

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Understanding servicescape from the perspective of ethical retail ideology

Airin AbdulGhani^{1*}, Puteri Fadzline Muhamad Tamyez¹, Norazidah Shamsudin¹, Imaduddin Abidin¹, Husna Hashim¹
 Joel Barniego Tan² and Mary Ann E. Tarusan²

¹Faculty of Industrial Management, Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah, Lebu Persiaran Tun Khalil Yaakob,
 26300 Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia

²Professional Schools, University of Mindanao, Philippines

ABSTRACT – This study investigates the roles of servicescape in customer loyalty, where data were collected through a retail store. The partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) technique was applied to analyse 119 respondents. For the measurement model and structural model used in this study. Findings revealed that the servicescape and frontline crew service have a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Additionally, customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer loyalty and serves as a mediator in the relationship between the servicescape and customer loyalty. However, customer satisfaction has no significant effect as a mediator between frontline crew service and customer loyalty. This study is significant as managers will be able to manage servicescape and frontline crew service much more effectively when delivering services to customers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Servicescape is an important part of customer satisfaction and behaviour (Lin & Cheng, 2015). In customer perception, servicescape is not only about functional tangibles but also directly influences overall customer satisfaction, leading to customer loyalty or buying retention (Situmorang et al., 2018). The servicescape has been identified as having three dimensions, including ambience, space or function, and signs, symbols, and artefacts. It influences the perception and behaviour of customers as well as frontline crew (Dong & Siu, 2013). In the context of service delivery, Lin and Mattila (2010) stated that, besides distinct service characteristics and tangible cues in serving customers, the physical environment also plays a role in the service quality perceived by customers. Frontline crew is an employee directly involved in customer service or production (Fellesson & Salomonson, 2020). Researchers design customer experience as a psychological structure: a holistic, subjective response resulting from customer contact with a service provider that implies customer knowledge and impact (Robledo, 2024). Cambra-Fierro et al. (2014) suggested that making a service organization outstanding, satisfying, and creating a positive customer experience is important, especially when interacting with employees. In the IKEA context, the frontline crew includes co-workers and customer service crew (Pressey & Harris, 2024).

Customer satisfaction has been emphasized for many years as the root of loyalty (Hu et al., 2019). As a key marketing concept, there is much literature on customer satisfaction that supports that customer satisfaction has a crucial influence on the future profit of a company by increasing customer loyalty (Ali et al., 2018). According to Jung & Yoon (2013), researchers mentioned satisfaction as a predictor of customer loyalty in retail. Emotional change is linked with the satisfaction and intention of tourists to visit different retail sectors due to their constant interaction with the physical and social 10 environments while consuming experience (El-Adly, 2019). Some studies have examined the robustness of customer satisfaction and loyalty and suggest that another dimension of service could play a role in building loyalty and sustainability (Demoulin & Willems, 2019).

IKEA is a multinational Swedish company based in the Netherlands that designs and sells home accessories, kitchen appliances, furniture for assembly, and other goods occasionally for home service. It was founded in Sweden by 17-year-old Ingvar Kampard in 1943, and IKEA is now the world's biggest retailer of furniture since 2008. Now, the IKEA Group has 424 retail stores in 52 countries, including Australia, Austria, Mainland China, Finland, Malaysia, Singapore, and so on. There are 4 IKEA retail outlets in Malaysia, which are IKEA Damansara, Selangor, IKEA Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru, and IKEA Batu Kawan, Penang. IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru, is the chosen subject for this research study. It is located in Taman Desa Tebrau, Johor Bahru. Its location is strategic and near shopping malls, hotels, and restaurants. IKEA Tebrau is Southeast Asia's biggest IKEA Store with an area of more than 46,000 square meters and more than 300 co-workers.

Based on the customer complaints in 2019, IKEA Tebrau has received 11,695 customer reviews, and there are 3261 negative reviews mentioning servicescape elements such as ambience and overwhelming space, besides negative customer experience that they perceived from the frontline crew when visiting the IKEA store. Bitner (1992) introduced

the term “servicescape” to indicate the physical environment in which a service process occurs. The literature analyzed the impact on consumers and consumer loyalty in services of an organization’s image (Demoulin & Willems, 2019). Some previous studies found that the quality of the physical environment has been perceived (Yen & Li, 2017) or that the service quality can have a significant impact on the store or corporate image (Lin & Cheng, 2015). According to Dedeoglu et al. (2018), the size and design of an IKEA shop are overwhelming. However, there is a lack of information regarding how overwhelming contributes to servicescape and overall customer satisfaction in IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. In IKEA, different coloured arrows are painted directly on the floor in a windowless environment for departments. Shoppers are herded along one way rather than following the usual grid-like boulevard or avenue layout.

With the retail sector becoming more service-based with more interactive experiences, it becomes more important to understand the concept of customer experience (El-Adly, 2019). The social environment of a firm, including employee emotion and climate, is a crucial factor in customer positive emotion during service encounters (Li et al., 2016). Lucia-Palacios et al. (2020) provide frontline crew service and customer satisfaction in a wider context. However, there is research that mentions that the frontline service crew directly influences customer experience due to a lack of competency in problem-solving and agility when interacting with customers at IKEA (Yu, 2019). Ideally, a successful retail store should fulfil all elements in the servicescape, which are ambience, space or function, and signs, symbols, besides high-quality service delivered by the frontline crew. Looking at servicescape aspects, IKEA must offer a wide range of attractions and opportunities that meet multi-optional customer demands and expectations (Torres et al., 2019). Besides, the IKEA retail store must be integrated well into the 5 main senses of customers, which are temperature, smell, sound, lighting, and appearance. Functionality and infrastructure should include facilities for customer convenience, such as restaurants, toilets, mosques, and safe places for customers to keep personal belongings (Ali et al., 2018).

Besides, a customer’s shopping experience is mostly related to the frontline crew service. Many scholars have discussed the importance of customer interaction with frontline service crews during a service encounter. Hameli (2018) stated that “humanists” depict how the service staff make the customer feel. Ryu and Han (2011) emphasized the importance of frontline employees, whose performance can influence customer experience. In the IKEA context, the frontline service crew or “co-workers” play the role of assisting customers, such as giving directions or assembling furniture. Hence, the frontline service crew should be equipped with the overall layout design in IKEA to support customers in the store and be agile in facing problems. The research gap is defined in this research study. First, there is a lack of information about the servicescape affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty in IKEA Malaysia.

In this research, the frontline service crew also plays an important role; however, there is limited information regarding the service delivery of frontline crew to customers during the shopping experience in IKEA Malaysia (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2014). This study focused on the servicescape of IKEA as it seemed more relevant for emotions, customer satisfaction, and loyalty in the retail business environment (Shashikala, 2013). Finally, there is no holistic framework mentioned in servicescape and frontline crew service affecting customer loyalty, which is directly linked to customer loyalty. Most of the journals only discussed servicescape or employee performance in creating customer experience. A major concern of this study is:

- (1) What is the relationship between servicescape and customer satisfaction?
- (2) What is the relationship between frontline crew service and customer satisfaction?
- (3) What is the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and frontline crew service and customer loyalty?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of Servicescape

The term “servicescape” or service environment affects customer satisfaction, and their store revisit intention is widely accepted by the literature (Lee, 2020). Nowadays, many retail marketers emphasize the atmosphere as critically essential for customer loyalty by delivering a positive overall shopping experience and making this experience memorable for customers (Demoulin & Willems, 2019). In the last three decades, the impact of atmospherics has been recognized as a tangible indicator for customer evaluation of service quality and repeated purchases in the service environment (Situmorang et al., 2018). Therefore, understanding elements of servicescape in creating unique customer experiences in retail stores can upscale their satisfaction and direct customer loyalty (Mustafa, Gayatri & Febliansa, 2022). Besides servicescape, Felleson and Salomonson (2020) emphasized that the frontline employee plays a crucial role, whose performance influences customer satisfaction during the store visit experience. An agile and professional frontline service crew contributes to customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ali et al., 2018), and doubtless, linking servicescape and the frontline crew service in creating a positive customer experience can satisfy customers and build their loyalty for the retail store.

The retail store relies on the servicescape to create a great customer experience (Kucukergin & Meydan Uygur, 2019). There are a few definitions from different authors. Situmorang et al. (2018) described servicescape as something that outlines the tangible attributes of an intangible service or service counter. According to Min et al. (2017), servicescape refers to the “built environment” or more specifically, the “man-made, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment”. The main elements of the servicescape included ambience, space, signs, symbols, and artefacts. The

dimensions of the environment contain those elements directly perceived by the senses of the organs: temperature, smell, sound, light, and appearance. Space was described as a special arrangement of the facilities for a particular task inside the service environment, while the symbols and artefacts are those that direct and shape the behaviour of customers within the service environment. There are past studies that emphasized that servicescape helps service providers position themselves (Oviedo-García et al., 2019). For services such as hotels, theme parks, hospitals, and retail stores, the influence of servicescape is more apparent, which can contribute to customers spending longer staying time in respective places (Haobin et al., 2021). Further services may influence the interaction of employees with customers. Interpersonal services such as retail outlets and restaurants can influence the behaviour of customers and staff and enhance service quality by facilitating interactions (Hughes et al., 2019).

2.2 Ethical Retail Ideology in Servicescape

Ethical retail ideology within the servicescape is a topic that has gained attention in recent research. Pecoraro et al. (2020) delved into this area by employing an ethnographic approach to explore how ethical retail ideology is manifested and experienced in servicescapes. This study contributes to understanding the practical implications of ethical retail ideology within the physical environment where services are provided. The concept of ethical retail ideology is crucial as it influences consumer perceptions and behaviours within the retail setting. Moreover, the servicescape plays a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours. Upadhyaya et al. (2018) highlighted that the servicescape environment reassures customers and helps them comprehend the experiential outcomes of their purchases and consumption. This underscores the importance of the servicescape in influencing consumer experiences and ultimately their decision-making processes.

In the context of retail settings, the servicescape is not only about the physical environment but also encompasses digital and social realms. Nyrhinen et al. (2021) emphasized the role of social capital in determining customer experiences within digitalized retail servicescapes. This broader perspective on the servicescape acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the environment in which retail interactions take place, highlighting the need to consider various dimensions, including social aspects, in understanding consumer behaviour. Furthermore, the servicescape is not static; it evolves with technological advancements and changing consumer behaviours. Mason et al. (2022) explored the relationships between human interaction, automated services, and atmosphere, and their impact on customer satisfaction in retail settings. This study sheds light on how technological factors interact with human elements to shape the servicescape and influence customer perceptions.

In the realm of ethical considerations within the servicescape, the study by Pecoraro et al. (2020) provides valuable insights into how ethical retail ideology is experienced by consumers in retail environments. Understanding how ethical values are embedded in the servicescape can help businesses align their practices with consumer expectations, thereby enhancing trust and loyalty. Moreover, the study by Tran et al. (2012) on microblog postings influencing consumer perceptions of e-servicescapes highlights the interconnectedness of online communication and the digital servicescape. This research underscores the importance of managing online content to maintain a positive servicescape perception, which can impact consumer trust and patronage.

Thus, retail ideology within the servicescape is a complex and multifaceted area that requires attention from both researchers and practitioners. Understanding how ethical values are integrated into the servicescape, considering the influence of technology on the retail environment, and recognizing the social dimensions of the servicescape are all crucial aspects in shaping consumer experiences and behaviours within retail settings. By exploring these dimensions, businesses can create more engaging and ethical servicescapes that resonate with consumers, ultimately leading to enhanced satisfaction and loyalty.

2.3 Frontline Crew Service

Service is usually used when the customer and service provider are present in the service environment, thus influencing their interaction with potential customer experiences (Ali et al., 2018). There are a lot of scholars who have discussed the importance of the frontline crew in delivering service to customers (Ren et al., 2016). Andersson et al. (2016) claimed that when the time of frontline crew delivering service is the employee-customer interface. Torres et al. (2019) described it as emotional outcomes linked with unique customer experiences in the relationship between the customer and frontline crew. Trendafilov (2018) stated that the concept of IKEA is a shop where customers can buy without interaction with any front-line crew service. This is possible because each product includes tags and self-storage. However, IKEA is always aware that it offers its customers the maximum level of service using personal sales and general service when needed (Fellesson & Salomonson, 2020). The approach of IKEA's "Simplicity and Self-Service" makes it even more important to understand the effects of personal sales and how the level of service can be improved to improve sales and satisfaction (Hellsten & Lidgren, 2011).

2.4 Customer Satisfaction

Generally, every business aims to satisfy customers because it directly leads to customer repurchasing and generates profit (Albattat & Romli, 2017). Customer satisfaction is defined and conceptualized differently in marketing literature. According to Li et al. (2016), customer satisfaction is defined as an evaluation of a particular transaction after choosing, and it is important for understanding customer experience. These interactions elicit a series of emotional reactions known

as emotion consumption, such as pleasure or displeasure, relaxation or action, and calmness (Albattat & Romli, 2017). According to the expectation-disconfirmation theory by Hu et al. (2019), customer satisfaction is supposed to be the outcome of a customer process that compares expectations and perceptions of performance, which is predicted to satisfy the customer. More recent definitions of satisfaction give an emotional response in the modelling of satisfaction assessments (Park et al., 2019), and satisfaction is defined as the evaluative assessment of consumers based on both cognitive and emotional responses (Al-Azzam et al., 2017). As one of the most frequently examined topics in the service industry, many researchers have used satisfaction-related theory, and many empirical studies show that customer satisfaction is a clear indicator of the intent to review the destination and recommend it to others (Situmorang et al., 2018).

2.5 Customer Loyalty

Consumer loyalty is an important aspect of marketing research in retail and has been researched in various industries (Ali et al., 2018). Customer loyalty is generally accepted when a person believes that the service providers provide them with the best service (El-Adly & Eid, 2016). Loyal customers contribute to a greater customer budget, increase visit frequency, and recommend by word of mouth to others (El-Adly, 2019). Every service provider should therefore strive to develop marketing strategies to achieve customer loyalty (Ali et al., 2018). Different studies have resulted in many customer loyalty concepts and definitions. For example, consumer loyalty refers to the consumer's willingness and desire to continue purchasing and using preferred service providers over time (Kim et al., 2019). The behavioural dimension takes into account consistent patronage or frequency of repeating purchases, but the attitude dimension regards a psychological commitment (decision-making or evaluation) towards the service provider (Lu, Zhao & While, 2019).

2.6 Relationship between Servicescape and Customer Satisfaction

Several researchers showed that servicescape can have a substantial effect on customer loyalty and subsequent behaviour in different business environments (Situmorang et al., 2018). Dedeoglu et al. (2018) stated that the Mehrabian-Russell (M-R) environmental psychology hypothesis in the literature on store atmosphere suggests that the setting and its experience affect emotional reactions, enjoyment, and anticipation. These related emotional reactions in effect contribute to a shopping experience, friendliness with others, a wish to explore, and a readiness to linger on unplanned long expenses (Lin, 2019). The atmosphere includes those elements that sense organs directly perceive and that are temperature, smell, sound, light, and appearance (Bitner, 1992).

- (1) Temperature: Tactile factors such as temperature and air quality can contribute to a holistic retail environment. This comfort had a significant and positive effect on the image of the store. Due to personal comfort and aesthetic values, store temperatures (air conditioning) may increase customer value (Lin & Cheng, 2015). In addition, if the customer feels hot during a store visit, it can affect customer satisfaction. This factor may lead to customers deciding to revisit the store due to a negative customer experience (Situmorang et al., 2018).
- (2) Smell: A pleasant atmospheric scent has a major impact on customer experience and time spent in the store (Gvili, Levy, & Zwilling, 2018; & Levy & Gvili, 2018). Demoulin and Willems (2019) also mentioned that customers spent longer staying in scented conditions compared with the no-scent condition. Smell plays a crucial role in ambience conditions for customer experience and customer satisfaction (Milman & Tasci, 2018).
- (3) Sound: Atmospheric music is known to have a tremendous effect on the response of consumers (tempo, volume, and preference). Customers have specific music preferences, and their assessment can affect overall satisfaction. Atmospheric music (rhythm, volume, and preference) has a major impact on customer behaviour. Customers have different music preferences, and their interpretation may impact overall satisfaction. For example, playing slow music contributes to the tendency for customers to move slowly, explore more, and stay longer in-store (Yi & Kang, 2019). According to Michel, Baumann & Gayer (2017), the scholar also mentioned that as classical music was the background music, consumers selected higher-priced products.
- (4) Lighting: Lighting plays an important role in the way a customer views a shop (Helmefalk, 2019). The right lighting has been shown to positively influence customers' shopping behaviour. Suitable lighting influenced customers to concentrate more on retail products. In addition, customers have general communication in better environments, whereas soft, light environments are preferred for intimate conversation (Mou et al., 2018).
- (5) Aesthetic factors: Aesthetics refers to the function of architecture as well as interior design, colour, images and paintings, flowers, and ceiling-wall decorations that are seen and used by clients to assess the aesthetic quality of the servicescape (Ren et al., 2016). The design and interior design of the retail store have a positive impact on the willingness of the customer to stay and to increase costs (Lin, 2019).
- (6) Spatial layout and functionality: Space layout and functionality describe the arrangement of machinery, equipment, furnishings, seating, aisles, lobbying and walking tracks, toilets, and service entrance and exit areas (Arifin, Mohammad & Jalil, 2022; Azmi, 2021; & Rashid et al., 2015). These factors are important in theatres, retail stores, concerts, restaurants, etc., because they directly affect customer comfort during visits. The layout that makes people feel restricted can directly influence perceptions of customer quality, levels of excitation, and the desire to return indirectly (Jahan, Hossain, & Aayaz, 2014).
- (7) Signs, Symbols and Artefacts: Signs, symbols, and artefacts include signs and decorations used to communicate or enhance the image or mood or to guide customers to desired destinations (Shashikala, 2013). It was found that signs, symbols, and artefacts have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction (Hameli, 2018). A service setting with

clear signage arrangements can signal symbolized product quality, customer contributes to a positive customer experience, and impact expenses (Rosenbaum, Edwards & Ramirez, 2021).

Previous research has empirically demonstrated that customer satisfaction can evoke positive or negative sentiments (Demoulin & Willems, 2019). The physical environment of a service setting includes designs and ambient factors (Arifin & Mohammad, 2019). These factors are linked together and affect customer experience holistically (Petermans, Janssens & Van Clampoel, 2013). Previous research in the retail and hotel sectors found that the physical environment has cognitive and emotional influences on customers (Ali et al., 2018). This is because the customer intends to explore more in the retail store and spend more time (Min et al., 2017). Although earlier studies have shown the importance of servicescape in service settings (Park & Park, 2018), there is a need for further research on the effect of servicescape on customer satisfaction, which has been less researched in the context of the IKEA retail store in Malaysia. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Servicescape has a positive effect on customer satisfaction

2.7 Relationship between Frontline Crew Service and Customer Satisfaction

A retail encounter is an interaction between a frontline crew and a customer that reflects the experience of the customer and thus influences customer satisfaction, values, emotions, and actions (Rod et al., 2016). Recent findings show that customer satisfaction with the business, the frontline team, and the shop itself is influenced by sales interactions (Jha et al., 2017; & Jha et al., 2019). This article focuses on the satisfaction of customers, as this satisfaction is a major objective of retailers in their operations and provides an overall evaluation of services for retailers. (Lucia-Palacios et al., 2020). Many scholars discussed the interaction between customers and frontline crew to the extent that they can affect customers' emotional commitment and overall experience (Hanks & Line, 2018). According to Li et al. (2016, frontline crew service can directly affect customer emotions in their study on service settings. Morone et al. (2018 stated the effect of interaction between frontline employees with customers in the context of retailing. Besides the servicescape, frontline crew service is an important part of building a positive customer experience (Hughes et al., 2019). El-Adly & Eid (2016) stated that service environments facilitate customer and front-line crew interaction. Although previous studies have emphasized the importance of frontline crew service in creating a positive customer experience, it is necessary to evaluate the influence of frontline crew service on customer satisfaction in the IKEA Tebrau retail store (Muriel, 2020). This study expects customers to be satisfied with their perception of frontline crew service. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

H2: Frontline crew service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction

2.8 Relationship between Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Several studies on consumer and retail services have examined the background of customer loyalty. While no comprehensive theoretical framework is available to define customer loyalty variables, experts conclude that customer satisfaction is an essential customer loyalty criterion (El-Adly, 2019). In different contexts, such as retailing, hospitality (Hu et al., 2019), hotels (Ren et al., 2016), and other types of service organisations (Li et al., 2016). Previous findings have shown that customer satisfaction is a key driver of customer loyalty (Albattat & Romli, 2017). When customers are happy with the services offered, they will repurchase or revisit stores and are more likely to recommend them to others (Li et al., 2016). In various service industries, researchers have tested this relationship, such as tourism, hospitality, retail, and hotels. Furthermore, in retail research, the researcher indicated that satisfaction with the services offered could result in loyal customers. However, in the IKEA Tebrau retail shop, the researcher has to assess the effect of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. Therefore, this research hypothesis states as follows:

H3: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty

2.9 The Mediating Effect of Customer Satisfaction between Servicescape and Customer Loyalty

Temperature, smell, sound, lighting, and appearance can be directly perceived by the sense organs, able to shape a customer's mood and satisfaction (Zoubi et al., 2024; Gümüşay, 2018; Ferrera, 2015; & Furnham & Milner, 2013). In the retail environment, servicescape has been linked with customer satisfaction because the environmental setting is the major indicator of customer experience (Pei et al., 2020). Chang (2016) stated that there are positive relationships between perceived customer satisfaction and loyalty. When customers enjoy the unique experience generated by servicescape, it fulfils their expectations, which are linked to customer satisfaction and then customer loyalty (Rod et al., 2016). Previous research has emphasized the importance of servicescape in generating positive customer experience. However, there is a need for more thorough research on the impacts of customer satisfaction on servicescape and customer loyalty, which has been less researched specifically for IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. In this study, the researcher proposed that customer satisfaction is a significant predictor of servicescape and contributes to customer loyalty. Therefore, the hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H4: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on mediating servicescape and customer loyalty

2.10 The Mediating Effect of Customer Satisfaction between Frontline Crew Service and Customer Loyalty

Customer satisfaction is described as his / her overall shopping experience in a retail store, including products or services, servicescapes, and frontline crew service. Despite other factors affecting customer satisfaction, engagement with

customers is a crucial touchpoint that influence customer experience in the store (Taneja & Shukla, 2024; Bezos, 2024; & Kim, 2024). Therefore, two broad categories of skills can be identified: task skills and interaction skills (Li et al., 2016). Task skill relates to the frontline crew's product knowledge and assisting customers in buying desired products, while interaction skill concerns the psychological and communication skills of frontline employees (Rod et al., 2016). Greater task skills can lead to greater customer intentions and store recommendations, improved sales, satisfaction, and loyalty (Hughes et al., 2019). On the other hand, interaction skill contributes to affecting customer emotions and enhancing their shopping experience, which directly increases customer satisfaction (Fang et al., 2020). Helmfalk (2016) stated that in service environments, the frontline crew service facilitates customer experience through small details, such as a greeting, a smile, a soft-spoken voice, or a friendly approach that may directly affect customer satisfaction and lead to their next visit decision. Previous research has emphasized the importance of frontline crew service in generating a positive customer experience. However, there is a need for more thorough research on the impacts of customer satisfaction on frontline crew service and customer loyalty, which has been less researched specifically for IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. In this study, the researcher proposed that customer satisfaction is a significant predictor of frontline crew service and contributes to customer loyalty. Therefore, the hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H5: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on mediating frontline crew service and customer loyalty

2.11 Conceptual Model

A research framework demonstrates the structure of the research plan and assists the researcher in formulating relevant research questions. Below is the research framework for the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and frontline crew service with customer loyalty in IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual model of this study:

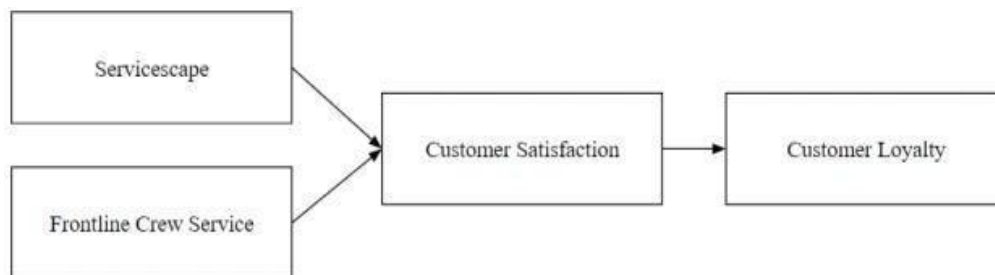


Figure 1. Conceptual model

3. METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to determine the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and frontline crew service and customer loyalty. It is assumed that the performance of servicescape and frontline crew service can satisfy customers' expectations and demands when they are experienced in retail stores. Generally, the contribution of three elements in servicescape (i.e., ambience, space or function, and signs, symbols, and artefacts) and the service of frontline performed in customer satisfaction and then to customer loyalty (i.e., returning customers and recommendations to people surrounding) was investigated. In addition, servicescape and frontline crew service are the independent variables; customer satisfaction will be the mediating variable; and customer loyalty will be the dependent variable.

In this study, the method of data collection is the quantitative research method. The targeted population in this study is customers who enjoyed the IKEA shopping experience in IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. According to the IKEA Annual Report 2019, the average customer population in IKEA Tebrau is 35411 per day. In this study, G-power Statistical Analysis Software is used to identify a minimal sample size. The minimum sample size is 119. Thus, 119 respondents will be required to answer the designed survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire is 14 questions designed as closed-ended questions, and the source of measurement is adopted from previous studies. The scale used in this study is a five-point Likert-type scale for independent variables, mediating variables, and dependent variables. The sampling technique is convenience sampling, and the researcher will launch an online questionnaire. The reasons for using convenience sampling are low costs, high efficiency, which easily reaches customers, and convenience for customers to answer the survey. To analyse the relationship between variables, the data collection and data analysis procedures are important. This study uses a cross-sectional approach. Cross-sectional survey-based research is an observational research method that analyses data collected at a given time in sample populations. The data was collected from people who have similar characteristics, such as servicescape experience, satisfactory level, and store revisiting experience in IKEA Tebrau, but with several interests such as age, gender, education level, and income level. To achieve the objective of measurement in this study, a closed-ended questionnaire with multiple-choice questions would be applied for data collection. The source of measurement was adopted from past research (Table 1: Measurement Items). The scale used in this study is a five-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to measure servicescape, frontline crew service, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. There are five sections in the online questionnaire, which are: (A) respondent demographic, (B) questions regarding servicescape, (C) questions regarding frontline crew service, (D) customer satisfaction, and (E) customer loyalty. It is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Measurement scale

Section B: Servicescape			
No	Variable	No. Items	Sources
1	Servicescape (Ambiance)	The lighting is appropriate	(Ali et al., 2018)
		The temperature is comfortable.	(Ali et al., 2018)
		The environment is clean.	(Ali et al., 2018)
		The architecture and setting are impressive.	(Ali et al., 2018)
		The background music is pleasant.	(Chang, 2016)
2	Servicescape (Space and Functionality)	There is adequate parking	(Cox, 2013)
		It is easy to move around with shopping carts	(Berndt, 2012)
		It is easy to move around.	(Berndt, 2012)
		The layout setting is unique.	(Situmorang et al., 2018)
3	Servicescape (Signs, Symbols and Artefacts)	The arrangement of the layout is creative	(Situmorang et al., 2018)
		There are clear directional signs (eg, Entrance, Exits, and Toilets)	(Berndt, 2012)
		The directional signs (eg, Entrances, Exits, and Toilets) give guidelines on how to move into the store.	(Berndt, 2012)
		It is easy to follow directional signs (eg, Entrances, Exits, and Toilets)	(Berndt, 2012)
		Directional signs are visually appealing.	(Berndt, 2012)
		Other types of communication, such as brochures, are visually appealing	(Berndt, 2012)
Section C: Frontline Crew Service			
4	Frontline Crew Service	Frontline crew are willing to help	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)
		Frontline crews are polite and /or friendly	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)
		Frontline crews are reliable.	(Ali et al., 2018)
		Frontline crews are professional.	(Ali et al., 2018)
		Frontline crews have good.	(Ali et al., 2018)
Section D: Customer Satisfaction			
5	Customer Satisfaction	I am satisfied with my decision to visit here	(Ali et al., 2018)
		I feel that my experience is enjoyable	(Ali et al., 2018)
		I am satisfied with the general impression of the store	(Berndt, 2012)
		I like the store environment.	(Berndt, 2012)
Section E: Customer Loyalty			
6	Customer Loyalty	I will revisit here again shortly	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)
		This is my first choice over others	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)
		I would recommend her to my friends and relatives	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)
		I would say positive things about here	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)
		I would encourage friends and relatives to visit here	(Dedeoglu et al., 2018)

In this study, the sample size for the pilot study is 119 respondents. Figure 2 shows the sample size, which is 119, through G-Power statistical analysis. Many researchers suggested that the assessment of the collected data would be possible for any common method variance because of the use of a single method (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Scholars consider the common method to be a potential problem in behavioural research. The data collected from this study have been examined using the Harman one-factor test to deal with the problem of common method variance. In factor analysis, the researchers examined items from all constructs to determine whether the majority of the variance could be considered a general factor. The results of the analysis of the main factor showed that one factor accounted for 41.5% (less than 50%) of the variance, and the variance was not the majority. Therefore, the data for this study did not suffer from common methodological distortions.

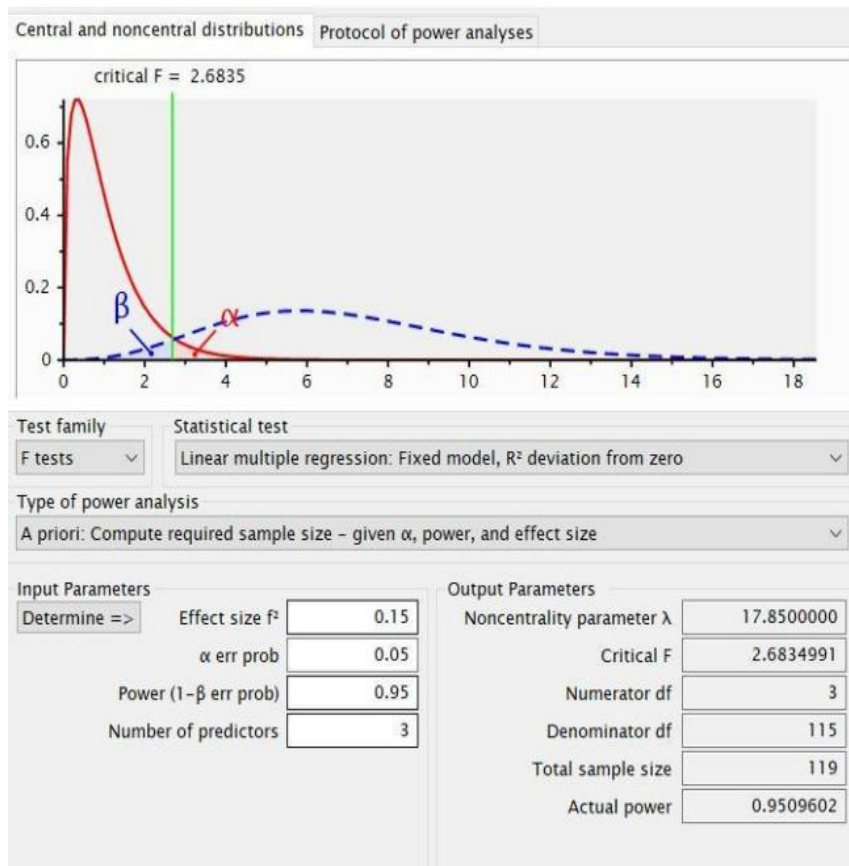


Figure 2. G-power statistical analysis

In this study, the researchers tested the above hypothesis using the Smart PLS M3 version 3.0 method. PLS is a widely known technology to estimate path coefficients in structural models, and marketing research has become increasingly popular in the past decade, given that latent models are available with small to medium samples under no normal conditions (Khan et al., 2019). Researchers performed the PLS algorithm processes to determine the importance of load, weight, and path coefficients, followed by a bootstrapping method to determine how significant the hypothesis was. The researchers evaluated the validity and fitness of the measurement model before testing the structural relations outlined in the structural model. Finally, blindfolding procedures were used to assess, evaluate, and obtain Q2, the accuracy of the test hypothesis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the targeted population is the visitors to IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. According to the IKEA Annual Report 2019, the average customer population in IKEA Tebrau is 35411 per day. Hence, the online survey questionnaire is distributed by Instagram Direct Message and Facebook Messenger to the customers of IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. Generally, the researcher can send approximately 250 messages per day to reach the customers. Table 2 shows that the minimum targeted sample size is 119; however, the researcher distributed 750 survey questionnaires and received 119 responses. Therefore, the response rate of this study is 15.87%. The responses are sufficient to perform the data analysis step. The reasons for the low response rate in this study are that the recipient might consider the survey link to be a scam message or ignore the message, even though the researcher did the follow-up.

Table 2. Response rate

Total of distribution	Total respondents	Minimal Sample Size	Response Rate
750	119	119	15.87%

$$\frac{\text{Total Responses obtained}}{\text{Total Distributed}} \times 100\% = \text{Response rate}$$

$$\frac{119}{750} \times 100\% = 15.87\%$$

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 3 shows the respondents' demographic profile. The first item in the respondent's demographic profile is the age of the customers. There are 54 respondents (45.38%) categorised as 18- 29 years old, followed by the 30- 39 years old category, which is 33 respondents (27.73%). Next, there are 21 respondents (17.65%) categorised as 40- 49 years old. Besides, for the 50-59 years old category, there are 10 respondents (8.40%). Lastly, the >60 years old have the lowest number of respondents, which is 1 respondent, or equivalent to 0.81%.

Table 3. Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
18 - 29 years old	54	45.38
30 - 39 years old	33	27.73
40 - 49 years old	21	17.65
50 - 59 years old	10	8.40
> 60 years old	1	0.84
Gender		
Male	47	39.50
Female	72	60.50
Employment Status		
Full-Time Employee	105	88.24
Part-Time Employee	2	1.68
Student	6	5.04
Retired	3	2.52
Unemployed	3	2.52
Income Level		
No income	11	9.24
Less than RM 1000	2	1.68
RM 1000 - RM 2999	20	16.81
RM 3000 - RM 4999	59	49.58
RM 5000 - RM 6999	20	16.81
> RM 7000	7	5.88
Total	119	100.00

The second item in the respondent's demographic profile is the gender of the respondent. Generally, there are a total of 119 respondents, and there are 72 female respondents (60.50%), and the remaining 47 respondents (39.50%) are male respondents. Besides, this respondent's demographic profile also included the employment status of the respondents. The table showed that full-time employee has the highest number of respondents, which is 105 respondents (88.24%). For the student category, it consisted of 6 respondents or equivalent, with 5.04% and then there are 3 respondents for the retired and unemployed categories, respectively. The lowest number of respondents is 2 for the part-time employee category. Lastly, the income level of respondents is also included in the respondents' demographic profile. The category of income RM 3000- RM 4999 has the highest number of respondents, which is 59 respondents (49.58%). The categories of income RM 1000- RM 2999 and RM 5000- RM 6999 have the same number of respondents, which is 20 respondents (16.81%). There are 11 respondents (9.24%) in the income category, while 7 respondents (5.88%) have income >RM 7000. Lastly, there are only 2 respondents in the <RM 1000 category.

4.2 Measurement Model Analysis

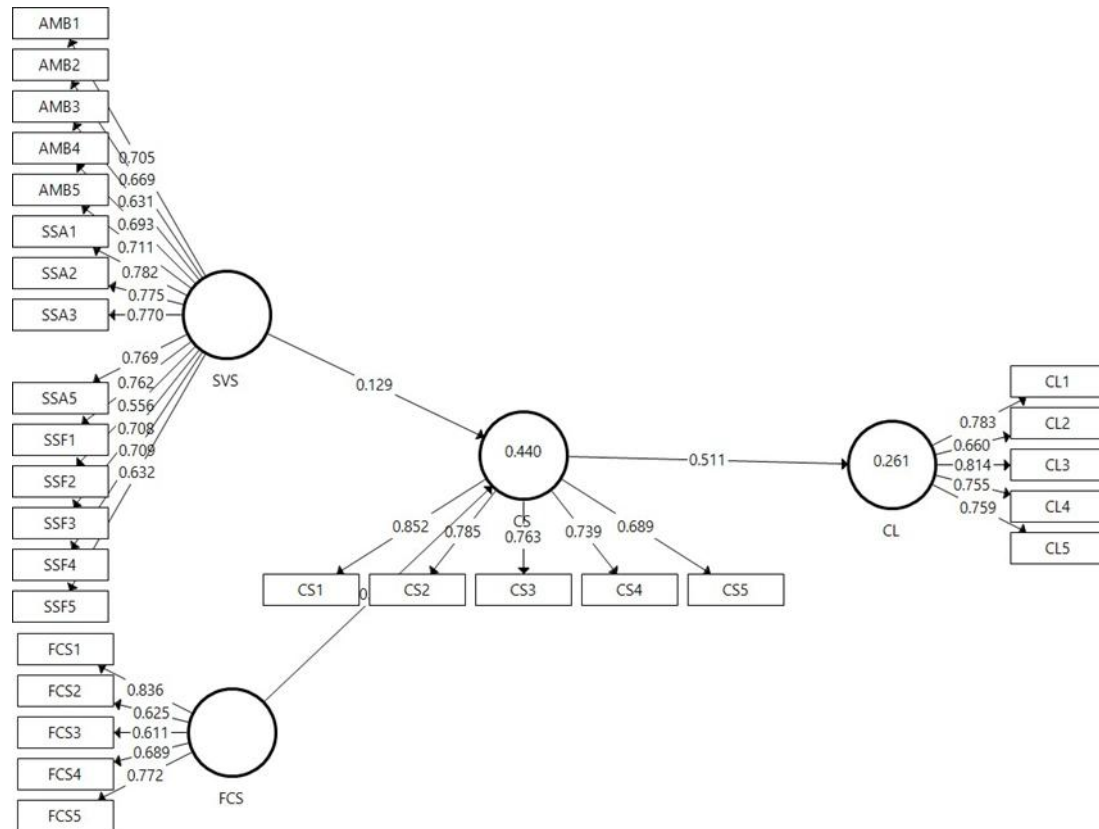


Figure 3. Measurement model

For the several dimensions, its implementation makes it possible for researchers to fit the abstraction level of predictor and result variables and reduces the complexity of the model (Mishra et al., 2019). In this study, the researcher is using a first-order model for the result analysis. Based on Figure 3, the first-order model displayed in the latent variables, which are named SVS (Servicescape), consists of AMB (Ambiance), SSA (Signs, Symbols and Artefacts), SSF (Space and Functionality), FCS (Frontline Crew Service), CS (Customer Satisfaction), and CL (Customer Loyalty).

4.3 Internal Consistency

Internal consistency reliability is a way to gauge how well a test or survey measures the items. The researcher normally used internal consistency reliability to measure constructs rather than particular items. For individual reliability, the variable is considered significant if its outer loading value is more than 0.5. If the particular item has an overloading that is less than 0.5, it should be omitted or dropped. Then, the computational process and model should be reassessed. Figure 5 shows the reassessed outer loading value to ensure the adequacy of the relationship between the independent variable, mediating variable, and dependent variable, besides examining the structural model in the relationship between the independent variable, mediating variable, and dependent variable.

4.4 Convergent Validity

Convergent validity is required for the empirical assessment of formative measurement models in PLS-SEM. The degree to which the calculation concerns other measurements of the same phenomenon is converging (Sarstedt et al., 2017). This test is carried out by a redundancy study, in which each formatted construct is compared with an alternative measure. The result helps to decide if the formative indicators together accurately reflect the interest structure. In the research, Hair et al. (2010) suggested that the adopted shared value of overloading is 0.40 or above, the composite reliability (CR) value is 0.70 or above, and the average variance extracted (AVE) is 0.50 or above.

Table 4 showed convergent validity, which included overloading, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach’s Alpha. All the overloading values in Table 4 exceed 0.50. For servicescape (SVS), the factor loadings are between 0.553 and 0.779, while for frontline crew service (FCS), the range of factor loadings is between 0.611 and 0.836. For the mediating variable, which is customer satisfaction (CS), the factor loading values are between 0.689 and 0.852. Lastly, for customer loyalty (CL), the factor loading is 0.660 to 0.814. Average extracted variance (AVE) is a measure of the sum of variance reported by a structure about the quantity of variance induced by the measurement error. According to Hair et al. (2010), the value of average variance extracted (AVE) should be 0.50 or above. Based on Table 6, AVE for servicescape is 0.501, which indicates 50.1% of the total variance is explained by the construct, while AVE for frontline crew service (FCS) is 0.507, which means 50.7% of the total variance is explained by

the construct. For customer satisfaction, the AVE value is 0.589, which also indicates that 58.9% of the total variance is explained by the construct.

Lastly, for customer loyalty (CL), the AVE value is 0.869, which means 86.9 % of the total variance is explained by the construct. According to Table 4, all AVE values are more than 0.50, which means all the values are appropriate. For the composite reliability (CR) criterion, higher values indicate higher levels of reliability. According to Hair et al. (2010), a value of composite reliability (CR) above 0.70 is considered acceptable. All Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability are more than 0.7. The CR and Cronbach's Alpha for servicescape (SVS) are 0.933 and 0.923, respectively. The CR and Cronbach's Alpha of frontline crew service (FCS) are 0.835 and 0.757, respectively. For customer satisfaction, the CR and Cronbach's Alpha are 0.877 and 0.825. Lastly, for customer loyalty, the CR value is 0.869 while Cronbach's Alpha is 0.812.

Table 4. Convergent validity

Construct	Item Code	Outer Loading	AVE	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
SVS	AMB1	0.704	0.501	0.933	0.923
	AMB2	0.670			
	AMB3	0.633			
	AMB4	0.692			
	AMB5	0.705			
	SSA1	0.762			
	SSA2	0.553			
	SSA3	0.705			
	SSA4	0.705			
	SSA5	0.630			
	SSF1	0.779			
	SSF2	0.777			
	SSF3	0.773			
	SSF5	0.770			
	FCS	FCS1			
FCS2		0.625			
FCS3		0.611			
FCS4		0.689			
FCS5		0.772			
CS	CS1	0.852	0.589	0.877	0.825
	CS2	0.785			
	CS3	0.763			
	CS4	0.739			
	CS5	0.689			
CL	CL1	0.783	0.571	0.869	0.812
	CL2	0.660			
	CL3	0.814			
	CL4	0.755			
	CL5	0.759			

Note: AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; Loadings > 0.50; AVE > 0.50; Composite reliability > 0.70; SSF4 was deleted because its outer loading value is less than 0.40.

The structural model represents the structural paths between the constructs, whereas the measurement models represent the relationships between each construct and its associated indicators (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Once the groups' manifests are reliable and valid, the next step is to assess the results of the structural model. This involves examining the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables. The structural theory involves testing the proposed hypotheses and addresses the relationships among the latent variables. Besides, it is carried out by checking the strength of the impact path of the independent variable on the dependent variable, and also the explanatory power (R^2). Another approach to assess predictive relevance is to apply the predictive sample reuse technique known as Stone-Geisler's Q^2 (Duarte & Amaro, 2018). The PLS-SEM adaptation of this approach follows a blindfolding procedure that omits part of the data for a particular block of indicators during parameter estimation and then attempts to estimate the omitted part using the estimated parameters (Duarte & Amaro, 2018).

4.4 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity is evidence that constructs that should not be strongly linked to each other are not highly correlated. Fornell and Larcker (1981) noted that discriminant validity was proved when the square root of each construct was higher than its highest correlation with any other construct. According to Hamid, Sami, and Sidek (2017), HTMT values close to 1 indicate a lack of discriminant validity. If the value of the HTMT is higher than this threshold, one can conclude that there is a lack of discriminant validity (Hamid et al., 2017). In this research, some contrast values exceeded 0.9. Hence, the researcher decided to use Fornell-Larcker as a criterion. Table 5 shows the discriminant validity by using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Based on Table 5, the square root of AVE for Servicescape is 0.756, Frontline Crew Service is 0.767, Customer Satisfaction is 0.712, and Customer Loyalty is 0.708. All these Square roots of AVE values are higher than the correlation estimates between those variables and other latent variables. Hence, these indicate adequate discriminant validity.

Table 5. Discriminant validity

	SVS	FCS	CS	CL
SVS	0.756			
FCS	0.511	0.767		
CS	0.422	0.653	0.712	
CL	0.706	0.382	0.422	0.708

The scope for future study is to test and validate this model by collecting the primary data from customer IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru, by using the Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) approach for hypothesis testing, and to investigate the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and frontline crew service and customer loyalty. In this study, a total of 5 hypotheses is tested. Bootstrapping of Smart-PLS 3 has been used to test these hypotheses. The hypotheses of this study were tested using a one-tailed test with a 0.05 confidence level. The reason for using a one-tailed test in this study is that the hypotheses proposed by this study are directional relationships among the latent variables. The model with 500 bootstrap samples at the 0.05 confidence level was tested by using SmartPLS 3 software. The hypothesis testing in this research is shown in Table 6, based on the path coefficient (β) and significance for this model. The t-values present the hypothesis for the independent and the dependent variable, and whether the hypothesis is supported or not based on the significance value. To assess statistical significance, the t-value must exceed 1.645 while the p-value must be not more than 0.05 to achieve the level of acceptance (Hair et al., 2018).

Table 6. Results of hypothesis testing

H	Path	Std. Beta	Std Deviation	T-Value	P-Value	Decision
H1	CS ->CL	0.511	0.071	7.154	0.000	Supported
H2	FCS -> CS	0.598	0.092	6.469	0.000	Supported
H3	SVS -> CS	0.129	0.068	1.892	0.030	Supported
H4	FCS -> CS-> CL	0.306	0.070	4.370	0.000	Supported
H5	SVS -> CS> CL	0.066	0.042	1.581	0.057	Not Supported

Based on Table 6, the t-value of H1 to H4 exceeded 1.645, and these 4 hypotheses are significant. On the other hand, the t-value of H5 is less than 1.645, which means the hypothesis is not significant. Besides, the p-values of H1 to H4 are less than 0.05. However, the p-value of H5 exceeded 0.05. It also means that the hypothesis does not achieve the level of acceptance. The standardised beta value of H1, which is the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, is 0.511, and its significant t-value is 7.154. Besides, the standardized beta value of H2 in the relationship between frontline crew service to customer satisfaction is 0.598, and its significant t-value is 6.469. Next, for the H3, which is the relationship between servicescape and customer satisfaction, H3 has 0.129 for the standardised beta value and 1.892 for the T-values. Lastly, for H4, the hypothesis is the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between frontline crew service and customer loyalty. Its standardised beta value is 0.306, and its t-value is 4.370. Therefore, all decisions for H1 to H4 are supported. Lastly, for H5, which is the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and customer loyalty. The standardised beta value is 0.066. However, the t-value is 1.581, which is less than 1.645. Besides, the p-value is 0.057, which exceeded 0.05. Both values indicate that H5 is not significant, and the decision should not be supported.

4.5 Assessment of R²

The next step involves reviewing the R2 value of each endogenous construct. The R2 is a measure of the variance explained in each of the endogenous constructs and is thus a measure of the model’s predictive accuracy (in terms of in-sample prediction). The R2 ranges from 0 to 1, with higher levels indicating a greater degree of predictive accuracy (Sarstedt et al., 2017). As a “rough” rule of thumb, R2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 may be considered substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively (Sarstedt et al., 2017). The standardized estimate of the structural model indicates that

44.00% of customer satisfaction is explained by the servicescape and frontline crew service. Next, the standardized estimate of the structural model indicates that 26.10% of customer loyalty is explained by customer satisfaction.

4.6 Coefficient of Determination (R²)

The effect size for each path model can be determined by calculating Cohen’s F². The F² is computed by noting the change in R² when a specific construct is eliminated from the model (Hair et al., 2014). F² measures the strength of each predictor variable in explaining endogenous variables (DV). Based on the F² value, the effect size of the omitted construct for a particular endogenous construct can be determined, such that 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Hair et al., 2014). Based on Table 7, servicescape has a small effect (0.024) on customer satisfaction, while frontline crew service has a large effect (0.525) on customer satisfaction. Besides, customer satisfaction has a large effect (0.354) on customer loyalty.

Table 7. Assessment of F²

Construct	Servicescape	Frontline Crew Service	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Loyalty
Servicescape	-	-	0.024	-
Frontline Crew Service	-	-	0.525	-
Customer Satisfaction	-	-	-	-
Customer Loyalty	-	-	-	0.354

4.7 Blindfolding (Q²)

Another means to assess the model’s predictive relevance is the Q² (also called blindfolding). The Q² builds on the blindfolding procedure, which omits a part of the data matrix, estimates the model parameters, and predicts the omitted part using the previously computed estimates (Sarstedt et al., 2017). The Q² values should be larger than 0 for the reflective endogenous variable (DV) to reflect the predictive relevance of the path model’s relevance (Sarstedt et al., 2017). Based on Table 8, both endogenous variables (DV) are greater than 0 with Q² values of 0.219 and 0.139. Hence, the PLS path model of the study has predicted relevance.

Table 8. Assessment of Q²

Q ²	Construct			
	Servicescape	Frontline Crew Service	Customer Satisfaction	Customer Loyalty
-	-	-	0.219	0.139

5. DISCUSSION

This study indicated the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and frontline crew service with customer loyalty in IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. Servicescape consists of ambience, space, functionality, and signs, symbols, and artefacts; while frontline crew service is a general service that customers perceive, both variables are independent. For customer satisfaction to act as a mediating variable, customer satisfaction is defined as an opinion that the product, service, or service itself offers a satisfactory level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Table 9. Summary of findings

No	Problem Statement	Research Question	Hypotheses	Remark
1	Inadequate information on the servicescape contributes to customer satisfaction.	What is the relationship between servicescape and customer satisfaction?	H1: Servicescape has a positive effect on customer satisfaction	Supported
2	Lack of competency of the frontline crew	What is the relationship between frontline crew service and customer satisfaction?	H2: Frontline crew service has a positive effect on customer satisfaction	Supported
3	Lack of information on servicescape and frontline crew to customer loyalty	What is the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and frontline crew services and customer loyalty?	H3: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on customer loyalty	Supported
4			H4: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on mediating servicescape and customer loyalty	Supported
5			H5: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on mediating frontline crew service and customer loyalty	Not supported

Lastly, customer loyalty is a dependent variable of this study and is defined as a consumer's commitment and intentions to continue to buy and consume preferred services over time. There are five hypotheses that will be discussed. The results of this study are based on the online questionnaire and bootstrapping testing of Smart-PLS. Table 9 shows the summary of the findings of this research. It includes the research problem statement, the research question statement, the hypotheses of the research, and the results of the research hypotheses. There are problem statements, research objectives, research questions, and hypotheses.

5.1 Servicescape and Customer Satisfaction

This study predicts that the first hypothesis, which is that there is a positive relationship between servicescape and customer satisfaction in IKEA Tebrau, Johor Bahru. Within the retailing context, Lee (2020) emphasized the importance of servicescape in giving customers a general perception of the characteristics of the store. Besides, the servicescape (ambience, space, functionality, signs, symbols, and artefacts) can contribute to IKEA's positioning in market segments. Therefore, when the customers are inspired by the general physical environment, it satisfies the overall customer experience (Shin & Yu, 2020). The t-value indicating the relationship between servicescape and customer satisfaction is 1.892. This t-value exceeds 1.645 of the threshold values, which indicates that the servicescape has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Besides, the p-value is 0.030, which is less than 0.050, and it achieved the level of acceptance.

5.2 Frontline Crew Service and Customer Satisfaction

This study predicts that the second hypothesis, which is that there is a positive relationship between frontline crew service and customer satisfaction. The t-value is 6.469, which exceeds the 1.645 threshold value. It means that frontline crew service and customer satisfaction have a statistically significant relationship. Besides, the p-value of this relationship is 0.000, which achieved the level of acceptance. Hughes et al. (2019) stated that the frontline crew is the one who can directly affect the customer experience and satisfaction. Considering the importance of interacting with staff, Pizam and Tasci (2019) mentioned that service providers should focus on human resource training to build up frontline crew competency to provide satisfactory service for customers.

5.3 Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

This study predicts that the third hypothesis, which is that there is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, is true. The t-value of this relationship is 7.154, which means that customer satisfaction and customer loyalty have a statistically significant relationship. Besides, the p-value of this relationship is 0.000, which achieved the level of acceptance. Previous research has supported that customer satisfaction is a significant determinant of customer loyalty (Sasikumar and Sundaram, 2024; Ali et al., 2021; Ali, Alam & Bilal, 2021; Ali et al., 2018). El-Adly (2019) states that if the customer is satisfied with the visiting experience, they have a higher chance of making a return visit and are willing to recommend the services to others. According to Sasikumar and Sundaram (2024), Abu-Alhaija, Hussein, and Allan (2019), and Darmawan (2019), customer satisfaction can result in loyal customers. Besides, in the retailing context, Helmefalk and Berndt (2018) also tested and proved the significant impacts of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty.

5.4 Customer Satisfaction as a Mediator

The 4th hypothesis of this study is the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between frontline crew service and customer loyalty. The t-value of this relationship is 4.370, which indicates this relationship is a significant positive relationship. Besides, the p-value of this relationship is 0.000, which achieved the level of acceptance. There are previous findings that emphasize that the interaction between customers and frontline crew can directly influence customers' degree of satisfaction and overall experience, which can lead them to their next visit decision (Ali et al., 2018). Lucia-Palacios et al. (2020) also proved that frontline crew service delivery can directly change customers' emotions and satisfaction. Hence, frontline crew service plays an integral role in creating a positive customer experience and then contributing to their next visit (Hughes et al., 2019). In this study, there is no supported hypothesis, which is the 5th hypothesis – the mediating effect of customer satisfaction in the relationship between servicescape and customer loyalty. The t-value is less than 1.581, which does not exceed the 1.645 threshold value. The p-value of this relationship is 0.057, which does not achieve the level of acceptance. In this research, servicescape is not a significant variable in contributing to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Based on the data analysis, frontline crew service has a higher R² value, which indicates it has a more significant impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty compared to servicescape.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The first significance of this study is to propose and test a holistic model of customer satisfaction and loyalty in the IKEA Tebrau Retail Store. The dimensions of this study included customer experience, frontline crew service, and servicescapes. Another theoretical importance of this study is operationalizing the concept of customer experience. This study uses the 'service theatre' model: similar to retail services as a theatre in which actors (i.e., front-line crews) serve the audience in their physical environment (i.e., customers). The interplay among the actors develops the whole customer experience. (i.e., clients) in (servicescape) (Hassan et al., 2015). The interplay between the actors, audience, and setting develops the overall experience of customers (Ali et al., 2018). In this study, the researcher emphasized frontline crew

service to customers, which directly affects their satisfaction besides the environmental setting. Lucia-Palacios et al. (2020) claimed that the frontline crew service influences customer satisfaction levels. The crew must perform in the retail shop. In most performances and meetings, personnel play an integral role that increases the frequency of customer interactions and the time frame of every interaction.

This study also mentioned that customer satisfaction is a significant predictor of customer loyalty, lending support to other research findings (Demoulin & Willems, 2019b). Customers are committed to a service provider because they have received an outstanding customer experience from the frontline service crew. Besides, several scholars emphasized the significance of customer satisfaction in marketing strategies (Al-Azzam et al., 2017). Specifically, research shows that if customers enjoy the experiences, it produces emotional bonds with a service provider (Al-Azzam et al., 2017; Putri, 2024). As a service user, customers are also likely to expect an experience which gives them positive emotions, such as excitement and joy, and then allows them to find more attractions from the service provider (Chen, Prebensen, & Uysal, 2024; & Aziz et al., 2018). It is only then that satisfied customers are loyal to the service provider (Milman & Tasci, 2018).

This study provides several practical significances for managers, especially retail store managers, on how to develop customer loyalty. To ensure excellent customer experience in retail stores, managers should manage the servicescape and frontline crew service when delivering services to customers. Management can collect customer information about the dimensions of customer satisfaction and the aspects that create “mental imprints” that may lead to their loyalty. Servicescape has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. This research indicates that ambience (i.e., temperature, smell, sound, lighting, and appearance), space symbols, and artefacts. A successful retail store shopping experience should engage the customer's main senses to ensure a superb experience. Furthermore, retail shop management should adapt to the overall environment and assess how these changes affect customer attitudes and behaviours (Dedeoglu et al., 2018).

In this study, the researcher also emphasized that frontline crew service affects customer satisfaction, which leads to customer loyalty. Management should provide adequate training, recognition, and rewards to employees to keep their motivation. Interaction between customers and frontline service crew can directly affect customer satisfaction when they are experienced in retail stores (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2014). The design of interaction points and support facilities to increase interaction with customers can contribute to a better customer experience. If all these two dimensions (service and front-line crew service) are properly combined, a positive customer experience can lead to delighted customers and customer satisfaction.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Airin AbdulGhani (Writing - original draft)

Puteri Fadzline Muhamad Tamyez and Husna Hashim (Writing - review & editing)

Norazidah Shamsudin and Imaduddin Abidin (Formal analysis)

Joel Barniego Tan and Mary Ann E. Tarusan (Methodology)

AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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