MPRI-EDIR | INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EARTH DESIGN AND INNOVATION RESEARCH
VOL. 02 NO. 1 OCT-2023 ISSN: 1116 - 2759

SPACE PERSONALIZATION AND PLACE ATTACHMENT OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN DORMITORIES: A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIAN STUDENTS IN EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Place attachment is important for the psychological stability of students, especially foreign students who leave their home environments for higher institutions outside of their familiar comfort zones. This research work has studied the relationship between space personalization and place attachment for Nigerian students living in Akdeniz dormitories of the Eastern Mediterranean University. The main objective of the study is to determine if space personalization creates feelings of attachment of foreign students to their dormitory and to the university. Quantitative, survey method was used for the research, where data was obtained by randomly distributing close-ended questionnaires to a sample of the Nigerian student population living in Akdeniz dormitory. Simple descriptive statistics was then used to analyze the data. The results confirmed that space personalization is generally important to Nigerian students in dormitories and that as a result of engaging in space personalization, most of the students admitted to some level of attachment to both their dormitories and to the university, thus showing a positive link between space personalization and place attachment. The study concludes by recommending that personalization of space be encouraged in student dormitories by dormitory designers and managers so as to ensure better bonding between foreign students and their environment, which could ultimately lead to better academic performances.

Keywords: Space Personalization, Place Attachment, Nigerian Students, Dormitory, Eastern Mediterranean University

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Introduction

Every year students leave their homes and move to various institutions to pursue their academic careers. International students who leave their countries and family settings to pursue studies in a culturally different environment may face greater challenges of adapting than local students who have no need for cultural adjustment. For some, the transition of leaving home and starting a new life in a new place is more demanding and stressful than for others.

One method which residents have often adopted in handling stressful situations is creating living environments which remind them of home. This is done through personalization of space. According to Thomsen (2007), personalization of private rooms is one of the highly appreciated ways by which sense of home can be created.

Attachment to learning and living environments is important for achieving a sense of stability in a student's" academic life. This statement is buttressed by Hay (1988) who states that there is a link between the ability to overcome emotional bonds and the ability to bond with a place. He further states that place bonding could even help in overcoming identity crises by giving people a sense of stability. Bogac, (2009), also states that "attachment to place forms an important part of the character development of an individual."

Over the years, Eastern Mediterranean University has become an important establishment on the island of Cyprus, drawing in students from far and near. The student population in E.M.U. is diversely multi-cultural, made up of a variety of both local and foreign nationalities. Among the diverse foreign student population in E.M.U., Nigerian students constitute a large number. Their population has witnessed a steady increase over the years, and as of the year 2016, the student population was registered at approximately 1,944 (International Office, E.M.U., 2016).

This study intends to look at the possible link between space personalization and place attachment of foreign students in dormitories. The emphasis of this research work will be on the Nigerian student population due to their substantial number in the E.M.U. community.

Problem Definition

Boarding students, particularly those from foreign countries, have a need to integrate well into their learning environments so that they can perform

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maximally in their academic pursuits. Space personalization has been identified as one of the ways by which students can express themselves and create feelings of home. Proper bonding and place attachment could ultimately have a positive effect on the academic performances of such students. Unfortunately, however, some student residential facilities are often designed and managed in such a way that residents are restricted from fully express themselves through space personalization.

Research Problem

Various research works have been done on topics that relate to student dormitories particularly in the areas of territoriality, privacy, sense of place and residential satisfaction. For example, AbuObeid & Ibrahim (2002) researched on the effect of dormitory type and room view on the perception of privacy and territoriality. Kaya & Weber (2003) did a cross –cultural study on the territorial behavior of American and Turkish students in residence halls while Khozaei, Ramayah & Sanusi, (2012) did a study on the role of housing satisfaction in creating sense of attachment to place and fulfillment. A recent related topic on space personalization in student's living environments in E.M.U. dormitories was done by Ayinde (2016) where she studied the personalizing behavior of Nigerian students living in dormitories.

Though these various studies have touched on various aspects of residential satisfaction, space personalization and place attachment in student dormitories, insufficient work has been done on the relationship between space personalization and place attachment of students in foreign countries to their dormitories and learning environments, with particular emphasis on African students. This research work attempts to bridge that gap by using Nigerian students as a case study.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research work is to determine the relationship between space personalization and attachment to place of Nigerian students living in E.M.U. dormitories. The sub-objectives are as follows:

1. To determine the importance of space personalization to Nigerian students.
2. To determine the factors which influence how Nigerian students personalize their spaces.

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3. To determine if space personalization creates feelings of attachment of Nigerian students to their dormitories and to E.M.U.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The experience of leaving home to a new learning environment may often prove a daunting and challenging task for some people. This is especially true for foreign students who may experience feelings of loss and insecurity while trying to adjust to a new environment. Chow & Healy (2008) state that some students experience feelings of displacement after leaving their homes, which until then had provided a grounding and safe place of safety, security and identity.

For students to be able to perform optimally in their academics, it is important that they integrate into their learning environment and become well adjusted. Residence halls, which are a 'home away from home' for students, are an integral part of the learning environment. Adapting to their residence halls and being able to feel it as a second home is important for foreign students. Thomsen (2007) states that when individuals provide solutions to their living spaces through space personalization, it may reduce a sense of institutionalization. Rowles (1990) is of the opinion that development of emotional bonds with places is a prerequisite of psychological balance and good judgment. This implies that for students, being able to personalize their living spaces makes such spaces feel more like home and less like institutions.

Personalization of Space

Personalization of space refers to the purposeful ornamentation, decoration, modification or rearrangement of an environment by its users to reflect their individual identities (Noorian, 2009). Various studies have been done trying to identify reasons behind space personalization and the factors that determine how and why people personalize their spaces. Lang (as cited by Kaya & Weber, 2003) identifies psychological security, aesthetic purposes and adaptation of physical environment as reasons for space personalization.

Personalization of space could be used as a means of dealing with stressful situations either in the dormitory or with issues related to other aspects of the students' academic life. For instance, Amole (2005) in a study carried out on living spaces in university residential facilities in Nigeria, established the fact that decorating of personal spaces was a major coping strategy which the students often used to deal with stress in their residential facilities.

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A closely related term to space personalization is territoriality. Abu-Obeid & Ibrahim (2002) define it as the control of spaces and areas in the physical environment. They go on to say that this control is often symbolized by personal objects, markers and other indicators of ownership. Altman, (1975) relates territorial behavior with the setting of physical boundaries which are clearly defined and also by the personalization of some environmental features. According to him, when people properly define their territories, it gives them a sense of security and they feel less threatened by intrusion from others,m due to the fact that they are able to restrict their level of social interaction through their territoriality. Noorian (2009) supports this view when she defines territoriality as 'a feeling of ownership of space which influences on social interaction.'

Humans have different needs when it comes to the desire for solitude, privacy, control and social contact. Lack of control over one's space might likely trigger unpleasant conditions for residents. According to Brown (1987), when territories are not clearly defined, conflicts may arise over claim to space ownership. Being able to define one's territory with clearly defined boundaries sets a limit to intrusion by others and helps to achieve a certain degree of privacy which, as explained by Noorian (2009), is achieved by the creation and controlling of interpersonal boundaries. Abu-Obeid & Ibrahim (2002) consider personal space and territorial behavior as two major mechanisms for attaining privacy. They emphasize that privacy and territoriality can help in achieving satisfaction of residents in dormitory environments.

Place Attachment

Most people, at some point in their lives develop feelings of attachment to a place due to some significant event which may have occurred in their lives at that particular place. Such attachments could help to define the character development of such an individual. Bogac (2009) describes place attachment as the act of 'falling in love with a place'. Such a place could be a city, a residence, dormitory, nursing home or even a working environment. Brown & Perkins (as cited in Chow & Healy, 2008) assert that place attachment clearly promotes and reflects stability which is not static, but is transformed in accordance with change in the people, their activities or processes, and the places involved in the attachments.

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The importance of the residence hall in students' level of adjustment and attachment to their environment cannot be overemphasized. In a study of first year students in their residence halls, Johnson et al (2007) observed that the atmosphere in the dormitories has a significant impact on students' sense of place attachment. Khozaei, Hassan & Khozaei (2010) support this view that a positive relationship can be found between housing satisfaction and a sense of attachment to place.

Attachment of students to their institutions should be encouraged by the institution because it has the potential to attract further patronage by prospective students. Thomas and Galombos (2004) buttress this point when they state that students' satisfaction is important to institutional success both because effective institutions should have satisfied customers and because satisfaction supports the recruitment of additional customers. Institutional managements should therefore make every effort to be involved in matters which relate to students' dormitories seeing the benefit which they also stand to gain when students are satisfied with their residences and are able to effectively bond to their institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative survey method was used for this paper. This was done primarily through literature review and field study. Information was obtained for the review from various sources such as books, past research projects, journals, articles and online sources. These helped to give background theoretical information related to the topic.

Field Study

Eastern Mediterranean University, also known as Dogu Akdeniz Universitesi, is located in Famagusta, North Cyprus and is one of the largest universities in North Cyprus. It was officially created as a state university and assumed the name of EMU in 1986. The university boasts an impressive campus with various faculties, schools, institutes and boards. A variety of programs are offered in the university which attract students from all over the world. Among the outstanding features of Eastern Mediterranean University are the impressive residential accommodations offered to students. Student dormitories are broken down into 2 categories, i.e., EMU owned dormitories and private dormitories, also

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known as Built-Operate-Transfer (B.O.T.), all of which are located within the campus. (See Fig. 1 for location of dormitory on EMU campus map).

For this field study, Akdeniz Dormitory was selected. It is one out of the seven private dormitories on the campus. The Akdeniz Student Dormitory Complex accommodates up to 1068 students with separate buildings for male and female students. The rooms are designed to accommodate two students each. The choice of this particular dormitory as a case study is because it houses a substantial number of Nigerian students, approximately 200 in all, broken down into about 50 female and 150 male students. (See Fig. 2&3 for photo of Akdeniz dormitory and diagram of room plan respectively).



Fig. 1. EMU Campus Map Showing Location of Akdeniz Dormitories in Red Box
Source: http://ww1.emu.edu.tr



Fig. 2. Akdeniz Dormitory Complex. Source: http://dormitories.emu.edu.tr/

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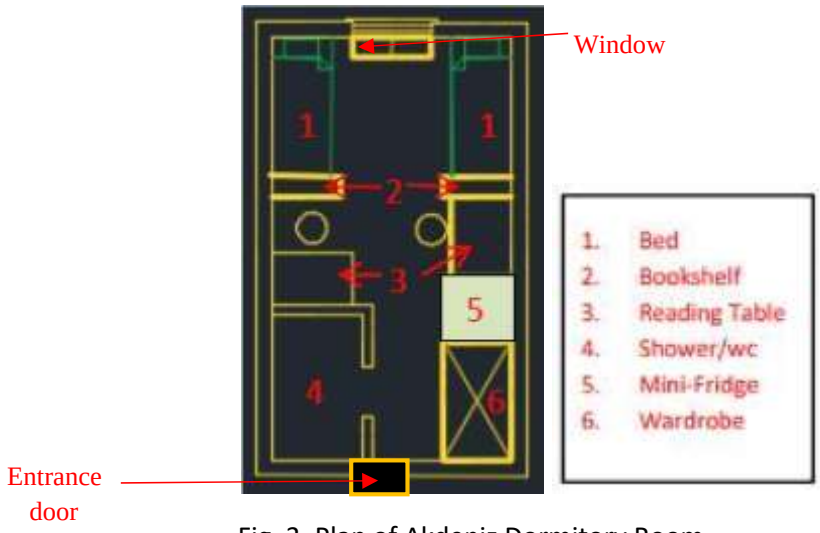


Fig. 3. Plan of Akdeniz Dormitory Room
Source: Drawn by author using AutoCAD

Data Collection Procedures

A sample of 20% percentage of the Nigerian student population was the target for the study. This amounted to 40 students (200/5). To collect data, close-ended questionnaires were randomly distributed to Nigerian students living in Akdeniz dormitory. Two methods were used for the distribution of questionnaires. The first involved going directly into the dormitory to give out the questionnaires. This was done in the female dormitory. The second method involved meeting the students outside as they were about to enter the dormitory. This method was adopted for the male students.

During the distribution, the purpose of the study was explained to the respondents. All the students who were approached willingly collected the questionnaires and completed them, some the same day while some others requested the researcher to come back the following day to collect them. Forty questionnaires were distributed and all were returned to the researcher. After analyzing the data, descriptive statistics was then used to evaluate the results.

Measures

Respondents completed a questionnaire composed of 4 parts. The first part was made of up general questions such as: age, gender, level of study, length of time spent in EMU and length of time spent in the dormitory. Part two was made up of seven questions related to personalization of space. Likert-type scale measures were used for five of the questions. The answers for these questions

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ranged from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree, while the other two questions required the respondents to tick the correct answers as it applied to them.

The questions in part two of the questionnaire are as follows:

- I have sufficient personal space in my dormitory room
- I don't like to see intruders in my space (Abu-Obeid & Ibrahim, 2012)
- I feel in control of my space
- I feel happy living in my room in the dormitory because I am able to personalize my space as I wish
- Putting up personal items around my living space is important to me
- Items I use to personalize my space include (please tick the ones which apply): pictures, posters, certificates, plants, personal belongings, others (please specify).
- I put up such personal items in order to (please tick the ones which apply): express my identity and individuality, show ownership of my space, remind myself of home, for aesthetics, express my cultural identity, others (please specify.)
- The way I personalize my space is influenced by: my friends, my religious beliefs, my

family attachment, my cultural affiliation, others (please specify).

The last part of the questionnaire dwelt on questions related to place attachment. It was comprised of ten questions which were all based on the Likert-type scale as those previously mentioned above. The questions were as follows:

- Being able to personalize my space makes me feel more attached to my dormitory
- I feel happy living in my dormitory
- I defend my dormitory when someone criticizes it
- I am proud of my dormitory
- I love being in EMU
- I defend EMU when someone criticizes
- I am proud of EMU
- I miss EMU when I am not here
- I want to be involved in everything that goes on in EMU

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- Being able to personalize my space makes me feel more attached to the school (EMU)

RESULTS

Respondents' Demographic Profile

The respondents" gender population is made up as follows: 25% female and 75% male. Seventytwo-point five percent (72.5%) of the respondents are between the ages of 18-23, while 25% are between the ages of 24-29; only 2.5% are above thirty. There are 80% undergraduates and 20% postgraduate students. For length of time spent in E.M.U., 12.5% have spent less than a year, 27.5 have spent one year, 17.5% have spent two years, 32.5% have spent three years and 10% have spent over three years. Length of time spent in Akdeniz dormitory varies as follows: 15% have spent less than a year, 30% have spent 1 year, 25% have spent two and three years respectively while 5% have spent over three years. (The respondents' demographic profiles are shown in Table 1).

Table 1 – Respondents' Demographic Profile

Demography		Categories	Percentage (%)
Gender		Female	25
		Male	75
Age		18-23	72.5
		24-29	25
		Above 30	2.5
Level of Study		Undergraduate	80
		MSc	17.5
		PhD	2.5
Length of Time Spent in E.M.U		Less than a year	12.5
		1 Year	27.5
		2 Years	17.5
		3 Years	32.5
		Above 3 years	10
Length of Time Spent in Dormitory	Akdeniz	Less than a Year	15
		1 Year	30
		2 Years	25

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		3 Years	25
		Above 3 Years	5

Results for Personalization of Space (POS), Attachment to Dormitory (ATD) and Attachment to EMU (ATEMU)

To evaluate these results, the questions were categorized and grouped together (i.e., POS, ATD, ATEMU). The sum of the values of each categorization was computed accordingly based on the answers strongly agree (SA), agree (A), neutral (N), disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD). The overall result for the various categories was then obtained by computing the mean value and then converting to get a percentage value.

The results revealed that personalization of space is important to Nigerian students in the dormitory (SA=34% and A=4%). Only few of the respondents had little interest in space personalization (D=4% and SD=2%). Most of the students use personal belongings to personalize their spaces (82.5%). Other items used include pictures (37.5%) and posters (30%) while a few use certificates (20%).

Reasons given for space personalization revealed that showing identity and individuality is the most popular for most respondents (67.5%). Other strong reasons are: for aesthetics (37.5%), and for showing ownership of space (32.5). The factors which carry the lowest values are 'to remind myself of home' (20%) and 'to show my cultural identity' (20%).

The results for 'factors which influence how Nigerian students personalize their spaces' show that the way the respondents personalize their spaces is largely influenced by their desire to express sense of home (family attachment - 52.5%). Other influential factors are personal taste (25%) and friends (20%) while culture (17.5%) and religion (15%) have the least influence. (See Table 2)

The results for attachment to the dormitory showed that most of the students felt a fairly strong sense of attachment to the dormitory and to EMU respectively because they were able to personalize their dormitory spaces (Attachment to dormitory: SA=28%, A=41.3%; attachment to EMU: SA=18.5%, A=35.5%). About 1% expressed little to no attachment to the dormitory (D=1%, SD=0%) and 18% showed little to no sense of attachment to EMU (D=14%, SD=4%).

(The results are shown in Table 3).

Table 2: Personalization of Space

	Categories	Percentage
Space personalization is important to me	Strongly Agree	34
	Agree	4
	Neutral	56

	Disagree	4
	Strongly Disagree	2
Items I use to personalize my space	Pictures	37.5
	Posters	30
	Certificates	20
	Plants	0
	Personal belongings	82.5
Reason I personalize my space:	To show my identity and individuality	67.5
	To show ownership of my space	32.5
	To remind myself of home	20
	For aesthetics	37.5
	To express my cultural identity	20
	Others	2.5
The way I personalize my space is influenced by…	My friends	20
	My religion	15
	My desire to express sense of home (family attachment)	52.5
	My cultural affiliation	17.5
	My personal taste	25

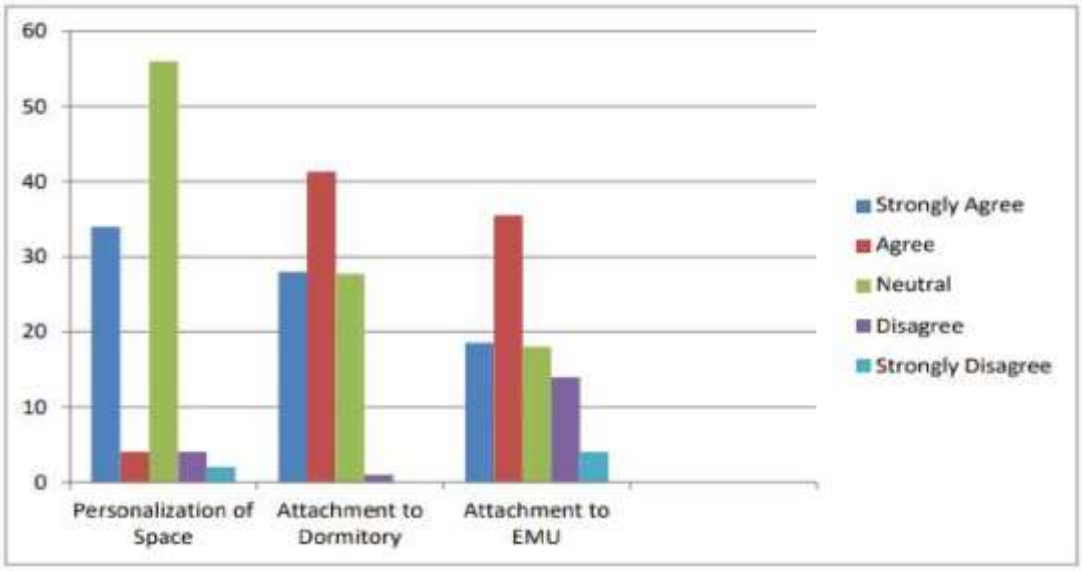
Table 3: Attachment to the Dormitory and the University

	Categories	Percentage of Respondents
I feel a fairly strong sense of attachment to the dormitory	Strongly Agree	28
	Agree	41
	Neutral	30
	Disagree	1
	Strongly Disagree	0

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I feel a fairly strong sense of attachment to EMU	Strongly Agree	18.5
	Agree	35.5
	Neutral	28
	Disagree	14
	Strongly Disagree	4

Fig. 4- Bar Chart Showing Importance of Space Personalization, Attachment to EMU and Attachment to Dormitory



CONCLUSION

Residential satisfaction is important for the adjustment of students in their learning environments. When a student is happy with where he/she is staying, the chances are high that he/she will perform well in his academics. One important component of residential satisfaction is the freedom of a student to personalize his/her living space. This enables a resident to create a homey environment which could lead to better bonding with his living space and institution.

This study set out to investigate the importance of space personalization to foreign students living in dormitories and to determine whether there is any relationship between space personalization and place attachment of these students to their dormitories and to the university environment. The overall intention was to look at these issues from the African perspective using Nigerian students as the case study.

At the end of the study, the researcher was able to confirm that personalization of space is indeed important to Nigerian students and that there is a positive relationship between space personalization and place attachment for these students to the dormitory and to the university.

Identification of the relationship between personalization of space and place attachment can provide useful insights into student accommodation issues. Designers and university administrators may find this information useful towards integrating effective and relevant strategies which ensure that students have the freedom to personalize their spaces without undue restriction. This could in the long run affect students' ability to bond to their learning environment and thus positively affect their academic performance.

As a recommendation for further studies, a cross-cultural study can be undertaken so as to compare the personalizing behavior of people from different cultures. A comparative study can also be undertaken to compare the feelings of attachment to place between those living in dormitories on campus and those who live outside the campus.

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