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Sense of Place and Customer Experience: Case Study in the State of Alaska

By

Maryam Al Ali

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Of

Doctorate in Business Administration

in the Robinson College of Business

Of

Georgia State University

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

ROBINSON COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

2022

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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the MARYAM AL ALI Dissertation Committee. It has been approved and accepted by all members of that committee, and it has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate in Business Administration in the J. Mack Robinson College of Business of Georgia State University.

Richard Phillips, Dean

## DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

*Dr. Satish V. Nargundkar (Chair)*

*Dr. Lars Mathiassen*

*Dr. Subhashish Samaddar*

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Thank you, God, for all the blessings.

They say, it seems impossible until it's done. This is how I would like to describe my Doctorate journey.

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Now that I am on the other side of this, I would like to share the journey. It all started in 2014 when I was about to finish my Masters Degree in the United Arab Emirates. I started looking for the right university. It was harder than I thought, so I started looking for conferences that could educate me on Doctorate Programs. This is when I came across the EMS conference in 2014 that was held in Tulsa Oklahoma.

At that conference, I got really overwhelmed learning about all the things I had to do to get my doctorate, and at that very conference, I met Dr. Lars Mathiassen. Dr. Lars taught me a lot about what the program at Georgia State University can offer me. He left our meeting telling me that he will see me soon as a student.

Two years later, I visited Atlanta for the very first time, and I decided to visit the campus in Buckhead to learn more about the program. It was then that I decided to apply for the DBA program at Georgia State University. I got accepted in 2017, to be a student in 2018.



I thought the most challenging part in this whole journey would be traveling monthly from Dubai all the way to Atlanta, on a trip that has a duration of 24 hours to get to my classes, then stay three nights in Atlanta per residency. However, that was the least of my concerns when I got to my first class that I realize it is a harder journey, but the reward will be remarkable.

Quitting is not a virtue of those who want to go ahead and create an impact in this universe, whatever life throws at you keep moving forward, it is the only way.

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## ABSTRACT

Sense of Place and Customer Experience: Case Study in the State of Alaska

By

Maryam Al Ali

November 2022

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Satish V. Nargundkar

Major Academic Unit: Doctorate in Business

Business owners aspire to create a great customer experience for their clients. They want their customers to buy their products or use their services and come back for more. This study examines the relationship between *Sense of Place* and *Customer Experience* using the Case Study Approach. The key research question addressed is “How does *Sense of Place* influence Customer Experience?” A case study approach was used to study this relationship in the tourism industry in the State of Alaska. Literal and theoretical replication was used to study convergence and variation. A typology of the reasons for attachment to a place was applied to customer experiences at Outdoor Business (a tour business) and an Indoor Business (a café). Insights were gained about the strength and types of attachment formed among visitors and locals. The literature suggests three reasons for attachment to a place – Form (cognitive), Activity (behavioral), and Meaning (affective/emotional). The effects of these three reasons were examined for each of the four stages of a customer’s experience - Consider, Evaluate, Buy, and Bond. Implications for theory and practice are discussed as well.

**Keywords:** Customer Experience, Sense of Place, Participant Observer, Alaska.

## PERSONAL MOTIVATION

It started when I visited Alaska in November 2018. Three places – Fairbanks, Coldfoot and Livengood – resonated with me for reasons I did not understand. The resonance did not make any sense, since I was born and raised and still live in the United Arab Emirates, where the weather is mostly hot and humid throughout the year compared to the brutally cold winter in Alaska. I started investigating why certain places resonate with people while others do not. I started looking into geography, psychology, human behavior, landscape, and tourism, to understand my Alaskan experience. The Alaskan Experience was my introduction to the term *Sense of Place*. As a result of my investigation, I went back to visit Alaska for the second time in March 2019 and visited the three locations to assure myself that Sense of Place is a real phenomenon and not a result of a jetlag or the long trip to Alaska. During the second trip, I met many people who I asked about the reasons why they keep visiting Alaska or why they decided to move to Alaska. After several experiences, I confirmed that I was not the only one who experienced the attraction to Alaska. In this study I investigate Sense of Place further from the viewpoint of Customer Experience. I was a customer in several businesses in Alaska, some of which I loved and some I was in indifference to, such as restaurants, hotels, tourism experience and transportation. It served as the impetus for me to try to understand the relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience.

## I INTRODUCTION

A sense of place is a common experience for all human beings. We are sometimes drawn to a place for no apparent reason and sometimes with good reason, such as the fact that we might have been born there, or experienced something pleasant or exciting there, or simply find the place aesthetically pleasing. Likewise, a place may repel us for various reasons, perhaps due to unhappy memories. The reaction to a place could also be one of indifference – perhaps a traveling consultant that is indifferent to hotels in various cities, each of which seems essentially the same. Regardless of the reaction, it is undeniable that places have effects on people. The interactions between places, their topologies, geographical features, and the people who live there shape the cultures of different places. Among the early work done on Sense of Place was a book by David Canter, where he defines Sense of Place as the relationships between activity, imagination and form (Canter, 1977). I am writing this paper during the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact of Sense of Place is undeniable.

*COVID-19 is fundamentally disrupting Sense of Place. It is causing transformative change in cities all over the world. Daily parts of city life, like shared seating, busy trains and eating out, have suddenly become threatening (The Conversation, 2020).*

As human activity in a place changes, so does one's perception of the sense of place. Sense of Place could refer to one's experience with any place. When it comes to businesses, the idea of Customer Experience has emerged in the past couple of decades, with an emphasis on managing that experience to create customer loyalty. Research in Marketing moved over the decades from looking at a customer's experience at the point of sale to taking a more holistic view of the customer experience at every stage of their interaction with a business. While both Sense of Place and Customer Experience speak to the concepts of experience in the cognitive,



affective and behavioral domains, little research has been done to understand the connection between a general sense of place and how it might affect a customer's experience with a business.

This study will attempt to fill that gap in the literature by studying the relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience. The goal of this study is to bring an in-depth understanding of the theory of Sense of Place and its relationship with Customer Experience. This research will take a case study approach and study two businesses in the State of Alaska.

Potential Theoretical Contribution: The goal is to contribute to theory by bringing an understanding of the theory Sense of Place within a business context. Sense of Place has been studied in graphical designing, environmental studies, and human geography. This paper aims at contributing to the body of knowledge by bringing more insights on how businesses can enhance and elevate Customers experiences through cultivating a Sense of Place.

#### Potential Practical Contribution

This study can help managers and decision-makers understand the importance of Sense of Place and its relationship to Customer Experience. The results of this study could lead to a model for businesses to follow that can elevate their Customer Experience.

The sections that follow in this document include a systematic review of the literature on Sense of Place and Customer Experience, identification of the gap in the literature that leads to the research questions, and the detailed methodology for data collection and the planned data analysis approach for the research.

## II LITERATURE REVIEW

### II.1 Sense of Place

Sense of Place is a relatively vague concept that has created some interest among researchers in the past few decades in the fields of geography, archaeology, architecture, cultural studies, and in business, particularly the tourism industry. People and cultures have always been associated with specific geographical locations, and there is in most humans an attachment to specific places. The difficulty lies in clearly defining what a Sense of Place means, and how it affects (and is affected by) human activity. Relph (1976) suggests that imposing precise but arbitrary definitions will not help in clarifying the matter, and that some subjectivity in understanding it is necessary. Still, many attempts have been made to come to terms with the concept.

Among the earliest publications that examined the relationship between people and places was by Carl Sauer (1925), who coined the term *Cultural Geography*. Sauer was interested in studying how people adapted to environments. Sauer was probably the most influential cultural geographer of the twentieth century. Throughout his career, he maintained his love of rural places, simple economies, and ancient cultures. In 1925, Sauer published his book *The Morphology of Landscape*, in which he argues that geography is not merely the physical landscape, but should be a study of the interplay between human activity that shapes the landscape, and in turn, the way the landscape shapes human culture. He considered human impacts on the landscape to be a manifestation of culture. Therefore, he argued, to understand a culture, a geographer must learn to read the landscape.

In 1927, Carl published the article "Recent Developments in Cultural Geography," which considered how cultural landscapes are made up of "the forms superimposed on the physical landscape." His paper argued that the physical location of specific geography influences the

culture and human behavior within that particular location. According to the Cultural Landscape Foundation, Cultural landscapes are landscapes that have been affected, controlled, or shaped by human involvement.

*A cultural landscape can be associated with a person or event. It can be thousands of acres or a tiny homestead. It can be a grand estate, industrial site, park, garden, cemetery, campus, and more. (Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2020)*

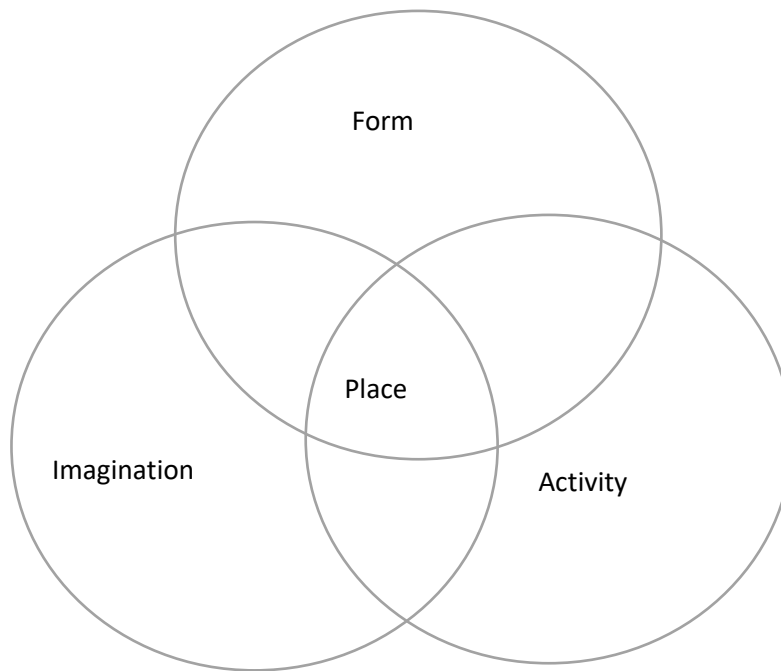
Collectively, cultural landscapes are works of art, narratives of culture, and expressions of regional identity.

## **II.2 Defining Sense of Place**

Edward Relph (1976), in his dissertation in Geography titled “Place and Placelessness”, conducted a phenomenological study of the significance of place in people’s lives. Among his many contributions is the idea of insideness and outsideness. Insideness refers to a state of identification with a place, of feeling “at home”. Outsideness, likewise, is a sense of alienation or lack of identification with a place. This explains, for example, a person feeling homesick in a new place. The most extreme forms of these concepts are described by him as existential insideness and existential outsideness. He also spoke of experiences that people have with place as being on a scale of authentic to inauthentic. An authentic experience is an organic one that is not mediated through social expectations or fashions about what the experience should be. In modern times, he argues, experiences are becoming more inauthentic (what he called placelessness), as standardization robs places of their unique identities. Relph could not have foreseen the extent to which shared experiences on social media today have further eroded

authenticity as people's expectations of a place are often set before they genuinely experience it themselves.

David Canter (1977) was one of the earliest to define the concept of *Sense of Place* as the relationships between three attributes activity, imagination, and form, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: David Canter's definition of Sense of Place**

This model developed by Canter is known as the Sense of Place Model, with place at the heart of the attributes. *Form* refers to the physical characteristics of the place, and a person's intellectual processing of those characteristics. For instance, a person may like living in a city because of attributes that are easily processed and communicated, such as "I like the proximity to the ocean", "I like the convenience of a major airport", etc. *Activity* relates to the behaviors associated with a place that one might engage in, and which therefore create an attachment to the place. In a city, for instance, these might include the ability to eat out at many types of restaurants, attend cultural events, visit art galleries, etc. The third attribute, *Imagination* (also

referred to as Meaning by some reserachers) is more difficult to express, since it involves the emotions or feelings of the person regarding a place. A place may generate in a person a strong feeling of attachment (also possibly detachment or fear or other emotions) for reasons that are not clear to that person.

Canter's (1977) attributes of form, behavior and imagination can be mapped to the cognitive, behavioral, and affective (emotional) domains. Cognitive aspects of the interaction are the rational relationship between humans and the physical form, Behavioral aspects speak to the human activity associated with the place. The emotional interaction between humans and their imagination of the place builds a sense of belonging and attachment (Low & Altman, 1992).

Tuan (1977) defined place as "a center of meaning and a field of care". Sense of Place is related to people's knowledge of a place, the activities they perform within a place, and the social relationships and emotions associated with the Place. Tuan coined the term Topophilia to describe a person's affinity to a place, and suggested that like love at first sight, a long duration of interaction with a location is not always necessary to create a sense of place. Bourdieu (2002) defined Sense of Place as it refers to the concept of 'genius loci', relating to the spirit of a place.

*The notion adopted here refers to the traditional approach focused on the uniqueness of a place, determined by its atmosphere, and the meanings collectively associated with it. It involves paying attention to what unites people who share a place, their 'habitus', defined as 'asystem of dispositions, that is, of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking' (Bourdieu, 2002).*

Other scholars, such as Stedman (2003), Manzo (2005) also identified Sense of Place as the natural environment of a place and its cultural or social characteristics that lead people to connect with Place.

### **II.3 Typology of Sense of Place**

Jennifer Cross (2011) made headway in understanding Sense of Place beyond the general definitions and came up with a typology to understand it in more specific terms. She states in her paper that she was frustrated with the concept of Sense of Place as there was no clear definition of what it means. She came to conclude that Sense of Place has two aspects, relationship to place and community attachment. The first aspect, relationship to place, consists of the ways that people relate to places or the types of bonds they have with specific places. Cross categorized the relationship to place into six specific types: biographical, spiritual, ideological, commodified, and dependent. Table 1 (reproduced from Cross, 2001) shows the six types with brief descriptions.

**Table 1: Relationships to Place (reproduced from Cross, 2001)**

<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Type of Bond</b>	<b>Process</b>
Biographical (9)	historical and familial	being born in and living in a place, develops over time
Spiritual	emotional, intangible	feeling a sense of belonging, simply felt rather than created
Ideological	moral and ethical	living according moral guidelines for human responsibility to place, guidelines may be religious or secular
Narrative (9)	mythical	learning about a place through stories, including: creation myths, family histories, political accounts, and fictional accounts
Commodified	cognitive (based on choice and desirability)	choosing a place based a list of desirable traits and lifestyle preferences, comparison of actual places with ideal
Dependent (9)	material	constrained by lack of choice, dependency on another person or economic opportunity

Each of the above types of relationships is described below in more detail, with illustrative examples from people's experiences.

### ***II.3.1 Biographical Relationship to Place***

Cross has identified biographical relationship as based on the individual's personal history and connectivity with the Place. It is the result of living in one place for a period of time long enough to develop strong relationships with the place and the community.

**Amna:** Amna was known as one of the elderly ladies in Umm Al Quwain in the United Arab Emirates. She lived in her own house for over 70 years. Amna had

four children; however, due to the harsh living condition in in the 1950s and lack of medical care, all her children passed away before her. Although she lived alone for over 70 years, everyone in town knew who Amna was. I used to visit her with my grandma. My grandma was one of Amna's best friends; grandma would visit Amna in her house and drink coffee and enjoy the dates that Amna gets from her palm trees at her own home. When my grandma died, I would visit Amna with my aunt. We would ask her often why she does not want to leave her house, especially that it was so worn down. She never answered the question, but she would just look around like she recalls some memories or experiences. In 2019, Amna went to stay over at a friend's house, and during that night her house was robbed. I remember that I visited her with my aunt on the day after the robbery. We learned that day that she was asked to leave her house as it will be demolished for new projects. Amna could not handle the fact that her house will be demolished and the robbery added to her grief. A few days later, Amna was admitted to the hospital due to health conditions. I visited her twice in the hospital, and every time I would see her, my heart ached to see how she would not speak although she could recognize who is in the room. Within three months of that incident, Amna passed away.

### ***II.3.2 Spiritual Relationship to Place***

Cross describes this relationship as intangible and mysterious connection to place, that shows a strong sense of belonging to the Place without apparent reasons. According to her, there is a strong intuitive relationship to a place, and it is not necessarily physical or cognitive relation, it is just emotional.

**Maryam:** I visited Alaska for the very first time on November 18, 2018. Immediately the moment I stepped out from Fairbanks Airport; I was greeted with a brutally cold wind that froze my cheeks. At that moment, I had a sense of spiritual calm, like I am home. At that moment, I thought I was tired, or it is a result of early jetlag hitting me. As I was going through my Alaskan experience, I came across two more locations in Livengood and Coldfoot. These were two rural areas in Alaska. Livengood is 49.5 miles north of Fairbanks, and Coldfoot is 11 hours drive north of Fairbanks with stops along the way. The day it hit me that I have a spiritual connection to Alaska was on the day of me leaving, it was on thanksgiving. I felt so sad, and I did not want to pack my bags and leave. I felt connected to the Place spiritually, that gave me a sense of calmness and belonging, and I did not understand why.



### ***II.3.3 Ideological Relationship to Place***

Cross described this relationship as one based on conscious values and beliefs, as opposed to the spiritual one that simply happens. You live in a place with other people and form a community that has similar values and support each other in various aspects of life.

**Dan:** I met Dan in November 2019 during my third trip to Alaska. At the time, it was Dan's third month in Alaska. Dan works in an isolated area in Alaska doing tours to the Atigun Pass and the driving tour buses to small villages to hunt for the Northern Lights. I did not think about Dan's story until my fourth visit to Alaska in October 2020. I was with a group of other four people who came to Alaska to look for the lights. We visited the rural area in Alaska together, where we met up with Dan. The group who was with me were curious about Dan's story. Dan shared with us that he is from Boston and that he is a Harvard graduate with honours. He studied geography and worked in a Lab in Boston. According to him, "I had not much going on for me in Boston, and I looked for the next place where I can be in the middle of nowhere, and my journey brought me to Alaska". Dan also mentioned to us that when he came to the camp where he is working, he was greeted with other men who shared similar experiences to Dan's. They formed a community where they connected and supported each other to assure that anyone visiting their camp will get the best experience there is. The last thing that Dan shared, which showed how strong is his ideological relationship to the Place, was that "you have access to people who want help if you want to learn how there are always opportunities".

### ***II.3.4 Narrative Relationship to Place***

Cross described the fourth relationships as a narrative relationship, inspired by stories of places we heard growing up that teach us about the history of the Place and the connection to it. Some of these stories could be mere myths, stories we heard from my elders, or experiences people share about places they have been to that we did not experience ourselves. Images from movies and television also shape the relationship one has with a place.

**Raj:** I had always heard stories of the sacred rivers of India, and when I got a chance to see the Ganges river and dip my feet in the water, I felt a connection with the place, as though I was meant to be there. Rationally, the river and its water were like any other, but it felt special because I was always told how this particular river was venerated in India above all others.

### ***II.3.5 Commodified Relationship to Place***

Cross explains the commodified relationship as the relationship of choice where the individual chooses a place based on specific aspects and features. This relationship bridges the gap between the features of the desired place and how well a particular place matches that desired ideal place.

**Ken:** We moved from the previous house to this one mainly for the location. The school district was better, there was better access to highways, so we could get to any part of the city within 30 minutes. The commute to work was less, with access to public transportation when needed. Above all, it was relatively less expensive to live here.

### ***II.3.6 Dependent Relationship to Place***

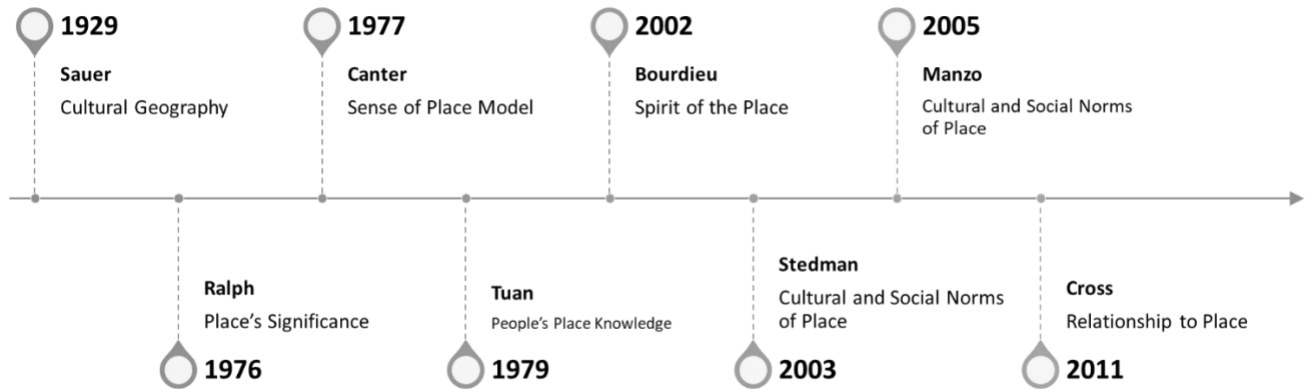
Finally, Cross identifies the dependent relationship, where the individual has no choice but to live in that Place due to someone else's decision to be in that Place. For example, kids who live where their parents live, a wife who would go to live where her husband works or a job requirement that require an employee to move to a specific business location.

**Joy Griffin:** Joy Griffin (1995) followed her husband Dick from New York to Alaska, when he decided that the family will move to the last frontier. Joy, in her book, *Sweet Home Homestead*, described that she has never thought in her life that she would live off the grid in a cabin with her husband. They moved to Alaska because her husband retired from the army and decided to live in a hill 49.5 mile north of Fairbanks. Joy followed her husband with their 7-year-old twins to Alaska because it was his wish, and she would go anywhere with him. In her words,

*Anyone in our age out to have known better. Dick and I were newly, madly in love. That was all that matter that summer of 1967 as we rolled across the continent from New York hauling all our possessions to homestead in Alaska. Of course, in my romantic state, I would have followed him anywhere.*

According to Cross (2001), a person may have more than one type of relationship with a place, and the degree of connection to a place or rootedness one feels in a place is a function of the combination of the various types of relationships that a person has with the place.

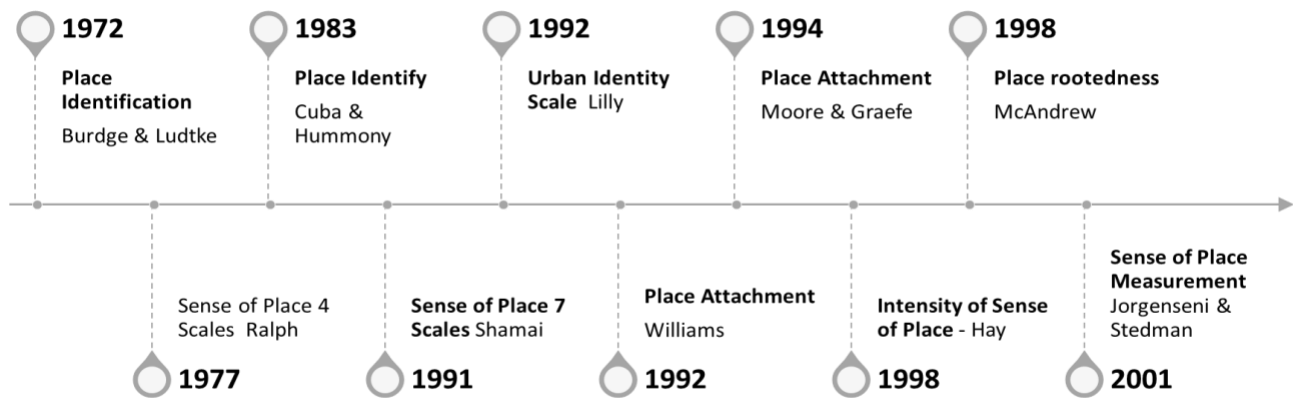
Figure 2 shows a summary timeline with some of the key authors and their contribution to the definition of Sense of Place.



**Figure 2: Defining Sense of Place**

## II.4 Measuring Sense of Place

Due to the difficulty of defining Sense of Place with any degree of clarity, the literature is relatively sparse in terms of measuring it. A fraction of those have measured it did so as part of quantitative research, such as the work done by Shamai (1991), Lalli (1992), and Jorgensen & Stedman (2001). Figure 3 looks at some of the measurements of different aspects of Sense of Place found in the literature.



**Figure 3: Measuring Sense of Place**

Burdge and Ludtke (1972), studied the attachment of individuals to their residential area, and introduced the 'Identification with place' scale. They included 12 questions on a Likert scale to measure a person's identity with ("This area is in my blood, it is really a part of me") and attachment to ("I don't really feel any strong attachment to this place") the residential areas. They concluded that a strong identification with place was related to a fear of moving to another location and start new relationships with another community and place.

Relph's (1976) created a scale for measurement of Sense of Place that included four levels along a single dimension - no feeling toward the place, belonging to a place, attachment to a place and commitment to a place.

Shamai's (1991) studied the influence of school on the sense of place of Jewish students in Toronto, Canada, and for this study he developed a scale of seven levels as an extension of Relph's (1976) work. As with Relph's (1976) measure, these levels were along a single dimension ranging numerically from 0 to 6. He suggested that Sense of Place consists of three phases: belonging, attachment, and commitment. Each of these phases were split into two levels on his scale, and the seventh level (represented by 0 on his scale) was a lack of any Sense of

Place. The seven levels of sense of place are: No Sense of Place (0), Knowledge of being Located in a Place (1), Belonging to a Place (2), Attachment to Place (3), Identifying with the Place Goals (4), Involvement in a Place (5) and Sacrifice for the Place (6).

Lalli (1992) developed the Urban Identity Scale. This scale had subscales for urban-related identity: Evaluation, Familiarity, Attachment, Continuity, and Commitment. The subscale had their own meaning for each sublevel. Evaluative addressed the uniqueness of the town relative to other towns (e.g., 'There are many things here which are envied by other towns'). Familiarity - cognitive orientation grounded in everyday experience, and was measured with items such as 'When I amble through Heidelberg, I feel very strongly that I belong here'. Attachment - feelings of belonging and measured it with items like 'I feel really at home at Heidelberg.' Continuity - it is defined as the extent to which the respondents perceives their past experiences as being synonymous with the history of the town. 'Lots of things in the town remind me of my own past.' Commitment - stay a future relationship with the town (e.g., 'I would like to stay in Heidelberg indefinitely'). The subscales showed strong correlations with one another. While the wording on the scale and the number of levels were different from that of Shamai (1991), the scale essentially did the same thing - tried to get at the level of attachment to a place along one dimension.

Cuba and Hummon (1993), measured Sense of Place based on dimensions of Place identity. Their measurement looked at three specific dimensions of Identity, namely: Existence ("Do you feel at home here?"), Emotions ("Why do you feel at home here?"), and Locus ("Do you associate feeling at home with living in this particular house or apartment, community?"). This helped study the reason for attachment, but not the intensity of it, as previous researchers had done.

Moore and Graefe (1994) tested Williams (1992) place attachment model in their research. Their research had two elements, Place Dependence (how well the place serves instrumental values or goal achievement) and Place identity (fact-based statement about symbolic values of the setting).

Hay (1998) created yet another unidimensional scale measuring the intensity of Sense of Place for a community in Banks Peninsula, New Zealand. The scale was a summation of four equally weighted variables - attachment level, motivation to remain in the setting, ancestry, and insider feelings.

McAndrew's (1998) measurement of Sense of Place addressed place attachment linked to rootedness. McAndrew looked at the positive and negative dimensions of rootedness, which were measured by six belief statements under 'Desire for Change ' (e.g., 'Moving from Place to Place is exciting and fun'). The negative dimension was measured with four belief statements and labelled 'Home/Family Satisfaction' and included items such as 'I love to reminisce about the places I played when I was a child'. McAndrew used orthogonal rotation in his principal analysis; the study found that the two dimensions of rootedness were not correlated.

Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) defined Sense of Place as a multidimensional construct comprising of three components. The first component speaks to the beliefs about the relationship between one's self and Place, referred to in their Research as Place Identity. The second component speaks to the feelings toward the Place, referred to in this paper as Place Attachment. The third component speaks to the behavior associate to the Place, referred to in their paper as Place Dependence. The researcher developed a 12-item scale to test a sample of lakeshore property owners in northern Wisconsin (Table 2).

**Table 2: Scale Items (reproduced from Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001)**

Factor	Item label	Item description
Place identity	IDENTITY1	Everything about my lake property is a reflection of me.
	IDENTITY2	My lake property says very little about who I am.
	IDENTITY3	I feel that I can really be myself at my lake property.
	IDENTITY4	My lake property reflects the type of person I am.
Place attachment	ATTACH1	I feel relaxed when I'm at my lake property.
	ATTACH 2	I feel happiest when I'm at my lake property.
	ATTACH3	My lake property is my favorite place to be.
	ATTACH4	I really miss my lake property when I'm away from it for too long.
Place dependence	DEPEND1	My lake property is the best place for doing the things that I enjoy most.
	DEPEND2	For doing the things that I enjoy most, no other place can compare to my lake property.
	DEPEND3	My lake property is not a good place to do the things I most like to do.
	DEPEND4	As far as I am concerned, there are better places to be than at my lake property.

Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) analyzed data to determine if the latent structure of Sense of Place consisted of the three dimensions as shown above, or whether all items collapsed to a single dimension. They found that the correlations between items indicated that Sense of Place was better interpreted as a unidimensional construct. This suggests that Identity, Attachment, and Dependence may not be unique concepts – rather, they are reducible to a single factor.

Miller (2012) studied some of the factors in the formation and success of small business innovation networks. The research was conducted in Temecula valley in California, where she went to interview owners and managers at the wineries to understand the roles of decision making and strategy development. The research identified a significant sense of place embedded in the regional culture and the importance of effective regional planning in positively impacting the success of the small business innovation network. Her research suggests that a further study of the effect of a sense of place on business success would contribute to both theory and practice.

## II.5 Customer Experience

*The Customer Experience can thus be conceptualized as holistic, comprised of multiple interactions across touchpoints involving the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social and sensory elements (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).*

A customer's experience with a business may be interpreted as analogous to (or perhaps a microcosm of) a person's overall experience with a location or community. If the latter leads to a sense of place, perhaps a customer's experience with a business can also lead to a bonding that is similar in nature. Lemon & Verhoef's (2016) statement quoted above uses language very similar to the definitions of Sense of Place found in the literature.

The literature on Customer Experiences goes as far back as the 1950s. According to Abbot (1955), people's desires are not related to products but satisfying experiences. In the 1980s, the focus on the behavioral aspects of Customer Experience started to surface. This is evident in the work done by several researchers (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989). Their work focused on the emotional aspects of decision making and how that impacts the overall Customer Experience.

More recently, Pine and Gilmore (1998) conceptualized the idea of "experiences" as a separate attribute that is beyond the products or services provided by the business owners. They suggested that a customer purchases an experience to "spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a business stages to engage him in an inherently personal way." Since then, the past couple of decades have seen several themes emerge in the literature that contribute to a deeper understanding of Customer Experience.



## **II.6 Customer Experience Themes in the Literature**

### ***II.6.1 Customer Experience as an interaction***

Chiara, Spiller and Noci (2007) explored that Customer Experience originates from a series of interactions between a customer and a particular business. Additionally, Meyer and Schwager (2007) and Schmitt (2015) concluded in their research that customers' experience includes all stages of a customer's interactions with an business. Voorhees (2017), similarly suggests that Customer Experience takes place throughout many interactions relevant to a core service offering, including multiple “moments of truth” that influence customer outcomes. Brakus and Zarantonello (2015) argued that every service exchange leads to a Customer Experience, regardless of its nature and form. Edvardsson (2010) work emphasizes on the importance of the social interaction between customers and employees, the role that technology plays in the experience and the physical attributes of the service.

### ***II.6.2 Customer Experience from a Business Perspective***

Kranzbühler (2017) looks at Customer Experience from an businessal perspective on the intentional experience the business wants their customers to have. Bolton (2016) identified and summarized Customer Experience as the intentional focus on designing and delivering the experience. Meyer and Schwager (2007), defined the Customer Experience as the overall experience businesss are offering their customers including the quality of customer care, advertising, packaging, product and service features, ease of use, and reliability. In summary, it is the direct or indirect contact the customers have with the business. This summary was backed up with the work done by De Keyser (2015) where he referred to Customer Experience as the essence of containing the direct or indirect interactions that result on the overall experience by the Customer. Grewal, Levy, and Kumar (2009) defined the idea of Customer Experience

Management (CEM) as the business strategy that creates win-win results for the products and services provider, the business, and the customers. Grewal, et al. (2009) suggest that in a retailing context, Customer Experiences can be categorized along the lines of the retail mix (i.e., price experience, promotion experience). Zomerdijk and Voss (2010), argue that a firm involved in CEM to provide what the customer requires in the technological, physical and social realms, at different "moments of truth" stages. Bolton, et al (2018) further explored business strategies along these three dimensions by looking at two levels of each dimension, namely – Low and High Complexity of the Physical dimension, Low and High levels of Social presence, and Low and High density of the Digital dimension. They suggest business strategies for each of the eight segments thus created. Homburg (2017) argued for the necessity of looking at the internal managerial perception of CEM, and for recognizing the need for changes in cultural mindsets, strategic directions, and the development of firm capabilities in this area.

### ***II.6.3 Customer Experience with the Brand***

Marketing professionals look at a customer's brand experience as an important part of the overall Customer Experience. Brand experience is conceptualized as a series of responses – sensations, feelings, behaviors – to specific stimuli provided by the firm through its designs, packaging, communications, etc. Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009) defined brand experience and measured it across four dimensions: sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral. They show that Brand Experience directly affects customer satisfaction and loyalty. Schmitt (2010) further explored the consumer psychology of brands, looking at several brand related constructs and integrating them into a comprehensive framework along with levels of consumer responses.

#### ***II.6.4 Customer Experience and Technology***

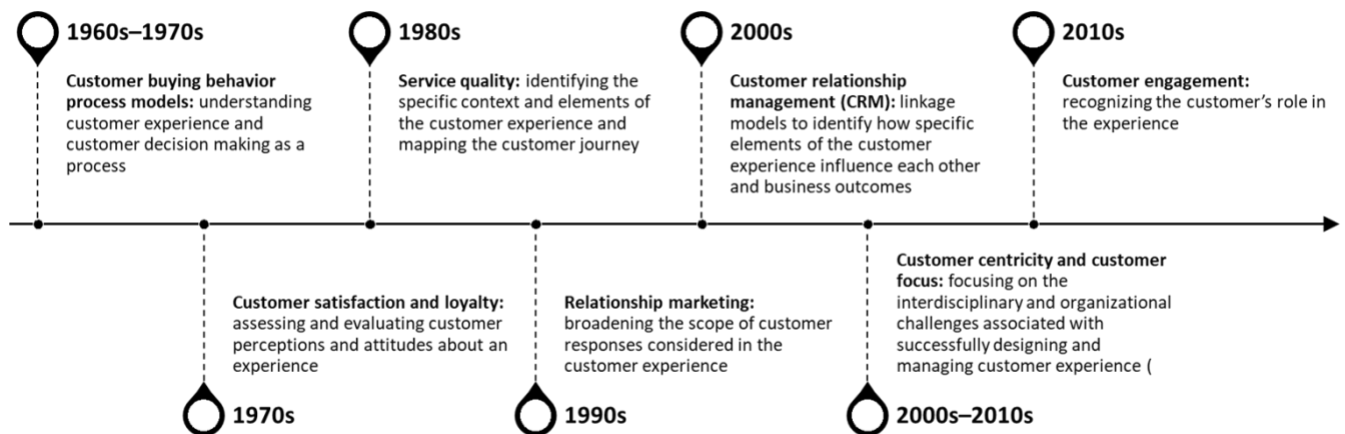
McCarthy and Wright (2004) looked at Customer Experience from the technology perspective where they study the role of technology in Customer Experience. Technology plays a big part in a customer's business experience. This has only accelerated during the COVID-19 global pandemic, with many people having shifted their shopping experience online. Bolton et al.'s (2018) study of the digital dimension also addresses the fact that there are a myriad of technologies that businesses use to reach customers, including mobile, location-based, virtual reality, augmented reality, blockchains, AI, and machine learning. These technologies can create highly personalized experiences for customers with a great degree of interaction and information exchange between the business and the customer (Parise et al., 2016).

#### ***II.6.5 Customer Experience Journey***

De Keyser (2015) looks at the Customer Experience journey as consisting of four stages - Consider, Evaluate, Buy and Bond - that the researcher refers to as CX. Customers first consider whether they need or want some product or service, and then proceed to evaluate their options, consider competing products and services in terms of the value they provide. They are then ready to buy the product and begin using it. The final stage of bonding refers to the creation of a connection with the product or service as well as the brand and the business. Others have thought of this overall journey in terms of three stages, namely pre-sale, sale, and post-sale.

### **II.7 Customer Experience Literature Timeline**

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) introduced their paper by tracing the roots of Customer Experience to the 1960s. Figure 4 below shows their summary of the evolution of customer experience literature, plotted on a timeline.



**Figure 4: Customer Experience Literature Timeline (based on Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)**

Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) traced Customer Experience to the 1960s, identifying the theories on marketing and consumer behaviour from the work of Philip Kotler (1967) and Howard & Sheth (1969). In the 1960s -1970s, the focus was on models that were studying the Customer behaviour in the buying process, specifically in the area of need recognition and the movement from there to the purchase decision. In the 1970s, the literature shows a common theme of customer satisfaction and loyalty, where there were several mechanisms to assessing and evaluating customer perceptions and attitudes about an experience they are having when buying or getting a product or a service. In the 1980s, Service quality emerged as a concept, with emphasis on identifying the specific elements of Customer Experience and how they relate to the stages of the customer journey. In the 1990s, researchers study relationship marketing to understand the scope of customer responses and their relationship to Customer Experience. The 2000s witnessed the emergence of Customer Relationship Management (CRM). More complex models were developed to understand how various elements of the Customer Experience influence each other and the business outcomes. Between the 2000s – 2010s, Customer centrality

and customer focus emerged as a focal point, with greater emphasis on interdisciplinary and business challenges in designing and managing the Customer Experience. And finally, in the 2010s, Customer engagement studies look at recognizing the customer's role in the experience. The idea of co-creation of products, services, and even the entire customer experience has been studied in recent times.

## **II.8 Relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience**

While Sense of Place has been studied in fields such as geography, architecture and the study of cultures, and Customer Experience has been a topic of study in business literature in the field of marketing, very few studies have examined the relationship between the two. One area where the connection between the two has begun to be studied in recent times is destination branding for tourism purposes. Branding a place for tourism affects not only the tourist experience, but that of the local inhabitants too (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005; Gover and Go, 2011). Researchers have suggested that place branding should illustrate the distinctive features of the local landscape that also includes the cultural aspects of the people that live there (Cai, 2002; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Campelo et al. (2014) argue that residents are often left behind in the branding process, and without a deeper understanding of their culture, the branding process is likely to be less effective. LeCompte et al. (2017) looked at the relationship between Sense of Place and place branding development. The research took a qualitative approach interviewing 31 individuals who were residents or visitors to the French coastal area, and the managers of that area. The research proposed a five-dimensional definition of Sense of Place and suggested that it can be used to develop place brand in 3 ways: defining the place brand concept, bringing together the internal stakeholders and involving users in brand building. Instead of focusing on a descriptive view of the features of a site, this approach focuses upon understanding and

integrating the lived experiences of the site users and their emotional ties to the site (LeCompte, 2017). Li, Hudson & So (2019) studied Airbnb customer experiences, and suggest that apart from personalized services, customers valued the social interactions with the host family and the authenticity of living in the home of a local resident. Respondents of their study felt more engaged with the local community as a result of choosing Airbnb over a hotel.

Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuram, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger (2008) took a holistic view of CEM, and presented a framework that included various attributes of of CEM strategy, such as service interface, retail atmosphere, variety of product, pricing, etc., and their effect on the overall customer experience. They suggested that situational variables would act as moderators in this relationship. Specifically, they mention location, culture, and consumer attitudes, among others. In other words, a customer's sense of place may act as a moderator between a firm's CEM strategy and the customer experience.

## **II.9 Gaps in the Literature and Research Goal**

While some studies have looked at place branding and sense of place as discussed, business literature has generally been sparse regarding the effect of a customer's sense of place and their experience with a business. While there is an intuitive understanding even among Indoor Business owners that a sense of place might enhance a customer's experience – for instance, a Chinese restaurant in the US may have Chinese art and décor, while an Indian restaurant will likewise attempt to evoke a feeling of being in India with paintings or other décor from India, and perhaps play Indian music in the background – researchers have not examined the relationship between these strategies and the customer experience.

Also, it is not clear whether the restaurant decoration in the above example is a conscious strategy to affect the sense of place in the customer, or if it is an indication of the sense of place

of the business owner. No study has attempted to see whether the relationship between customer experience and sense of place. This study therefore will attempt to address some of these shortcomings in the literature through a qualitative case study in Alaska.

This paper will look at Sense of Place and Customer Experience as the key constructs. For Sense of Place, the study will consider the three attributes from the work by Canter (1977), namely Form, Meaning and Activity. For Customer Experience, the study will consider the work by de Keyser et al (2015), which breaks down the experience into four stages - Consider, Evaluate, Buy and Bond. The research will use the three attributes of Sense of Place and four stages of customer experience to create a 3x4 matrix, shown in the methodology section, to study the influence of each attribute of Sense of Place on each stage of the Customer Experience.

### III METHODOLOGY

This research used the case study method to explore the relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience. The case method has been used quite extensively in social sciences. According to Mayer (2013), qualitative research is ideal for studying the social, cultural, and political aspects of people and businesss. Case study research can be used both to build and to test theory (Mayer, 2013).

*Qualitative research is best when wanting to study a subject in depth. It is good for exploratory research, especially when the topic is new and there is not much previously published research on that topic (Mayer, 2013).*

Case studies are in-depth investigations of phenomena within their environmental context, and can include a study of an individual, group, or business (Yin, 2014). Data collection for cases is typically done through interviews, archives, and observations by the researcher (Flick, 2009). There has been some debate in the literature on the benefits of single cases versus a comparison across multiple cases. Dyer & Wilkins (1991) are proponents of the single case study to identify new relationships, while Eisenhardt (1989) preferred multiple cases so that the comparisons allowed for replication in order to corroborate theoretical propositions.

Ridder (2017) studied different cases study designs and highlight three key designs. The first, propounded by Eisenhardt (1989) is the idea of “no theory first”, where the researcher studies a case (or several cases) without a specific theory being studied. The theory is seen as a limitation. Constructs are investigated, but no a priori relationship between them is assumed. The second approach (Yin, 2014) is that of filling gaps and holes in existing theory. Both of these designs are considered positivist, while the third approach is constructivist approach – that is, the assumption is that one is not merely looking for meaning in an objective reality, but rather, constructing the reality through sense making of the case study (Stake, 2005). According to



Stake (2005), case studies are either instrumental in that they help understand a research issue, or intrinsic, in that the case itself is of interest, and not an instrument to answer some other question. In the instrumental case study, the case itself is secondary, and is selected to further the research goal.

In this study, to understand the relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience, the multiple case approach with both theoretical and literal replication logic was used. Specifically, I study two business, one small and one big, both in the tourism industry in the Alaska, to understand the influence of Sense of Place on Customer Experience, through interviews of customers at each business. Literal replication was used to help find similarities and corroborate findings, while theoretical replication was used to look for variations in the relationships across two dimensions of interest. The size of the business (small and large) is one dimension, while the type of customer (local vs visitor, or insider vs outsider) is the second dimension. Replication adds confidence and robustness to the findings, but it does not ensure generalizable results (Mathiassen & Vainio, 2007).

### **III.1 Data Collection Plan**

The data collection process started with interviewing customers in two business locations in Alaska. Two places were studied for this research that are different in some way. The decision was to study two tourist locations in Alaska, a Indoor Business and Outdoor Business.

The customers interviewed in the research were either be locals or visitors from outside the local area. Two to four customers were interviewed within each of these four segments formed by the two dimensions, for the sake of *literal replication* to look for similarities to ensure robustness of the findings. The four segments themselves serve as the *theoretical replication* for studying diversion/variation. It is reasonable to expect that there will be some differences in the

relationship between the Sense of Place and Customer Experience for a Indoor Business vs a large one, and for a local customer vs a visitor to the place from outside.

The interview questions have two key objectives, one for each construct used in the study:

Objective (1): Evaluate the Customers' Sense of Place toward the Business Location.

Objective (2): Understand the experiences the customers have when visiting these business locations.

Based on their responses and my observations, the goal of the study is to discover the relationships between the two key constructs.

### **III.2 Participant Observer**

Participant observation in research is seen as far back as 1800. This is a type of data collection typically used by researchers who study ethnography, or the study of cultures. The goal is to gain familiarity with a particular group of community by immersing oneself in it to some extent. Joseph Marie, baron de Gérando (1800) uses this method to study the native American's culture and communities. This concept was then popularized by Bronisław Malinowski in 1929, where he studied non-Western societies as a participant observer.

In more recent times, Spradley (1980) introduced five types of participant observations based on their level of involvement in the research. Spradley (1980) summarizes the five types in the Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Participant Observation Types (based on involvement) – Spradley (1980)**

Type	Level of Involvement
<b>Non-Participatory</b>	No contact with population or field of study
<b>Passive Participation</b>	Researcher is only in the bystander role
<b>Moderate Participation</b>	Researcher maintains a balance between "insider" and "outsider" roles
<b>Active Participation</b>	Researcher becomes a member of the group by fully embracing skills and customs for the sake of complete comprehension
<b>Complete Participation</b>	Researcher is completely integrated in population of study beforehand (i.e. they are already a member of particular population studied).

In this research, I consider my role to be that of a *Moderate Participant*, as I maintained a balance between "insider" and "outsider" roles. I am participant observer as I have also been a customer of both the outdoor and indoor businesses, whose customers I interviewed and believe that my own experience enriches the research. I was careful to not let my experience and feelings bias the analysis of the data from other customers, and to avoid asking any leading questions.

### **III.3 Question Categories**

#### ***III.3.1 Customers Experience and Sense of Place***

The questions are designed to ask the Customers about their experience at the business locations. Questions were informed by David Canter's Sense of Place model's attributes activity, Imagination, and form, as well as Cross's (2011) typology that gets at the reasons for their

attachment. The questions focus on helping Customers identify the meaning of Sense of Place at the business location and how much of that they feel when they are at the business location.

The questions were based on the 3x4 table below (Table 4) showing the three attribute of Sense of Place from Canter (1977) and the four stages of Customer Experience from De Keyser et al (2015).

**Table 4: 3X4 Matrix for data collection and analysis**

	<b>Consider</b>	<b>Evaluate</b>	<b>Buy</b>	<b>Bond</b>
<b>Form</b>	This section will identify the role that the physical location (form) plays when customers consider a business.	The Section will identify the role that the physical location plays when a customer evaluates the service or products.	The Section will identify the role that the physical location plays when a customer transacts the business by buying the service or product.	The Section will identify the role that the physical location plays when transacting emotionally with the place.
<b>Activity</b>	This section will identify the role that the activities play when customers consider doing business with a business.	The Section will identify the role that the activities play when a customer evaluates the service or product.	The Section will identify the role that the activity plays when a customer transacts with by buying the service or product.	The Section will identify the role that the activities play in bonding with place. Linking the activity of the place with the emotional bond
<b>Meaning</b>	This section will identify the emotional aspect when customers consider doing a business.	This section will identify the emotional aspect of a place when customers evaluate the products and services.	This section will identify the emotional aspect of a place when customers transact with the business.	This section will identify emotional aspect of a place when customers feel an emotional bond with the business.

In addition, replication logic process for the case study was used. There were 9 interviews conducted overall in the two business locations. These include 3 visitors and 2 locals at the Outdoor Business, and 2 or each in the Indoor Business, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 Indoor and Outdoor Customers**

Customer	Indoor Business	Outdoor Business
Tourists	Two people were interviewed.	Three people were interviewed.
Residents	Two people were interviewed.	Two people were interviewed.

### **III.4 Booking Appointments**

The interview appointments were pre-booked before showing up. Since I visited Alaska four times within two years, it is easier for me to navigate my way to get to the businesses' locations. The primary method of transportation to reach the interview location was by van. Between the interviews in Alaska, I dedicated specific days to rewrite the notes and assure the files are secured and transferred to Georgia State University Dropbox to prevent loss of data.

### **III.5 Data Analysis**

After conducting the interviews, the data was analyzed to find commonality of relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience within each segment, if any, and the variations between the segments. The findings will contribute to the understanding of the relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience. Based on my own reflections from the interviews, the analysis of the relationships was first be conducted separately within each segment, followed by a cross-case analysis to compare the segments with each other.

### **III.6 Protocol and Interviewee consent letters**

#### ***III.6.1 Consent Letters***

I carried two different consent letters with me.

- First Consent Letter: Addressed to the Customer to do the interview.

- Second Consent Letter: Addressed to the Customers to disclose their identity if they choose to do so.

Example of these consent letters is addressed at appendix 2.

At the beginning of the interview, the participant was informed about the purpose of the study. The consent of the participant was sought before asking any questions. The consent was be obtained via a form.

## IV RESULTS

### IV.1 Alaska: The Place

Known as the last frontier of the US, as it's Located at the northwest corner of North America, Alaska is the northernmost and westernmost state in the United States. Alaska is the largest U.S. state by area, with a population of 736,081 as of 2020, where more than half of Alaska's residents live in Anchorage.

Alaska was under the control of the Russian Empire beginning in the 18th century. However, due to the hardships and logistics, the Russian Empire did not want to deal with maintaining land and as a result sold it to the US in 1867 for US\$7.2 million (equivalent to \$140 million in 2022), or approximately two cents per acre. Alaska was officially admitted as the 49th state of the U.S. on January 3, 1959. (Video, 1959)

Alaska has its own to a diversified economy including [oil](#), natural gas, gold and fish. Alaska has a total area of 663,268 square miles (1,717,856 km<sup>2</sup>). Alaska has more than three million lakes, Glacier ice covers about 28,957 square miles (75,000 km<sup>2</sup>), Alaska is also home to the Tallest Mountain: Denali, at 20,320 feet, is the tallest mountain in North America.

The towns and cities in Alaska have a very cozy and warm vibe. The people who live in towns have a very welcoming and kind hospitality. The towns are so small the people live there tend to support each other and know what everyone else is going. In addition, Alaska has some smaller towns Example Wiseman has 9 people in total and Cold food has 25 people in total. People don't tend to be uncomfortable as they love what Alaska is offering them. The photographs below give a sense of the natural beauty of Alaska, and illustrates perhaps why the place has so much meaning for many people.



**Clockwise from top left:** A cabin in the heart of Alaska; Northern Lights dancing in the dark winter night; Gold Mine in the middle of Alaska; A majestic mountain chain

## **IV.2 The Interviews**

### ***IV.2.1 Outdoor Business Interviews***

The interviews started at the premises of the Outdoor Business, a business that specializes in tours in the Northern Region of Alaska to conduct tours to see the Northern Lights (the identity of the business is not disclosed to protect the confidentiality of the Outdoor Business). I conducted a total of 5 interviews - 2 visitors to the place, and 3 locals. The interesting fact is that the 3 local interviewees came to this business for a short trip, ended up working there and living in the premises of the business. Some of the details from each interview are presented below, followed by an assessment of the type of attachment to place that the individual had.



#### *IV.2.1.1 First Interview: Dr. Lia (visitor)*

Doctor Lia referred to the business as a business that created an additional experience that other companies did not create. She was looking at other places online and had to book it last minute. The route of the activity (Northern Lights) is what attracted Dr. Lia's attention to book with the Outdoor Business. The main reason she booked it was to be able to see the aurora on her own since she was travelling solo. Dr. Lia also shared that there were three items on her plan during her trip to Alaska, which are visiting Denali National Park, crossing the Arctic Circle and the whole aurora experience. The fact that she could cross the Arctic Circle and experience the aurora on the same day was appealing to her to save time and energy.

Dr. Lia enjoyed the service of the Outdoor Business and called it a "Convenient experience". She noted that other companies she called, referred her to call centers, where the call agents did not have enough experience about the nature of the tours, and they were not connected directly with the tour companies. In the Outdoor Business, on the other hand, the employees who picked up the phone knew everything about the products and the services provided by the business. Dr. Lia added that the professionalism of the tour guides was wonderful and the experience they shared had shown her that the tour guides has been doing this work for a while. Also, Dr. Lia has shared that the promised experience is exactly what she got. They delivered what they have promised. When asked about the amenities, Dr. Lia shared that that the amenities did not impact the experience at all. She was there for crossing the arctic and seeing the Northern Lights, and that exactly what she got.

Dr. Lia also mentioned that she decided to make the transaction after the Outdoor Company told her about the option of flying over the wilderness. "With the Outdoor Company, I did not think twice," she said. She shared how excited she became when she got the confirmation to be part of the experience. According to Dr. Lia, the experience was flawless.

#### *IV.2.1.2 Second Interview: Sara (Nurse) – Visitor*

Sara shared that the reason for visiting Alaska was influenced by her friend Nora. Nora wanted to go to the Arctic Circle and Sara took the responsibility to plan the trip. Sara made the decision to go to Alaska after she consulted with Nora and Nora's husband. Sara mentioned that as she was planning the experience, "I planned the Arctic Circle crossing for Nora and the Northern Lights experience for myself". Sara and Nora had 2 weeks off from work. Both of them decided to start their vacation in Fairbanks where they want to watch the Northern Lights. The reason they booked their experience with the Outdoor Business, is due to the uniqueness of the experience – and the promise to cross the Arctic Circle. "This was the only business that we ended up looking at as it's the MOST out there". Also, when asked about the amenities, Sara shared that the amenities provided by the business did not impact their decisions.

Sara mentioned that she has transacted with the business over the phone after shared the route of the trip with Nora, and both agreed on the route. "We were excited as Nora got a lot of novelty of this trip and it hit me then that it is happening".

#### *IV.2.1.3 Third Interview: Anna (Med Student) - Local*

"Since I was 5 years old, I had a dream to go to Alaska," said Anna. She said that she had broken up with her boyfriend after her miscarriage. "I had nothing going on for me in my city, so I decided to go to Alaska, a place that I have always wanted to visit".

During the interview Anna mentioned that the reason she decided to go to Alaska is because of her father and uncle. When she was a little girl, her father and her uncle went to Alaska. When they came back, Anna got fascinated by Alaska from the photos they shared with her. Her fascination with Alaska helped develop a strong desire to live off the grid.

She shared the Outdoor Business makes her happy with the location they are operating in. Anna shared that she found the Outdoor Business when she applied for seasonal jobs online. With excitement and joy in her eyes Anna said, “This place is exactly what I am looking for. I had nothing going at home. I loved Fairbanks Airport; I knew it then that it is the place for me, and the Outdoor Business and its location is for me.”

Anna added “This place is so welcoming; the community is strong and it’s a place where I can read more and write more”, and continued “My family is proud of me for making this decision, and they are excited about my decision to move to Alaska”. Her childhood dream came true to live off the grid. Anna also shared that her father taught her how to live off the grid, teaching her the basics of living in the wilderness, deciding on the type of food to eat or not, using a gun, and hunting.

When asked about the reason for her to consider the Outdoor Business as a business to work for, she shared that she has applied to many places in Alaska and was hoping to get a job in this place due to its remote location. Anna did not want to work for a commercial larger business than the Outdoor Company, as she wanted to experience the real version of Alaska not the glamorous one.

When evaluating the different options Anna had, she added that she selected this place because the Outdoor Business is not remote and not too modern. Anna also mentioned that she is looking forward to spring as she will get to experience moving into a tent. Anna also emphasized a few times during the interview that this place is not too far from civilization and not too close to it as well. Also, Anna shared that her best friend, the one who supported her during her hardships, has decided to move to this place with her to work together.

When asked how she bonded with the place, she shared that she looks forward to hiking during the summer. “There is more into life than music and boys,” she said. “Choose where you want to be. It is supposed to be hard, and you gain the freedom to do the things you are supposed to do”. Anna’s statement triggered me to ask her further, *what if you were not here?* Anna answered without any hesitation “I will not be in the place I am supposed to be, after the breakup I realized that there is more into life than what I already have. I want to do so much, to go up north and I did it!”

#### *IV.2.1.4 Fourth Interview: Steve (Local)*

Steve also came to the Outdoor Business as a tourist and shared that he ended up working with the business for 6 years. At the time of the interview, Steve’s plan was to stay with the Outdoor Company for 2 and a half years before his retirement. He shared the reasons why he is still in this place even after all that time. “This place is stress-free. The only rule in here is to do your job and help people have a great experience and enjoy themselves”, said Steve with excitement. “The facilities are great; the accommodation and food are paid for, and they have access to what we need to be able to live in the wilderness and operate the business. There is also a sense of community to this place.” Steve shared that everyone gets to share the experiences with the world, which is very important to them. “This place is so peaceful nothing or anyone can bother you,” added Steve. He mentioned that being in the Outdoor Business helped him cope with life effectively.

When I asked Steve, would he ever visit this place after retirement, his reply was “I don’t think that I will ever come back to this place after retirement, this place is so far and remote”. When I asked him at the end if there is anything he wants to add he said, “My soul is free around here”.

#### *IV.2.1.5 Fifth Interview: Ben (local)*

Ben shared that he just wanted to get out of from his town to a new place, far away from everything. “I chose to work with the Outdoor Business, as I was looking for seasonal work. I wanted a far place, away from anything and everything, a place I should be in. I did not want a far place like Deadhorse (Northern Town in the United State), this place is just perfect”. Ben’s initial plan was to go visit Alaska and work there for a seasonal job, but he ended up working there for years.

Ben added that his experience in this location started slow but comfortable. One of the main reasons he enjoys working in this place is because of the community, people working together and hanging out together.

When asked why Ben considered the Outdoor Business to work for, he shared that after he applied to work for this place, the hiring person spent 3 hours and a half on the phone to assure that he is the right person for the leadership role he applied for at the Outdoor Business. The reason Ben wanted to work in this place is due to the uniqueness of the place and the confidence that the hiring manager had in him. In addition, there was a mutual philosophy and understanding about the Outdoor Business with the owner during the hiring process. Also, Ben added that the Outdoor Business has all the basics that brings the experience of working in this place together. Ben shared multiple times during the interview that there is also a sense of familiarity with the place being in the center of everything, where he gets to work and meet new people all the time. In addition, he mentioned repeatedly how much he values Building relationships with the people working in the business that brings a strong sense of community to the Outdoor Business.

When asked about any other activity that he wants to accomplish during his spare time he replied “I don’t have certain activities to do in this place, all my hobbies are not aligned with

Outdoor Business. I am here for work and to be at work”. I wanted Ben to elaborate more on this point so I asked him *how he would feel if the location of the business change*. He said “If the location changes, I don’t think it will have any difference for me. I am attached to the work I do more than the surrounding areas.”

Ben shared that the kind of people who visit, are people who enjoy meeting new people. Those people who come to visit do not want a super fancy place, but they want to enjoy what Alaska has to offer. He added that it is still a personal preference. Ben believes that the owners of business want the visitors to have a personal unique experience as well, and that what he enjoys offering the visitors with. Finally, I asked him if he would recommend this place to anyone, in which he replied, “I would recommend this place for sure! If it’s for working purposes, it is not for everyone in here”.

#### *IV.2.1.6 My Experience as Participant Observer in the Outdoor Business*

In 2018, I accidentally found the outdoor business as part of the tour to the Arctic Circle. I remember how cold it was as I walked into the outdoor business location and was in so much admiration of the huge mountains surrounding the outdoor business location. Although it was so cold in the outside, it was so warm in the inside of the cabin.

I remember the staff of the outdoor business welcoming us with warm hot chocolate to keep us warm while we stay their anticipating the northern light. Looking at the surroundings of the outdoor business, I did not pay much attention to crossing the arctic circle nor to the northern light. I was looking at the outdoor area and the cabin in the middle of nowhere. I still smell the wood built in that place and I still remember my footsteps on the snow as I walk around the outdoor area. It felt familiar and close to my heart for reasons I could not understand.

As mentioned earlier, the outdoor business was part of the tour. I did not know I would connect with it. When I first looked for a company that could take me to the Arctic Circle, I came across the outdoor company as a major tour company in the heart of Alaska. In the consideration phase in the customer experience, I was looking for a company that can show me the real Alaska, not a commercial tour but an authentic tour. The outdoor business stood out as a company that is known and well-reviewed in the tourism pages and blogs, and this was the evaluation I needed to decide with the outdoor company. I called the company and due to their smooth process, I paid immediately. I did not bond with the company immediately. The bonding happened when I reached the location of the outdoor business and I got to experience the location myself.

My Sense of Place came into existence in the outdoor company, as I got to experience the location in the middle of the wilderness of Alaska. My main activity was exploring and staying the outdoor business to embrace what Alaska can offer. A sense of calmness and appreciation of how majestic Alaska is, gave it personal meaning for me. It became the reason I started the research in the first place.

During my more recent April 2021 trip to Alaska, the chimney at a homestead, where the Outdoor Business provide aurora experiences for its customers, got broken due to the snow sliding into the homestead. Due to a broken chimney, the aurora tour was shifted from the homestead to the coach. The Outdoor Business offered the customers the option to get a full refund or still go on the aurora tour but stay inside the coach instead of the homestead. This sense of responsibility by the Outdoor Business showed a high level of professionalism and awareness. It showed how much they value their customer and their experience in Alaska, even if that means losing money to keep their promises.

### ***IV.2.2 Common Themes about the Outdoor Business***

Customers who have been visiting the Outdoor Business had a lot of things in common, whether they were taking the service from the Outdoor Business for the first time, they have been using the service multiple times, or even deciding not only to use the service of the business but also to work for the Outdoor Business. Here are the themes that were observed from the interviewees at the Outdoor Business both locals and visitors.

#### ***IV.2.2.1 Unique Experiences***

This theme came as one of the main reasons why customers will choose the Outdoor Business's services. The customers explained that the experiences provided by the business were exceptional. All the visitors interviewed explained that they decided to transact with the business when they learned about the Arctic Circle option and hunting for the aurora to be done on one the same day. This shows how convenient it was for the customers, especially those who had a limited time in Alaska. We see here that the Outdoor Business has a strong advantage to attract customers to do business with them due to the uniqueness of the experiences they are providing for them. The customers bonded with the company due to the uniqueness of the experience, a strong point to be considered for business owners with unique experiences.

#### ***IV.2.2.2 Deliver Promises***

The customers also shared that the Outdoor Business delivered on the promises made, whether it was the exact route or other experiences promised to them. One customer stated that the reason she transacted with the business was due to the route. She explained how excited she was when she got the confirmation letter and knew that she will get what she signed up for. In addition, she stated that the business explained the exact route of the trip and that was exactly



what she has experienced on her journey with the Outdoor Business. Delivering promises is a common theme for the Outdoor Business, and that helps them get more clients and referrals.

#### *IV.2.2.3 Experienced Guides*

Another great common theme the customers have shared in the interview was the interaction with the tour guides. The customers explained that the guides are well-experienced, professional, well-informed, genuine, love to share their experiences, generous with their information about Alaska and extremely helpful. Having experienced guides in the Outdoor Business has added a lot to the customer experience and helped the customers bond with the business and the services provided. A customer shared that during the evaluation stage of the experience, the reason they picked up the Outdoor Business was *due to experience and knowledge of person who picked up the phone*. “Many other companies, the person who picks up the phone don’t have all the information about the experiences I wanted”. “In the Outdoor Business, whoever picks up the phone knows the experiences inside out, knowledgeable of the names of the tour guides who would meet us and the duration of the experiences we want to have”. This came as a common theme from the customers who believes that the knowledge and familiarity of the customer service call agents is what got them sold into taking the service from this business.

#### ***IV.2.3 Indoor Business Interviews***

After I completed the interviews at the Outdoor Business, I said goodbye to the locals and promised to visit them again soon. After that, I started the second phase of the research. I went back to civilization to prepare to go to the location of the Indoor Business. A café located in the middle of the city where people go to for breakfast, lunch, snack, or dinner (the identity of the business is not disclosed to protect the confidentiality of the Indoor Business). I sat at the café

observing and looking for people who are willing to be interviewed for the research. Many of the people who come into the café don't dine. They place their order, grab it and leave. The ones who stayed at the café and were willing to be part of the research, I targeted to interview them. I ended up interviewing a total of 4 people, 2 of them were locals and 2 of them were visitors to the town. I include myself as a participant observer.

My first two subjects were both local University students, Rosa & Mike. I met both Mike and Rosa, who agreed to do the interview together. They come to visit the Indoor Business location a decent number of times. At the beginning of the interview, they have stated they that are classmates and university students. The interview was done with them together. In this section, I will divide what Mike and Rosa said, each in their own section.

#### *IV.2.3.1 Sixth Interview: Rosa (University Student)*

Rosa shared that she started coming into the place three years ago. The reason she keeps visiting the Indoor Business is due to the unique experiences provided by the place such as free WIFI, she is a university student, and she would normally need WIFI to work on her university projects. Another reason why Rosa like the Outdoor Business is due to the size of the space compared to other businesses in town that do not have big places like that of the Indoor Company. In addition, Rosa, mentioned the great menu the Outdoor Business Provides and the general vibe created by the Indoor Business.

Rosa also added that it is easy to focus and work around the place. Normally, she comes to the business to hang out in the middle of the day, and the food adds to the experience of the place. "I don't feel bad for hanging around this place as there are plenty of spaces. Also, the price of this place is reasonable".

I noticed how Rosa loved the place, so I asked her *if she will still visit the Indoor Business if the location changes*. She replied, “If the location of the business changes, I will go check it out but not really go back in there all the time”. Rosa shared that the vibe and the reputation she hears about the Indoor business. Rosa shared that she likes visiting the place in winter, “This place has a great breakfast vibe. It has a concept of a coffee shop and a restaurant”

#### *IV.2.3.2 Seventh Interview: Mike (University Student)*

Mike got introduced to the Indoor Business through his classmate Rosa. He had many similar points to Rosa on why he is a regular customer at the Indoor Business. The Reputation of the place is what got Mike to continue to visit the place. He enjoys the music, the food and the general atmosphere created by the Indoor Business.

Mike also mentioned that the prices in the Indoor Business are affordable for anyone coming to the place for breakfast, lunch or dinner. He also mentioned that this a great place to go hangout in or work in as well. Like Rosa, he does not feel bad for staying in this place for long, as they are plenty of places to sit in it.

My third and fourth subjects for the indoor business were Nancy and Joe, who came in together. They also agreed to do the interview together. Nancy and Joe are dating and visiting the Outdoor Business from outside of town. While both Nancy and Joe had some commonality in their answers to the interview questions, in this section, I report on their interviews separately to get the accurate information for their customer experience at the Indoor Business.

#### *IV.2.3.3 Eighth Interview: Joe (Visitor from outside of Town)*

Joe shared that it has been 6 years since he has visited the place for the very first time. The reason for Joe to keep visiting this place for the past 6 years is because it was voted number one destination for tourists and residents of the town, and he enjoys being around the place.

One of the reasons why Joe to visit this place is due to the high-quality food served in this location. Joe said that is convenient that the Indoor Business is in the downtown area. He said, “This place has great music and a very comfortable coffee vibe”. Joe also mentioned that the price of the food is reasonable for Alaska prices. “I love the place; I am attached to the product and the place. A friendly place to and amazing people. This a place where we had our second date.” said Joe. When asked about what Joe heard about the place, he shared that what he hear about the place is all positive. He shared that this place is a stop for people to come, a friendly place that brings a sense of satisfaction, great experience vibe, and customer experience is friendly and vibrant.

#### *IV.2.3.4 Ninth Interview: Nancy (Visitor from outside of Town)*

For Nancy, at the time of the interview it was her second time at the Indoor Business, and she considers herself new to the Indoor Business. The first comment she shared about how she got to know about that place, referring to Joe she said, “He brought me here”. Nancy agreed with Joe that about the high-quality food served in the Indoor Business.

Nancy has a specific comment about the atmosphere, “It’s an open and bright place with music that brings the whole experience together”. This triggered me to ask her how *she would feel if the location of the Indoor Business would change*, she said “If the location of the place’s changes, I will also change. I will choose this place over other places, as I always like to support local businesses.”. The last comment Nancy shared was “I like the place more than other places around the town.”

#### *IV.2.3.5 My Experience as Participant Observer in the Indoor Business*

It was 2018, and I still remember the cold morning where I found the indoor business. It was my first trip to Alaska, and I was looking for a good authentic local place that has a good

breakfast. The moment I walked into the authentic place I felt the warmth of it and was greeted by a very friendly staff who helped me understand the menu and the different coffees they have. After I placed my order, I love to see how they are making the crust bread with mix of vegetables and cheese. Alongside of that, I order my favorite white chocolate. I selected a table by the corner and waited for order while admiring the yellow and white walls with the painting of nature all around the place.

I observed the different people walking into the place. What they all have in common was the smile on their face when they get their order. One of the staff members brought my order and breakfast sandwich to me. I still remember the freshness of the drink and the warmth of the cup of coffee.

Looking at my experience from the research lens, here is how I experienced the indoor business. The way I considered the indoor experience was due to convenience and google reviews and it was one of the few options that I had around me. The main thing that sold me into going to this specific indoor place was that its authentic and known to the locals in town according to the google reviews. The trip I made to indoor place took me around 12 minutes from the hotel I stayed in. I already bought the coffee in my mind even before I get to the place, I was sold into the reviews even before I get to the place. I bonded so much with the place immediately due to the authenticity and amazing product they have. I even visited the place few more times before I left Alaska. For the next few trips to Alaska, it became my go-to place for breakfast and lunch. While the great outdoors had sparked my feeling of a sense of place in Alaska, having breakfast in a cozy indoor setting enhanced that experience for me.

#### ***IV.2.4 Common Themes in the Indoor Businesses***

Customers who have been visiting the Outdoor Business had a lot of things in common, whether they were visiting the Indoor Business as usual local customers or visiting from outside of town. Here are the themes that were seen under multiple sections of the interview:

##### ***IV.2.4.1 Warmth and Coziness***

All the interviewees who visit the Indoor Business agreed that the main reason for going back is the vibe that the Outdoor Business provides. The interviewees shared that the vibe was presented in the kind of music that the Indoor Business plays that continuous to provide great experience. In addition, the interviewees agreed that they love the simplicity of the decoration of the place, and the large space for dinning in the Indoor Business, compared to other Indoor Business in the city.

##### ***IV.2.4.2 Authentic staff***

Another theme that was in common for all customers who were interviewed, was the Authentic staff who work in the Indoor Business. They have shared how everyone is welcoming them into the Indoor Business, from the clerk who takes the order, to the one who makes the food, to the one who serves the food, to the manager.

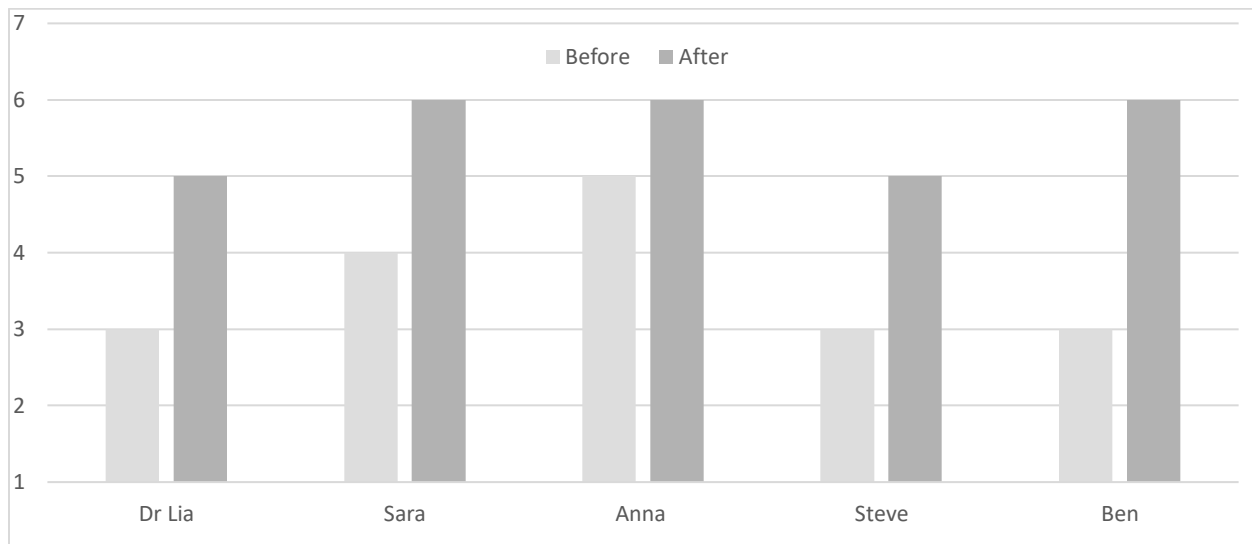
They also noted that the owner, who is also the manager, is always seen in the store serving the customers and works with his staff as well. It was amazing to see that the owner of the business is well known to his customers. Everyone who keeps on coming back know who the owner is and his story. When I was there, I would always see the owner speak to the clients and being very genuine and interested in the well-being of his customers. I had a conversation with him to take his permission to interview the customers. He was excited about the idea and told me that he is fully supporting me with this.

#### IV.2.4.3 Accessible Location

The Indoor Business is situated in the middle of downtown, where it is very visible by customers, whether they are regular or visiting. For example, Nancy and Joe clearly stated that whenever they come to downtown for shopping, they stop by the Indoor Business for a bite. The fact that the location of the business is accessible to the clients makes it even more visible, and that for sure drives customers in due to its convenient location.

#### IV.2.4.4 Levels of attachment among the participants

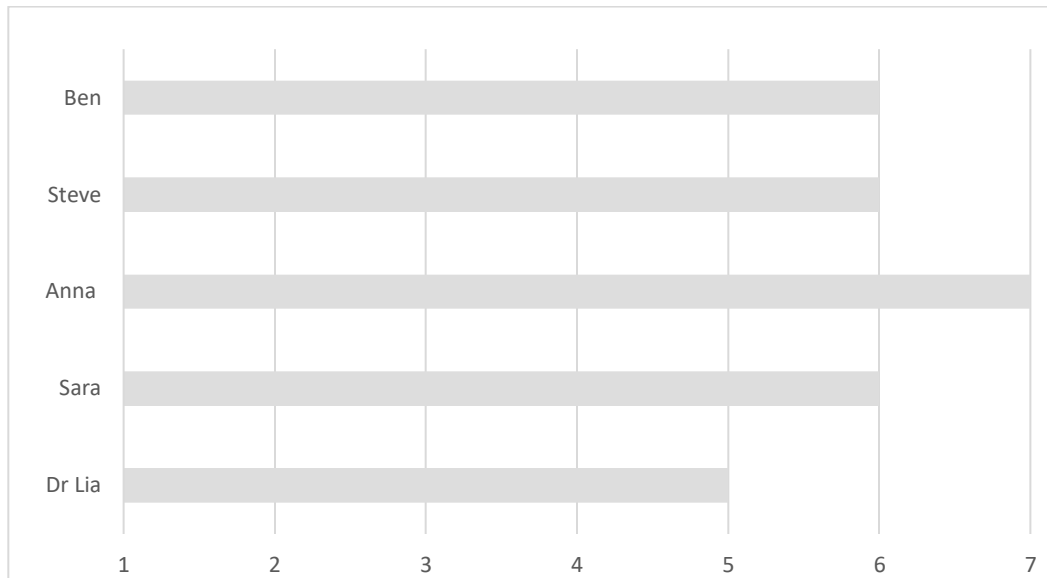
The final part of the interviews involved asking the interviewees three questions on a 7-point Likert scale. The first two asked them about their level of attachment before and after visiting the place, and the third was how likely they were to recommend the place to other people. The charts below summarize the responses for the Outdoor Business.



**Figure 5: Level of Attachment to Outdoor Business, before and after by participant**

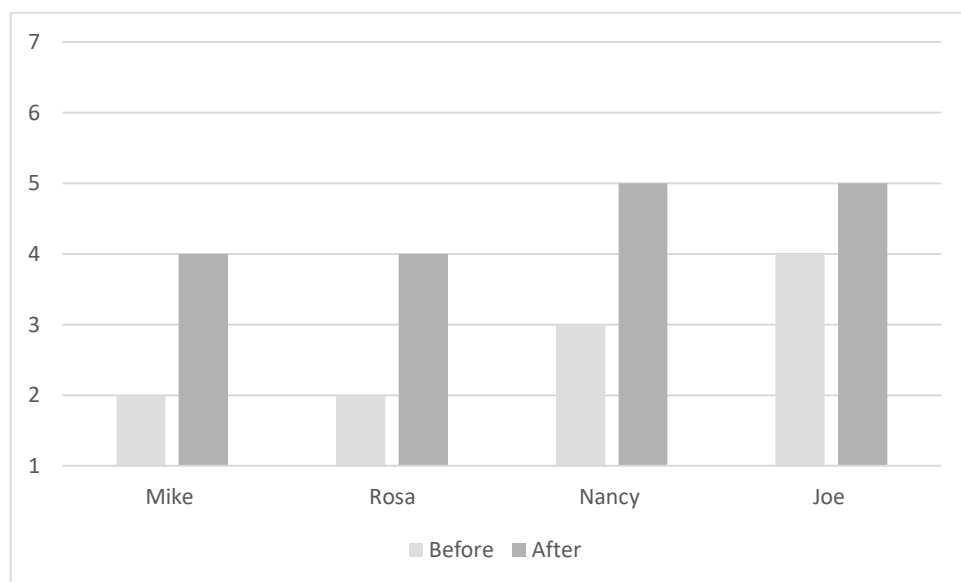
Figure 5 shows the level of attachment to place according to Shamai's (1991) scale, where 1 have no attachment to place to 7, be willing to die for the place. We see that across all

the interviewees, all of them have a degree of an increased attachment to the place, before going to the place and after being in the place of the Outdoor Business location in Alaska.



**Figure 6: Recommendation to visit or be in the Outdoor Business Location**

Figure 6 shows that the participants were very keen to recommend visiting or being in the Outdoor Business location. It is important to note, that their level of recommendation is alignment with their degree of attachment, or Sense of Place at the Outdoor Business location.

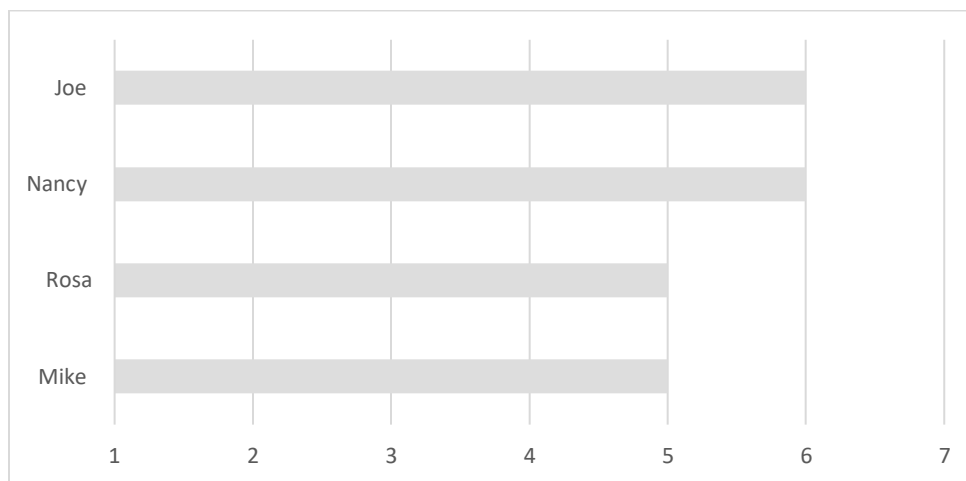




**Figure 7: Level of Attachment to Small Business, before and after by participant**

Figure 7 shows the level of attachment to place according to Shamai's (1991) scale, we see that across all the interviewees, all of them have a degree of an increased attachment to the place, before going to the place and after being in the place of the Indoor Business location in Alaska.

It also noticeable that while the level of attachment increased after the visit, the level of attachment to the Indoor Business was lower than that for the Outdoor Business interviewees. One of the reasons for that is the Outdoor Business in nature is about tourism and taking people to places they want to visit. On the other hand, the Indoor Business is a fixed Café located in the middle of downtown.



**Figure 8: Recommendation to visit or be in Outdoor Business Location**

Figure 8 showed that the participants were very keen to recommend visiting or being in the Indoor Business location. Like Outdoor Business, their level of recommendation is in alignment with their level of attachment to the Indoor Business location.

## **V DISCUSSION**

The promise of Alaska as an outdoor lover's paradise was seen in the customer's responses about their experience with the outdoor business. Attachment to the place was uniformly high among the visitors, and their positive experience increased the bond they felt with the place.

A comparison of the themes that emerged during the interviews of the visitors and locals that visited the Outdoor and Indoor Business revealed some similarities and differences.

### **V.1 Comparison between the Outdoor and Indoor Business**

Except for the Authentic Staff, all the themes that emerged from the interviews regarding the indoor and outdoor businesses were different. Table 6 summarizes these findings.

**Table 6: Themes from the experiences with the Indoor and Outdoor Businesses**

Theme	Outdoor Business	Indoor Business
Authentic Staff	Locals and Visitors agreed that they both felt how genuine the staff of the Outdoor Business were. This was experience from the call center all the way to the guides who provided the service	Locals and Visitors agreed that they both felt how genuine the staff of the small business were. This was experience from the moment the customers walk into the store, until they are served their requested meal.
Unique Experience	Locals and Visitors agreed that they both experience the uniqueness of experience, that led some of the visitors to decide to stay and work in Alaska	Not mentioned
Personalized Experience	Locals and Visitors agreed that they both felt the personalized experience that the Outdoor Business was offering the client. The service was customized based on what the business can do for the people who wants to have a special customer experience.	Not mentioned
Warmth & Coziness	Not mentioned	Locals and Visitors agreed that they both felt the warmth of the place and the coziness of its decorations that was felt through music and seen through the simplicity of the location.
Accessible Location	Not mentioned	Locals and Visitors agreed that they loved how accessible the location was to them to have a quick and delicious meal in Alaska, the location of the business was downtown, and close to stores that both locals and visitors would go to.

As the table shows, customers valued the personalized and unique experiences provided by the outdoor business, while they spoke of warmth, coziness, and accessibility when speaking of the café.

## **V.2 Contribution to Theory**

A key aspect of this research was to examine how Canter's (1977) attributes of Meaning, Activity, and Form as the components of Sense of Place are related to the customer decision

making process in considering, evaluating, buying, and bonding with a business (de Keyser et al., 2015). Based on the customer interviews, support was found for some of the intersections between the Canter's (1977) attributes and de Keyser et al.'s (2015) decision making process.

These relationships are summarized in Table 7 for the Outdoor Business:

**Table 7: Analysis of the Interviewees for the Outdoor Businesses**

	Consider	Evaluate	Buy	Bond
Form (Cognitive)		<p>“This place is stress-free. The only rule in here is to do your job and help people have a great experience and enjoy themselves”</p> <p>“The facilities are great”</p>	<p>“I don't have certain activities to do in this place, all my hobbies are not aligned with Outdoor Business. I am here for work and to be at work”.</p>	<p>“This place is exactly what I am looking for. I had nothing going at home. I loved Fairbanks Airport; I knew it then that it is the place for me, and the Outdoor Business and its location is for me.”</p> <p>“This place is so peaceful nothing or anyone can bother you”</p>
Activity (Behavioral)	<p>“Convenient experience”</p>	<p>“With the Outdoor Company, I did not think twice”</p> <p>“This was the only business that we ended up looking at as it's the MOST out there”</p> <p>I am attached to the work I do more than the surrounding areas.”</p>		<p>“I would recommend this place for sure! If it's for working purposes, it is not for everyone in here”.</p>
Meaning (Affective)		<p>“I planned the Arctic Circle crossing for Nora and the Northern Lights experience for myself”.</p> <p>“I had nothing going on for me in my city, so I decided to go to Alaska, a place that I have always wanted to visit”.</p>		<p>“We were excited as Nora got a lot of novelty of this trip and it hit me then that it is happening”</p> <p>“Since I was 5 years old, I had a dream to go to Alaska”</p> <p>“This place is so welcoming; the community is strong and it's a place where I can read more and write more”</p>

Primarily, the interviews supported the idea that form, activity, and meaning all matter during the evaluation phase, and again in creating the bond after the experience.

Taking Anna for example, we see her attachment for Sense of Place in relation to the Customer experience across the 3X4 table. Anna clearly described through the interview her Sense of Place to the Outdoor Business, by describing the physical from, the activity of experiencing the wilderness of Alaska and the meaning that the place held for her, as she had heard great stories about Alaska before she made it there in person.

Throughout the Customer Experience, Anna's experience to Alaska through the Outdoor Business was influenced by the personal meaning of the place across all the stages of Customer Experience. Followed by the activity, Anna loved the activities, that she did not need to evaluate the experience. Finally, the form of the Outdoor Business did not matter much to Anna, as her main reason for going and ended up staying in Alaska was the personal meaning she had for the place and the actual activity associated with the place.

As with Table 6 for the Outdoor Business, Table 8 below summarizes the relationships which were supported by the interviews for customers of the Indoor Business.

**Table 8: Analysis of the Interviewees for the Indoor Businesses**

	Consider	Evaluate	Buy	Bond
Form (Cognitive)		"Convience and google reviews and it was one of the few options that I had around me"	"Convenient that the Indoor Business is in the downtown area"	
Activity (Behavioral)		"I don't feel bad for hanging around this place as there are plenty of spaces. Also, the price of this place is reasonable". "I was sold into the reviews even before I get to the place"	"If the location of the place's changes, I will also change. I will choose this place over other places, as I always like to support local businesses."  "Prices in the Indoor Business is affordable for anyone coming to the place for breakfast, lunch or dinner."	"This place has great music and a very comfortable coffee vibe" "It's an open and bright place with music that brings the whole experience together"  "For the next trips to Alaska, even before doing the research, I would still go to the indoor place for breakfast, in fact, it became my go to for breakfast and lunch."

Meaning (Affective)		“This place has a great breakfast vibe. It has a concept of a coffee shop and a restaurant”		“I love the place; I am attached to the product and the place. A friendly place to and amazing people. This a place where we had our second date.”
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For the Indoor Business, we consider the example of Nancy. Nancy was engaged to Joe at the time of the interview. The Indoor Business location has a special place for Nancy since it was the place, she went out with Joe for their first date. The physical form and activity of having a meal in the place were decisions made by Joe for her, that she enjoyed and was thrilled and excited to share her experience with. Once she was there, the physical attributes of the place and the activity of enjoying the café’ became part of the buying and bonding experience. Overall, she had a strong emotional connection to the place based on the special meaning it held for her.

### **V.3 Contribution to Practice**

Based on the type of attachments people form and reasons that they visited the Outdoor Business and the Indoor one, it will help businesses to think about ways to attract and retain customers by enhancing their experiences. To ensure that customers will come back to the business location, creating a Sense of Place should be factored in. For an Outdoor Business that operates in the tourist sector, some of the following factors need to be considered when designing a Customer Experience to intentionally create a Sense of Place for the clients.

#### ***V.3.1 Unique Experiences***

Business owners of Outdoor companies shall attract and retain Locals and Visitors to their business location by selling the uniqueness of the experience, and the spiritual connection to the place that one might feel. Creating a narrative about the place and the unique experiences you can offer sticks in the minds of the customers and creates a narrative relationship even before they visit and provides a strong reason for them to visit the location.

### ***V.3.2 Authentic Staff***

Having employees who believe in the narrative is critical to create the sort of experience that is promised to the customer. Employees must genuinely believe in the uniqueness of the experience and be willing to take care of the customer.

### ***V.3.3 Keeping Promises***

The commodified relationship that several of the customers had implies that the experiences must match expectations. It is important that businesses promise only the kind of experiences that they can truly provide the customers with.

### ***V.3.4 Form, Activity, Meaning***

Canter's ideas of Form, Activity, and Meaning are all relevant to a customer's decision-making process. This study shows that at each stage of the process outlined by de Keyser et al (2015) – consider, evaluate, buy, and bond – customers are looking at one of the three factors. *What do I know about the place and its amenities? What activities can I engage in at this place? How do I feel about the place itself?* Knowing which of these is important to a customer at each stage of the process can help businesses create a better experience for the customer.

## VI CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study looked at the relationship between *Sense of Place* and *Customer Experience* using Case Study Approach, and the interviews were conducted in the State of Alaska. The study provided insights for both Outdoor and Indoor Business owners who aspire to create a great customer experience for their clients through intentionally creating a Sense of Place for their clients.

This study provided business owners with ways to attract their customers to buy their products or use their services and come back for more. The research question “How does Sense of Place influence Customer Experience?” was explored in the State of Alaska, with a case study approach. Literal and theoretical replication was used to study convergence and variation in the research paper.

A limitation of this research is that it focused on only one location. Also, due to limitations imposed by Covid during the study, a limited number of interviews were possible. Expanding the number of interviewees as well as conducting multiple case studies can enhance our understanding of Sense of Place and how businesses can use that knowledge to provide better experiences to customers.

Future research can build on this current research by comparing Alaska to a completely different location in size and weather, such as the United Arab Emirates located in the Middle East. This will help understand to what extent would the geographical location and the cultural norms influence the Relationship between Sense of Place and Customer Experience. Further research can also be conducted to examine the reasons people develop a sense of place, to build upon the research by Cross (2001).



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Sense of Place Interview Protocol – Customers

#### Interview guidelines

- At the beginning of the interview, the participant will be informed about the purpose of the study.
- The consent of the participant will be sought before asking any questions.
- The consent will be obtained via a form (attached in the form)

History of the Place from the customer view		
1.	Are you a regular customer to the business? Or are you just visiting?	
2.	If you are a regular customer, can you share your personal story to this business? And for how long have you been coming here?	
3.	If you are a regular customer, what are the services/products of this business you think are known to the community?	
4.	If you are just visiting the place, can you share your personal story of coming to this place?	
Stage (1): Consider the Product/Service		
5.	What experiences (activities, emotions, conveniences) were you looking for when you began thinking about this place?	
6.	What are some other places you considered?	
Stage (2): Evaluate the Product/Service		
7.	How did you decide on this place over all others that you considered?	
8.	When evaluating the place, what did this place mean <b>emotionally</b> to you?	
9.	What are the <b>activities</b> you planned to do in this place as you evaluated the product/service?	
10.	Did the <b>amenities available at this physical location (or even the convenience of travel to this location)</b> influence your decision?	
Stage (3): Buy the Product/Service		
11.	At what point did you transact with the product/service and why?	
12.	How did you feel when you transacted with the business? And were you the one making the transaction or was it someone else?	





## **Appendix 2: Informal Consent Letter**

### **Georgia State University**

#### **Informed Consent**

**Title:** Sense of Place and Customer Experience Case Study in the State of Alaska

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Satish Nargundkar

**Principal Investigator – Student:** Maryam Al Ali

#### **Procedures**

The research is conducted in the state of Alaska. And the data collection is collected in April 2021. The procedures will be performed in two different business locations with 12 total participants 6 at each business location. Each interview will be conducted between 30 – 45 minutes. Also note that this interview will be recorded via audio.

#### **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

You do not have to be in this study. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time.

#### **Contact Information**

Maryam Al Ali at 678-978-8682 and malali1@student.gsu.edu

Dr. Satish Nargundkar at 678-644-6838 and snargundkar@gsu.edu

#### **Consent**

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below.

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