

# **An exploration of the effect of servicescape on student institution choice in UK universities**

## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years there has been increased discussion of the subjective, emotional and sociological factors influencing student choice of university. However there is a dearth of information exploring what constitutes these feelings. This exploratory paper uses the conceptual model of the servicescape to provide insight into the emotional factors driving student choice.

In-depth interviews with prospective students revealed first impressions really do count. Students are deterred by poor physical environments and excited by enthusiastic staff and students. Most significantly the study revealed the necessity of a restorative servicescape to provide both a sense of escape and feeling of belonging.

This paper contributes to broadening the application of the servicescape model, to a greater understanding of the impact of the environment on prospective students, and creates an opportunity to inform policy by providing university marketing decision makers with a better understanding of what constitutes the university environment and what makes it appealing to prospective students.

Keywords: Servicescape; student choice; higher education marketing; university selection; university facilities

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the 2012 introduction of increased fees and the stagnation of graduate employment, UK Higher Education has become an increasingly competitive environment; universities vie to attract prospective students and choice of university has become a more complex decision making process. This has led to the marketisation of HE (Gibbs, 2001) and as a natural consequence, the desire to better understand student choice of university.

As with any consumption behaviour, university choice is driven by both rational and emotional factors (Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp, 2010). Rational influences include career prospects (Maringe, 2006) and distance from home (Briggs, 2006). Emotional factors are those which are more subjective or sociologically grounded; they are driven by whether or not the institution has a good 'atmosphere' (Pampaloni, 2010).

Whilst there has been increased discussion of their presence, there is a dearth of information to explore what constitutes these subjective feelings. Obermeit (2012) suggests the quantitative nature of many studies means there is insufficient qualitative information to explain variables; asking large samples of students whether atmosphere *is* important does not explain why it is important

or indeed, what it is. This should concern university marketing decision makers; if reasons driving student choice are not fully understood, universities cannot expect to market and differentiate themselves successfully.

The provision of education is a service. Within their extensive examination of services marketing literature, Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry (1985) identify four key characteristics of services: intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity and perishability. These four characteristics are all present within education: education is inherently intangible; product and consumption – teaching and learning – are simultaneous; the provision of education varies greatly between institutions; and education cannot be stored. Indeed, in recent years HE has been widely acknowledged as being within the service industry and therefore managed as a service sector business (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). That said, HE is a complex service and there are “differences in context between HE institutions and other service organisations” (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006, p. 8): the variety of HE offerings and the increasing number of institutions makes comparisons difficult; consumer decision making is highly involved and complex; and purchase is very infrequent. However as Mazzarol (1998, p. 164) says: “education remains a service capable of treatment as any other in terms of marketing theory”

Taking this argument further, when considering education as a service, students can be considered as co-producers of that service – student participation and involvement within their own learning experience is a critical success factor. For this reason, academics posit HE is an experience-centric service (Jarvis, 2000; Petruzzellis, D'Uggento, & Romanazzi, 2006). Here, the customer experience – ‘experience’ being some level of interaction between the customer and the service provision – is at the heart of the service offering and is deliberately created to provide a service distinguishable from competitor’s offerings (Voss, Roth, & Chase, 2008). The premise of experiential marketing is that it facilitates subjective or emotional decision making. Functional values are replaced by customer experiences (Schmitt, 1999) and the environment in which these values are delivered is central to the customer’s perception of the experience (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). With this in mind it is unsurprising that within the HE environment, the Open Day – which deliberately offers the opportunity to sample the service environment and experience – is cited as a key factor in student decision making (Briggs, 2006; Connor, Burton, Pearson, Pollard, & Regan, 1999; Pampaloni, 2010; Veloutsou, Paton, & Lewis, 2005)

Whilst it is agreed that the open day *is* a key factor in decision making, little is known about *how* it influences prospective students. It is therefore suggested that alongside other marketing tools and techniques that have been applied to HE as a service organisation, a closer look at the service environment itself – the servicescape – is now required.

This study uses the conceptual model of servicescape to provide an insight into the emotional factors driving student choice of university. This will result in a greater understanding of how the service environment impacts prospective students and furthermore, it will facilitate further comprehension of the subjective decisions underpinning choice of university.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The concept of Servicescape*

The impact of the service environment on consumers has long been acknowledged; drawing on environmental psychology studies, Kotler (1973) explored the concept of 'atmospherics' within a retail setting. However it was Booms and Bitner (1981) who first put forward the term 'servicescape' to refer to the physical environment in which a service is delivered. Bitner (1992) drew on the extant literature at the time to present a conceptual model which outlined the servicescape as being defined by three distinct physical areas – i) ambient conditions - elements which are normally subconscious, such as temperature, lighting, background noise, music and scent; ii) spatial layout and functionality - the size, style and arrangement of the furniture and equipment and the degree to which it facilitates both production and consumption; and iii) signs, symbols and artefacts - the explicit and implicit signs communicating instructions, directions or image. More than twenty years later, these distinctions are still perceived to be relevant and an accurate reflection of a physical service environment (Mari & Poggesi, 2013).

Although most frequently been applied to retail settings, the concept of physical servicescape is equally applicable in a non-retail setting (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011); indeed Bitner (1992, p. 57) acknowledges previous studies that consider the impact the physical environment has on behaviour within 'hotels, restaurants, professional offices, banks, retail stores and hospitals'. It is therefore felt the educational environment is equally applicable, especially given the growing interest in student centred learning is leading a number of HE institutions to consider a more deliberate design of their environments to promote better teaching, learning and interaction (Radcliffe, Wilson, Powell, & Tibbetts, 2008).

Bitner's servicescape model has been reviewed and developed only by a handful of authors (Mari & Poggesi, 2013) who, almost without exception, point to considering the impact of social or human factors alongside the physical service environment (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999; Bonnin, 2006; Esbjerg & Bech-Larsen, 2009; Harris & Ezeh, 2008; Rosenbaum & Massiah, An expanded servicescape perspective, 2011; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2003). The social dimension of servicescape therefore encompasses the presence of, and interaction between, 'staff' and 'customers'.

Developing the concept of social servicescape further, Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) posit the existence of two additional socially directed dimensions: the socially symbolic dimension and the natural or restorative dimension.

The socially symbolic dimension refers to signs, symbols and artefacts purposefully employed to appeal to 'groups of customers with a unique ethnic, sub-cultural, or marginalized societal status' (Rosenbaum & Massiah, An

expanded servicescape perspective, 2011, p. 478). As the vast majority of HE environments are committed to equality and diversity, overt social symbolism is unlikely to be applicable to the university servicescape. However a broader view of social symbolism could be the way in which a service environment is generally crafted to appeal to certain groups of people.

The natural or restorative dimension has three stimuli: i) being away- a sense of escape from 'day after day concerns'; ii) fascination - the ability to effortlessly hold somebody's attention; and iii) compatibility – the ability to create a feeling of belonging.

### ***Implications of the Servicescape concept***

The concept of servicescape is underpinned by Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model which explains the mechanism of how individuals respond to environmental stimuli. Bitner (1992) suggested consumers will have a cognitive, emotional and/or physiological response to the service environment and that the degree of cognitive/emotional/physiological response will determine the individual's ultimate behaviour - either approach or avoidance.

Whilst there is criticism of the simplicity and linear representation of the S-O-R model itself (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Jacoby, 2002; Mari & Poggese, 2013) it does reflect at some level that consumer behaviour *is* influenced by the holistic environment of the consumption setting. If it is agreed that HE is an experience-centric service, then it should follow that the environment where that service is provided – the institution itself - should be deliberately crafted to encourage emotional decision making. Developing this argument further, the concept of servicescape integrating S-O-R where emotional responses are known to determine behaviour, becomes highly relevant to the learning environment; in fact, Mehrabian & Russell (1974) themselves suggest the application of S-O-R to education. Despite this, there does not appear to be any research that explores the conceptual application of servicescape in an educational context.

Consumer decision making, and university choice is no exception, is driven by both rational and emotional factors (Angulo, Pergelova, & Rialp, 2010). Rational influences are those which are considered to be more objective and where information can be sought to support the decision making; within the realm of university choice this includes career prospects (Maringe, 2006) and the distance away from home (Briggs, 2006). Emotional factors are those which are more subjective or personally felt and supporting information is not available; they include, for example, the student's 'own perception' (Briggs, 2006) as to whether the institution 'feels right' (Allen, 2002).

In reviewing the extant literature on student choice there are two clear areas that are underpinned by the concept of servicescape – the influence of the physical environment and the emotional drivers behind student decision making. In terms of how the physical environment influences student decision making, the consensus is 'place', 'facilities' and 'campus' are determinants of

student choice of institution (Angulo et al, 2010; Ivy, 2008; Maringe, 2006; Mehboob, Shah, & Bhutto, 2012; Veloutsou et al, 2004). However there is little in the way of exploration with regards to *why, how or which elements* of campus, facilities or place is important.

There is a similar void in the investigation of emotional drivers behind student decision making: Allen (2002) presents a framework explaining how rational choice for postsecondary education is driven by the sense that the institution 'feels right'; Diamond, Vorley, Roberts, and Jones (2012) suggest the 'feel' of a university is key; Moogan, Baron & Bainbridge (2001) found that 'atmosphere' experienced at open day influenced UK student decision making, as did Pampaloni (2010), who highlights 'atmosphere' as the ultimate reason for application for almost 60% of US students. Similarly Briggs (2006) cites 'own perception' amongst the top ten factors for Scottish university choice. Whilst they all acknowledge that the feel of a university *is* a key determinant for prospective students, nobody elaborates on what is actually meant by atmosphere. It is known, however, that within the concept of servicescape, the intention is to use the physical setting to *create* an atmosphere which will influence behaviour (Bitner, 1992)

And so the argument returns full circle and together, these two literature gaps provide credence to exploring drivers of student choice using the servicescape model. To address these gaps, this study explores the effects of the holistic university servicescape and uses it to provide an insight into the emotional factors driving student choice. Specifically the study seeks to explore:

- 1) The relative importance of the servicescape dimensions
- 2) The emotional and cognitive responses triggered by the dimensions of servicescape
- 3) How the servicescape impacts upon approach/avoidance decisions and ultimately student choice of institution?

Given its status as the most recently acknowledged holistic view of the servicescape, Rosenbaum & Massiah's four dimensional servicescape framework – physical, social, socially symbolic, natural – is used as both a structural guide for data gathering and analysis.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Methodologies for previous studies on student choice have been largely quantitative in nature (Obermeit, 2012, p. 217), providing respondents with 'a limited number of response options' and therefore there is a need for exploratory, qualitative work to explore the factors behind student choice. Although the nature of this research project considers external objects – the constructed physical and social environment – it is the way in which these are interpreted or perceived that is of relevance. Therefore this study follows a phenomenological philosophy and takes an inductive approach to understand the significance of the university servicescape and its impact on resultant behaviours.

### **Data collection**

Qualitative data was gathered through semi structured interviews which aimed to create a picture of the respondents' true feelings (Chisnall, 1992), thereby providing a deeper understanding of the impression left by the university servicescape. Semi structured interviews were chosen as the standardisation of some questions increases the reliability of data collection, and yet the format still provides a degree of spontaneity by allowing the interviewer to probe and explore responses (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

As it was equally important to speak with students for whom the servicescape triggered avoidance behaviours and as those for whom it triggered approach behaviours, prospective students attending university open days (rather than existing students) were the population for this research. Telephone interviews were undertaken with a sample of 24 participants considering business related courses. Participant details are outlined in Table 1. Participants were recruited from the open day guest lists from two UK south coast universities although in order to ensure validity of the data gathered, the interviews explored participants' reflections and experiences at all open days they had attended, not just the open day where they were recruited. The sample size was considered appropriate for an exploratory study and exceeds those previously used within qualitative studies researching student choice (Obermeit, 2012), such as Baker and Brown (2007) – 13 participants; Brown et al (2009) – 22 students; and Moogan et al (1999) – 19 students. Data saturation, the point at which no new information is uncovered (Mason, 2010), was reached after 18 interviews and therefore the sample size is robust and offers indicative results that are representative (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Table 1 – Participant sample details

| Participant | Gender | Number of Open Days attended |
|-------------|--------|------------------------------|
| 1           | M      | 3                            |
| 2           | M      | 3                            |
| 3           | M      | 7                            |
| 4           | F      | 9                            |
| 5           | F      | 5                            |
| 6           | M      | 3                            |
| 7           | M      | 6                            |
| 8           | M      | 6                            |
| 9           | M      | 2                            |
| 10          | M      | 3                            |
| 11          | F      | 3                            |
| 12          | M      | 6                            |
| 13          | M      | 6                            |
| 14          | M      | 5                            |
| 15          | M      | 1                            |
| 16          | M      | 1                            |
| 17          | F      | 5                            |
| 18          | M      | 6                            |
| 19          | F      | 3                            |

|    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 20 | F | 6 |
| 21 | M | 3 |
| 22 | F | 3 |
| 23 | M | 5 |
| 24 | F | 4 |

To ensure the experience and resulting perceptions were fresh in their minds', telephone interviews were conducted with participants within a week of their attendance at the Open Day. The duration of the telephone interviews was, on average, 37 minutes.

The particular topics explored during the interview were as follows:

- How it was decided which open days to attend and what were the expectations of the university servicescape based on material viewed prior to visit
- What were the impressions of the servicescape experienced at open day and what were the thoughts and feelings it created
- What were the key reactions to servicescape experience and how the servicescape influences ultimate decision making

Notes were made during the interviews and the telephone calls themselves were audio recorded. Data gathered was then subjected to thematic analysis to look for commonalities in responses or trends through coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) using Rosenbaum and Massiah's (2011) servicescape framework as a structural guide. Specifically, responses were analysed for reference to servicescape stimuli as outlined in Table 2, and resultant cognitive, emotional or physiological responses to these stimuli along with evidence of ultimate approach/avoidance behaviour. A sample of coding was cross checked by an independent researcher to ensure consistency.

Table 2 – Servicescape stimuli

|                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| Physical servicescape | Ambient conditions:<br><i>Temperature</i><br><i>Air quality</i><br><i>Noise</i><br><i>Music</i><br><i>Odour</i><br>Space and layout:<br><i>Furniture and its layout</i><br><i>Equipment</i><br><i>Furnishings</i><br>Signs, symbols and artefacts:<br><i>Signage</i><br><i>Artefacts</i><br><i>Interior and exterior decor</i><br><i>Interior decor</i> |
| Social servicescape   | Staff<br>Other students<br>Social density   |

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
|                                | Displayed emotions of others  |
| Socially symbolic servicescape | Ethic signs and symbols<br>Ethnic objects/artefacts   |
| Natural servicescape           | Being away:<br><i>Sense of escape</i><br><i>Natural settings eg grassy areas, seaside, parks, botanical gardens</i><br>Fascination:<br><i>Ability to engage or hold one's attention</i><br>Compatibility:<br><i>Free from constraint</i><br><i>Sense of belonging</i> |

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with much of the extant literature on student choice (Allen, 2002; Briggs, 2006; Pampaloni, 2010), a number of respondents made comment that a specific university 'just feels right'. However the use of probing in interviews and the mapping of comments to the conceptual framework of the servicescape during analysis, uncovered key factors contributing to this state.

### ***The servicescape as a driver for shortlisting universities***

Amongst all participants there was acknowledgement that university selection is a multilayered process that begins with compiling a shortlist of universities to visit, and ends with reflection on the different institutions and a comparison of the overall offerings.

Students have an idea of what they think university is like based on little more than expectations and anecdotal evidence from friends or family. Expectations seemed to be related to the size of the institution – 'it's just sixth form college but a bit bigger' – and anecdotal evidence was generally directed at the location rather than the university itself – 'my mum said it was the second roughest city in the UK'. Whether their preconceptions are valid or not is, at this juncture, slightly irrelevant. If there were sufficient negative preconceptions, the university didn't make it on to the shortlist.

Alongside individual perspectives on geographical location and personal recommendation from either friends or family, the university website and prospectus form a key part of the evaluation process by shaping initial impressions of an institution. This links to findings by Connor et al (1999) Diamond et al (2012) and Moogan et al (2001) who all cite the prospectus as a key tool facilitating decision making. More specifically, over half the participants stated the photographic and written portrayal of the physical servicescape within the university website or prospectus played a part in their shortlisting.

Whilst they make good use of website and prospectus material, students readily accept that the images portrayed are ones which illustrate the best facets of the

university. Some participants were more cynical in their appraisal of images, stating that photographs do not necessarily convey the reality:

Pictures on a website or in a prospectus can be a bit misleading... you can't get a sense of scale from website pictures.

You don't put a picture on that shows your flaws... the pictures make you look as attractive as you can.

One participant talked eloquently of 'websites giving false impressions', and he therefore 'stopped looking at websites other than for course content', and was focused on 'getting the feel of the place on open days.'

That said, both the website and prospectus can be powerful image creating tools for universities and through description and photographic images, they portray an image of the physical, social and natural dimensions of servicescape. All participants reviewed either one or both of these in preparation for an open day visit and in the vast majority of cases, looking through university produced material was the only preparation the respondents undertook prior to an open day. Some participants talked about informally discussing open day visits with friends, thus linking with the general agreement that friends and family can be a key influence in decision making amongst students of any nationality (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Dawes & Brown, 2008) and a small number of participants also looked at independent sources such as league tables.

### ***The need to 'experience' the servicescape***

Whilst university produced marketing material is used as a preliminary filter, it is accepted that it is not a substitute for personal experience of an institution. An open day, or visit, allows the first impressions gleaned from the web and prospectus to either be reinforced or damaged:

What you see on paper doesn't necessarily convey the atmosphere.

Once there, it becomes more real.

Participants talked of emotional responses to the overall university servicescape; personal responses that arise only as a reaction to physically being within the environment which cannot be easily conveyed through the prospectus or website. For example 'the campus felt comfortable' or that 'it was cosy and felt safe'. This draws directly on Mehrabian and Russell's (1972) S-O-R theory which reflects upon the emotion-eliciting qualities of environments.

This, in marketing terms, clearly reinforces the experiential nature of HE and emphasises the possibilities for institutions to adopt experiential branding. Consequently all respondents supported previous research on student choice (Briggs, 2006; Connor et al, 1999; Pampaloni, 2010; Veloutsou et al, 2005) in

agreeing the open day is a key factor in decision making, with comments such as: 'It will probably always be different in your mind to what it actually is' and 'You will never get a better impression than when you actually see it properly.'

### ***First impressions do count, but some more than others***

## **THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION OF SERVICESCAPE IS A HYGIENE FACTOR**

Students have a set of expectations for how a university should look. Specifically they expect buildings to be aesthetically pleasing, clean and obviously well maintained – a view expressed by 22 out of the 24 participants. Whilst these are clear expectations, they do not appear to trigger approach behaviours in themselves; rather they are hygiene factors and the absence of them creates avoidance behaviours.

If it looked old then I would think "*oh no, I don't want to go here*"... that would be behind the times.

The feel and look of the buildings needs to be new but not necessarily modern.

They have got to look clean and well maintained. If I went into an old building that needed a refurb, I wouldn't like that. It needs to look well cared for.

The desire for university buildings to be well presented was linked to the rise in tuition fees. As one participant said:

If I'm spending all this money, I don't want the university to feel scruffy or shabby.

Bitner (1992) suggests that the physical servicescape elements trigger either a cognitive or emotional response which leads to approach or avoidance behaviour. Participants' comments suggest that the physical dimension of the university servicescape leads to a cognitive response - their aesthetic and state of repair is a non-verbal communication reflecting the care and consideration taken by the university. The underlying implication is that a lack of care and attention for university buildings would be a reflection of a lack of care and attention in respect of the education provision:

It costs a lot to go to university. If I turn up to that university and they haven't taken care of the facilities and the buildings that would be a bad impression. If they are not taking care of the facilities and investing [in them], I would expect the level of teaching to follow the same.

Exterior environments seemed to resonate on a conscious and subconscious level. Whilst participants were not expressing the need for cutting edge design and décor, several negative comments were made about buildings that were 'grey and ugly', with participants even altering perceptions and rankings for universities where the campus seemed 'too concrete'. Perhaps therefore, there

is a subconscious desire for an emotional reaction to university building; to be slightly excited by them? As one participant put it:

If it doesn't look like a vibrant place with a bit of colour it's not going to make you want to go there; it's not very appealing.

Whilst the exteriors of buildings triggered a reaction, with many respondents citing a 'modern exterior' as being aesthetically pleasing, there was much less to be said about the interiors. Only five participants passed comment on the interior of buildings and the comments referred to what Bitner (1992) called the 'ambient conditions' – the light, colour, standard of cleanliness and a sense of space.

### **THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF SERVICESCAPE, SPECIFICALLY INTERACTION WITH STAFF, LEADS TO APPROACH/ AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS**

The formation of the social servicescape arises from the inclusion of people within the physical servicescape. Unsurprisingly all participants cited both the staff and students involved in the open day as being key components in forming impressions of that university. However unlike the physical dimension of servicescape which elicited a cognitive response, the social dimension elicited an emotional response – pleasure or arousal. Whilst the concept of social servicescape includes the impact of over and undercrowding, the number of other people present at an open day did not cause significant comment from participants; discussion centred around the social encounters.

Of all the social encounters at open day, participants felt the course talk was the greatest opportunity for an impression to be made and this was most likely to affect the participant's state of arousal. Unsurprisingly then, the course talk was discussed much more frequently than any other aspect of the social servicescape. Twenty-three out of 24 participants specifically discussed the course talk when describing their open day experiences and 18 said this created the key impact for the open day, adding credence to previous academic research where the quality of teaching or reputation of teaching staff has been cited as a key determinant of choice (Moogan & Baron, 2010; Palacio, Meneses & Perez Perez, 2002; Price et al, 2003). Participants appeared unconcerned with the academic standing of the staff – research was not mentioned at all within the interviews – but it was clear there was a need for staff to *inspire*. A view supported by Maringe (2006) who found that teaching reputation was more important for students than research profiles. Being able to interact with staff was felt to be important and this is generally offered through the course talk. Engagement emerged as being critical. It is not sufficient for staff to be knowledgeable and polite - staff that were 'enthusiastic', 'passionate' or 'engaging' triggered approach behaviours and staff that weren't, triggered avoidance behaviours:

I couldn't even understand what this lady was saying. This is supposed to be giving me the best impression... if this is what it is like on Open Day what on earth would it be like on a normal day?

She didn't sell it to me; she made me think I wouldn't enjoy learning with her.

You are spending so much on fees, you need to think you are getting a good experience. If the staff are not engaging, that does matter.

Engaging staff were those who attempted to build a rapport with guests, providing an honest course talk. As one participant said: 'It's the little stories that stick in your head... it [the course talk] was a little bit funny, a little bit light hearted. It kept the mood up'.

Conversely a dry, un-engaging course talk, or one that focuses too much on one aspect, was remembered as a negative experience and triggered avoidance behaviour. Some participants explained how choices and institution preferences were re-evaluated in favour of those with a more engaging course talk 'that brought the course to life a bit more' and more crucially, none of the participants were prepared to include a university with a 'poor' course talk on their final preference list. This links with the findings of Moogan et al (1999) who say that open day experiences are crucial in final evaluation stages and can be influential in changing prospective students' minds.

If the impression from the lecturers was better, I would choose xxx. I absolutely loved it.

Student talks and student ambassadors or representatives were also considered important in 'getting the real story' and adding to the 'buzz and the campus feel'; 'friendliness' and a 'welcoming attitude' were valued. This is explored further below.

## **THE NATURAL DIMENSION OF SERVICESCAPE IS A KEY TRIGGER OF APPROACH/AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS**

*Students need somewhere 'to escape'*. Rosenbaum and Massiah (2012) highlight three key stimuli that provide the natural, restorative servicescape which are 'being away, fascination and compatibility'. Of these, the provision of a 'being away' stimulus – the ability to offer a sense of escape from 'day after day concerns' (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2012, p480) was seen as a huge draw and triggered a positive emotional response. Prospective students highlighted natural environments as being ideal for creating the feeling of 'being away' – grassy areas, trees, parks, playing fields, seaside locations – and the ability to escape was cited by a number of participants as being important:

It's nice to know I can sit on the grass and chill out a little bit.

It's not too far from the seaside – if you ever had a bad day you could just go and take a walk.

Going down to the seaside is a nice little break. It's relaxing; the air was fresher; it's not such a rush as it is up here [home city].

Similarly, the lack of any green space was seen as a negative factor:

It felt like you were never going to really get away from the university because of its dominant presence within the town.

I need to feel as though I am not cooped up.

The desire for a natural restorative servicescape is interesting as often, and especially for non-campus universities, this natural environment is provided by the location itself rather than the university.

Linking in with the desire to have some physical relief from a study environment, sports facilities were singled out among some participants as being noteworthy, with the presence of good sports facilities engendering a positive impression of the servicescape and subsequent approach behaviour. It was also interesting that few students made specific mention of some of the more recent additions to campuses such as branded coffee shops, cafes etc. Whether this is because they are now just accepted as part of the general environment, or are not considered important, is interesting.

*A feeling of belonging is crucial.* Whilst 'fascination' – the ability for the university servicescape to hold a student's attention - was not considered by participants to be important, the notion of 'compatibility' – the ability of a university to provide a 'sense of belonging' (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2012, p480) was seen as being essential and when specifically asked for the key reasons for choosing one university above another, the feeling of belonging was cited in some form by all participants, thus highlighting that a positive emotional, rather than a cognitive, response to the servicescape is a key indicator of approach behaviour. In most cases (20 out of 24 participants) this was created from the social dimensions of servicescape, in particular a positive atmosphere created by 'friendly' students, staff or locals. Students being helpful isn't enough; as one participant said:

I assume everyone at the Open Day is going to be *helpful*; the students seemed as though they wanted to be there; they seemed genuine and made it seem friendly and casual.

A desire to ensure that all students contributed to a positive environment – not just those involved in the open day – was cited by some participants:

We go and find some students. Not the ones who are wearing the badges because they are supposed to say nice things... then you get a proper insight not just the selling vibe. Honesty is important.

More specifically for many participants, the sense of belonging was recognised after a conscious decision to evaluate the other students with participants revealing that they actively considered whether they 'could get along with' other open day guests and existing students. Citing Banning and Banning (1986), Price et al (2003, p. 213) refer to this as 'student-institution fit':

I am looking around to see if people are like me. If you hear someone say they don't like it [the university] and they aren't like you, then that is a good thing. It is a conscious decision to see if I fit in.

You need to see how students [at that university] are behaving... whether you see yourself as that kind of person and you want to be around people like that.

You see the students walking around and they don't seem all sluggish... they look like people who are similar to me.

One participant explained how she continued with the evaluation of other students after the open day, by looking at the profiles of individuals who were tweeting about a specific university.

The theme of self-reference emerged very strongly with all except two participants saying they needed to 'be comfortable', 'fit in' or 'see myself there'. This was not only engendered by the social dimension of servicescape; the physical environment of both the university and also the wider physical environment of the city or town, was seen as having a role to play in creating the sense of compatibility:

If it looks clean and safe you will keep wanting to go back.

I know that I am going to be spending a lot of time there .... the [university buildings] environment has to be one where I feel comfortable ... and that I am going to do a lot of work in.

It has to be that atmosphere of *"this is a place to work but we're going to make it as easy and as comfortable for you to do that whilst you are here"*

Compatibility arising from the physical environment was particularly prevalent for those participants seeking the perceived safety and security of a campus based university.

The sense that belonging can also arise from the physical servicescape blurs the boundaries between the dimensions of social symbolism and the compatibility element of the natural servicescape. Taken in the broadest sense, social symbolism can be interpreted as the deliberate crafting of the environment to appeal to certain groups of people; in this situation, prospective students are the desired audience. If the environment is such that it appeals strongly, then it follows that a sense of belonging will be created.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The core contribution of this research lies in examining the role of the service environment in the emotional factors driving student choice of university. In taking Rosenbaum & Massiah's (2011) servicescape model and applying it to Higher Education within the UK, the research provides insights into the impact of the university service environment on prospective students and its resulting effect on decision making. A number of elements were particularly significant:

Assuming there are no significant negative preconceptions of the university, websites and prospectuses are important in creating a significantly positive impression of the university servicescape to encourage attendance at an open day. However once the prospective student attends the open day, the written and visual impression provided by the website and prospectus loses its significance; there is a need to 'fit in' with the actual university environment experienced at the open day. The need for a sense of belonging during the open day emerges as extremely important in the decision making process. This element of self-reference is interesting as it resonates clearly with the social and socially symbolic dimensions of the servicescape model adopted. However this does present a challenge in practical terms; can social symbolism and compatibility be deliberately created, managed and maintained especially when some of it stems from the wider environment of the location. Clearly further work is needed to consider this.

Other factors in the open day experience are evidently more pragmatically viewed. Buildings, for example, are hygiene factors that do not trigger positive approach behaviour on their own, but can trigger avoidance behaviour where they are seen negatively. This has very clear implications for management of the university experience in general, with the first impressions at open day being particularly poignant.

Websites and prospectuses may attempt to create impressions of the natural, 'being away' elements of servicescape but this servicescape dimension needs to be felt at the open day itself. An understanding of how a university might provide this element is evidently very important for those who seek to optimise the open day experience, as our work indicates that the presence or absence of the natural dimension (e.g. parks, green spaces, beaches) will strongly trigger approach/avoidance behaviours. In many locations the town or city already has a natural, restorative servicescape; close work with civic counterparts may help to showcase this.

The importance of interactions with people, in particular academics, should not be underestimated; the social dimensions can elicit a significant emotional response resulting in ultimate approach behaviour and were overwhelmingly discussed as important by our sample, and key in facilitating a feeling of belonging.

Broadly speaking the findings resonate with Rosenbaum and Massiah's (2011) servicescape model, demonstrating its relevance to the HE environment and contributing significant value to both academics and practitioners. That said, the findings suggest some overlap between the dimension of social symbolism and the element of compatibility within the natural dimension; further work to provide clearer distinction or the nature of the relationship between the two would be welcome.

The findings from this study also draw on an interesting debate within the field of place branding of how 'place' can be defined. Whilst Bitner's work considers the discrete and deliberately crafted service environment created by the provider, place branding literature argues that place is more fluid and is a

relative concept (Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Warnaby, 2009). Participants' perceptions of what was included within the university servicescape often extended beyond university buildings, staff and students, to include elements of the wider location: for example, the natural restorative servicescape that was provided by the civic park or local coastline; the friendliness of the local residents; the sense of 'fitting in' not just at the university but also within the city or town. This should be of great interest to university marketing decision makers and it is suggested that further work is undertaken to explore the perceived contribution of location to the university.

Whilst this study specifically offers clarification of the key servicescape dimensions within the UK HE market, HE provisions outside the UK are also increasingly subject to market pressures and therefore this research offers genuine insight for both theory and practice in the UK and beyond. Clearly however, it is an initial step and further research is outlined below. Ultimately a specific model that allows conceptualisation and management of the HE servicescape dimensions would be desirable.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS**

A number of practical implications are apparent:

Maintenance of the physical elements of the servicescape, such as upkeep and cleaning of buildings, are important as students talked of 'judging a book by its cover'. Interestingly maintenance might be considered to be more critical than investment or development of buildings and interiors, which is *expected* to some degree. A lack of maintenance, and therefore a perceived lack of care, creates a significant negative response, triggering avoidance behaviour. Investment or development of buildings does, of course, result in significant and longer term infrastructure projects for universities; changes will inevitably have significant time and cost implications. However the portrayal of physical servicescape within the website and prospectus are still important in the initial filtering process and therefore should be actively managed by the institution to create a positive impression.

The social aspect of the open day experience (eg happy staff and students) is clearly very important as part of the servicescape. Whilst this is perhaps unsurprising, it is evident that some institutions still have issues managing this important element. It is of course inherently difficult to manage and control but its importance makes addressing this a priority.

An understanding of the natural restorative elements of servicescape is helpful to HE managers; there is a need to highlight a sense of escape, both in communications material and during the open day itself. For campus based institutions this may involve deliberate creation, and highlighting of, green outside space. However for all institutions, but particularly non campus based, the practical focus is on working with civic counterparts in maximising this.

An acknowledgement is required that from the prospective student's point of view, the boundary between the university and location is blurred. Whilst the university owns and can therefore control its own physical servicescape, there are elements of the wider environment that are outside of its control and yet are key factors in student decision making. The provision of a natural, restorative servicescape is a good example of this.

Finally, but arguably most significantly, creating that elusive sense of belonging appears to be critical. Whilst this is of course difficult, university managers need to both acknowledge and better understand how to create that 'I could see myself here' feel at an open day which is perhaps the fundamental challenge evident from this work.

## **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDED FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study is designed only to be exploratory in nature and participants were drawn from home/EU applicants for business related courses at two UK post-92 universities. Further qualitative work exploring views from a broader sample of participants may offer further insight into the research questions. For example a comparison with international students, or a cross faculty sample from a wider range of universities, including representation from 'Russell group' institutions, are recommended. Replication in other country markets is also desirable.

Whilst this study considers the impact of the servicescape on student choice, it doesn't consider the impact of the servicescape on existing students. To investigate the impact of the university environment on students in their longer term satisfaction and retention would offer a number of benefits to both educators and managers and could offer further insight into facilitating student engagement. A longitudinal study would be necessary to explore this.

Therefore although it begins the process, it is beyond the scope of this exploratory work to offer a specific empirical model that allows conceptualisation and management of the HE servicescape. This however, would be desirable from both an academic and practitioner perspective and further qualitative and quantitative work is a logical progression.

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