

A STUDY OF HOTEL LOBBY PHYSICAL SERVICESCAPE AND GUEST IMPRESSION TOWARDS HOTEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand the physical servicescape elements of the hotel lobby and guest impression of hotels. Servicescape's role in the service industry is increasingly important and getting attention in hospitality research. A hotel lobby is the place or meeting point between guests and employees upon arrival. However, less attention has been given to the hotel lobby operationally. The physical environment and ambience of the hotel lobby are critical to impress guests and convey the hotel image. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to operationalize the construct of the servicescape for the hotel lobby. This study aims to examine the relationship between hotel lobby servicescape towards guest impression. A quantitative study by distributing questionnaires to hotel guests who experienced the hotel lobby servicescape at the hotel will be employed. Analysis of the data collected by using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be used to test the relationships among variables. In addition, it is hoped that this study will shed new light on the relationship between hotel lobby servicescape and guest impression specifically in the hotel industry.

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Keywords: *Hotel lobby, Servicescape, Physical environment, Atmospheric, Guest impression*

INTRODUCTION

You know your vacation or staycation just started the moment you enter a hotel lobby where hotel lobby attendants will be some of the people that we will meet first. There is nothing better than the unfamiliar welcome of a new hotel, its smell, its sounds, and the smiling staff to start a fantastic weekend. For some people, hotel lobbies aren't that exciting, but for some of us who still believe in the attraction of the hotel lobby, there is a lot to know about what a lobby in a hotel is and all the services and facilities it can offer us.

Generally, a lobby is known as a room in a building used for entry from the outside. It is also referred to as a foyer, reception area or entrance hall. Often, it is a large room or complex of rooms (in a theatre, opera house, concert hall, showroom, cinema, etc.). The hotel lobby is one of the most important rooms or areas in the hotel (with the obvious exception of the guest rooms themselves) as it is the first area guests experience upon arrival at the hotel. In addition, lobbies act as the point of face-to-face communication between guests and hotel employees upon arrival. Besides that, hotel owners have spent significant sums renovating the lobbies (Nanu et al., 2020) up to \$6.85 billion in 2017 (Manley, 2018). Despite being the most important rooms in the hotel, it is highlighted that it led to the first guest impression. It is emphasized that the design of the hotel lobby is very important because of the guest's first impression, it set the stage for guests' stay and it is where people wait and socialize. Hence, it is important to pay attention to the visual elements of the lobby and the atmosphere-forming elements (Triana et al., 2018).

The element of servicescape consists of visual and non-visual (Lin, 2016) whereby the hotel lobby leads to non-visual experiences through the lobby's initial visual appearance (Bloch et al., 2002). Both elements combined to increase the various behavioural impact (Lin & Mattila, 2010) such as work performance and social interaction (Naqshbandi Muzamil & Munir, 2011). Imperatively, functionality is the first and design is the second

attribute of the hotel lobby. For instance, hotel lobbies and public spaces can be designed in such a way that bars and televisions attract like-minded individuals to one area, while quiet and secluded spaces attract couples seeking a quiet cocktail or business travellers looking for a calm place to work (Line & Hanks, 2019). In addition, luxury hotels spend a large amount of money on hotel lobby designs. They give attention to creating a lobby that captivates guests with architecture and design. To add atmospheric value, they add fresh flowers or green plants in the lobby. Viewing nature over metal structure helps remove fatigue and gives a positive effect on health and stress-related illness (Franěk et al., 2018).

Many research focuses on atmospheric and servicescape design of hotel lobby from ambient, spatial layout and functionality, signs, symbols, artefacts (Bitner, 1992), style, lighting, furnishings, colours, space and function, music (Countryman & Jang, 2006; Naqshbandi Muzamil & Munir, 2011) and scent (Leenders et al., 2019; Ramlee & Said, 2014). A hotel lobby will normally be equipped with a seating area with a concierge and a front office counter for guests to check-in / out (refer to Figure 1.1). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the hotel lobby that we once used to know has changed with the new norm and following the SOP given by the government, there is going to be an adjustment to guest's experiences. A hotel lobby is one of the crowded areas in a hotel, but in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, hotels need to create and implement new safety measures as part of new health and safety protocols (refer to Figure 1.2). As seen in the figure, the new norm has brought in the connection between humans and technology that is accessible in a hotel lobby. For instance, the self-check-in service. With the emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industrial Revolution 4.0), which originated from the German government in 2011, there is a need to link humans and technology together (Zhen Zhi et al., 2022). In addition, it is being highlighted that the integration between humans and technology will help the organization to achieve favourable production cost, increased efficiency, productivity and reduction in human stress and workload (Hossein Ghasempourabadi & Taraz, 2021). Besides the technology thingy in the hotel, it is also crucial for all frontliners to strictly adhere to the SOP to stop the further spread of the virus and to ensure safety and hygiene are being practised in the hotel.

This is very important to get back the trust of future hotel guest.

Remember, the travel industry has been battered beyond recognition and cannot withstand another major impact any time soon. For instance, MGM Resorts International have developed a Seven-Point Safety Plan and will place custom-built hand-washing stations with soap and water along with hand-sanitizing stations (Simon, 2020). The Seven-Point Safety Plan consists of (i) Employee preparedness and wellness, (ii) Digital Innovations and Technology, (iii) Convene with confidence: Meetings & Conventions, (iv) Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), (v) Handwashing, cleaning & sanitization, (vi) Enhance air quality and (vii) Response management. With that, however, there is still limited research into understanding whether the hotel lobby has an impact on the guest impression in the hotel setting, specifically in the Malaysian context. Thus, the study aims to look at the hotel lobby servicescape toward guest impression. This study intends to answer the following objectives: i. to examine a relationship between hotel lobby servicescape and guest impression, ii. to determine the most influential hotel lobby servicescape towards guest impression.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to the theoretical and practical in the related areas. For the theoretical significance, this study will add to the literature on the subject area namely hotel lobby servicescape and guest impression. There will be more information on this area to be referred by the scholars. For practical significance, the study will benefit the industry as the management of the hotel could see the importance of the hotel lobby to ignite guest impression. Generally, hoteliers knew that a hotel lobby is being treated as a normal and must-have area in the hotel. Hence, this study aims to understand factors affecting the guest impression of hotel lobby atmospherics thus giving guests an overview of hotel total services. This study could help provide information that affects various design elements that have qualities that make lobbies become attractive and impress the guests. As mentioned earlier, most luxury hotels spend lots of money on their physical servicescape, especially in the hotel lobby. Hence, insight information for the management of the hotel will be discussed.



Figure 1 1. Hotel Lobby Before Pandemic at the Double Tree by Hilton Kuala Lumpur

Source: travelweekly.com



Figure 1 2. Hotel Lobby during the Pandemic at the Double Tree by Hilton Kuala Lumpur

Source: ummigoeswhere.com

CONCEPTUAL STUDY

There are four types of conceptual papers in research. It consists of Theory Synthesis, Theory Adaptation, Typology, and Model (Jaakkola, 2020). For this study, Model type is the chosen method as the study is not yet conducted. A model paper identifies previously unexplored connections between constructs introduces new constructs or explains why elements of a process lead to a particular outcome.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There are numerous studies focusing on servicescape towards customer behaviour. Nevertheless, little research has investigated the servicescape of a hotel lobby which is the main resource of the hotel. It is being emphasized that hotels invest a sum of money in their hotel lobby to welcome the hotel customer. Considering the post-pandemic and the comeback of the tourism industry, the hotel industry should enhance the quality of their hotel lobby to make a positive first impression of the hotel among the customers. As a hotel lobby is the first intersection that hotel customers will experience before checking in, the impact of the servicescape is very important. In addition, the hotel lobbies are the heart of every hotel and thus, significantly shape the often lasting impression on the guest. Hence, scholars need to investigate how the hotel lobby servicescape influences customer's impressions. The study will provide some input to the management of hotels on the importance of a hotel lobby and the servicescape towards the hotel customer impression. The management should also consider frequent enhancement of the hotel lobby to get the best impression from the hotel customers. To accomplish this, this study will examine how the elements of the hotel lobby servicescape of luxury hotels in Malaysia influence customer impressions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hotel Lobby Servicescape

Servicescape can be defined as the physical environment in which a service can take place (Bitner, 1992). The ability of the physical environment to influence behaviour and create an image is particularly apparent for service businesses such as hotels, restaurants, professional offices, banks, retail stores, and hospitals (Bitner, 1992).

One of the physical environments in the hotel is the hotel lobby. A hotel lobby is an initial point where the communication between a service provider and guest happens, thus a positive first impression is crucial to guests as it impacts guests' confidence and hope of the brand and their services. Engagement between servicescape and hospitality will enhance

guestsatisfaction (Ariffin et al., 2013). Guests of higher-priced luxury hotels tend to be more engaged and satisfied when the hotel atmosphere matches guests' expectations (Choi & Kandampully, 2019). There are three elements which consist of the physical environment, atmospheric, and flower arrangement that will create guests' impressions.

Figure 1.3 illustrate the hotel lobby floor plans for the hotel. The hotel lobby consists of reception, seating area, women's and men's restroom, luggage storage and other areas (in this floor plan is a fine jewellery boutique). Other areas of the hotel lobby could be a coffee house or a small business centre (depending on the hotel). Among the basic things that a hotel lobby should have been a desk for check-ins and customer service, a seating area, a water station, and clear signage. Besides the traditional elements of the hotel lobby, such as a reception desk, waiting area and a concierge stand, the hotel needs to provide a gathering place where hotel guests can relax and enjoy themselves. In addition, the place should be a multifunctional place that is inviting and guest-oriented.

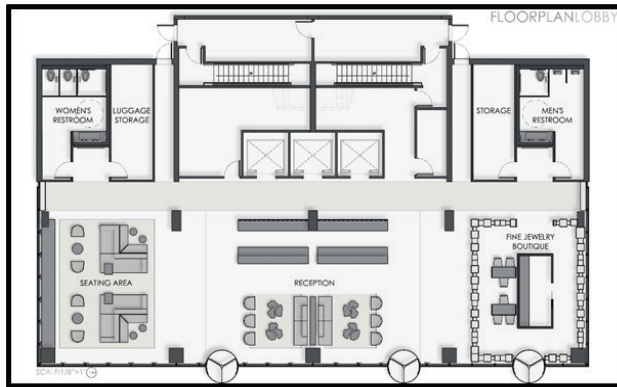


Figure 1.3. Hotel Lobby Layout Floor Plans (Normal)

Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/33073378496703408/>

Table 1.1 highlights the different criteria of normal hotel lobby (before the pandemic) and hotel lobby during the pandemic.

Table 1.1. The different Criteria for Hotel Lobby

Normal hotel lobby	Hotel lobby during the pandemic
Hotel employees are ready to provide information to guests (face to face)	Provide clear and hospitable guidelines (provide written / online message / digital signage) a. Pre-arrival messaging b. Clear signage
Face-to-face check-ins and check-out process	Contactless check-ins and check outs process
Guests queue at the reception	Connect with guests – social distancing (6 feet of separation and wearing a mask) (Refer Figure 1.4 and 1.5)
Keep it clean	Keep it clean a. Hand sanitiser available everywhere (front door, front desk, elevators, etc

Source: Author



Figure 1.4. The Signage on Wearing Masks

Source: <https://webrezpro.com/>

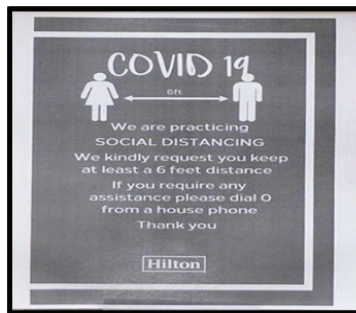


Figure 1.5. The Signage on Social Distancing

Source: <https://webrezpro.com/>

Physical Environment

The physical layout is the flow or circulation space, arrangement of furniture and facility. Usually, a hotel lobby needs to be designed in circulation space to look wide and spacious. Front desks need to be immediately visible to guests once they enter the hotel lobby and a short distance from the front desk to the elevators (Ariffin et al., 2013). The furnishing and high ceiling are associated with spaciousness, spatial movement, and cosiness (Lin, 2004).

In designing a hotel lobby, the physical layout and ambience are important as they will impress guests and convey the brand. For physical layout, hotel managers and designers need to carefully design the layout of the lobby. The physical layout should be designed to minimise crowding and hence create favourable impressions among guests (Ariffin et al., 2013). A lobby is a place where the circulation and waiting area of guests happen from entering and leaving the building or transfer to the hotel public area. Some consideration can be put in designing front desk or sitting furniture. Some hotels design their front desks nudged into lobby corners while others become the lobby's focal point (Vallen & Vallen, 2009).

The seats provided in the lobby must provide a cozy and private waiting experience for guests. According to Vallen and Vallen (2009), women travellers prefer a lobby bar over a lounge bar thus hotels have enlarged their offerings with food and beverage service, afternoon tea and continental breakfast. Thus, the service makes guests spend more time in the lobby and increase hotel profit. Furthermore, the hotel lobby has become a popular place for guests to make meeting appointments. An inviting lobby is the first means of capturing the sale.

Atmospheric

Atmospheric stimuli from spatial layout, colour, scent, lighting, and music affected human behaviours through emotion, impression, and satisfaction (Ramlee & Said, 2014). Lighting effects change the atmosphere (Fox, 1963) thus the ambience of the hotel lobby does not only affect guests, but it does also influence the service provider.

Hospitality goods and services are inseparable. Guests can only consume the good or service in the place or location where it is being produced. Staff are therefore part of the production of the experience that the customer receives. This means that the quality of service must be optimised and the delivery of the product to the customer must conform to the brand standards of the company to maximise customer satisfaction. As all customers will be part of the production process it is in the interest of the hospitality enterprise to ensure that the atmosphere and ambience of the business are maximised (Hassanien, Clarke, & Dale, 2011).

Fresh Flower Arrangement

The design and decoration of the physical environment that touches the hotel lobby vary for every lobby. The flower arrangement that is placed as the centrepiece of the lobby area is designed to match the ambience and create uniqueness in each lobby. The design development is considered to meet the demands of guests as their expectations become higher day by day.

Flower arrangements are used in decorating areas. Flower arrangements displayed in hotel lobbies are very big and unique. Flower arrangements offer a great variety in design and imagination to achieve harmony of colour, and texture. The arrangement should lend cheerfulness, character, and beauty to the lobby ambience. The use of natural-looking artificial plants needs to combine with fresh flowers to give an elegant look because it is cheaper and easier to move around to suit the occasion (Fox, 1963).

Hawaiian cut flower target market is luxury hotels because their demand is for exotic varieties and high-quality flowers for flower arrangement (Shehata, 1996). Flowers add a snug and refinement to hotels, homes and almost any place. For hotels, it attracts the guests more. Flowers symbolise a warmth, love, and affection welcome to the guests. Flower arrangement is the art of blending different flowers with different colours, kinds, and sizes to achieve another dimension of beauty. The arrangement should blend with the décor and design of the lobby to enhance the surroundings, adding positive vibes and ambience in hotels. The natural scents of flowers entice the guests and hotel staff, making the clients stay longer and staff work harder.

Guest Impression

It is highlighted that integrating appropriate design criteria into the hotel lobby is very important. This is because the hotel lobby is where a guest gets their first impression of a hotel's brand image and quality (Huang & Tsaih, 2021). When hotel guests are impressed with the hotel lobby, they will normally be satisfied at the first sight before they experience the services and facilities in the hotel. Guest satisfaction varied because of preferences, behaviour, and personality. This is what creates uniqueness in an individual. The guest's impressions of the physical environment may influence a guest decision to enter the business premise, either they prefer or avoid the hotel (Fidzani & Caughey, 2014). Guests are sensitive to the aesthetic qualities because decoration arouses them, thus good decorating will lead to good business (Fox, 1963).

The focus of service delivery and how it is received is based on the customer's first impressions. These are often described as moments of truth where emotional work management takes place to ensure the guest receives a quality product and the highest level of service. A product's position involves the complex set of perceptions, impressions, and feelings that consumers hold for the product compared with competing products (Hassanien, Clarke, & Dale, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

It is highlighted that a conceptual framework can be defined as a network or a plane of linked concepts where the analysis will offer a procedure of theorization for building conceptual frameworks based on the grounded theory method. There are some advantages of a conceptual framework such as the analysis is flexible, it gives space for modification, and it is focused more on understanding rather than prediction (Jabareen, 2009).

For this study, hotel lobby servicescape which consists of physical layout, atmospheric and fresh flower arrangement is classified as the independent variable (IV) whereby guest impression is categorised as a dependent variable (DV) respectively. Figure 1.6 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework for the study. The framework shows a direct

relationship between the element of hotel lobby servicescape and guest impression. There is evidence exists that a hotel servicescape (hotelscape) plays an important role in consumers' service evaluation and behaviours (Bitner, 1992; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). The guest impression is one of the behaviours that will occur from the hotel lobby servicescape which for this study consists of physical layout, atmospheric and fresh flower arrangement. There is a study which highlighted atmosphere influences the guest future engagement with the hotel (Choi & Kandampully, 2019). For the service firms including hotels to gain customer engagement and impression, they must invest heavily in providing a great atmosphere.

More recently, it was found that there is a direct positive relationship between hotel servicescape and guests' future behavioural intentions (Lin, 2022). A closer look at the review shows that servicescape as an independent variable plays many different roles. For instance, they act as the packaging of goods which can affect people's emotions, evaluations, and behaviours (Bitner, 1992). Atmosphere of the hotel lobby will affect guests' behaviour. It is further suggested that the guest experience can be enhanced by creating a good environment and atmosphere (Choi & Kandampully, 2019). Hence, it is very important to provide interesting things such as fresh flowers. From my search of the literature, it is clear that guest's first impression will lead to the intention of the guest to return to the hotel (Isroilova, 2022).

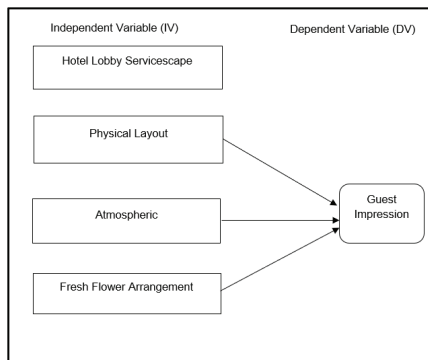


Figure 1. 6. Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: Author

METHODOLOGY

The study is categorized as basic research as the aim is to answer questions about how hotel lobby servicescape can affect guest impression of the hotel. This research is driven by curiosity and the desire to expand knowledge of physical servicescape towards guest psychology that is guest impression.

In addition, the study will be quantitative research. The method will focus on obtaining data through a set of questionnaires. With regards to the condition of the Online survey will be the chosen method to distribute the questionnaire to the respondent. The survey will be distributed through social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Besides that, a survey will also be distributed through appropriate WhatsApp and Telegram groups. The target population of this research are hotel guests that have experienced the hotel lobby of luxury hotels in Malaysia for the last 6 months to 1 year. Eligible respondents should be 18 years and above and reside in Malaysia.

This study will use Roscoe for the sample size as it is appropriate for most behavioural studies (Putri, 2012). According to the Roscoe 'rule of thumb', a sample size greater than 30 and less than 500 is suitable for most behavioural studies (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). It is mentioned that a sample size of 100 is considered small, between 100 and 200 is considered medium, and more than 200 is considered large (Hulland et al., 1996). Hence, this study will collect 200 to 300 samples. In general, the choice of sample size is a function of budgetary considerations as well as statistical considerations. When they can afford it, large samples are usually preferred to smaller ones (Putri, 2012).

In addition, the study will use SPSS to analyse the descriptive results of the study such as the reliability and the demographic analysis. This study will adapt CBSEM which the software AMOS for the relationship, the study will involve a large sample (at least 200). Hence, CBSEM is the best analysis and AMOS will be the suitable software for this study.

CONCLUSION

It is well known that the hotel lobby is the heart of the hotel and often has more than one function. The area is crucial as it creates a first impression for hotel guests that normally affect their visuals and emotions. This is because some hotel lobbies become homes to frequent travellers or hotel guests. The hotel lobby has entered a new era. Hotels don't just think about aesthetically pleasing design in their hotel lobby, they look for function. Today's, hotel guests are looking for a warm, comfortable place that can easily meet a variety of needs. Whether they are a professional looking for a place to connect, or a family that needs a space to sit, guests expect a place that suits them. Most lobbies today are multifunctional, offering a range of services and uses, such as checking in or out, meet and greet, social hangout, waiting area, and information hub. In addition, it also keeps people's memories in collective enjoyment and relaxation. With the importance of the lobby to the hotel operation, it is worth mentioning that there is a need of the study.

This study intends to examine the relationship between hotel lobby servicescape and guest impression of hotels in Malaysia. A hotel lobby is an important venue in the hotel as a guest will gain the first experience and meet other guests and hotel employees as well. The study hopes to help the hotel upgrade their servicescape design according to standards design and guests current demand. The best hotel lobby is the one that can provide services that are acquired by the guest but also services that they want. Hoteliers invest a lot of money in the overall image of a hotel, especially in the hotel lobby as it forms the basis of the first impression. To increase the guest impression, a hotel would want to consider providing extra services and "freebies" to the hotel guest. For instance, refreshment drinks or welcoming drinks for hotel guests.

In the future, the study might want to look at the impact of hotel servicescape and value co-create behaviour towards guest impression towards the hotel. It is being highlighted that co-creation consists of three imperious aspects which include customer, firm and the interaction between the customer and the firm (Sharma, 2021).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the design of the conceptual paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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