LUND UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

The Lost Art

A Qualitative Study on How Consumers with Non-Dominant Ethnicities Assess Welcome in Retail

by

Sofie Bixo
Sara Lundqvist

Master Thesis
International Marketing and Brand Management
Lund School of Economics and Management

May 2024

Supervisor: Ulf Johansson
Examiner: Ulf Elg
Word Count: 21,921

Abstract

Title: The Lost Art: A Qualitative Study on How Consumers with Non-Dominant Ethnicities Assess Welcome in Retail

Course: BUSN39 – Degree Project in Global Marketing - Master Level

Keywords: Welcome, retail, ethnicity, non-dominant ethnicity, servicescape, multicultural conviviality, self-congruity, vulnerable consumers.

Purpose: The purpose of this explorative study is to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape.

Methodology: The methodology used in this study is qualitative. The empirical material has been collected by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, with elements of Critical Incident Technique (CIT). To prepare for these interviews, two prior interviews with representatives from IKEA were conducted.

Theoretical considerations: As the literature on the topic of welcoming/unwelcoming aspects of the servicescape is limited, this study focused on reviewing the literature on areas tangential to the topic, which included welcoming service encounters, welcoming places, self-congruity, servicescapes, and welcoming symbolism.

Empirical data: From the 13 interviews, empirical data on the interpretation of welcome, welcoming aspects non-related to ethnicity, welcoming aspects related to ethnicity, and perception of welcome at IKEA were gathered.

Conclusion: Our findings suggest that people with non-dominant ethnicities assess welcome in a servicescape by evaluating the congruity between their self-image and the store image, by determining whether they have been included in the design/creation of the product assortment, as well as by responding to verbal and non-verbal social cues that signal welcome or unwelcome. However, this assessment process does not occur during every shopping experience; The significance of a customer's ethnicity becomes relevant only when specific elements of the service environment either signal welcome or unwelcome.

Collaboration Statement: During the initial phase of this thesis, we were presented with the unique opportunity to collaborate with IKEA, specifically INGKA Group. INGKA Group has aided us with resources, contacts, and guidance throughout this project. However, it is important to note that this thesis focuses on the retail industry as a whole and not specifically on IKEA as a corporation. We affirm that our findings and conclusions have been developed independently, without any conflict of interest or influence from INGKA Group.

Acknowledgments

We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to…

… our supervisor, Ulf Johansson, for his invaluable insights, guidance, and encouragement throughout this journey.

… Simon Sjölander, our primary contact at INGKA Group, for generously providing resources, offering excellent advice, and collaborating with us throughout this process.

… Gabriella Fredriksson and Reza Shomali at INGKA Group, for sharing your knowledge and perspectives with us.

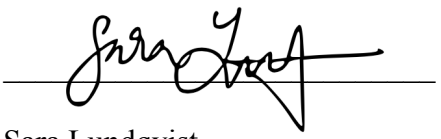
… Leonard Wulkan from Augur, for your helpfulness and contributions in recruiting participants.

… and last but certainly not least, the participants in our interviews, whose contributions made this master's thesis possible.

Thank you all.

Lund (Sweden), May 27, 2024

Sofie Bixo



Sara Lundqvist

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”The art of making people feel welcome isn’t brain surgery, and it isn’t magic. Call it old-fashioned common sense or common courtesy, we don’t care. All we know is that there are a lot out there who think of it as ***a lost art.****”*

Gunnarsson & Blohm, 2011, p.7

1 Introduction

In recent decades, ethnic diversity has increased in society due to various factors such as globalization and migration, leading to increased encounters and interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Jones et al. 2015; Dirksmeier et al. 2014). Consequently, it is reasonable that marketers should expect that an increasing number of consumers will identify as belonging to a minority ethnicity within a given society. For instance, nearly 20 percent of the Swedish population is foreign-born (SCB, 2024), 23 percent of Canada's population are immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2023) and 31 percent of the Australian population is born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). However, alongside this trend, many societies are grappling with heightened tensions among multicultural groups, impacting the overall well-being of their populations (Demangeot et al. 2019). These tensions manifest in various forms, from the surge in support for nationalistic and anti-foreigner parties across Europe to instances like the Quran burnings in Sweden in 2023, and ongoing conflicts such as those between Israel and Palestine, and Russia and Ukraine. Given the potential for such tensions to breed hostility and resentment within a society, scholars emphasize the urgent need for an enhanced understanding of how multicultural conviviality can be achieved (Jones et al. 2015; Noble, 2013). Various scholars have found that spaces play a crucial role as a gateway for inclusion and exclusion in this context. Given that retailers and marketplaces are shaping interactions between people in a multicultural society, scholars claim that retailers have a responsibility to address these issues, contributing to minimizing the gaps between different groups (Demangeot et al. 2019). However, limited research has been done on how this can be achieved. Therefore, it is of interest to explore how retail marketplaces can work as spaces for social inclusion in a multi-ethnic society. This includes investigating the factors that create a welcoming retail environment for people with non-dominant ethnic backgrounds.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Vulnerable Consumers in Social Spaces

Marketers have long delved into questions of *how* and *where* when designing retail spaces (Edwards et al. 2018). However, the *who* question – understanding consumer demographics and identifying which consumers engage in marketplace exchanges – has been largely overlooked (Edwards et al. 2018). Addressing the *who* question involves examining how

retail and social spaces can be inclusive for all consumers. Edwards et al. (2018) further explain that some consumers have more likelihood of being overlooked and discriminated against in such spaces, referring to them as *vulnerable consumers*. There are various definitions of what a vulnerable consumer is. Brenkert (1998) was the first scholar to introduce the concept of vulnerable consumers, explaining that all consumers experience vulnerability in one form or another. This vulnerability arises from a lack of control, with contributing factors including physical, cognitive, motivational, and social characteristics (Brenkert, 1998). Jafari et al. (2013) argue that any consumer who feels uncomfortable in social spaces, regardless of the specific factors identified by Brenkert (1998), is considered to be vulnerable. This highlights the critical importance of how consumers perceive their service experiences. Similarly, Baker et al. (2005) define a vulnerable consumer as someone who lacks power in a consumption setting due to individual and external conditions that place them at a disadvantage. While all consumers possess the potential to become a vulnerable consumer, certain factors heighten the likelihood, as noted by Baker et al. (2005). There are individual characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and cognitive deficiencies that are linked to a higher risk of consumer vulnerability. Stigmatization, repression, and discrimination also contribute to customer vulnerability. However, Baker et al. (2005) underscore that an increased likelihood of experiencing consumer vulnerability does not necessarily equate to actually being vulnerable or experiencing it. Vulnerability is contingent upon individual experiences, which can vary significantly across diverse social contexts. As vulnerable consumers move in social spaces, Saatcioglu and Corus (2016) assert that investigating spatial vulnerability entails delving into how daily interactions within socially constructed spaces shape the experiences of marginalized consumers. The retail environment, being a prime example of such a socially constructed space, hosts interactions among individuals daily, making it a focal point of interest for investigation. As summarized by Saatcioglu and Corus (2016), space plays a crucial role in shaping consumer vulnerability, with certain societal groups being disproportionately exposed to its effects due to factors such as race or ethnicity.

1.1.2 Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been defined as any group of individuals that claims a distinct peoplehood or an identity that sets them apart from others (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007). Traditionally, ethnicity was seen as a fixed, inherent identity tied to one's birth and as a construct possessing deep historical and cultural roots. However, through historical, anthropological and sociological research, this view has been challenged. The understanding of ethnicity has shifted to see ethnicity as a product of specific social and historical contexts, influenced by power dynamics between groups and the state (Sasson-Levy, 2013). Additionally, a cognitive approach in sociology has further deconstructed ethnicity, suggesting it should be understood not by objective commonalities but by individual beliefs, perceptions, understandings, and

identifications (Brubaker et al. 2004). Ethnicity, from this approach, is seen as a perspective rather than a tangible entity, shaped through processes of classification and categorization by oneself and others.

Comaroff (1996) suggested a similar view of ethnicity, arguing that ethnic identities are relational rather than inherent entities, often defined by relationships of inequality. Comaroff (1996) argued that ethnic identities are formed through everyday practices and interactions between those who are ethnicizing and those who are being ethnicized, with the ethnicizing group typically being the dominant ethnic group in a given area. Although research in race and ethnic relations frequently refers to the *dominant* ethnic group, it seldom provides clear definitions or discussions of what constitutes dominance. As a result, the term *dominant group* often remains an undefined, residual category signifying simply a nonminority (Doane, 1997). However, Doane (1997, p.376) defined the *dominant ethnic group* as "the ethnic group in a society that exercises power to create and maintain a pattern of economic, political, and institutional advantage, which in turn results in the unequal (disproportionately beneficial to the dominant group) distribution of resources". Crockett and Weinberger (2023) elaborated on the concept of dominant and non-dominant identities, explaining that dominant identities are seen as normal and normative, setting the standards against which others are compared. In contrast, non-dominant identities are viewed as abnormal, emerging when personal attributes are linked to negative stereotypes, and these are subject to varying degrees of discrimination, stigmatization, and ostracization. Accordingly, non-dominant ethnic groups can be defined as those experiencing discrimination, stigmatization, and/or ostracization within a given society. These groups do not hold a majority position or dominant power in a societal or national context. As Crockett and Weinberger (2023, p.75) note, such discrimination and stigmatization can harm well-being, with "feelings of rejection or being unwelcome in marketplace settings having long-term negative effects on self-esteem and agency".

1.1.3 Ethnic Consumers

Within retail, researchers have shown that retail establishments overtly and covertly exhibit discriminatory behavior against various ethnic groups, including African Americans, Hispanics, homosexuals, and Jews in the United States (Rosenbaum, 2005; Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007; Schreer et al. 2009) and Turkish, African and Middle Eastern people in Germany (Ehrkamp, 2005; Walsh, 2009). This discrimination extends to various aspects. For instance, according to Klink and Wagner (1999), Turkish people in Germany frequently report being denied reservation requests at restaurants and transportation services. African-American consumers often recount their experiences associated with retail racism (Schreer et al. 2009). For example, African Americans are more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be ignored, treated rudely, and followed by security in stores (Rosenbaum et al. 2012). Similarly,

gay men frequently report experiencing discourteous verbal remarks and hostile glances from both customers and employees (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007).

Furthermore, within marketing research, researchers have found ethnicity to represent a consumption driver (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007). For instance, Hispanics tend to have favorable opinions of retailers that employ a diverse workforce, engage in Hispanic community events (Tharp, 2001), and utilize Spanish-language advertising (O'Guinn et al. 1985). African American men frequently visit barber shops where they can interact with other African Americans (Wright, 1998). Irish, Jewish, and Native American consumers are reconnecting with their heritage by consuming ethnic goods and services (Halter, 2000). Homosexual consumers have been found to patronize bars, restaurants, resorts, theaters, and health clubs more often than heterosexuals (Kates, 2002). Also, ethnicity has been highlighted as an important consumption driver within the social media sphere (Bozkurt et al. 2021).

1.1.4 Achieving Multicultural Conviviality

At the start of this introduction, it was exemplified how tensions between different groups have increased. In response to this issue, Demangeot et al. (2019) urge marketers to help facilitate multicultural engagement and multicultural conviviality. They argue that marketers and brands have the power to change individual and social mindsets, positioning them as agents of change and responsibility (Demangeot et al. 2019). *Multicultural conviviality* refers to culturally diverse groups existing and interacting in harmony in a shared space (Gilroy, 2006; Neal et al. 2019; Wise & Velayutham, 2013). When individuals from diverse backgrounds coexist harmoniously, it helps to reduce tensions between different groups, fostering societal well-being. Demangeot et al. (2019) provide initiatives on what future research should focus on if wanting to help achieve multicultural conviviality. To guide these efforts, they provide a model called 'The bridge towards multicultural engagement', consisting of six important components: security, visibility, opportunity, utility, competence, and cultural navigability. Security is a foundational pillar that entails feeling safe and free from anxiety or threat (Demangeot et al. 2019). Without security, the rest of the bridge cannot be built. One of the initiatives suggested by Demangeot et al. (2019) to enhance security involves investigating which aspects of spaces are perceived as threatening or welcoming. Therefore, by researching how consumers with non-dominant ethnicities, with an increased likelihood of being vulnerable consumers, perceive welcome in a retail environment, one can contribute to an important part of the knowledge necessary for promoting multicultural conviviality, thereby enhancing societal well-being.

1.1.5 The Concept of Welcome

Merriam-Webster (2024) defines *welcome* as greeting with hospitality and courtesy, as well as accepting with pleasure or presence. The term *welcome* is used frequently within many different contexts, however, within academia, to the best of our understanding, it is not typically a primary focus within academic discourse. However, there are a few studies within academia addressing the term from different perspectives. Snethen et al. (2018) express that feeling welcome is closely related to the feeling of having a desired presence and being greeted with pleasure. Gill (2018) agrees with Snethen et al. (2018) as he describes the feeling of welcome as the "perception that your presence brings joy or satisfaction in someone else" (Gill, 2018, p.90). Continuing, Gill (2018) explains that welcoming is about human warmth, and it is more than simply letting people join. Plage et al. (2023) explore how welcomeness applies to homeless individuals seeking medical assistance. They found that welcome is characterized by a sense of being invited and free from judgment. Baker et al. (2007) suggested that welcome entails a sense of inclusivity, where individuals feel that they are treated like everyone else, accepted, comfortable, and empowered to actively engage in the desired context. Considering the views of these scholars, it becomes apparent that the concept of welcome is versatile and applicable across various settings, yet consistently embodies a similar essence. Welcome revolves around creating an environment where individuals feel comfortable, and where their presence is valued and wanted.

Scholars often employ the concept of *welcome* together with the concept of *belonging*. Davis et al. (2022) argue that belonging is the feeling of being valued and connected to others within the same group. The authors continue to argue that another important factor is having a relation to the group identity. Individuals must feel that their identity aligns with the identity of the desired group to experience a sense of belonging (Davis et al. 2022). In this sense, the term *belonging* differs from the term *welcome*. While welcome revolves around creating an environment where individuals feel comfortable, and where their presence is valued and wanted, belonging revolves around the feeling of being valued and establishing a sustained connection to a group. To be concrete, some individuals may not want to feel a sense of belonging in all situations, but they still want to feel welcomed. For example, an atheist might not want to feel that they belong in a church, but they still want to feel welcomed.

1.1.6 Welcoming Servicescapes

The concept of *servicescape*, coined by Bitner (1992), refers to the physical surroundings that impact the behaviors of customers and employees in service organizations (Mari & Poggesi, 2013). Despite numerous studies on the servicescape, empirical research examining the specific attributes that signal welcome in a servicescape remains limited. Snethen et al. (2018), who explored features of community locations considered welcoming by individuals with serious mental illnesses, found that, amongst these, welcoming places were often

perceived as architecturally open, featuring natural light and plants. Welcoming places also facilitated reciprocal relationships and provided opportunities for these individuals to engage in a number of activities (e.g., socializing, entertainment, improving health, among others). Baker (2007), who investigated how people with disabilities judge welcome in interactions in retail stores, found that four primary situational factors determine the perceptions associated with welcome: service personnel, store environmental factors, other customers, and product/service assortment. Concerning service personnel, Baker (2007) found that a welcoming experience is characterized by friendly, respectful, proactive, and knowledgeable service personnel who treat customers with dignity and provide tailored assistance without making assumptions. Unwelcoming experiences, within this group, often involved judgmental or overbearing behaviors that highlight the customer's disability unnecessarily. Regarding the store environment, Baker (2007) found that home-like aesthetics, inclusive displays, accessible design, considerate sensory elements, and clear signage characterize it. Unwelcoming environments, amongst people with disabilities, often involve physical and sensory barriers and a lack of understanding of the customers' specific needs. Moreover, concerning other customers, a welcoming environment is characterized by considerate behavior, empathy, and understanding. Conversely, unwelcoming experiences often involve inconsiderate actions, misattributions, and crowded or noisy conditions that heighten challenges related to disabilities (Baker, 2007). Lastly, a welcoming product assortment in a store is characterized by product availability, high quality, reasonable pricing, and variety. Unwelcoming experiences related to product assortment often stem from the unavailability of desired products, poor quality, high prices, lack of variety, and inefficient or uninformed service processes (Baker, 2007).

Rosenbaum (2005), building upon the theory of the servicescape, researched how ethnic consumers interpret symbols within consumption settings and how these symbols impact approach and avoidance behavior. In his article, Rosenbaum concluded that displaying meaningful ethnic symbols, such as the pride flag or kosher signs, may elicit approach behavior and signal welcome among ethnic consumers. These symbols evoke feelings of comfort and inclusiveness, making consumers feel valued and respected (Rosenbaum, 2005). In a subsequent study, Rosenbaum and Montoya (2007) researched how ethnic consumers, specifically Hispanics and homosexuals, assess their place identity and investigated factors in the social and physical servicescape in restaurant settings that contribute to approach behavior amongst these. Rosenbaum and Montoya (2007) found that ethnic consumers assess their place identity by evaluating the ethnicity of employees and customers in a setting, a process termed *place likening*, and by responding to verbal and nonverbal cues in a consumption setting. In this context, place identity is linked to the extent ethnic consumers feel belonging, which the scholars indirectly equate to the extent ethnic consumers feel welcome. Verbal cues indicating unwelcomeness in this context were found to include negative and abusive comments, while nonverbal cues involve actions such as glaring stares and a lack of recognition (Rosenbaum & Montoya, 2007).

1.2 Problem Statement

While previous studies have explored the factors influencing feelings of welcome among individuals with disabilities (Baker et al. 2007) and those with serious mental illnesses (Snethen et al. 2018), as far as our knowledge extends, no scholar has delved into the concept of welcomeness concerning people with non-dominant ethnic backgrounds. Rosenbaum and Montoya (2007) examined the assessment of *belonging* (place identity) among ethnic consumers within restaurant servicescapes, focusing on the ethnic groups of homosexuals and Hispanics in the United States. Moreover, Rosenbaum (2005) researched how ethnic consumers interpret symbols within consumption settings and how these symbols impact *approach* and *avoidance behavior*. Collectively, this means that no scholar has researched how non-dominant ethnic consumers assess *welcome* in the retail servicescape. Belonging and welcome are two different constructs with different meanings and implications. Belonging revolves around the feeling of being valued and establishing a sustained connection with a group, while welcome includes feeling comfortable, valued, and wanted. In retail interactions, customers may not want to feel belonging but still want to feel welcome. Therefore, studying welcome instead of belonging is of relevance. Additionally, as Rosenbaum and Montoya's (2007) study was conducted almost twenty years ago, the relevance of these findings can be contested today. Moreover, as Rosenbaum and Montoya's (2007) study was carried out in the United States, focusing on only two ethnic groups, one can question the relevance of the findings in a European context. This gap in the literature requires attention because experiencing feelings of unwelcome can have enduring negative effects on individual well-being, such as reduced self-esteem and agency (Crockett & Weinberger, 2023). Moreover, if people feel unwelcome, threatened, and uncomfortable, in the retail environment, one possibility of contributing to multicultural conviviality is overlooked (Demangeot et al. 2019). To summarize, continued neglect of this area of study means a missed chance to enhance consumer welfare and perpetuates long-term societal tensions.

1.3 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this explorative study is to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape. Understanding these potential factors can contribute to multicultural conviviality, enhancing both societal and individual well-being. The research question is posed as follows:

> What potential aspects of the retail servicescape contribute to the perception of welcome and unwelcome among customers with non-dominant ethnicities?

For this study, we define the feeling of *welcome* as the feeling of having a desired presence, being greeted with pleasure, and feeling comfortable. Furthermore, *ethnicity* in this study, is defined as any group of individuals that claims a distinct peoplehood or an identity that sets them apart from others. The term *non-dominant ethnicity* pertains to individuals belonging to a minority ethnic group within their residential and local contexts experiencing some degree of discrimination, stigmatization, and/or ostracization.

1.4 Aimed Contributions

With this research, our objective is to contribute to the service marketing literature by enhancing our understanding of the aspects that customers use to perceive welcome in retail servicescapes in general, and the aspects that customers with non-dominant ethnicities use to perceive welcome in retail servicescapes in particular. The aspects that customers with non-dominant ethnicities use to perceive welcome are presumably different from the ones that people with mental illnesses (Baker et al. 2007) and consumers with disabilities (Snethen et al. 2018) use, given that these groups experience places in different ways. Furthermore, this study aims to align with the transformative service research (TSR) movement, since it aims at enhancing consumer welfare and strives to create uplifting changes and improvements in consumer, communal, and global well-being (Edwards, 2018).

In terms of practical contribution, we aim to contribute to aid managerial decision-making in retail. By recognizing and addressing the unique aspects that customers of non-dominant ethnicities utilize to perceive welcome, businesses can implement more inclusive practices in retail settings, which corresponds to behaving in a socially responsible manner. This can lead to tangible benefits such as increased customer satisfaction and possibly, improved financial performance (Cho et al. 2019; Hamad & Cek, 2023). When a broader spectrum of customers feels valued, respected, and satisfied while interacting with a store, the benefits extend to the retailer, fostering a positive reputation, customer loyalty, and ultimately, increased profitability (Söderlund, 2010).

In addition to managerial implications, we aim to contribute to fostering multicultural conviviality and societal and individual well-being. We believe this can be done by providing insights that can inform retailers on how to create welcoming environments for customers of non-dominant ethnicities. By understanding the specific aspect that these customers use to assess welcome, and managing them appropriately, businesses can tailor their strategies to better meet the needs of diverse populations, fostering inclusivity and engagement, and enhancing customer experiences by increasing customer well-being. Ultimately, through our research, we hope to promote a more equitable and welcoming society where individuals feel valued and respected in the spaces they inhabit.

1.5 Outline of Thesis

This paper begins with a comprehensive review of the relevant literature in this domain, providing a thorough context and background for the study. Following this, the research approach is outlined, detailing the methodology and procedures employed for data collection and analysis. The subsequent section presents the study's findings, offering insights and results derived from the research. In the concluding section, the paper discusses the findings in-depth, exploring both their theoretical and practical implications. Additionally, the study's limitations are acknowledged, and recommendations for future research directions are proposed, aiming to guide subsequent investigations and enhance understanding in this field.

2 Literature Review

This thesis aims to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape. In this section, we review and discuss existing knowledge on this topic. The section is organized into five subparts. First, we explore the theory of servicescape. Second, we examine welcoming places and their impact. Third, we investigate welcoming encounters. Fourth, we discuss ethnic symbols in relation to welcomeness. Fifth, we discuss the theory of self-congruity. Our review aims to illuminate the current understanding of these topics. Given that this thesis is explorative, and current research on the topic of welcome in retail is limited, we chose these areas under the presumption that they would be applicable to some extent, since the areas are tangential to our topic.

2.1 The Retail Servicescape

The concept of servicescape, coined by Bitner (1992), refers to the physical surroundings (i.e. the built environment) that impact the behaviors of customers and employees in service organizations (Mari & Poggesi, 2013). Bitner (1992, p.59) articulates that "a variety of objective environmental factors are perceived both by customers and employees and that both groups may respond cognitively, emotionally and physiologically to the environment". The framework illustrates that consumers' want to approach or avoid a store setting is influenced by their interpretations of and reactions to various stimuli. Bitner posits that these stimuli can be classified under three categories: ambient conditions (e.g. temperature, noise, music, and odor); space/function (e.g. layout, equipment, and furnishings); and signs, symbols, and artifacts (e.g. signage, personal artifacts and style of décor). Bitner's (1992) framework is anchored in Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model. In the servicescape framework, the atmosphere is the stimulus (S) that causes a consumer's evaluation (O) which in turn causes some behavioral response (R). Three emotional states – pleasure/displeasure, arousal/non-arousal and dominance/submissiveness – mediate responses to the environment in approach or avoidance behavior (Mari & Poggesi, 2013).

Other scholars have extended the servicescape framework, to deepen the understanding of the impact of the physical environment on customer behavior and experiences. Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) presented the expanded servicescape framework, which comprises physical, social, socially symbolic, and natural environmental dimensions (see Figure 1). The physical

dimension of stimuli corresponds to Bitner's (1992) categorization of stimuli. The social dimension comprises customer and employee elements encapsulated in a consumption setting. The socially symbolic dimension contains signs, symbols, and artifacts that are part of an ethnic group's symbolic universe. These symbols carry distinct, sometimes evocative significance for members of a group, thereby exerting varying influences on customers based on their group affiliations. Finally, the natural dimension comprises natural stimuli such as being away and compatibility. This dimension moves Bitner's (1992) work into public health by showing how a servicescape may possess restorative qualities, which can increase customer's well-being and help customers assuage negative symptoms associated with fatigue, including but not limited to, burnout, stress, depression, and ADHD (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011).

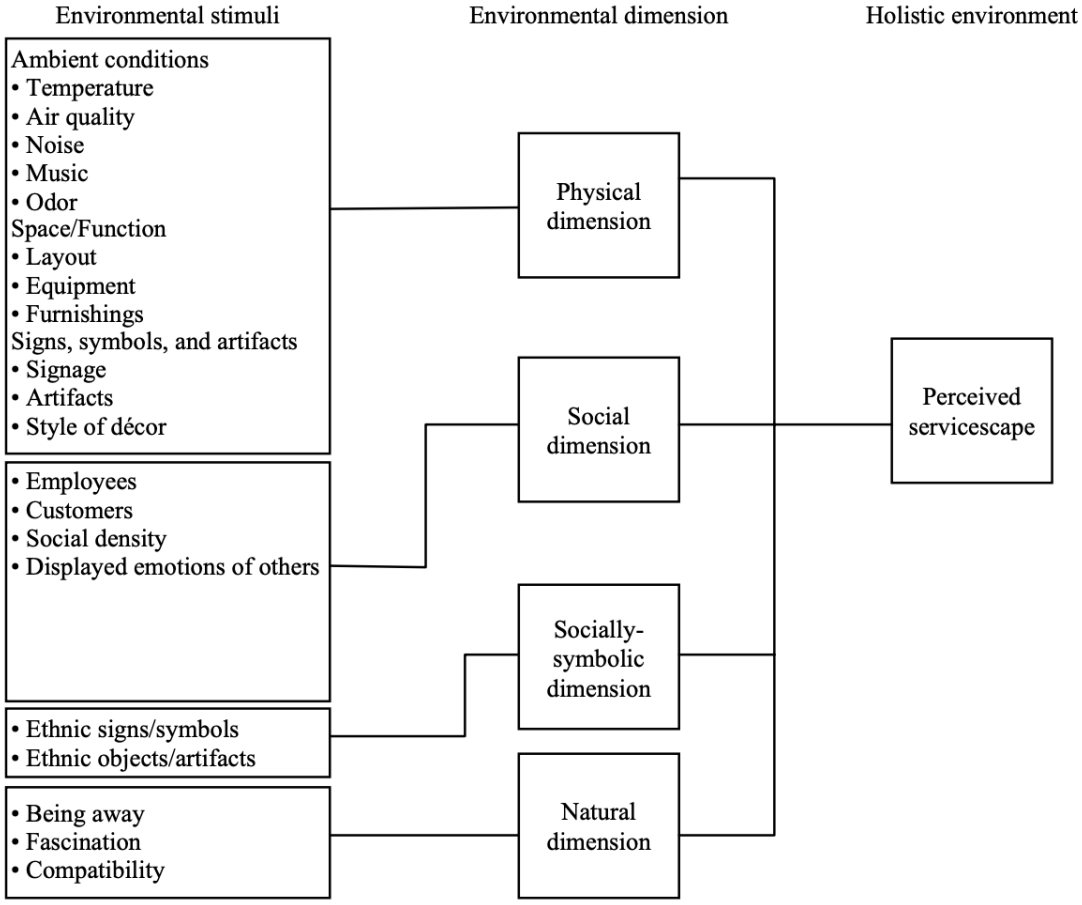

Figure 1 Expanded servicescape framework (Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011)

The implication of the extended servicescape framework is that approach/avoidance behavior is not only influenced by physical stimuli, but also social stimuli, symbolical stimuli, and natural stimuli. As Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) point out, however, not all customers will perceive and prioritize the four dimensions of servicescapes equally. Research indicates that customers' interpretations of subjective stimuli in a servicescape vary. Resultantly, managers face the challenge of adjusting the servicescape stimuli to cater to the unmet consumption,

emotional, and psychological needs of their target markets. For instance, customers seeking companionship are likely to respond to the social and symbolically social aspects of a firm's servicescape. Similarly, customers seeking psychological escape may also be influenced by the natural dimension of a servicescape.

Rosenbaum and Massiah's (2011) extended servicescape framework could be criticized for overlooking service elements. Such elements could for instance include educational, entertainment, or spiritual dimensions (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010), organizational culture of hospitality (Pizam & Tasci, 2019), or green dimensions (Jang, 2021). Furthermore, there is a call in the literature for a re-evaluation of current servicescape design frameworks to incorporate the concept of safety, both physical and psychological, for customers (Kumar et al. 2023). This suggests that the extended servicescape framework may not adequately address the evolving and exhaustive set of needs and concerns of customers in service environments. Despite such potential shortcomings, the extended servicescape framework is still a valuable and helpful tool for examining the impact of retail environments on customers.

2.2 Welcoming Places

This subsection discusses what is already known about places and what aspects of spaces have been found to be welcoming. The section is organized into three subparts, each portraying different streams within this area.

2.2.1 Atmospherics and Welcome

The effect of the physical environment on human psychology has been given attention in various academic fields, such as architecture, retailing, marketing, and environmental psychology (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). Many articles credit Kotler (1973) for initiating the literature stream on atmospheric effects on consumer behavior. Kotler coined the term *atmospherics* to denote the intentional control and structuring of environmental cues. For instance, studies by Ryu et al. (2021), Jang & Namkung (2009), and Moon et al. (2015) delve into specific settings like restaurants and airports, demonstrating that the overall atmospherics created by the physical environment can positively influence emotions such as joy, excitement, peacefulness, refreshment, arousal, and pleasure.

Regarding the relationship between the physical environment and the feeling of welcome, some research has been conducted, predominantly in relation to the fields of education, healthcare, and urban sociology. For instance, Berris & Miller (2011), who investigated the design of early learning centers, found that early learning centers should be homely, inviting, bright, and linked to the outdoors to be welcoming. Noble & Devlin (2021), who investigated

the perceptions of psychotherapy waiting rooms, noted that comfortable, decorated, warm, well-lit, and homely environments were related to a sense of welcome amongst visitors. Among people with mental illnesses, Snethen et al. (2021) found that welcoming places were often perceived as architecturally open, featuring natural light and plants. Snethen et al. (2021) put forth the idea that since natural light and the presence of plants are associated with lower stress levels (Ulrich et al. 2018), users of the places may experience lower stress levels, contributing to the degree to which they are perceived as welcoming. As a final example, Ahsan et al. (2022) found that improving thermal comfort in urban public spaces enhances the overall quality of outdoor environments and makes them more inviting. Synthesizing the findings from these scholars, one can conclude that pleasant and comfortable spaces in general enable people to feel welcome from an atmospheric perspective.

2.2.2 Inclusive Design

Within the field of design thinking, an approach termed *inclusive design* has developed in recent decades. Inclusive design can be defined as "the design of products, environments, programmes, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Heylighen et al. 2017). It plays a crucial role in fostering welcoming environments. The goal of inclusive design is to eliminate barriers and exclusion, enabling products, services, and built environments to meet as diverse a range of needs as possible (Li & Dong, 2019). Design exclusion occurs "when existing mainstream products, services, and environments fail to satisfy certain needs of (potential) users" (Li & Dong, 2019, p.2).

Imrie (1996), who studied the experiences of disabled people in cities, argued that public spaces are often intentionally designed to uphold and enhance the dominance of able-bodied individuals, thereby excluding disabled individuals and reinforcing existing power imbalances. He posits that the exclusion of disabled people from these spaces is not a natural occurrence but a result of prevailing power dynamics, policy decisions, and inadequate planning that favors able-bodied individuals. In the context of design exclusion and disabled people, Kitchin (1998) suggests that the way disabled individuals are excluded within a space is critical in conveying that they are *out of place*. Kitchin (1998) explains that societal norms establish who is considered welcome in certain areas, with these norms becoming normalized and accepted as standard. This process leads to the inclusion of some individuals in these spaces while others, who do not conform to these dominant norms, feel excluded and marginalized. When individuals who do not conform to dominant norms challenge these exclusionary feelings and assert their presence in these spaces, dominant groups may feel uncomfortable or threatened (Kitchin, 1998, p.350), making these individuals targets for ridicule and mistreatment. While this thesis does not investigate the experiences of people who are disabled, relevant insights can be drawn from these studies. In summary, these studies

suggest that design inclusion positively affects individuals' feelings of belonging, normalcy, and proper treatment, whereas design exclusion has a negative impact, making individuals feel out of place, unwelcome, uncomfortable, and possibly subject to mistreatment.

2.2.3 Urban Sociology and Welcome

Within the field of urban sociology, Hillier (2018) discusses case studies on how cues within public spaces signal who is welcome and who is not. Byrne and Wolch (2009) claim that spaces are often ideologically charged and ethno-racial inscribed, something Hillier (2018) continues to explain, meaning that they are constructed around hidden and nonverbal codes. Individuals interpret these codes differently based on their identities and lived experiences. In unfamiliar environments, the brain assesses various cues, often related to physical attributes within the space such as smells, sounds, and visuals. If these cues are perceived as unwelcoming or threatening, particularly in spaces where individuals encounter unwelcoming behaviors, the brain interprets the environment as hostile (Hillier, 2018). In other words, cues within public spaces affect us involuntarily. Hillier (2018) compares multiple different case studies on two public spaces: food stores and public spaces. In terms of food stores, the store location significantly impacts the sense of welcome. If the store is placed in an area where the consumer feels a sense of belonging, they are more inclined to enter. Second, the cleanliness of the store signals that the customer is desired and expected. Third, the environment and activities outside the store can also signal welcome or unwelcome feelings. For instance, if people are "hanging around" outside the store, it can feel unwelcoming, and if it is dark or nighttime, it is also considered unwelcoming (Hillier, 2018).

Hillier (2018) also summarizes examples of how to promote spatial inclusion, ensuring more people, especially those from marginalized groups, feel welcome in public spaces. The first step she mentions is to recognize who is or is not using the public space and to delve deeper into how this decision is shaped by their perception of who is actually welcomed in that setting (ibid). Understanding these perceptions is crucial for creating environments that are genuinely inclusive and inviting to all individuals. Second, she expresses two important concepts: *positionality* and *intersectionality*. Positionality implies that the social, historical, and political position of an individual influences their perspectives on the world (Holmes, 2020). Consequently, those with marginalized identities often perceive spaces differently, often experiencing them as less welcoming or inclusive than non-marginalized individuals. Intersectionality, on the other hand, involves recognizing multiple social identities simultaneously, examining power dynamics and inequalities, and understanding changing social contexts (Muirhead et al. 2020). Not all consumers of the same ethnicity interpret a space in the same way, as factors like ethnicity, race, gender, and more do not entirely define them (Hillier, 2018). This concept is important to create more inclusive and welcoming spaces for all individuals. Finally, to conclude her chapter, Hillier (2018, p.225) emphasizes: "Only

when social cues and power relations are made explicit in the process of design can we expect to see people across identities using the same spaces".

2.3 Welcoming Encounters

This subsection discusses what is already known about social interactions and what aspects of these have been found to be welcoming. The section is organized into two subparts, one pertaining to employees, and the other focusing on other customers.

2.3.1 Service Encounters and Welcome

Within the service marketing literature, service encounters have been thoroughly studied. Service encounters have been found to influence customer's emotions, in turn impacting their overall experience, satisfaction, and behavior (Barger & Grandey, 2006). Positive emotional responses, such as feelings of happiness, elation, pleasantness, and affection, have been found to be influenced by whether the service provider provides extra attention and mutual understanding to the customer, is perceived as authentic and performs competently (Price et al. 1995). In Price et al.'s (1995) study, giving extra attention to the customer was found to be especially influential in creating positive emotions (Price et al. 1995). Moreover, research indicates that emotional labor and *deep acting* play a role in influencing customer's emotions. That is, the authenticity of an employee's emotional labor display is an important factor in influencing the customer's emotions and perceptions (Hennig‐Thurau et al. 2006; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). In the context of enhancing welcomeness, Darling (2018) connects authenticity and welcome and suggests that the act of welcoming someone must be genuine and authentically aimed at improving human connections. If the act of welcoming someone becomes a superficial gesture, its positive impact falls short. Additionally, the concept of emotional contagion is an important cornerstone within service marketing literature concerning the relationship between service personnel and customer's emotions. Emotional contagion suggests that customers can *catch* the emotions displayed by service employees (Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008), and the process occurs through the three stages of mimicry, feedback, and contagion (Hatfield et al. 2014).

The significance of service encounters has been increasingly emphasized in recent decades. Scholars highlight this aspect due to the evolving nature of the market (Kandampully, 2012). As the retail market becomes more global, differentiating from competitors has become more challenging for retailers. Consequently, customers tend to purchase goods from retailers that offer the best service. Service has become the top priority, surpassing the products being sold. Excellent service encounters increase profitability and customer loyalty (Kandampully, 2012). Kandampully (2012) proposed that this shift represented a new paradigm for the retail

industry, necessitating a new philosophy of service management to ensure retailers' success. Supporting this notion, Andreassen and Olsen (2012) compared how customers with bad versus good service encounters perceive the rest of the servicescape. They found that customers who experienced poor service were more attentive to other aspects of the environment, while satisfied customers were less likely to be critical of other elements within the retail environment (Andreassen & Olsen, 2012). In other words, positive service encounters appear to be the most crucial element of the servicescape.

2.3.2 Other Customers and Welcome

Söderlund (2011) explored how the presence and behavior of other customers within a retail environment influence a customer's perception and interpretation of the retailer. Although Söderlund did not explicitly link this to the concept of welcomeness, it is reasonable to anticipate that the interactions between customers can significantly affect their sense of welcomeness. This aligns with Bitner's (1992) retail servicescape model, particularly the social dimension, which emphasizes the influence of other customers on the overall retail experience. Söderlund (2011) identifies three ways in which the presence of other customers has an impact. Firstly, the number of customers in the retail space has an effect. An empty store can signal the retailer's impopularity and abnormalcy (Söderlund, 2011). However, if the store becomes overcrowded, leading to long waiting times and a crowded space, it can create a negative experience for customers. Secondly, the purchasing patterns and activities of other customers influence the evaluation of the retailer (Söderlund, 2011). Thirdly, interactions between customers also play a crucial role. Martin and Pranter (1989) provide examples of both verbal and nonverbal cues that affect the shopping experience. Negative cues include rudeness, inappropriate clothing wear, customers cutting in line, and loud behavior. Positive cues include good manners, friendly behavior, appropriate clothing wear, absence of crowds, and orderly conduct. These interactions can significantly shape a customer's overall perception and experience within the retail environment. Other scholars worth mentioning are Brocato et al. (2012), who confirmed that customers tend to favor retailers where they encounter other customers perceived as similar to themselves.

2.4 Ethnic Symbols and Welcome

Symbols have been defined as "something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Rosenbaum (2005), concluded that displaying meaningful ethnic symbols, such as the pride flag or kosher signs, may elicit approach behavior and signal welcome among ethnic consumers. These symbols evoke feelings of comfort and inclusiveness, making consumers

feel valued and respected (Rosenbaum, 2005). Shum (2020), focusing on Africans as an ethnic minority in Hong Kong, aligned with Rosenbaum's findings. He emphasized that symbols act as tangible expressions of acceptance, contributing to a sense of belonging for individuals from various ethnic groups. Shum (2020) noted that these symbols help bridge cultural gaps and create a welcoming environment, which is crucial for fostering positive social interactions and community cohesion. Similarly, Stanisevski (2010) expressed that incorporating ethnic symbols, such as gestures of greeting or cultural markers, demonstrates recognition and respect for cultural differences. This practice enhances inclusivity in multicultural settings by acknowledging and valuing the diverse backgrounds of individuals. Stanisevski argued that these small yet significant actions can greatly improve the social dynamics within diverse communities. Moreover, Hillier (2018), in her case comparison study, provided an example that ethnic products can elicit a sense of welcome. She brought up an instance where a Latino customer in Philadelphia cried tears of joy upon finding a Puerto Rican breadfruit in a local store. The store manager had recognized the growing Latino population and the lack of produce from Latino countries, hence he stocked up on such items. This gesture made the customer feel included and accounted for, highlighting how thoughtful actions can foster a sense of belonging and emotional connection within the community. In summary, ethnic symbols play a role in signaling welcome by expressing acceptance, comfort, inclusiveness, and consideration. These symbols and actions not only cater to the specific needs of ethnic consumers but also foster an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

2.5 Self-Congruity

Research has shown that a consumer's attitude toward a product is affected by the compatibility between the product image and the consumer's self-image (Sirgy et al. 2000). Similarly, consumers are theoretically more inclined to shop in a store when the image projected by the store aligns with their own self-image. This process of matching the product or store image with the customer's self-image is referred to as self-congruity (Sirgy et al. 2000). Self-congruity manifests when individuals perceive an alignment between their own selves and the image of a product or retail store. Essentially, the greater the match is between a customer's self-image and that of the retailer, the more likely it is that the consumer patronizes the store (Sirgy et al. 2000). There are different attributes of a retail store that contribute to the matching process such as the atmosphere, location, merchandise, price, and promotion (Sirgy et al. 2000). Retail patronage, the authors explain, reflects several related aspects, which may include store attitude, store preference, store selection, actual or intended patronage, satisfaction with a store, repeat patronage, and store loyalty. Ibrahim and Najjar (2007) elaborates on the self-congruity phenomenon by arguing that the ideal self-image congruity has a stronger effect on the matching process than the actual self-congruity.

Consequently, customers' desired view of themselves in comparison to how they actually view themselves affects which retailer they decide to shop at.

Sirgy et al. (2000) continue by suggesting that consumers not only evaluate stores based on the level of self-congruity. For instance, they also assess stores concerning specific attributes in accordance with consumers' anticipated performance levels for each attribute. For example, this can relate to how the store's opening hours correspond to consumer's expectations of opening hours. The alignment between the store's attribute level and the consumer's expectation of that attribute is termed *functional congruity* (Sirgy et al. 2000). Consumers may use a combination of self-congruity and functional congruity when evaluating retail establishments depending on various situational and personal factors (Sirgy et al. 2000).

3 Methodology

The aim of this research is to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape. In this section, we offer an overview of the research methodology employed to fulfill the aim of this study. We advocate for our chosen methods by grounding them in our philosophical standpoint, provide a comprehensive depiction of our data collection method, outline our method for data analysis, and reflect on the quality of this research. The section is concluded by reflecting on ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) explain that by understanding research philosophy, one can comprehend a researcher's basic assumptions about the nature of reality. It is essential for determining research design. In relation to aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape, we believe that there are many truths. In other words, we believe that each participant will provide a different perspective based on their narrative and previous experience and that facts depend on the viewpoint of the observer. Thus, we embrace the ontological perspective of relativism, which belongs to the social constructionism paradigm.

Having defined our ontological positioning, we reflect upon our epistemology, i.e. "the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social world: how do we know what we know?" (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.77). We believe that reality is socially constructed and that humans give it meaning. Consequently, we position ourselves within the epistemology of social constructionism. Within social constructionism, the researchers are a part of what is being observed, the aim is to increase the general understanding of the situation, generalization is achieved through theoretical abstraction and sampling requires small numbers of cases chosen for specific reasons (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

3.2 Research Approach

Having determined a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology, we reflected on our research approach. Both abduction and induction were considered. Abduction relies on systematic combining, characterized by a dynamic interaction between theory and initial empirical observations (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In this approach, "new combinations are developed through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p.559). The main objective of abductive reasoning is to generate new theoretical insights rather than to confirm existing theories. Dubois & Gadde (2002) recommend it in exploratory research. On the other hand, induction involves reasoning where one compares instances of a phenomenon to induce general principles (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.267). In inductive research, one starts without theory and builds knowledge based on observations.

Since our study is exploratory, we deemed abduction most suitable. While an inductive approach could have been adapted, it might have led to an increased risk of subjectivity and bias from our preconceptions (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Subjectivity and preconceptions influence which patterns are observed and how they are interpreted, which may result in selective observation and confirmation of preexisting beliefs. This can skew findings, as researchers may unconsciously prioritize data that supports preexisting beliefs while overlooking or undervaluing contradictory evidence. Resultantly, the inductive approach might compromise the reliability and validity of the study's outcomes. Therefore, we deemed it less suitable.

For this thesis, systematic combining meant that the data collection was flexible. We continuously adapted our method based on initial insights and emerging findings, such as adding questions derived from new perspectives brought up by participants. Another example is that we found an additional participant during an interview. Furthermore, there was an interaction between our chosen method and existing theory. We based our interview guide on existing theory and knowledge. Conversely, had we used an inductive approach we would not have wanted existing theory to influence our data collection in any way.

3.3 Research Design

Research design is about "making choices about *what* will be researched, and *how*" (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.101). Having decided on a relativist ontology, a social constructionist epistemology, and an abductive approach, we carefully evaluated which qualitative research method would be the most appropriate (given the lack of existing knowledge on our topic and our research philosophy, quantitative data collection methods

were deemed inappropriate). Having decided on a qualitative methodology, we carefully evaluated which specific method and techniques to use to gather empirical data. Our choice revolved around using interviews, focus groups, ethnography, netnography, and qualitative surveys. In the end, semi-structured interviewing, with elements of Critical Incident Technique (CIT), was chosen as the most suitable method.

The aim of qualitative interviewing is to attempt to gain an understanding of the respondent's worldview (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.195). Conducting interviews in a private setting, with only the interviewers and the interviewee present, fosters a safe environment for open expression. Thus, we deemed interviews suitable. There are different types of interviews: unstructured, semi-structured, and structured. With the purpose of studying individuals' perception of welcome in retail, semi-structured interviews were regarded as a suitable method. Semi-structured interviews are suitable when the researcher aims to gain in-depth knowledge of the participant's worldviews (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). It allows for flexibility in both the sequence and manner of discussing predetermined topics, as well as the incorporation of new perspectives introduced by participants (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). We deemed these qualities important, aligning with the abductive approach.

The CIT element of the chosen method meant that part of the interviews were dedicated to exploring participants' potential critical incidents related to welcome/unwelcome in retail. In CIT, subjects are asked to recall specific incidents that are critical examples of the phenomenon under study (Baker, 2007). CIT, first introduced by Flanagan (1954), is a method of "teasing of information, often employed within interviews, which get into the heart of an issue" (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021, p.206). It is a projective technique that delves into a phenomenon where there is a lack of knowledge (Baker et al. 2007). Furthermore, CIT allows us to tap into extreme incidents of welcoming/unwelcoming experiences in a retail setting, which are more valuable than average incidents (Flanagan, 1954). By using elements of CIT methodology in our interviews, we could get to the core of our topic quickly. Also, it aligned with our abductive approach.

3.3.1 Alternative Methods

As for alternative methods, options included focus groups, ethnography, netnography, and qualitative surveys. Focus groups have been proven to be helpful when doing exploratory research. However, for us, they were deemed unsuitable due to two reasons. First, our topic and research question revolves around one's ethnicity, something that can be regarded as sensitive and not something one would want to discuss publicly. Second, conducting a focus group demands considerable expertise and proficiency as an interviewer (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), something which we authors do not have. It necessitates ensuring that participants feel at ease, managing dominant individuals, and being vigilant of the potential for groupthink (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021).

Ethnography, characterized by immersing oneself in a group to observe authentic behaviors (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), appeared unsuitable due to the possibility of customers modifying their behaviors in the presence of two observers. If participants would have modified their behavior, the validity of this research would have decreased. Given more time, conducting ethnographic research could have potentially been suitable as a supporting method. More time would have allowed for fostering an environment where participants felt comfortable enough to exhibit their genuine selves in the presence of two observers. Moreover, given our research topic and question, we are investigating people's feelings (of welcome), something not visible, thus difficult to observe through an ethnographic method. Netnography, a type of ethnography conducted in a virtual context (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), was also deemed unfitting. We carried out some screening on internet forums, however, no relevant discussion forums or threads online were found on the topic of welcomeness in retail, focusing on ethnic consumers, and therefore this research method had to be disregarded.

Qualitative surveys, a survey method where the aim is to gather non-numerical data through open-ended questions, could also be considered an alternative method. Using surveys would have allowed for anonymity, mitigating the risk of social desirability bias (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021), however, the use of surveys can also reduce validity as participants are likely to put less effort and sincerity into their answers (Vecchio et al. 2020).

3.4 Data Collection Method

The data collection began with us authors interviewing representatives from IKEA. The interviews with IKEA representatives were conducted with the purpose of providing us with knowledge about the topic of welcome in retail. These interviews were also of great help when preparing for the customer interviews. Following, we carried out a customer pilot interview with the aim of ensuring that the questions in our customer interview guide were clear and easily understood. Having completed these two steps, we carried out the customer interviews, which acted as the main empirical data used to answer the research question of this thesis. In this section, we describe these three steps. However, we begin by outlining the delimitations of our data collection.

3.4.1 Delimitations

In this research, we have decided to limit the data collection to Sweden, even though the research question is not limited to any geographical scope. This delimitation is mainly due to two separate reasons. First, the Swedish population is suitable since despite being predominantly homogenous, it has experienced a significant increase in cultural diversity due

to immigration in recent decades (SCB, 2024). This mix of homogeneity and diversity provides a suitable context to explore interactions in retail stores among individuals identifying with non-dominant ethnicities. Second, focusing on one country instead of several increases the feasibility of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring a more focused, in-depth, and manageable research endeavor within the constraints of available time and resources.

Furthermore, we have decided to narrow the scope to ethnicity in terms of origin, although we acknowledge that ethnicity, as defined within this study, extends beyond mere origin. This decision is driven by the aim of maintaining a clear focus, thereby enhancing the precision and relevance of our research findings. Moreover, this maintained precision contributes to preventing overgeneralization. Expanding the scope to include aspects such as sexual orientation or gender could potentially dilute the study's specificity, leading to overgeneralized conclusions. Furthermore, this limitation aligns with the overarching goals of our study and takes into account the heightened tensions among multicultural groups within society.

3.4.2 Interviews with IKEA Representatives

The selected IKEA representatives were found through our INGKA contact Simon Sjölander. Through snowball sampling, he suggested two employees within the organization who he considered knowledgeable and experts in this area. The first representative was Reza, Country Business Development & Transformation Manager. The second was Gabriella, Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion leader at IKEA. In these interviews, we sought to understand IKEA's initiatives aimed at ensuring a welcoming environment for all individuals during their store visits, aligning with their vision of being the retailer "for the many people". Moreover, we delved into whether IKEA conducts customer surveys to investigate aspects of welcome, aiming to gain insights into customer perspectives on this matter. Furthermore, similar to the customer interviews, IKEA representatives were asked about factors contributing to a welcoming retail environment overall. Lastly, we aimed to explore IKEA representatives' perspectives on the role and responsibility of retailers in promoting societal well-being, aligning with the overarching aim of this study to contribute knowledge and insights on how retailers can facilitate societal inclusion. See Appendix A for the complete interview guide. The information gained from these interviews equipped us with background knowledge, priming us for the customer interviews.

The interviews with IKEA representatives were carried out on the 10th and 12th of April 2024. Both interviews were conducted online due to geographical constraints. One interviewer led the questioning while the other took notesThe sound was recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, again leaving room for the managers to express their opinions and expertise within and outside the questions asked. These interviews

opened up for discussion and follow-up questions as we were curious about IKEA's own initiatives.

3.4.3 Pilot Interview

This pilot interview was carried out on the 13th of April 2024. It was conducted with an individual within our social network who met the screening criteria (see Section 3.4.4.2). The interview took place online to resemble our future planned interviews as much as possible. This interview was not included in the findings. After conducting the interview we made alterations to the introduction in terms of information provided, which meant that we added some new information to increase clarity. Concerning the questions asked, we included an additional question at the end addressing the sense of welcome in society. We deemed this question important as it allows us to explore how the feeling of welcome extends beyond specific settings like retail, offering insights into participants' overall sense of welcome in society.

3.4.4 Interviews with Customers

The customer interviews were carried out between the 15th and 25th of April 2024. All the interviews were conducted in Swedish as all participants were proficient. For each interview, we had set out an hour, however, the majority of them lasted about forty minutes. Given that our participants were located across the country, virtual interviews were the most suitable format. This approach not only enhanced the comfort of the interviewees by allowing them to participate from their own homes but also facilitated logistical simplicity. The interview began with a short introduction of us and the project following a statement regarding their anonymity. Prior to commencing the interview, the interviewee was informed about the roles each interviewer would assume, with one conducting the interview and the other taking notes. We aimed to facilitate an open and honest discussion by making sure to be attentive and avoid any type of judgment. This included being mindful of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and sounds, which could inadvertently convey judgment. Additionally, we made sure to avoid using any words that could be considered theoretical. We ensured that they knew they had the right to withdraw at any time.

3.4.4.1 Interview Guide

The interview guide was inspired by Baker et al. (2007), who investigated how people with disabilities assess welcome in retail, by using CIT. Our interview guide was divided into four sections (see Figure 2), where the first two are based on CIT. In the first section, we asked the participants to describe a shopping experience in any chosen retail setting where they felt especially *welcomed*. In connection to doing so, we also provided a definition of how we interpret welcome in the context of this research paper, thereby ensuring a shared

understanding of the concept. We asked them to tell us about the timing and location of the occurrence, the specific store visited, the purpose behind the store visit, and whether the individual was a regular customer or not. The primary emphasis of the inquiry lay in gaining a detailed description of the event itself and the contributors to the feeling of being welcome.

In the second section, the participants were asked to describe an incident where they felt particularly *unwelcome*. They were asked to consider the same aspects of the retail servicescape as for the first question. In the third section, they were asked to describe general aspects of the servicescape that made them feel welcome, referring to the store environment, the service personnel, product assortment, and other customers. Here, they answered in a general manner describing their ideal shopping experience in regard to welcomeness. Lastly, we incorporated a few questions related to perceptions of welcome at IKEA. IKEA is known for its commitment to diversity and its mission to build homes "for the many people", resulting in a very broad consumer demographic and brand awareness. Moreover, Simon Sjölander, Consumer Insights Manager at IKEA, explained that general customer satisfaction is very high at IKEA. Combined, these two aspects made us consider IKEA as a potential exemplar case, thus a relevant one for examining particularly welcoming attributes in the servicescape. See Appendix B for the complete interview guide.

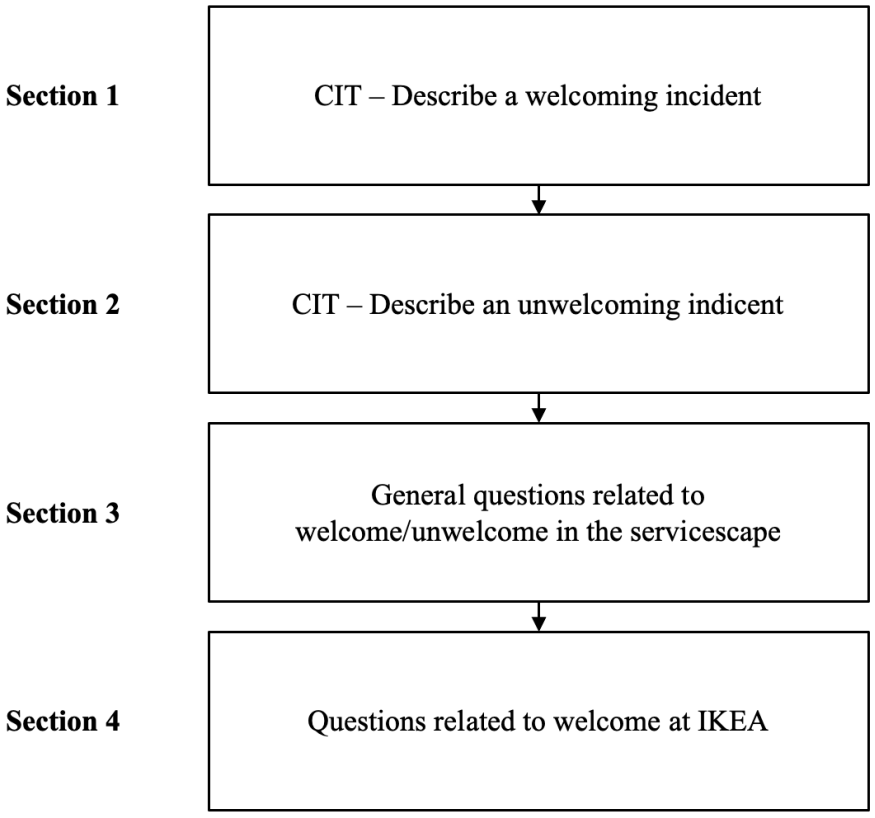

Figure 2 Interview guide structure

3.4.4.2 Sampling and Participant Criteria

The sampling criteria were specific in targeting non-dominant ethnicities in Sweden. As stated in Section 1.3, *non-dominant ethnicity* is defined as individuals belonging to a minority ethnic group within their residential and local contexts experiencing some degree of discrimination, stigmatization, and/or ostracization. Furthermore, as explained in Section 3.4.1, we have limited our scope to ethnicity in terms of origin in this study. Discrimination due to ethnicity in Sweden is correlated to racism and anti-immigrant discourse (Antoine, 2022; Regeringen, 2005). For example, within the labor market it is shown that individuals who have immigrated from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are discriminated against (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, 2023). Therefore, we decided to have a screening criteria of either the participant or at least one parent being born outside of Western Europe. Moreover, regarding screening criteria, we decided that participants must have been residents of Sweden for a minimum of three years, in order to have enough experience to answer the questions. Also, the participants needed to own their own homes where they were in charge of their own consumption. Additionally, participants needed to be between 25 to 65 years old and speak either Swedish or English. In Table 1, the participant selection criteria are summarized.

Table 1: Participant selection criteria summarized

Characteristic	**Criteria**
Country of residence	Sweden
Ethnicity	Origin outside Western Europe
Age	25-65
Gender	All genders (preferably 1/1 split)
Living situation	Has their own home
Mastered languages	Swedish or English
Years of residence in Sweden	< 3

In regards to sampling, purposive sampling was employed through the help of the agency Augur, a resource provided by INGKA Group. Augur has a specific process for how they find participants. They recruit their participants from their own panels where individuals have signed up voluntarily or been added by an Augur recruiter. First, they sent out 3,000 emails randomly to potential participants stating the following:

> We are looking for talkative participants with a background outside of Western Europe who are willing to share their thoughts and opinions about public spaces in Sweden. The study will be conducted through a Zoom interview, which will take a maximum of 1 hour. As a thank you for your participation, you will receive a gift card worth 400 SEK. Interested? Click on

> the link below to register your interest. We will get back to you based on availability, but you are not guaranteed a spot.

The link in the email led possible participants to a form where they were asked to answer a set of questions related to the selection criteria. Augur received 131 responses from interested potential participants via this form. Out of this pool, 12 participants were carefully selected based on key criteria such as *age, place of residence, gender, presence of children at home, country of origin*, and *occupation*. This selection process was implemented to guarantee a well-rounded and representative sample. Notably, an additional participant was found during an interview, which means that snowball sampling was used (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Thus, the total number of participants was 13. In Table 2, all the participants are listed, with their real names exchanged by pseudonyms:

Table 2: List of participants

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Origin**
Leila	29	Bosnia
Hanna	46	Lebanon
Nima	33	Bosnia
Yasmin	46	Iran
Kourosh	36	Iran
Malik	60	Iran
Ali	31	Iraq
Aisha	51	Turkey
Alessia	33	Hungary
Javier	30	Cuba
Simona	42	Romania
Diego	52	Peru
Jasmina	24	Kuwait

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis methodology of this study was inspired by Rennstam and Wästerfors's book *Analyze* (2018). First, we transcribed the interviews. Afterward, we compared how each

participant interpreted the concept of welcome against the definition we provided. This step was crucial as the participants' understanding of welcome influenced their responses to our questions. Second, it quickly became apparent that certain welcoming and unwelcoming aspects were related to ethnicity, while others were not. This distinction allowed us to categorize the data into two separate groups, a process referred to as initial coding by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). Third, any statements that did not fit into these two categories were reduced, aligning with what the authors describe as the reduction phase. Fourth, after careful examination, it became apparent that we could categorize the sentiments into four main subcategories: service personnel, the physical environment, other customers, and product assortment. We thoughtfully tried to remain open to the emergence of any additional subcategory, however we could not distinguish such. Fifth, we coded statements from participants into the four established categories by continuously asking ourselves, "How does this statement relate to the feeling of welcome/unwelcome?". From their statements, we extracted the essence and took notes. Consider the following quote from a participant answering the question "What is it that makes you feel welcome at IKEA stores?":

> If you know what you're looking for, you know which department to go to. There are no complications. And then you know the logistics, like where to go for the checkouts, etc. It feels like a routine, simply put. Even if you don't visit daily or once a week, you know exactly what to do when you go there. With the checkout and the bags, you pick up. I mean everything, it feels like a routine.

The essence of this statement is that easy access to information and ease of navigation contribute to a sense of routine, which is a valued welcoming aspect by the participant. Below is another quote from a participant answering the follow-up question "Why does overly nice personnel make you feel unwelcome?":

> It feels a bit intrusive, and it's almost like I can't say no afterward, I'm unsure how to say that the price isn't right. Or that… yes, it could be something that makes you feel a bit coerced because they're there.

The essence of this statement is that overly nice personnel contribute to feeling pressured, which makes the participant uncomfortable, resulting in a feeling of unwelcome. The entire coding process can be illustrated as follows. First, consider the following quote:

> As I said, I use my stepfather as a reference. Like, when he goes to those kinds of stores and how much information he gets, how they explain things and like... It's mostly about the treatment. They address him as if he knows what they're talking about. They assume he knows a lot about skis.

In this statement, the participant discusses an unwelcoming experience. It is evident that this comment pertains to the second category, welcoming/unwelcoming aspects related to ethnicity. Furthermore, it is evident that the unwelcoming experience falls under the subcategory of service personnel. The essence here is unequal treatment and judgmental

behavior. This process was applied to all statements that we believed could provide valuable insights.

The final step in the data analysis involved arguing and constructing a theory based on our findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Having completed the coding phase, we could compile the notes on essences from statements, enabling us to see how patterns emerged. By examining these patterns, we could form arguments. When arguing, we were inspired by Richard Swedberg's four rules when crafting a theory: "(1) Observe - and choose something interesting, (2) Label the phenomenon and formulate a concept, (3) Broaden the concept into a theory, (4) complete the theory in such a way that it constitutes an explanation" (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.192).

3.6 Trustworthiness of The Study

There is a debate among scholars on how to assess the quality of qualitative research studies (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Tierney and Clemens (2011) suggested that the trustworthiness and validity of qualitative research can be addressed through assessing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In this subsection, we use this framework to evaluate our own research efforts. Additionally, we address our positionality and the employed reflexivity throughout this research.

3.6.1 Validity

Credibility assesses if the data is credibly presented to the audience (Tierny & Clemens, 2011). In our research, we believe that the data has been credibly presented since we have provided thick descriptions of findings though including quotes from participants. Furthermore, we have been transparent with our thought processes and interpretations of quotes. Moreover, besides translating the quotes from Swedish to English, we have not edited them in any way. However, we have not peer-reviewed or member-checked the presented data, which decreases the credibility (Tierny & Clemens, 2011).

Transferability addresses the issue of generalizability, exploring to what degree our findings can be applied to similar contexts and studies (Tierny & Clemens, 2011). We believe that we have achieved adequate transferability. Our insights concerning welcoming and unwelcoming aspects within the servicescape for people with non-dominant ethnicities can be applied to similar contexts. Depending on the scope of the relevant study, the receiver can select parts of this study applicable to their research. In total, we interviewed 13 people, each offering unique narratives and insights. It became apparent after approximately 10 interviews that we started

to reach saturation. If we had not sensed that we were beginning to reach saturation, we would have asked Augur to recruit more participants. Nevertheless, the transferability can be contended in two ways. First, since this study was conducted in Sweden, findings might not apply in all other geographical areas where there is a different demographic. Second, the selected participants had to be a member of Augur and therefore, other relevant participants might have been overlooked. Some of the participants stated that they looked like a "typical" Swede, not experiencing much discrimination due to this, and all participants were well integrated into Swedish society. Therefore, we might not have reached the most marginalized groups with non-dominant ethnicities in Sweden, affecting our transferability.

Dependability is related to the process of inquiry, focusing on the methodology and research design (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). To achieve high dependability, we have provided a detailed description of the selected method, the sampling criteria, the structure of the interview as well as their interview guides based on the CIT, which combined enable replication. We also carried out a pilot interview to ensure the comprehensibility of questions. Moreover, we carried out all interviews in Swedish, a language in which all participants were fully proficient, limiting misunderstandings. Additionally, to ensure consistency in the interviews, we clearly defined the concepts of "welcome" and "unwelcome," ensuring that our measurements accurately reflected our intended constructs. However, one can criticize the method for not achieving triangulation. As detailed in Section 3.3.1, we deemed focus groups, ethnography, netnography, and qualitative surveys inapplicable. Nevertheless, complementing with additional methods would have enabled triangulation, which is beneficial since it increases confidence in the accuracy (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021)

Confirmability is related to establishing a clear connection between the findings and conclusions deriving from the data and the analysis (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). To ensure this, we aimed to have a clear representation of gathered data and where it originated from. The findings are clearly related to examples, quotes, and narratives from interviewees. Additionally, providing and referencing relevant literature enhances the confirmability of this report. We prioritized logical coherence throughout the report, achieving a high level of confirmability. However, it is important to address potential biases influencing this report, which transitions us to the next section.

3.6.2 Positionality and Reflexivity

When it comes to this thesis, it is vital to acknowledge the positionality of us researchers, which includes how our biases, preconceptions, and perspectives might have influenced the interpretation and selection of themes in our data analysis. Our world's view is affected by the fact that we are female Caucasians born in Sweden with privileged backgrounds. We will not

fully comprehend how it feels to experience discrimination and racism, and be an individual with a non-dominant ethnicity. As a consequence of our positionality, we might have overlooked certain aspects, emphasized aspects that should not have been highlighted, or misinterpreted certain statements unintentionally. To address these concerns and increase the quality of this research paper, we employed reflexivity throughout the process (Alvesson, 2003). Before starting the research, we reflected on our own background, beliefs, and experiences when it comes to feeling welcome. We concluded that we feel welcome almost everywhere. During the interviews, we remained aware of power dynamics. We reflected on how our status related to having a dominant ethnicity might affect the participant and tried to create a comfortable and non-judgmental atmosphere. Webster (1996) explained that when there are ethnic similarities between the interviewer and the interviewee, it tends to improve the quality of the interviewee's responses. Thus, considering that we do not share ethnic similarities with the participants, striving to create a safe space where the participants felt valued and accepted was important to us. Lastly, during the data analysis, we tried to challenge our interpretations. Using some type of data analysis software or having our data peer-reviewed could possibly have improved the quality even further and mitigated consequences arising from our personal biases.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Firstly, since the research topic of this master's thesis addresses ethnicity, a sensitive and private matter, we wanted to ensure that conducting this research was authorized and that no ethical review application was required. It was clarified to us that, as this is a master's thesis conducted by students, ethical approval was not necessary. Secondly, given the private and possibly sensitive nature of this project, the protection of the research participants was of the highest importance to us. Before starting the interview, we ensured to get fully informed consent from the participant and ensured them of their right to withdraw at any time (Easterby-Smith et al. 2021). Continuing, we asked for their consent to record the audio for transcription. We ensured the confidentiality and privacy of this record as it would be stored on our private devices to later be deleted from all platforms used. Lastly, we stated that we would protect the anonymity of the participants. This was done by giving them pseudonyms not related to their names or their stories. Lastly, it is of great interest to protect the integrity of the research community as well. To do this, to the best of our abilities, we avoided deception about the nature and aim of this study and aimed to communicate honestly avoiding any type of misleading information.

4 Findings

The aim of this research is to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape. In this section, we present our findings within the subject area, organized under four different subsections: participants' interpretation of welcome/unwelcome, welcoming/unwelcoming aspects unrelated to ethnicity, welcoming/unwelcoming aspects related to ethnicity, and participants' perception of welcome at IKEA. By doing so, we aim to provide the background for answering our research question.

4.1 Participants' Interpretation of Welcome

As previously mentioned, the customer interviews were first analyzed to determine if participants were interpreting welcome/unwelcome in the same way it was defined for this study. For this study, we defined the feeling of *welcome* as the feeling of having a desired presence, being greeted with pleasure, and feeling comfortable. We defined the feeling of *unwelcome* the opposite way, that is, the feeling of *not* having a desired presence, *not* being greeted with pleasure, and feeling uncomfortable. The interview transcripts suggest that the participants interpret the feeling of welcome/unwelcome similar to how we defined it. Consider the following statement from participant Alessia:

> He half turned away. His body language wasn't as open any more. He seemed a bit indifferent. You really got the feeling that he wanted to get rid of you quickly. He wanted me to leave so he could attend to other customers. He became very brief in his responses. He didn't become outright rude, he couldn't do that. But you quickly got the sense that he didn't want me there.

This participant interpreted *unwelcome* to include the feeling of being wanted to get rid of and being greeted with displeasure. The words used to describe *welcome* could for instance resemble a statement such as this:

> I don't know how to explain it, but you can feel it in a [sales]person when they are very happy. Then they say hello, what can I help you with? They have a positive attitude, and they give you that attention.

This participant, Simona, interpreted welcome to include being greeted with pleasure and being given attention, which closely aligns with our definition. Additionally, some

participants associated feeling welcome with feeling seen, being acknowledged, and receiving attention, elements implied in our definition. Essentially, being acknowledged and receiving attention typically leads to feeling comfortable and having a desired presence. However, on occasion, some participants interpreted the feeling of welcome more broadly, by bundling *welcome* with the notion of *appealing*. Consider the following answer to the question "Is there anything IKEA could do better to make you feel even more welcome?", from Diego, as an example:

> Let's see... No, not if I can think of anything. Every time I think of IKEA, I think of good prices. Or, maybe the bathroom furniture. They are of slightly poor quality. Improving their bathroom furniture to maximum quality, simply put. Everything else usually holds durability quite well. But not when it comes to bathrooms. It's lower quality.

In this example, it becomes evident that the participant interpreted welcome differently compared to our definition. That is, improving the quality of the bathroom furniture might make IKEA more appealing (desirable, enjoyable) to the customer, however, it has no clear link to increasing the feeling of having a desired presence, being greeted with pleasure, and feeling comfortable. Despite this discrepancy, one can still assert that the participants demonstrated a clear understanding and familiarity with the concept of welcome, allowing them to articulate their thoughts effectively in relation to it.

4.2 Perception of Welcome in the Servicescape

When reading through the interview transcripts, it became apparent that some aspects of judging welcome were related to the participant's ethnicity, while others were not. In this section, the aspects that contribute to a sense of welcome in general are presented.

4.2.1 Store Personnel

The participants interviewed consistently emphasized the importance of store personnel in fostering a sense of welcome. For the majority, this aspect stood out as the most significant contributing factor. A prevalent theme among the participants was the emphasis on common courtesy exhibited by service personnel as a key element in creating this welcoming atmosphere. This common courtesy encompasses gestures such as greetings, maintaining eye contact, displaying politeness, offering help, presenting a well-groomed appearance, and emanating friendliness, all of which were regarded as signals of welcome. Consider the following statement from a participant Hanna:

> And then there was a staff member who was a bit older and dressed nicely, polite, and greeted me. I felt important and acknowledged.

In this example, participant Hanna conveys how the common courtesy exhibited by the staff member made her feel important and acknowledged. Overall, participants appeared to agree that friendliness and politeness contribute to fostering a sense of welcome. However, participants Simona, Nima, Javier, Ali, Leila, and Yasmin also expressed that over-friendliness from the store personnel was a negative thing, referring to how it made them feel pushed and generally uncomfortable. The following statement from Nima illustrates this sentiment:

> It feels a bit intrusive, and it's almost like I can't say no afterward, I'm unsure how to say that the price isn't right. Or that… yes, it could be something that makes you feel a bit coerced because they're there.

In this statement, the feeling of being coerced could be interpreted as an uncomfortable feeling. In essence, none of the participants expressed a preference for overly friendly behavior. Instead, a recurring theme among the participants was that they wanted their interactions with the personnel to feel neutral, relaxed, and easygoing, or, as put by Javier, "as usual". Several participants also expressed the importance of the personnel displaying a willingness to help, highlighting its role in fostering a sense of welcome. Actions such as putting in more effort than expected and actively listening and providing advice were perceived positively by participants such as Ali, Yasmin, and Malik. Furthermore, participants Kourosh, Ali, Diego, and Hanna specifically mentioned the term *personal* concerning how they wanted the service to be for them to feel extra welcome. For instance, in the critical incident section of his interview, participant Ali said the following when describing his welcoming experience in a store that sold chargers for electric vehicles:

> They approached immediately and greeted me. Personally asked how I was doing and so on. They inquired a bit about my background, and what kind of car I have. There was some small talk. Then we delved a bit deeper, "what is it that you need?". They conducted a good needs analysis, came up with a solution, and presented it well. The service felt personal. It wasn't forced, we simply found a solution to my needs.

Participant Kourosh also highlighted the importance of getting good help and service even though one does not intend to purchase anything in the store, such as when returning a product to the store:

> It's not always about wanting to buy things. Sometimes you want to return items. So it often happens that you've bought the wrong product. As a company, and as a store, you still have to show the same interest in the customer.

In this example, Kourosh expresses how he expects the personnel to show interest, even if he is not buying anything. Regarding aspects that particularly signal *unwelcome*, participants highlighted instances where store personnel either conveyed a poor and disinterested attitude or exhibited stressed behavior, leading to unpleasant interactions. These experiences left participants feeling bothersome, unwanted, and overlooked. Participant Simona also shared an

experience where she had witnessed a dispute between store personnel colleagues, which made her feel uncomfortable and unwelcome.

4.2.2 Store Environment

Concerning the store environment, participant opinions were a bit more dispersed regarding what contributes to the feeling of welcome/unwelcome. While some favored cozy, intimate settings that evoke a sense of home, two participants highlighted the appeal of standard, conventional store environments. Similarly, opinions diverged on lighting preferences, with some preferring bright spaces while others favored dimmer settings. The same diversity emerged regarding color schemes, with some preferring vibrant palettes and others opting for more neutral tones. In terms of ambiance, opinions also differed on music volume and store size. Some participants mentioned that they liked loud music, while others preferred lower music, and some participants preferred smaller environments, while others liked larger, more spacious stores. However, there was consensus among participants that cleanliness and organization play a crucial role in fostering a welcoming atmosphere. As participant Aisha expressed:

> I believe that stores should be fresh and orderly. It shows respect for the customer. If I were to enter a store that is... chaotic or with boxes out and not tidied up, then it feels like they are not ready to have customers there. If they have stocked items, they shouldn't be in the way. It has happened occasionally.

Participant Aisha explains how cleanliness makes her feel respected as a customer, and how untidiness and disorder make her feel as if the store is not ready to have her there, almost as if they are not expecting her. Similarly, Yasmin highlighted how poor information and signage make her feel neglected, and therefore unwelcome. Furthermore, a few participants noted that open store layouts that allow one to walk around freely contribute to a feeling of welcome, since then one can walk around with ease and tranquility, which contributes to a sense of welcome. Conversely, participant Leila explained how she strongly disliked the maze-layout store, since it made her feel trapped:

> Hmm... If I go into stores like, for example, Normal. They have a certain store design and layout, and there I can feel "Oh my god…". I might find it fun to go in there, you always find something interesting, but I always hurry out because I think those walkways they have are awful. There's no way out, you have to go through the entire store. I find that really annoying. […] Let me out!

In this example, the feeling of being trapped could be interpreted as an uncomfortable feeling, and thus something that contributes to not feeling welcome. Another aspect that contributes to feeling uncomfortable was brought up by Yasmin, who mentioned that she feels unwelcome in

store environments which she perceives as stressful. Participant Javier also brought up how marketing and commercial displays in the store influence whether he feels welcome:

> I mean, you see the marketing, for example, when you walk into an outdoor store, it's all about Fjällräven from head to toe. And it's like, yeah, whatever... I think that when you've walked into a store that's more fitness-oriented, the marketing is much more about being big and muscular. It feels like...I don't know…

Javier implicitly conveys that when the marketing or mannequins represent a particular demographic he does not relate to, he senses a lack of expectation towards him, consequently leading to a feeling of exclusion rather than welcome.

4.2.3 Other Customers

When discussing the influence of other customers, participants did not delve deeply into their opinions regarding what contributes to feeling welcome or unwelcome. However, participant Aisha shared that she did not feel welcome in overcrowded stores:

> If it were crowded with people in the store and a long queue, then I wouldn't feel welcomed by other customers if that were the case. Then you become just another person to push through.

In her statement, Aisha implies that a store with too many customers makes her feel unvalued as a customer. Participant Ali echoed a similar sentiment, explaining that when other customers create a chaotic atmosphere, he does not want to be there. Furthermore, participant Yasmin articulated how the stress of fellow consumers can be contagious, leaving her feeling uneasy. Overall, since the other participants did not provide elaboration on the influence of other customers, it appears that their impact was perceived as relatively minimal among the group.

4.2.4 Product Assortment

When discussing the influence of the store's assortment, participants offered a bit more insight compared to their views on other customers, yet opinions remained somewhat limited. Participant Kourosh expressed how he feels welcomed when stores offer season-based assortments, as it demonstrates consideration for him as a customer, highlighting that they value him beyond simply pushing unsold items. Kourosh also stressed the importance of reasonable prices when it comes to assortments that foster a welcoming atmosphere, as did Participant Diego. Participant Javier emphasized the significance of being able to test products as a key aspect of the assortment that contributes to his sense of welcome:

> When it comes to the selection of items in stores to create a more welcoming atmosphere, I feel that if the items are displayed openly, allowing customers to touch, look at, and try them out, it feels welcoming, it feels like you are in someone's home. It feels like it's always better than if they're just hanging on walls. I like it when stores have their products on tables, it's on a more human level.

In his statement, Javier conveys that being able to test, feel, and try products makes him feel at home, which he perceives as more welcoming. He prefers when products are on a more relatable and accessible level, possibly because it enhances the shopping experience, making it feel more personalized, casual, and hospitable. Additionally, Javier articulates his dissatisfaction with retailers who list products on their website but do not have them available in-store, as this also prevents him from physically trying out the items. Participant Alessia also shared her perspective on what she finds welcoming in stores, noting that an optimal balance of products is key. She expressed a preference for a store that offers neither too many nor too few products, as she dislikes feeling overwhelmed or as if there is nothing of interest for her to explore. However, overall, since the other participants did not delve deeply into the assortment's impact, it appears its influence was perceived as relatively small within the group.

4.3 Perception of Welcome in the Servicescape Related to Ethnicity

As previously mentioned, when reading through the interview transcripts, it became apparent that some aspects of judging welcome were related to the participant's ethnicity, while others were not. In this section, only the aspects that were attributed to the participant's ethnicity, as defined by the informants themselves or expressed in his or her narrative, are presented.

4.3.1 Store Personnel

As detailed in Section 4.2.1, participants identified several welcoming characteristics associated with service personnel that were unrelated to ethnicity. These included friendly behavior, common courtesy, a willingness to give advice and help, and a balance between being helpful without being overly nice and pushy. Overall, most aspects that were expressed were unrelated to ethnicity, however, not all. For example, an unwelcoming experience related to ethnicity was described by Javier:

> I went into a ski shop in Uppsala. I wanted to check out skis. I had questions about the fit of the boots. I ski every year. I got this feeling that the guy working there thought I was asking completely absurd things. It feels like it happens quite often in ski shops and in winter sports. Then I wonder, do you think I don't do winter sports? I think that's where I've experienced

> the most. There's nothing directly saying that someone is being mean, but the treatment feels a bit dry […]. The vibe you get is… weird. I have been to similar stores with my stepfather Anders, who is Swedish and buys skis. […] It feels like he gets a lot more information from the staff. They treat him as if he were an expert. They gladly provide a lot of information. It seems like they understand, or assume that he understands, what they're talking to him about because they are happy to share and discuss various specifications, performance, and different details. It feels like I don't get the same information.

Javier expressed how the store personnel treated him differently, and used his observable characteristics to assume that he did not know much about skiing. In turn, this judgment made him feel unwelcome, like he did not belong there, like he was not normal. Despite the personnel not saying something mean directly, Javier felt like he got a drier treatment compared to his stepfather, as if they were more pleased that his stepfather was there than that he was there, and more happy to help him. Other participants also brought up feeling negatively judged by the service personnel as an unwelcoming aspect. Specifically, three types of negative judgments were brought up: (1) assuming that one is not able to afford, (2) assuming that one does not know the language or is less knowledgeable, and (3) assuming that one is going to steal products from the store. Regarding *language assumptions*, participants noted that some personnel speak slower and more clearly, which they found demeaning. Concerning being *less knowledgeable*, participants noted that personnel can assume that they possess little knowledge within certain areas, which they also found demeaning. Related to the third type of prejudice, several participants noted how either they or their friends had been monitored and tracked by store personnel or store guards, and how this contributed to feeling particularly uncomfortable and unwelcome. Participant Jasmina also shared an especially unwelcoming experience, where she had been treated differently due to her hijab:

> I believe I have been treated differently in a store because of my hijab. There have been instances where I have stood in line and observed how the staff treated customers before me. When it's my turn to pay, they become very curt in their tone and barely glance at me. They want to get rid of me and complete the transaction quickly so that I can leave.

When asked what she believed was the reason for this hostile treatment from the staff, Jasmina answered "I strongly believe that it could be rooted in a lack of knowledge or even some form of racism". Participant Diego also highlighted the issue of lack of knowledge, suggesting it as a cause of various prejudices. With this in mind, one could identify ignorance and racism from the store personnel as additional factors contributing to feeling unwelcome among customers of non-dominant ethnicities. Essentially, welcoming experiences seem to involve being treated just like everybody else, which can be deciphered for example from the following statement by Jasmina:

> Even though there are people who treat me differently or wrongly or strangely, there are also many who treat me just like any other person.

In this statement, one can interpret that Jasmina perceives being treated differently negatively and being treated the same positively. Another welcoming aspect related to store personnel, mentioned by Ali and Leila, is diversification and representation among the workforce. Ali appreciates diversification as it signals acceptance and anticipation of his presence, making him feel welcome. Similarly, Leila found that representation in the workforce fosters a sense of identification and belonging. Leila furthermore expressed the significance of language:

> You know, when you're abroad like in Spain where there are a lot of Swedes, you're like 'Oh, hello, are you Swedish? Our people!' You don't really know these people, but automatically, you feel a kind of belonging… Or like Spaniards who have learned Swedish because there are so many Swedes in Malaga, for example. 'You from Sweden? Thank you very much!' It's like they've put in an effort and learned.

Leila believes that speaking the same language makes you feel that you belong. Yasmin also touched upon the significance of language and the importance of being treated equally:

> One might feel more welcome in a Swedish store. And it has to do with how professionally one can perform their job. I mean, how they've learned to treat customers in the same way. And speaking another language that I don't understand. It doesn't feel nice, in my opinion.

Leila implied that feeling welcome has less to do with belonging related to ethnicity, and more to do with fair and equal treatment from the store personnel. Speaking a language that she does not understand in general was perceived as non-welcoming staff behavior by Leila. The important thing is how professional the store personnel act, Leila expressed. This utterance from Lelia's statement can be seen as emphasizing the significance of feeling welcomed over simply feeling like one belongs.

4.3.2 Store Environment

Regarding the store environment, not many welcoming/unwelcoming aspects related to ethnicity were revealed by the participants. Only Ali had an issue to raise:

> If we talk a bit about the environment and specifically about signage and marketing – now this might be so darn non-politically correct – but one thing is that what is being advertised is either people of European descent, light hair color, light eyes and so on, or then it goes towards the black side, dark and so. But I feel there's nothing in between. And I think that's a bit strange. Fine, fun with diversification, but it feels like there's nothing between black and white, which is odd in my world. Inclusion… of course, you can't include everyone, and they usually throw in a few Asians as well, like East Asians who are a bit more towards the Japanese side, but very few Middle Easterners. I don't know, maybe it's difficult to access those types of models. But something about it feels strange […] like they are doing it just because they have to.

In his statement, Ali highlights that he perceived that his ethnicity is underrepresented in signage and marketing within and outside retail stores. Moreover, he implies that he perceives retailer's attempts to work with diversity and inclusion as tokenism, evoking a sense of unease. This example could be said to be a depiction of self-congruity as perceived by the participant. The signage and marketing in the store, and outside the store, provide cues to this participant about the expectations of the retailer in terms of what customers *should be*. When the participant does not match the expectation of what customers are *supposed to be* (i.e. the person's image and the store's image were incongruent), he feels unexpected and unwelcome in the retail servicescape.

4.3.3 Other Customers

Regarding the influence of other customers, participants Jasmina, Javier, Ali, Diego, and Leila, had something to say about unwelcoming aspects related to ethnicity. For example, Jasmina expressed:

> As you can see, I wear a hijab. And there are very divided opinions about what the hijab signifies. Many people believe that I and other girls who wear the hijab are simply forced to do so. And many just don't know. It's mostly due to ignorance. So what has happened is that other customers look at me with a strange gaze. And I understand why they don't look at me. But if there's anything they wonder about, they can still ask. Not knowing and not asking won't help. You won't learn anything.

Jasmina expressed that she feels unwelcome if other customers look strangely at her. This aspect was brought up by Ali and Javier as well. Javier emphasized that he feels unwelcome if the customer demographics are very homogenous because that is when he gets stage looks from other people. Consider the following statement from Javier:

> When you entered. Then it was Swedish and bright. Then you got looks. In other places. When you come and the people are much darker. Then I also received looks. So it's been both. On both sides.

Javier's statement underscores that regardless of the specific racial makeup of the customer crowd, he can still experience being stared at. This highlights the problematic nature of homogeneity in social environments, regardless of the specific ethnic composition. This could also be interpreted as a depiction of self-congruity as perceived by the participant. The other customers in the store provide cues to this participant about the expectations of what customers *should be*. When Javier does not match the store's image, he feels uncomfortable and unwelcome in the retail servicescape.

Furthermore, Diego addressed the issue of racism concerning interactions with other customers, highlighting its potential to create a sense of unwelcomeness. He illustrated this with a personal example:

> When I tried to come [to the gym] for the first time, a man came in a direct manner and talked about South Americans in a disrespectful way. I just wanted to go there and exercise. Most were nice, but they had a reactionary group. I had to put one man in his place and confront him.

Diego's narrative elucidates how he was subjected to disrespectful treatment based on his ethnicity, to the extent that he felt compelled to confront the individual responsible. Participant Leila, in her interview, highlighted another facet of racial or ethnic mistreatment. In her interview, Leila noted that she looks typically Swedish even though she has origins in Bosnia and that therefore she is often mistaken for having a Swedish ethnicity, leading her to always feel welcomed and treated like everyone else. However, despite this, she can still feel unwelcome due to racial or ethnic mistreatment. Consider the following statement from Leila:

> I've been in restaurant settings where you might be standing and ordering, and you hear people treating others poorly. And that can make you feel unwelcome even if it's not directly aimed at me. At the end of the day, I'm also an immigrant, so when you hear other customers... We're living in a very strange time right now, and we have significant societal issues. But people refuse to recognize that you can't lump a whole group together; this has emerged from immigration and integration. It's a consequence of something. You can hear other customers thinking out loud, and yes, that can make you feel unwelcome.

Leila's narrative suggests an interconnectedness of experiences, where mistreatment of others based on ethnicity resonates deeply and indirectly, contributing to a sense of unwelcomeness, even when one is not personally disrespected.

4.3.4 Product Assortment

As for the store product assortment, both participant Ali and participant Jasmina highlighted that they perceive not being accounted for as a customer category as a non-welcoming aspect. Ali articulated his experience, stating:

> Just when looking at the size of clothes, that's where I can also feel that due to my origin, I have difficulty finding the right size, particularly in terms of the length of clothes. Often, they're a bit... there are some stores where you can find specific lengths for pants, but if you look at the standard, then they're a bit longer. I understand that clothes are ordered for a certain store based on the country you're in and what the average height is, maybe in that size and so on. But then it feels like you're still a bit... not really, not unwelcome, but you're not accounted for as a customer category. They don't take that customer category into consideration in that way. It has led me to steer clear of many stores.

In his statement, Ali expresses that he has difficulties finding pants that are tailored for him. He explains that the absence of pants in his desired length does not make him feel unwelcome, but that it creates a feeling of not being overlooked and unaccounted for as a customer category, and it has led him to steer away from many stores. This sentiment suggests

that Ali perceives the store as prioritizing the needs of the dominant population over his own, which can ultimately lead to a sense of insignificance and unease in the retail space. Participant Jamina explained her experience as follows:

> I usually wear fully covering clothes. Because I have... It's part of it. I wear long sleeves. Preferably slightly longer shirts. Or tunics. Or whatever I want at the moment. Dresses too. But you often see that most shirts are short-sleeved. Or cropped tops. I've walked into stores where I absolutely haven't found anything that I've liked. Because I simply can't wear it out in public.

Jasmina struggles to find suitable clothing in most stores. Her experience suggests that she feels overlooked and unaccounted for as a customer category, leaving her with a sense of being unwelcome. It is as if the store does not truly consider or cater to her needs or those of others like her, making her feel unwanted. Both Jasmina's and Ali's experiences can be interpreted as examples of design exclusion and the effects of design exclusion, which include the feeling of being 'out of place', unwelcome, and uncomfortable.

Regarding the topic of welcome in relation to assortment, participant Leila conveyed how the presence of products from her home country can signal acceptance, which can be interpreted as a welcoming cue. Meanwhile, participant Yasmina shared her perspective on the matter, offering a different angle. Yasmina expressed:

> If you go to stores that sell Iranian goods and Iranian or Persian music is played, you can... It reminds me a lot of my childhood. All the memories that I had. But I don't know if you feel welcome. I can't say that. Because if it's messy, if it's disorderly, and if the staff are unfriendly, it doesn't matter if it's a Swedish store or an Iranian store. I get the same irritation and the same negative feeling.

Yasmin's narrative suggests that while the presence of products from her home country may evoke nostalgia, it does not necessarily translate to feeling welcomed. Instead, factors like the overall atmosphere and customer service play a more significant role in her perception of welcome, regardless of the store's assortment.

4.4 Perception of Welcome at IKEA

When asked whether the participants felt welcome at IKEA, all participants answered 'yes', most of the time without hesitation. Participant Leila articulated her sentiment as follows:

> Everything there just contributes to me feeling welcome. Partly, there's the adventure of IKEA. But just everything, both the layout […] You don't feel trapped or confined. There are sofas everywhere if you need to rest. You can spend time at IKEA. I've never encountered any IKEA staff who aren't friendly. You always find what you need. There's like a range of

> options. I think of when I shopped at IKEA when I moved out from home. I moved quite young, I worked but didn't have the salary I have today. You could easily find what you needed in different price ranges. That is especially good with IKEA. I could shop there then and now.

Leila highlighted a lot of different aspects of IKEA that she finds welcoming: the feeling of adventure, the layout that enables her to walk freely, the many possibilities to rest if needed, the friendly staff, the assortment that has everything she could ever need, and the different price ranges. These sentiments were echoed by others. The majority of participants commended IKEA's friendly, service-oriented, relaxed, and helpful staff. However, Jasmina pointed out that she perceived the personnel at IKEA to be a bit unavailable and unattainable. Several participants also mentioned the wide range of the assortment, and the broad range of price points, as welcoming aspects. Also, participants highlighted the varied diverse crowd at IKEA as a factor that adds to the feeling of being welcomed. For example, participant Simona expressed:

> When you think about it in terms of customers, you meet all sorts of people there. All classes, regardless of their economic status. Everyone is there.

Furthermore, participants Malik, Diego, and Javier (alongside Leila) highlighted the adventurous and experienceable nature of an IKEA visit, appreciating the opportunity for activities beyond shopping. Participant Diego, for instance, appreciated the restaurant as a welcoming space where he could take a break. Similarly, Participant Malik highlighted both the restaurant and the fast-food section at IKEA. He shared how his children, usually hesitant to accompany him to stores, look forward to joining him at IKEA:

> When you enter IKEA, that's what they've made fun, you know, they also serve food. So, my kids, they don't like stores. No kids do, right? But when it comes to IKEA and they're standing there together, they want to come along. There you can buy hot dogs and everything else. It's very nice and well-kept. The food at the restaurant costs almost nothing. It feels a bit like a home environment, you could say.

In this example, Malik also mentioned that IKEA feels a bit like a home environment (i.e. almost as if one is in someone's home), which is something also brought up by other participants. One aspect contributing to this feeling, alongside the availability of non-shopping activities, is the opportunity to test, try, and feel all the products at IKEA. For example, Jasmina remarked:

> I think it's so cozy to stroll around, look at how a room looks and how they've decorated it. Try out the furniture, sit on a sofa or a bed or a chair. Test a desk, see how high it comes. Yeah, a bit like that. Yeah.

Jasmina also noted how the layout of the stores, featuring various furnished rooms, gives the impression of being in a home, thereby fostering a sense of welcome. Kouroch echoed this sentiment, agreeing that the layout with furnished rooms contributes to the overall feeling of welcome. However, three participants pointed out that they still feel that IKEA is somewhat stiff and cold, that they get the feeling of being in a big warehouse, and that they perceive this part of IKEA as a bit impersonal. One participant, Yasmin, expressed that she preferred Costco (which recently opened a store in Sweden) over IKEA:

> If you compare IKEA to Costco. Ikea is very boring. [...] I mean, if you compare the two. Things are happening there. There's pace. There's something new. There's a lot of joy. It's like exploring. But at Ikea, it's gray. If you compare. It's different. […]. The staff doesn't have the same activity. No. They're polite. But not salespeople. There are long queues. If you want to ask for help. You have to run around to find someone to ask a question. There's a lot that falls on you as a customer. To find the right thing and measure. Or wait in a line. Or ask. Or go and look for it. But there's a different concept there. You can find things more easily. You can get help faster. Their attitude. That's it.

Yasmin favors Costco because she finds more joy, pace, fun, and activities there. Furthermore, she perceives the staff as more service-oriented there. Participant Hanna suggested that IKEA could enhance its welcoming customer experience by being more considerate of their customers, by for instance offering water to customers towards the end of the store. Aisha similarly remarked that IKEA would feel even more welcoming if they occasionally offered customers a cup of coffee.

Another welcoming aspect mentioned by participants Malik, Hanna, Ali, and Nima in relation to IKEA was the ease of navigation and finding desired items at IKEA, aided by its clear layout, signage, and information. For example, participant Hanna remarked:

> If you know what you're looking for, you know which department to go to. There are no complications. And then you have the logistics, like the checkouts, you go there, etc. It feels so routine, simply put. Even if you don't visit it daily or once a week, you know exactly what to do when you go there. With the checkout and the items you pick up. I mean everything, it feels like routine.

In this instance, Hanna describes her experience of visiting IKEA as routine. She finds it easy to navigate and knows how everything works, making it effortless to find what she needs. This familiarity and ease of navigation could also be seen as contributing to the sense of being in a homely environment. When one is in a familiar home, navigation comes naturally. Conversely, when visiting unfamiliar places, one can feel disoriented.

5 Discussion

This exploratory thesis set out to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape. The research question formulated to aid this investigation was: ”What potential aspects of the servicescape contribute to the perception of welcome and unwelcome among customers with non-dominant ethnicities?”. In this section, we begin by summarizing and abstracting the findings. We then continue by discussing the findings in relation to previous literature on this topic. Afterward, we outline the theoretical and practical implications of this study, as well as the relevance of our findings. Finally, we conclude by addressing the limitations of our research and proposing avenues for future investigation.

5.1 Summary of Findings

Our findings, first and foremost, suggest that the vast majority of aspects that customers with non-dominant ethnicities use to perceive if they are welcome are largely independent of their ethnicity itself. In other words, the way retailers respond to customers’ non-dominant ethnicities is seldom the main factor determining whether they feel welcomed or not. Instead, the relevance of a customer’s non-dominant ethnicity only becomes significant when it interacts with specific elements of the service environment that either signal welcome or unwelcome. Nevertheless, when it comes to the store personnel, our findings suggest that, for people with non-dominant ethnicities, elements that signal welcome include seeing diversification and representation among the workforce, and in general being treated like everybody else. Elements that signal unwelcome include feeling negatively judged (due to ignorance) and being treated differently or with hostility. Specifically, three types of negative judgments were identified: (1) assuming that one is not able to afford, (2) assuming that one does not know the language or is less knowledgeable, and (3) assuming that one is going to steal products from the store. In terms of the store environment, our findings suggest that an absence of diversity in visual communication, and perceived tokenism, contributes to the feeling of unwelcomeness. When it comes to other customers, our findings suggest that strange looks, homogenous crowds, and direct and indirect racism are unwelcoming aspects. Lastly, when it comes to product assortment, our study suggests that perceiving that one is unaccounted for as a customer category is something that contributes to feeling unwelcome, and vice versa. Seeing products from one’s home country can signal acceptance, but it does not necessarily create a sense of being welcome.

As indicated in Section 4, some of these aspects can be classified as expressions of self-congruity, while others cannot. Self-congruity, as detailed in Section 2, occurs when individuals perceive an alignment between their own self-image and the image of a product or retail store. The greater the match between a customer's self-image and that of the retailer, the more likely the consumer is to patronize the store. In our study, factors such as diversity in visual communication, diversity in the workforce, a heterogeneous crowd, and the presence of products from one's home country exemplify the effect of compatibility between the store image and the consumer's self-image, contributing to a feeling of being welcome. However, other aspects like racism, equal treatment, stares, and judgments cannot be classified as expressions of self-congruity. Instead, these aspects can be classified as verbal and non-verbal social cues indicating welcome or unwelcome sentiments. Moreover, the aspect of perceiving that one is unaccounted for as a customer category in the product assortment can be classified as an expression of design exclusion, and something that signals unwelcome. Thus, our findings suggest that people with non-dominant ethnicities assess whether they are welcome or not in a servicescape by evaluating the congruity between their self-image and the store image, by evaluating whether they have been included in the design/creation of the product assortment, as well as by responding to verbal and non-verbal social cues that signal welcome or unwelcome. However, this assessment process does not occur during every shopping experience. The significance of a customer's ethnicity becomes relevant only when specific elements of the service environment either signal welcome or unwelcome.

5.2 Findings in Relation to Previous Literature

In exploring the implications of our research findings, it becomes evident that they both align and converge with existing literature on this topic. To begin with, Snethen et al. (2018), who quantitatively explored features of community locations considered welcoming by individuals with serious mental illnesses, found that, amongst these, welcoming places were often perceived as architecturally open, featuring natural light and plants. Welcoming places also facilitated reciprocal relationships and provided opportunities for these individuals to engage in a number of activities. Our findings also suggest that the opportunity for individuals to engage in additional activities is a welcoming aspect. However, contrary to Snethen et al. (2018), our findings did not emphasize the significance of reciprocal relationships. Furthermore, our study suggests that a welcoming environment is not strictly tied to brightness and openness; rather, it hinges on individual preferences and contextual factors within the setting. These disparities between our research and Snethen's should not be regarded as unexpected. Snethen et al. (2018) focused on the experiences of individuals with serious mental illnesses in community locations, while our study centered on the experiences of customers with non-dominant ethnic backgrounds in the retail servicescape. Given the differing life experiences of these groups, variations in findings are to be anticipated.

Baker (2007), who investigated how people with disabilities judge welcome in interactions in retail stores, found that four primary situational factors determine the perceptions associated with welcome: service personnel, store environmental factors, other customers, and product/service assortment. This entirely aligns with our findings. Moreover, regarding service personnel, Baker (2007) found that a welcoming experience in a servicescape is characterized by friendly, respectful, proactive, and knowledgeable service personnel who treat customers with dignity and provide tailored assistance without making assumptions. Unwelcoming experiences often involve judgmental or overbearing behaviors that highlight the customer's disability unnecessarily (Baker, 2007). This aligns with our findings to an extent. The difference in this regard stems from that judgment, in our study, was not perceived as unwelcoming since it highlight the ethnicity of the customer per se, instead, it was seen as unwelcoming because it was perceived as demeaning and/or insulting. Also, our findings highlighted three types of negative judgments: (1) assuming that one is not able to afford, (2) assuming that one does not know the language or is less knowledgeable, and (3) assuming that one is going to steal products from the store, none brought up in Baker's study. Again, this discrepancy should not be seen as unexpected, given that our studies center around two completely different customer groups.

Concerning the store environment, Baker (2007) found that home-like aesthetics, inclusive displays, accessible design, considerate sensory elements, and clear signage, characterize a welcoming environment. Unwelcoming environments, amongst people with disabilities, were found to involve physical and sensory barriers and a lack of understanding of the customers' specific needs. This aligns with our findings. Our findings brought up home-like aesthetics, inclusive displays, clear signage, and considerate sensory elements. Moreover, in terms of other customers, Baker (2007) found that a welcoming environment is characterized by considerate behavior, empathy, and understanding. Conversely, unwelcoming experiences often involve inconsiderate actions, misattributions, and crowded or noisy conditions that heighten challenges related to disabilities (Baker, 2007). This aligns with our findings to an extent. The difference in this regard stems from that we found that homogenous crowds also contribute to unwelcomeness, as do direct and indirect discrimination or inconsiderate behavior. Furthermore, Baker (2007) found that a welcoming product assortment in a store is characterized by product availability, high quality, reasonable pricing, and variety. This aligns with our findings, however, regarding the assortment, we also found that perceiving one is unaccounted for as a customer category contributes to feeling unwelcome. Also, we found that seeing products from one's home country can signal acceptance and may affect the perception of welcome. This last aspect is, however, something that aligns with Hillier's (2018) findings.

Rosenbaum and Montoya (2007), who researched how ethnic consumers, specifically Hispanics and homosexuals, assess their place identity and the factors in the social and physical servicescape in restaurant settings that contribute to approach behavior, found that

ethnic consumers assess where they belong by evaluating the ethnicity of employees and customers in a setting, and by responding to verbal and nonverbal cues in a consumption setting. Our findings support Rosenbaum and Montoya's (2007) insights, however we also contribute with some new findings. First, our results suggest that customers do not only evaluate employees and other customers when seeing if their identity matches the store's image. Instead, customers also evaluate this by considering, for instance, the visual displays in and outside the store. Second, our findings suggest that customers judge welcome based on an additional category: by evaluating whether they have been included in the design/creation of the product assortment. Customers seem to sense the effect of inclusive design practices concerning product assortment. This aligns with Kitchin's (1998) findings.

Rosenbaum (2005), who researched how ethnic consumers interpret symbols within consumption settings and how these symbols impact approach and avoidance behavior, found that displaying meaningful ethnic symbols, may elicit approach behavior and signal welcome among ethnic consumers, as these symbols evoke feelings of comfort and inclusiveness, making consumers feel valued and respected (Rosenbaum, 2005). Our findings support this. However, as we investigated the dimension of symbols alongside other dimensions (e.g. physical, dimension, and social dimension) our findings suggest that this is not a very important aspect. Instead, the most important aspect was undeniably the service encounter. This aligns with Andreassen and Olsen (2012), who suggested that positive service encounters appear to be the most crucial element of the servicescape.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

With this research, our objective was to contribute to the service marketing literature by enhancing our understanding of the aspects that customers use to perceive welcome in retail servicescapes in general, and the aspects that customers with non-dominant ethnicities use to perceive welcome in retail servicescapes in particular. In regards to the latter, we have found that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities assess whether they are welcome in a servicescape or not by evaluating the congruity between their self-image and the store image, by evaluating whether they have been included in the design/creation of the product assortment, and by interpreting verbal and non-verbal social cues that signal welcome or unwelcome. However, this assessment process does not occur during every shopping experience. Moreover, our findings reveal a novel insight that, to our knowledge, has not been previously documented: there are at least three common negative judgments that contribute to feelings of unwelcomeness among this group. These judgments include assumptions that they cannot afford the products, that they do not know the language or are less knowledgeable, and that they might steal from the retail store. Additionally, another unique aspect of our findings is the interconnectedness of experiences, where the mistreatment of others based on ethnicity

indirectly resonates, contributing to a sense of unwelcomeness even if an individual is not personally disrespected.

When it comes to understanding the aspects that customers use to perceive welcome in general, our research suggests that attributes that signal welcome in a retail servicescape are multifaceted, encompassing service personnel, store environment, other customers, and product assortment. Key attributes of service personnel include common courtesy (greetings, eye contact, politeness), a balanced friendliness that avoids being overly intrusive, willingness to help, and personalized service, while negative signals include poor attitude and internal disputes. The store environment's cleanliness, homeliness, organization, clear signage, and open layout are important, with negative feelings arising from maze-like layouts, stress, exclusive marketing, and mixed feelings arising from ambiance attributes (lighting, music, and colors). Regarding other customers, overcrowding and a chaotic atmosphere detract from the welcoming feeling. For product assortment, attributes like season-based offerings, reasonable prices, the ability to test products, and a balanced product selection enhance the sense of welcome. Essentially, our findings indicate that people generally find attributes that convey respect for the customer and elements that create a home-like atmosphere, as welcoming. Therefore, if the goal is to enhance the sense of welcome for customers, focusing on creating a homely environment, while ensuring respectful conduct, can be highly effective.

Notably, when it comes to creating a homely environment, our findings offer a unique perspective. While previous scholars (Baker, 2007; Berris & Miller, 2011; Noble & Devlin, 2021) have emphasized the importance of homely *aesthetics* in creating a welcoming environment, our research reveals that creating a homely atmosphere involves much more than just aesthetics. Our investigation suggests a holistic approach to nurturing this feeling, extending beyond mere elements of visual appeal. These include a layout that allows for free and easy movement, opportunities for restorative activities (such as visiting a restaurant), intuitive navigation, personal service encounters, relatable product placement, and the possibility to test, feel, and try out products. While aesthetics undoubtedly contribute, it only constitutes a fraction of the overall equation. Consequently, achieving a truly homely environment necessitates addressing multiple dimensions, a facet that, to our knowledge, has not been extensively illuminated before.

5.4 Practical Implications

With this research, our objective was to offer managerial and practical implications to facilitate the creation of a more welcoming retail environment. By doing so, we also sought to contribute to multicultural conviviality and enhance societal and individual well-being. As mentioned previously, scholars emphasize that retailers bear a responsibility to foster an

inclusive society. Below, we outline practical implications that can serve as initial steps in this process.

The findings of this master's thesis offer valuable insights for retail managers. Our recommendations are threefold: (1) educating service personnel, (2) creating a homely environment, and (3) additional directives. Regarding educating service personnel, retailers should consider educating their employees on the topic of welcoming all. Our findings identify three types of prejudice, all of which significantly impact perceived welcomeness among ethnic consumers. Prejudice often stems from ignorance, therefore we recommend comprehensive training programs to increase cultural awareness and to teach employees on how to recognize and avoid such behaviors. Addressing racism is crucial for creating a welcoming environment. While training can mitigate some pervasive behaviors, changing deep-seated prejudices is challenging. Thus, a possible remedy could be to emphasize a zero-tolerance policy towards racism during the recruitment process, ensuring that new hires align with the company's commitment to welcoming all. Furthermore, cultivating an environment of openness and respect is key. Managers should actively promote these values to foster a welcoming atmosphere for all customers. By implementing these tactics, retailers can enhance customer experiences and build a more welcoming retail environment. However, it is challenging for managers to control individual behaviors completely. Therefore, it is valuable to explore other areas where managers have more control, such as enhancing the retail store's physical servicescape to make it more welcoming to everyone. This brings us to our second managerial recommendation: creating a homely environment.

The fact that a homily environment has a strong impact on perceived welcomeness, creates a unique opportunity for managers. Thus, we recommend several practical directives to achieve it. First, ensure the layout is open and spacious, allowing customers to move around freely. An open layout creates a welcoming atmosphere where customers feel comfortable exploring the store without feeling confined or restricted. This openness can evoke the feeling of being at home. Second, consider incorporating additional activities within the retail space, such as a restaurant or a small café. The possibility to, for instance, pause and dine while shopping enhances the feeling of hospitality, making customers feel like guests in a home. IKEA exemplifies this approach with its in-store restaurant and the *Småland* playground for children, which offer a family-friendly atmosphere and additional reasons for customers to visit and linger. Third, ensure ease of navigation. Make it easy for customers to find their way around the store with clear signage and easy access to key areas like restrooms, exits, and specific product sections. When customers can easily find their way, it enhances their sense of routineness and familiarity, contributing to a homely environment. Fourth, pertaining to product assortment, we want to emphasize the value of being able to test, feel, and try out products. These products also need to be on a relatable level where customers can reach and find them with ease. Fifth, retailers should consider making their service encounters more personal. By fostering more personalized interactions, customers can feel as if they are in a

home-like environment. Lastly, retailers should consider the aesthetics of the retail store. This includes thoughtfully choosing lighting, color schemes, and furniture. The right combination of these elements can create a warm, inviting atmosphere that makes customers feel comfortable and welcomed, much like being in a home.

Lastly, concerning additional directives, we propose the following. First, retailers should adopt an inclusive design approach, which involves considering the needs of all existing and potential customers. Conducting a self-assessment to identify which customers may feel excluded by the current product assortment is essential. One approach is to enhance engagement with diverse stakeholder groups, including marginalized communities. Another effective strategy is to understand the demographics surrounding the store and tailor offerings to meet the needs of specific customer segments. For instance, in a clothing retail setting, offering a line of fully covering clothing tailored to the preferences of religious women can help address inclusivity gaps in the product assortment and foster a welcoming environment for all customers. Second, we recommend that retailers adopt a democratic approach to product development by actively seeking and incorporating customer feedback. This feedback holds significant value as it provides insights into customer preferences and can guide retailers in aligning their offerings with customer needs and desires. Third, enhancing workforce diversity is preferable. By fostering a team that represents a wide range of ethnicities, retailers can cultivate a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere for marginalized groups. Fourth, evaluating the retailer's marketing strategies is crucial to promoting a sense of welcome. Incorporating diverse representations in marketing materials, with multiple ethnicities being featured, can help convey an inclusive message. However, it is imperative for retailers to steer clear of tokenism as this demonstrates a lack of authenticity and a mere superficial gesture.

In addition to influencing managerial decision-making in the retail sector, these insights can also have broader societal implications. By fostering a more welcoming retail environment for all individuals, we believe that societal well-being can be positively impacted. However, many unwelcoming behaviors stem from ignorance and prejudice, which are often created outside the retail servicescape and developed at an early age. Therefore, it could be beneficial for government actors to implement educational initiatives in schools aimed at increasing awareness of multiculturalism and promoting inclusivity from an early age. Additionally, increasing media coverage that highlights underrepresented groups or counters negative stereotypes can also play a significant role in promoting welcome and inclusion in society. By expanding knowledge and promoting acceptance beyond the confines of the retail environment, we can positively influence how individuals feel welcomed in retail settings and contribute to a more welcoming society overall.

5.5 Relevance of Findings

The findings of this research should be considered significant for at least a few reasons. First, they relate to individual and social well-being, both of which hold social value and perhaps could even lead to increased multicultural conviviality. Second, our findings directly address the research question, providing clear and precise answers rather than tangential ones. Our findings are focused and relevant, offering practical and actionable insights that stakeholders can comprehend and use. Third, our results contribute by offering new insights and nuances to existing research, enhancing the current understanding of the topic. By building on previous studies, our work helps to fill gaps in the literature, offering a more comprehensive view of the subject matter. Fourth, our findings are readily applicable and can be implemented if resources and willingness are available. This practical applicability means that our research can have real-world benefits, influencing policy, practice, and further research initiatives.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that no study is perfect. As mentioned in Section 3.6, one may hold some reservations regarding the validity of this research. Despite these reservations, given the exploratory nature of our study aimed at illuminating this domain, the findings retain relevance. To further validate and enhance the significance of this study, a follow-up quantitative study could be conducted to test these insights. Such a study could involve a larger, more diverse sample to increase generalizability and to better understand the nuances and broader applicability of our results.

5.6 Limitations and Future Research

This study has diverse limitations that create opportunities for future research. Firstly, this study only researched retail stores. There are numerous other public spaces where customers engage in purchase behaviors that are not strictly retail environments, such as shopping malls, restaurants, and salons. These spaces are of relevance to research in the future to investigate how welcomeness and unwelcomeness are applied in those contexts. Researching welcomeness from both a general perspective as well as from an ethnic consumerist perspective is relevant. Secondly, this research is limited to the *physical* retail store environment. Today, retailers operate through omnichannel strategies, where *online* space also serves as a marketplace where customers shop. Additionally, there are online touchpoints that contribute to perceived welcomeness such as social media, advertisements, and websites. Therefore, it would be interesting and relevant to research how the feeling of welcome is perceived in an online environment. Thirdly, since this study only investigated the physical retail space, it focused solely on visible features. However, there are invisible aspects connected to a retailer that potentially also contribute to feelings of welcome or unwelcome,

operating in the background. For example, how does a welcoming business vision contribute to feelings of welcome? What does that look like? What does a welcoming recruiting process look like and how does that contribute to feelings of welcome? In other words, how do steps prior to a retail visit, operating in the background, contribute to welcomeness? Therefore, it would be important for future researchers to investigate how a business' vision and strategies contribute to welcomeness. Fourthly, the use of the Critical Incident Technique, including the interview method, proved useful, however, it has its limitations. Future researchers may benefit from using alternative methods, particularly those conducted within the physical retail setting, such as ethnography. Especially, given the fact that it is easy for participants to forget details or observations of an experience that took place years ago. Ethnography creates the opportunity to find new relevant observations directly within the physical retail environment. Fifthly, longitudinal studies could contribute by offering insights into the long-term effects of this and similar studies. Monitoring perceived welcomeness over time by tracking adjustments made in the retail servicescape is of high interest. Sixthly, as mentioned previously, studying this topic through a quantitative method would enable testing and verification of results. Seventhly, this study was conducted in Sweden and it would be of relevance to do a similar research study in another country with a different demographic group. Lastly, it could be of interest to investigate the potential negative side effects of making a retail environment exceptionally welcoming. Some people might not want personal service encounters or homely environments, as they value effectiveness over feeling comfortable and wanted. Perhaps, as Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011) indicated, only customers seeking, for instance, companionship or comfort are likely to prefer their servicescapes to be welcoming. Also, some critical consumers might perceive welcoming servicescapes as inauthentic (Darling, 2018). In other words, there might potentially be some negative side effects and situational contingencies to be discovered and revealed.

6 Concluding Thoughts

This exploratory thesis set out to gain insights into the potential aspects that consumers with non-dominant ethnicities use to assess welcome in the retail servicescape. Having carried out our research, we believe that this aim has been fulfilled and that the research question posed has been answered. Referring back to Gunnarsson & Blohm's (2011) quote at the very beginning of this paper, we can affirm that the art of making people feel welcome is indeed, not brain surgery or magic – it is quite the opposite. With this research, we have proposed numerous practical implications marketers can use. If these are implemented, individual and societal well-being can be enhanced; every effort contributes to the overall improvement. We hope this research has paved the way to revive the art of making people feel welcome, restoring this lost art to its rightful place.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide IKEA Representatives

Part 1: Introduction

- Hi and welcome! How are you?
- We are so happy to talk to you! During this interview, we will ask you some questions, and you have already had the chance to read some of them through.
- We want to provide you with a bit of background. We are Sara and Sofie, and we are currently studying International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund University. We are writing our master's thesis in collaboration with IKEA, where the overall aim is to promote a more welcoming retail environment. We are investigating potential aspects that contribute to making people feel welcome in a retail store.
- During this interview, I will ask you a number of questions. You can answer freely based on your thoughts and experiences. We have allocated an hour for this, but it will most likely not take the whole hour.
- Before we start, we also want to assure you that your answers will only be used for the purpose of this thesis. During the interview, you always have the right to withdraw, and if you do not want to answer any question, you do not have to. Do you agree to participate?
- Great. To ensure we do not miss anything in your answers, we would like to record this interview. The recording will be stored on our computer and deleted when the thesis is finished. The purpose is to be able to transcribe and thus come to a good conclusion in the thesis. Are you okay with that?
- Great. I also want to add that I will be conducting the interview today. Sara/Sofie will sit in and listen and may ask a question occasionally.
- Any questions? ... Then let's get started.

Part 2: Questions

- To begin with, could you briefly describe what you do and what your role entails?

- Have you/IKEA done any work to ensure that all customers feel comfortable and welcome when they visit IKEA stores? In other words, have you/IKEA done anything to make everyone feel welcome?
    - If yes,
        - What have you done/what are you doing?
    - If no,
        - Why do you think that is?

- Do you think all customers currently feel comfortable and welcome when they visit IKEA?

- How do you show appreciation when customers come to IKEA stores? In other words, how do you show that you are glad they are there and that you want customers to be there?

- Do you have any specific thoughts on the feeling of being desired and comfortable in relation to customers who may not naturally feel comfortable everywhere?
    - If yes,
        - What have you done/what are you doing?
    - If no,
        - Why do you think that is?
    - What do you think you do well, and what do you think you can improve on in this regard?

- There is a saying that "What gets measured gets managed." Are there any surveys conducted on whether customers feel appreciated and comfortable when they visit IKEA stores?
    - If no,
        - Are there any other similar surveys conducted with customers?
        - Do you think there would be any value in investigating whether all customers feel appreciated and comfortable (that they have a desired presence, greeted with pleasure)?
    - Are there any surveys aimed at understanding the experiences of minority groups?

- Thinking beyond IKEA, what overall, in your opinion, contributes to a customer feeling comfortable in a store, feeling desired, and feeling that the retail store is glad they are there?
    - Which aspect would you say is the most important regarding the store environment?
    - Which aspect would you say is the most important regarding store staff?
    - Which aspect would you say is the most important regarding the store's selection?
    - Which aspect would you say is the most important regarding other customers?

- How do you view the fact that society is becoming more multicultural? Is it something you take into account when designing the future IKEA?

- How do you view the retailer's role in the issue of social sustainability, that is, the role in creating and maintaining conditions that promote well-being, equality, and participation for all members of society both now and in the future?

- Do you think retail has a responsibility?
- What should retail do to contribute, in your opinion?
- Can/should retail do anything to contribute, in your opinion?

Part 3: Outro

- We are approaching the end of this interview. Before we part, is there anything you would like to add?
- Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in an interview. We appreciate it. Take care, goodbye!

Appendix B

Part 1: Introduction

- Hi and welcome! How are you?
- First of all, thank you for agreeing to participate! We really appreciate it.
- We want to provide you with a bit of background. We are Sofie and Sara. We are studying for a master's degree in marketing at Lund University and are currently writing our master's thesis. The overall aim of the thesis is to promote a more welcoming retail environment.
- During this interview, we will ask you a number of questions. You can answer freely based on your thoughts and experiences. We have allocated an hour for this, but it will most likely not take that long.
- Before we start, we want to assure you that your answers will only be used for the purpose of this thesis and that you will remain anonymous. During the interview, you always have the right to withdraw, and if you do not want to answer a question, you do not have to. Do you agree to participate?
- Great. To ensure we do not miss anything in your answers, we would like to record this interview. The recording will be stored on our computer and deleted when the thesis is finished. The purpose is to be able to transcribe it and thus come to a conclusion in the thesis. Are you okay with that?
- Great. We can add that Sara/Sofie will be asking all the questions, and Sofie/Sara will be listening and might chime in occasionally. Any questions?... Then let's get started.

- To begin with, where in the country do you live?
- What is your occupation?
- Do you often shop in stores?

- Okay, then let's move on to the questions related to our study.

Part 2: Critical Incident Technique Questions

- Think of an occasion, roughly within the last year, when you as a customer felt welcome in a store. By welcome, we mean that you felt the store wanted you there, that they were happy you were there, and that you felt comfortable (at ease, good, relaxed) there.
    - When was this approximately?
    - Which store was it?
    - Why were you in the store?
    - Is it a store where you usually shop, or were you a new customer?
    - Can you describe what happened during the shopping experience?
    - What specifically made you interpret the experience as welcoming?
        - Was there anything else?

        - Was there anything else related to the store environment, store staff, the store's selection, other customers?
        - How would you describe the attitude of the store staff?
    - What has been the result of this experience?
        - Have you returned to the store?
        - Have you told others about it?
        - Have you taken any other actions? (gave positive feedback, shared on Instagram, gave a positive review)?

- Do you have any other occasion where you also felt welcome within the last year that you would like to share?
    - Same sub-questions as before.

- Think of an occasion, roughly within the last year, when you as a customer felt unwelcome in a store. By unwelcome, we mean that you felt the store did not want you there, that they were not happy you were there, and that you felt uncomfortable (uneasy, troubled, tense) there.
    - When was this approximately?
    - Which store was it?
    - Why were you in the store?
    - Is it a store where you usually shop, or were you a new customer?
    - Can you describe what happened during the shopping experience?
        - What specifically made you interpret the experience as unwelcoming?
        - Was there anything else?
        - Was there anything else related to the store environment, store staff, the store's selection, other customers?
    - What has been the result of this experience?
        - Have you returned to the store?
        - Have you told others about it?
        - Have you taken any other actions (such as reporting it, giving a bad review, sharing on Instagram)?

- Do you have any other occasion where you also felt unwelcome within the last year that you would like to share?
    - Same sub-questions as before.

Part 3: General Questions

- Overall, what would you say makes you feel welcome or unwelcome in a store? (i.e., what makes you feel that the store wants you there, that they are happy you are there, and that you are comfortable there)
    - Is there anything else besides that which makes you feel welcome/unwelcome?

    - If you think specifically about the store environment, what in it makes you feel welcome or unwelcome?
    - If you think specifically about the staff's behavior, what in it makes you feel welcome or unwelcome?
    - If you think specifically about the store's selection, is there anything in it that contributes to making you feel welcome or unwelcome?
    - If you think specifically about the presence of other customers in the store, what in this aspect makes you feel welcome or unwelcome?

- We have talked quite a bit about the importance of service staff. Is there any time when you felt that you were treated differently because of your ethnicity?

Part 4: IKEA Related Questions

- How often do you visit IKEA?
- Do you feel welcome when you visit IKEA?
        - Can you give examples of what makes you feel that way?
    - Does it depend on things related to the store environment, store staff, the store's selection, other customers?
    - Is there anything you think IKEA could do better to make you feel even more welcome?
    - Is there a specific store or type of store where you generally do not feel welcome?

Part 5: Outro

- Do you generally feel welcome in public places in society? Is it something you have thought about or reflected upon?
- Those were all the questions we had for you. Is there anything you would like to add or any reflections you would like to share?

- Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in an interview. We really appreciate it. Take care, goodbye!