



Applying the servicescape model to understand student experiences of a Norwegian academic library

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ABSTRACT

The servicescape model from the marketing discipline was adapted to understand students' library usage and experiences of academic library as a learning space. With a qualitative and explorative approach, it was discovered that the servicescape has great influence on student users when the physical environment triggers certain responses and behaviours. Physical workspace discomfort and disturbance from other students, lead to negative cognitive perceptions, which in turn cause negative emotional responses that impact students' learning experiences. Students' behaviour and experience of the library facilities are also influenced by whether the library can accommodate their various needs throughout the study progression. Additionally, the purpose of library usage is much affected by the structure of the library and proximity to other social facilities. The findings also indicate that a workspace with effective and flexible seating solutions contribute to approach behaviour. As the model goes beyond the physical facilities alone, further understanding of various user responses triggered by the interplay between the built and social environment is gained. Such knowledge contributes to improve library facilities and for libraries to remain important as effective and relevant learning space.

1. Introduction

With the entry of new digital tools and focus on distance learning, the traditional concept of space in a university campus is challenged (Bryant, Matthews, & Walton, 2009; Saunders, 2015). Research indicates that there is a need for modern and flexible space solution to support learning, creativity and interaction (Lillejord, Børte, Nesje, & Ruud, 2017). As such, library space usage has received great attention as the quality of the library facility strongly influences student learning (Hanssen & Sandberg, 2015; Wells & Daunt, 2016). Before planning for user space, it is necessary to consider user experiences and to understand how user behaviours can be affected by the physical environment as well as determine type of behaviour that is desired (Bitner, 2000; Choy & Goh, 2016). For students, a well-designed library space contributes to supporting learning and satisfaction while attaining their academic degrees.

2. Problem statement

Numerous studies have underlined the importance of designing space and service together for students to interact, learn and share

(Kim, 2016; Lillejord et al., 2017; Wells & Daunt, 2016). An increased focus on the experience of library users in the last decades challenges academic libraries and library and information science (LIS) to think “outside the box”. Based on the servicescape model from the marketing discipline, this explorative study focuses on how elements in the physical environment influence user behaviours (Booms & Bitner, 1981). The framework provides an alternative approach to evaluate the physical environment where the library service is delivered. It emphasises how such an environment triggers certain responses and behaviours, which in turn affect user experiences and satisfaction of the service provider (Bitner, 2000). The purpose of the study is to investigate the application of the servicescape model as a framework to understand students' library usage and experiences of academic library as a learning space. The focal point of the study is student users as their points of view are not traditionally investigated. Moreover, while many similar studies address physical facilities and virtual resources such as electronic library and digital services, the servicescape model focuses predominantly on services delivered in the physical environment and the interplay between the built and social environment, which together trigger certain user responses and behaviours. On basis of the discussion, two specific research objectives have been developed:

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- To investigate students' usage, needs and experiences of the servicescape (physical environment) of an academic library in Norway.
- To understand how the servicescape (physical environment) triggers certain responses that influence user behaviour in an academic library context.

By understanding how users interact with the physical environment, the library can seek to design and improve its facilities to enhance students' learning experiences.

3. Literature review

3.1. Academic libraries

The operation of academic libraries is dependent on the higher education institution that they are made to serve. They exist for the parent institutions' "customers" such as students, teachers, researchers, and other staff. Therefore, academic libraries are increasingly concerned with ensuring their contribution to the purpose of the parent institution in supporting and stimulating student learning (Hillman, Blackburn, Shamp, & Nunez, 2017). It is largely agreed that physical space, such as academic libraries, affect students' psychological mindset. Also reflected in learning theories, students have a psychological interaction with the physical environment (Wilson & Cotgrave, 2016). Subsequently, learning behaviour is shaped by the learning environment and vice versa (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Wilson and Cotgrave (2016) discover that access to the academic library is one of the crucial factors affecting students' physical learning environment. Other studies have also evaluated the library facility usage of both students and staff (Hillman et al., 2017; Mangrum, 2019; Montgomery, 2014). Although both quantitative and qualitative studies with a user experience and design approach are increasing (such as Priestner & Borg, 2016; Walton, 2015), the application of the servicescape model in the current context is rather novel.

3.2. Servicescape to understand user experiences and behaviours

The original servicescape model was coined by Booms and Bitner (1981, p. 36), who define servicescape as "the environment in which the service is assembled and in which the seller and customer interact, combined with tangible commodities that facilitate performance or communication of the service". Both exterior (landscape, architecture, parking etc.), interior (design, equipment, furniture, layout) and ambience (temperature, lighting, air quality) conditions are considered. The servicescape affects user experiences and behaviours in multiple ways by hindering or aiding users in accomplishing their activities and enhancing forms of social interaction (Bitner, 1992). An ideal

servicescape enhances user experiences and promotes approach behaviour, while discouraging avoidance behaviour so that users can carry out their plans and purpose (Bitner, 1992; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2013). Approach behaviours such as extended and repeat visits as well as recommendations to others, occur when pleasant feelings are triggered. Avoidance behaviours have evidently the opposite effect. In a study by Mei, Hågensen, and Kristiansen (2020), it was discovered that a servicescape, which triggers hedonic tourism experiences was positively received by the visitors, leading to approach behaviours. Hence, the servicescape also has a great impact on satisfaction with the service provider (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2009).

The model has however received a fair share of criticism as it concentrates more on the physical environment and the control assumed by the service provider, while disregarding the social aspect and the impact of other users (Ardley, Taylor, McLintock, Martin, & Leonard, 2012; Line, Hanks, & Kim, 2018). Subsequently, later studies have integrated user experiences in greater degree as well as the social aspects of consumption experience. Furthermore, the original servicescape model encompasses several elements, which are deemed to be irrelevant and too complicated to implement in practice by practitioners in commercial service sectors (Bitner, 2000). Thus, a more integrated model was proposed by Bitner (2000). The integrated model further discussed in the following section is also regarded as more suitable in the current context as it includes the social environment as an important aspect of the overall user experience.

3.3. Servicescape in academic libraries

Many academic libraries are adopting a service provider approach in the recent years by drawing knowledge from other disciplines such as marketing (Andrews & Eade, 2013; Saunders, 2015). Nevertheless, when considering academic library as a servicescape, it is also important to emphasize the primary purpose of an academic library. Different from commercial servicescapes, where the purchase and consumption of commercial goods and services are the key purpose, one of the main purposes of an academic library is to accommodate the needs of students and their learning process (Andrews, Wright, & Raskin, 2016; Budd, 1998). Although the situation may be different in countries where higher education is associated with expensive tuition fees where students now see themselves very much as "customers", the goal of an academic library is still to provide students with an environment that stimulates learning as part of their academic endeavours (Clemes, Ozanne, & Tram, 2001). Hence, the servicescape of an academic library must promote student learning, rather than approach behaviour alone. Fig. 1 presents an integrated servicescape model applied in the current context.

Ambience in the built environment, like air quality, noise and

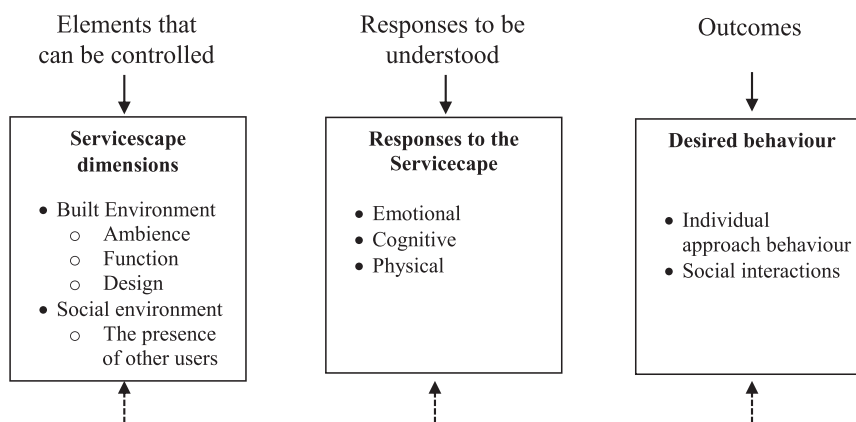


Fig. 1. Author's visual representation of an integrated model of the servicescape. Adapted from Bitner (2000, p. 46)

lighting are elements that can be controlled (Bitner, 2000). This also includes Wi-Fi access and reception, which may be considered as part of electronic library facility. Other aspects in the servicescape that are sought to be understood include users' cognitive, emotional, and physical responses when using the library. Cognition refers to the way the students communicate with the physical environment physical environment, which in turn influences how they experience the library (Bitner, 2000; Kim & Moon, 2009). Emotions simply refer to the various emotional responses experienced. These include joy, happiness or sadness and anxiety. Furthermore, physical responses include physical comfort or discomfort, which are triggered by the servicescape (Bitner, 2000).

With the exception of Lin and Chiu (2012) and Mamahit (2017), the model has received scant attention in the education context (Wells & Daunt, 2016). Lin and Chiu (2012) argue that the visual design and the functionality of the library servicescape have impact on user intent and attitude towards the physical environment. Similarly, Mamahit (2017) provides interesting findings in regards to aspects in the built environment that are deemed as important to users including the interior design and ambient elements. Despite the scant focus, more studies are seeking to investigate user experiences in academic libraries using other theoretical frameworks (Walton, 2015), which share many of the commonalities with the servicescape model. However, more in-depth studies focusing on several elements including user responses and behaviours in addition to experiences are needed.

4. Methodology

A qualitative approach is considered to be the suitable method to explore the nature of the activities taking place (Bryant et al., 2009). Although quantitative approaches are widely used in such a context, they provide little room for further investigation and exploration. In comparison, qualitative approaches can provide richness and depth of the data. Qualitative studies of explorative nature does not seek to quantify the findings as such process would not serve the purpose of the study (Boyatzis, 1998; Green, 2001). Specifically, it was important to gain knowledge of users' experiences, opinions and thoughts (Mehmetoglu, 2004). Ringdal (2013) further explains that this method is suitable when the purpose is to study a certain phenomenon rather than finding conclusive evidence.

4.1. Context of study

The academic library in question is located at one of the campuses of a large university in Norway. Serving a student population of 3500 enrolled at the university's business school, the library sits in the middle of the main campus building, and is approximately 650 square meters in size, with a staff of five. The library facilities from the 1980s have been modernised in terms of lighting and climate conditions, but otherwise quite worn. Other study facilities consist of a few study seating spaces located on the lower floor of the campus building. The campus has one cafeteria, located right across the hallway of the library in the campus building, and it is the only food outlet on campus. The campus itself is situated in the middle of the town centre.

4.2. Method

Data collection was conducted through a bird's eye view floor plan with relevant tasks (see Appendix 1), which was presented to individual respondents. This was followed by semi-structured interviews. It was believed that such a two-step approach would facilitate the respondents in visualising the library facilities and services, and thereby being able to share and elaborate their meanings, opinions, and experiences in the following interview. Similar visualisation of facilities as a methodological approach was used in several studies concerning academic libraries and space usage (Andrews et al., 2016; Andrews & Eade, 2013;

Lin & Chiu, 2012). The floor plan depicts the solid infrastructure such as bookshelves and study spaces including single seating and group seating areas. Respondents were informed that "facilities" referred mainly to "hard" infrastructure as part of the physical environment. Ambience elements were however recorded when raised by the respondents. Any changes in such controlled environment would require a collaboration with a separate unit in the institution, which is in charge of all ambience related elements.

The interview guide was developed based on relevant topics raised in the literature such as the importance of users' points of view and experiences, the learning environment and the integrated servicescape model presented in Fig. 1. These were used to determine key topics to be asked in the semi-structure interviews, including questions regarding the physical dimensions related to behaviours, usage of the library facilities as well as social interactions. Furthermore, information emerged in the floor plan tasks in step one was explored in detail during the interviews. Hence in addition to the interview guide, the floor plan tasks were used as a guide to investigate topics and answers from the respondents further as part of the exploratory approach.

Purposive sampling that was used as the selection process is based on the notion of seeking participants who can provide rich information about issues that are of central importance (Patton, 1990). Inclusion criteria consist of full-time and part-time bachelor's or master students at the business school, frequenting the campus and using the library facilities on a regular basis. Freshmen were excluded as it was necessary to recruit respondents who already had experienced and established opinions about the library. With the assistance of the library staff, the first eight respondents were recruited from a population already known to be frequent library users. A limitation may exist as less frequent users or non-users were not included. This choice was however made due to the exploratory and the purposive sampling approach.

A suitable interview date and time were arranged with those who agreed to participate. After each interview, a snowball sampling method was employed to locate other potential respondents, who also fit the inclusion criteria. The researchers were aware of achieving a gender balance. In total, 12 interviews were completed, which lasted approximately 45 minutes including the floor plan tasks. The respondents were all aged 22 to 32 with a majority being final year bachelor students, while the remaining four were either second year bachelor or master students. The interviews were entirely voluntary and the results anonymous. The respondents could terminate the interviews at any given time. The interviews were recorded on a digital recording device and transcribed shortly after completion of each interviews. The actual interviews and the transcriptions were completed by the same researchers in order to ensure consistency.

4.3. Data analysis

The large amount of rich data had to be organised into various codes, categories and themes based on topics identified from the text. Thematic analysis was employed as the data analysis approach as it is suitable for textual types of data such as in-depth interviews (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002). The nature of the interviews also required a more interpretive approach as it was important to interpret the meaning behind the data. It was vital to make replicable and valid inferences from data to their context as the content goes beyond the data (Finn, Elliott-White, & Walton, 2000). First, the researchers worked independently with coding, dividing the interviews between them. This choice was made to achieve a faster progression. Second, codes were compared and discussed among the researchers to resolve any discrepancies. A continuous dialog was maintained during the coding process to ensure consistencies. The actual coding process involved classifying the text into fewer topics consisting of one or several words (Weber, 1990). This was conducted systematically to become familiar with the material. Based on the appropriate topics, data were then rearranged into various categories (Bramwell &

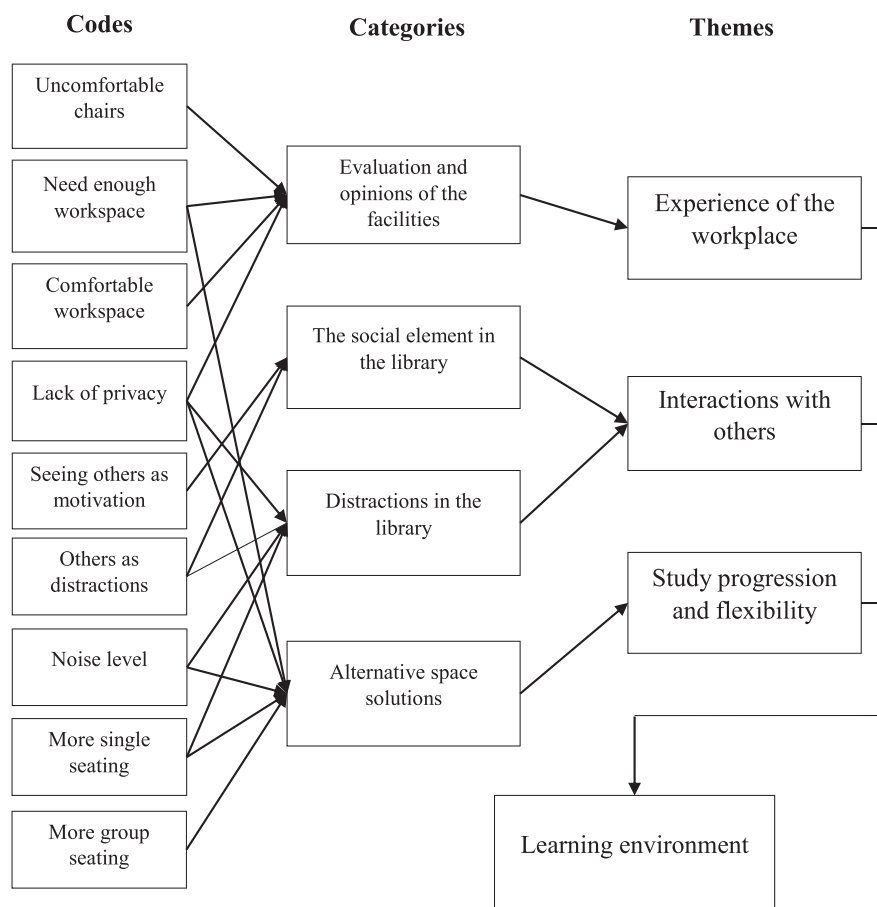


Fig. 2. Codes and coding process.

Sharman, 1999; Medeiros de Arajo & Bramwell, 1999). Moreover, the relationships between the key categories were examined before concrete themes were identified. The process was driven by the overall research aim and objectives, and a combination of deductive and inductive coding was applied (Jennings, 2001). Due to the nature of the data, analysing qualitative data is dependent on the interpretive skills of the researchers. Hence, all researchers participated in the process to ensure that there were no misinterpretations. Since the interviews were carried out in Norwegian, the citations employed in the text were translated by the authors. Some minor differences may exist between the original and translated versions as languages cannot be translated word-for-word to account for linguistic and other cultural differences (Hilton & Skrutkowski, 2002).

Fig. 2 provides an overview of generated codes and categories, which resulted in three main themes. Attention to frequencies of codes was not applied in greater degree as they serve little significance to the research aim and objectives. As illustrated, it was necessary to expand the servicescape model in an academic library context as categories such as distractions and seeking alternative space solutions to study are additional elements that impact students' learning experiences.

5. Findings and discussion

Based on the generated codes from the thematic analysis, an overview of concrete findings in accordance to the servicescape model by Bitner (2000) is illustrated in Fig. 3. Nevertheless, the desired outcome in a library context is not simply approach behaviour alone, but also to understand students' usage and experience of their learning environment. The bracketed number at the end of each quote represents the participant number.

5.1. The library workspace

The workspace may be considered as part of the functional space in the servicescape that triggers certain responses and behaviours (Bitner, 2000). It is evident that a workspace must accommodate the respondents' PC and power sockets, a couple of books, food, and water/coffee. Such need is related to the length of time they spend at the library; hence it is important that the workspace has enough space for essential items that students need when studying. This can be considered as part of their cognitive responses to the servicescape (Bitner, 1992; Kim & Moon, 2009). As explained:

...the option of having your water bottle and pen, and possibly a book on a shelf above you. Also having the desire to work on what you want and at the same time you've got the elbow room. And it's so wonderful to sit there to work because you get things done and then you wanna do more! [12].

The findings echo previous studies as a workspace that cannot accommodate students' needs would simply discourage library usage, leading to certain undesirable avoidance behaviour (Bitner, 1992, 2000; Hillman et al., 2017). Arguably, such a situation impacts the learning process, as access to library is a key contributor to learning (Wilson & Cotgrave, 2016). Moreover, as some respondents may use the library for up to ten hours a day to study, comfortable chairs are also one of the most crucial parts of the workspace (Bailin, 2011; Montgomery, 2014). Negative experiences occur presently with the existing chairs as they are plastic, which tend to be too cold or unpleasantly damp. This is classified as a direct physical response to the servicescape, specifically physical discomfort (Bitner, 1992), which possibly lead to avoidance behaviour.

Servicescape dimensions in academic library context

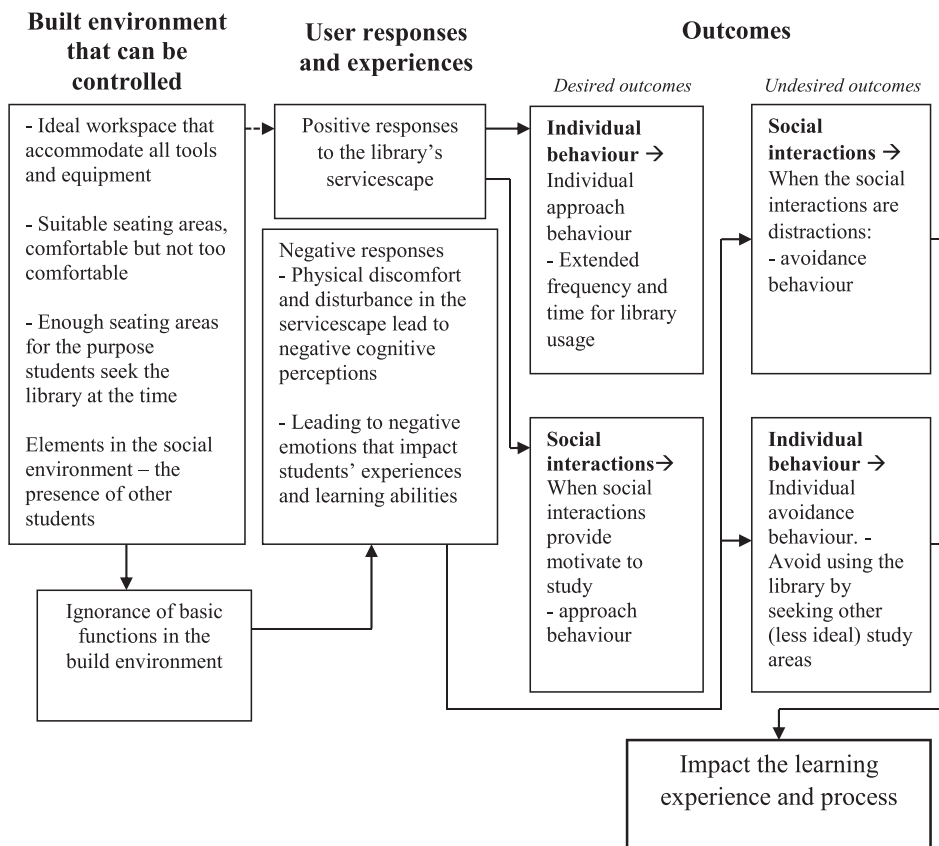


Fig. 3. Findings in accordance with the servicescape model.

If I want to change something like that right away, it would be the chairs. Feel that they're a bit more design focused than comfortable to sit on over time [1].

It should preferably have something at the back when you sit for several hours to work. It's a bit like sitting on a rock, or sitting on a wooden bench, you get a sense of plastics in the buttocks when you get up. And towards the summer, it's not very convenient to come to school in shorts and hope that you won't be stuck in the chair after sitting [there] for a while...I rather sit downstairs (somewhere else than the library)...[11].

Hence, the level of comfort is more important than the captivating appearance of the chairs, which is a finding in direct contrast with Mamahit (2017) but concurs with Bailin (2011). Similarly, Wells and Daunt (2016) argue that comfort is a key element affecting students' experiences of the learning environment. Although such features are strong modifiers of behaviour, they are often overseen, possibly because they are so basic and users' points of view are not usually considered (Göçer, Hua, & Göçer, 2015). As part of the built environment, changing to more comfortable chairs is a concrete solution, which can be controlled. Nevertheless, the chairs cannot be too comfortable either.

... not too comfortable, so that you sit back and can't concentrate as well. I could never have just sat on a couch [4].

... you shouldn't have it as comfortable as when you're at home on the couch, but you should have it as comfortable so that it can generate work, so you'll have the energy to sit there [11].

Some discrepancies are found with other studies, which emphasize academic libraries as a multipurpose adaptable space where students need comfortable chairs such as bean bag chairs and areas to make themselves at home (Hays & Silverman, 2016; Hillman et al., 2017). For

the library in question however, it is evident that the library is used as a place for studying and not socialising. Such findings may also be related to the structure of the library and the proximity to other more preferred social arenas, which are further explored in the following sections.

5.2. Interaction with other users

Social interactions with others and other users' behaviours are aspects that affect experiences of the servicescape (Campos, Mendes, Valle, & Scott, 2018; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). Nevertheless, as discussed, the library in question is not necessarily seen as a meeting place for socialising or social activities.

I never just go to the library to hang... [2].

You could have done it (used the social area in the library) but I haven't had time for it for the last half a year now. We aim to get here at 9 am and leave at 3 pm, so we need to be efficient the time we spend here. If you wanna relax (and socialise) then you go out of the library. I go to the cafeteria or somewhere else to change the environment [4].

People need to do what they come here for, to study. You're not supposed to sit here and be super social. For that you can go to Wahl (local coffee shop) and sit with others who are not students [11].

Although socialising itself may not be sought by the respondents, they express that they appreciate the possibility of seeing other students study (Bailin, 2011), as this encourages them to go into their own modus operandi. While the presence of other users in the servicescape is part of the controlled social environment, such presence triggers certain responses that result in desired social interactions for some.

...when I read, it's very nice that there're things happening around me. I'm just as concentrated when there're a lot of people [here], even more [concentrated] [12].

Thus, seeing other students study triggers positive emotional responses to the servicescape that encourage their own learning process as well as approach behaviour (Bitner, 1992, 2000; Zeithaml et al., 2009). Nevertheless, this is not the case for everyone.

...I'm a person who gets easily distracted so when I sit and look at others, I can become distracted. My eyes are caught by what the others are doing so it can be a little disturbing... [5].

It is stupid when the noise level (from other students) gets so loud... and you choose not to use the library because of that [11].

Respondents further explain that their need to see other students as a motivational factor is also dependent on the situation and the time of the semester. For many respondents, the purpose of using the library is to study and learn (Applegate, 2009; Kuh & Gonyea, 2003). This indicates that physical discomfort caused by disturbances in the servicescape lead to negative cognitive perceptions, which in turn cause negative emotions that impact students' learning experience. In other studies however, academic libraries have been found to function as a meeting place for the social side of studying at higher education institutions (Bryant et al., 2009). Adding to the discussion, Mangrum (2019) and Allison, DeFrain, Hitt, and Tyler (2019) highlight that while socialising may be an important aspect of an academic library, it is not the main purpose. The discrepancies in the findings are possibly caused by the structure of both the library and the parent institution. The proximity of the library in question to the campus cafeteria has certainly an impact as the cafeteria and other social arenas including local cafés, are the preferred places for social activities. Hence, a high level of social interactions is not necessarily applicable to all academic library contexts as it depends on the structure and facilities available.

5.3. Study progression and space flexibility

Another interesting finding is that user experience and satisfaction with the library varies according to the progression of the semester. For instance, areas meant for discussions are needed when working in pairs and single seating areas are sought when studying for individual exams. Negative experiences are expressed when it is difficult to find a space that suits the immediate needs at the time.

Sometimes when we're writing a bachelor's (thesis) it was very full at the library. And that has been one of the reasons why we went down (out of the library) [10].

I haven't used it [single seating], but there were some people sitting there when we did the exam, but we've got a lot of group exams, so we need a group room. There're a lot of people who come during exam period. This is what the problem is [11].

There are different needs in different times of the semester. While negative experiences due to capacity issues were raised by Andrew (2017), there is a lack of discussion of such issue in conjunction with students' study progression. A further investigation discovers some concerns with the fixed single seating spaces, which are currently not ideal.

I'd like to have more single seating spaces, you sit very on top of each other when you sit right next [to other people]. It gets a little intimate... [2].

Yes, and like now, when people come alone, there're some seats you can sit at, but there're not very many [of them] and then you've to either occupy the group tables or you go somewhere else. So, I think more single seating had been good... Maybe it's okay to find a solution in front of the panoramic windows so you can take advantage of the space and not get pinched. So that you end up with sitting

opposite each other and looking at one another. That can be a little daunting [10].

Single seating is considered one of the important features for student learning in an academic library (Andrews et al., 2016). Hence, flexible space arrangement solutions such as partition walls to increase seating spaces and the level of privacy are needed (Andrews et al., 2016).

I think it's really good to have partitions. Then you feel a little more alone than sitting right next door... Sometimes there're a lot of people in the library, and then there's a shortage of seating. If you come in the middle of the day, you don't have many places to sit and especially towards the exam and so. All the group rooms are actually booked and then you've to sit in the cafeteria, and it can be noisy. But you clearly have to sit there if there's no other table available [at the library], although it's not very comfortable to sit there [1].

Similarly, Khoo, Rozaklis, Hall, and Kusunoki (2016) discovered that traditional group study tables are often occupied by only half. Hence, flexible space solutions in accordance with the study progression is necessary (Lillejord et al., 2017). Logically, when the library space is at its capacity, negative experiences lead to students seeking less ideal study areas (Andrew, 2017). Avoidance behaviours are undesirable for any service providers. Another detrimental outcome is a servicescape that impedes students' learning process (Wilson & Cotgrave, 2016), a situation that is damaging for the students, the library and the parent institution.

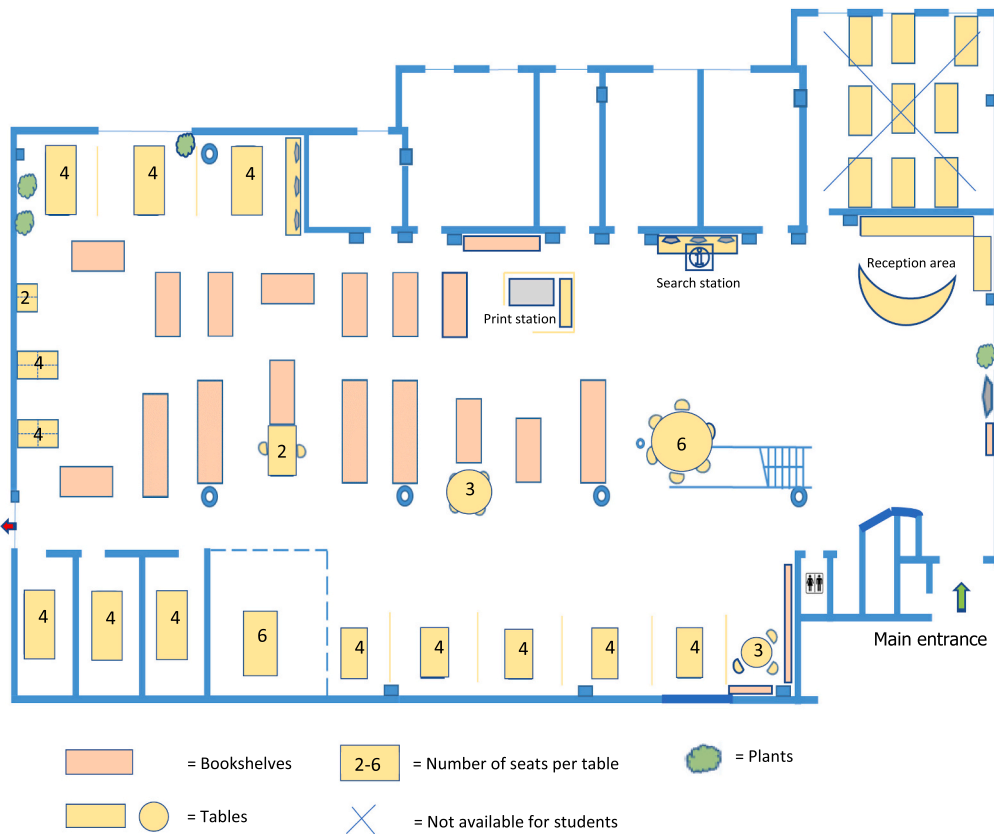
5.4. Limitations

As with any research, some limitations exist within the current study. While the servicescape model is a novel approach to explore the current topic, the virtual and electronic library aspects of the facilities are not greatly integrated at present as the model focuses predominantly on services delivered in the physical environment. Future studies may investigate other approaches to also include such aspects as a part of the overall user experience in line with the current development. Furthermore, more studies are needed to determine whether the findings are applicable to other academic libraries, including the social element, which is possibly influenced by the proximity of the library to other social arenas. It is also necessary to include other types of users as less frequent and non-users may also provide valuable insights. Finally, students' interaction with the library staff should be further investigated as this could affect students' overall learning experiences.

6. Conclusion

It is evident that a well-designed academic library environment enhances user experiences and thereby students' learning process. The servicescape model has provided further value to the body of knowledge as it goes beyond the physical facilities alone by examining certain responses that are triggered by the interplay between the built and social environment. Subsequently, approach behaviour and desired outcomes can be gained by redesigning the facilities to improve the overall servicescape. This includes changing the workspace and the seating arrangements as well as providing flexible space solutions. While not all approach and avoidance behaviour influence learning for everyone as learning certainly occurs outside of the library space, the negative responses triggered by the library facility surely have a strong influence on the overall learning experience. By investigating the topic through the lens of a model adapted from a discipline beyond LIS, further knowledge is gained on how academic libraries can improve the physical environment while remain relevant as an effective learning space for student users.

Appendix 1. Floor plan



Tasks

1. Where do you (the respondent) usually sit in the library (draw and elaborate)?
2. Identify places in the library that you do not use (draw and elaborate).
3. How do you (the respondent) move within the library when you are there (draw)?
4. Describe a perfect place to study with relevant facilities.

Demographic info:

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Study year: _____

Study program: _____

Part-time/Fulltime: _____

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