the wood smoked aroma of the sausages' (Sophia, interview); and the Christmassy scents of 'citrus or a mulled wine like a spiced candle' (Tanya, interview). These recognisable Christmas smells helped participants feel grounded at the market. They were one of the first things that participants acknowledged when approaching the market, acting as an invisible olfactory field which delineated this consumption space from the (comparatively dull) urban streetscapes outside. Doug (interview) describes 'a general atmospheric smell, if you like, of various food outlets all together in one place…which you wouldn't get normally, other than at this time of year'. Participants also reflected that without such recognisable festive scents something would be missing, emphasising how a sense of ontological security can arise through familiarity and congruence. Yet paradoxically, participants such as Sophia (interview) describe these 'sweet smells' of Christmas as being too much, and an olfactory combination that was almost sickening and at times overpowering.

Sound was similarly highlighted as having capacity to make participants feel at one with their surroundings, and notably when 'there are some Christmassy sounds' (Larry, interview). However,

several participants noted a lack of this in the market space. As Finn (interview) comments: 'we've seen quite a few buskers around, but not singing anything Christmassy, which I just find a bit of a missed opportunity'. Instead, participants emphasised the sounds of the general melee of the markets or sounds which were perceived as incongruent: 'the dance music immediately strikes me and changes the atmosphere from 'traditional Christmas' to a party atmosphere' (fieldnotes), chiming with studies examining combinations of the senses (see Spangenberg et al., 2005). There were also the more startling accounts referenced earlier of loud firecrackers going off at the markets (Peggy, interview) which induced panic and fear. We argue that these multi-sensorial paradoxes have a significant potential to enhance or erode feelings of ontological security, because of the feelings of familiarity, memory, and ease which they either promote or deny.

Conclusions: The ontological security continuum, temporality and servicescapes

Existing servicescape research largely focuses on conditions contributing to positive consumer experiences (Arnould and Price 1993; Aubert-Gamet, 1999; Bitner, 1992; Higgins and Hamilton, 2019). Christmas markets can offer an idealised, festive atmosphere where visitors buy into 'images, representations and signs more than reality' (Castéran and Roederer, 2013: 156). In this research, we identify three paradoxes (heightened by the temporary locale of Manchester's Christmas market) that undermine such idealised consumption settings, unconsidered by existing servicescape frameworks.

Our first contribution lies in our consideration of the *paradoxes* of ontological (in)security in servicescapes. We offer an empirical case which demonstrates how, using ontological (in)security as a lens, paradoxes in the servicescape context are multi-dimensional, each dimension viewed as a continuum 'along which we all necessarily move', feeling secure/insecure simultaneously (Bondi, 2014: 334). Our analysis identifies three paradoxes – *social*, *safety, and sensorial* – which can evoke opposing experiences of ontological (in)security. We address a gap in prior literature on servicescapes which has previously overlooked these paradoxes, often assuming a very linear relationship between curating social, safety, and sensorial dimensions linked to consumer perceptions of servicescape spaces (Bitner, 1992; Jeon and Kim, 2012; Siguaw et al., 2019).

These paradoxes have important managerial implications, where designers of such ephemeral spaces must balance competing imperatives to create effective servicescapes. Taking the social paradox as an example in this particular context, there is a delicate balance or 'sweet spot' to be struck by market managers who want consumers to experience togetherness and shared emotions to enhance the atmosphere (Hill et al., 2022), but seek to minimise (over)crowding, where ontological (in)security could emanate from individuals and their micro-level interactions within the servicescape, feeding back into a collective anxiety and producing potential unrest (Ejdus and Rečević, 2021). The implications of this search for an optimal level of ontological security among consumers incorporates issues of managerial control, such as regulating capacity, as well as subtle controls on the desired types of people occupying the market space. If these markets are considered yet another example of the neoliberal domination of urban space by the middle classes, then managers may adopt strategies which deliberately exclude perceived 'undesirable' consumers through prohibitive pricing strategies and repressive security tactics, like heavy policing and surveillance to deter the use of this space by 'othered' groups (Castilhos, 2024). However, such practices may come at a cost (i.e. giving the impression of a discriminatory, overly managed space, thereby detracting from the festive atmosphere which visitors seek).

Our second contribution addresses the temporary nature of market spaces, offering a contrast to existing literature that predominantly examines permanent servicescapes (Figueiredo et al., 2021;

Lockwood and Pyun, 2019; McCamley and Morland, 2021). Although temporary/pop-up consumption spaces have widespread appeal because of their novel nature, which often taps into the contemporary consumption zeitgeist, we argue that ontological insecurity can be heightened within these ephemeral consumption settings precisely because of the lack of routine and familiarity consumers have with them (Giddens, 1984; Phipps and Ozanne, 2017). Our contribution lies in advancing existing knowledge on ontological (in)security in temporary servicescape settings. Much original work on ontological security (see Giddens, 1984) takes place in grounded, stable environments like the home (Milligan et al., 2024), long term institutions (James et al., 2015) or nation states (Rumelili and Adısönmez, 2020) where routine and predictability foster a sense of self continuity. In our temporary setting, we show how ontological (in)security can also be negotiated in ephemeral, less predictable urban locales.

Consequently, existing servicescape frameworks should consider ontological (in)security more acutely within such temporary urban locations. Here, managers have a more challenging task, as these spaces are harder to control. There are many unpredictable factors present making design problematic compared to permanent, fixed consumption venues such as shopping malls, where long established physical boundaries and historical routines make managerial control of the space more straightforward (Sibley, 1995). Accordingly, in temporary servicescape spaces, learning from previous experience (whilst less straightforward because of their ephemerality) may be pivotal in helping managers to implement appropriate control mechanisms and strategies for future, similar amorphous temporary events.

We acknowledge the methodological limitations to our study (i.e. the use of walking interviews *and* focus groups may elicit different responses). Although our study is context-specific (which may be seen as a limitation) the implications of our findings have wider application. Specifically, the paradoxical security concerns identified here could be present at any mass gathering; and are especially relevant for temporary, 'pop-up' consumption spaces where routine is not as firmly embedded (which may also be evident in more permanent spaces, to varying degrees).

There are, consequently, opportunities for future research to explore ontological security within different servicescape contexts. Some other interesting avenues for future study could include experimental work which attempts to determine optimal servicescape conditions which promote ontological security thus hitting the so called 'sweet spot' of sensory ambiance. Future research may benefit from recruiting participants who might have a greater tendency to feel ontologically insecure within servicescapes, such as minority groups or neurodiverse participants, thereby helping to understand the factors which may deter such consumers from these service contexts.

Ultimately, our paper contributes to marketing theory by revealing the more latent dynamics at work within a servicescape that is temporary (as opposed to routine) and offers a micro setting in which to analyse those affective processes that define our sense of ontological (in)security in the servicescape. Organisers of such events should recognise that reactions to such servicescape settings are nuanced and as well as creating what is 'ambient', there is potential to take action to mediate those elements that might intimidate consumers. To protect a sense of ontological security for consumers is to guard against the magic of such events being lost, and moreover, to ensure the maintenance of Christmas markets as popular liminal consumption spaces.

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