WORKPLACE AESTHETICS AND EMPLOYEES' ENGAGEMENT OF GOVERNMENT TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the relationship between workplace aesthetics and employees’ engagement of Government Tertiary Institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria. The aim of the study was to ascertain if a relationship exists between office aesthetics and measures of employees’ engagement: vigor, dedication and absorption. The cross-sectional survey design method was adopted. A sample size of 302 was drawn using Krejcie & Morgan sample size determination table from a population of 1346 non-academic senior administrators from three selected tertiary institutions in Rivers State. 302 copies of questionnaire were personally administered out of which 211 representing 70% were found valid for analysis. Descriptive statistics, Spearman's Rank Order Correlation Coefficient and partial correlation coefficient computed with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences were used for univariate, bivariate and multivariate analysis respectively. Findings revealed a significant relationship between study variables; and the study concludes that this relationship enables employees to exert physical, mental and emotional energies on the job. Thus, the study recommends that management of tertiary institutions should provide employees with aesthetic work environment in order to heighten work engagement.

Keywords: Workplace Aesthetics, Employee Engagement, Vigor, Dedication, Absorption, Tertiary Institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The survival and prosperity of today’s organizations depend extensively on the degree of engagement among her workforce. Organizational success is made possible by engaged employees who are driven by the work environment, HR practices, feeling of being involved, valued, empowered and cared for (Madu et al., 2017). Schaufeli W. B. et al. (2006a) opined that employees’ engagement contextualizes employee’s passion for work, expression of emotional, intellectual commitment, involvement, discretionary efforts and is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Research shows that engagement triggers business growth, increased profitability and performance (Markos and Sridevi, 2014). Regardless of these great benefits, studies also show an escalating trend of employees' disengagement in the workplace. (Gallup Report, 2013) and (Towers Perrin Report, 2003) reports that 70-80% of workers globally are disengaged from work. In the Nigerian work context, Okpu (2012), Oyeyinka (2010), Nwachukwu (2006) and Jaja (2003) validates this finding. These Scholars revealed that most employees of Nigerian public organizations are disengaged from work, and that they exhibit behaviors such as absenteeism, poor service delivery, poor public relations at work, verbal harassment to clients and are most often absent from their duty posts.

Several workplace factors could be responsible for employee engagement or disengagement. One of such determining factors could possibly be the nature of the physical environment workers are exposed to; especially as it has to do with office aesthetics. This is on the account that a great number of public tertiary institutions in Nigeria is characterized by inadequate and unsuitable workspace, poor aesthetic composition, temperature that are most often not designed for maximum comfort, safety and ease of use.

Accordingly, JLL Research Report (2016), and Hammed and Amjad (2009) revealed that providing employees with physical work environment that is aesthetic, adequate, appropriate and conducive facilitates employees' work engagement, task performance and productivity. Office aesthetics, workspace, furniture and thermal condition of the immediate surroundings of the workplace are components of physical work environment that enable employees connect physically, mentally and emotionally to work.
roles Haynes (2008). Literature indicates that it influences employees' physical, mental and emotional strength and energies on the job Sundstrom et al. (1994); Chandrasekhar (2011), and provides context for behavior by virtue of its ambient qualities, its spatial and architectural arrangements and its perceived purpose Pfeffer (1997), enhances job performance (Samson et al., 2015), job satisfaction, productivity (Hammed and Amjad, 2009), fosters employees' engagement.

Going by the documentary evidence of the importance of physical work environment and the scanty attention given to its aesthetic component and its relationship with employee engagement by Nigerian researchers; especially as it has to do with the tertiary institutions, we are then poised to fill such gap through the study of aesthetic workplace environment and employees’ engagement of degree awarding tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria.

2. LITERATURE

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

2.1.1. Social Exchange Theory (SET)

Nunkoo (2016), Saks (2006), and Robinson et al. (2004) opined that social exchange theory presents a stronger logical base to explain the concept of employee engagement. Social Exchange Theory (SET), according to Nunkoo (2016) is considered by scholars as one of the oldest and most popular theories of social behavior that best explains the social exchange and relationship between employers and employees' in a work setting. The social exchanges between or among social actors generate responsibilities voluntarily agreed, entered and created through interactions between or among parties who are in a position to give tangible or intangible resources in expectation for a return of that which they expect from each other. The social exchange theory takes into consideration, feelings of loyalty, commitment, devotion, discretionary effort as types of mutual exchange of obligations, services on the part of the employees and duty of care, involvement, rewards, favors and privileges on the part of the employer.

A general consensus amongst scholars is that social exchange between social actors influence behavior because (i) it involve social actors who engage in a relationship that one has something to offer which the other may not have but desires (ii) dealings are mostly on a give-and-take basis that serve as means of achieving desired goal at a cost in terms of time, energy or resources to both (iii) employees' decision to be engaged on their job or not is triggered by the exchange of tangible or intangible materials associated with such and or the treatment they receive from employers (iv) the relationship eventually, develops into loyalty, trusting each other, sharing commitments so long as both social actors keep to the conditions of mutually agreed exchanges (Nunkoo, 2016). Within the context of this study, a social exchange could be said to occur when employers provide employees with an appropriate and adequate physical work environment features-aesthetic beauty that have the potential to arouse and sustain employees passion for work, opportunities to experience a sense of oneness and care while at work, the space to express themselves. In return, employees exhibit discretionary efforts, puts in more time and energy into work roles, have passion for work, make positive contributions to matters of interest to the organization and work towards organizational goal. Therefore, exchanges between employees and employers are key to sustaining employees' engagement and the degree organizational goals are achieved.

2.2. Workplace Aesthetics

Encarta Dictionary (2007), defined aesthetics as the philosophy of beauty, the outward appearance of how something looks, in terms of how pleasing, inspiring beautiful or artistic such is Gagliardi (1996) cited in Siler (2009) defined office aesthetics as the tangible components of organizations such as the physical objects and buildings that employees or others experience through their senses as beautiful. The ambience appearance or beauty of the work environment is viewed as organizational aesthetics Kenny (2008) opined that the aesthetics of the workplace is considered in relation to employees' specific experience with specific features and characteristics of the workplace, the interaction between work and the physical work environment and the manner such experience stimulates or impedes work flow.

Siler (2009), Vilnai-Yavetz et al. (2005) and Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) analyzed office aesthetics as serving instrumental and symbolic purposes. The work environment or piece of art serves an instrumental function when it communicates and has the ability to play a major role in achieving a result or accomplishing a purpose. The symbolic purpose of office aesthetics conveys meanings, associations or achievements. For instance, organizational trademarks such as logos, colors, convey meanings, personality or preferences of the organization. Organizational insignias such as crests, muffsers, badges, emblems, stickers convey associations while trophies such as plaques, medals, shields, cups
symbolizes and communicates achievement. Another instance is the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by employees at work that serve instrumental and symbolic purposes. It communicates the safety goals of organizations and symbolizes safety consciousness and duty of care. It forms part of employee work experience and perception about the organization. Vilnai-Yavetz et al. (2005) and Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz (2004) stated that aesthetic tangible components of the work environment like furniture, workspace, piece of art or objects communicate the value and class of the occupier. This means that components of the physical work environment exudes class, value and importance attached to the office occupier and the organization, thus, the disparity in size, class or type of workspace, environmental condition gadgets, furniture and furnishings used by officers of top, middle and lower level management employees in most organizations.

Nevertheless, Strati (1992) cautioned that attributions made to the aesthetic state of the work environment is subject to an observer's interpretation and its associated meaning, implying that what is interpreted as beautiful by one may not be considered as beautiful by another. Similarly, Elsbach (2004) mentioned that architectural artifacts as components of workplace aesthetics are frequently subject to multiple interpretations and can have both intended and unintended symbolic consequences.

2.3. Concept and Measures of Employee Engagement

According to Schaufeli W. B. et al. (2006a), employees’ engagement contextualizes employee’s passion for work, expression of emotional, intellectual commitment, involvement, discretionary efforts, that are characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. It describes the attachment, connection, passion and energy that employees exert on the job with the purpose to help the organization to succeed. Employees' engagement according to Kular et al. (2008) and Truss et al. (2006) has been put to use and measured in distinct ways without a universally agreed definition. Some of the interpretations and meaning of employee engagement as presented by some scholars are that it concerns employees’ passion for work, higher level of attachment and dedication towards the affairs of the organization Saks (2006), employees' emotional, intellectual commitment or participation towards work that is characterized by vigor, dedication, absorption (Schaufeli W. B. et al., 2006b; Truss et al., 2006).

Truss et al. (2013) described the construct of employee’s engagement as employee’s commitment to improve work performance and connection to the goals of the organization expressed through physical strength, mental and emotional attachment to the workplace and on the job. This study adopted the measures of Schaufeli W. et al. (2002) because they were found to be the most consistent in employee’s engagement literature. The authors described Employee Engagement as a significant and satisfying work related mindset that typifies the physical strength or energy, loyalty and absorption that employees bring to work and exert on their respective work roles. The measures are as follows:

2.3.1. Vigor

Encarta Dictionary (2007) defines vigor as vitality, great physical strength and energy. Schaufeli W. B. and Bakker (2004) described vigor as the speed and focus which employees’ exert into given tasks arising from heightened morale, enthusiasm, sense of responsibility and connection to the goals of the organization. It describes employee’s intensive way of carrying out their duties or going about the business of the organization beyond the usual or standard level of efforts. It demonstrates high energy, resilience, willingness to invest discretionary effort on the job, the ability of not being easily fatigued and persistence when confronted with difficulties. It is expressed through showing hyped levels of drive and mental resilience at the work place. Vigor is mostly expressed by employees when they are faced with persistent difficulties or challenges at work or by the inherent zeal to put in effort into any task that one is assigned to carry out.

The positive state of mind of employees towards their work or the work environment trigger employees into displaying or exerting high physical strength and energies into work. This intensity drives them into selflessly taking up additional work, putting forth extra strength or power when faced with work pressure at the workplace. Within the context of this study, vigor explains elevated levels of energy, cognitive resilience during work, the inclination to put a lot of effort into work and persistence even when there are apparent difficulties. Madu et al. (2017) opined that employees who display high level of physical strength and energy in course of carrying out a given task at work are result oriented and are self-motivated.
2.3.2. Dedication

Dedication simply means devotion or commitment to something that an individual has passion or fondness for. It is an exceedingly strong feeling of support and loyalty to the cause of a business enterprise. Schaufeli W. B. and Bakker (2004) and Schaufeli W. B. et al. (2006b) defined dedication as employees' sense of passion, responsibility, significance, motivation and satisfaction to the values and tenets of the organization. Dedication as espoused by the authors highlight employees' strong participation, attachment and desire to devote efforts in what one is doing at work and the willingness to overcome challenges on the job. It reflects employees' determination, consistency, continuity and connection on the job aimed towards achieving organizational goals. Employees who are dedicated to the course of the organization, are effective and have the ability to make a difference in the organization help organizations to meet their set goals. Employees that are dedicated to work most often are the first to show up at work and the last to go home, they have positive attitude in their personal interaction with other employees and stakeholders, and they exhibit very high level of attendance at work, meetings or functions of the organization. They demonstrate initiative, know the history, mission, values, vision and mandates of the organization. These traits they exhibit because they are loyal to the mission of the organization and have its interest at heart. Employees' are spurred to express dedication when they are paid well, promoted at the right time, valued, appreciated, empowered, trusted, involved in matters that concerns their wellbeing and work practices.

2.3.3. Absorption

Absorption is a pleasurable state of being engrossed on a task and the difficulty to disconnect from it. Madu et al. (2017) mentioned that absorption is a condition in which the concentration or minds of employees' in the workplace are totally occupied on their tasks. The total immersion and difficulty to disengage or detach from work role typifies absorption. It entails very high focus, embeddedness triggered by inherent motivation at work to the extent that an employee finds it not easy to separate from work. Schaufeli W. et al. (2002) explained absorption to be the intensity and extent of an employee fixation and concentration on a task. The intrinsic inspiration or satisfaction an individual derives from a given task sustains absorption and enables employees to flow with the job. Employees who display high level of concentration and disengagement from work tasks were classified as actively engaged employees.

2.4. Workplace Aesthetic and Employee Engagement

De-Chernatony (2001) argued that the shape and content of an organisation's physical environment, either in terms of the architecture of the building or the shape of the office space, reflects the core values of the organization. Also, DePaoli (2003) suggests that a company should develop a type of aesthetic profile that reflects the core values of the company. When the aesthetics of a workplace is inviting and appealing to the employee, it could trigger several positive behaviours including engagement at work. It is on this backdrop that we propose that:

\[ H_0: \text{There is no relationship between Workplace Aesthetics and measures of Employees' Engagement} \]

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the cross-sectional survey method. The population of the study was 1346 non-academic senior administrative employees of three (3) government tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria. The stratified sampling technique was used to determine the population while the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table on sample size determination was used to determine a sample size of 302. Structured questionnaire on a 5-point scale were personally administered to respondents out of which 211 representing 70% were used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze univariate data while Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient and Partial Correlation computed the aid of SPSS were used for bivariate and multivariate data analyses respectively. This study adapted the measurement scales of Naharuaddin and Sadegi (2013) for physical work environment, Utrecht Work Engagement Scale of Schaufeli W. B. et al. (2006b) for employees' engagement to operationalize the study variables.
4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographics

Data generated and utilized in this study revealed as follows: (i) 78% female respondents participated in this study, implying that there are more female employees in tertiary institutions in Rivers State (ii) majority of respondents were aged 40 - 49 years (47%) while the least age category were within the age of 50 and above (24%), (iii) 68% of respondents possessed Bachelor's Degrees while 32% had Post Graduate Degrees (iv) 46% of respondents were Administrative Officers and while Deputy Registrars were the least participants (2.4%).

4.2. Univariate Data Analysis

Neuman (2006) criteria for univariate result analysis (mean values $x < 2.00$, is considered low, $2 < x < 4$, is considered moderate and $4 < x < 5$ is considered high), guided the analysis of this study. Table 1, illustrates summary mean values for each variable of the study.

| Source: Researchers’ Survey Data, 2019 |

The significant result between office design and measures of employees' Table 1, illustrate summary mean values of workplace aesthetics $(x = 2.8714)$ and employee engagement $(x = 2.5744)$. The result show Workplace aesthetics and Employees' Engagement are moderately evident in the Tertiary institutions investigated.

4.3. Bivariate Data Analysis and Results

Table 2 reveals a correlation between Workplace Aesthetics and Vigor (rho .363, P. value 0.000), Office Aesthetics and Dedication (rho .533, P. value 0.000), Office Aesthetics and Absorption (rho .632, P. value 0.000). The correlation between Workplace Aesthetics and all three measures of employees’ engagement indicates significant relationship at P < 0.05.

Neuman (2006) decision criteria for interpreting bivariate analysis results using Spearman Rank Order Correlation Tool @ 0.05 level of Significance for Null-Hypotheses were used. The criteria were (i) reject null-hypothesis if P < 0.05 (ii) accept null-hypothesis if P > 0.05. The following thresholds (.00 - .19 = very low, .20 - .39 = low, .40 - .59 = Moderate, .60 - .79 = High, .80 - .90 = very high, interprets the strength of relationship

Thus, the rejection of the earlier null-hypothesis and restated thus: there is a significant relationship between office aesthetics and measures of employees' engagement.
5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The significant relationship between office aesthetics and employees' engagement in government tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria, suggests that the appearance, beauty or ambience of the work environment, is viewed by employees as a component of physical work environment that contributes to their experiences at work, the way they respond to work and/or work facilities and exert physical, cognitive and emotional energies at work. This means that employees' sensory feeling, responses or connection to the workplace, say a lot on how they feel about the organization having value or concern for their comfort or well-being and in turn impact on their work engagement levels. This is on the account that aesthetics relates to the sensory means of taking hold of reality, assessing what is perceived or imagined, understanding preferences or impulses, interpreting and making judgments.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study validates generally held opinions that the workplace aesthetic as a part of work environment is a huge determinant of employee well-being, comfort, and ultimately, level of vigor, dedication and vigor at work. Therefore, workplaces should be designed to be comfortable and aesthetic to support employees' engagement and well-being, while taking into account the needs and limitations of employees who occupy the facilities, more especially, as this study proves that a conducive physical workplace environment is necessary and important as it gives pleasurable experience to employees, connects employees physically, cognitively, emotionally to work roles and ultimately builds up resistance to be disengaged at work. Conclusively, providing employees with an aesthetic and properly designed user-friendly office design, environmental conditions and furniture is central to achieving employees' engagement.

RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends as follows:

That management (Governing council) of tertiary institutions should make substantial efforts in providing employees' with an adequate, suitable and aesthetic physical work environment to heighten and sustain employees' vigor, dedication and absorption at work.

REFERENCES


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