

**THE IMPACT OF SERVICESCAPES ON
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION:
A STUDY ON AFRICAN SERVICE-BASED SMALL
AND MEDIUM SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMES) IN
IRELAND**

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“THE IMPACT OF SERVICESCAPES ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: A STUDY ON AFRICAN SERVICE-BASED SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMES) IN IRELAND”

submitted for the degree of **MSc in Programme Name here** is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to God Almighty, without whom I know I would not have gotten this far. I also dedicate this work to my parents, they have been my rock and have pushed me into becoming the woman I am today and helping me in achieving all my career and educational goals.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of servicescape (the physical environment of a business) on customer satisfaction amongst African service-based SMEs. Servicescape is an essential part of a business as it accentuates the experiences a customer has while receiving a service, this further leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction. As such, the servicescape need to be properly constructed taking into cognisance the physical dimensions (lighting, spatial, ambient, scent, music etc), the social dimensions (crowd control) and the natural dimensions (supporting relaxation). This study also considered the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which revised servicescapes to adhere to government regulations on social distancing. The study adopted the qualitative research methodology which uses non-numerical forms of data and analysis. Data was collected through the conduct of interviews with five (5) owners of African service-based SMEs and five (5) customers of these SMEs. Data was analysed using the thematic format, themes where was based on the research objectives. The study discovered that the use of the several dimensions of servicescape (physical, social and natural dimensions) by African service based SMEs resonated positively with customers thus keeping them satisfied and loyal to the business, furthermore the revised servicescapes due to the COVID-19 pandemic had both positive and negative effects on customer satisfaction, for some customers the revised servicescape enhanced their trust and loyalty to business as they had a feeling that the business owner was mindful of their health and safety, while to other customers the revised servicescape reduced the level of social interaction thus reducing the satisfaction gained whenever they visited such SMEs. The study recommends that considerations should be given to physical, social, and natural dimensions when constructing a servicescape. In addition, business owners should consider gender of their target market, when implementing servicescapes as what constitutes customer satisfaction and experience differs across gender lines. In addition, business owners should consider cushioning the effect of the strict Covid-19 guidelines on customers.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Overview

The service sector is characterised by industries that provide intangible or non-material products to individuals, and it deals with the production of services in the place of end products. In the 21st century, the service sector is regarded as the most developed and largest sector of the world economy ahead of the manufacturing and exploration sector as Line, Hanks and Kim (2018), note that the service sector holds 76% of the global economy while the manufacturing and mineral exploration sectors hold 16% and 8% respectively. The rise of the service sector is often attributed to the gradual shrinking of the number of manufacturing firms due to cross border competition, rapid technological advancement, reduced cost of transportation and increasing automation of production systems.

With the decline of manufacturing firms, the services industries have evolved to be a beneficial and significant force for economic growth and development. Mari and Pogessi (2013), explain that the service sector contributes significantly to GDP, trade, and employment. Service industries have created several opportunities for structural economic transformation, which is manifested through disruptive technology and a digitalised economy. The sector also contributes to economic productivity and wide-scale economic growth through the provision of other products and services. With the development of rapid telecommunication systems and information technologies (IT), service industries have witnessed unprecedented growth and increased transactions between 2000-2019 (Hakim and Deswindi, 2015). The service industry also catalyses economic expansion, international trade, and global value chains.

Line, Hanks and Kim (2018) also note that the service industry engages in many essential social functions across finance, health, hospitality, energy, transport, and telecommunications sectors. These services have become indispensable in the 21st century due to a change in consumption patterns of individuals, making the industry critical to meeting the growing demands of individuals. Also, the service industry contributes significantly to the GDP of nations, with the services sectors' contribution to

share of GDP increasingly significantly across all income groups between 1980-2015 from 61 to 76% in developed economies, and 42 to 55% in developing economies (UNCTD, 2017). In Ireland, the service sector has contributed immensely serving as the highest contributor to the Irish GDP since 2008, as seen in figure 1 below:

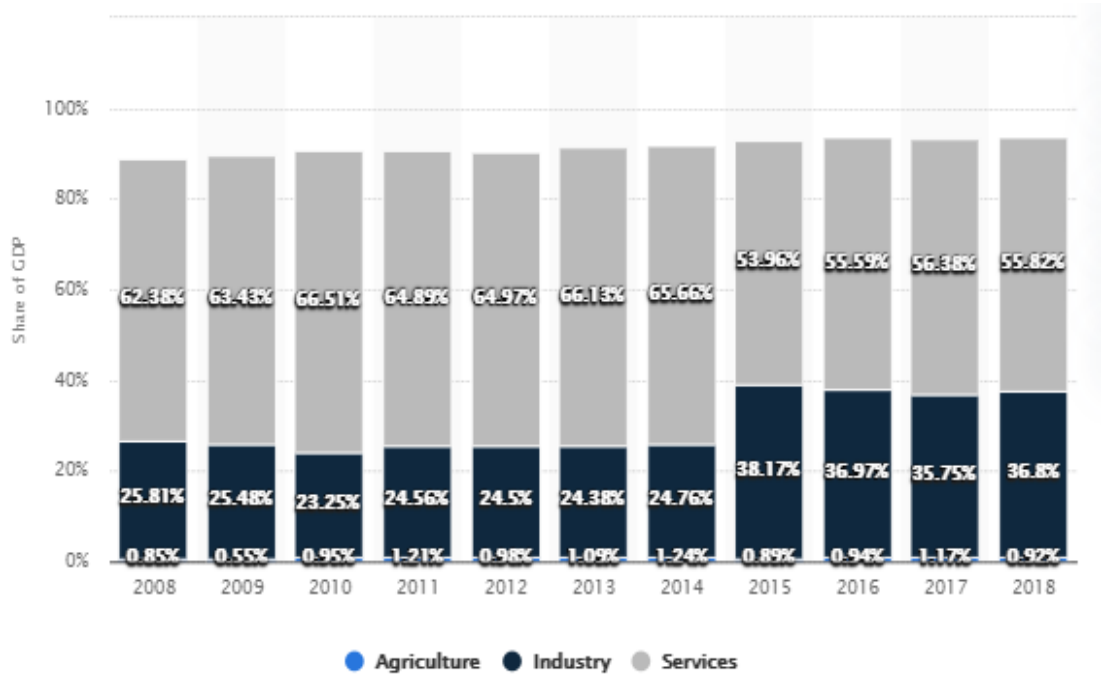


Figure 1: Distribution of gross domestic product (GDP) across economic sectors from 2008 to 2018 in Ireland (Source: Statista, 2020)

The service industry is also essential to the creation of employment, with the sector employing about 49% of global jobs available worldwide as of 2016 (UNCTD, 2017). In terms of output, service sector employment is more experienced in developed economies, where service jobs represent 75 percent of total jobs provided (Jutter et al., 2013). The case is similar in Ireland, as seen in figure 2, the service sector has provided the most jobs since 2009, to 2019 which the percentage is currently at 76.75%.

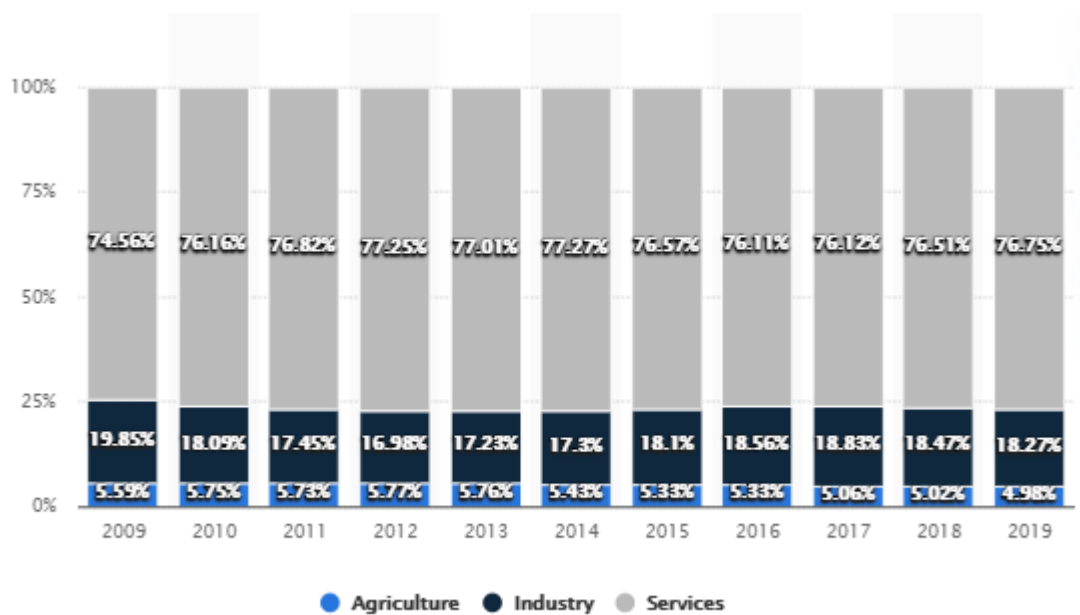


Figure 2. Distribution of employment by economic sector from 2009 to 2019 (Source: Statista, 2020)

From figure 2 above, it is evident that the service sector is pertinent to the Irish economy. Within the service sector, service-based industries have a goal of meeting up to customer expectations and rendering quality services which in turn brings profit. Service industries are not like product-based industries, in the sense that most of services rendered by the services industry take place in an environment or a facility. The client or customer thus has to go to these facilities to get the required services, making the physical environment of the service provider of critical importance to the overall success of the business. This physical environment is popularly known as “servicescape”. Servicescape is an established field of research within service provision, as it influences the customer perception, attitudes, behaviour, and value (Gunewardana, 2017). It also creates and generates customer satisfaction, which often results in repeat business. Kim and Lee (2012) highlight that the servicescape involves the physical location where the service is performed, and customers interact with, having the potential to interfere with or support the achievement of the strategic goals of the business. Mari and Pogessi (2013) also posit that organisations which focus on servicescape had better advantages at creating, retaining, and extending their customer base. These firms also have a chance of connecting and contacting clients in immeasurable ways, thereby providing the service providers the opportunity to differentiate themselves and create positive experiences for clients. This further underlines the importance of servicescapes to service-based businesses.

There are however some limitations to the implementation of servicescapes within businesses. Abou-Shouk and Khalifa (2017) noted that a key factor with the potential of limiting the performance of servicescapes is the inability of clients to physically visit the service facility. This means that events which prevent stop customers from visiting the business environment can significantly affect the performance of the business and impact of the servicescape, hence service providers need to be innovative and look for other measures to revise current servicescapes to attract customers.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is an example of such “Black Swan” events that has significantly put a hold on client visits to service-based facilities across the world, hence limiting the extent to which conventional servicescapes can influence clients. Most service providers have had to revise their servicescape in order to meet up with changing customer needs during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic was a key factor in this study, as it resulted in nationwide lockdowns across Ireland, which significantly reduced the movement of individuals and prevented customers from visiting business centres. As a result, the study is informed by the need to study how the service providers revised their servicescape to accommodate emerging trends in the post-COVID-19 lockdown period, in order to maintain client satisfaction and retain customer loyalty. The research investigation explored the impact of servicescape on overall customer satisfaction and how service providers revised their servicescape to create feelings of loyalty, trust and security amongst customers. In addition, the study assessed how servicescape led to improvement (-or reduction) in clients’ willingness to patronise service-based firms before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2. Research Purpose

Customer satisfaction is critical to business success as it defines the level to which a business can attract, retain and expand its customer base. One proven way to keep customers satisfied especially in the service industry is through standard servicescapes. Standard servicescapes lead to desirable experiences amongst customers and create a positive feeling that results in repeat business. Kim and Lee (2012) explain that the interaction between servicescapes and customers can influence perceptions of services, leading to tangible impact on emotions, loyalty intentions and customer behaviour. Mari and Pogessi (2013) also argue that standard servicescapes give customers reasonable experience, provoking an emotional response that either leads to the customer continuing

or discontinuing patronage. Therefore, an understanding of good servicescape design and operations is therefore necessary to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Customers seek services that give memorable experiences, and servicescapes are crucial in providing memorable experiences for customers patronising service providers, as it can be used as an attraction for new clients and for retention of current customers. Seeing the importance of servicescape to customer satisfaction, it is not surprising that a lot of research inquiry is directed at the topic, however, there seems to be less research on the topic as it relates with African service-based SMEs in Ireland. In 2020, world events such as the George Floyd Murder and accompanying #BlackLivesMatter movement has generated focus on African-owned businesses, with the presence of these firms increasing within the Irish market at a remarkable rate. The population of Africans in Ireland has also been in the rise, with data from the Central Statistics Office showing that Africans constituted about 6.7% of the population in Ireland, and would significantly continue to grow at a rate of 0.3% over the next decade due to immigration and birthrate (CSO, 2016). This increase in the population of Africans living in Ireland is bound to increase the demand for African-focused service-based SMEs to cater to essential services such as food, hairdressing, and tailoring. The purpose of this study is thus to discover the role of servicescapes on customer satisfaction as they relate to African service-based SMEs. Furthermore, the research will explore how African service-based SMEs have revised their servicescapes to meet up with customer demands during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3. Research Questions

The central research questions guiding this inquiry is as follows:

- i. How have servicescapes impacted customer satisfaction within African service-based SMEs operating in Ireland?
- ii. How has the use of servicescapes been essential in maintaining customer loyalty in African service-based SMEs in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- iii. What are the challenges associated with the use of servicescapes and its relationship to overall customer satisfaction amongst African service-based SMEs in Ireland during the COVID-19?

These three questions will guide the research inquiry and will lead to the research objectives which will be discussed in the next section.

1.4. Research Objectives

The role of servicescapes in attaining customer satisfaction has already been established, and as Lilien and Rangaswamy (2008), notes, customers evaluate service experiences by focusing on servicescapes and its impression on them. Servicescapes must appeal to positively and seamlessly to clients, hence the success of a service-based firm is significantly hinged on its ability to create standard servicescapes that resonate with the service clientele. Interactions of customers with servicescape has significantly been reduced due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the associated restrictions in movement, with businesses forced to adapt. Due to the measures recommended by the Irish government to curb the spread of the virus such as physical distancing, limited contact, and reduction in certain non-essential operations, African-owned service-based firms have faced serious challenges to keep their client base, with many businesses having to revise their servicescapes to meet up with social distancing and limited contact regulations. The effect of these revised servicescapes have however not been explored empirically, leading to a gap, which will be filled by this study. The objectives of this study are therefore:

- i. To investigate the impact of servicescapes on customer satisfaction with reference to African service-based SMEs in Ireland
- ii. To critically evaluate how the use of servicescapes during the COVID-19 era has been essential in maintaining customer loyalty with reference to African service-based SMEs in Ireland
- iii. To discover the challenges associated with COVID-19 servicescapes with references to African service Based SMEs in Ireland.

1.5. Justification of the Study

Line, Hanks and Kim (2018) had established that servicescapes were essential in maintaining customer loyalty and keeping them satisfied, highlighting that businesses that paid attention to their standard servicescape recorded 13% increase in client patronage and 40% increase in profits. In an earlier study, Mari and Poggesi (2012) highlighted that servicescape engendered positive experience amongst customers, making them revisit service facilities and recommend same to other customers. This further connotes a positive connection between servicescapes and customer satisfaction, which has not been explored empirically within African service-based SMEs in Ireland. Thus, this study will

be the first-of-its-kind exploring the link between servicescapes and customer satisfaction amongst African service-based SMEs, particularly within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, filling the gap in the literature in this area.

Another justification of the study will be the evaluation of the revised servicescape and its potency in maintaining customer loyalty particularly during the COVID-19 era, which is an emerging issue. This study will fill this existing gap by evaluating the importance and challenges of COVID-19 induced servicescapes on customer loyalty and retention on African service-based SMEs in Ireland, which has hitherto being unknown.

1.6. Significance of the Study

Servicescape plays an important role in customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. A pleasant, interactive and standard servicescape can resonate easily with customers, with the potential to increase their loyalty and commitment to an organisation. The study is also significant in that it helps in drawing the link between servicescapes and customer satisfaction, with specific reference to African service-based businesses which has hitherto remain unknown. The findings from the study holds the potential to highlight ways by which servicescapes can be improved, relative to the needs of patrons of these businesses. The findings can also potentially assist business owners/service providers in optimising their servicescapes for increased customer satisfaction.

Lastly, the study will provide empirical data on revised servicescapes and their impact in the COVID-19, serving as a best practice guide and point of reference for academics and researchers within the services field.

1.7. Research Outline

The research is subdivided into 5 parts according to the requirements of the study

Chapter One comprises of the introductory part of the study, outlining the research overview, purpose, research questions/objectives, justification and significance for academics and practice.

Chapter Two is the literature review, which critically reviews relevant studies in the body of knowledge to provide context to the study.

Chapter Three focuses on the research methodology and overall procedure for conducting the study.

Chapter Four outlines the analysis of the data, presentation of findings and discussion of practical implications of the findings in the light of practice and theory.

Chapter Five is the concluding chapter, providing a summary of the study, conclusion, recommendations, reflection, and prospects for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview

This section contains the literature review which provides a critique and analysis of previous academic resources that have been written in line with the research subject matter. The essence of the literature review is to understand the variables of the study properly, setting the scene for the study in light of previous research and highlighting gaps in the literature that the study fills. Thus, this study carried out a literature review concerning servicescapes and customer satisfaction. The review also explores theories that explain the influence of servicescapes on business and customer experience.

2.1. Servicescape of Service-Based Businesses

The physical environment of service-based industries is an important part of the business as most often the service is produced and consumed within the surrounding environment, making this a critical contributor to business success. As service-based industries keep increasing in number and play a pivotal role in the GDP of many economies (Zeithaml, 2008), more environmental psychology and marketing research is required to determine how the physical environment of service-based firms influences customer satisfaction through the creation of creating positive experiences.

The physical environment of the service-based industry is called servicescape, the concept which was first put forward by Booms and Bitner (1981). The researchers put forward servicescape to include the entirety or totality of the physical environment where a service-based industry is established. Based on the authors' position, servicescapes constitute a representation of the physical and objective factors within the business environment, which can be controlled by the business owner to enhance client satisfaction and patronage. They further noted that servicescape is a critical part of the business, as it facilitates overall business performance. Another seminal author in the marketing space, Hightower (1997) postulated that servicescape encompasses everything within the physical environment of a service business that the consumer encounters and is involved in shaping their perceptions of the business.

Yi et al. (2013) also argued that servicescape are the sole responsibility of the business owner, as they cannot be influenced by the customer, but can affect their perception of the business. This means that servicescapes holds the potential to elicit certain internal reactions from the customers that can influence their return or total avoidance of the business. This argument by Yi et al. (2013) focuses more on the impact on the customers, and since clients are the focus of every business, it is reasonable to agree with this perspective, as every business owner wants to understand what influences the extent to which customers will want to patronise a particular service.

Another perspective provided by Akaka (2015) proposes the servicescape to be the entire built environment of a service-based business, comprising of tangible elements (buildings and furniture) and intangible elements (temperature, scent, music, colour), which can be manipulated and controlled by the owner (s) of a business to promote the provision of services to customers. All the perspectives cited above are valid, and it can be deduced that servicescape involves the physical business environment which a customer is exposed to during a service encounter. This could be tangible or intangible.

The span of servicescapes is yet to be agreed on by marketing scholars, with researchers like Chang (2016) stating that it is limited to all physical things only such as materials, equipment, interior and exterior design, while others like Diktaş and Tekin (2018) argue that servicescape includes other nonvisible elements such as temperature, air, and ambience.

The argument in this study is for a balanced view of servicescape as espoused by Aitken et al. (2013), who states servicescapes includes all seen or unseen elements in a service environment that can be felt by customers and can create emotional and cognitive experiences to customers. This balanced view is adopted throughout this study and explained in detail in the next section.

2.2.1. Dimensions of Servicescape

According to Afthanorhan et al. (2019), the original dimension of the servicescape includes: ambient conditions, spatial layouts, symbols, signs and artefacts. These are part of the physical and environmental components of a business, however some scholars believe that there is more to the servicescape than these. For instance, Chen (2014) expanded the dimensions of servicescapes to include physical, socially-symbolic, social, and natural dimensions. Hakim and Deswindi (2015) in their study also grouped the

dimensions of a servicescape to include sound, visual, scent, cleanliness, space, symbols, and signs.

Other authors choose to focus instead on the social dimensions of servicescapes, which includes the employees, customers and the level of social density at the facility (Hanks et al., 2017). Scholars who hold this view believe that clients will gravitate towards service centers that fulfil certain utilitarian, social and psychological needs. As a result, the social dimension worldview of servicescape explores how the business provides a serene environment for the customer to achieve all they need. Some authors also believe that the social dimension of servicescapes should incorporate social experiences and interactions between customers and employees (Aitken et al., 2013). Others such as Jepson and Sharpley (2015) argue that social dimensions should focus on how a service facility can manage crowd, the number of customers present at a facility can influence decisions and behaviour. They believe that the ability to manage crowd can be detrimental or beneficial to a business, as facilities that have a reputation of increasing the level of joy and positive experience of customers are those that accurately manage crowd at their service facility.

The socially-social dimension refers to the extent which the facility contains signs, symbols and artefacts, which are used intentionally to influence customer behaviour and perception of the facility. Scholars such as Naylor et al. (2012) espouse that the socially-social dimension involves the display of signs and artefacts with symbolic significance at the service facility. Businesses may employ several signs and symbols to attract consumers across different cadre and sphere of life, some signs may be used to attract people of a certain age, ethnic or social group. The use of the socially-social dimension is thus determined by what the business stands for and its target market. The use of artefacts, signs, and symbols has a significance in the facility as it is used to provide tangible cues and information about the business to customers. Mari and Poggesi, (2013) note that the socially-social dimension serves as the “welcoming servicescape” for customers.

The final dimension of the servicescape is the natural dimension, which involves the innate connection between humans and other living systems within the facility. As such, the natural dimension can affect the wellbeing, health, approach/avoidance behaviours of customers. According to Hanks et al. (2017), the attention restoration theory explains the role of the natural dimension better as it posits that humans concentrate better after spending time in nature. The natural dimension of a servicescape should therefore support

and offer benefits of relaxation to customers. One way to ensure that the natural dimension is properly incorporated into a business is by creating three forms of stimuli on the customer which are away, fascination, and compatibility (Akaka and Vargo, 2015). The Service provider's facility should offer the customer a feeling of "being away" and escape from the pressures of one's daily experiences and environment. The facility should also be fascinating i.e. capture and hold the attention of the customer. Lastly, the natural environment must be compatible, and allow the customer have a feeling of belonging and ability to interact without feeling inferior, socially, inept, or embarrassed.

From the above dimension of a servicescape, it is evident that servicescape is a combination of those tangible and intangible, seen and unseen elements within a facility that ensure that the customer has a positive and enjoyable experience. As Weerasinghe (2019) explained, a well-established servicescape is one that satisfies both physical, psychological and emotional needs of the customer. Therefore, this study will ensure to capture the physical, social, socially-social, and natural dimensions that resonate properly with the customers within the servicescape.

2.2.3. Types of Servicescapes

Servicescape is a complex phenomenon hence, there are varieties of servicescape which depend on the nature of service offered to customers. The figure below describes the typology of service organisations, which is based on their complexities and usage of servicescape.

Servicescape Usage	Complexity of the Servicescape	
	Elaborate	Lean
Self-service (Customer only)	Golf course eBay	ATM Car wash Simple Internet Services Express mail drop-off
Interpersonal Service (both customers and employees)	Hotel Restaurant Health Clinic Hospital Bank Airline School	Dry cleaner Retail cart Hair salon
Remote Service (Employees only)	Telephone company Insurance company Utility Professional services	Telephone mail-order desk Automated voice messaging services

Figure 3. Types of Servicescape (Source: Bitner, 1991)

Based on the above, Servicescape can be classified into three possible categories namely:

a. Self-Service Servicescape:

This involves services in which customers help themselves with the service and perform most of the activities. Businesses in this category include gyms, ATMs, cinema halls, and self-service restaurants. Within this environment, the role the service provider is limited or absent. While operating such an industry, the service provider or business owner must design the servicescape exclusively with the customer in mind, thus making services easy to use and enjoyable to the customer. According to Jeon and Jeong (2009), servicescape within this business should be designed for the desired or target market.

b. Interpersonal Servicescape

In the interpersonal servicescape, there is a close interaction between the service providers or employees and the customer. Examples of services that use this servicescape include hotels, schools, restaurants, hospitals, and banks. Since there is an interaction between service providers and employees and customers, with the servicescape potentially affecting them both, the latter must be careful to design the environment in such a way which attracts, satisfies and facilitates activities and interaction in an arena that is conducive for both (Tsaur et al., 2015),

c. Remote Servicescape

Within a remote service, there is no physical presence or interaction with a customer such as in telecommunications, call centers, insurance etc. In such cases, the servicescape is designed for employees and not for customers, thus servicescape should be designed to keep the motivations and morale of employees high. In addition, the servicescape should potentially be able to enhance teamwork and efficiency. All of the servicescapes discussed above can be designed to have either elaborate or lean based complexity.

d. Lean Servicescape

The lean servicescape is often simple with lesser elements, space, and little equipment, this is due to fewer interactions between the service providers and the customer. For example, the ATM or dry cleaning, or tailoring workshops are examples of lean servicescape.

e. Elaborate Servicescape

This includes a more elaborate and sophisticated environment, this is due to the high level of interaction between the service providers and customers. Examples include hotels, theme-park, airport, or dining restaurants. Elaborate servicescapes promote interactions between customer and customer, service provider-customer, equipment-service provider, equipment-customer and service provider-employees. Service firms that are positioned to be interpersonal have elaborate servicescapes and hence need to have more complex and standard environments.

2.3. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is an important element in both this study and has implications for marketing. The seminal inquiry into customer satisfaction was carried out by Cardozo (1965), who espoused it to mean the ability of a business to meet the expectations of a customer. Chen (2014) also put forward that customer satisfaction is an evaluative judgment or a post-consumption assessment of a product or service, which causes the customer to further patronise the service or totally avoid it. This implies that the process involves comparing the perception a customer has of a commodity/service before and after the consumption of that product/service.

Diktas and Tekin explained that customer satisfaction can be thoroughly understood via the expectancy disconfirmation theory. This theory argues that customer satisfaction is calculated by the difference in expectation and perception after the consumption of a product/ service. Satisfaction (positive disconfirmation) occurs when the perception of a service or product after consumption is better than what was expected. Dissatisfaction (negative disconfirmation) is usually the opposite.

Customer satisfaction thus measures the positive feelings a customer or consumer of a product or service has after the consumption of a product/service. According to Diktas and Tekin (2019), while customer satisfaction appears to be a simple concept, it significantly determines the success or failure of a business. Therefore, it is logical to explore how servicescapes boost or reduce customer satisfaction within service-based businesses.

2.4. Servicescapes and Customer Satisfaction

Servicescape is not just an environment but plays an important role in determining the success of a service-based company. This is because it influences the customer's satisfaction level. Gunewardana (2017) outlined that services more often necessitates the customer to visit the service provider, hence customers are characterised by high uncertainty and expect more from service providers. The presence of positive, rich tangible and intangible cues will enable customers to evaluate services, before and during consumption. With good servicescape, services providers can effectively communicate service features and shape the expectation of a customer, thus leading to better satisfaction. Diktas and Tekin (2019) also note that services require the customer to be present at the “service factory”, thus customers constantly interact with the physical environment through the service delivery process, hence this can have an effect on the customer's experience. Servicescape therefore affects the satisfaction of customers, through emotional connections and service delivery experience

Gunewardana (2017) also pointed out that servicescape can be further used for the marketing of services, as they perform certain functions such as:

(i) **Attention-Creating Medium:** servicescapes with unique features can stand out amongst competitions and thus attract new customers.

(ii) **Message-creating medium:** servicescapes with symbolic cues help communicate distinctive nature and quality of services provided by a firm.

(iii) **Effect-creating medium:** servicescapes that provide appealing attributes such as textures, colours, scents, sounds, and spatial design helps to heighten the desire for a particular service and further enhances the delivery and experience attained from the service.

The significance of servicescape on customer satisfaction is often dependent on the amount of time customers spend interacting with the physical environment of the service provider and also the purpose of the service consumption (i.e. whether it is utilitarian or hedonic; Chen, 2014). The figure below describes a broad range of services which are based on the length of time spent by the customer and the purposes of the service consumption.

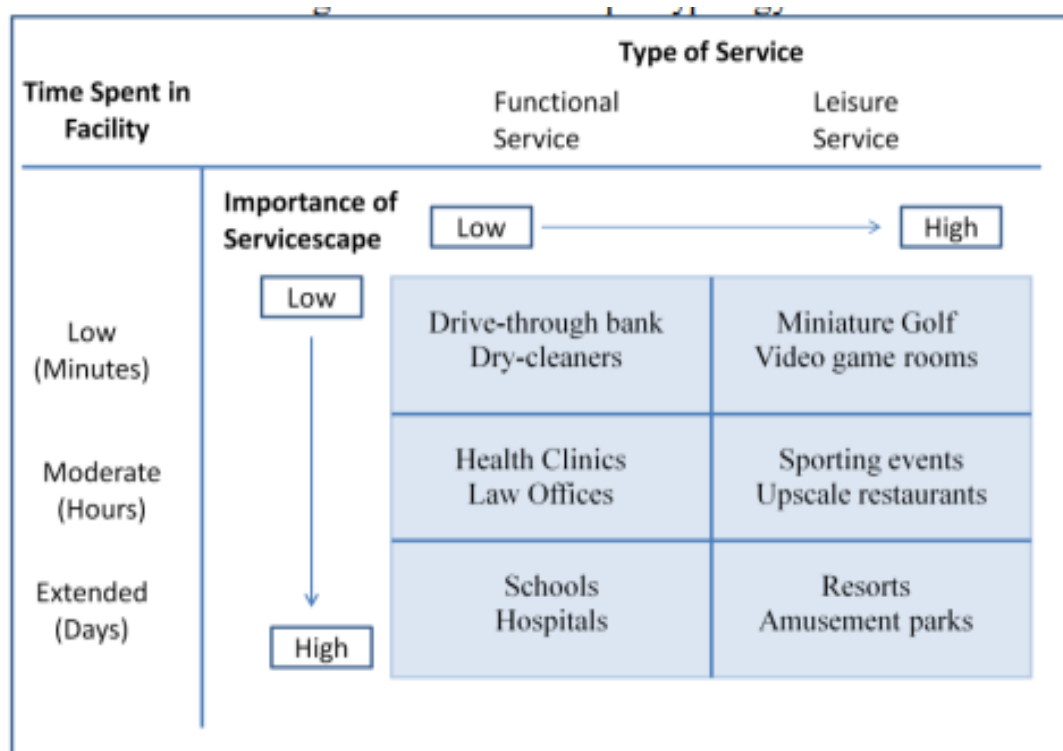


Figure 4. Servicescape based on time spent at Facility (Source: Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004)

Figure 4 above explains that the longer time a customer spends in a service facility the more likely he/she can get influenced by the servicescape and more the quality or lack of quality of the servicescape will determine their satisfaction level. Furthermore, in cases of leisure services where customers derive hedonic benefits servicescapes are likely to play a greater role in customer satisfaction than in functional services which provide utilitarian benefits. For example, in a hotel or restaurants where customers spend more

time, standard servicescapes will significantly determine the degree of customer satisfaction rather than schools or market places.

Servicescape thus influences customer satisfaction as it boosts the perception of a service facility and the services offered in it, by increasing the nature and value of experience derived by the customer.

2.5. Servicescape usage during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 virus forced majority of businesses to move marketing and service provision to online platforms due to government restriction of personal contact and adoption of social distancing measures. Most businesses, therefore, had limited or closed down physical operations and have recommended customers to adopt online services. Website and other social media platforms thus witnessed a spike in usage during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, banking services were moved to mostly online and platforms. Hakim and Deswindi (2015) recorded that the benefits of using e-servicescape, noting that customers believed it offered ease and convenience in carrying out transactions coupled with reliable access to information. Some customers also noted that they had become more aware and enlightened on the way to use websites due to tutorial videos being updated to teach customers how to access certain features.

Iorliam (2020) also points out the servicescape had been useful during the COVID-19 pandemic to both business owners and customers as it provided a platform for direct and indirect communication which enabled businesses to retain their customers. Customers were also kept abreast of several new services and offer made by business owners (Derania and Naidua, 2015). O'Brien et al. (2020) added that most businesses only used e-servicescapes during the COVID-19 period for the dissemination of information as there were significant limitations on the transfer or delivering of goods and services, however most businesses kept customers engaged with prospective services and goods which will be launched into the market after the lockdown.

Shabalina et al. (2020) also noted that the use of e-service had grown during the COVID-19 pandemic was significant in preserving jobs. For example, restaurants adopted e-servicescapes to display food options and also take orders and delivery. In addition, service based offerings such as teaching and consulting adopted online platforms to continue their work through video conferencing.

Iorliam (2020) recorded that online businesses such as Amazon, Verdo, and North American chain stores witnessed rapid growth and an increase in sales during the COVID-19 lockdown, due to wider adoption of e-servicescape. This was accomplished via the display of real-time, accurate, and complete information on products, parts, and giving clients the ability to track delivery. Some of the e-servicescapes includes the provision for customers to quickly make payments, checkout, track their orders, pay invoices, and manage their returns. However, a similar pattern is not noticed in service-based businesses, which usually require a high amount of client-customer interaction. Service-based businesses could not harness the power of e-servicescapes as much as possible due to the limitation posed by technology and the high degree of customisation of service offered. For instance, it is impossible to visit the hairdresser or barbing salon over the internet/phone.

Due to the limitations of e-servicescapes to the product marketing sector, the service sector did not easily adapt to the ‘new normal’ of the pandemic, and the sector suffered largely as a result. However, some firms were able to implement servicescapes to suit the current pandemic, and these are the firms of interest to this study. A review of some of the theoretical underpinnings of servicescapes is outlined below.

2.5. Theoretical Reviews

Several theories have been developed that seek to explain the influence of Servicescapes on customer satisfaction and retention. Some of these theories are adaptations from natural sciences, which have now been modified to suit the study of social behaviour. Some of the theories are explained in detail below:

2.5.1. Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR)

This theory is an adaptation from the environmental science discipline, and was developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974), who posit that the environment is a stimulus that stimulates or influences the internal reactions of an organism, leading to a behavioural response. The internal reactions of the organism involves both cognitive and affective elements, which in turn influence its behavioural response. A diagrammatical explanation of the theory in relation to servicescapes and e-servicescape is explained in the diagram below;

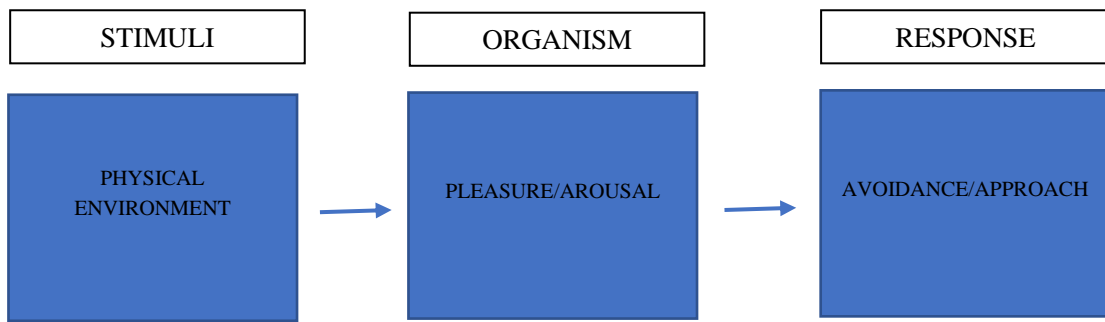


Figure 5. SOR Theory (Source: Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004)

From the diagram, it is evident that the customer reacts to different stimuli which are manifested as physical, ambient, spatial, or website design, which in turn influences the cognitive and emotional elements of the customer (perception of the customer). As a result, customers respond by being attracted, patronising or revisiting the facility or business. Mummalaneni (2005) also notes that the SOR theory has applications in explaining client characteristics, buying behaviour or emotional responses. Baker et al. (2004) further noted that the theory draws a significant line between servicescape (stimulus), trust/satisfaction (internal reaction) and loyalty and buying intentions (Response behaviour).

While explaining the relevance of the theory to the study of servicescape, Baker et al. (2002) also note that the theory provides adequate explanations of a customer's patronage intention/desire to stay longer and spend more time in a facility or a website. The outcome of stimuli from the business physical environment can be measured based on how it influences both behavioural intentions and actual behaviours.

2.5.2. Bitner's Integrated Servicescape Model

The model was developed by Bitner (1992) based on the earlier SOR model of Mehrabian and Russel. The model however incorporates three dimensions of the servicescape which are the ambient conditions, spatial layout, and functionality. A description of the theory is provided in the diagram below

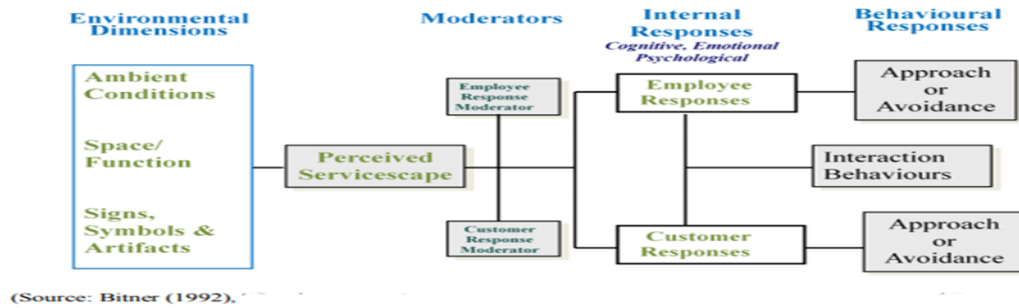


Figure 5. Bitner's Integrated Servicescape Model

Nguyen (2006) posits that the Bitner model is a comprehensive build-up of the SOR theory as it considers the impact of all dimensions of the servicescape on the customer. The impacts considered within the model includes conditions and employee interactions with customers. The theory sees servicescape as a multidimensional element influencing multiple parties (Mummalaneni, 2005), resulting in multiple internal responses (emotional, cognitive and physiological) and leading to a variety of individual and social behaviour. The model proposes that the organisation of the servicescape and its multiple dimensions can affect both customers and employees which can provoke certain internal responses which results in the desire to approach/avoid or interact more with the business (Nguyen, 2006).

Namasiviyam and Lin (2008) also outline that notes that theory offers more explanations as to what influences an individual's perception of the servicescape, they mentioned that subjective perception of a servicescape can occur due to the difference in the personality of customers and their basic desires, a servicescape thus may have different satisfying levels to different customers. This is regarded as one of the criticisms of the theory, as it appears to posit that a servicescape cannot be encompassing and offer much satisfaction. Nguyen (2006), however, notes that the theory explains the multiple interactions of the dimensions of the servicescape and its possible outcome on customer behaviour. Customer behaviour is influenced holistically by all elements in the servicescape hence for effective positive customer behaviour, there must be an integrated approach for servicescape design.

The two theory provides insights on how a servicescape influences customer and what aspects of a servicescape properly resonate with customers and makes them avoid/approach a business. The theories will, therefore, be applied to the study to discover

correlations between servicescapes, e-servicescape, and customer satisfaction and loyalty.

2.6. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework shows how different elements of the literature review are being marshalled up in a way that influences data collection and analysis, it further provides units of measurement to several elements of the literature review. The concepts which will be used for data collection and their means of measurement are highlighted in the table below

Table 1. Conceptual Framework

S/N	CONCEPTS	DEFINITION	MEASUREMENT
1	Servicescape	The entire or totality of the physical environment where a service-based industry is established. It is a representation of the physical and objective factors which can be controlled by the business owners to enhance employee satisfaction and patronage.	<p>Physical dimension: Ambient conditions; spatial layouts; and symbols, signs and artefacts. The extent which the facility contains signs, symbols and artefacts' which is used intentionally to influence customer behavior and perception of the facility.</p> <p>Social dimension: Social density Management of crowd and creating a serene environment to fulfil certain utilitarian, social and psychological needs.</p> <p>Natural Dimension: Supports relaxation, compatibility and fascination.</p>
2	Customer Satisfaction	Customer satisfaction can be defined as an evaluate judgement or a post-consumption assessment of a product or service which causes the customer to further patronise the service or totally avoid it (Chen 2014).	<p>Expectations: What a customer desires from a facility.</p> <p>Perceptions: Evaluation after receiving a service.</p>
3	Customer Loyalty	Retaining customer interest to service providers	<p>Constant patronage</p> <p>Informing other potential customers about services.</p>

Table 2. Theoretical Analysis

S/N	THEORIES	Measurement on Servicescape	MEASUREMENT on Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty
1	Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR)	Physical conditions	Cognitive and emotional reactions triggering approach/avoidance of the business
2	Bitner's Integrated Servicescape Model	Physical, Ambient and Spatial conditions	Emotional, Cognitive and Psychological reactions leading to patronage intentions and further interactions.

The diagram below simplifies the explanations of the conceptual framework

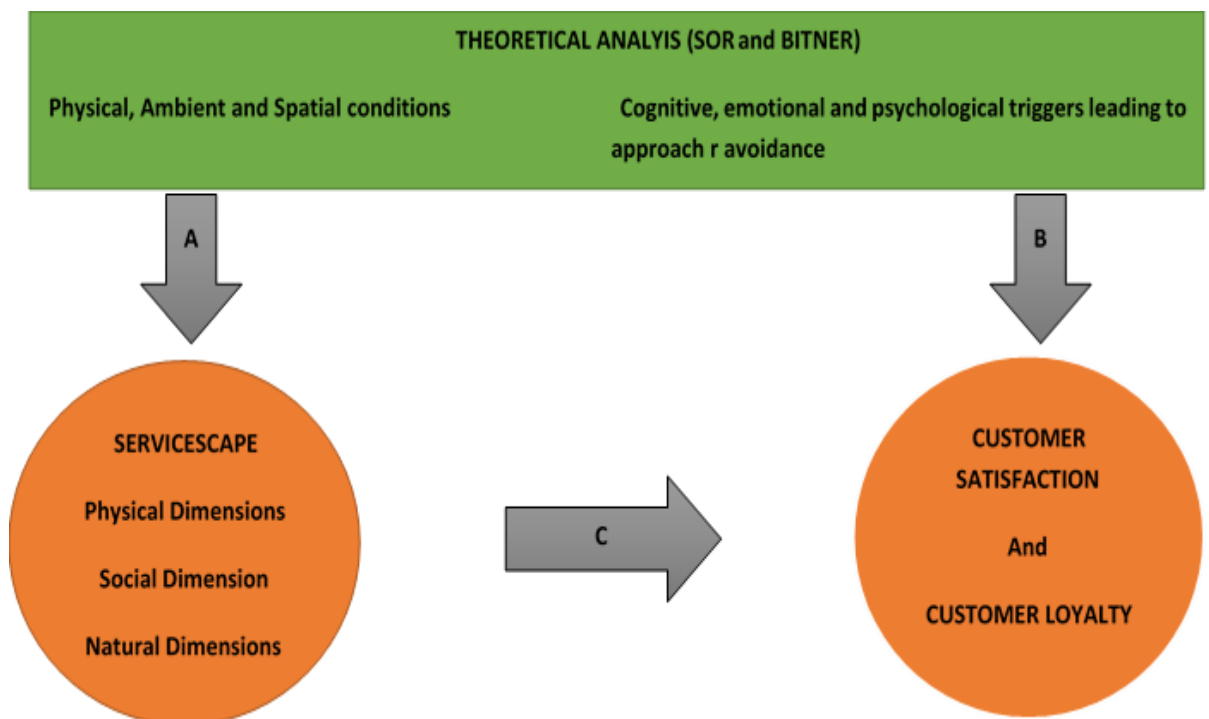


Figure 6. Conceptual Framework

From the above figure, the theory of SOR and Bitner has provided the frameworks for investigating the nature of servicescapes based on the physical, ambient and spatial conditions. Using the two theories, the researcher will be able to discover if African service-based SMEs have implemented these conditions in their servicescapes, as

highlighted in arrow A. The SOR and Bitner theory explains that when physical, ambient and spatial conditions are put in place, it will lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty, which is denoted by the arrow B. The study will therefore investigate if this is applicable to African service-based businesses. Finally arrow C shows the influence of Servicescapes dimensions on Customer Satisfaction and Customer loyalty, allowing the researcher to investigate if the physical, social and natural dimensions of servicescapes indeed lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty as explained by the conceptual framework.

2.7. Conclusion

The literature review on servicescape has analysed the concept of servicescapes, its dimensions, and its impact on customer satisfaction. It is worthy to recall that the dimensions of servicescape as revealed by this research involve the physical, social and natural dimensions. The physical deals with the ambient, spatial, and furnishing arrangement of the servicescape, the social dimension involves the nature of crowd management as well as interactions within the servicescape while the natural dimension talks about the level by which the servicescape supports relaxation and fascination. Proper structuring of these three dimensions is what provides the customer with a positive experience, resulting in customer satisfaction.

The literature review in this chapter will now serve as the foundation for further inquiry into whether there is a relationship between the servicescape and customer satisfaction in African service-based businesses or not.

The next chapter explores the methodology adopted in carrying out the research, gathering data and interpreting it.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the processes and techniques adopted in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data used in the study, otherwise known as the methodology. The research methodology is an essential part of the research which seeks to present logical methods of arriving at authentic and credible answers to research questions and achieving research objectives (Bell and Waters, 2014). This chapter thus explains all techniques adopted in data gathering and analysis in the study. The research onion developed by Saunders et al. (2009) is adopted as the key framework for analysing the methodology used in the study, and this is shown in figure 8 below.

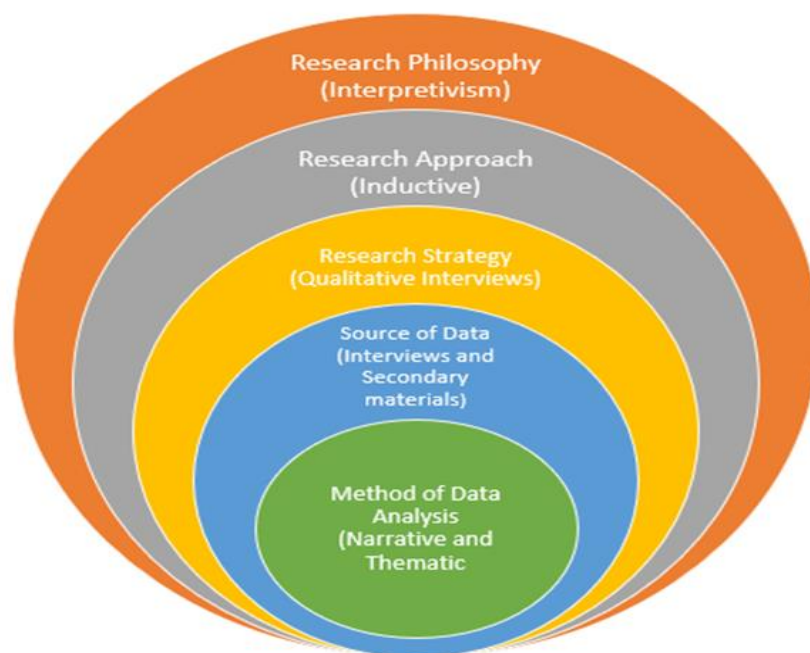


Figure 7. Research Onion based on Saunders et al. (2009)

3.2. Research Philosophy

The research philosophy refers to a list of frameworks through which knowledge is obtained. The philosophical stance is a position accepted by a community of researchers,

which provides in-depth guidelines and process to conduct research, and add or update knowledge (Gall, 2007). Research philosophies, therefore, seek to coordinate how scientific studies are carried out by providing guidelines, principles, and procedures that should be adhered to for such studies to be recognized as academic or worthy of adding value to existing knowledge. The importance of research philosophies cannot be underestimated as without a standard philosophy, researchers cannot arrive at logical and acceptable conclusions. Thus, every scientific research is mandated to use a research philosophy, this study inclusive. To understand and adopt a research philosophy one must understand the difference between the ontological, epistemological and theoretical perspectives. One also needs to examine the methodology, methods and data source, as explained in the figure below.

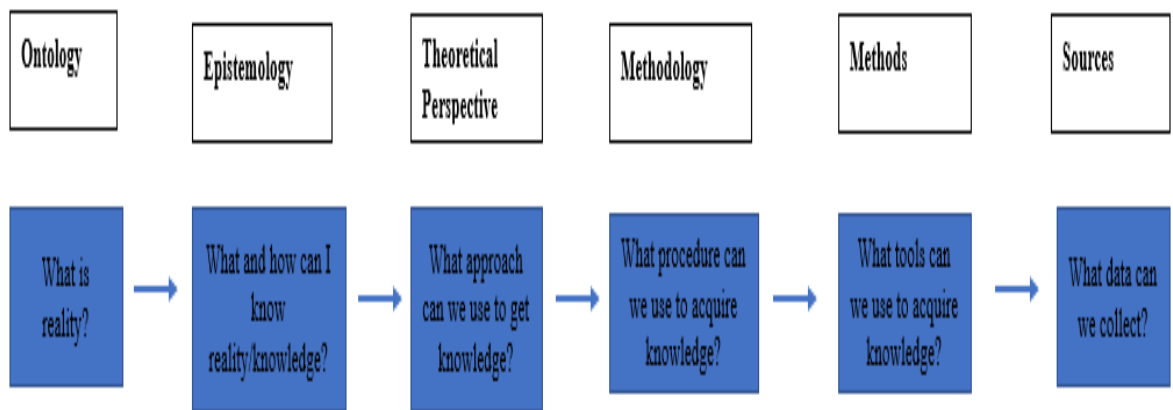


Figure 8: Breakdown of Research Philosophical Terms (based on Salma, 2015)

Having explored the steps involved in the research methodology selection process as shown in Figure 9, the various philosophical stances available are discussed below:

Table 3. Research Philosophy (Source: Salma, 2015)

Research Philosophy	Ontology What is reality?	Epistemology What and how can I know reality/knowledge?	Theoretical Perspective What approach can we use to get knowledge?	Methodology What procedure can we use to acquire knowledge?	Methods What tools can we use to acquire knowledge?
Positivism	There is a single truth and reality (more realist)	Reality can be measured and hence the focus is on reliable and valid tools to obtain that	Positivism-Post Positivism	Experimental Research Survey Research	Usually quantitative; could include sampling, measurements, Scaling, Statistical analysis Questionnaires Interviews Surveys
Interpretivism	There is no single reality or truth. Reality is created by individuals or groups (less realist)	Therefore, reality needs to be interpreted, it is used to understand the underlying meaning of events and activities	Reality needs to be interpreted Phenomenology Symbolic interactionism Critical inquiry Feminism	Ethnography Grounded theory Phenomenological research Heuristic inquiry Action Research	Using qualitative could include; Qualitative interviews Observation Participant Non-Participant Case study Narration Thematic Analysis
Pragmatism	Reality is constantly renegotiated and debated. Interpreted in light of its usefulness in new unpredictable situations	The best method is one that solves problems. Finding out its meaning and changing its fundamental aims.	Pragmatism research through design	Mixed methods Design-based research	Combination of every of the above and more, such as data mining expert review, usability testing and physical prototype.
Subjectivism	Reality is what we perceive to be real	All knowledge is purely a matter of perspective	Post-modernism Structuralism Post-structuralism	Discourse Theory Archaeology Genealogy Deconstruction etc	Autoethnography Semiotics Literary analysis

For this study, the interpretivism philosophy was adopted as it involves studying a phenomenon through the use of observable and measurable variables, centering its procedures on what can be observed and measured empirically using scientific methods that can be authenticated and replicated (Lodico et al., 2010). The interpretivism philosophy relies deeply on scientific methods, leaving room for flexibility between objectivism and subjectivism (Howell, 2013). In addition, interpretivism mainly studies human behaviour, exploring its multi-layered nature and varying sentiments, personal opinions, and values about certain issues, which cannot be thoroughly measured using predefined scientific models.

Another reason for selecting the interpretivist worldview is that it is mostly used for conducting studies involving measuring intangible elements such as emotions and social issues. Salma (2015) notes that interpretivism sees reality as constructed by human beings hence to understand reality, one must get insights from human beings. The use of the interpretivist philosophy is therefore considered appropriate as the study seeks to discover the impacts of one of the socially constructed realities by humans which is servicescapes. In addition, since the study involves investigating servicescapes and its impacts on African service-based businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interpretivist philosophy however is not without limitations, with its major limitation being its subjectivity which can lead to inaccurate and inconclusive findings. The researcher

overcame this limitation by ensuring that the data was interpreted in light of theoretical underpinnings and accurate conclusions drawn based on the findings, free of bias and guesswork. Another way the researcher prevented this limitation is by pilot testing the research instrument to ensure its validity and reliability before widespread dissemination.

3.3. Research Approach

The research approach refers to the overall strategy which the researcher uses to integrate different components of the research. According to Howell (2013), the research approach is a set of methodological procedures adopted by a researcher. The research approach specifies the kinds of data to be collected, methods of collection and method of analysis of data. The research approach is thus essential as without it the researcher will not arrive at a logical and coherent answer to research questions and objectives.

For this study, the researcher adopted the inductive approach, which is used for investigating the potential relationship between variables (Briggs et al., 2014). This study seeks to investigate the relationship between servicescape and customer satisfaction, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the inductive approach allows the researcher to study both variables independently and explore their relationship, while discovering new knowledge. In addition, the inductive approach, the researcher was able to identify procedural gaps and fill them within the context of the study, therefore using the inductive approach the researcher was able to identify procedural gaps within the use of servicescapes for customer satisfaction by African service-based firms and in answering the research questions/objectives.

3.4. Research Strategy

The research strategy involves the plan of action which harmonises and influences all parts of the research especially the collection of data (Bell, 2014). The research strategy enables the effective and systematic collection of data that will yield quality results and detailed reporting. Sliverman (2012) argued that the choice of a research strategy should flow from the research philosophy, and from the data shown in table 3, the associated research strategy suited to interpretivism includes qualitative interviews, observations etc.

The selected strategy adopted for this study is qualitative interviews, which according to Check and Schutt (2012:160) involves “*the collection of information from a sample of*

individuals through their responses to questions”. Qualitative interview is an essential method for recruiting participants, sourcing and collecting data via the interview processes (Sliverman, 2012). A pictorial description of the benefits of the qualitative interview and why the researcher adopted it in this study is described in the figure below;



Figure 9: Benefits of the qualitative interviews (Source: Blair and Blair, 2014)

From the figure above, qualitative interviews deal with collecting first-hand information which is more reliable and intuitive, providing a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Sliverman, 2010). Singleton and Straits (2009) also posit that the process of undertaking qualitative interviews are more rigorous, thereby ensuring the credibility of the study and collection of data free from bias and individual interference. Another benefit of using qualitative interviews is that they are more focused, hence can be used for inductive analysis and can be used to describe characteristics of a large population while maintaining the accuracy of data (Blair and Blair, 2014).

Evidently, qualitative interviews trumps all other research strategies used for interpretivism methods, as no other strategy can high level and yet meaningful data otherwise. Furthermore, the qualitative interview is effective in getting in-depth data and establishing correlations amongst variables. The qualitative interview was selected for use in this study and as it assisted the researcher in gathering in-depth data concerning servicescapes and its impacts on customer satisfaction of African service-based firms during the COVID-19 era. This research strategy also proved to be cost-effective and easy-to-use, while paying attention to data protection and security issues.

3.5. Research Time-Frame

The time frame for this study was the cross-sectional timeframe, which involves gathering data within a specific snapshot of time (Saunders et al., 2009). This study is part of a time bound research project for the award of master's in international business administration, hence the researcher had a specific timeline for data collection and analysis, hence the selection of the cross-sectional timeframe.

3.6. Sources of Data

The data source for this study was primary data gathered by the researcher directly from respondents. The data-driven nature of the research questions and objectives make the collection of primary data necessary. Data used in this study was collected first-hand from owners of African service-based SMEs in Ireland, in order to understand the effectiveness of servicescapes in eliciting customer satisfaction. Using the snowballing sampling technique, the researcher was able to get referrals to other African service business owners and their clientele for further interviews.

The data gathered from the primary investigation was then triangulated with literature in order to support the findings and in synthesizing the results of the inquiry.

3.7. Instrument of Data Collection

The major instrument for data collection is the interview questionnaire, which enabled questions to be asked directly to a participant and responses recorded. The interview enabled the researcher to get quality data regarding servicescapes and their impacts on customer satisfaction based on units of measurements noted in the conceptual framework. The interviews enabled the collection of credible and authentic data, allowing for eliciting proper information in response to measurable variables in the conceptual framework. These are captured via questions about experiences, examples, and evidence.

The interview was also used in this research because it enabled a two-way conversation between the researcher and interviewee, enabling the researcher to ask questions in a fluid and flexible way, leading to more quality responses. The interviews was drafted in the semi-structured, open-ended format which gave the participant the privilege of giving wide and elaborate responses.

3.8. Population of study

The population of the study included owners of African SMEs in Ireland and their customers. The population will be recruited via judgemental, convenience and snowball sampling techniques, which allows for participants to be free to involve or withdraw themselves from the study. Interviews was conducted with ten (10) respondents, comprising of five (5) business owners and five (5) customers. The conservative sample size was adopted due to two reasons. First, it was to avoid data saturation as Creswell (2013) noted that too many participants could lead to the repetition of data. Secondly, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions meant that the researcher was at risk of contracting the virus if too many participants were recruited.

The non-probability sampling method was adopted as they lead to collection of rich data from the participant (Creswell, 2013). The judgemental sampling is based on the researcher intuition, and the researcher sampled several African-owned SMEs in Ireland who have unique servicescapes and interviewed their owners and clients. The participants were recruited of their own free will and asked to sign consent forms in order to ensure that sufficient consent was sought. In addition, the participants were constantly reminded that they were under no obligation to complete the research, and had the option to pull out of the interview at any time. The snowball sampling on the other hand was also based on referrals whereby service providers linked the researcher to willing clients, who wished to participate in the study.

3.9. Method of Data Analysis

Qualitative research relies mainly on narration and description of events, thus, the analysis of data is mainly narrative (Howell, 2013). According to Silverman (2010), the qualitative data is properly presented and narrated under themes which capture the results and discovery of the research. Thus, this research adopted the narrative and thematic frameworks.

Narrative and thematic frameworks enable a clearer and adequate interpretation and representation of data. Data was analysed by transcribing, annotating data, and drawing themes from the conceptual framework, most especially by linking the measurable variables.

The procedure for the narrative and thematic analysis follows the five-step format recommended by Silverman (2010), which includes:

- i. Transcribing the interviews
- ii. Filtering of transcribed interviews
- iii. Coding of filtered interviews
- iv. Developing themes from coded responses
- v. Drawing conclusions, collaborating and synthesising responses with secondary data.

The following steps were thus adopted in the data analysis, with strict attention paid to data integrity and storage of interview data in line with Griffith College's ethics guidelines and the European General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

3.10. Ethical Considerations

Ethics in research is an important aspect of the entire research process, and it ensures the reliability of results, its transparency and the integrity of the researcher and knowledge produced during the study (Bell and Walters, 2014). Two key areas of research ethics that were critical to this study were regarding the health, safety, and wellbeing of the participants and anonymity of responses. The researcher ensured that all the interviews were carried out while observing social distancing and all guidelines as released by the Health Service Executive (HSE). The researcher had a mask on during all interviews and ensured that hand sanitiser was on hand during all interviews. The data gathered from all respondents was also anonymised, excluding any information that could personally identify any individual or businesses.

In addition to this, all participants were informed that they were under no compulsion to involve themselves in the study and able to withdraw from the study at any time. Other ethical considerations in the study include:

- i. The protection of identity, rights and welfare of participants, and taking precautionary measures to avoid physical or psychological injury. As such the participants' identity and business name were anonymised
- ii. Protect and uphold the rights of participants to withdraw from the research at any point in time. A consent and plain statement form was sent to the participants to authenticate that they were participating in the research based on their free will (see Appendix B for consent form).

- iii. Reduce possible occurrence of research malpractice such as plagiarism, intellectual theft or sabotage. This was done through following the acceptable Harvard referencing principles.

3.11. Validity of the Research

Validity of the research refers to the extent by which the findings of the research reflects what transpires or is obtained. This metric measures the degree of accuracy of the research findings and how reality appears. Several methods were adopted to ensure that this research study is valid.

First, the instrument of data collection was presented to the supervisor and other academics to discover the relationship between theories and constructs and their accuracy in the interview questions.

Secondly, a pilot study was conducted with one (1) potential participants to identify errors, ease of understanding the questionnaire and areas for improvement in the survey. The pilot survey showed minimal errors in the research instrument.

Thirdly, when the data from the interviews was transcribed, it was sent back to the interviewees to ensure that there is no misinterpretation in the data collected. Participants authenticated that the transcription was in line with their opinions of servicescapes, and where there were errors, corrected them on demand.

These methods were used in ensuring validity of the data collected, reducing the limitations and possibility for error in the data obtained.

3.12. Conclusion

This chapter extensively discussed the research methodology adopted for this study. The chapter provides a procedural framework to ensure that the researcher arrives at credible and logical explanations to the research questions. The research methodology chapter outlined ensures replicability of the current study, and also provides a roadmap through which the research data was collected and analysed.

Although some limitations were outlined, the research took steps to minimise the effect of the limitations and they were not a threat to the validity and reliability of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1. Overview

This chapter contains the analysis of data and discussions of findings. Interviews were conducted with five African service-based SMEs in Ireland and five customers of these SMEs. The participants in the study include: Hairdresser (HD), Barber (BB), Mechanic (MH), Event Manager (EM) and Afric-cargo (AC), Customers of a Barbers shop (CB 1, CB 2), Customer of a Hair Dresser (CHD), Customers of a restaurant (CR 1 and CR 2).

Table 4. Participants Biodata

S/N	Participant	Gender	Nationality	Year business was established
1	Hairdresser	Female	Nigerian	2007
2	Barber	Male	Nigerian	2017
3	Mechanic	Male	Ghanian	2013
4	Event manager	Female	Nigerian	2019
5	Afric-cargo	Male	Nigerian	2005
6	Customer of Barbershop 1	Male	Nigerian	
7	Customer of Barbershop 2	Female	Nigerian	
8	Customer of Hair dresser	Female	Nigerian	
9	Customer of Restaurant 1	Female	Ghanaian	
10	Customer of Restaurant 2	Female	Malawian	

The data presented in table 4 is the profile of the respondents in the study. Data was analysed using the thematic methods as discussed in chapter three of this research. The data was transcribed, coded using the units of measurement in the conceptual framework, and findings documented in line with the research objectives. Not all responses were used in the analysis, as not all business owners incorporate certain aspects of servicescapes to their business. The most relevant responses were picked based on codes assigned.

4.2. Research Objectives One: To investigate the impacts of servicescapes on customer satisfaction with reference to African service-based SMEs in Ireland

This objective was posed to discover the extent to which servicescapes used by African service-based SMEs has stimulated satisfaction amongst customers. To this end, three

findings were discovered in relation to the different dimensions of servicescapes (Physical, Social and Natural dimensions). These are discussed in detail below.

4.2.1. The Physical Dimensions of Servicescape on Customer Satisfaction with reference to African-service based SMEs in Ireland

The physical dimension refers to the direct, tangible, and intangible environment of a business, including the ambient conditions, spatial layout, symbols, signs, and artefacts (Weerasinghe, 2019). The physical dimension plays an important role in influencing customer satisfaction based on the data from the study. Both the businesses owners and the customers had similar opinions of the physical dimensions of the servicescapes, however, the business owners mainly implemented these conditions to enhance customer experiences, while the customers themselves reacted to the conditions.

Respondent HD stated that

“I try to make my salon as neat as possible, as nobody loves a dirty place, I also play the kind of music or movies the customer wants this is to enable them relax and enjoy the hairdressing experience. The chairs in the salon are placed in a comfortable sitting arrangement which allow customers relax while they wait their turn or get their hair done”.

Similarly, Respondent BB stated that

“I keep the business environment clean as people are attracted to a clean barbershop. I also use different forms of signs and symbols including pictures and catalogues to let people know about the services I am offering. However, I do not use signage in excess as people were not attracted to the signage but quality handwork. I also use good music, footballs, and sometimes African films to keep customers entertained while they wait”.

Contrary to the opinion of the BB, respondent EM explained that she uses signages as part of the servicescape in her business.

“I use signages a lot as signages were significant in keeping my clients informed about what I do, my facility has sophisticated signages that informs clients on what to do, where to buy tickets, entrance, and exit, fire exit, etc. This is essential as it brings awareness to my customers and also enables them to conduct themselves properly in the facility. I also make good use of ambient conditions, such as soft lightening; I purposefully uses light blue colours as it compliments dark, this gives them a five-sense experience”.

In the same vein, respondent CB1 agreed that the use of signage as a servicescape helped him in his interaction with the barbershop and influences his overall service experience.

“The use of signages and symbols in the barber's shop helps me interact more with the facility, it informs me of the accurate place to go and things to do within the facility. The spatial arrangement of the place was conducive as it enhanced the interactions amongst people especially Africans. The football displayed on the Television (TVs) at the barber's shop enhanced my desire to go there as I could watch football and also have a chat with other people there, the music and the film was also entertaining, therefore, increasing the positive experiences I gained in the barber's salon. The fluorescent lighting also enhanced the beauty of the salon, it brings out the cleanliness of the environment and further makes it desirable to stay”.

Respondent CHD also agreed that the ambient conditions of the store made a significant impact on her service experience and was a key criteria for repeat business to the hairdressing service. *“...the entertaining nature of the salon makes me want to constantly visit the salon, apart from music and films being played the owner of the salon provided snacks and sometimes coffee for her clients”.*

CHD also took time to extol the details of the physical environment of the hairdressing salon, highlighting that the signs, symbols and artefacts are critical to her decision to keep using her service provider.

“...there is this beautiful antique mirror which makes me look good anytime I stands in front of it, this is one of the reasons why I always return to the salon. The temperature of the salon was always warm, this makes the place cosy and comfortable”.

The responses from the respondents overwhelmingly support the position that the physical dimensions of the servicescape plays an important role in keeping customers satisfied.

4.2.2. Discussion 1

The physical dimension (spatial arrangement, lightening, ambient conditions, music, scent etc) of a servicescape is extremely important as it the first contact to customers. This is because customers spend a considerable amount of time within the physical environment of the business, thus significantly affecting their experiences of the service provider (Aitken Stringer and Ballantyne, 2012). The effect of the physical environment

on the customer experience is evident, as one of the respondents (CB1) outlined that the physical servicescape influences decision to visit the service provider more often:

“...most times even though I don’t want to cut my hair, I just go there to watch football”
– **CB1**

Another consequence of the physical dimensions of the servicescape is that clients spend more time on the service premises, and may even led to them spending more money at the business.

“...the lightening, chairs, music is so comfortable, I’m not in a hurry to leave”- **CHD1**

This finding confirms that the physical environment holds the potential to give customers a memorable experience, echoing the findings of Miles, Cannon and Miles (2012) and Hanks (2017), who espoused that the physical dimensions heighten the psychological pleasures on the customers, which can subtly make them continuously visit the facility. Chen (2014), also noted that the physical dimensions give a negative or positive reflection of the business to the customer. Using things like signs and symbols can effectively help customers by giving them directions and also making them know what kind of services are provided, thus giving the business a serious outlook and clients know what to expect from the service provider.

Another example of the use of signage and artefacts was cited by respondent CB1, who noted how the use of catalogues enriched his service experience.

“The use of picture catalogues tells clients the type of haircuts that can be delivered and also enables them to choose what they want”- **CB1**

Chang (2016) explained that the physical dimension of the servicescapes elicit different physical and emotional responses from the client, and a beautifully designed facility with good scent, warm temperature, interesting music, and warm lightening were essential in eliciting positive emotional responses from the consumers. Since these issues directly affect the customer, they offer a tangible medium of keeping them satisfied and winning their loyalty.

An example of this is seen in the response of CHD 1 who noted that the physical environment was so critical to her satisfaction, that unless she found a service with a similar servicescape to the one she is used to with her current provider, she would not use their service but only purchase products and option for self-service at home.

“...whenever I visit another salon, I always look for the kind of environment which I regularly visit, if they do not have it, I just buy hairdressing materials and go home and make my hair”- CHD1

Respondent CB1 also echoed similar sentiments, outlining that the physical environment determined comfortability and time spent at the service provision center.

“...if the physical environment was not well arranged and designed with all the attractive features, I will probably just visit there when I only want to have a haircut, afterward I’ll go home”. – CB1

Also, respondent BB, who is a service provider and business owner noted he tries to keep his environment neat as it influences the perceptions of customers to his business. The respondent stated that he maintains a high level of hygiene in store, as clients did not like other people’s hair sticking to their bodies. A similar comment was made by respondent HD, who adjusts the ambience of her business to suit clients’ needs.

“I constantly ask for what kind of movies or songs my clients will want to watch or listen to, I also give them snacks and position a coffee table”.- HD

From her response, it is evident that the physical dimension creates a feeling of value to the customers, as CHD outlines that she feels valued due to the nature of the servicescape.

“I feel valued whenever I go there because apart from the services, the environment makes me feel safe, secured, I am rest assured I’ll get a good value for my money”. – CHD

The findings in this section validates the work of Moliner et al. (2019), who explained that the way the physical environment of a business is maintained significantly influences the perception and feeling of value to the customer and the services which they receive. Chang (2014) echoes this sentiment, explaining that a poorly maintained physical environment can make customers suspect the business’s commitment to quality.

4.2.3. The Social Dimension of Servicescape on Customer Satisfaction with reference to African-service based SMEs in Ireland

The social dimension has to do with how the business can manage crowd within the servicescape, thereby creating a serene environment to fulfil certain utilitarian, social and psychological needs of customers (Chang, 2016). Concerning the way crowd are managed in the servicescape, different business owners and customers expressed diverse opinions.

For respondent BB, he explained that:

“My facility can take 15 to 20 people at a time, I made provisions for long chairs where customers can sit and wait their turn, when the inside was full, customers can wait outside, as they did not mind waiting as long as I offered the right services. Crowding in my facility could easily be minimised with appointment schedules, however, I do not fancy it as many people do not keep appointments, hence, people just have to wait for their turns. I am able to reduce the noise in my facility by constantly reminding the clients of the need for quietness, I also stop some form discussions such as issues relating to racisms, or unfair treatment especially if I had a white customer because such discussions could easily offend the white, and since I have a good rapport with my white clients, I would not want to offend them”. –**BB**

The clever use of the social dimensions of servicescape by respondent BB one is evident from the quote above, showing that each person may customise their approach to the topic. Respondent HD on the other hand, adopts a different approach:

“I minimise crowd in my facility by taking four (4) clients in my facility at a time, others will have to go and come back later, or book an appointment, the reason for managing crowd was to prevent the place from being rowdy and also provide the clients in the facility with a quiet and serene environment while making their hair”. -**HD**

Here we see that while respondent BB allows everyone to come in and wait for their turn, respondent HD only takes 4 clients at a time and request others to book appointments. These approaches cannot be squeezed into a one-size-fits-all box, as each business owner customises their approach to the client base and their perceived preferences.

Moving to a different service field, the response of respondent MH to social dimensions of servicescapes is based on the limitations of space:

“My facility did not provide room for customers to linger, or interact, customers just drop their vehicles or electronics and leave, I do not like customers staying within the vicinity as it was an electronics and mechanic facility, a customer may touch something and end up getting injured. I make use of appointments and bookings to ensure that clients come at the right time and obtain the services they need”. - **MH**

Another business owner, respondent AC, reasoned along the same lines with HD, opting not to allow people into the store randomly without appointments. This is to prevent overcrowding and for facility control.

“My facility though can supports chairs which customers can sit and interact, I do not encourage that, I informs clients when to come, so they can come at the right time, make their transactions and leave, I use appointments and booking to ensure that my facility is not overcrowded”. -**AC**

Surprisingly, despite the seemingly uncontrolled nature of customers at BB’s business, the female customers are in support of a controlled servicescape, where crowd and interaction at the business venue are reduced to a minimum. Speaking about this, CB2 opined that the management of crowd at BB’s business was effective, despite its seemingly unplanned nature, as the owner had strict regulations on noisemaking and client interactions during business hours.

“...the crowd in the barber's shop are effectively managed, and gave room for limited people to be in the facility, this was ok as it limited noise and baseless discussions, less noise enabled me to listen to the movies or songs being played, however for some people it was not ok because the shop also served as an area where Africans interact and discuss on some issues”. – **CB2**

This view also resonates with the customer at HD’s business, who suggested that the crowd control system allowed for easier customer interaction with the business owner.

“...the limited number of people aided me to express myself better on how I wanted to be treated, I am very shy so she did not do well with crowd”.-**CHD**

Here, we notice a pattern with female customers who prefer less crowded social environments within the servicescape as opposed to a crowded one. This means that gender plays a huge role in the customer experience and in the client’s perception of the servicescape. This theory is further reinforced by the comments of CR1, who opined that she feels more comfortable at restaurants with less social density.

“...minimal social density is highly maintained, the chairs are spaced out to effectively monitor the number of clients in the facility and also make provision for clustered customers, such as large families, birthday well-wishers, etc. This large group of customers have their sections where they stay and make all the noise they want. The level of social density gives me satisfaction, as I can go there and not be bothered by much noise”. – **CR1**

From the above, it is evident that the level of social density convenient within a service based business differs based on gender, as men are convenient in places with high social

density while women prefer places with much lesser social density. Overall, social density as part of the servicescape is critical for business owners and customers, as affects the customer experience and their overall satisfaction with services being offered by the service provider at the business venue.

4.2.4. Discussions

Crowd management is an important aspect of the servicescape, as the literature review reveals that the number of customers in a facility at a time can influence the decisions and behaviours of customers (Nguyen et al., 2012). Some customers feel reserved in the presence of crowd and may not want to explicitly express themselves on the kind of services they desire, as shown in the earlier response of respondent CHD. Jepson and Sharpley (2015) also share this view, as they claim that crowd management enhances the freedom of customers. This means that although large crowd may lead to more profit for the business as it signifies a large customer base, however, it can impede the way the business responds to customers. Large crowd limit or slows down the communication between staff and customers, hence customers may not get the exact services and experiences they need. Customers may not open up on the exact way they want to be treated, meaning that staff will be less informed on how customers want to be treated.

Chen (2014) also note that businesses that have a good reputation for increasing the level of joy and positive experience of customers are those who can effectively manage crowd. This is evident from the response of CR1, who claimed to have an excellent service experience due to the well-spaced out nature of restaurant, and their ability to manage crowd who come in large groups or single customers.

Noise levels can give negative experiences to customers and limit the satisfaction attained when patronising a business. Dedeoglu et al. (2018) highlight that for businesses in the service sector, servicescapes should endeavour to reduce the amount of noise produced as noise levels can make conversations difficult and also cause psychological stress and fatigue. In addition, a noisy servicescape could put an unhealthy strain on customers' voice, disabling them from thoroughly expressing themselves.

Crowd management is also essential for the safety of customers as Mechanic noted,

“My facility does not support means for customers to linger, as this is an electronic and mechanic facility, customers may touch something that could injure them”- MH.

This is true as much crowd in a facility make it difficult for staff to keep track of customers, this puts customers at risk of accidents or other facility hazards. Line et al. (2018) explained that overcrowding was the 6th cause of accidents in a workplace as in a crowded workplace, it is not unusual to experience an accident due to negligence of another customer or inability of staff to pay close attention to customer movements and behaviours. Overcrowding in a facility or shop severely reduces the positive satisfaction and experiences customers get while receiving a service. Johnstone (2012) also noted that overcrowding gives customers the feeling that they have limited space or have lost their personal space. It also interferes with customer goals of visiting a business as they may not get the type of quality service they need, some customers when seeing a crowded shop or facility may leave without patronising the business. It is therefore prudent of businesses to manage crowd as it is a critical determinant for customer satisfaction.

4.2.5. Natural Dimension of Servicescape on Customers Satisfaction with reference of African-service-based SMEs

The natural dimension describes how the servicescape supports relaxation and its compatibility with customers' needs (Jepson and Sharpley, 2015). It also describes how fascinating the servicescape is. From the interviews, several participants expressed their opinions concerning the natural dimension of the servicescape.

“I have created my salon to ensure that customers feel relaxed anytime they come to make their hair, the chairs, and all other equipment in the servicescape were designed to give customers a relaxing experience. Sometimes while attending to certain customers they often expressed their pleasures with the service as they said “this is so relaxing”, I have incorporated extra services such as giving tea, chips, playing the type of music the customer likes to ensure that the customer is relaxed in the shop”-HD.

By providing a supporting and enabling ambience within the business, and the provision of snacks and tea, the business owner puts service users at ease and makes them feel welcome at the facility. Other business owners such as EM also agree with this type of servicescape,

“...since my business was more of event management, I ensured that the place was relaxing as possible, especially by making the environment beautiful and enchanting. Through the use of different coloured bulbs, soft music, and sweet scent, I provide my customers with 5-senses experiences and relaxations, also by keeping the place warm,

using soft chairs and placing beautiful decorations, I am able to create the perfect environment for the relaxation of my customers” – EM.

Not only the business owners are affected by the natural dimensions of the servicescape. For instance, Customer of Barbershop 1 noted that:

“...the barber's shop was relaxing, I felt very relaxed anytime I visited the shop, as everything in the shop enhanced the relaxation experience, the chairs were comfortable, the speakers in the environment were loud enough for me to hear the good music being played or to watch and understand the movie or football being played. The barber's shop provided avenues for me to meet with other Africans and discuss, I am always looking forward to visiting the barber”.

Respondent CR1 also noted that the African restaurant which she patronises *“was very relaxing because the chairs were spaced out and very comfortable, there was less noise and much safety precautions in the environment, with signs showing places of exit and entrance, normally I do not like eating outside but due to the comfort at the restaurant most times I and my friends eat in the restaurant”.*

From the explanation given by CR1, it is clear that the environment and attention to health & safety precautions on the part of the service provider is critical for customer satisfaction within the restaurant setting. Other conditions such as music and layout of the business venue can have a calming effect on the client and lead to more customer satisfaction as shown by CHD’s response.

“The salon was relaxing, this is due to the absence of crowd, the music being played, the chairs and the way I was being treated by the hairdresser, the absence of crowd at the salon enhanced the serenity and quietness of the environment, it enabled me to relax my mind while making my hair, also noted the music always resonated well with me, the decorations and wall colours made me feel at home whenever I go to the salon, I have recommended many people to the salon due to the quality experiences which I received”
–CHD.

From the evidence above, the ability of a relaxing atmosphere to improve overall customer experience cannot be overemphasised. It is clear from the examples provided that a relaxation inducing servicescape increases the positive experiences received from a business

4.2.6. Discussion

The natural dimension which includes elements for relaxation and fascination is essential in providing customers with a good experience anytime they come to obtain services (Line et al., 2018). As discussed in the literature review, the natural dimension can affect the health, wellbeing, and the approach/avoidance behaviours of customers to a business. A key example of this is the Customer of Barber 1, who observed that due to the relaxing nature of the barbing salon he was always “*looking forward to going for a haircut*”.

Another interesting finding is that of CR2, who stated that although she does not fancy eating out, she was encouraged to do so as a result of the attractiveness of the natural environment of the service provider. This agrees with the position of Park et al., (2020), who noted that the extent to which a servicescape can incorporate relaxation features to its servicescape can determine the extent which customers frequent the business.

Zhu, Sun, Chang (2016), noted that the natural dimension was an added feature of the servicescape, i.e. it incorporates both physical and social dimensions, and supported by the claims of respondent CHD, who stated that

“the absence of crowd, the comfortable chairs, and music being played enabled me to relax my mind while making my hair”

It is important to note that while the absence of crowd is an aspect for the social dimensions, provision of comfortable chairs and music deals with the physical dimensions. Furthermore, EM outlined that she adopts

“the use of different colour bulbs, soft music, and sweet scent, I can provide customers with 5-senses experiences and relaxations”.

This use of coloured bulbs, soft music, and the sweet scent was part of the physical dimensions of the servicescape, it can thus be deduced that how relaxing a servicescape is a product of the physical arrangement and social management in the environment. The physical environment provides a form of aesthetic appeal and psychological influences which accentuates the experiences of a customer thus making the place good for relaxation.

The importance of the natural dimension has been pointed out in the literature review, and it has been further supported by responses from interviewees as being critical to customer satisfaction and repeat business. Park et al. (2020) already outlined that servicescapes support the relaxation of customers and enabled humans to concentrate

better, giving them a feeling of “*being at home*”. As a result, it can be inferred that African service-based businesses should leverage the power of servicescapes to give customers a feeling of being away from the pressures of one’s daily experiences and environment.

The researcher reflects on her own personal experience of visiting African-owned serviced-based businesses and notes that more can be done to improve the ability of the business venue to hold the attention of customers. In the words of customer CHD,

“...the hairdressing salon was beautifully decorated with pink which I like and also different flowery decorations which makes me always want to visit the place”.

When the natural dimension of business is properly constructed, it enables the customer to have a feeling of belonging and ability to interact without feeling inferior, socially, inept, or embarrassed (Akaka and Vargo, 2015). Hence, it is recommended that more African service-based SMEs adopt same approach to servicescapes.

4.3. Research Objective Two: To critically evaluate how the use of servicescapes during the COVID-19 era has been essential in maintaining customer loyalty with reference to African service-based SMEs in Ireland

The way servicescapes were constructed before and after the COVID-19 lockdown had significantly changed. Interviewees gave their different opinions concerning the change in servicescapes. Some of their responses are analysed below:

“Before the COVID-19 lockdown, my salon could accommodate four (4) customers, customers could seek services at any time, however, in line with social distancing regulations, I only allow two customers into the shop and attendance is strictly by appointment. Customers now have to wear face masks and wash their hands thoroughly before entering the salon, before the COVID-19 lockdown I offered tea and chips at the salon, this was quite different now as I do not do any of that since most customers had their face mask on throughout the hair making sessions”. - **HD**

The hairdresser is not the only business whose servicescape has changed since the onset of the lockdown. Other business owners also agree that several innovative steps have been taken to improve the servicescape to meet government guidelines since the lockdown.

“...the servicescape has significantly changed before the COVID-19 lockdown, and after the COVID-19 lockdown, before the lockdown, my shop accommodates 20 customers, however, I have significantly reduced the number to ten (10), also chairs are more spaced

out to create distance between customers. I have made provisions for sanitisers and handwashing equipment and placed signs for customers to know how to use them. Nothing significant was changed in the ambient conditions, however, the arrangement of chairs and spacing was changed”.- BB

Yet, another business owner noted that significant changes were made before the COVID-19 lockdown and after the COVID-19 lockdown. In her words,

“...the facility was more restricted, before my business operated 16 hours a day however that has reduced to eight (8) hours, coupled with that, the number of customers in the facility has also reduced. I had to cut down on certain services, such as closing the dancehall. In the bar people had to stand a distance away from each other”.-EM

Not only the business owners had to adjust to the changes necessitated by the Covid-19 restrictions. Infact, most of the changes needed to be borne by the customers and there were different reactions to these changes across the board. Some of these reactions are outlined below:

“I am satisfied with the arrangements as they ensured my safety, the move was mainly to protect customers, hence I am happy to find that the business was adhering to government regulations, the use of signs and signages offered tangible directions for customers and also gave them information on the need for washing of hands, sanitizing and always using a facial mask. This to me was satisfying, as I am confident of being protected anytime I went for a haircut. However, I am not so pleased with the diminished level of interactions at the barber’s shop, in the barber’s shop, there were not many customers as it used to be. Before, I could go and chat with individuals in the shop and have a quality African experience, however now I just go with my headphones, and face mask, cut my hair and come back home”.-CB1.

The statement above outlines that Covid-19 has caused quite a disruption in the customer experience at African businesses. Due to the restrictions, clients no longer see the service provider as a place for communal interaction and meeting with fellow Africans, but as a simple service center. This might not bode well for patronage in the long-term, seeing that customers want more from their visits, usually beyond the service being rendered only. This perspective is however different with the female gender.

“...the experience in the dressing salon was still the same, however, the environment was much safer, the hairdresser had provided free face mask, plastic aprons, and sanitizers

for free, before the COVID-19 I could walk into the shop anytime, however during the post-COVID-19 services were strictly by appointments, I had to book before I was served, I am not pleased about this arrangement, however, it was for the best to ensure everyone was safe in the shop”-CHD.

From the above, the female customer is not too worried about the new restrictions, seeing that it guarantees their safety and wellbeing. One key finding from this is that the perceptions of servicescape differs across gender lines and this is a critical contribution to the body of knowledge, especially within the post-COVID servicescape.

4.3.1. Discussions

The COVID-19 pandemic altered a significant level of the way individuals lived their lives and their business, the pandemic served as a catalyst for better ways of doing business. Business owners have had to adapt to new ways to operate their business while adhering to government regulations and keeping customers satisfied. The COVID-19 lockdown significantly changed the view of servicescapes, according to HM Government (2020), while most people searched for ambient factors, comfort, and level of interactions in the servicescape before the COVID-19 pandemic, after the lockdown, most people while visiting a facility were concerned about the safety and precautionary measures to ensure that they were safe during their visit to the facility.

Jake (2017), noted that facilities that were overcrowded and did not adhere to social distancing measures did not give the customer a reassurance of safety, hence, it diminished customer satisfaction. This was evident in respondent CB2’s interview,

“I am satisfied with new safety arrangements at the barber's shop as they ensured my safety and those within the shop, I am also happy that the business was adhering to government’s regulation in keeping a safe workplace”-CB2

It appears that a critical part of the customer experience is now adherence to government Covid-19 prevention guidelines as shown in the response of respondent CHD:

“I am happy with all safety precautions taken in the shop, as it gave me confidence that my health was put into consideration by the hairdresser”.

Drawing on the two responses above, it can be deduced that post-COVID-19 servicescapes placed by African SMEs in Ireland has increased customer loyalty and trust to the business. This is because the businesses had thoroughly implemented health and safety regulations, according to (James, 2020), making customers have more confidence

in their businesses since they incorporate safety measures into the business environment. Due to these servicescapes, clients are rest assured that they would not contract the disease while visiting the business facility.

Ensuring a healthy environment for customers is part of good customer service, and Afthanorhan et al. (2019) notes that this creates a positive impact on the business, with the potential to increase customer loyalty, profits, and reputation. Varsanis et al. (2019) also claim that it is an essential responsibility for business owners to care for the health of customers within the business environment, as this gives customers a sense of value, confidence, trust and makes them loyal to the business. Furthermore, Diktas and Tekin (2019) explained that when strong customer service is being implemented and executed it makes customers feel good about a business, influencing willingness to pay extra to travel to the establishment and also tell others about their experiences. This is effective means of word-of-mouth advertising strategy that costs nothing.

Post-COVID-19 servicescape had thus significantly changed, with catering to the health and safety of customers through abiding by social distancing regulations taking top priority within servicescape design. The provision of this kind of servicescape holds the potential to enhance confidence, trust, and loyalty of customers to the business.

4.4. Research Objectives Three: Challenges associated with COVID-19 servicescapes in reference to African service Based SMEs

Several opinions have been discovered concerning the challenges faced in the use of servicescapes during the COVID-19 pandemic especially among the customers. One prime example is the erosion of open conversations in service centres.

“... with the post-COVID-19 servicescape interactions had reduced, the African feeling I get any time I visited his barber's shop was reduced as I could no longer effectively discuss politics, football etc with other customers since, everyone wore a face mask, and stay a significant distance away, also there were fewer people in the shop than it used to be” –CB1.

The same challenge is experienced across board, as respondent CHD also complained of the same thing, when visiting her hairdressing salon:

“...the challenge I experienced was based on appointments since the salon could no longer accommodate many people, I had to book an appointment which to me was unsatisfying as previously I could just walk into the salon”.

The frustrations of having to book appointments and staying in scantily filled service centres may be something African SMEs have to battle with in the near future, as an important component of African culture is the communal spirit. These same frustrations are echoed by respondent CR2:

“...the COVID-19 servicescape supports fewer interactions, the spacing out was much and there were hardly people sitting in the restaurants, most people come to make their orders and leave. This reduced the friendliness and entertaining levels of the restaurants”.- CR2

4.4.1. Discussion

The challenges discovered from the post-COVID-19 servicescape on the customer's side shows that the increasing lack of interactions is fast becoming a challenge as certain businesses were built around communal settings and have become a forum for people to interact and discuss on certain issues. With the current restrictions and social distancing requirements, this was no longer possible, hence experiences in the servicescape was not fulfilling as it used to be. This aligns with the argument of Akaka and Vargo (2015) about the value of interactions in a servicescape. They noted that the ability to interact with employees and other customers in a servicescape often heightened the positive experiences gained by customers, as these interactions aided relaxation and excitement. James (2020) also posit that limiting the nature by which customers can interact with themselves in a servicescape can thus significantly reduce the client satisfaction, and can lead to customers avoiding the business altogether.

4.5. Summary of Findings

Having explored and analysed the data from the study, the following highlights are the summary of the findings of the study;

1. Servicescapes are an essential part of the business and it determines customer satisfaction. Servicescapes enhances or diminishes the positive experiences attained by a customer while visiting a business. Good servicescapes increase customer satisfaction.

2. The physical dimension of a servicescape that includes; signs, symbols, ambient conditions, music, etc were important for giving information to the customers concerning services provided, also stimulating psychological calmness and enhancing the aesthetic appeal of a business
3. The social dimension of a servicescape which deals mainly with crowd management was important for providing customers with the best services, allowing them to express themselves and also achieve their goals of visiting a business. Overcrowded businesses could lead to stress, fatigue, lack of expressions from customers, and also cause injuries.
4. The natural dimension which carted for relaxation was significantly linked to the physical dimension and was also essential in enhancing psychological calmness, and aesthetic appeals to customers. Customers were more attracted to servicescapes that supported relaxations.
5. Pre-COVID-19 and Post-COVID-19 servicescapes were significantly different in spatial layouts i.e spacing and arrangement of chairs with fewer interactions and more social distancing measures. This, however, had increased customer loyalty as measures put in place to curb the COVID-19 virus has increased customer confidence and trust in the business, this is because customers feel valued as their safety is being put into consideration by the business
6. Challenges experienced in the post- COVID-19 servicescape involves the limit servicescapes placed on interactions amongst customers, this has reduced the experiences they receive when visiting businesses.
7. Gender plays a critical role in the experiences of customers of the servicescape. Men have a different preference in servicescapes in comparison to women, especially within the African context.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter has revealed the importance of servicescapes to a business and has further discussed each aspect of the servicescape and how it enhances customer satisfaction. The findings from this section reveals that servicescape is indeed an important element of the business and thus prime importance should be given to developing a standard servicescape that can provide quality experiences to customers. One critical finding that

is hitherto unexplored is the role that gender plays in the understanding and response to servicescapes, which is a novel discovery within servicescape research of African SMEs.

The next chapter will, therefore, be the concluding section which will relate the findings of the study to the research questions.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH, ITS

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

5.1. Implications of the Research findings on the Research Objectives

This study has established that servicescape is the physical environment of an organization where the service is offered, consisting of all the non-living elements within the vicinity of the business (Hanks et al, 2017). Servicescapes are an essential part of the business as it determines the quality of experience a customer receives, thus significantly affecting his/her satisfaction levels. A well-constructed servicescape can provide customers with a memorable experience thus increasing their desire to constantly revisit the business environment. Businesses that expend resources in constructing their servicescapes often create a stronger relationship between the business environment and their customers (Lin and Mattilam (2010). Thus, understanding the role of servicescapes in customer satisfaction has become one of the most important and relevant streams of marketing research especially for service-based businesses that require customers to physically visit the business environment to receive services. This study attempted to understand the nature of servicescapes of African service-based SMEs in Dublin, Ireland and link it to customer satisfaction. The study also attempted to investigate how servicescapes have been revised and adjusted due to the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance better customer services, satisfaction, and loyalty. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were regulations placed on businesses to curtail the spread of the virus, this research tried to understand how African SMEs in Ireland incorporated these regulations into their servicescapes and its effects on customer satisfaction. The study also investigated the challenges associated with the adoption of servicescapes after the COVID-19 lockdown in relation to customer satisfaction.

To this end, three research questions were posed and the implications of these on the research objectives are explained below;

Research Objective One: To investigate the impacts of servicescapes on customer satisfaction with reference to African service-based SMEs in Ireland.

This objective was intended to uncover the nature of African SMEs servicescapes and how these servicescapes have resonated with customers, to create memorable experiences thus increasing customer satisfaction (Hakim and Deswindi, 2015). The study looked at the major components of servicescapes which includes physical dimensions, social dimensions, and natural dimensions.

The physical dimension includes the use of signs, symbols, artefacts, ambient conditions, spatial layout and arrangement of the servicescape, and the findings suggest that this dimension has a profound impact most on customer experiences and satisfaction. One of the ways this dimension affects the customer experience is its direct linkage to the customer, during their visit to the business premises. The physical dimensions was critical to disseminating information to the customers concerning services provided and also stimulating psychological calmness, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of a business in line with the findings of Yi et al. (2013).

The social dimension on the other hand, incorporates the management of crowd into the service-based business, ensuring that customers are provided with the best services, and allowing them to express themselves and also achieve their goals of visiting a business (Chang, 2016).

The final dimension of servicescape that was studied was the natural dimension, which deals with how relaxing the servicescape was and the extent it provided an “away from home experience”.

The findings of the research revealed that all three dimensions were incorporated into African service-based SMEs and they created the effect they were meant to. However, the effects were varied across gender lines with women experiencing a different effect from the menfolk.

The physical dimension stimulated the psychological calmness of customers thus providing them with positive satisfaction, crowd were effectively managed and the business environment was generally relaxing, supporting the findings of Diktaş and Tekin (2018). The implications of these findings is that business owners should understand their target market along gender lines, and focus on what works best for optimising the customer experience of their target market. For instance, while the barbershop service users revealed displeasure at the crowd management strategies being implemented, the hairdresser service users were more accepting of the move. This shows that businesses should pay attention to the gender dimension when incorporating physical, social, and

natural dimensions into their service provision in order to create memorable experiences for customers.

Research Objective Two: To critically evaluate how the use of servicescapes during the COVID-19 era has been essential in maintaining customer loyalty with reference to African service-based SMEs in Ireland

This objective was posed to discover how servicescapes have been revised to incorporate government regulations on social distancing, prevent the spread of COVID-19 and also ensure that customers visiting a facility were safe. The findings show that majority of the African SMEs have placed social distancing measures such as cutting down the number of customers in the shop, spacing out chairs, providing facial masks, plastic aprons, hand sanitizers, and hand washing materials. These measures had increased the loyalty of customers to the businesses, because customers were of the view that they felt more secure anytime they visited the business. Implementing such servicescape meant that business owners were taking responsibility to ensure that services were provided in a safe environment, thus increasing customers' sense of value and overall loyalty to the organisation. It was further discovered that most customers were happy that business owners had incorporated health and safety regulations on COVID-19 into the servicescape thus improving their confidence and trust in the business. A minority of customers were unhappy with the changes as it prevented interactions between them and other customers, limiting the enjoyable experience they enjoyed at the service provider pre-COVID.

Research Objective Three: To discover the challenges associated with COVID-19 servicescapes with references to African service Based SMEs

This objective was posed to investigate the challenges of the use of revised servicescapes on customer satisfaction. It was discovered that the challenges posed by the use of revised servicescape were mainly on how to ensure that customers-maintained the principles of social distancing in the facilities as some customers will not adhere to social distancing. Amongst the customers, a challenge recorded was that the business environment was not as interesting as it used to be. Before the COVID-19 certain businesses were meeting points for Africans, where they would discuss several issues, however, due to social distancing principles and cut down on the number of customers that could visit a facility, the level of interaction in a servicescape had significantly reduced. The implication thus reflects a decline in satisfaction of customers while visiting servicescapes, as the ability

to interact and discuss politics, football etc. with other customers, was one of the factors that increased the positive experiences when visiting a business.

From the above, all the research objectives have been achieved and in-depth insights have been provided on the role servicescapes played on customer satisfaction before the COVID-19 lockdown and after the COVID-19 lockdown. Overall, the current servicescape of African SMEs has provided satisfaction to customers, however, satisfaction has reduced by a little due to COVID-19 protective measures incorporated into servicescapes.

5.2. Contributions and limitations of the study

The purpose of every research endeavour is to make significant contributions to knowledge and practice, and by studying servicescapes, the study has secured in-depth insights on how business owners were able to properly shape their servicescapes to achieve optimal customer satisfaction. The key contributions of the study are as follows:

Firstly, this study has discovered the impact of Post COVID-19 servicescape on customer satisfaction, which is a novel area in research as there is a paucity of studies that explores the linkages between servicescapes and customer satisfaction. The study also discovered that by incorporating post-COVID 19 preventive measures in the servicescape, customers were more confident in the business, and did not have any fear in visiting shops or facilities. This is because clients are assured that the servicescape was well established to ensure their safety. This increased the loyalty of customers to their business, as taking responsibility for the health of customers made them feel valued and appreciated. These feelings also differed along gender lines, as most male participants, although appreciated the safety measures, disagreed with the restrictions placed due to Covid-19. More female customers however, supported the restrictions put in place due to Covid-19, making a critical contribution to knowledge within servicescape studies.

The study also discovered the challenges associated with the use of revised servicescape on both business owners and customers. The major challenge posed by revised servicescape to business owners relates to ensuring that customers adhered to social distancing while in the shop or facility as some customers will not just comply. From the customer's perspective, it was discovered that post-COVID 19 servicescapes reduced the satisfaction customers got from interacting with other customers in the business environment. This also presents tangible knowledge for practice, as it will help the owners

understand how to further make the servicescape more convenient for their clients in these difficult times.

In terms of practical implications, the study provides a basis for business owners to effectively structure their servicescapes to enhance customer experiences, via providing further signage and symbols that inform the reasons for implementing new things within the service provision center. Seeing that clients that patronise African service-based SMEs love music being played at the location and other things that remind them of their motherland, it is advisable for businesspeople to manipulate the ambient conditions within their businesses to suit client requirements.

A limitation experienced in this research was the absence of greater access to business owners, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The sample population is considered small relative to what could have been obtained pre-Covid. Hence it is difficult to generalise the findings to the entire African service-based SMEs in Ireland. Although, anecdotal evidence suggests that there are less than 50 registered African-owned SMEs in Ireland, meaning that the study covered only about 10% of the sample population.

5.3. Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations which business owners can adopt to increase the quality of their servicescape thus increasing customer satisfaction

1. Business owners should ensure that servicescapes are well designed and structured to include physical, social, and natural dimensions of servicescapes. This can be done by putting adequate lightening, music, scent, spatial arrangement, aesthetic decorations and properly managing crowd.
2. The type of business operated should determine the kind of servicescapes constructed. Business owners should, therefore, study servicescapes and implement the appropriate servicescape that will resonate well with customers. For example, hospitality service industries will need more aesthetic and relaxing servicescapes, than education or hair grooming SMEs
3. Business owners should provide more enlightenment on the need for social distancing in service facilities to further ensure the safety of all customers visiting the service, as customers have a civic responsibility to adhere to government rules and regulations.

4. Business owners should consider the gender metric when designing servicescape for their business and implement those most suited to the population they serve.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can build on the limitations of this study and conduct a better research through the following ways;

1. Future research can use quantitative methods, questionnaires, statistical analysis, and representative samples to get general views of servicescapes in African businesses in Ireland.
2. Future researchers can also try to authenticate the validity of this research by testing the findings on a wider population of African service-based SMEs in Ireland, this will lead to richer insights and more robust findings.
3. Future research can investigate the satisfaction levels of customers in relation to different elements of servicescape i.e. discover empirically which dimension of the servicescape resonate better with customers and is significant in creating better customer satisfaction.

5.5. Conclusions and Reflections

It was the central aim of this research to investigate the impact of servicescapes on customer satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on African SMEs. This research had achieved this objective by empirically understanding the impact of the physical dimension, social dimension, and natural dimension on customer perceptions and experiences. It was discovered that servicescape is an important aspect of the business, even more, important than the services rendered at a business, as servicescape that was properly constructed increased the level of positive experience gained by a customer.

The study has contributed to knowledge and practice, shining the light on the under explored area of African owned service-based businesses in Ireland. The findings will assist business owners in leveraging servicescape to improve the rating of the business, and overall customer satisfaction.

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Appendix A: Plain Language Statement

APPENDIX A: The IMPACT OF SERVICESCAPE ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: A STUDY ON AFRICAN SERVICE-BASED SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED ENTERPRISES (SME) IN IRELAND.

GRIFFITH COLLEGE DUBLIN

Plain Language Statement

I. Introduction to the Research Study

- The Research working title is **The IMPACT OF SERVICESCAPE ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: A STUDY ON AFRICAN SERVICE-BASED SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED ENTERPRISES (SME) IN IRELAND.**
- This research is being carried out by Olabode Olubunmi Arinola a master's student of Graduate Business School at Griffith College, Dublin
- She can be contacted at olubunmiarinola.olabode@student.griffith.ie

II. Details of involvement in the Research Study

- Participants would be required to participate in an interview
- Data gathered from the participants would be subsequently analyzed by the researcher
- Participants are allowed to decline participation in the study.
- Interviews will take place during the 2019/2020 academic year.

III. Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study (if greater than that encountered in everyday life)

- There is no risk to participants due to their involvement in this research.

IV. Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study

- This research intends to discover how effective social media is on the growth and expansion of small-scale entrepreneurs in Nigeria. Participants will benefit indirectly from the study because it may be used for further research in academia.

V. Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect the confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations

- All efforts will be made to ensure the anonymity of participants.
- The data collected will be analyzed by the researcher only.
- The actual names of participants will be protected.
- Data collected from the interviews would be stored in a secure location.

VI. Advice as to whether data is to be destroyed after a minimum period

- Data would be destroyed within three years from the date of collection and participants can request the prevention of data processing according to GDPR guidelines.

VII. A statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary

- Participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point and there will be no penalty for withdrawing.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

The Secretary,

Research Ethics Committee,

Griffith College Dublin, South Circular Road,

Dublin 8, D08V04N.

Tel 01-4150400

Appendix B: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

1. **RESEARCH TOPIC: A critical investigation of Servicescape use in African Service-based SMEs in Ireland.**

UNIVERSITY: Faculty of Business, Griffith College Dublin, Ireland

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Olabode olubunmi arinola

2. The purpose of this study is to critically investigate how **servicescape use** and its **complexity** affect service-based African SMEs in Ireland, particularly in the Covid-19 era.

3. Requirements for this research study is the completion of a questionnaire

Please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

- I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) **Yes/No**
- I understand the information provided **Yes/No**
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study **Yes/No**
- I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions **Yes/No**
- I am aware that all information gotten from this study will be retained **Yes/No**
- I am giving consent for all data to be retained **Yes/No**

4. I confirm that my involvement in this research study is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the research study at any point **Yes/No**

5. I understand that all information provided, and data obtained will be treated as confidential and protected under the law. **Yes/No**

6. I will ensure the confidentiality of all data used in this research study and that it is protected by the law. Identity will only be disclosed if participant agrees to that.

Signature:

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Participants Signature: _____

C. J. Arinola

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Interview for business owners

Interviewer: My name is Olabode Bunmi, I am a student from Griffith Business college. I thought it would be a good idea to interview you, so that I could understand the way the servicescape has enabled your business achieve customer satisfaction in the current Covid 19 pandemic (Give a brief introduction of what Servicescape is and how it applies to current business).

The aim of this interview is to find out how servicescapes affect African businesses, and its impact of customer perceptions especially post-COVID-19. This data collection phase is part of the requirements for an M.Sc. dissertation in international business management. The interview should last between 30 minutes to 45 minutes.

(Transition: Let me begin by asking you some questions about your business)

Body A. (Topic) General information

1. Can you tell me about your business and when it started?
2. What was your motivation for starting this business?
3. Current number of employees?
4. What is the ownership structure within your business? (e.g. sole proprietorship, partnership, private limited company)
5. What do you enjoy the most about running your own business?
6. How many clients will you say are loyal to this business? What percentage of the business do these people make?
7. What is the average number of clients per day (pre-Covid, post-lockdown)?

(Transition to the next topic: Let us move on to servicescapes)

Explain the concept of Servicescapes

8. How will you describe current business at your establishment?
9. How do you use signs and symbols in your establishment (both interior and exterior)?
10. Does using signs and symbols have any effect on your customers?

11. How do you use ambient conditions for customer satisfaction? (colour, scent, lighting)
12. How do you think customers relate to the use of ambient conditions?
13. Do you think ambient conditions have any effect on your customers?
14. How do you manage crowd and social density between customers at your establishment?
15. How does your establishment support relaxation?
16. Has there been any spital changes at your business recently? (furnishings, equipment, and machinery)
17. How has customers related to this change at your business?
18. Do customers visit your establishment more often due to the recent arrangements?
19. How have you incorporated accessibility to your business?
20. Has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the physical environment of your business? If yes how?
21. What changes has been made to your physical environment (Post COVID)?
22. Has this change affected your customers positively or negatively?
23. Are there any barriers to implementing or improving servicescape in your business?

Concluding statement: Well, it has been a pleasure finding out more about your business. Let me reiterate that the information recorded during our interview will be kept confidential and unidentifiable in line with GDPR requirements. I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know so that I can successfully include in my dissertation?

Would it be alright to call you at home if I have follow-up questions? Thanks again.

Interview for customers/clients of business

Opening A. (Establish Rapport) My name is Olabode Bunmi, I am a student from Griffith College Dublin, I thought it would be a good idea to interview you, so that I could understand the way the servicescape has impacted your experience as a customer (explain servicescape, its application to the customer).

B. (Purpose) I would like to ask you some questions about service environment in some of the small-scale African business you patronise. How does the way the service is structured, its interaction and ambience affect your service experience especially during the COVID-19 period.

Demographic questions:

Nationality:

Gender:

Occupation:

Age range:

Domicile:

Educational level:

General information

1. Can you tell me about any African-owned business that you patronise frequently?
2. What was your motivation for patronising this business?
3. What do you enjoy the most about patronising this business?
4. Are you loyal to this business? What is the reason for your loyalty/disloyalty?
5. What is the average number of visits you have to this service per month (pre-Covid, post-lockdown)?

(Transition to the next topic: Let us move on to servicescapes)

Explain the concept of Servicescapes

6. How would you describe your last visit to this business?

7. How does this business use sign and symbols for your satisfaction?
8. Has the use of sign and symbols been effective?
8. How does this business use ambient conditions for your satisfaction? (music, lighting, Scents)
9. Does the use of ambient conditions make you feel more at ease?
10. How has this business implemented crowd and social density management (pre Covid, post Covid)?
11. What is your perception of the medium used to manage crowd and social density?
12. How is the servicescape at this business structured to ensure that you as a customer is comfortable whenever you visit during the COVID-19 era?
13. Do you feel relaxed whenever you visit this business?
14. Are you fascinated about the business environment?
15. Based on your satisfaction with this business, would you recommend other customers to patronise the business?
16. Do you perceive your experience at this business a pleasurable experience?
17. How has the business incorporated accessibility?
18. Has the business environment changed considerably post-COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, in what ways?
19. Do the service offerings at this business meet your expectations?
20. How will you describe the spital layout of this business? (Furnishing equipment and machinery)
21. Does the arrangement enhance your interaction with this business?
22. Is there any additional information you wish to add regarding the service?

Interviewer: Well, it has been a pleasure finding out more about your perception about the servicescape of the business. I appreciate the time you took for this interview. Is

there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know so that I can successfully include in my dissertation? Thank you.

Appendix D: Transcribed and Coded Interviews of Event Manager

Question: can you tell me about your business and when it started?

Answer: I run an event business and I started 2019 it is called RESCONCEPTES what we do is we use your imagination and work ethics to bring reality to live.

Question: what your motivation for starting this business?

Answer: I started this business because I noticed was a lack of the services I provide in the market especially among the age group of 21-30 they was not any like lucrative substantial event producing going on this typical like clubbing, afrobeat night and I personal did not have a interest in that so I started because I personal would like to do and go for and as a result I guess other people who had simply interest in it started to go for this kind of event.

Question: what your current number of employees?

Answer: basically five

Question: What the ownership structure of your business?

Answer: sole proprietorship

Question: what do you enjoy running your own business?

Answer: I enjoy been in control, I enjoy not have to listen go anyone, I kind of do what I like I take suggestion from other people, at the end of the day I have the final say of what happens that's what I enjoy.

Question: how many clients are loyal to this business?

Answer: base on what I have done so far, I will say twenty-five.

Question: What's the number of clients you have per day/before covid?

Answer: like sixty after lock down I have not done anything after lock down.

Question: How do you use signs and symbols in your establishment?

Answer: we are here to fire safety signage and there are clear signage like where entry is, where exist is, toilets, where you get your ticket.

Question: Does using signs and symbols have effect on your customers?

Answer: Yes, because you let them know where to go in case of emergency and let them know where and conduct themselves in the environment.

Question: How do you use colour, paint, saint and other conditions for your customer satisfaction?

Answer: we use soft lighting in the venues, because majority of attendances are people who are black and soft lighting complement the skin tone so when you look it is complimenting your skin,so we stay away from green,blue there do not complement black skin and saints as long as it does not smell bad, hearing the music that appeal to the specific group of people that attend.

Question: How do you think customers related to this condition?

Answer: I believe it makes them come back, it gives them a good five sense of experience you know when you treat them in five sense it give a lasting expression on customers and they would not hesitate to come back

Question: How do you manage crowd and social density between customers in your establishment?

Answer: Because per covid there was not much restrictions now on covid you have your time period at when people can come in, they will different time for people to attend and stuff like that.

Question: How do your establishment support relaxation?

Answer: conduct business and leave.

Question: Has there been any vital changing in the establishment?

Answer: Yeah in reaction to venue there have to be more sanitizing stations, more toilets as well ,there has to be fear signage on what covid is and how to handle it, the rules like washing your hand every twenty seconds, stand two metres away from each other and no dance floor anymore, people coming from different part of the country have to sit among

themselves, if you are coming from the west stay one side, East you stay one side and wearing of face mask and hand sanitizer on all the tables, if you feel unwell like high temperature is aching as well.

Question: How has customers relate to this change of business?

Answer: a bit of mixed reaction some people think its excessive some people think it's good you know to try not to contain the virus even if there no symptoms some people can carry symptoms and they do not even know it. yeah, its mixed reaction.

Question: Does customers visit your establishment more often due to the recent arrangement?

Answer: No

Question: How have you been able to incorporate accessibility to your business?

Answer: It's easy for people to are able and disable to enter into the venue there's not any need for special entries because it can be entered by different types of people.

Question: Has the covid-19 affect physical environment of your business?

Answer: Yes, because it made demanding less, there less business to supply to people because everybody is at home, people are conscious at where there go, people are restrictive in their movement and enjoyment, they have been a massive decline impact due to the virus.

Question: Are there any barriers to implement or improve in your business?

Answer: cost is a big one, you need to have sanitizing stations, having different points for entry, different points for exit.

Appendix E: Transcribed and Coded Interviews of Customer of Barbershop

Question: can you please tell me any African business you patronize?

Answer: Well I can talk about my barber.

Question: can you tell me the motivation for patronizing this business?

Answer: well first of it ,the fact that I need to look good, my hair need to be cut regularly so it an African barber who knows how to cut the African hair styles different from the European styles that one of the motivation I go to the place and also a unique environment you can interact with people from African and all of that is one of my motivation for going there mostly number one the quality of the service ,number two the fact that I can meet with other Africans there interact with them ,number three I will say the cost of the service it quite affordable.

Question: How would you describe your last visit to this place?

Answer: During my last visit to this place things have really changed I saw that now you have go put on your mask to come into the shop, not more than four people can be in the shop at the time, a lot of things have change there are lot of signage at the shop, sign for social distances there something there for you to wash your hands, hand sanitizer soap and water so the Barber also take care that he does not have too much of people at the same time so it's only like four people allow in the shop so those are the key changes I have seen at store at the moment.

Question: Does this business use signs and symbols to your satisfaction?

Answer: Well at the moment there have a sign on the floor say two metres social distancing, there also have signage about Covid-19, wash our hands, wear a mask or limited number of people to come in so I well say some of the signs have been really useful in the prime of the pandemic, it help you to understand that you don't need more than four people in the store, so if you are coming in you have already seen all the signage and all of that so you don't go into the store if there is more than four people you just have to stay away. It very useful its very beneficial for me.

Question: How has this use of this signs and symbol be effective?

Answer: Well it's been very effective for me as a person but you know for other people, some people is not necessary for everybody who can read this signs and all of that it's been very positive for me but it's not for everyone who actually take time to read all of this signs and symbols ,sometimes some people don't bother reading, there just bump into the shop and becoming two or three people coming at once and then the barber has to say to them you have to stay outside and all of that so it been very beneficial for me it help me understand for instance I had to call the barber beforehand and ring him and say that I want to come around and cut my hair so I wanted to know if there's a lot of people on ground or I have to book appointment or all that, I understand as a result of the signing I understand, I need to be careful of coming into the store when there so many people there so I am more careful but wouldn't say the same,not everybody understand why the signs are there m, I understands but not sure if everybody does.

Question: How does this business use ambient condition for your satisfaction?

Answer: Well one of the key things that the business does is there playing soccer matches in the business to ensure that you know mostly men visit the business so there want to keep men coming they always try to show live football matches that will make your visit pleasurable when you come into the business and also the lighting of a barbing salon is kind of attractive with the florescent light and also they play music in the background just to keep you entertain when you are at the store so I will say its very useful when they use music, tv by playing football matches and something they play local African movie, to let you get there African feeling so when you are in that store so one of the ways I will say the business uses ambient condition such as TV, and all of that. the business plays a lot of African movies just to make people feel at home, African movies which you otherwise would have access to there have access to it and they play them in the store to make people feel at home since its an African business most of the customers are African

so is very focused in the African community so they do all of that just to keep you coming back, is not like your hair is too full, but because you want to go there and watch an African movie.

Question: Does the use of this ambient conduct effect on you?

Answer: Yeah especially when you listen to songs you're aware of locally languages, when they play songs that really connect with you,so it gives me a serious experience. when I go to the business when I hear Nigerian songs for instance been played or African songs or African movies been played put more pleasurable experiences when at the business.so for me it really works, and that keeps me going back.

Question: How does this business manage crowd and social density? Per covid and post covid?

Answer: Well before covid started we used be like when you go to the business you fund 8-10 people in the business mostly because of the movie and music people want to come around but post covid do not allow more than four people in the store that decision I believe its for the best to protect their customers and ensure that, that place should start as a place of spreading the disease and all the measures they put in place has been very useful to ensure the spread of the disease before the covid we use to be 8-10 people at any time but now maximum is 4 people, if there more than four people he ask you to leave and come back.

Question: What is your perception on the medium use to manage the crowd and social distancing?

Answer: Well my perception is it's effective and far but don't everybody understands it, some people feel it's not pleasant, some people would disagree when you tell them not more than four people in the store at a time but for I think its very effective, its very efficient and its also help to safe guard everyone of us,so it's also help keep everyone safe I think more good can be done in terms of helping people understand how there are doing this thing, why these signs are there why we are been ask not to be more than four in the store some people don't just get it, some people don't just understand until you have to take your time to explain to them maybe I would have to see the business using social media campaign, WhatsApp messages just to get the word out that the reason why we are doing this is to keep everyone safe and all of that.

Question: How is the service scape?

Answer: Well one of the key things I have noticed is the fact that the owner of the business himself now take time to communicate with people on WhatsApp, for instance I wanted to go there on a certain day but there's a lot of people, but he had to say please could you come back on another day, can you stay because of the number of people in the store at that time so I think one of the ways more convent is by using technology to reach out to us all by using WhatsApp, I believe that a way there have made me feel more comfortable, I understand that the business is actually looking out for me, not to allow me go all the way down and find more than four people and I have to go back to my house that a waste of time but by using technology using WhatsApp I can just ask ,can I come now he can say no, you have to come later on another time or another date

Question: Do you feel relaxed when you visit these businesses?

Answer: Yes of course I feel very relaxed when am going to this business, everything within the environment, within the store helps you to relax from the design of the store from the way the business is structured, from the presence of the TV in the main area you will understand with the speakers and music Nigerian music going on in the background .I feel very convent and happy when I go there, I also look forward to visit the barber now with the newly introduce Covid -19 guidelines where you have social distancing so now everyone is well spaced out in the shop not more than four people in the shop at a time, I feel very safe going there

Question: Are you fascinate about the environment?

Answer: Fascinated well not really but satisfied yes fascinated is not the word but I think at the moment happy enough with the way it's but fascinate is more than happy ,it's not like the design is out of this world , current design it could be better but also depend on how financial the owner of the store can access to actually improve the conditions of the store, so fascinated no, if you ask if am satisfied I will say yes.

Question: Does your satisfaction affect your patronage?

Answer: Well of cause it does, my physical environment affect my attending the store because I am very curious for the fact that this is a barbing salon peoples hair are not flying on the air and all that but the barber take care after each cut he ensure to sweep the floor of the store and he ensure that there is no hair of anyone lying around within the

business I think that, that level of neatness encourages me to want to go back unlike some store where the barber keeps piling everybody's hair on the ground all through the day and at the end of the day he sweeps them that not very neat, that not very, not like this ,the barber ensure he cleans up the environment he cleans up the environment of the business before he cut the next client so I think that very important for me, that one of the thing that keeps me going back there, that level of neatness, level of arrangement.

Question: Would you recommend other customers to patronize this business?

Answer: Definitely any of my African friends who come around, I will recommend them to go to that particular business, because I believe that a very important business for African people, especially African men in the community and also women are starting to visit the store I will whole heartly recommend that business base in everything we have talked about today and also level of customers service that you receive from the barber.

Question: How has the business incorporated accessibility?

Answer: Well in terms of accessibility I will say the business has introduced new signage and everything to their store,they have introduced all sort of representation, but in terms of accessibility like have a fire exist, where wheel chair access and all that, I will say that the business is a bit far off putting that in place I feel if this was recommended to the owner of the business he am sure will take it up very seriously and adjust that.

Question: Has the business environment change considering the covid-19 pandemic?

Answer: well the business has changed in the sense that for example some of the chairs that were in the building before has reduced,just to reduced numbers of people that will sit physical in the building so before we use to have several chairs that can contain people at the moment, it's a huge reduction that the key things that have really changed since the covid started reducing of the chairs was to reduce people from sitting around, coming around doing nothing.

Question: Do the arrangement affect you?

Answer: Well the new arrangement enhance how I interact in the business, because before I can actually just go the store and sit down gist with people, but now I only go there like ten minutes or five minutes for the time when I have appointment not even talk to anyone when am there ,when it's my turn I go up to the barber and cut my hair so I think it has really change the way I interact within the business due to business environments.

Question: Does the service meet your expectations?

Answer: Well the service meet my expectations, I am glad, happy and confident that the barber is keeping to social distancing and health regulations. And I also saw that during the lockdown I saw that the barber took time to learn new technics cutting the hair and all of that, it has really been beneficial for the barber because he's now offering a better service like shaving experiences and more customer experience I believe its better.