

Students Experience Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Academic Library Spaces

Mei, X. Y., Aas, E., & Eide, O. (2020). Applying the servicescape model to understand student experiences of a Norwegian academic library. *Library & Information Science Research*, 42(4), Article 101051. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2020.101051>

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Volume 16, numéro 3, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082680ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip29988>

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Éditeur(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

1715-720X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Bussell, H. (2021). Compte rendu de [Students Experience Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Academic Library Spaces / Mei, X. Y., Aas, E., & Eide, O. (2020). Applying the servicescape model to understand student experiences of a Norwegian academic library. *Library & Information Science Research*, 42(4), Article 101051. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2020.101051>]. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 16(3), 149–151. <https://doi.org/10.18438/ebliip29988>

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Evidence Summary

Students Experience Cognitive and Emotional Responses to Academic Library Spaces

A Review of:

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Received: 1 June 2021

Accepted: 12 July 2021

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DOI: 10.18438/ebli29988

Abstract

Objective – To understand how the physical environment of an academic library influences user behaviour.

Design – Qualitative explorative.

Setting – An academic library at a large university in Norway.

Subjects – Twelve bachelor's and master's students at a business school.

Methods – The researchers used a two-step approach, with the servicescape model from the marketing discipline serving as a

theoretical framework. Subjects completed several tasks involving drawing and elaborating on their usage of the library space, utilizing a bird's-eye floor plan. This was followed by semi-structured interviews to explore how subjects use and experience the library facilities.

Main Results – Students found it important to be physically comfortable and to have enough room for the items they need while studying. The library in this study was seen more as a place for studying than for social interactions, and while some subjects reported being motivated by seeing students around them studying, others said they are distracted by having other students in their sightline. The

time of the semester appeared to influence user experience and satisfaction with the library space, with spaces conducive to group work desired at some points in the semester and with single seating preferred when individual exams are taking place.

Conclusion – The library’s physical environment triggers cognitive and emotional responses in users. These responses influence how frequently they visit the library and how well they are able to concentrate while there. Because academic library spaces have an impact on student learning, it is important to design libraries with user comfort in mind. Libraries should accommodate the different ways students work throughout the semester by providing flexible study space configurations.

Commentary

This study uses the servicescape model to understand how academic library spaces influence student learning. Developed in marketing literature and originally focused on customers and employees, servicescape is a framework for understanding how the design of physical spaces influences user behaviours (Bitner, 1992). The model draws a connection between the physical and ambient conditions of a space, the cognitive and emotional responses elicited in users, and overall perceptions of the services received within the space (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2013). Though a great deal of scholarship exists on the role of library spaces and services in student learning, the servicescape model has seen little application in Library and Information Studies. Lin & Chiu (2012) used the photo-elicitation method to understand college students’ preferences regarding different aspects of an academic library’s servicescape. In the current study, the authors extend the application of the servicescape model by exploring not only how academic library spaces influence user behaviour and satisfaction, but also how they impact student learning experiences.

The study was assessed using the CASP Qualitative Checklist (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). The study was particularly strong in its in-depth description of the data analysis process. The authors explained recruitment and data collection procedures clearly, as well as the rationale for employing an exploratory qualitative method. They used visualizations effectively to illustrate the qualitative coding process and to map the findings onto the servicescape model. Though the bird’s eye view floor plan with relevant tasks was included in the appendix, the semi-structured interview guide was not. Information on sample size determination, whether the data collection and analysis activities overlapped chronologically, and whether they reached data saturation were also missing from this article. Despite these minor weaknesses, the detailed description of methods and analysis procedures provides a clear blueprint for anyone who might be interested in conducting a similar study.

This study’s insights into how physical discomfort and distractions cause negative cognitive and emotional responses in students are important considerations for anyone involved with designing library spaces. The research provides evidence for prioritizing comfort and flexibility over aesthetic considerations. By illustrating how the servicescape model can provide insight into student learning experiences, this study demonstrates its usefulness for academic libraries. The authors acknowledge where their findings diverge from previous studies (e.g., attitudes towards the use of library for studying versus socializing) and suggest that similar studies be carried out with other types of users and in academic libraries where there are fewer nearby options for socializing. In addition to these recommendations, it is also important to consider the role cultural differences play in student library usage (Wertman, Campbell, Blummer, & Kenton, 2018). Future studies conducted in other geographical locations as well as other types of libraries could help to determine the wider applicability of this study’s findings.

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