CONSTRUCTING AN ONLINE SERVICESCAPE FOR THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY

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Research Thesis

submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Business Management)

Supervisor: Prof. M. Tait

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ABSTRACT

An online servicescape serves as a moderator for excellence in Customer Relationship Management (CRM). The study approached the online servicescape from the perspective of the funeral industry. Nowhere is the relevance of an online servicescape more apparent than in an industry which is firstly, unsought, and secondly, perceived as dismal. During the process of arranging a funeral, the customer is experiencing an unusual purchase situation as it is a purchase that cannot be avoided. The possibility also exists that the customer most likely did not seek information about a funeral home prior to the demise of a loved one. A third contributing factor is the emotional state of the customer which will, in a time of bereavement, have a strong impact on the rational decision-making process. Considering these conditions, the study approached the online servicescape based on three elements, namely Search Engine Optimisation, perceived value, and perceived usefulness of the online servicescape. These elements contribute to trust in the funeral home's online offerings, which could influence the purchase outcomes significantly.

The aim of the study was to construct a functional servicescape for an unsought business such as a funeral home, hence contributing significantly to the CRM body of knowledge as it was determined that this has not been explored before from an academic perspective. A quantitative, exploratory methodology was implemented. The exploration is depended on Bitner's (1992a:60) seminal model of servicescapes, Harris and Goode's (2010:230-243) model for online servicescapes, and the key constructs of Simon's (1996:141-142) Design Theory to provide a methodological basis with which to construct the key elements for a funeral industry based online servicescape. The data collection process followed a twostep process. A content analysis was conducted on existing websites from five English speaking countries, followed by a survey that largely reflected the content analysis variables to gain customer insights. The data was analysed using a descriptive analysis process.

It was determined that customers would trust a functional servicescape, which will most probably lead to a purchase situation. However, customers also indicated the opposite if they detect anything on the website that might lead to distrust. It was therefore concluded that it is imperative for a funeral home to ensure that their online servicescape meets the functional needs of customers in order ensure trust and purchase intention.

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Crawling	Crawling is performed by robots, also known as spiders, on websites to retrieve relevant URLs to the keyword search conducted by the user (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:370)
Functional values	Functional value refers to the appreciation of functional, utilitarian, or physical performance of a website (De Moura *et al.*, 2021:3).
Funeral industry	The funeral industry is described as a vital service provider for end-of-life care and welfare provision (Fletcher & Mcgowan, 2020:2).
HTML	HTML is the acronym for Hyper Text Markup Language. It is used for creating web pages and web applications. Hypertext is used to link two or more web pages (HTML documents) on a website with each other (JavaTPoint, 2021:Online)
Internet	An infrastructure of network servers and communication links that links computers across the globe (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:636).
Keywords	Words entered on a search engine to search for specific information. The key objective for both parties is that the keyword entered on the search engine matches the result searched for (Gay *et al.*, 2007:526).
Meta tags	Text within a hypertext markup language file that summarises the content of a website and relevant keywords that are matched against the keywords typed into search engines (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:638).
Search engine	A specialised website that uses automatic tools to index web pages of registered websites (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:643).

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)	A structured approach used to increase the ranking position of a company or its offerings in search engine results listings (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:643).
Search Engine Results Page (SERP)	The pages generated and displayed by a search engine after a search was conducted by a user using certain keywords (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:644).
Servicescape	Servicescapes are the environments in which services are managed and marketed (Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014:374).
Sui generis business	*Sui generis* is the Latin for a business "of its own kind". It could also constitute "a class alone", "unique" or "peculiar" (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2021:Online).
Uniform Resource Locator (URL)	A unique web address assigned to a website or a page on a website (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:646).
Unsought services	An unsought product is a product that the customer might not know about, or the customer might know about, but does not usually think of buying (Sari & Ali, 2020:1180).
User Interface (UI)	The user interface (UI) (or simply referred to as "interface") comprises the screen menus and icons, keyboard shortcuts, mouse and gesture movements, command language and online help. Hence, the point of human-computer interaction and communication on a device (PC Mag, 2019:Online).
Web page	A single page of a website (Chaffey & Smith, 2017:647).
Wireframe	Wireframes are used to design how the content elements are spatially placed on an application page, hence representing the visual structure of the pages (Bozkir & Sezer, 2018:96).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The internet has emerged as a widely used tool for information seeking and decision-making regarding customer goods and services. It is considered the single most disruptive development in marketing history (Ryan & Jones, 2012:5). Since its inception, the internet has become an essential feature for many customers in both developed and developing countries (Dharmavaram, 2015:448). It provides a global information infrastructure that enables the creation of websites and applications (Zhitomirsky-Geffet & Maman, 2014:417), resulting in value-added services with worldwide connectivity for both end-users (customers) and businesses alike (Ghezzi *et al.*, 2013:43). From a consumer's perspective, the use of information communication technologies offers several benefits, including efficiency, convenience, richer and participative information, a broader selection of products, competitive pricing, cost reduction, and product diversity (Tiago & Verıssimo, 2014:704).

The popularity of online searching for information stems from the perceived utilitarian value of the internet for accessing information quickly, efficiently, and effectively (Roscoe *et al.*, 2016:103). Recognising the highly diversified requirements of service customers specifically, coupled with the opportunities provided by new technology-enabled services provision, inevitably resulted in businesses developing a more holistic offering to customers (Stare & Križaj, 2018:83-84). Therefore, businesses should approach their online presence as another retail location with which they engage proactively by creating, developing, and maintaining committed, interactive and profitable exchanges with customers (Fox, 2012:4).

It is from this perspective that the study approached online customer relationship management (CRM). Figure 1.1 depicts the positioning of the study within the services marketing discipline.

Figure 1.1: Positioning the study within the e-services marketing context
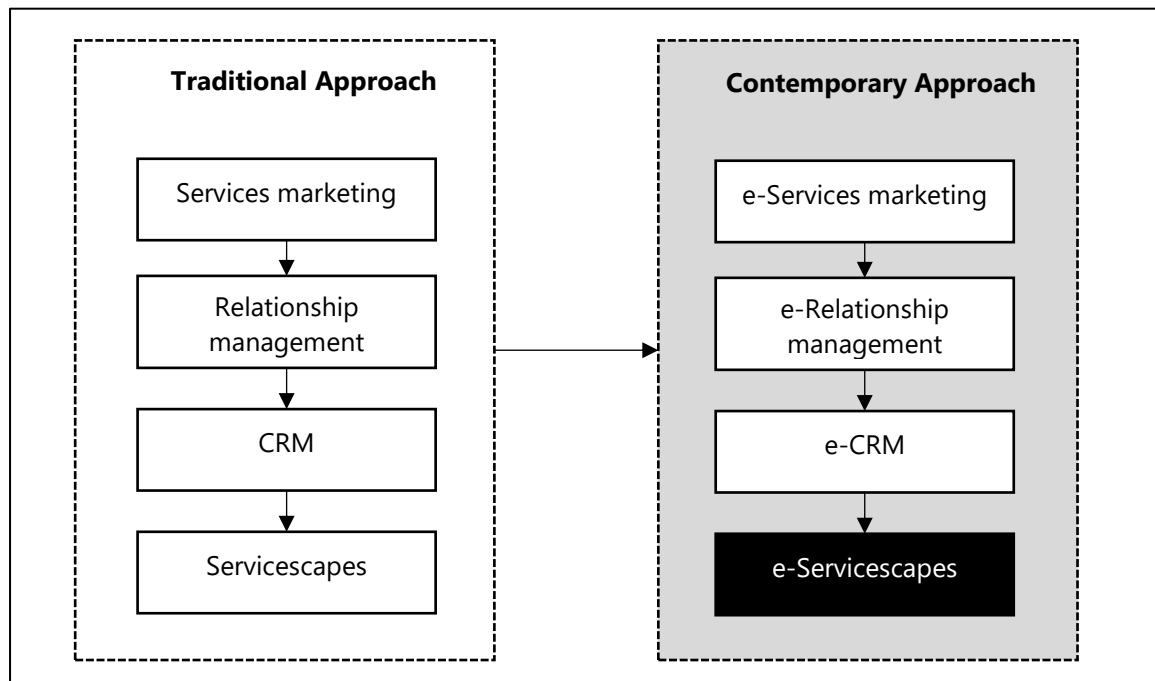
Source: Researcher's own construction

The online environment is considered an ideal mechanism for achieving strategic CRM outcomes (Taylor & Hunter, 2002:452). The study followed a juxtaposition approach to traditional services marketing by focussing on a contemporary, online approach. Since websites are considered as the new service setting for businesses (Tankovic & Benazic, 2018:1127-1128), the study explored CRM within the online context with a specific focus on online servicescapes.

1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Several desktop searches were conducted during the conceptualisation phase of the study to determine whether previous studies explored a similar topic. Search strands used to perform searches were: [Unwanted Services *or* Unsought Services] *and* [Funeral services *or* Funeral homes] *and* [Digital marketing *or* Electronic marketing *or* E-marketing *or* Online marketing] *and* [Services Marketing] *and* [Relationship Marketing] *and* [Servicescapes]. The results of the searches are depicted in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1: Systematic review search results

Search	Results (number of sources)
Initial search	66,213
Delimiters applied	7446
Reviewed	4
Exact matches	0

Source: Researcher's own construction

The initial search strands delivered 66,213 articles. Once the delimiters were applied, 7446 sources remained. Based on the topic of the study, a review of the content keywords further delimited relevant articles to only four. Theron (2011:1-7), Theron (2013:1-13), Ebersohn and Theron (2013:1-23), and Maree *et al.* (2014:35-56) are the only authors who attempted to address unsought services in academic literature. Maree *et al.* (2014:35-56) being the only authors to address the online marketing perspective of unsought services and the funeral industry. Theron (2013:3-4) investigated the satisfaction construct within the unwanted industry, focusing on funeral services. Theron (2011:5-7) explored trust-building in an environment such as the funeral industry, where trust is not necessarily sought. Theron (2013:1-13; 2011:1-7) focussed on the physical business environment, excluding the online environment.

A further review of existing literature also showed that little information is available regarding the marketing of unsought services, much less so regarding the online marketing of unsought services. A general search engine results (SERP) search did not provide exact matches other than Maree *et al.* (2014:35-56). Some of the funeral industry topics encountered from the SERP search included sociological perspectives (Sanders, 2009:447-470), cultural perspectives (Sanders, 2010:47-68), functionality and emotions in the service consumption process with the funeral industry as a case study (Korai & Souiden, 2017:247-264), and business management perspectives (Han, 2016:58-77; Korai & Souiden, 2017:247-264; Lee, 2011:226-247; Van der Laan & Moerman, 2017a:1-63). For instance, Nansen et al. (2017:76-79) investigated the impact of social media on the funeral industry but did not investigate the actual social media applications. The study focused mainly on how social media is used to disseminate pictures and comments of attendees at a funeral, focusing primarily on disruption from technological innovation in terms of data, affect, and value. Wenzel *et al.* (2017:361-378) also used the funeral industry as an industry selected to determine an information systems strategic path analysis within the industry. Sanders (2012:263-282) conducted a study investigating brandscapes of the American funeral industry within the marketing discipline. Sanders (2012:264) explored ways in which interpassivity (as opposed to interactivity) can contribute to understanding the role of brands in commodity form. It was contended that brandscapes in funeral products and services are becoming more widespread and that these developments are contributing to the colonisation of capital into human emotion. The only study that focused on funeral homes marketing was published by Schwartz *et al.* (1986:40-45). The authors investigated emerging industry practices that could have been helpful to both marketers and potential purchasers of funeral services. However, this article was published pre-internet, and although some of its content still holds key valuables, it did not contribute to the body of online research.

Although literature exists regarding unsought services and the funeral industry, no information was encountered that studied CRM and online servicescapes within the context of unsought services or funeral homes. The information searches confirmed that this study is a world-first endeavour in services marketing, CRM and online servicescapes.

1.2.1 Services marketing

Services marketing gained prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s through the seminal works of some of its most notable advocates such as Levitt (1976), Shostack (1977), Lovelock (1979), Berry (1983), Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1985). The discipline of services marketing spans a broad spectrum of marketing strategies ranging from personalised service offerings to customer experiences.

A service is generally defined as an act or performance that one party can offer another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything (Capon & Go, 2017:269). The intangible characteristic of services poses unique challenges to marketers. Not only is it almost impossible to market something that is intangible, but it is also challenging to achieve service standardisation and establish acceptable levels of quality in the delivery of services (Ashour, 2018:122-123).

One of the most distinguished contributions to early services marketing strategy theory is ascribed to Booms and Bitner (1981b), who conceptualised the additional three Ps of services marketing (physical evidence, participants (people) and process) to McCarthy's (1964) existing four Ps of the marketing mix (product, place, promotion, price). Booms and Bitner's (1981b) framework of services marketing advocated that, due to the simultaneity of production and consumption, both the personnel of a business and its customers (people) are actors who play an integral part in service

delivery. Therefore, the delivery of the service happens while the business and its employees interact with customers (Larivière *et al.*, 2017:238-239; Sok *et al.*, 2018:366).

Physical evidence refers to the environment in which the service is delivered and any tangible goods that facilitate the performance and communication of the service (Booms & Bitner, 1981b). Physical evidence is of particular importance in this instance because customers use tangible clues to assess the quality of the service provided. The physical environment (buildings, decor, furnishings, and store layout) is instrumental in customers' assessment of the quality and level of service they can expect from a business. As a result, the physical environment becomes part of the service itself. The procedures, mechanisms, and flow of activities by which the service is acquired are referred to as the process of services marketing. Therefore, customers must understand the process of obtaining a service, and marketing managers to ensure that the process is acceptable to customers to reach satisfactory levels of customer satisfaction (Jain *et al.*, 2017:642; Storey & Larbig, 2018:101).

Services marketing in the online context

The juxtaposition to the traditional aspects of the services marketing mix operates on internet-based platforms' added abilities and accessibility. These added options allow businesses to create a dialogue between the business and customers, convenient transacting options, relationship building, and added value through service delivery (Bressolles *et al.*, 2015:728). Hence, still incorporating the Booms and Bitner (1981b) framework of people, processes and physical evidence.

The mode of delivery of the service changes when conducted online which leads to a different approach to the traditional marketing mix. Online physical evidence can vary from the overall ambience of the website or application layout to customer reviews, trust certificates and privacy policies. When planning the online operation, a business

should create a two-way customer dialogue platform to reassure the customers about the tangible components that will generate customer confidence (Gong *et al.*, 2020:2-3; Zhang *et al.*, 2018:58-59).

Unsought services

This study approaches online services marketing from an unsought perspective. Unsought services relate to services that customers do not seek after until the need arises for such a service (Theron, 2013:2). Maree *et al.* (2014:38) defined unsought services as a type of service that does not form part of the customer's regular spending patterns, which could evoke strong, negative emotions resulting in an unreceptive buying situation. Although the terms "unusual" (Schwartz *et al.*, 1986:41), "unwanted" (Ebersohn & Theron, 2013:2-3; Theron, 2013:2) and "unsought" (Korai & Souiden, 2017:248) are used interchangeably in the literature, it refers to the same concept. In this study, the term "unsought" will be upheld.

1.2.2 Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing is intricately linked to the growth of the service sector. Long-term customer relationships characterise it, focused on customer-firm interaction and customer participation in service outcomes (Gummerus *et al.*, 2017:1). The term relationship marketing was first introduced by Berry (1983:66), who defined it as a process that is aimed at "attracting, maintaining and enhancing customer relationships". Relationship marketing changed the services marketing paradigm from a transactional to a relational perspective and from market share to share of wallet objective in marketing (Grönroos, 1994:8-10; Morgan & Hunt, 1994:31). In their seminal work, it is described by Morgan and Hunt (1994:8) as a set of marketing activities oriented to establishing, developing, maintaining and, if necessary, the termination of relational exchanges. Therefore, a business which is committed to

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proactively creating, developing, and maintaining interactive and profitable interactions with customers and other stakeholders, practices relationship marketing (Osborne *et al.*, 2015:430).

The relationship marketing discipline initiated a shift from theories of competition and competitive advantage to theories of cooperation. The emancipation of internet-based communication platforms and their inherent two-way communication structure further prompted the paradigm shift in relationship marketing from its original conception of transactional exchanges to retention and loyalty strategies (Sheth, 2017:7-9).

Contemporary relationship marketing recognises the business's customer database as an important asset since technology makes it easier for the business to identify loyal customers and retain and reward them. Therefore, businesses must invest in a technology-driven infrastructure and develop an organisational culture that will enhance customer relationship building within the online environment (Berndt, 2014:344). Customers are increasingly sophisticated and are using technology to their advantage to search for services, analyse and compare product features, prices, payment options, shipping information and return policies before considering online purchases (Verma *et al.*, 2015:278). Therefore, businesses must re-evaluate their strategies to accommodate a new set of online customers to build meaningful and profitable relationships with these customers.

1.2.3 Customer relationship marketing (CRM)

Relationship marketing evolved from a contemporary marketing philosophy to the marketing function of customer relationship marketing (CRM). Gummesson (2004:137) described CRM in his earlier work as the practical application of relationship marketing principles. While the philosophy of relationship marketing is aimed at developing added-value experiences with customers and business partners through the

integration of business functions, CRM is, in essence, a business strategy function that focuses on creating and retaining long-term customer relationships (Kampani & Jhamb, 2020:221-222).

Within the online context, building and maintaining customer relationships is perceived as an enabler of electronic commerce (Wu *et al.*, 2016:691). Online CRM emerged as a subfield to traditional CRM and continues to evolve within the information systems discipline (Romeroa & Vernadat, 2016:5). It is considered part of a business's online marketing strategy, similar to the traditional context, but uses electronic channels to shape online CRM strategies (Mulyono & Situmorang, 2018:97). Online CRM enables businesses to attract new customers, increase customer service, retain customers, encourage customer loyalty and provide analytical information regarding customer preference and behaviours (Tarhini *et al.*, 2015:1).

1.2.4 Servicescapes

Bitner (1992b:58) identified the physical environment in which the service is delivered as a "servicescape". The servicescape is viewed as an antecedent to service quality and customers' behavioural intentions (Hooper *et al.*, 2013b:272) because the service environment is more than often the first aspect of the service perceived by the customer (Bujisic *et al.*, 2017:576; Hooper *et al.*, 2013b:273; Mari & Pogessi, 2013:174).

Customers respond physiologically, cognitively and emotionally to the physical surroundings where the service is delivered (Bujisic *et al.*, 2017:579). Bitner (1992b:60) summarised these dimensions into three composite dimensions, namely ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols, and artefacts. In the online environment, the servicescape has found its footprint in websites, social media applications and any other visual platforms where the customer engages with the business online offerings (Lai *et al.*, 2014:517).

The online presence of a business is defined by Tankovic and Benazic (2018:1127-1128) as "the designing of web environments to create positive effects in users to increase favourable consumer responses". Services offered by businesses on their websites are constantly growing, and online media marketing communication is becoming a fast-growing strategy, making the internet a powerful merchandising tool (Dong *et al.*, 2017:710-711). Ballantyne and Nilsson (2017:228) noted that the notions of space and place in online settings permit new subtleties in framing online behaviour. Service activities may therefore expand by "parasocial relationships" between customers and a business's online presence. It is in this environment where servicescapes imprints its online footprint.

1.2.5 Contextualising the study

Recognising the highly diversified requirements of service customers, coupled with the opportunities provided by new technology-enabled services provision, resulted in businesses developing a more holistic offering to customers (Stare & Križaj, 2018:83-84). Therefore, businesses should approach their online presence as another retail location to engage proactively by creating, developing, and maintaining committed, interactive and profitable exchanges with customers (Fox, 2012:4).

Nowhere is Booms and Bitner's (1981b:47-51) concept of simultaneity of production and consumption more evident than in the online environment. Along with Booms and Bitner's (1981b:47-51) physical environment construct, McKnight *et.al.*'s (2011:16) functionality dimension plays an essential role in creating an online servicescape. Websites, therefore, become the contextual landscape (Ballantyne & Nilsson, 2017:266) for service delivery; transposing Booms and Bitner's (1981b:47-51) original conception of physical evidence into a virtual environment where the website of a business becomes the physical evidence (Mari & Pogessi, 2013:180). Therefore, the

servicescape manifests as the online service encounter (Zhang *et al.*, 2020:3) in support of online CRM to deliver timely and excellent service (Taylor & Hunter, 2002:454).

The industry selected: funeral industry

The funeral industry is generally perceived as a service provider (Beard & Burger, 2017:2; Sanders, 2010:49; 2012:266; Theron, 2011:1). As with most service providers, the funeral industry too must adhere to customer service expectations. By definition, the funeral services industry encompasses all the activities related to the internment of the deceased (Korai & Souiden, 2017:249). The industry is a diverse entity whose practices vary according to religion, ethnic issues, environmental concerns, and aesthetic considerations (Nansen *et al.*, 2017:77).

An integral part of any business strategy is the marketing of the business, a fact which even the funeral industry cannot escape due to fierce competition and regulation within the industry (Van der Laan & Moerman, 2017a:23-40). Therefore, the funeral industry is also increasingly engaging in new methods of marketing their services to attract more business (Beard & Burger, 2017:55-56).

Funeral homes are also likely to use the web and social media to market their businesses rather than using more traditional marketing methods in the contemporary business environment. The National Association of Funeral Directors (United Kingdom) (NAFD, 2018:2) recognised funeral directors to be "purveyors of services that no one wants to use", which makes the purchase of funeral services more complex, sensitive, and challenging. The report also admitted that rapid changes in how customers consume services and products had left the funeral profession "running to catch up" (NAFD, 2018:2) to explain the nature of its services and the value of a funeral to customers in ways that bereaved customers can digest. Subsequently, funeral directors

are increasingly participating in the digital economy by building more sophisticated web presences.

1.3 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Not only is the funeral industry perceived as a "dismal trade" (Sanders, 2010:47) , but according to Schwartz *et al.* (1986:40), the customer is also experiencing an unusual purchase situation. Firstly, before the death of a loved one, the customer has not sought or obtained information about available, required, and desired options related to the funeral. Secondly, the purchase cannot be avoided, and substantial time pressures prevail to execute the funeral. A third contributing factor is the emotional state of the bereaved buyer which will, in a time of bereavement, have a strong impact on the rational decision-making process.

Considering Schwartz *et al.* (1986) influencing factors on the customer decision-making process when requiring the services of a funeral home, the study postulates that a funeral home must produce a functional online servicescape. Not only will it lead to increased levels of trustworthiness, but it could also encourage customers' purchase intentions. It is further posited that a positive perception of a funeral home's website could increase relationships between the funeral home and the customer before the physical encounter occurs.

This study will investigate the problematic issue of functional, online servicescapes within an industry that is firstly, perceived as "dismal" (Sanders, 2010:47), and secondly, is interacted with by customers during an unusual buying situation (Schwartz *et al.*, 1986:40).

1.4 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of a study are described by Fouche and De Vos (2011:94-95) as the steps a researcher take to achieve the aim of the study. For the purposes of this study, a primary objective was identified, which is supported by five secondary objectives, to fulfil the aim of the study.

1.4.1 Primary objective

The primary objective of the study is to develop an online servicescape for the funeral industry.

1.4.2 Secondary objectives

The secondary objectives, which were developed in support of the primary objective, are summarised in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Secondary objectives

Secondary Objective 1:	To provide an overview of the extant literature related to:
	1.1 The primary constructs of the study in terms of customers' purchase intentions (commitment), trust in websites, and the defining role of an online servicescape in facilitating these behaviours.
	1.2 The interrelationships between the dimensions and sub-dimensions of the conceptual model.
	1.3 The underlying theories pertaining to the conceptual model.
Secondary Objective 2:	To construct a profile of existing funeral home websites based on the following sub-dimensions:
	2.1 The accessibility of existing funeral home websites from a search engine results page (SEO) based on online visibility and accessibility from a search engine results page (SERP).
	2.2 The perceived usefulness of existing funeral home websites based on the website's usability, contactability, interactivity, and navigability.
	2.3 The perceived value of existing funeral home websites based on the levels of service interaction, the relevance of information and the quality of service represented on the website.
Secondary Objective 3:	3.1 To determine customers' perceived trust in websites of funeral homes based on the following sub-dimensions:
	3.1.1 Search engine optimisation
	3.1.2 Perceived usefulness
	3.1.3 Perceived value
Secondary Objective 4:	To determine customers' purchase intentions based on funeral home websites representations.
Secondary Objective 5:	To construct an online servicescape for websites of the funeral industry based on data collected and analysed for this purpose.

Source: Researcher's own construction

1.5 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study postulates that if customers are satisfied with the physical environment representations on a funeral home's website, they will invest in the services offered by the funeral home.

1.5.1 Research Paradigm

A research paradigm comprises four elements: epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:26). The epistemic imperative refers to the quest for truthful knowledge (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:9). The researcher aims to generate valid and reliable descriptions, models, and theories of the world (Mouton, 2001:138). Ontological assumptions are concerned with the reality of a study. Researchers need to take a position regarding their perceptions of how things really are and how things work (Scotland, 2012:9).

Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) state that paradigms about epistemology, ontology, and axiology exert significant influences on the methodology used in a research project. The choice of a paradigm for a research project implies that the research will be nested in a particular epistemology, ontology, and axiology. These elements will guide the research towards a particular methodology. To this extent, Scotland (2012:10) concludes that it is impossible to engage in any form of research without committing to ontological and epistemological positions because differing ontological and epistemological positions often lead to different research approaches towards the same phenomenon.

The study is seated in the Digimodernism meta-theoretical approach. Kirby (2009) first conceptualised the term "digimodernism" in his seminal work. Digimodernism owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerisation of texts, impacting all forms of art, culture, and textuality. Texts are found across contemporary culture, ranging from Web 2.0 platforms to the most sophisticated applications. The text allows the reader or viewer to intervene textually, physically, and add visible content or intervene textually. In its purest form, digimodernism is "where digital technology meets textuality and text is reformulated as a positive act of partial or obscurely collective textual elaboration" (Kirby, 2009:1). In this study, texts refer to online servicescapes as

opposed to their physical counterparts, which are seated in postmodernism (Burton, 2002:793).

The ontological approach of the study is presented in Section 1.5.2. The study will follow the commitment-trust theory of relationship as first conceptualised by Morgan and Hunt (1994). The methodological approach of the study follows the Uses and Gratification model conceptualised by Katz *et al.* (1974) and the online servicescape as conceptualised by Harris and Goode (2010), which is supported by the key constructs of the Design Theory (Simon, 1996:141-142). The process of the study (the how?) is discussed in Section 1.6, and the axiology (ethical) component of the research paradigm is discussed in Section 1.7.

1.5.2 Theoretical approach

The study followed the commitment-trust theory of relationship as first conceptualised by Morgan and Hunt (1994). The methodological approach of the study followed the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) conceptualised by Katz *et al.* (1974) and the online servicescape model as conceptualised by Harris and Goode (2010). Concepts from website design theory were incorporated to support Harris and Goode's (2010) model to create the servicescape for the funeral industry.

Commitment-trust theory of relationship management

The commitment-trust theory of relationship management (Morgan & Hunt, 1994:22-26) is presented as the overarching theory of the study. The theory firstly hypothesises relationship commitment and trust to be key constructs of relationship management as it offers valuable guidance for the development of information system-based theories for online CRM (Nyadzayo & Khajehzadeh, 2016:263). Secondly, relationship benefits are identified in the commitment-trust theory as a key antecedent for the type

of relationship commitment that characterises customers who engage in relational exchange. Customers desire relationship partners that they can trust, and they do so because a trusted partner reduces risks associated with a relational exchange (Hunt *et al.*, 2006:75). Thirdly, trust and commitment are considered central tenets in building successful long-term relationships in the commercial online context.

Businesses can use websites to gain trust and commitment from customers and deliver on the promises made without physical interaction between the business and the customer. These are some of the central issues in online CRM (Verma *et al.*, 2015:7). The central tenets of the commitment-trust theory were applied in this study to determine the impact of trust on commitment based on the customer's experience and expectations with a funeral home website.

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT)

The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) originated with and is one of the most influential theories in the field of communication research (Treviño *et al.*, 2016:332). Its particularity is seated in the change from the original paradigm of "what media do to people" to a new approach of "what people do with media" (Zapata-Cantú *et al.*, 2018:93). The UGT subsequently provide researchers with a theoretical framework of understanding why and how individuals seek out and use specific media (Dolan *et al.*, 2016:262; Treviño *et al.*, 2016:332). It was one of the first theories to consider the audience's active role in media choice, suggesting that individuals actively search for, identify with, and employ media to fulfil a specific gratification of needs (Ku *et al.*, 2013:228), such as the need for information.

The rapid growth of the internet has created mediums with higher levels of interactivity from users (Dolan *et al.*, 2016:262) in comparison to traditional media. Since the UGT assumes that customers communicate or use media to gratify needs or wants

(Tejumaiye *et al.*, 2018:66), it is posited that the online servicescape elements will positively influence customers' behaviour towards a funeral home. UGT furthermore assume that individuals are aware of their needs and are goal-oriented in their use of media (Ifinedo, 2016:195), which reiterates the customer's judgement of the funeral home based on its online servicescape dimensions.

Online servicescape model

Harris and Goode's (2010) conceptual model of online servicescapes was applied to determine customers' trust in the funeral home websites and the current state of the websites. The model explores the relationships between an online servicescape, trust and customers' purchase intentions. Certain adjustments have been made to the original sub-dimensions of the original model to fit the purpose of the study. Harris and Goode (2010:231-233) attempted to interpret Bittner's (1992b:60) servicescape model literally into the online environment, focusing on the aesthetic appeal, layout and functionality, and financial security dimensions. Several sources were consulted in addition to Harris and Goode's (2010:232) model to determine sub-dimensions best suitable for the study. As a result, the study excludes the financial security dimension because it does not focus on e-commerce websites. Instead, financial security was replaced with search engine optimisation (SEO), perceived usefulness, and the perceived value of the websites to determine customers' trust in the websites.

Design theory

Design is defined by Friedman (2002:3) as "a process that involves creating something new, or reshaping something that exists for a purpose, to meet a need, to solve a problem or to transform a less desirable situation to a preferred situation". Seminal authors presented the expansion of design theory into the information systems discipline as a problem-solving theory. Although imagination is still required for the

creative process, its role changed to offer an initial list of options that can be progressively explored until a satisfactory solution is reached (Newell *et al.*, 1979:144,166). Although design remains a form of creative thinking, it transposes to the decision-making and problem-solving model (Hatchuel, 2002:262).

Simon (1996:130), one of the seminal authors on technology interface design, observed that everyone who designs creates courses of action to change existing situations into preferred situations. Simon (1996:141-142) suggests a science of design approach rooted in utility and statistical decision-making to define the problem and, secondly, optimise and substantiate techniques to research it. The problem arena of this approach is characterised by desired situations, the present situation, and differences between the desired and the present. Search techniques represent actions that are likely to remove differences between the expected and the present. The representation of design problems, and the generation and evaluation of design solutions, are thus presented as significant tasks in design science (March & Storey, 2008:726).

As conceptualised by Newell et al. (1979) and Simon (1996), which is based on creative solution-seeking, the design approach was used to address the problem identified in this study and provide an innovative solution for funeral home websites.

1.5.3 Conceptual model

A conceptual model was constructed based on the theories and models presented in the foregoing section and in support of the objectives of the study (refer to Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Conceptual model

Commitment Trust Theory Morgan & Hunt (1994)	*Relationship Benefits*	*Trust*	*Commitment*

E-Servicescape

- Visibility
- Accessibility

← SEO

- Usability
- Contactability
- Interactivity
- Navigability

← Perceived Usefulness

- Service Interaction
- Relevance of Information
- Web service quality

← Perceived Value

E-Servicescape
Harris & Goode
(2010)

RQ1

RQ2

RQ3

Trust in the website

RQ4

Purchase Intention

Uses & Gratification Katz *et.al.* (1974)	*Needs*	*Beliefs*	*Intention →* *Gratification*

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1.5.4 Research questions

Based on the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.2, the following research questions are presented:

Search engine optimisation (SEO)

RQ1: Which aspects of SEO will influence customers' perceptions of a funeral home website?

Information technology has the potential to alter several dimensions of a customer's information search process. This includes the number of total searches, the number and types of sources consulted, and the distribution and weighting of information gathered from these sources (Moat *et al.*, 2016:687-693).

Searching for information on the web can be a complex problem-solving activity that involves various cognitive processes (Chevalier *et al.*, 2015:306). Chevalier *et al.* (2015:306) further explain that information search activities can be conducted in two ways: using a search engine tool to formulate inquiries using keywords and navigating on the selected website to identify the information needed.

In the context of this study, it was assumed the user would use a search engine such as Google to search online for funeral homes from which the user would use the link displayed on the SERP to connect to the selected website. Once a website is accessed, the user would look for information required on the website. It is therefore posited that the search results will influence the user's selection of a website. If a user finds it difficult to access a website from a SERP, it will affect their perception of the perceived usefulness of the funeral home's website.

Perceived usefulness

RQ2: Will a funeral home website's perceived usefulness impact customers' trust beliefs in the funeral home?

Davis (1989:320) defined perceived usefulness in his seminal work as "the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance". The general assumption is that users will use an application such as a website if they consider it useful for achieving specific results (Ayeh *et al.*, 2013:133).

Perceived usefulness refers to customers' perceptions regarding the outcome of the experience (Cho & Sagynov, 2015:23). This implicates that a higher degree of perceived usefulness helps customers generate a higher level of usage intention (Lai *et al.*, 2013:1518). Within the context of the study, it was considered what the implications would be if customers perceive the funeral home's website as functional and if it will increase the likelihood to capitalise on the funeral home's services.

Perceived value

RQ3: Will a funeral home website's perceived value impact customers' trust beliefs in the funeral home?

Sheth *et al.* (1991), as cited by Chi and Kilduff (2011:423), proposed five dimensions of perceived value that promotes the consumption and selection of all products, namely functional, emotional, epistemic, social, and conditional values. This study only focussed on the functional values since it explored the utilitarian aspects of the websites of funeral homes. Functional values entail those products or brands are

awarded with some function, effectiveness or physical property and meet the objective of using the function. These values are usually the most key factors that influence the selection and purchase of products. The functionality and effectiveness of a funeral home website were measured through levels of service interaction, the relevance of the information provided, and the service quality of the website.

Trust in websites

RQ4: Do customers' trust beliefs in a funeral home website impact their purchase intentions?

Trust in websites plays a vital role in e-commerce since customers are unlikely to invest in a business whose website they do not trust (Kim & Peterson, 2017:48). Within the online context, trust is defined as a belief that leaves customers vulnerable to the integrity of online service providers after assessing their characteristics (Elbeltagi & Agag, 2016:294-295). Another definition of trust in the online context is presented by Kim *et al.* (2008:545), who perceives trust as the subjective belief that an online vendor will fulfil its transactional obligations. In a more recent presentation, Ponte *et al.* (2015:299) found that many customers are still reluctant to invest in vendors' online offerings because they distrust websites. To this extent, Pengnate and Sarathy (2017:51) found that websites can engender cognitive-based trust primarily through the attributes of vendors. Businesses should therefore be aware of the importance of improving the level of customers' trust in websites.

Therefore, it was postulated that customers' trust in the services of a funeral industry would increase if they found the online servicescape appealing and trustworthy.

Purchase intention

Purchase intention relates to Katz' (1974) gratification dimension. Gratifications of internet use can be categorised into two broad categories: utilitarian and experiential values, which explain internet user behaviour. Utilitarian internet users consider the internet as a means to accomplish their tasks whilst experiential users visit websites for psychological, physiological and emotional pleasure and excitement (hedonic) needs (Cha, 2014:18). The study only investigated the utilitarian perspective of gratifications which correlates with Booms and Bitner's (1981b:47-51) physical and McKnight *et al.*'s (2011:16) functionality dimensions. It was therefore posited that the bereaved customer would approach the internet from a utilitarian perspective to reach a gratifying point that could transpire into a receptive purchase intention. The process to reach the point of gratification is built on the website's trustworthiness, the customer's perceived value and usefulness, and the online visibility and accessibility of the funeral home's website.

1.6 METHODOLOGY

This study is positioned within the quantitative model, using an exploratory, descriptive research design. Creswell (2009:107) stated that exploratory studies are often conducted when none or little information is available about a specific topic. In addition, descriptive studies often represent the first scientific steps in new areas of inquiry (Vetter, 2017:1797). This type of research model aims to explore the characteristics of a population for which there is no previously valid model (Farinha *et al.*, 2021:600).

A two-step methodological process was conducted. Firstly, the online servicescapes of existing funeral home websites were analysed, and secondly, customer perspectives regarding funeral home online servicescapes were attained.

Subsequently, the study followed a two-step data collection and analysis process. A quantitative content analysis of existing funeral home websites was conducted, followed by a self-administered, anonymous online survey. The descriptive nature of both methods supports the reliability of the technique as elements not belonging to the sample cannot be scientifically generalised (Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015:118). A comprehensive discussion of the methodological approach of the study is presented in Chapter 4.

Both data collection methods were analysed and reported with descriptive statistical analyses. The findings are presented in Chapter 5.

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The axiological component of a research paradigm refers to the ethical issues that need to be considered when planning a research proposal. It is therefore important to consider the human values of everyone that will participate in the research project. To this extent, the study adhered to the three basic principles relevant to the ethics of research involving human subjects as laid out in the Belmont Report (1979): the principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice.

The implementation of ethical considerations focuses on four principles that must be upheld when dealing with participants and data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:28).

Table 1.3 summarises the four principles of axiology in relation to the study:

Table 1.3: The four principles of axiology in relation to the study

Principle	Consideration	Application in the study
Privacy	What information participants will be required to reveal to the researchers or to others about themselves, their associations, or businesses?	Participants are not required to reveal any information about themselves other than the fact that they have organised a funeral in the past. The survey is based on the opinions of the participants and not on their individual experiences. Participants are not required to reveal any sensitive information about their associations or any businesses.
Accuracy	Who is responsible for the authenticity, fidelity, and accuracy of information?	The researcher.
	Who will be held accountable for any errors in data?	The researcher.
	If any party were to be injured, how would they be compensated?	There are no risks involved in completing the questionnaire. The questionnaire is a self-administered, electronically distributed questionnaire and does not require any activities which could lead to mental distress.
Property	Who will own the data?	Nelson Mandela University
Accessibility	Who will have access to the data?	The researcher and the supervisor of the study.
	Under what conditions and with what safeguards will researchers and participants have access to the data?	The survey constitutes an anonymous, electronically distributed questionnaire. No identifiable personal information will be gathered for the purpose of the study. Should the data be questioned, the complainant can submit a request in writing to the university to view the data.

Sources: Kivunja and Kuyini (2017:28-29) and Researcher's own construction

In addition to the foregoing summary, it is worth mentioning that the study investigated the web-based portrayal of the funeral industry and that the anonymous, electronically distributed questionnaire will be based mainly on the results of the content analysis of websites. The study did not address cultural,

religious, or other ethical sensitive issues related to the funeral industry. Data will be collected from information already in existence on the public forum (the internet) through an unobtrusive process (content analysis). The electronic questionnaire did not contain any questions that could be perceived as unethical since it largely mirrors the criteria of the content analysis.

Before either of the data collection methods was conducted, full ethical clearance was obtained from the university's ethical committee (Refer to Annexure 4).

1.8 CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

One of the more noticeable contributions of the study is that more insight may be gained into customers' purchase intentions when engaging with websites of unsought service providers. Little is currently known about the marketing of unsought services, its underlying principles, and the effective management of the online servicescape for unsought services such as the funeral industry. The study aimed to provide a greater understanding of customers' trust and purchase intentions.

The dimensions contributing to purchase intention explored both the customers' perceptions of an unsought servicescape and the customers' individual characteristics. The findings provided greater clarification on the extent to which intentions relating to the online service provider and subsequent website characteristics may contribute towards consumers' intention to invest in the services of an unsought service provider.

The research findings may benefit funeral undertakers specifically in developing proper online strategies to increase customers' disposition to engage with funeral homes during a time of bereavement and need. The study, therefore, provides

insights into the importance of servicescapes for the funeral industry. Customers who found the servicescape useful may have a greater appreciation of the usefulness of the service and may be more willing to engage with the funeral home.

The research findings may also assist funeral undertakers in understanding the extent to which customers' perceptions of the servicescape may contribute to their overall revenue increments. Insight was gained into the intervention strategies required by funeral undertakers to ensure customers fully understand the services offered online and the value gained for the business from the website.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

The study commences by introducing the funeral industry and how it relates to the unsought services discipline (Chapter 2). A discussion of services marketing and the role of CRM within the services discipline is presented in Chapter 3. The discussion also addresses the role of websites in terms of their application to an online servicescape. The study's methodological approach is presented in Chapter 4, followed by the analysis and discussion of the findings in Chapter 5. The study will conclude with the application of the results by constructing a servicescape for the funeral industry and a discussion of the shortcomings and recommendations pertaining to the study in Chapter 6.

1.10 SUMMARY

This chapter presented the background of the study. Several desktop searches confirmed that the topic of this study has never been explored. The study is seated in the services marketing discipline and explored online servicescapes as a CRM tool for the funeral industry which is classified as an unsought service. The key problem that will be explored is the fact that customers will most likely search for the services

of a funeral home while bereaved. The problem was approached from an ontological perspective based on the commitment-trust theory, the UGT and a previously constructed online servicescape model which was adapted to suit the outcomes of the study. The key principle of the design theory, which is based on creative solution-seeking, is applied to discuss the outcomes of the study.

CHAPTER 2

UNSOUGHT SERVICES - A FUNERAL INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

All businesses have a component of rendering a service in their market offerings (Du Plessis, 2014:5). An essential element in user-integration to support this service is the need for information, which does not only come from marketing techniques to gather data, but also from the interaction between the business and customer (Bosch-Sijtsema & Bosch, 2015:793). Within the contemporary online environment, these relationships are built through online engagement (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014:151; Diffley & McCole, 2015:592; Giannakis-Bompolisa & Boutsouki, 2014:68). The customer, therefore, becomes a central figure in the co-creation of value in the service creation process (Li *et al.*, 2018:219). Experience-centric service businesses such as funeral homes, deliver services in which the customer experience is at the core of service offering. Since the service experiences are constructed by bereaved customers and cannot be fully controlled by the funeral director, funeral homes must stage the prerequisites, which enables a positive service experience. Within this context, the value creation is enhanced using both physical and online servicescapes (Fernandes & Neves, 2014:3).

This chapter introduces the funeral home as an economic unit within the services industry. It considers the unique characteristics which differentiate the funeral industry from standard service businesses and introduces the concept of an unsought servicescape.

2.2 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SERVICES SECTOR

A service is described as a useful exchange, that results from purposeful action and communication between individuals and businesses (Maglio *et al.*, 2019:2). In its applied form, the description of services specifies an industry that satisfies people's needs, rather than producing goods (Zhang, 2017:20). Within the economic and wealth creation context, a service can be described as a change in the status of a person, arising from the operation of another economic unit, with the prior consent of the former individual or economic unit (Daniel *et al.*, 2017:491-492).

Services were previously considered as unproductive, in comparison to tangible goods. However, since changes in technology and the use of microelectronics have altered the structure of the global economy, services are now perceived as commercial entities with measurable values. Yoon (2018:17) notes that most advanced economies have experienced structural changes towards a service economy, during the process of digitally empowered economic growth in the modern economy.

The service sector accounts for over 70 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP). It has expanded globally at a quicker rate than the agriculture and the manufacturing sectors (Wirtz *et al.*, 2015:565). A summary of the differences between the contribution of agriculture, industry, and services concerning the total GDP of selected countries, is depicted in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Percentage contribution to total GDP for selected countries

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States	South Africa
■ Agriculture	3.6	1.6	0.7	0.9	2.8
■ Industry	25.3	28.2	20.2	19.1	29.7
■ Service	71.2	70.2	79.2	80	67.5
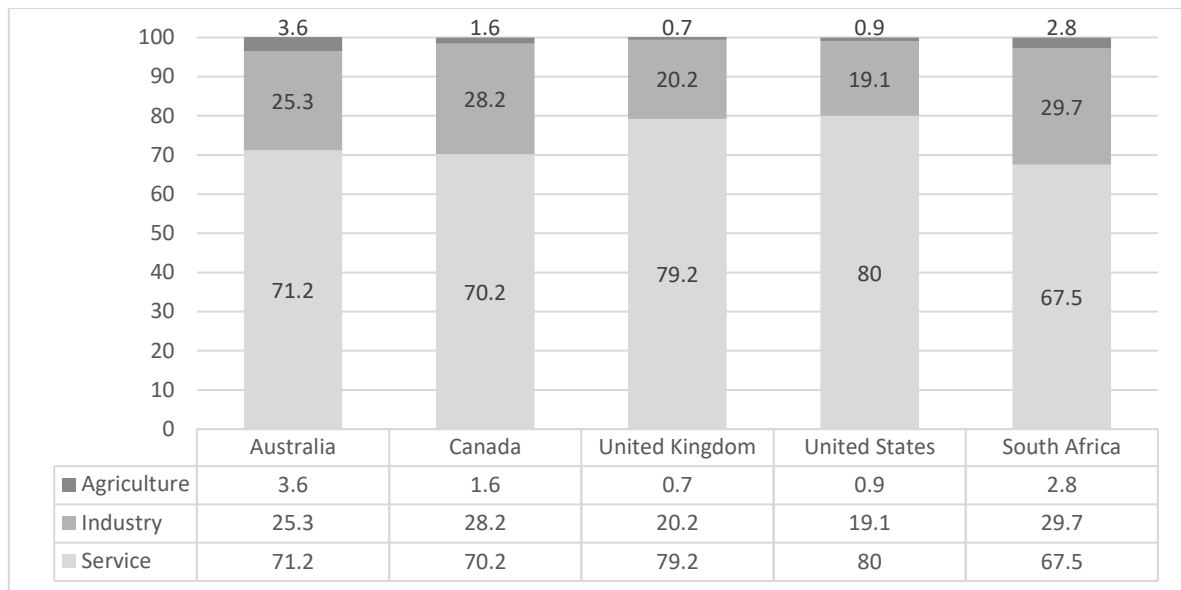
Source: Central Intelligence Agency (2021)

Figure 2.1 indicates that services in most developed and developing countries far exceed the value contribution of industries which produce tangible goods. This reiterates the importance of services in a world economy, which has increasingly become service-driven (Brax *et al.*, 2017:686).

Rapidly evolving Information Technologies (IT), such as website prominence, big data, cloud computing, and mobile and social networking technology, have transformed the nature of services fundamentally. As such, several researchers concur that services have become a key driver for businesses (Böhmann *et al.*, 2014:73; Peters *et al.*, 2016:137).

Moreover, Li *et al.* (2018:219) describe successful online services as the degree to which a technology-based interface assists a customer in performing a task online. This description suggests that contemporary businesses can create a competitive, online advantage through operant resources, which are typically human (skills and knowledge of customers and employees), business (routines, cultures,

competencies), informational knowledge about markets (competitors and technology), and relational (relationships with competitors, suppliers, and customers). This is the case since knowledge and skills operate on the basis of resources to solve problems, fulfil needs and produce a favourable customer experience (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011:329). As a result, businesses are increasingly using technology platforms, such as websites, to enable a broad base of stakeholders to engage with each other and with the business (Akman *et al.*, 2019:1205).

2.3 THE UNSOUGHT SERVICE PERSPECTIVE

Consumer products and services are generally classified as convenience, shopping, speciality or unsought (Gbadamosi, 2020:114-116). Convenience products are relatively inexpensive, frequently purchased items, for which buyers want to exert only minimal purchasing effort and are most likely forming part of their daily consumption such as bread and milk, airtime for cell phone and internet access. Customers are willing to spend more time locating shopping products, since they are relatively more expensive than convenience products and because these products or services may possess additional psychological benefits for the purchase, such as a smartphone. Specialty products have one or more unique characteristics and thus, customers plan the purchase of a specialty product. These products are unique, aspirational, and luxurious, and typically call for a higher emotional and financial involvement from the consumer, for example, a state-of-the-art computer. Unsought products, on the other hand, include products that are typically not actively sought by customers despite the existence of a latent need, such as insurance policies and funeral expenses (Amato *et al.*, 2014:753; Hameed & Soomro, 2014:151; Weng & De Run, 2013:71).

Few authors embark on exploring the unsought service component of consumer products and services models. Agbele *et al.* (2019:3-4); Jan and Jan (2014:292-293); Kumar and Gupta (2016:311-312) and Sari and Ali (2020:1180) merely mention and define unsought products and services as a component of the consumer product and service model, but do not engage in investigating it. This leaves the unsought component of the model mainly insufficiently researched (Sheng *et al.*, 2019:672), especially in the funeral industry (Korai & Souiden, 2017:257).

The term "unsought" is often used interchangeably with "unwanted" or "avoidance" products or services. Terminology assigned to "unsought" and "unwanted" products and services, furthermore, relates to the concept of avoiding those products and services because it might also relate to something that customers have an aversion towards, due to its inherent characteristics (refer to Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Unsought, unwanted and avoidance terminology

Unsought	Unwanted
Unsought goods are goods that customers do not know about and do not have the desire to buy. (Nasir *et al.*, 2020:76)	Unwanted services refer to those services that typically evoke negative emotions from customers. (Theron, 2016:186)
Customers usually do not buy unsought products and services unless they are made aware of it. (Mallick & Nayak, 2017:38)	A separate type of service to which customers do not want to be attracted to or express a strong reluctance to commit to. (Korai & Souiden, 2017:249)
An unsought product is a product that the customer might not know about, or the customer might know about but does not usually think of buying. (Sari & Ali, 2020:1180)	Customers perceive it as high-risk items associated with complex products. (Ruefenacht, 2018:1038)

The funeral industry is mostly referred to in the literature as an unsought service (Jha, 2017:5; Osman *et al.*, 2016:87; Sheng *et al.*, 2019:672). In contrast, industries such as insurance (Harrison & Ng, 2019; Nasir *et al.*, 2020) and healthcare (Engström

& Elg, 2015; Mu *et al.*, 2019; Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013) are classified as unwanted products and services.

Customers would usually avoid purchasing unsought products and services, unless they are required to due to specific circumstances (Korai & Souiden, 2017:249; Raoufi *et al.*, 2019:532), such as in the case of a funeral. Due to the unsought nature of funeral offerings, customers usually avoid engaging with funeral homes (Borres, 2020:117), because of unpleasant features of the service experience such as embarrassment, discomfort or perceived stigma (Leo & Zainuddin, 2017:407).

2.4 THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY AS AN USOUGHT SERVICE

The funeral industry is described as "both indispensable and ubiquitous as a vital, if somewhat inconspicuous, service provider, and a fascinating exemplar of how complex the public-private, as well as state-corporate, nexus of end-of-life care and welfare provision is" (Fletcher & Mcgowan, 2020:2). A funeral home is, without exaggeration, a *sui generis* business: no other business in the trade industry is exclusively related in its marketing and business development with death (Vélez-Zapata, 2012:93).

The organisation of a funeral is an economic development engine that supports other small to medium enterprises (Boateng & Anngela-Cole, 2012:304), which provide additional services and products essential to the successful execution of a funeral. However, the stigmatisation of death (Peacock, 2014) unfortunately leads to the perception of a negative public good that no one wants to purchase (Korai & Souiden, 2017:250). Subsequently, customer perceptions of funeral homes are primarily influenced by the fact that these are perceived as commercial businesses that profit from the dead, which highlights the inherent conflicting characteristics of "commerce" and "care" (Bailey, 2010:205,208). The funeral business, like most other

businesses, is also tied directly to the ebbs and flows of economies. While the need to bury the dead does not diminish during economic downturns, the ability of clients to pay for services does (Bunch-Lyons, 2015:68).

The funeral industry is no stranger to service delivery. Yet, the type of services provided by the funeral industry is significantly influenced by the inherent nature of the industry, particularly in the context of service production (Filimonau & Brown, 2018:68). The speed with which funeral services need to be provided leads to a lack of sufficient information on the part of the customers and restricted bargaining situations for funeral homes (Lares & Lehenbauer, 2019:18). A service recovery strategy in the funeral industry is less straightforward than in other sectors, because errors in the service delivery process are not easily reversible and may lead to a negative impact on the bereaved customer's evaluation of the funeral home (Korai & Souiden, 2017:250).

These unusual features separate funeral providers from other industries, because there is firstly, no socially acceptable way to generate demand for services that customers will consume at some stage and secondly, funeral homes interact with their customers at a time of bereavement (Morelli & Perry, 2017:49). Nonetheless despite its dichotomous nature, the contemporary funeral industry remains a capitalist business which requires funeral homes to change, innovate, and attract customers, or risk stagnation and decline (Beard & Burger, 2020:546).

Despite its challenges, the funeral industry is globally considered a high demand sector. The United Kingdom (UK), employs around 20,000 workers and had an estimated annual turnover of £2 billion in 2018 (Fletcher & Mcgowan, 2020:2). Australia reported a combined profit of 122.9 million Australian Dollars (AUD) for the 2015-16 financial year, with an expected 10% growth within the following five years (Van der Laan & Moerman, 2017b:11). In the United Stated of America (USA),

funeral homes were estimated to generate $16.1 billion revenue per year (Mazareanu, 2020), whilst the Canadian funeral industry market size is estimated at $1.7 billion (IBIS World, 2020). Within the South African business sector, there are an estimated 10 000 legal funeral operators, generating revenue of up to R10 billion per year (Thompson, 2019).

As with any other contemporary business, the funeral industry is also not adverse to change. Beard and Burger (2017:48) argue that current changes in the funeral industry are being driven by two separate, general motivations, namely business-related and customer-related motivations. From a business perspective, the industry's first intent is to recover profits, because of customer-related commodified changes driven by the development of new products and services in the market. Secondly, current changes in the industry are shaped by the development of customer service materials designed to inform potential customers about the industry, such as technology-based communications, including websites and other online communication platforms. In this regard, Ting and De Run (2012:23), in a study about generational perspectives on controversial advertising, found that while some respondents from the Generation X cohort still found funeral advertising controversial, respondents from Generation Y and higher perceived it as positive, since it facilitates awareness and adoption of the products advertised. This indicates that not only are the changes in the funeral industry motivated by sound business strategies, including the exploration of technological advances, but are also driven by changing customer perceptions and expectations. By capitalising on internet-based communications, specifically social media and reviews on websites, funeral homes can create a positive perception with a potential customer by providing information and sharing the experiences of other customers through testimonials on their electronic media platforms. It is hence imperative for funeral homes to conduct market research to gain knowledge that is crucial to creating and communicating a value proposition (Villamin, 2016:453).

Considering the impediments faced by funeral homes, creating a positive servicescape poses several customer relationships challenges for funeral homes.

2.4.1 The unsought servicescape

Hightower (2003) and Hightower *et al.* (2006) conducted conceptual research into the servicescapes of funeral homes. One of the key takeaways from their seminal works is that, over and above the design and ambient factors of a funeral home, the funeral industry relies mostly on the social interaction factor of servicescapes to create customer satisfaction (Hightower, 2003:91-92). The funeral undertaker, therefore, needs to be aware that managing the servicescape in conjunction with satisfaction, may affect the customer decision-making criteria favourably (Hightower *et al.*, 2006:53).

Hightower (2003:87) presents three primary servicescape concepts that influence the funeral industry, which correlate with the "conditions confronting buyers of funeral services" posited by Schwartz *et al.* (1986:41) in their seminal research into the marketing of the funeral industry (refer to Table 2.2).

Table 2.2: Correlating factors that influence funeral customers' decision-making

Conditions confronting buyers of funeral services Schwartz *et al.* (1986:41)	Concepts that influence the funeral industry Hightower (2003:87)
Negative demand	General lack of focus by marketing practitioners of the funeral industry.
Lack of prior information	
Time pressures	Managerial framework for the funeral home servicescape.
Buyers' emotional state	Intuitive importance of the service encounter in the funeral industry.

Schwartz *et al.* (1986:41) furthermore state that the customer is in an atmosphere that does not lend itself to rational decision-making during the purchase of the

funeral service. The locus of control therefore shifts from the buyer to the supplier. To this extent, Hightower's (2003:89) statement that "the servicescape provides the clues that consumers need to formulate a mental reality of the service" sustains the value of a social servicescape during the funeral purchase process.

Considering Beard and Burger's (2017:48) argument that current changes in the funeral industry are being driven by business-related and customer-related motivations (refer to Section 2.4), the argument is put forward that the funeral industry remains a capitalist unit, yet the way it interacts with customers changed since the inception of internet-based communications. The business of death and dying has not changed and will not change, and there will always be a market for the services of a funeral home (Birrell *et al.*, 2020:106; Han, 2019:88; Van der Pijl, 2017:46). However, customer demands have changed over time and funeral homes must therefore incorporate these changes in their business conduct. A prominent change facilitator is the advancements in internet-based technology, where funeral directors act as intermediaries between new media technologies and bereaved customers (Van Ryn *et al.*, 2019:446).

However, the emergence of digital landscapes does not mean that the physical and digital landscapes exist separately, but that in the contemporary business environment, both are needed. Servicescapes serve as significant stimuli when enabling service operations, by providing cues that create, influence, and enhance the customer experience (Fernandes & Neves, 2014:2). It can thus be concluded that a well-designed combination of the servicescapes can contribute positively to the success of the funeral home, whilst also being conducive to customer relationship management (Ragnar & Allmér, 2020:2).

2.5 SUMMARY

The funeral industry was presented in this chapter as an unsought service. The concept of unsought services as part of the consumer products and services model is largely insufficiently researched because several authors only allude to and briefly describe these types of services without actively engaging in researching unsought service-related topics. It was determined that the funeral industry contributes substantially to the services industry despite several challenges faced by funeral homes, which are customarily not encountered by standard service businesses. This has led to a discussion about the unsought servicescape, as it pertains to the funeral industry. The funeral industry has not been averse to change, and is therefore required to adapt to the contemporary, online environment, whilst still maintaining sociable physical servicescapes, to create an acceptable environment in which the funeral service is consumed.

Chapter 3 will explore customer relationship management (CRM) in more detail, from the perspective of online servicescapes for funeral homes.

CHAPTER 3

ONLINE SERVICESCAPES IN CONTEXT TO CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The internet is a service (Wilson *et al.*, 2016:13). This statement implies that all businesses which have an online presence, are essentially providing a service - whether they are disseminating information about the business, offering essential customer services, or facilitating online transactions - a service is delivered via the internet.

Servicescapes are the environments in which services are managed and marketed (Nilsson & Ballantyne, 2014:374). The rapid growth of e-commerce has led to several studies, which investigated the servicescape in online environments. Since purchasing patterns vary between online and physical stores, the online servicescape is shown to have a major influence on online consumer behaviour (Harris & Goode, 2010; King *et al.*, 2016; Teng *et al.*, 2018; Wu *et al.*, 2016). This chapter demonstrates how relationships are built between businesses and their customers through online servicescapes.

3.2 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM)

Businesses use relationship management (RM) to build long-term relationships with customers and to enhance the businesses' value perceptions. RM is often cited as the philosophical basis of CRM (Kimiloğlu & Zarali, 2009:246). To this extent, CRM and RM have a mutually assisted relationship (Wu & Lu, 2012:277-278) in building customer relationships with the business. Although RM and CRM are frequently used interchangeably, it is important to recognise how CRM relates to RM. The

relationship between RM, CRM and customer management is contextualised by Payne and Frow (2017:12) in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: The RM, CRM, and Customer Management Relationship
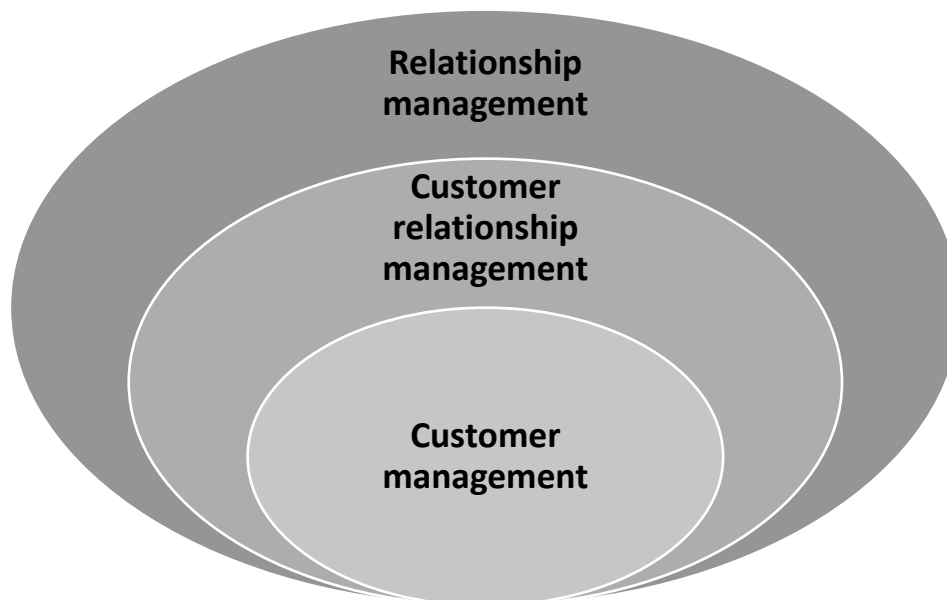
Source: Payne and Frow (2017:12)

RM entails the strategic management of relationships with all relevant stakeholders. These relationships include not only customers, but also suppliers, influencers, referral sources, and internal markets. CRM, in turn, forms a strategic part of relationship management, involving the appropriate use of technology. Although technology is a critical enabler, it is not the focus of CRM. Customer management involves the implementation and tactical management of customer interactions with the business, including aspects such as campaign management, call centre management, and sales force automation.

Rababah *et al.* (2011:22) define online CRM as the building of a customer-oriented strategy with an information technology application to achieve mutual benefits for both the business and the customers. To this extent, CRM becomes part of an

integrated approach for managing relationships, by focussing on customer relationship development and customer retention (Bukhari & Kazi, 2016:164; Rahimi, 2017:1382-1383). Subsequently, CRM has been identified as one of the determinants of a business's innovation potential within the marketing context (Kozioł *et al.*, 2014:326).

3.2.1 Types of CRM

The types of CRM cover the extent to which a business implements CRM in terms of its strategic, operational, and analytical application (Table 3.1):

Table 3.1: Types of CRM

Type	Focus	Application
Strategic CRM	The creation of a customer-centric business culture through which value is created in terms of resource investment.	Enhancing shareholder value of a business by systematically identifying objectives and measuring the results of the CRM system over time.
Operational CRM	Customer processes automation, including marketing automation, sales-force automation, and service automation.	Sales and services are executed through various customer touchpoints, based on the knowledge gathered from analytics.
Analytical CRM	Analyse customer data to generate information about customer segmentation, customer behaviour, and customer value.	Data mining techniques such as the incorporation of advanced statistical and machine learning techniques, text mining, and web mining techniques are employed to customer data. The information is attained to solve various business problems related to customers.

Sources: Compiled from Krishna and Ravi (2016:30); Pedron *et al.* (2016:527); Rababah *et al.* (2011:23).

A fourth type of CRM can be added to the types of CRM depicted in Table 3.1, namely collaborative CRM. Since collaborative CRM ties in at the operational CRM level, many researchers discuss it as a subset of operational CRM (Rababah *et al.*, 2011:23), while others consider it as a definitive type of CRM (Krishna & Ravi, 2016:31).

Collaborative CRM focuses on customer integration, using a set of interaction channels and collaborating closely with customers, suppliers, and business partners. Collaborative technologies include different forms of interpersonal communication, such as email, mobile communication, social media, and websites that customers may use to interact with the business. Collaborative CRM is therefore performed while servicing customer requirements in almost real-time (Krishna & Ravi, 2016:30-31; Rababah *et al.*, 2011:22-23), using collaborative technologies. According to Diffley *et al.* (2018:1075), new technological mechanisms for serving customers, subsequent market offerings, and marketing programmes that emerge from the process of collaboration, are the representation of customer needs and wants. These needs and wants represent value propositions that function as a means for continually engaging customers in the co-creation of value for the business.

3.2.2 CRM implementation

CRM is implemented through a combination of people, process, and technology, within the collaboration domain (Garrido-Moreno *et al.*, 2015:395; Iriana *et al.*, 2013:468; Rababah *et al.*, 2011:22; Rahimi & Gunlu, 2016:93; Shukla & Pattnaik, 2019:23). The human factor (people) remains crucial in a CRM strategy. Employees and customers both play a key role in the CRM strategy. Even with the best definitions of processes and the most advanced technology, the relationship between people has a determining effect on the CRM strategy. Implementing CRM processes requires a shift in focus from product-centric to customer-centric approaches (processes), as it integrates internal processes and functions, and external networks to create and deliver value to targeted customers at a profit, hence creating value for the business. As such, technology plays a key role in CRM, not only to collect and analyse data on customer behaviour, but also to create a 360-degree view of customers, develop predictive models, respond with timely and

effective customised communications, and deliver product and services value to customers.

3.2.3 CRM strategy in juxtaposition to service value mix

A CRM strategy must be focused on the process of selecting customers who a business can serve most profitably and shaping interactions between the business and these valuable customers. The goal, therefore, is to optimise the current and future value of customers for the business (Kumar & Reinartz, 2012:23). To this extent, the CRM strategy is built on the business's service output, which is based on Booms and Bitner's (1981a:48) service mix elements (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2: CRM strategy in juxtaposition to the service value mix

	Participants	Process	Physical evidence
Service value mix	People (employees of the business and customers) can be an essential source of differentiation as well as a competitive advantage.	Creates the value proposition that has been promised to customers.	Customers use the service environment as an important proxy for quality.
	People	**Process**	**Technology**
CRM strategy	The relationship between people has a determining effect on the CRM strategy.	Creates value for the business.	The means of delivering service value to an individual in the online environment.

Sources: Compiled from Booms and Bitner (1981a:48); Garrido-Moreno *et al.* (2015:395); Rababah *et al.* (2011:22); Rahimi and Gunlu (2016:93); Shukla and Pattnaik (2019:23).

The juxtaposition presented in Table 3.2 reiterates the importance of people in the process of delivering service value, from both the business and customer perspectives. The most significant point of convergence between the services mix and the CRM strategy appears in the strategic approach to value creation. Technology-enabled businesses aim to gather and align the information collected about customers in a practical, value-creating strategy. CRM also provides the

means for understanding customers' in-store and online behaviour, which allows businesses to create a richer customer experience, by delivering the right information at the right time in the right place (Parise *et al.*, 2016:412).

Not only does IT provide a new means for collecting and analysing customer information, it also allows for the physical service locations in which services are delivered (Booms & Bitner, 1981a:48) to transition to an online service environment in the form of online servicescapes (Tankovic & Benazic, 2018:1125). Thus, extending the business's physical environment from an in-store experience to an online experience.

3.3 SERVICESCAPES

Booms and Bitner (1981a:49) and Bitner (1992a:57) noted in their seminal works that the physical environment is rich in clues, such as the design of the business's building, the interior decor, the level of noise in the environment where the service is designed and packaged, the appearance and attitude of the contact personnel, and the process by which the service is to be delivered. Bitner (1992a:58) first introduced the term "servicescape" as an umbrella description for the entire spatially bounded environment that customers respond to (Ardley *et al.*, 2012:655) in a service setting. Servicescapes therefore comprise the contextual landscape of services (Ballantyne & Nilsson, 2017:226).

The simultaneous nature of production and consumption of services, allows for much of a business's promotional activities to occur before and during the service experience, at the physical location where the service is delivered (Booms & Bitner, 1981a:49). Since the publication of Bitner's (1992a) seminal work, the contributing effect of servicescapes to the value creation process, has been researched in several contexts, with different purposes, and with diverse outcomes (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3: Diverse research approaches to servicescapes

Author	Industry	Context	Approach	Implications
Bitner (1992a)	Retail	Environmental psychology	Examining the multiple strategic roles of physical surroundings in service organisations.	Spatial layout and functionality, ambient conditions, signs, symbols, and artefacts, are designed into the service setting to create a positive experience setting for customers.
Rosenbaum and Massiah (2011)	Retail	Marketing, environmental psychology, humanistic geography, and sociology.	Constructing a conceptual model of perceived servicescapes.	Customers' responses to social, symbolic, and natural stimuli are often the drives of profound person-place attachments.
Bonfanti (2016)	Retail	Servicescape surveillance management (SSM).	Design a high level of security, while concurrently enhancing customer service experiences.	Service managers must consider surveillance as an opportunity to enhance customers' desired service levels.
Beudaert *et al.* (2017)	Retail and online retailing	Auditory disorder.	Explore how customers with hidden auditory disorders experience exclusion in servicescapes.	Service providers can give customers opportunities to bypass situations involving sensory overload, through temporary or permanent modifications of in-store and e-servicescapes.
Teng *et al.* (2018)	Online retailing	Integrating purchase intention with e-service quality and segmentation theory.	Clarify the significant attributes of e-servicescapes, in relation to customers' purchase intentions.	Aesthetic appeal and interactivity increase users' purchase intentions.
Tran *et al.* (2012)	Online retailing	E-servicescapes within the Network Coproduction Model of WOM (microblogging).	Investigate how and whether e-servicescape perceptions influence customers' trust and engagement with e-tailing websites.	Microblog postings may harm customers' e-servicescape perceptions. Customers' trust positively impacts retail patronage and e-WOM intentions.
Sahoo *et al.* (2016)	Healthcare	Inference and image congruity theories.	The relationship between customers' servicescape perceptions, self-image congruity and attitude.	Hospital servicescapes have a significant impact on both self-congruity and functional congruity, which in turn influences customers' attitude toward the hospital.

Author	Industry	Context	Approach	Implications
Lai and Chong (2019)	Healthcare	Attributes and validity of servicescapes.	Exploring the differences in public and private hospital servicescapes.	How patients interact and view the servicescape attributes in both public and private hospitals, serve as a competitive edge for these premises.
Sheng *et al.* (2016)	Tourism and Hospitality	Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA)	Assessing how servicescape attributes shape customer well-being.	Prioritised servicescapes contribute to an ideal allocation of scarce resources.
Durna *et al.* (2015)	Tourism and Hospitality	Substantive Staging of Servicescape (SSoS) and word-of-mouth (WOM).	Examine the relationships between servicescape components, image, and behavioural intentions of customers.	Overall image has a mediating effect between servicescape and customer behavioural intention components.
Lin (2016)	Tourism and Hospitality	Visual servicescape aesthetics comprehension and appreciation (VSACA) and perceived perceptual experience quality (PPEQ), pleasure and arousal.	Measure the direct effects of VSACA on PPEQ, pleasure and arousal.	An understanding of customers' simultaneous cognitive-emotional processing of servicescape aesthetics is crucial for the designing and planning of a servicescape.
Lee (2018)	Mobile Tourism and Hospitality	Mobile servicescape (m-Servicescape). Stimulus Organism Response (S-O-R) model.	Explore how customer engagement behaviours and brand loyalty are enhanced through customers' preference for m-servicescapes.	Aesthetics, functionality, and symbolism in m-servicescapes positively influence customers' engagement behaviours and brand loyalty.
Purani and Kumar (2018)	Hospitality and Banking	Environmental psychology	Explore the relationship between biophilic stimuli in the servicescape and restorative effects on psychological states among customers.	Customers are more responsive with regards to restorative effects of biophilic elements in contexts where they seek emotional, experiential value compared to rational, functional value.
Bravo *et al.* (2019)	Retail banking	Multi-channel strategy	Conceptual model of customers' perceptions of offline and online channels relations to brand trust and brand commitment leading to customer engagement.	Offline banking experiences are more important than online experiences in terms of impact on trust, commitment, and customer engagement.

Author	Industry	Context	Approach	Implications
Touchstone *et al.* (2017)	Retail banking	Linguistic servicescape	Combination of the sociolinguistic theory of linguistic landscape, with research into multilingual service encounters.	The wider symbolic use of language is key in determining the success of service encounters.
Chaouali *et al.* (2019)	Mobile banking	S-O-R model	Analyse the influence of design aesthetics on adoption and recommendation intentions of mobile banking applications, through the mediating role of perceived usefulness and trust.	Persuasion knowledge weakens the effects of design aesthetics on perceived usefulness and trust.
Pareigis *et al.* (2012)	Public transport	Micro-technographic approach using think-aloud protocols and video documentation.	Explore customer interactions with servicescapes concerning navigating and ticketing in a public transport environment.	Servicescape design must be intuitive, meaningful, and easy to use.
Miles *et al.* (2012)	Fast food industry	Porter's generic competitive strategy	Explore the relationship between a business's service characteristics and customer satisfaction as moderated by a business's competitive strategy.	Investment in physical surroundings differs depending on the business's competitive strategy.
Dassanayake and Senevirathne (2018)	Education	Student engagement in Distance Education (DE)	Investigate the impact of e-servicescape design on student engagement in DE.	E-servicescapes have a significant direct impact on student engagement. The social presence feature of e-servicescapes has the highest impact on student engagement.
Andrés *et al.* (2016)	Performing arts	Effects of the social servicescape and emotions, as moderators are examined, using interaction techniques on performing arts attendees.	Determine the role of social servicescapes and positive emotions in post-use responses.	Knowledge of social servicescapes and emotional effects on customer behaviour enables cultural managers to improve the consumption experience of performing arts attendees.

Table 3.3 presents only a fraction of the extant literature pertaining to servicescapes. The purpose of the summary was to demonstrate the importance that the concept of servicescapes has gained since its inception, concerning its role in service delivery, and value creation for both businesses and customers. It is evident from Table 3.3 that research has been conducted, and continues to be conducted, in both physical and online service settings, which further emphasises the importance of servicescapes as a continuous value contributor to services. However, it is noted that no funeral industry context research has been encountered, which reiterates the validity of this study.

3.3.1 The servicescape typology

Bitner (1992a:58) presented a typology of servicescapes which operates on both vertical and horizontal dimensions. The vertical dimension relates to who performs the actions within the servicescape, such as the employee, customer, or both. At one end of the vertical axis is the self-service business, where few employees are present, and the level of customer activity is high. On the other end is the remote service environment, where little or no customer involvement in the servicescape is present, for example, in a fully automated service setting. In between these two ends of the spectrum, is the interpersonal service setting, where both customers and employees are present, performing actions within the servicescape.

The horizontal dimension of Bitner's (1992a:58) typology represents the complexity of services and is either classified as lean or elaborate servicescapes. Lean servicescapes relate to modest environments with few spaces and forms. Design decisions are relatively straightforward for these types of environments, especially in self-service or remote service situations where there is no interaction between customers and employees. Elaborate servicescapes specify the full range of

marketing and business objectives. These require careful management, because of the complex variability of the functions performed in such an environment.

Servicescapes act as expectations primers, because customers mould the perceptions of the personal service they are about to receive on the environment they enter into (Hooper *et al.*, 2013a:273). The typology of servicescapes therefore becomes a means of understanding the probable responses customers might exhibit to the objective and subjective stimuli, encountered in spatial-bounded service settings (Ballantyne & Nilsson, 2017:227). The online servicescape research stream suitably emphasises the importance of functionality within servicescapes, where customers need to perform the service (Keiningham *et al.*, 2017:151), indicating a lean servicescape setting with high customer involvement. However, with the proliferation of digital touchpoints, channels, media (Alexander, 2019:257), equipment (Hooper *et al.*, 2013a:273) such as computers, mobile phones, tablets, and the shortening attention span of customers (Szymanska *et al.*, 2017:s.a.), online servicescapes are propelled into an elaborate, collaborative typology.

3.4 WEBSITES AS SERVICESCAPES

Bitner (1992a:58) identified servicescapes as socialisers - the design of a servicescape not only contributes to socialisation between customers and employees, but also among customers. These interactions play significant roles in the operational CRM environment (Rababah *et al.*, 2011:23), and the collaboration component of the marketing of services (Carù & Cova, 2015:277-278). Hence, the online environment is also perceived as a setting for experiences (Bilro *et al.*, 2018:206; Loureiro, 2015:546), and therefore fulfils the same role as the traditional servicescape.

Online servicescapes therefore act as a window into a socially constructed reality (Ballantyne & Nilsson, 2017:228). It manifests through various engagement platforms (EPSs) (Blasco-Arcas *et al.*, 2016:560) such as websites, downloadable applications, and microblogging platforms. In most cases, the servicescapes are actively reconstructed through productive relationships between customers, businesses, and technologies (Torres *et al.*, 2018:211). It is therefore imperative that the website is easy to locate on the internet, visible, accessible on various technological devices, and useful to the customer to create a valuable experience for the customer.

Websites also constitute an important touchpoint between the business and its customers, as the first online navigation experience can determine the future of a customer's relationship with businesses and their offerings (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016:814). The functionalities of a website convey messages from text-based to multimedia, providing a richness of product information and responsiveness to the customer (Sharma & Lijuan, 2015:469). The goal of a website is to create an attractive online presence that not only meets the objectives of a business, but also attracts customers (Beachboard, 2017:196). A well-designed website will subsequently invoke positive perceptions and attitudes among customers (Burford *et al.*, 2015:3).

The website of a business is a built, virtual environment through which customers interact with the service provider. An online servicescape can subsequently be contextualised as a built environment, which impacts customer perceptions and shape their behaviours (Dassanayake & Senevirathne, 2018:204). A high-quality website will therefore yield higher website identification (King *et al.*, 2016:321), enhance customers' first impressions and encourage them to trust the website (Teng *et al.*, 2018:336), which in turn promotes purchase intention (Harris & Goode, 2010:231; Hsu *et al.*, 2012:242).

3.4.1 Website identification

Search engines are considered powerful tools, rather than threats for businesses. As a result, search engine optimisation (SEO) is perceived as the implementation of practices aimed at making online resources accessible to search engine crawlers to improve their visibility on search engine results pages (SERPs) (Dickinson & Smit, 2016:591).

Odom and Habermann (2013:16) define SEO as the exact science to display the website of a business on the first page of a SERP once a search for a specific business, product or service has been entered into a search engine. A SERP is effectively the collection of pages a customer sees when the results are displayed after a keyword search has been conducted, using a search engine such as Google (Odom & Habermann, 2013:25; Yalçin & Köse, 2010:488). The preferred outcome of SEO is hence to optimise a website for visibility and accessibility, which involves search content that would enable higher rankings on SERPs (Fox, 2012:79; Serrano-Cinca & Muñoz-Soro, 2019:8). The higher a website is ranked on the SERP, the more visits it will receive from a search engine's users (Park, 2018:78).

Information search activities on the internet can be a complex, problem-solving activity which requires a cognitive understanding of the information presented online, to solve the information problem (Dinet *et al.*, 2012:51-58). The information search activity can be conducted in two ways: firstly, by using a search engine tool and secondly, by navigating websites to find the required information (Chevalier *et al.*, 2015:306). Adequate and accurate information is considered useful and is influential for online customers' potential purchasing intentions (Jeon & Jeong, 2017:441).

The influence of SEO can also have a positive impact on the accessibility of content (Lewandowski & Sünkler, 2019:312). The process of accessing the website forms part of the customer experience and act as a precursor to the perceived trust of the online servicescape, because the quality perception of a website increases if it is easily identifiable and accessible to customers (Galati *et al.*, 2016:313).

Leppäniemi *et al.* (2017:168) identified customer perceived value as a significant antecedent of purchase intention. This indicates that the higher the perceived value of a product or service, the higher the likelihood that customers will be willing to purchase it (Chen *et al.*, 2018:584). Within the online context, the perceived value of a relationship can be defined as the result of customers' perceptions. These perceptions are formed after comparing benefits and sacrifices from online activities, in which websites attempt to establish a long-term relationship with the customers by providing services that are valuable to them (Tsao *et al.*, 2016:1990). Furthermore, Salem and Čavlek (2016:371) state that website interactivity affects customer perceived value and intention to revisit the website in the future.

The connection between servicescape attributes in creating perceived value, affects attitudinal and behavioural loyalty of customers (Tankovic & Benazic, 2018:1124). The causal relationships between the perceived quality of services, value and satisfaction suggest that customers' evaluation of a website can lead to an emotional reaction, which guides customers' behaviour (Tzavlopoulos *et al.*, 2019:579). This reiterates the importance of a well-developed and designed servicescape because online customers experience a website and evaluate the website's online service quality. This contributes to their perceived value, and they subsequently build their purchase intentions based on these experiences (Teng *et al.*, 2018:335).

3.4.2 Trust in Websites

The role of trust in the relationship between customers and business has been discussed in several business studies, especially in the marketing discipline (Poon *et al.*, 2017:328). Mayer *et al.* (1995:717-721) defined the dimensions of trust in their conceptual work as competence (ability), benevolence, and integrity. Benevolence trust is described as being thoughtful and motivated to act in one's own interest, rather than being deceitful, integrity trust as keeping to agreements made, being truthful and fulfilling promises, and competence trust as being able to do what needs to be done (Williams-Middleton & Nowell, 2018:886-887). The competence of a system is hence directly related to perceptions of the usefulness of the website. If customers believe in the competence of the website, they would be more inclined to be at ease and trust the interaction with the website (Wang *et al.*, 2016:50).

King *et al.* (2016:321) acknowledge that trust between the business and the customer is critical to motivate a customer's initial and ongoing support. Trust in websites directly increases purchase intention and reinforces the positive relationship between website appeal and purchase intention, through service content quality and search delivery quality (Liu *et al.*, 2017b:759,763-765). A well-designed, competent website contributes to building customer trust in a business's online offerings (Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013:245). Trust is especially important in the online context, as it is a reflection of customers' confidence in the business's website (Li *et al.*, 2017:3). Trust is therefore an essential factor in the creation of long-term customer relationships, because it reduces uncertainty among customers, and raises their confidence in the business's reliability and integrity (Garcia-Madariaga *et al.*, 2019:18; Li *et al.*, 2017:4).

The level of trust in the online environment, is based on the perceived usefulness of the website, owing to the lack of personal interaction between customers and

employees of the business (Gregg & Walczak, 2010:10). This is especially important in an industry such as the funeral industry. Pengnate and Sarathy (2017:49,56) conducted a study of trust on the influence of website design features in unfamiliar online vendors' websites and found that the website is the primary means by which online consumers evaluate whether or not to engage or conduct business with unfamiliar vendors. Consequently, the design features of the website play a defining role in establishing trust. If customers are not comfortable with a website, the effects of visual appeal and trust on intention to use the website tend to override the effect of use. Considering the dimensions of trust, competence trust will be the dominant dimension when considering the unfamiliar and unsought nature of a service such as the funeral industry.

3.4.3 Purchase intention

Purchase intention is a consequence of trust (Kim & Peterson, 2017:45), and serves as a proxy for purchase behaviour (Hu *et al.*, 2016:1221). Intentions are proximal antecedents of actual behaviour, as they prompt an individual's motivation to perform a certain behaviour (Kim *et al.*, 2017a:338). Purchase intention can predict or direct customer future behaviour (the realisation of a purchase) (Bebber *et al.*, 2017:85). Therefore, the intention is influenced by the level of effort necessary to affect the behaviour, along with the convenience, the associated costs, and the time involved in sourcing the business's offerings online (Ramayaha *et al.*, 2010:1420).

Online trust is typically conceptualized as a mediator in research models, between selected antecedents and consequences (Kim & Peterson, 2017:44). Trust is therefore viewed as a significant antecedent belief, which creates a positive attitude toward customer transaction behaviour. Trust can help customers reduce their risk perceptions when dealing with online vendors, thereby encouraging them to

engage in trust-related behaviours, such as sharing information or making purchases (Lu *et al.*, 2016:229).

Empirical evidence suggests that an online servicescape is positively linked to purchase intention (King *et al.*, 2016:343; Teng *et al.*, 2018:346; Wu *et al.*, 2017:710). The main function of a website using the online servicescape model is to persuade, maintain, and offer some knowledge and information to customers (Josien, 2010:60-61). It is therefore crucial for businesses to cultivate a clear identity for the website, because it helps in establishing sustained advantages in an increasingly competitive marketplace (King *et al.*, 2016:325).

3.4 SUMMARY

Chapter two presented a review of the literature pertaining to servicescapes in the online context. Websites were presented as the physical environments of online servicescapes. A business's servicescape does not only pertain to the physical layout of the website - the service value perception in the online environment begins at the point of searching for information, followed by the perceived usefulness of the website and the subsequent evaluation of the website. These factors greatly influence customers' trust in the business's offerings, which in turn will affect customers' intentions to purchase.

The literature review also confirmed the pivotal role of servicescapes in the value co-creation process of services marketing. Servicescapes create the context in which customers and the business's offerings interact with each other, to develop profitable relationships. To this extent, the servicescape serves as an antecedent for effective online CRM.

Chapter four will present the methodology followed in this study to determine which website constructs will constitute an effective online servicescape. Such a servicescape will advance customers' trust in the website and their subsequent purchase intentions.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The study followed a cross-sectional, exploratory, descriptive research design. Cross-sectional studies are designed to study a phenomenon by selecting and analysing a cross-section of it at a specific time (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:92). Descriptive statistics are the procedures that describe quantified numerical data collected for a cross-sectional study in such a way that it assists the researcher in organising, summarising and interpreting the sampled data, either through quantitative or qualitative methods (Fouché & Bartley, 2011:251). Quantitative research is defined by Maree and Pietersen (2007:145) as a process that is systematic and objective in its ways of using numerical data from only a selected subgroup of a universe (or population) to generalise the findings to the universe that is being studied.

A two-step data collection process was followed. Firstly, an online content analysis was conducted to determine the current state of funeral home websites. Thereafter, a self-administered, electronically distributed questionnaire survey was conducted to gain customer insights on funeral home websites.

This chapter commences with the discussion of the content analysis process, followed by a discussion of the survey and the analysis methodology of both methods.

4.2 CONTENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the content analysis in this study was to determine the current state of funeral home websites. Content analysis is defined as "an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process, and predictive or inferential in intent" (Krippendorff, 2013:1). Quantitative content analysis is described as a systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, using statistical methods for analysis, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context (Riffe *et al.*, 2019:23).

Contemporary content analyses examine data, printed matters, images, and text to understand what it means to people, through new conceptualisations and an empirical orientation. The processing of digital communication, in tandem with the ability to reproduce data in visual and textual formats, encourages content analysis within contemporary paradigms (Krippendorff, 2013:2-3).

A website, as a medium of communication, lends itself *prima facie* to content analysis and as such this was one of the first methodologies used in website analyses (Herring, 2010:233; Kim & Kuljis, 2010:369). As an unobtrusive technique, content analysis avoids any biases usually experienced in both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Content analysis can absorb unstructured matters as data, hence preserving the conceptions of data sources which structured methods largely ignore. The technique, therefore, allows for reliable and effective replication of data collection, whether conducted by coders or computer software (Krippendorff, 2013:45-48). Using the content analysis method to gather data from websites is therefore minimally obtrusive, less expensive, and more comprehensive and yields faster results than other research methods.

4.2.1 Content analysis framework

There are two content analysis research frameworks which are predominantly used in content analysis. The first is Krippendorff's (2013:84) six-step framework and the second, Neuendorf's (2017:50-51) nine-step framework. However, the content analysis process followed in this study was based on an equally comprehensive, but condensed model, presented by Riffe *et al.* (2019:159-166), which has been successfully applied by contemporary authors to investigate visual content (Lee *et al.*, 2020:615-644; Robson & Robinson, 2015:1043-1069; Trigoni, 2016:339-366; Vourvachis & Woodward, 2015:166-195). Zamith and Lewis (2015:307-318) specifically used the framework to conduct a website analysis.

Figure 4.1: Riffe's Content Analysis Framework
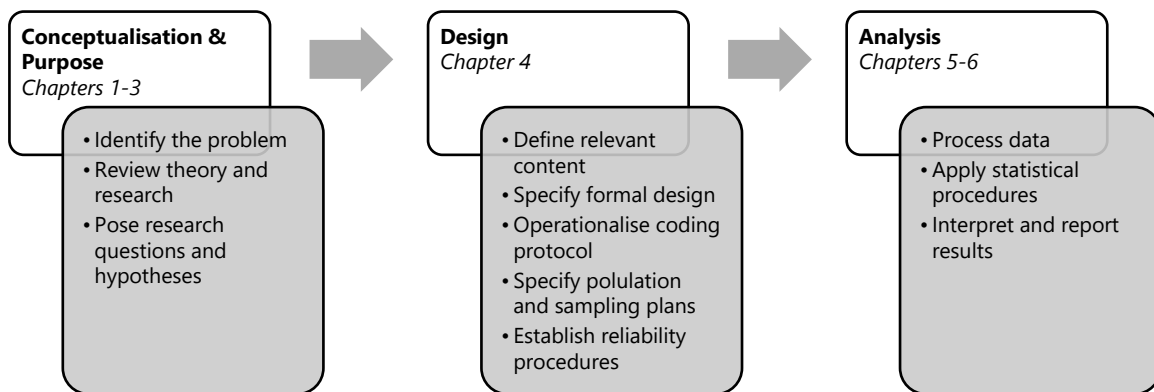
Source: Riffe *et al.* (2019:159)

The primary objective of the study was to develop an online servicescape for the funeral industry. The purpose of the content analysis was to determine what the current funeral home online servicescapes entail and to draw inferences from existing funeral home websites. Three key constructs were identified as: search engine optimisation (SEO), perceived usefulness, and perceived value. Based on the three key constructs, six subsequent variables were identified to assist in gaining better insights into the current funeral home websites' servicescapes (refer to Table

4.1). These constructs relate to RQ1, RQ2 and RQ3 (refer to the conceptual model, Chapter 1). The design of the content analysis data collection process is discussed in Sections 4.2.2 − 4.2.6 of this chapter and the interpretation of the results are discussed in Chapter 5.

4.2.2 Units of analysis

A unit of analysis is the demarcated content which defines one or more variables of theoretical interest in content analysis (Riffe *et al.*, 2019:57). The units of analysis in content analysis are often referred to as "content units" (Borca *et al.*, 2015:51), and the process referred to as "unitising" (Krippendorff, 2013:84,98). Regardless of the terminology assigned to it, the units of analysis remain fundamental in the content analysis, because these are used to determine the reliability of the variables (Nadolny *et al.*, 2020:4) to transpose the basic unit of analysis into semantic validity (Onay & Öztürk, 2018:385), and provide a detailed specification of the investigations that will be performed (Scheaffer *et al.*, 2012:38).

The following units were identified from the conceptual model for content analysis (refer to Table 4.1):

Table 4.1: Content Units of Analysis

Construct	Variables	Criteria (Units of Enquiry)	Data collection
SEO	V1 Visibility	CA[1]-C1 SERP results	CA-Q1 Does the URL to the FH website appear on the SERP page? CA-Q2 Does the hyperlink that appears on the SERP page contain the brand name?
		CA-C2 Keywords	CA-Q3 Which keywords do funeral homes use? CA-Q4 Which are the ten highest-ranking keywords?
		CA-C3 Social Media Links	CA-Q5 Which social media pages are linked to the website? CA-Q6 Which are the most preferred social media links?
	V2 Accessibility	CA-C4 Accessibility from SERP	CA-Q7 If a user clicks on the URL on the SERP, does it open the website of the FH?
Perceived Usefulness	V3 Usability	CA-C5 Sitemap	CA-Q8 Does the website contain a sitemap?
	V4 Contactability	CA-C6 Contact information	CA-Q9 Which contact options are listed on the website? CA-Q10 Which are the most used contact options?
	V5 Navigability	CA-C7 Navigation buttons	CA-Q11 Which navigation buttons do the websites use to guide visitors? CA-Q12 Which are the most used navigation buttons?
Perceived Value	V6 Service Interaction	CA-C8 On-site testimonials	CA-Q13 Does the website contain the option to provide onsite testimonials?

Source: Researcher's own construction

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[1] CA and S (refer to Table 4.5) are used in the units of analysis tables to distinguish between the Content Analysis (CA) and Survey (S) components.

Al-Khalifa and Al-Khalifa (2012:954) state that a URL which contains the name of the business name reinforces online access to the website from a search engine results page (SERP). García *et al.* (2017:148) note the importance of a URL in capturing the initial attention of a user to a website, because it is at this exact point that the dialogue starts between a customer and the business. The URLs of each funeral home website were therefore investigated to determine similarities between the brand name of the funeral home and the URL, and the effect these have on a website's online visibility from SERP results.

Keywords are used to search for specific websites. Websites which contain keywords that are entered into the search engine, are identified by the algorithm and displayed on the SERP (Oh *et al.*, 2018:276). When users engage in a browsing session, there is usually a theme, for example, "*funeral homes*" in "*Australia*". Users generally do not visit web pages randomly, but rather tend to focus on a collection of web pages around one topic in a brief period. The result is that one URL may contain many keywords, or one keyword may be used by many URLs (Du *et al.*, 2018:213,216). The keywords from all the sampled websites were collected to firstly determine the keywords currently used by funeral home websites to create visibility on the internet and secondly, to correlate which keywords delivered the most visible results on the SERP. The set of keywords from the webpages was identified, and the weight of each keyword was determined. This process has been successfully applied by Amaro and Duarte (2013:755-785), and Morosan and Bowen (2018:557-580), using co-occurrence relations based on the logical connections to online purchasing and was replicated in this study to determine the most effective keywords for funeral home websites. Accessibility was determined by confirming if the funeral home website opened when the URL was selected from the SERP.

Keywords are not the only factor that would lead to a website being ranked on a SERP. Sitemaps also play an essential role in developing online visibility and

accessibility, as well as the usability of a website. A sitemap acts as a navigation aid by providing an overview of the website's content at a glance. It is a page on the website that lists all the pages of the website (Brunetti & García, 2014:527-528), which in turn helps search engines to determine which pages on the website have changed, how often these changed, when these were last updated, and which information on the page was more important than others (Özkan *et al.*, 2020:885). Having a sitemap to guide the visitor's navigation also shows that a business is considering its customers. A sitemap allows visitors to move effortlessly through the different levels of navigation on a website (García *et al.*, 2017:144), hence improving the usability of the website. It is imperative to determine if the selected funeral home websites contain sitemaps and how these are constructed for practical use.

Navigation buttons differ from sitemaps in that these allow users to navigate through different sections and pages of the website by clicking on the buttons. They tend to be the only consistent navigation elements on a website because they are present on every page of the website. Navigation buttons are useful because users are comfortable with them, due to regular interaction, and therefore they improve the navigability of the website (Brunetti & García, 2014:525). The type of navigation buttons used on the sampled website was collected to determine which buttons are most used on funeral home websites. Considering the uniqueness of the funeral industry, navigation buttons became an important criterion since these would reflect unique aspects on a funeral home website.

The contact information variable investigates the contact information provided by the funeral home to customers. The key purpose of contact information on a website is not only to solicit a response from customers, but also to provide information which will make it easier for the customer to contact business. The aim is to provide lines of communication through different channels on the website via the provision of office addresses, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers, directions to the funeral

home, virtual maps, and social media accounts. These options are usually grouped under the "contact us" navigation button on a website (Cassidy & Hamilton, 2016b:2068; Villanueva *et al.*, 2018:39,42-43). Considering the three dimensions presented by Schwartz *et al.* (1986:41), in which unsought services are delivered, it was deemed to be essential for a funeral home website to contain sufficient contact information, since the customer experiences time constraints and is in a state of bereavement when searching online for the services of a funeral home.

Onsite testimonials encourage website visitors' involvement (Agrebi & Boncori, 2017:623). Testimonials are credibility indicators which help to develop a positive image of the business and lead to higher reputation perceptions (Ageeva *et al.*, 2019:701). These are considered impactful on audiences, because customers tend to absorb this type of information quickly and consider it strongly when making decisions. Testimonials have long been used to reflect customers' direct experience using a product or service (Howes & Sallot, 2013:208). These are therefore considered useful in promoting the services of a funeral home website.

4.2.3 Content analysis population

The population for the content analysis consists of funeral home websites from five English speaking countries namely Australia (AU), Canada (CA), United Kingdom (UK), United States of America (US), and South Africa (ZA).

These countries were firstly selected because of their predominant use of English as communication language. The assumption was that funeral home websites from these countries would use English as their language of communication on the websites. In the case of South Africa, English remains the most commonly spoken language and is also the language of official business and commerce in the country (South African Government, 2019:Online), despite the fact that the country has

eleven official languages. It was decided to include South Africa in the population sample of the study, because the investigation is firstly conducted at a South African university and secondly, that the business language is English and subsequently the business websites are assumed to be in English.

A comparable situation was encountered in Canada, where both French and English are official communication languages. According to the Canadian Official Languages Act of 1988, the federal approach to official languages is based on the principle of institutional bilingualism, which means that communication in Canada is conducted in both official languages (Hudon, 2016:1; 23). The implication for selecting funeral home websites from Canada was that if the website is in French and could not be translated into English via the website's translation facility, a replacement website had to be sampled.

A second motivation for selecting the population countries is related to their internet usage (refer to Table 4.2).

Table 4.2: Percentage of internet users per country

Country	Date	Population	Internet Users	% Of the population that uses the internet
UK	30/06/2019	66,959,016	63,356,621	94.6
CA	30/06/2019	37,279,811	34,558,385	92.7
US	30/06/2019	329,093,110	292,892,868	89.0
AU	30/06/2019	24,772,247	21,743,803	87.8
ZA	18/05/2019	58,065,097	31,185,634	53.7

Source: Internet World Stats (2019:Online)

All countries selected, except for South Africa, have high percentages of internet use. This indicates that internet users in these countries will most likely consult the internet when searching for a funeral home. Despite its considerably lower percentage of internet use, it was postulated that the data collected from South

African websites might provide additional insights in comparison to the international market.

4.2.4 Content analysis sampling

Instead of following the traditional method of using human coders to source the websites, an existing website crawler was used to sample the websites for analysis. A web crawler, which is also referred to as a web spider, is a programme or automated script which browses the internet in a methodical, automated manner. This process is referred to as web crawling or spidering. Many legitimate sites, such as search engines, use crawling as a means of providing up-to-date data. Web crawlers are used to harvest specific types of information from web pages. The types of information are usually predetermined utilising algorithms (Science Daily, 2020:Online).

The motivation for using a web crawler instead of human coders was twofold: firstly, to ensure reliability and secondly, to secure the validity of the data. In terms of validity, it was decided that a crawler will be the ideal method for sampling and data collection since the study is seated in the online environment. Reliability measures the consistency, precision, repeatability and trustworthiness of a study (Mohajan, 2017:68). It indicates the extent to which the study is without bias and subsequently ensures consistent measurement across time and the various items in the instruments (Peters, 2014:63-64). The argument for using a web crawler is, therefore, seated in the fact that, given the same criteria, the web crawler will be able to produce the same accurate results from the selected websites.

After several crawler applications were evaluated, it was determined that SEOQuake would be best suited for this study. SEOQuake is a Google Chrome extension, or otherwise referred to as a plugin. This means that the SEOQuake algorithm can

conduct organic research and provide data via the Google Chrome browser. SEOQuake also provides parameters for listings within search engine results. Included in the crawler package are tools such as a keyword density report, internal and external link analysis, social metrics, and an SEO audit function. In summary, SEOQuake provides the user with easy access to analytical data on any webpage (SEMrush Inc., 2020).

A multistage, criteria-based sampling process was conducted to sample the websites for data analysis. The criteria in this process were represented by search keywords related to the funeral industry. Multistage sampling has proven to be a reliable sampling method for drawing a sample from the internet (Agarwal *et al.*, 2017:396-416; Bala & Singhal, 2018:173-192; Dermentzi & Papagiannidis, 2018:191-212; Martínez, 2015:896-917; Roy & Moorthi, 2017:268-295; Shih & Tsai, 2016:1373-1392). This method differs from independently used probability sampling techniques, because it may involve any of the probability sampling techniques in any one or at several stages of generating the sample. However, it is required that the technique used at each stage of the sampling process reflects the purpose of the research and produces a representative sample for inferring to the population (Riffe *et al.*, 2019:83).

Three initial stages were conducted to draw the first samples using SEOQuake's SERP overlay function. A SERP report of up to 100 websites per country, based on the same predetermined search strands, was compiled. The results of the keyword searches are summarised in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Keyword SERP results

	Search Keywords	Results (Number of total websites displayed on SERP)				
		AU	**CA**	**UK**	**US**	**ZA**
Stage 1	Funeral Homes, $country$	98	99	99	99	98
Stage 2	Funeral Home, Funeral Services, Funeral Director, $country$	99	100	99	99	98
Stage 3	Funeral Home, Funeral Services, Funeral Director, Funeral Parlour, $country$	100	99	49	99	79

Source: Researcher's own construction

The keywords used in the searches were predetermined in relation to the funeral industry and aimed at attracting websites of funeral homes in the specified countries. Each keyword search was repeated with the specific country's identity, for example, Funeral Homes Australia. After each search, specific keywords were added to focus the search to find more funeral home websites. Keywords were added to the searches because the initial SERP results delivered not only funeral home website links, but also several other links related to the funeral industry. Each SERP result was coded and cleaned up before the next search was conducted. The final counts for websites retrieved from the searches are depicted in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: Funeral home websites retrieved from SERP results

	AU	CA	UK	US	ZA
Stage1	41	54	36	4	45
Stage2	32	28	7	8	16
Stage3	43	23	4	3	12
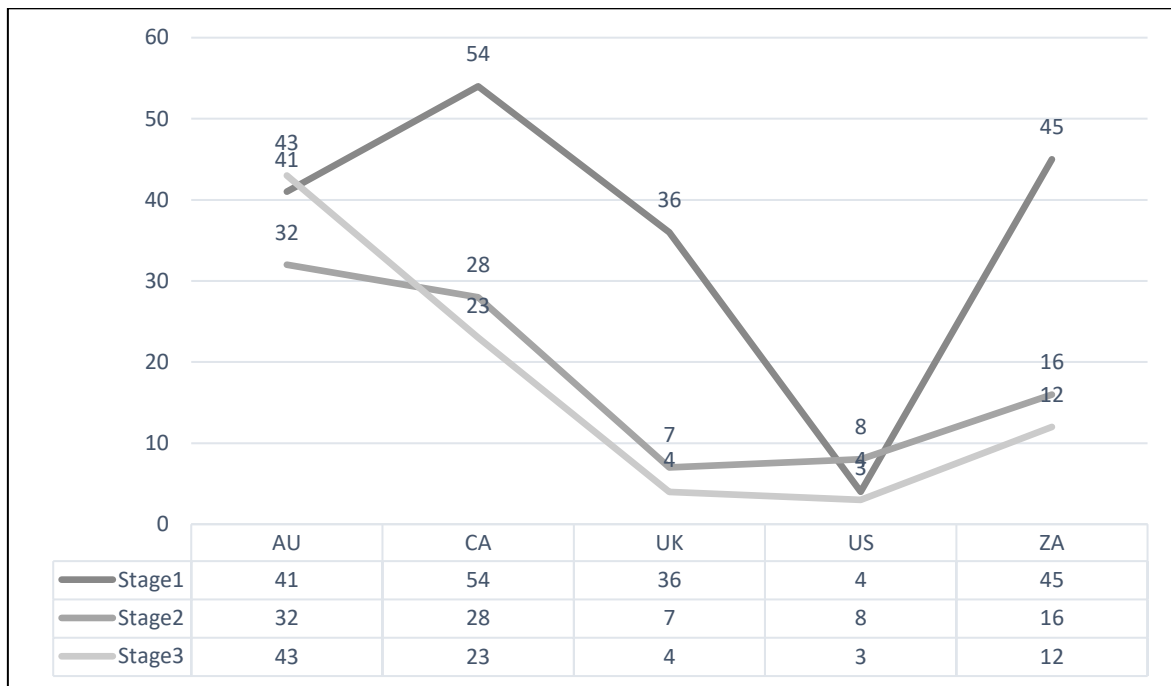
Source: Researcher's own construction

Websites to be included in the sample were selected from the stage which delivered the most websites per country (refer to Table 4.4).

Table 4.4: Funeral home websites selected for inclusion in the sample

Country	Stage	Number of websites
CA	Stage 1	54
ZA	Stage 1	45
AU	Stage 3	43
UK	Stage 1	36
US	Stage 2	8
	Total	**186**

Source: Researcher's own construction

Except for Canada, all searches conducted in stages one, two, and three delivered a shortfall of more than 50%. This reiterated the validity of the study in terms of the importance of online visibility. Considering that the keyword "funeral home" was repeated in each search stage of the sampling process, confirms the value of having clearly defined keywords on a web page. Several authors have encountered similar instances. Dickinson and Smit (2016:590) outrightly ask the question "if search engine visibility is technically possible, why is it not happening?" Responding to similar instances, Charest and Bouffard (2015:302) underline the relevance of online visibility as a critical factor impacting upon the image of a business. Concurrently, Smithson *et al.* (2011:1573) note that online visibility is a differentiating factor, able to produce superior business performance online, hence the importance of being visible when an online search is conducted.

Once the sampling process was completed, SEOQuake functionalities were used to collect the data.

4.2.5 Content data collection

The first step in the content data collection process was to construct a coding sheet (refer to Annexure A) in concordance with the units of analysis identified in Table 4.1.

The coding sheet was created in MS Excel and served a twofold purpose: the primary purpose was to ensure that the entire sample was included, and secondly, to ensure control and consistency of the data collected in concordance with the units of analysis. In the more traditional models of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013:84; Neuendorf, 2017:51-52), the coding sheet is used to collect data and determine intercoder reliability. This is mainly because human coders are employed to collect

data, but in this instance, the data are collected by means of an algorithm which is easily replicable for reliability and validity purposes.

Verification of the data collection was recorded with dichotomous indicators as 1 (present) or 0 (not present). A worksheet was created for each country's websites, and the information was recorded per URL, as extracted from the SEO SERP. Recording the data on separate Excel worksheets allowed for analysis per country, but also enabled the seamless compilation of the information from the different worksheets into one worksheet for analysis of the total results.

Apart from the data recorded on the coding sheet, additional data were extracted from the websites. These extractions pertained to the keywords used by each website to create visibility (V1, C2, Q4), the different social media platforms linked to the website (V1, C3, Q6), the navigation buttons (V5, C7, Q12), and the types of contact information used on each website (V4, C6, Q10). The data extracted for these purposes were stored in separate text files (*.txt), to be analysed separately from the coding sheet data. This was done because a different method of analysis was used to determine the frequency of these components (refer to discussion in Section 4.4).

4.3 SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Survey research is based on the use of structured questionnaires given to a sampled population to assess a variety of questions regarding behaviour, intentions, attitudes, awareness, motivation, and demographic characteristics (Malhotra & Birks, 2007:265). The second part of the data collection for this study employed a structured, self-administered, electronically distributed questionnaire to gain insights from customers pertaining to funeral home websites. Self-administered, electronic questionnaire surveys have been successfully used by authors such as Akram *et al.* (2018:235-256); Chang *et al.* (2015:292-307); Jian *et al.* (2019:529-539);

Rahman (2015:291-488); Tseng and Lee (2016:903-918); Wang *et al.* (2020:63-82), and Zhang *et al.* (2016:772-792) to gather information pertaining to website effectiveness, user behaviour, online brand authenticity, online service quality, trust, and online buying intentions. It is therefore deemed an appropriate method to collect data from customers, to gain further insights into aspects that might have an influence on an online funeral home servicescape.

4.3.1 Units of analysis

The survey was also constructed to follow the conceptual model. It was thus designed to mirror the website content, but from a customer perspective. Moreover, the survey addressed all the hypotheses in the conceptual model. The following units were identified for the survey analysis (refer to Table 4.5):

Table 4.5: Survey Units of Analysis

Construct	Variables	Criteria (Units of Enquiry)	Question
SEO	V1 Visibility	S^2-C1 Keywords	S-Q1 Which keywords are users most likely to use when searching for a funeral home online?
Perceived Usefulness	V2 Usability	S-C2 Website information	S-Q2 To what extent will accurate and sufficient information influence the user's intention to solicit the funeral home's services?
	V3 Contactability	S-C3 Contact information	S-Q3 Which contact options do users prefer to communicate with the funeral home from the website?
	V4 Interactivity	S-C4 website interaction	S-Q4 Which interactive components influence users' perceptions of a website?
	V5 Navigability	S-C5 website navigation	S-Q5 Which navigation options are most likely to influence users' perceptions of a website?
Perceived Value	V6 Service Interaction	S-C6 Levels of service interaction	S-Q6 To which extent does the funeral home's response to the user's interaction from the website influence the intention to use the services of the funeral home?
	V7 Relevance of Information	S-C7 relevance of the information	S-Q7 How does the information provided on the website influence users' likeliness of engaging with the funeral home?
	V8 Quality of website services	S-C8 Service quality	S-Q8 To which extent will testimonials influence users' decision to use the services of a funeral home?
Trust in website	V9 Trusting the website	S-C9 Reliability, Consistency, Integrity	S-Q9 To which extent does the projection of reliability, consistency and integrity on the website influence the user's intention to use the services of a funeral home?
Purchase Intention	V10 Purchase Intention	S-C10 Commitment and Recommendation	S-Q10 To which extent will the information provided on the website influence users' likelihood to capitalise on the services of the funeral home, and recommend the funeral home to other potential users?

Source: Researcher's own construction

Customers use search engines to search for information on the internet, and with each search and each click, they are providing information to researchers and businesses alike about their behaviour. This plays directly into some of the critical components of customer relationship management, where businesses collect information (data) about online customer behaviour and draw critical insights from these behavioural patterns (Jerath *et al.*, 2015:2). SEO hence helps in improving the ranking and the visibility of a business's website when online users enter specific keywords in a search engine, which ensures that the search engines can easily read, understand, crawl and navigate the pages of a website to index it correctly when delivering search results (Taneja, 2018:1293-1294). Since search engines are two-sided platforms that present search results by matching customer search enquiries with service businesses' keyword selections, it is essential to address the complexity of online service searches from both the business and the customer perspectives (Cheng *et al.*, 2018:127; Serrano-Cinca & Muñoz-Soro, 2019:10). Keywords were included in the survey to determine customer preferences in comparison to what funeral homes allocated as keywords on their websites, and to determine which keywords would overall be most suited to a funeral home website.

Information quality on a website manifests as customers' general perception about the completeness and accuracy of the website information, concerning both the services offered and the intention to invest in the offerings of a business (Kim *et al.*, 2008:549). The quality of information on the website may, therefore, influence a customer's perception of the business either positively or negatively (Ponte *et al.*, 2015:288). It was therefore considered of value to the study to determine to what extent accurate and sufficient information will influence users' intention to solicit the services of a funeral home. Equally important is the interaction abilities of the website because this factor is closely related to the information richness of the website. In many instances, a website becomes the main portal through which

customers familiarise themselves with a business, its values and how it conducts its business (King *et al.*, 2016:324).

Shia *et al.* (2016:126-127) argue that website development should be focused on the quality attributes of the information and service interaction. These are specifically from the aspects of providing believable, timely, relevant and the right amount of information to improve the levels of service interaction. Taking into account that the customers are in a state of bereavement when they search for the services of a funeral home, it is also essential to consider the frame of mind of the customers when constructing a website and its content, since it will affect their behaviour, which will in turn significantly affect the service provider's behaviour and ultimately the service outcome (Seger-Guttmann, 2019:63). The survey aimed to determine customer expectations regarding the website interactivity, the levels of service interaction, the relevance of the information provided online and the perceived quality projections of the funeral homes through the surveyed responses.

Navigability acts as a catalyser for several of the foregoing validation aspects of a website. A navigational structure describes the hierarchical layout of a website's content and is often referred to as the menu on the website, or as referred to in this study, navigation buttons. It reflects customers' movement through the website and is characterised by the number of clicks it takes to work through the website content. Complex websites could negatively affect customers' perception of the website and the organisation (Garaus, 2018:482). Easy navigation adds to the credibility of the website, as it allows for smooth navigation (Khrouf & Frikha, 2016:1255), and positive relationship building between the customer and the website, and subsequently, the business (Demangeot & Broderick, 2016:816). Navigation buttons should also be explicitly related to the underlying concepts on the website, and content categorisation should be distinct and easily understandable to users (Pant,

2015:911-912). It was, therefore, essential to assess which navigation buttons customers most likely associate with a funeral home website.

Customers evaluate accessible contact information (Wilson, 2015:92) as the second most important dimension of website information (Salem & Čavlek, 2016:382), because it affects trust and improves customers' comfort level when engaging online with the business (Tamimi & Sebastianelli, 2016:557). Downloadable FAQs and contact information for correct support personnel have also been found to improve conversion rates from a service website (Gudigantala *et al.*, 2016:84). This is reiterated by Harris and Goode (2010:238,242) who note that a business could increase trust on their website by adding contact telephone numbers thereon.

Trust is a complicated factor, because it is an abstract factor and in the online environment trust is created through high-quality information on the website, which is likely to lead to customer perception of trustworthiness (Ponte *et al.*, 2015:287-288). Trust is therefore significant in the online context, as it reflects confidence in the business (Li *et al.*, 2017:8; Wang *et al.*, 2015:109), based on the perceived usefulness of the website interface (Garcia-Madariaga *et al.*, 2019:18). Customer trust in website content not only reduces uncertainty, but also increases the possibility that the customer will commit to the business' offerings (Rahimnia & Hassanzadeh, 2013:242). Since trust is built on website content and influences commitment, this study set out to investigate customer perspectives to gain better insights on how these components will influence customers' perceptions of a funeral home website.

4.3.2 Survey population and sampling

The population for the survey study was drawn from the same countries identified for the content analysis, namely Australia (AU), Canada (CA), United Kingdom (UK),

United States of America (US) and South Africa (ZA). A total sample of 500 respondents were initially proposed. The proposed sample consisted of 100 respondents from each of the identified countries. A total of 40% responses were successfully solicited from the sample.

To attain the required sample, stratified, random sampling was used. The notion of random sampling is that all units in the population have an equal chance of being selected (Sharma, 2017:750; Taherdoost, 2016:20-21). The purpose of stratified sampling is to ensure that all strata are proportionately represented in the data collection process (Rudhumbu *et al.*, 2020:190). Stratifying the population ensures that the resulting sample will be distributed in the same way as the population, according to stratifying criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2007:187). The process thus entails stratifying the population into smaller groups and then conducting a random sample from within these groups. These groups are also more homogenous than the entire population, as a result of the specified strata (Riffe *et al.*, 2019:81). For this survey, age (generation), gender, country of residence, internet use and previous funeral arrangement experience were identified as applicable strata.

A number of studies applied stratified sampling to analyse websites and customer responses, such as media characteristics on websites (Hurwitz *et al.*, 2019:44-58), website accessibility (Zhang *et al.*, 2017:1190-1208), browser extensions (De Sarkar, 2015:334-354), service co-creation (Chen *et al.*, 2017:1522-1540) and online servicescapes (Teng *et al.*, 2018:333-350). It was, therefore, deemed an appropriate sampling method for this study.

4.3.3 Survey data collection

The electronically distributed questionnaire (refer to Annexure B) was designed to gather specific information relating to online customer behaviour in relation to

funeral home websites. It followed the key constructs of the conceptual model, namely SEO, perceived usefulness, perceived value, trust in websites and purchase intention.

The first step was to determine whether respondents use the internet to search for information. The qualifying question was considered to have a negative impact on the responses in the questionnaire if the respondent does not use the internet to search for information. Since the study is seated in the online environment, it was imperative that respondents should be familiar with searching online for information. If a sampled member did not comply with the qualifying criterion, the questionnaire was discarded.

Two additional, non-discounted, qualifying questions were added to the questionnaire. The first question was constructed to determine whether respondents have previously used the internet to search for the services of a funeral home and the second question was to determine if the respondent has prior experience of organising a funeral. These qualifiers were added to differentiate between the responses, to gain more significant insights into respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards funeral home websites.

The next step in the data collection process was to determine the demographical profile of the respondents required for this study. Three demographical components were considered of value to the study: the country of residence, age (generation) and gender of the respondent. Although this study does not address cultural aspects of funeral practices, the country of residence was considered of value. Several studies found that respondents from different countries would respond differently to the same survey from their own perspectives inimitable to their country-specific practices (Loosveldt *et al.*, 2018:227-242; McPhedran *et al.*, 2017:214-227; Oumlil & Balloun, 2020:17-34; Torres *et al.*, 2019:317-329).

The majority of the respondents from all countries were female (refer to Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3: Total number of respondents by gender
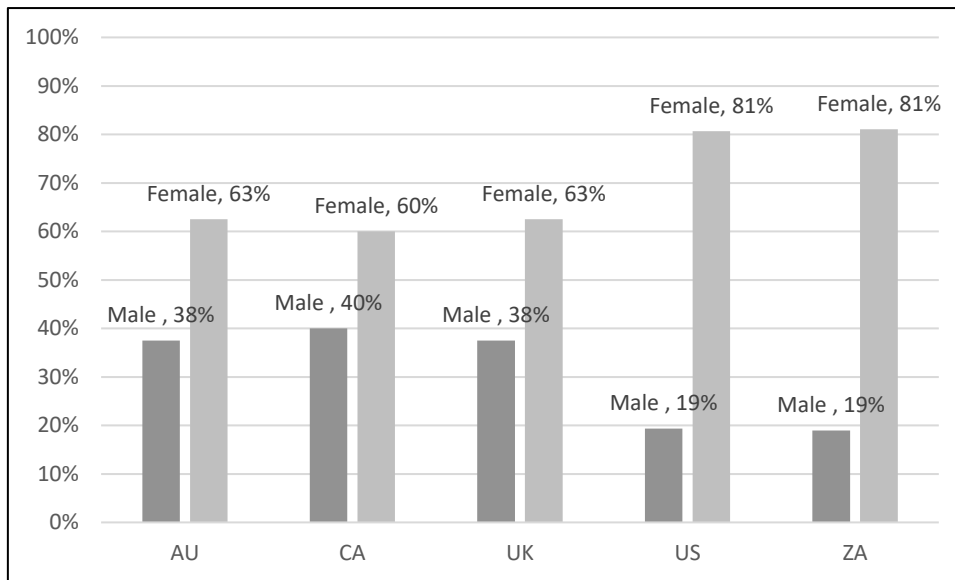
Source: Researcher's own construction

Recent studies also found significant differences in responses, based on age and gender, in topics closely related to this study, such as website use (Wang, 2016:631), relationships between customer satisfaction and behavioural outcomes (Ho *et al.*, 2017:513), atmospheric perceptions (Savelli *et al.*, 2017:1219), usage intention (Garaus, 2018:485) and online servicescapes (Teng *et al.*, 2018:339-340). Gender was included in the survey to attain a response perspective between male and female respondents.

Age, or generational segmentation, is an important consideration in any study, since members of various generational cohorts have been found to exhibit differences in responses due to the experiences that they encountered during their lifetimes (Dorie & Loranger, 2020:396). However, there is no consensus regarding the demarcation of generations (Dorie & Loranger, 2020:398-399; Eastman & Liu, 2012:94; Jackson *et al.*, 2011:3; Loria & Lee, 2018:Online), except for Baby Boomers, which is based on

the surge in post-World War II births in 1946 and a significant decline in birth rates after 1964 (Colby & Ortman, 2014:2). Dimock (2019:Online) notes that generational demarcation is not an exact science and is often considered by its span, but there is no agreed formula for how long that span should be. A generational demarcation should therefore be viewed primarily as a tool, allowing for the type of analyses required for a particular study. Based on Dorie and Loranger's (2020:396) earlier statement that different generations will respond differently based on their experiences, the age factor in this study was constructed according to generations. The demarcation was considered due to and in consideration of technology use experience across generations. The age factor in this study followed the generational demarcation, as suggested by Dimock (2019:Online) and in concordance to the ethical requirements and limitations as prescribed by the Nelson Mandela University (refer to Table 4.6).

Table 4.6: Generational demarcation

Generation	Span	Age in 2021
Baby Boomers	1962 – 1964	59 - 57
Generation X	1965 – 1976	56 - 45
Generation Y (Millennials)	1977 – 1995	44 - 26
Generation Z (Centennials)	1996 – 2003	25 - 19

Source: Dimock (2019:Online)

The highest number of overall respondents for this study was generated from Generation X and older (refer to Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Total number of respondents by generation
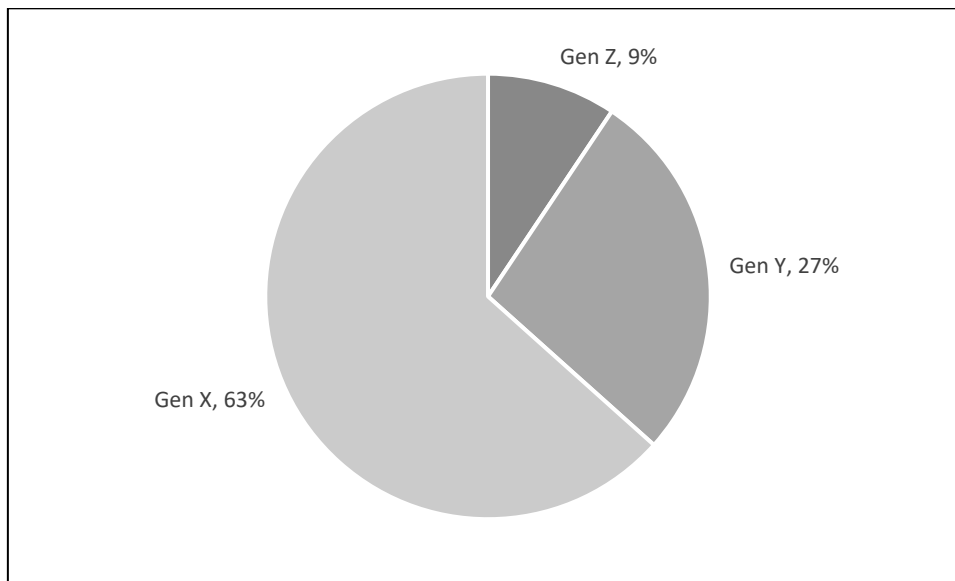
Source: Researcher's own construction

Other differentiation factors included in the survey were the type of device, preferred browser respondents use to access the internet, and how regularly respondents access the internet to search for information. Wu *et al*. (2018:482) note that society has become a multi-device world. The expansion of the internet onto various devices magnified the number of ways in which information can be presented to customers (Stewart *et al*., 2019:2453). Both Power (2018:457) and Stringam and Gerdes (2019:17) found that customers use different browsers and different devices when searching online for information. Taking into account that websites are one of the most important pipelines to access information, Liu *et al*. (2017a:221) calculated that people use browsers an average of two hours and nine minutes, and click approximately 185 times per working day looking for information online. For these reasons, it was imperative to determine which device and which browsers customers use to access the internet. This could provide valuable insights to funeral home directors, to develop their websites to work flawlessly on several devices such as desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones, using a variety of search browsers such as Google, Firefox and Safari.

Keywords and navigation buttons were extracted from the content analyses of the websites. The ten most used keywords and navigation buttons were listed in the questionnaire and respondents were prompted to select which keywords and navigation buttons they most likely would use to search for a funeral home, and in the case of the navigation buttons, they would prefer on a funeral home website. The results were then compared to determine which keywords and navigation buttons would be best practice when constructing a funeral home website from a customer perspective, in comparison with what is currently used on funeral home websites. The remainder of the questionnaire consisted of Likert scaled questions.

Likert scaled questions are ranking order questions which produce interval data. This data possess sufficient numeric properties to be treated as numeric data for the purpose of statistical analysis (Wegner, 2012:11-12). The inherent structure of the Likert scaled question makes it easy to construct and administer, and aptly suitable for electronic questionnaires (Malhotra & Birks, 2007:349). It has previously been used to determine web components of perceived measures of service value, trust and usefulness (Lee & Wu, 2011:7768), website usability factors (Nathan & Yeow, 2011:154), website benchmarking (Cassidy & Hamilton, 2016a:1058) and online servicescapes (Teng *et al.*, 2018:339).

The majority of studies which analyse online content, either used a five or seven-point Likert scaled question structure (Everaert *et al.*, 2019:428; Popa *et al.*, 2016:134; Qu *et al.*, 2017:376; Woo & Jin, 2016:45). However, a general tendency exists among respondents to unwittingly select the mid-point in uneven scaled questions (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2019:664). To the contrary, an even-pointed four or six-point scale avoids the issue of biased responses towards a pivotal point in an uneven numbered scale. Even-pointed scaled questions prompt undecisive respondents to select a point to either the positive or negative end of the scale, which delivers more concrete results for analysis (Akhtar & Mittal, 2015:74). Following Simms *et al.*'s

(2019:568,558) suggestion, a six-point Likert scaled question structure was followed ranging from 1-Strongly disagree to 6-Strongly agree to the statements presented in the questionnaire (refer to Annexure B).

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive analysis was used to analyse and present the data collected for this study. Descriptive analysis is a technique that refers to "statistically describing, aggregating, and presenting the constructs of interest or associations between these constructs" (Bhattacherjee, 2012:119). It involves methods of organising, picturing and summarising information from samples or populations (Brase & Brase, 2013:10). Descriptive analysis techniques can be of particular value when findings focus on diagnosing real-world needs that warrant intervention or identifying undocumented phenomena (Loeb *et al.*, 2017:2,3), as is the case in this study. Several contemporary researchers have applied descriptive statistics successfully to analyse website content (Blazquez *et al.*, 2018:956-970; Chalmeta & Viinikka, 2017:53-73; Hurwitz *et al.*, 2019:44-58; Molodchik *et al.*, 2018:443-462; Nadeau *et al.*, 2016:110-136). The method is also considered applicable to exploratory studies and has been used successfully in several different industries such as the health industry (Ersig, 2019:12-17), commerce (Farinha *et al.*, 2021:594-624), operations research (Fathi *et al.*, 2020:223-249), and higher education (Klaus & Steele, 2020:1-21).

Excel data analysis capabilities were used to analyse the information collected from websites and the survey. The data are presented in chart format and discussed in Chapter 5.

4.5 SUMMARY

This chapter presented the methodological approach of the study. It discussed the two-step data collection and analysis process. Firstly, the content analysis data collection and analysis process were discussed. Websites of sampled funeral homes from five English speaking countries were analysed to determine the current state of funeral home websites. The second step was to gain a customer perspective on funeral home websites. A structured, electronically distributed questionnaire survey was conducted to attain customer perspectives. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse and describe the findings from both the content analysis and the survey. The findings from both data collection methods will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the analysis and discussion of the data collected for this study. The data collection process entailed analysing information from existing funeral home websites sampled from five countries: Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and South Africa. In conjunction with the website analyses, a survey was conducted amongst respondents from these countries to gain consumer insights about certain aspects of funeral home websites.

The data discussion follows the conceptual model presented in Chapter 1. The key constructs of search engine optimisation (SEO), perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived value (PV), and its associated variables are discussed to determine its effect on customers' trust in a website funeral home website, which is postulated to affect customers purchase intentions. Data from both the website analyses and the survey are discussed simultaneously as it pertains to each of the construct variables.

5.2 DATA DISCUSSION

Salem *et al.* (2019:433) stated that trust in an online business offering is a matter of customer perception. This is because trust is a consequence of online market development and is significantly heightened in the online market compared to traditional, offline markets due to the perceived risk and uncertainty associated with online markets (Kim *et al.*, 2017b:2). Trust, commitment and satisfaction are the most important aspects of online relationship marketing (Garepasha *et al.*, 2021:835-836) and is primarily influenced by customer expectations. Customers will compare their expectations with their product or service experience, and a positive experience will

most likely result in a purchase intention (Mou *et al.*, 2017:126). Purchase intention, therefore, refers to customers' intention to engage with the business' online offerings and represents the customer's final decision based on trust-building cues (Liu *et al.*, 2019:382).

In this study, purchase intention (PI) was treated as the response to the research model. Search engine optimisation (SEO), the perceived usefulness (PU) of the funeral home websites, and its perceived value (PV) was identified as the key constructs that will influence customer trust and subsequent purchase intentions. These constructs were based on the online servicescape seminal model presented by Harris and Goode (2010), aligning with Katz's (1974) theory of uses and gratification. SEO, PU, and PV relate to the theory's needs element, representing the actual servicescape constructs, trust with the belief component of uses and gratification theory, and purchase intention (PI) with gratification. The data was collected with the intention to construct an online servicescape for the funeral industry to support their customer relationship management efforts.

5.2.1 Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) analysis

SEO is defined by Stokes (2018:4) as "the practice that aims to improve a website's ranking for specific keywords in the search engines". Search engines play a key role in contemporary society and are among the most widely used services on the internet as it influences the knowledge acquisition of internet users (Schultheiss & Lewandowski, 2021:542). The optimisation of these services is developed from the understanding of particular human information searching behaviours and consequently influence the way information is searched for, found, and presented through search engines (Onaifo & Rasmussen, 2013:88). A search engine's ability to deliver the most relevant results is based on an algorithm that looks at several factors, including the keywords used by the customer to search for a specific

product, service or business (Hingoro & Nawaz, 2021:1247). Its function on a website is to obtain the best corresponding results to the keywords used to conduct the search (Lara, 2014:80). URLs, or otherwise referred to as the domain names of websites, should therefore be easy to remember and, if possible, include essential search keywords related to a business (Stokes, 2018:140).

In this study, the SEO construct addressed the visibility and accessibility variables resulting from a search engine search conducted for funeral home websites. It addresses the first research question: *Which aspects of SEO will influence customer's perceptions of a funeral home website?*

VISIBILITY

The visibility of a website is measured as the number of keywords, position on the results page and the number of visible pages on a SERP that can be used to compare competing businesses in one common geographical area or per industry (Strzelecki, 2019:2). The concept of visibility is specific to internet marketing and originated in the brand awareness arena. It refers to the characterisation, memorability and recognition of URL positions in search results, which adds to website promotion success (Kovalenko & Kuzmenko, 2020:41). Kaur and Kaur (2017:104) furthermore concluded that for greater visibility on a SERP, a URL should also reflect the name of a business. This indicates the validity and importance of analysing the structure of websites' URLs. Most of the websites' URLs analysed for this study contained the name of the funeral home in its URL (refer to Figure 5.1). Apart from the United States websites (63%), 81% - 89% of the countries' funeral homes websites contained the name of the funeral home in its URLs.

Figure 5.1: Number of URLs that contains the funeral home's name

ZA, 82% AU, 81% CA, 89% UK, 89% US, 63%
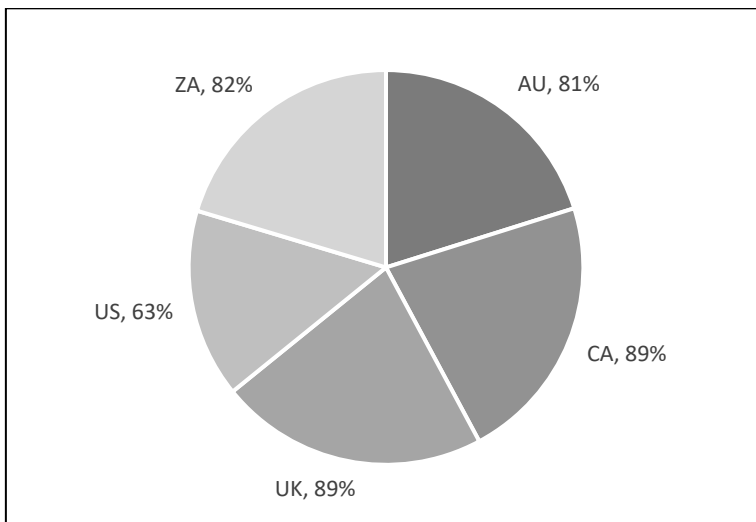
Source: Researcher's own construction

Contradictory to the URLs analysed, less than 50% of respondents from all countries indicated that they would use the name of a funeral home to conduct an internet search, even if they know it (refer to Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2: Respondents that will use the name of the funeral home to conduct an internet search

ZA, 40% AU, 38% UK, 13% CA, 20% US, 31%
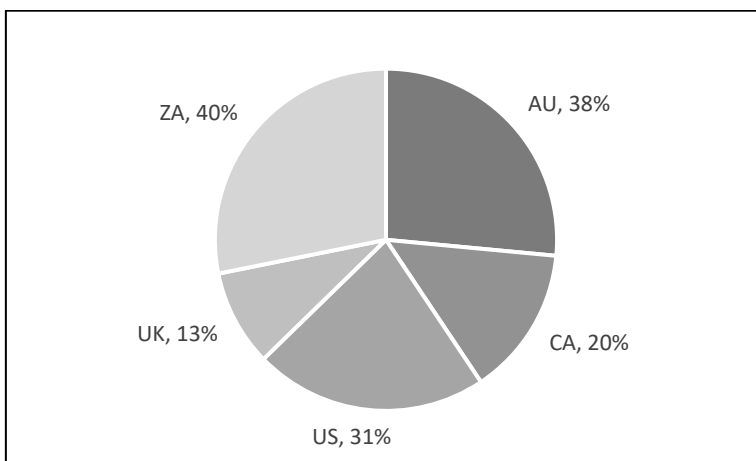
Source: Researcher's own construction

KEYWORD ANALYSIS

Visibility reaches beyond search engine optimisation (Kovalenko & Kuzmenko, 2020:42). Keywords are the foundation for categorising and indexing the web (Stokes, 2018:73). Nagpal and Petersen (2021:2) noted that several market research surveys indicated relevant content creation and keyword searches as the most effective on-page SEO tactics to create visibility.

SEOQuake's keyword density function was deployed to extract keywords from each of the websites identified for analysis. The keyword density report breaks down each website's landing page by keywords to reveal the target keywords attached to a page on the website (SEMrush Inc., 2020).

Websites from the United Kingdom provided the highest number of keywords (32%), and the United States had the lowest number of keywords (4%) (refer to Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3: Total number of keywords collected by country
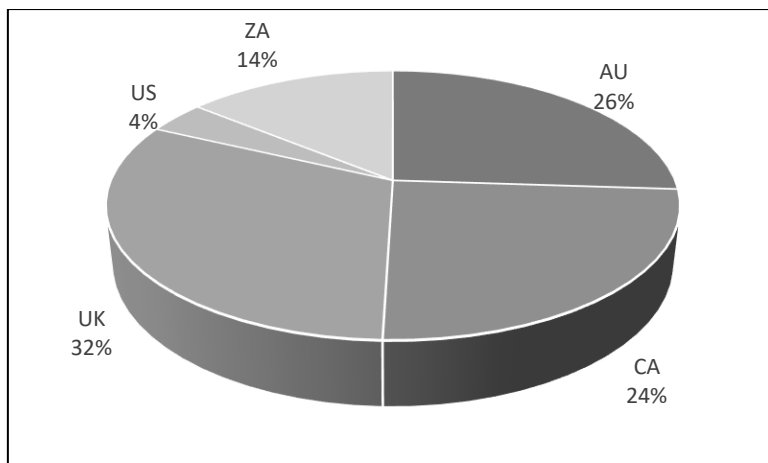
Source: Researcher's own construction

A total of 18 265 keywords were extracted from the websites (refer to Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Total amount of keywords collected

	Total Keywords	Secondary	Primary Total	T	K	D	H1	T,K,D,H1
AU	4,758	4,350	408	229	30	307	131	6
CA	4,461	4,026	435	254	107	233	68	12
UK	5,757	5,424	333	194	95	197	68	14
US	712	633	79	34	28	46	4	3
ZA	2,577	2,272	305	190	48	162	43	7
Total	**18,265**	**16,705**	**1,560**	**901**	**308**	**945**	**314**	**42**

Source: Researcher's own construction

The total number of keywords were divided into smaller segments to gain a better perspective of how the keywords are functionalised on the websites. The keywords were differentiated as primary and secondary keywords (refer to Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4: Primary and secondary keywords per country
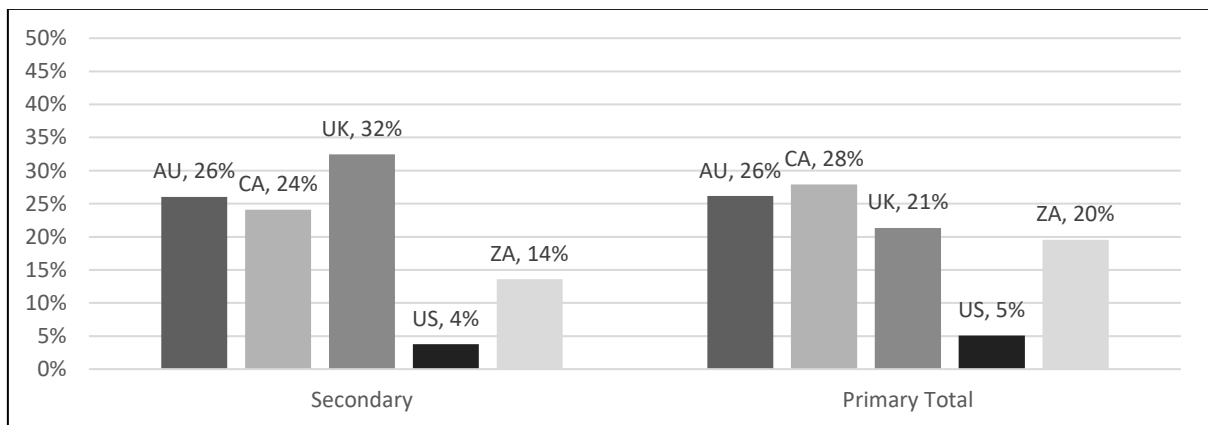
Source: Researcher's own construction

Primary keywords relate to word tags placed at specific points on the website to increase search traffic to those sections of the website. These keywords are placed either in the main header (H1) of a web page, as metadata (D) words, meta keywords (K), or tags in the page title (T) (SEMrush Inc., 2020). The overall findings of the primary keywords per country is summarised in Figure 5.5.

Figure 5.5: Primary keyword placements on the websites per country
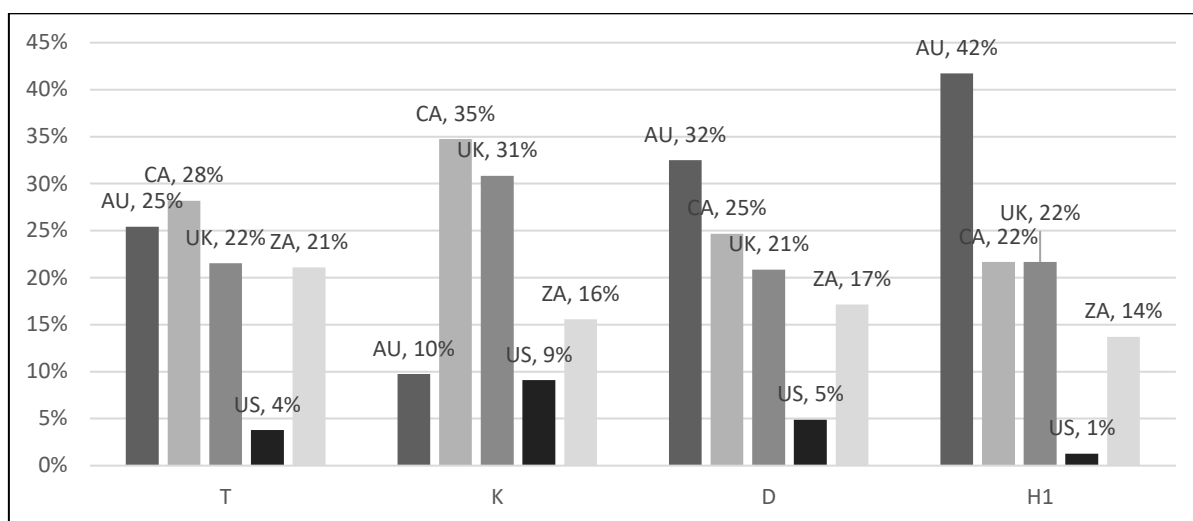
Source: Researcher's own construction

Table 5.2 contains primary keywords that had the highest frequency of appearance when the keywords from all the websites were analysed with AntConc.

Table 5.2: Primary keywords words according to the different types of tags on the websites

	H1	D	K	T		H1, D, K, T
1	directors	cremation	cremation	cremation		burial
2	fhname	burial	burial	fhname		cremation
3	funeral	family	funeraldirectors	funeraldirectors		funeraldirectors
4	funerals	fhname	fhname	funeral		fhname
5	hits	funeral	funeralarrangements	funerals		funeral
6	locationarea	locationarea	funeral	locationarea		funerals
7	locationcity	locationcity	funerals	locationcity		locationarea
8	locationcountry	search	locationcity	locationcountry		locationcity
9	service	service	memorial	memorial		locationcountry
10	services	services	services	services		services

Source: Researcher's own construction

During the data coding process, a uniform code was assigned to some of the primary keywords to make the analysis more efficient. The name of a funeral home, its geographic location indicators, and phone numbers were standardised for

analysis purposes. Table 5.3 contains a list of coding adjustments that were made to standardise these keywords.

Table 5.3: Example of coding of specific keywords extracted from websites

Keyword	Standardised Coding
bfsg south africa	fhname locationcountry
bloemfontein funeral services	locationcity funeralservices
blue crane funerals	fhname funerals
mosaic funeral group cape	fhname funeral group locationstate
9882 2321	phone number
rose cheltenham	fhname locationcity
adelaide south australia	locationcity locationstate

Source: Researcher's own construction

An average of 50% of the respondents from all the countries indicated that they would use any of the following industry identifiers to search for the services of a funeral home: funeral, funeral home, funeral director, funeral services (refer to Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6: Respondent's indication to use industry identifiers as search criteria
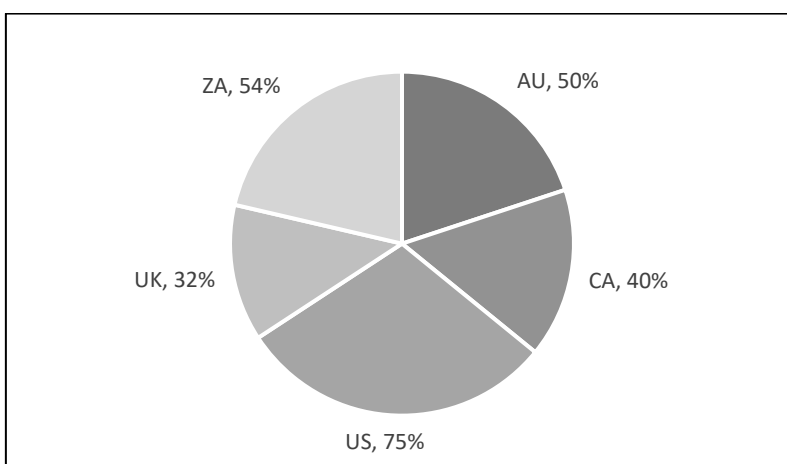
Source: Researcher's own construction

Between 50-55% of South African and Australian respondents indicated that they would use the location of a funeral home or any of the industry identifiers to search for the services of a funeral home (refer to Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7: Respondent's indication to use industry identifiers and the location of the funeral home as search criteria
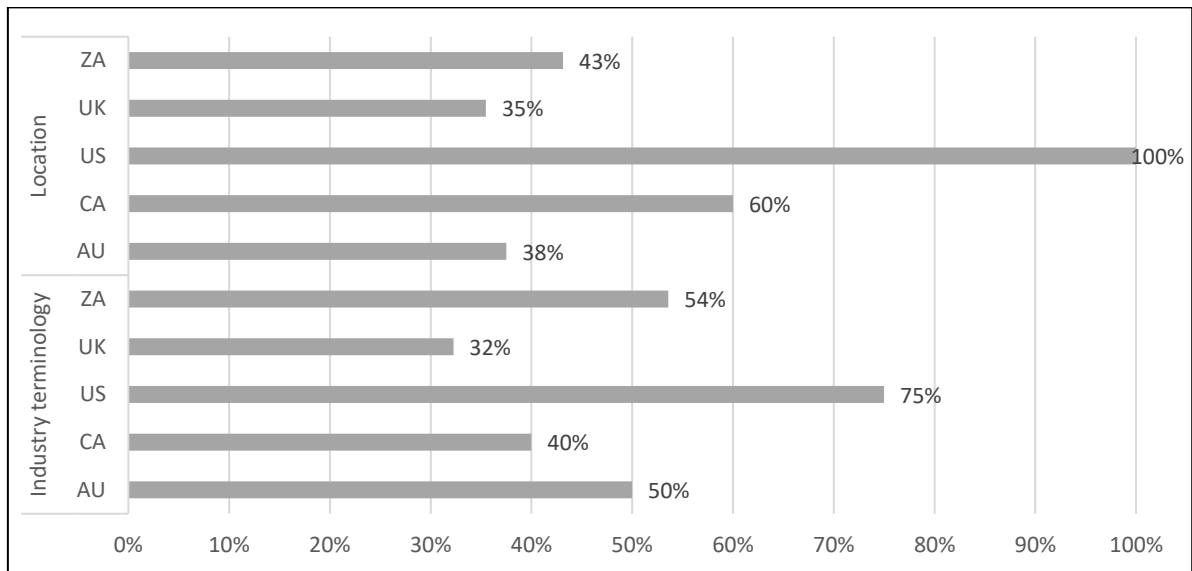
Source: Researcher's own construction

Apart from the primary keywords on a website, search engines usually use the first 200 words on a website as additional search options (secondary), which indicates that the identification of additional keywords on the entire website is essential for optimum results (Harikumar & Rejikumar, 2018:566). Figure 5.8 represents the secondary keywords with the highest frequency from all websites analysed.

Figure 5.8: Secondary keywords with the highest frequency

cremation, 5
arrangements, 14
cemetery, 5
casket, 5
assistance, 9
burials, 5
burial, 5
body, 5
beautiful, 8
benefits, 5
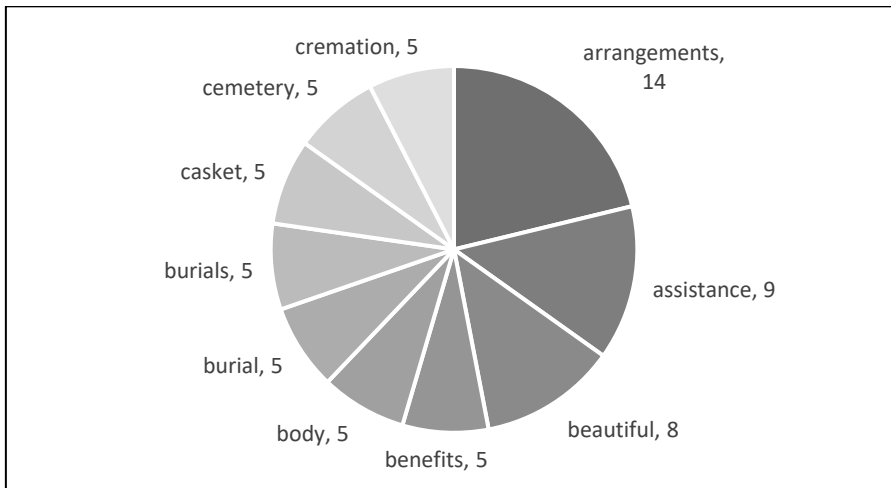
Source: Researcher's own construction

Figure 5.9 depicts respondents' indication to use the types of services offered by funeral homes as search criteria. This indicates that an average of 20% of respondents will use the type of service offering criteria to search for funeral home websites.

Figure 5.9: Respondents' indication to use the type of services of funeral homes as search criteria

AU, 13%
CA, 0%
ZA, 31%
US, 40%
UK, 16%
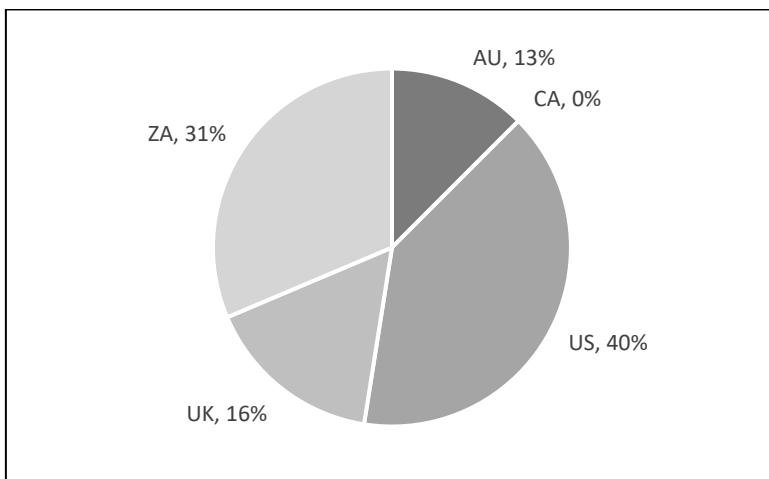
Source: Researcher's own construction

ACCESSIBILITY

A URL typically allows users to access the website from a search engine results page (SERP) (Louw & Nieuwenhuizen, 2020:196). Hence, becoming the link that the user uses to access the website. Therefore, it is imperative not only to create visibility when an online search is conducted but also to ensure that the link to the website opens the website when accessed from a SERP.

The majority of the respondents indicated that they would consider the website of a funeral home as ineffective if they cannot access it from a SERP (refer to Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.10: Respondents' perceptions if they are unable to access a website from a SERP
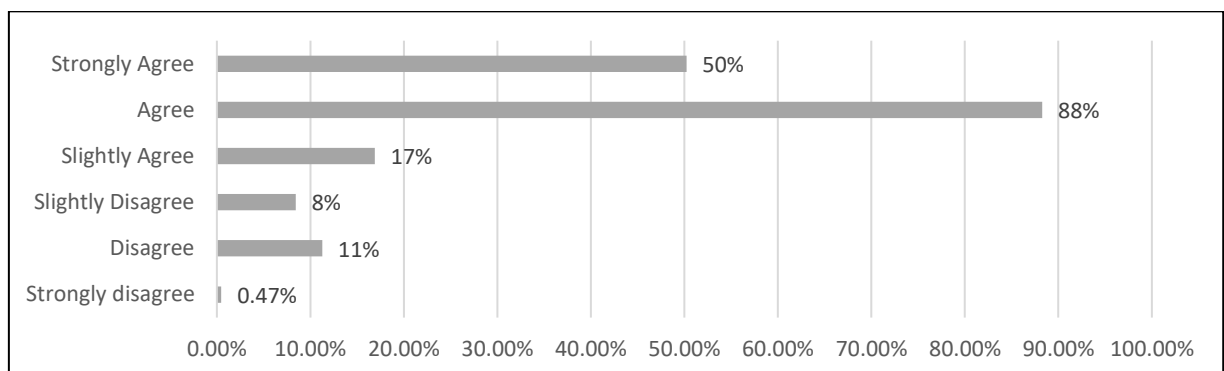
Source: Researcher's own construction

From the website URLs identified for this study, more than 80% of the websites could be accessed from their URLs (refer to Figure 5.11). 100% of the Canadian and United Kingdom websites could be accessed from the URLs, with 98% of the South African websites, 95% of the Australian websites, and 88% of the Unites States websites being accessible from the URLs.

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Figure 5.11: Number or URLs which opened to the website

ZA, 98%   AU, 95%

US, 88%

CA, 100%

UK, 100%
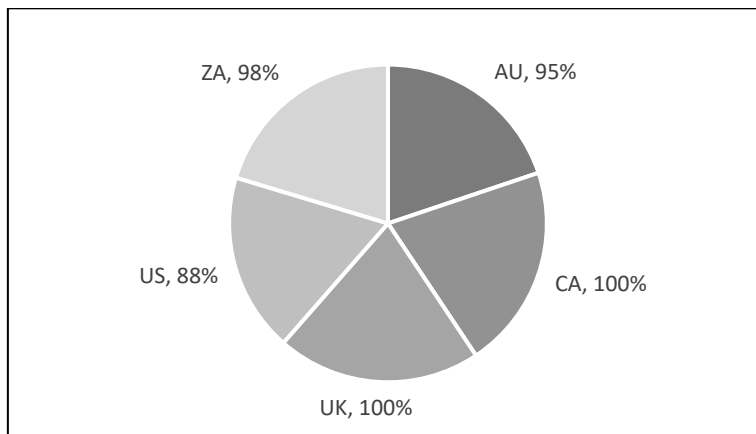
Source: Researcher's own construction

One of the websites that did not open from the URL indicated that the website was, at the time of access, under construction and could therefore not be accessed. The remainder of the inaccessible websites returned HTTP 404 error codes. An HTTP status code is a server response to a browser request to access a website. It is a code that indicates that a requested website cannot be found. This could either be because the link has been deactivated by the business or that the website does not exist anymore; or it simply cannot be reached by the search engine. HTTP 404 errors are harmful to the brand and negatively impact a business SEO effort by making it difficult for search engines to crawl a website. It is, therefore, crucial for every business to understand the impact of an HTTP 404 error, as it might leave a negative impression on the user (Moz.com, 2021; Patel, 2021).

Google Chrome was used as a search engine to identify the websites for analysis. However, it is not the only search engine available to users. The survey determined that the generational cohorts have different preferences of search engines to access information from the internet (refer to Figure 5.12).

Figure 5.12: Respondent's preference of search engines by generation
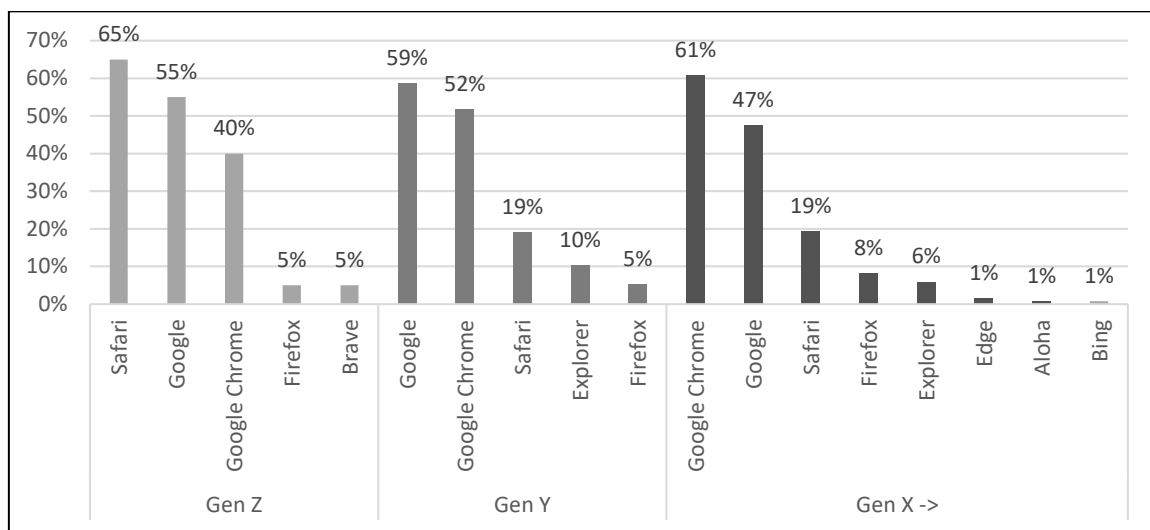
Source: Researcher's own construction

Generation Z mostly preferred using Safari, generation Y Google, and generation X Google Chrome. Safari is a dedicated, built-in search engine application for Mac devices. It is not compatible with Windows operated devices (Cross, 2021), whereas Google and Google Chrome can be used on both Mac, Windows, and Linux operated devices (Google Support, 2021). The indication is that most of generation Z works on Mac powered devices and generations X and Y on Windows operated devices. The implication for funeral homes is to construct their website accessibility to accommodate both Mac and Windows operated devices.

The study also investigated which devices the respondents use to access the internet (refer to Figure 5.13). 77% of the respondents indicated that they use more than one device to connect to the internet (refer to Figure 5.14). The results suggest that the majority of respondents across all generations use either a smartphone or a laptop to connect to the internet daily (refer to Figure 5.15).

Figure 5.13: Devices used to connect to the internet by generational cohort
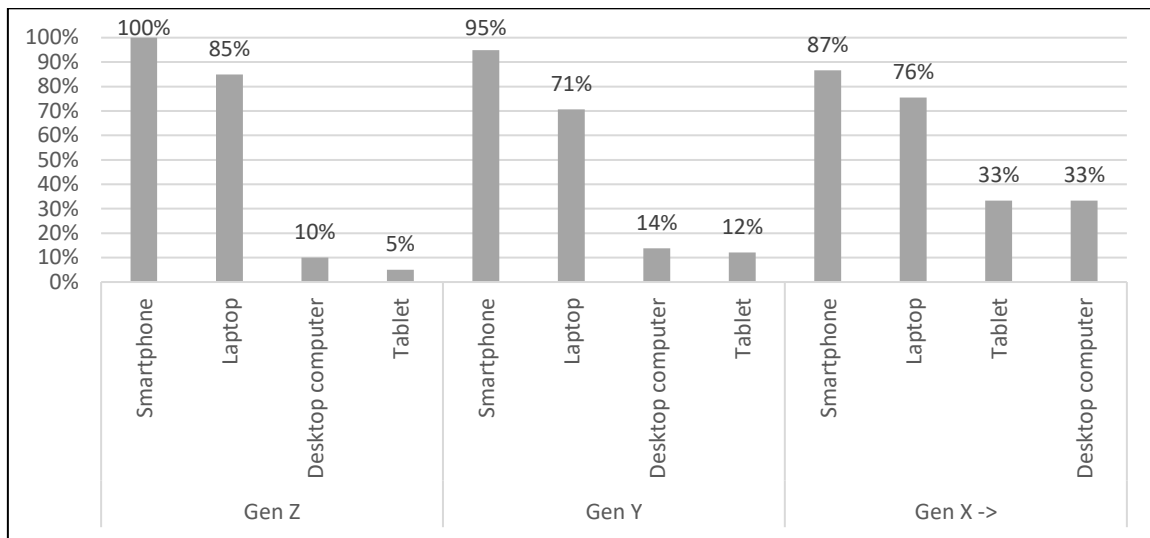
Source: Researcher's own construction

Figure 5.14: Number of devices used to connect to the internet
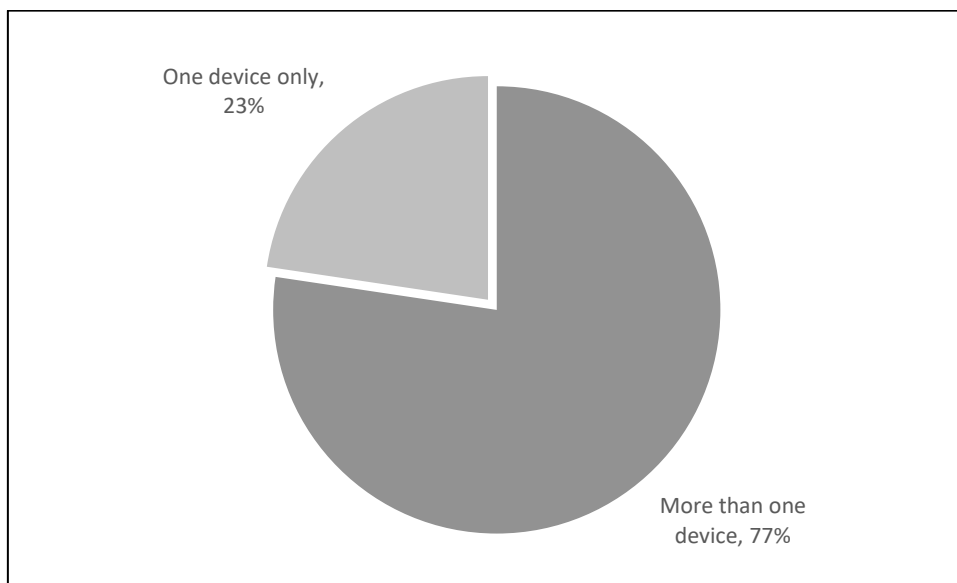
Source: Researcher's own construction

Figure 5.15: Frequency of accessing the internet across all generations
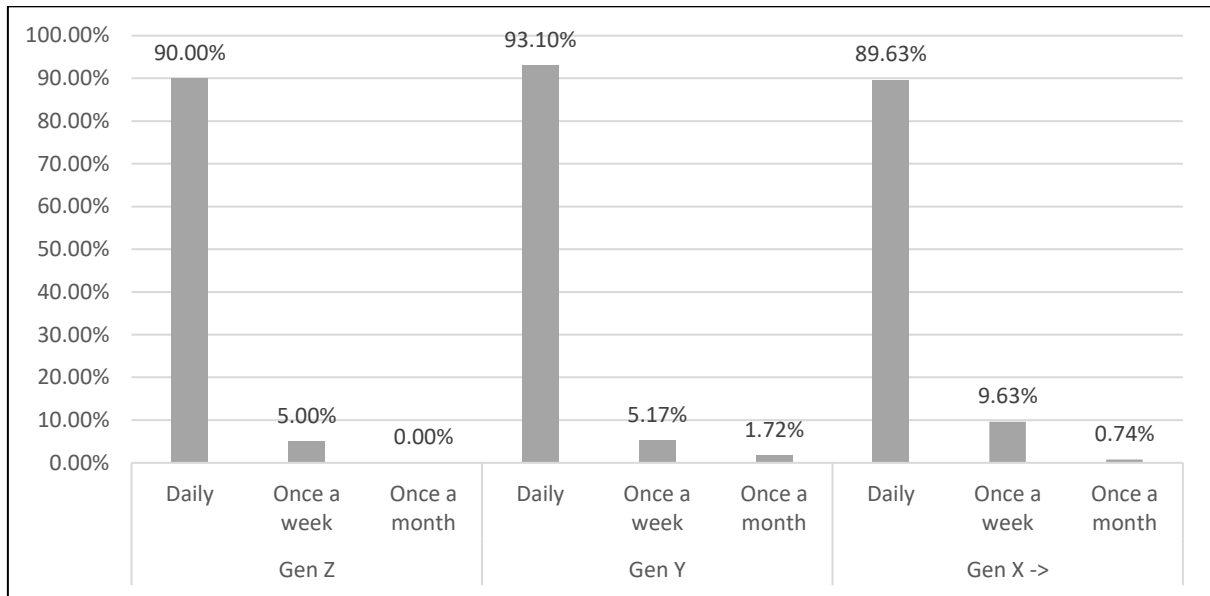
Source: Researcher's own construction

An analysis was also conducted to determine if respondents will use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home if they must arrange the funeral of a loved one (refer to Figure 5.16). The question was posed at the beginning of the questionnaire and the end of the questionnaire. The first question required a multiple-choice answer, and the question at the end of the questionnaire, a scaled response. When compared, the results show a decline in the respondents who will not use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home (6%), and almost 50% decline among those who might or might not use the internet to search for information. The results also show an increase of 23% amongst those who will use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home.

Figure 5.16: Respondents' intention to use the internet to search for funeral home services
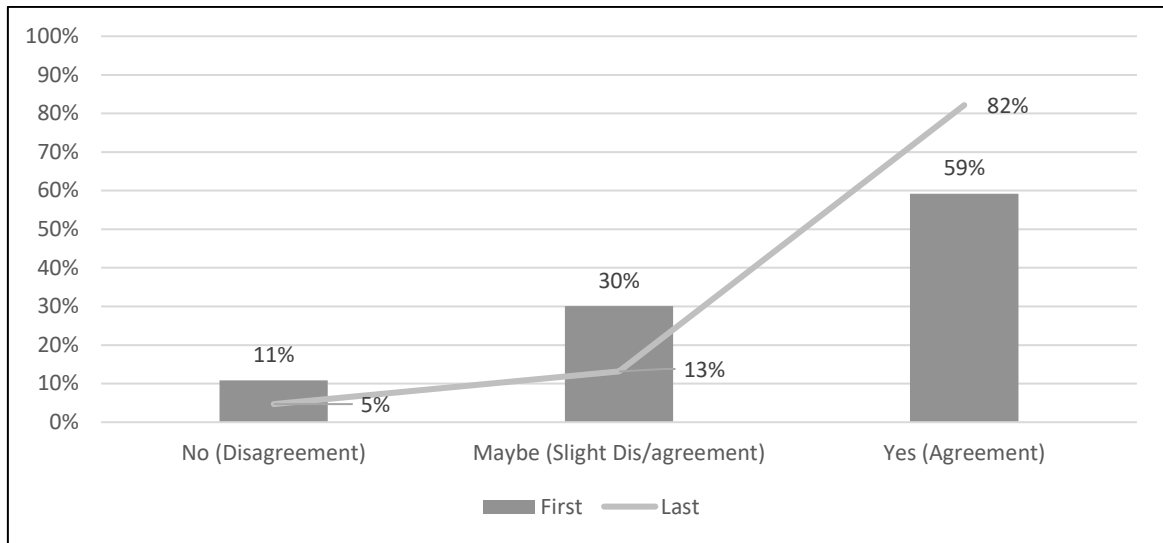
Source: Researcher's own construction

A further analysis per generational cohort (refer to Figure 5.17) showed that the most considerable variances appeared in the Generation X cohort, followed by Generation Y and Generation Z. It can therefore be concluded that Generation Z is the generational cohort who will most likely be the ones to search for information about a funeral home's services regardless of the circumstances.

Figure 5.17: Generational variances of intention to use the internet to search for funeral home services
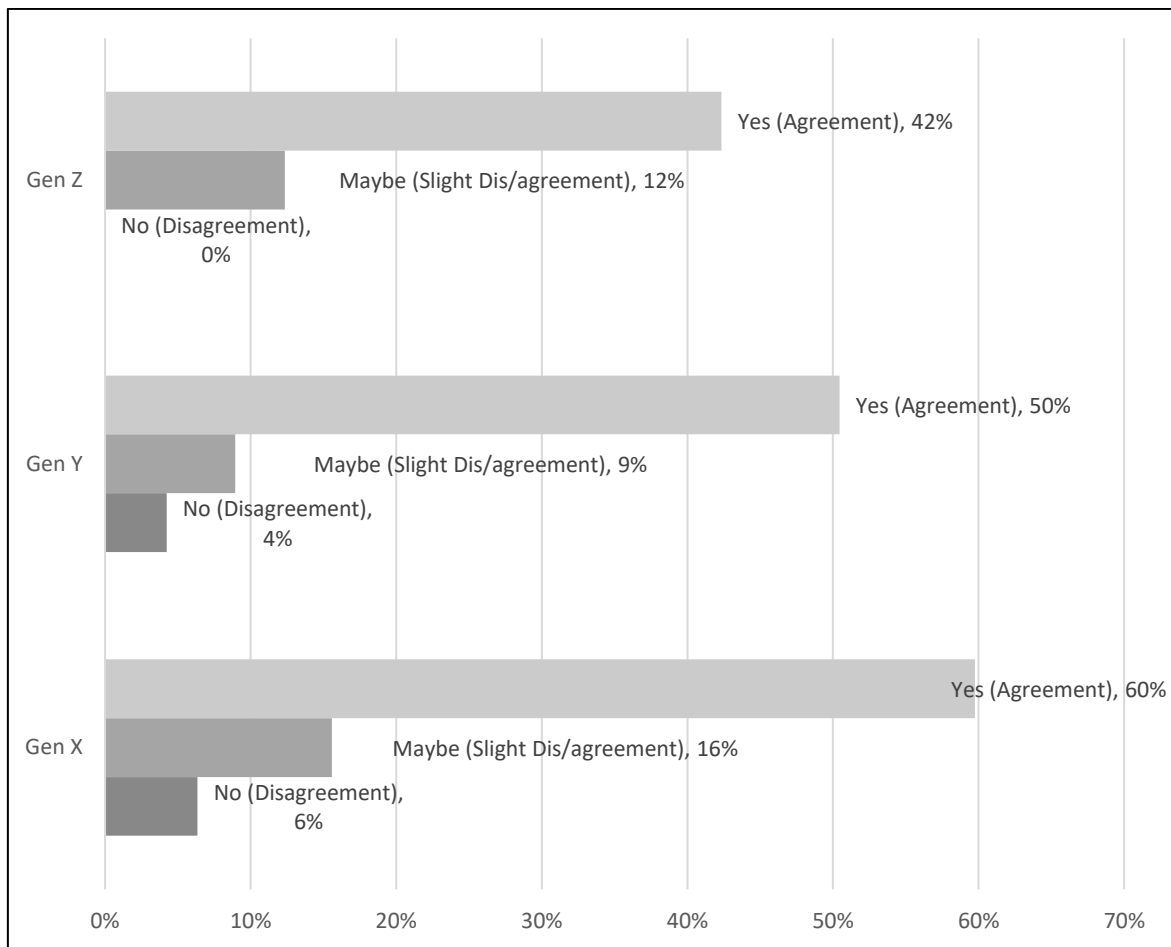
Source: Researcher's own construction

When the variances to use the internet to search for funeral home services was analysed per country (refer to Figure 5.18), the United Kingdom showed the highest variance (81%), followed by South Africa (73%) and Australia (69%). Canada was the only country with 50% and fewer variances, showing a variance of only 10% between the first and the second time the question was asked. This indicates that the Canadian population will be the most likely to search for funeral home services regardless of the circumstances.

Figure 5.18: Intention to use the internet to search for funeral home services per country

Bar chart showing intention to use the internet to search for funeral home services per country:

- **ZA**: Yes (Agreement), 73%; Maybe (Slight Dis/agreement), 20%; No (Disagreement), 8%
- **US**: Yes (Agreement), 66%; Maybe (Slight Dis/agreement), 26%; No (Disagreement), 8%
- **UK**: Yes (Agreement), 81%; Maybe (Slight Dis/agreement), 19%; No (Disagreement), 0%
- **CA**: Yes (Agreement), 10%; Maybe (Slight Dis/agreement), 50%; No (Disagreement), 40%
- **AU**: Yes (Agreement), 69%; Maybe (Slight Dis/agreement), 31%; No (Disagreement), 0%
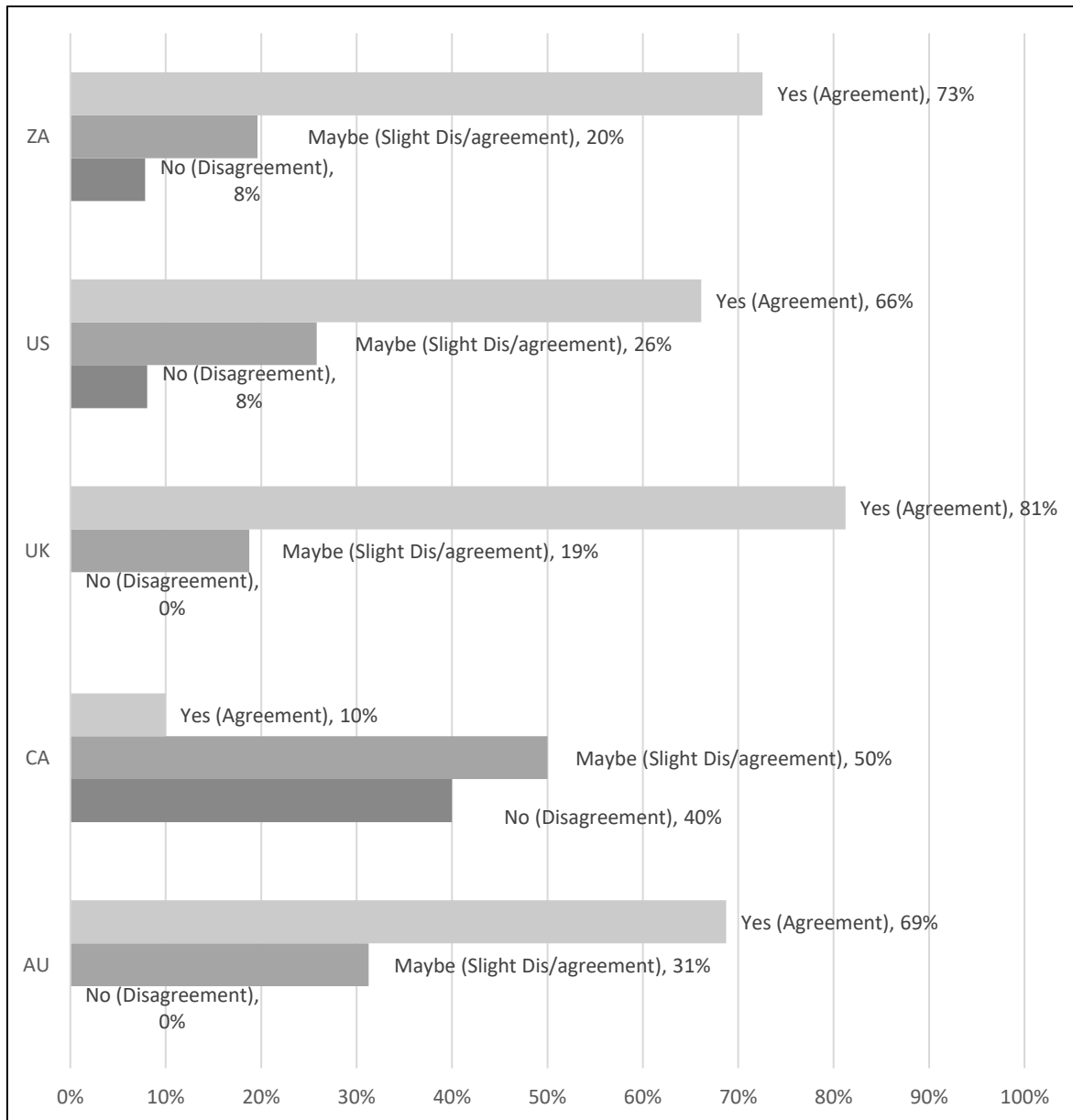
Source: Researcher's own construction

RQ1: WHICH ASPECTS OF SEO WILL INFLUENCE CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A FUNERAL HOME WEBSITE?

The results on a search engine results page (SERP) are the first steps towards creating online visibility for a funeral home, which leads to the accessibility of the funeral home website.

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The key takeaway for visibility indicated that respondents would use generic search terms to find funeral homes online, not the funeral home's name *per se*. The name of the funeral home does not hold a high priority with respondents as they would rather use industry identifiers such as funeral, funeral home, funeral director, and funeral services to search for funeral homes. This finding contradicts Kaur and Kaur's (2017:104) statement that a URL should include the name of a business for greater visibility. However, it does support Stoke's (2018:140) statement that URLs should include essential keywords related to a business.

Respondents also indicated that it is more likely that they will use the location (city, area, country) where the funeral home is located, in addition to the industry identifiers to search for a funeral home. Less than 40% of the respondents indicated that they would use the services offered by a funeral home to conduct a search. The implication for funeral home website design is that industry-specific keywords should be tagged as primary keywords. Service-related keywords should be tagged as secondary keywords to create higher visibility on SERPs.

To accommodate all generations from all countries, it was determined that funeral home websites should ensure accessibility on both Microsoft and Mac powered devices. The websites must also be accessible on different devices. The majority of the respondents indicated that they access the internet daily from more than one device, specifically mobile devices such as smartphones (94%) and laptops (77%). Accessibility is of particular importance for funeral homes, as 82% of the respondents indicated that they would use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home. This is of particular value for funeral homes as most respondents indicated that they would consider the website ineffective if they cannot access it from a SERP.

Based on the findings of this section of the study, it can be concluded that both visibility and accessibility will significantly impact users' perceptions of a funeral home website.

5.2.2 Perceived usefulness (PU) analysis

The PU construct is presented in this study based on Davis' (1989:320) seminal definition, which pertains to the degree to which a user of a specific electronic system believes that it would enhance the experience. It addresses the second research question: *Will a funeral home website's perceived usefulness impact customers' trust beliefs in the funeral home?*

Rahi *et al.* (2021:988) found that PU and user satisfaction will positively influence a user's intention to use, and continue to use, a technology. This is further underlined by Wang (2016:628), who confirmed that both information quality and system quality would positively influence a user's perception of a technology. The variables assigned to the PU construct in this study are the usability of a funeral home website, the funeral home's contact information, the interactivity of a funeral home's website, and the website's navigability.

USABILITY

Understanding users' viewpoints to evaluate usability issues of websites can help to enhance website design (Inal, 2018:67). The quality of a website is influenced by its usability, information content, and aspects of service interaction (Kaabachi *et al.*, 2020:504). Customers thus use different website features related to usability to examine the quality of websites (Ongsakul *et al.*, 2021:686).

Nearly all respondents indicated that the layout of a website would influence their perceptions of its effectiveness (refer to Figure 5.19).

Figure 5.19: Respondents' perceptions of website effectiveness based on its layout

Strongly Agree — 63.85%
Agree — 21.13%
Slightly Agree — 14.55%
Slightly Disagree — 0.47%
Disagree — 0.00%
Strongly disagree — 0.00%
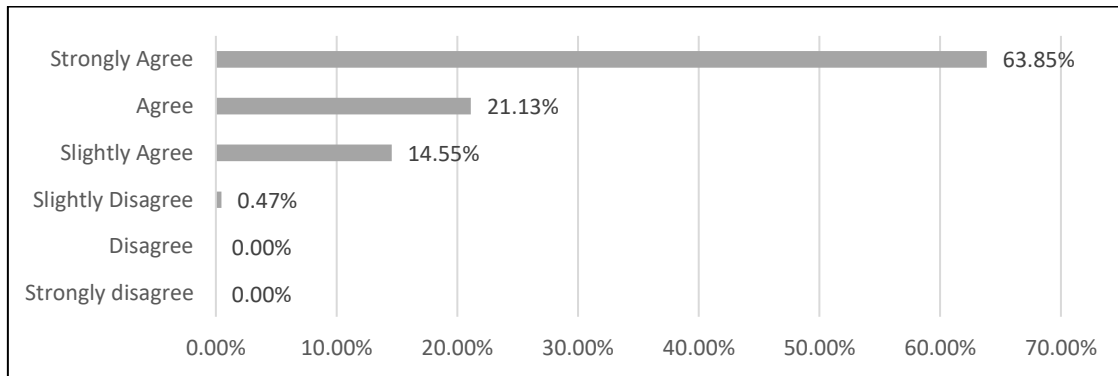
Source: Researcher's own construction

It was further determined that an average of 86% of the websites analysed contained sitemaps (refer to Figure 5.20). Alqaraleh *et al.* (2015:666) and Patil (2020:421) noted that every website should have a sitemap, but many websites still do not have sitemaps. Key to the design of a website is sitemaps. A sitemap is a list of the pages on a website (Park, 2018:80) and should be included as an additional navigation system (Silvis *et al.*, 2019:579). Sitemaps support user navigation and guide search engines in the crawling process (Zineddine, 2016:317). A sitemap, therefore, has a dual usability purpose: it assists users with navigation of the website and guides crawlers such as Google to find information on the website (Alqaraleh *et al.*, 2015:665-666; Patil, 2020:421-422). The fact that more than 80% of the funeral home websites have sitemaps is a good indication that these funeral homes are capitalising on the dual value of having a sitemap on their websites.

Figure 5.20: Websites containing sitemaps per country

Country	Percentage
UK	89%
AU	88%
US	88%
ZA	84%
CA	81%
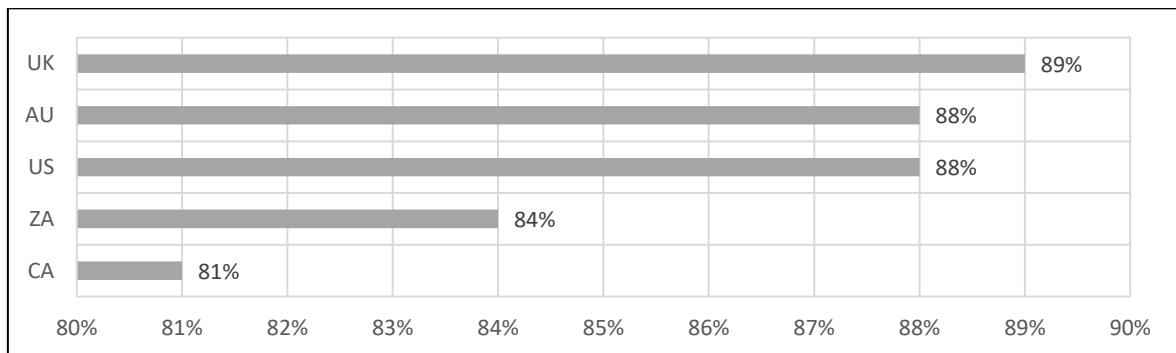
Source: Researcher's own construction

CONTACTABILITY

Websites, more than often, become the first and only point of contact between a business and potential customers (Iaia *et al.*, 2017:2295). Sufficient contact information on websites provides resources to users for gathering information (Xiang & Birt, 2021:50-51), is conducive to relationship building with customers (Depaoli *et al.*, 2020:1050), and minimises perceived risk, which is usually heightened in the online environment (Bobalca *et al.*, 2021:6). Marzo-Navarro and Pedraja-Iglesias (2021:1) also noted that if a website contains links to the business's social media sites, it could improve interactive communication with the funeral home. The importance of contactability options should therefore not be underestimated as it contributes significantly to online CRM.

Overall, the outcome of sufficient contact information on a website will lead to increased visibility (Xiang & Birt, 2021:55) and open dialogue (Hetze *et al.*, 2019:255) between the potential customer and the funeral home. This is reiterated by the responses from the survey as 76.53% of the respondents strongly agreed, and 16.43% agreed that contact information on a website is important as they must stay in regular contact with the funeral home if they decide to use the services of the

funeral home. Less than 1% of the respondents disagreed to some extent about this factor (refer to Figure 5.21).

Figure 5.21: Respondents' perceptions of the importance of contact detail on a website
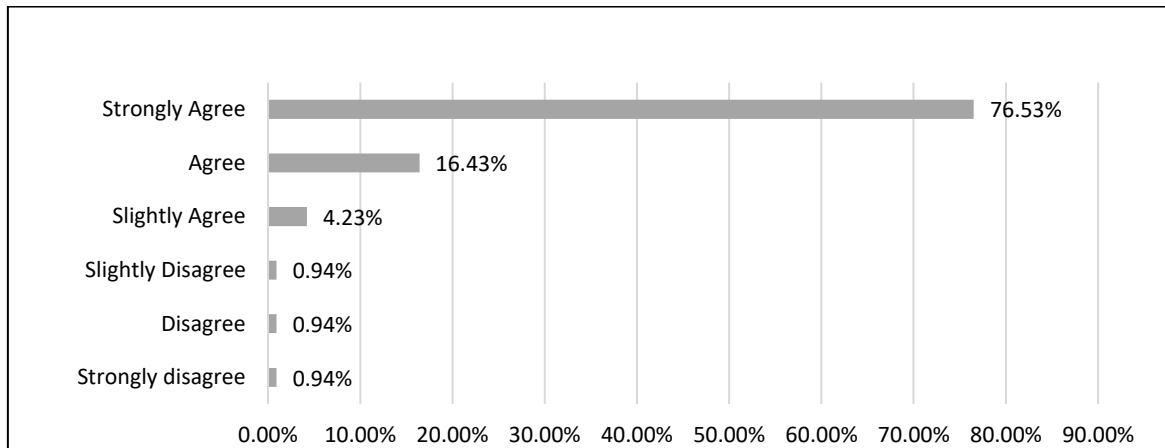
Source: Researcher's own construction

Figure 5.22 depicts the contact detail with the highest frequency from all websites analysed.

Figure 5.22: Contact detail with the highest appearance on websites analysed
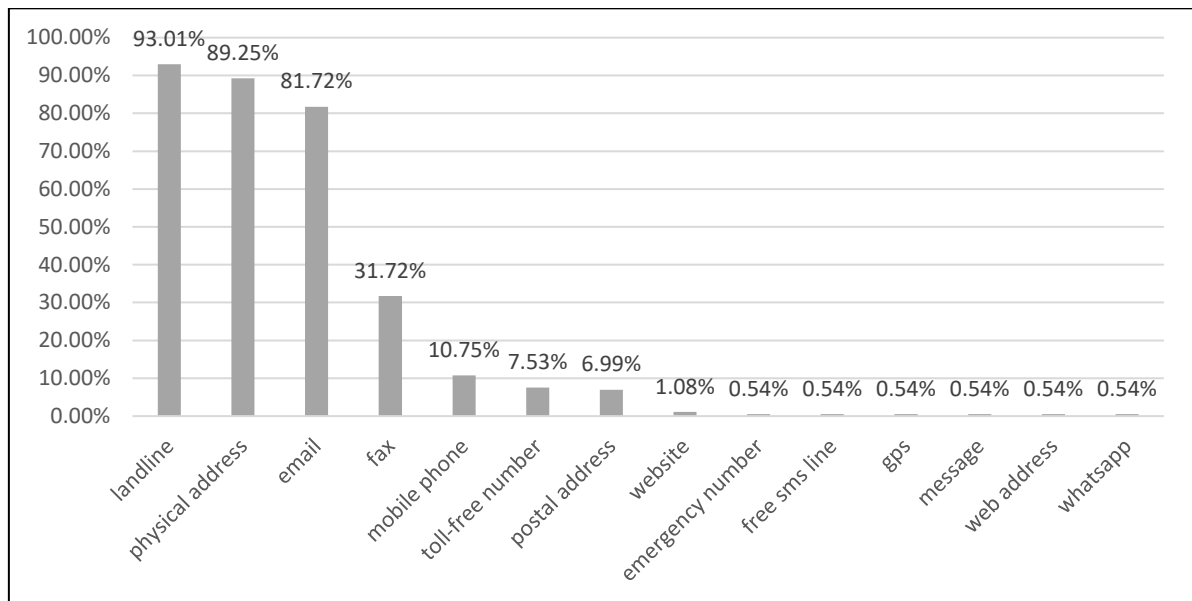
Landline numbers, a physical address and an email address are the most prominent contact details on the websites exceeding 80%. Few websites contained mobile contact numbers (10.75%) and toll-free emergency numbers (7.53%). Less than 1% of the websites contained SMS applications, emergency numbers *per se*, or a physical address. An SMS is a short message service number or alternatively known as texting. WhatsApp and other similar texting applications are classified as SMS' (Wilkinson, 2021). The contact detail findings from the websites are concerning as Majid and Lakshmi (2020:15), Rebolledo *et al.* (2017:365) and Tan *et al.* (2017:571) all found that websites must provide adequate resources and support for customers, inclusive of toll-free customer care numbers, SMS and WhatsApp support.

Overall, respondents indicated an email address to be their most preferred method of contact (68%), followed by a mobile phone number (54%) and a landline number (45%). Instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp, a chatbot and live engagement platforms such as Teams, Skype or Zoom, all received less than a 40% preference (refer to Figure 5.23).

Figure 5.23: Respondent's contact detail preferences overall
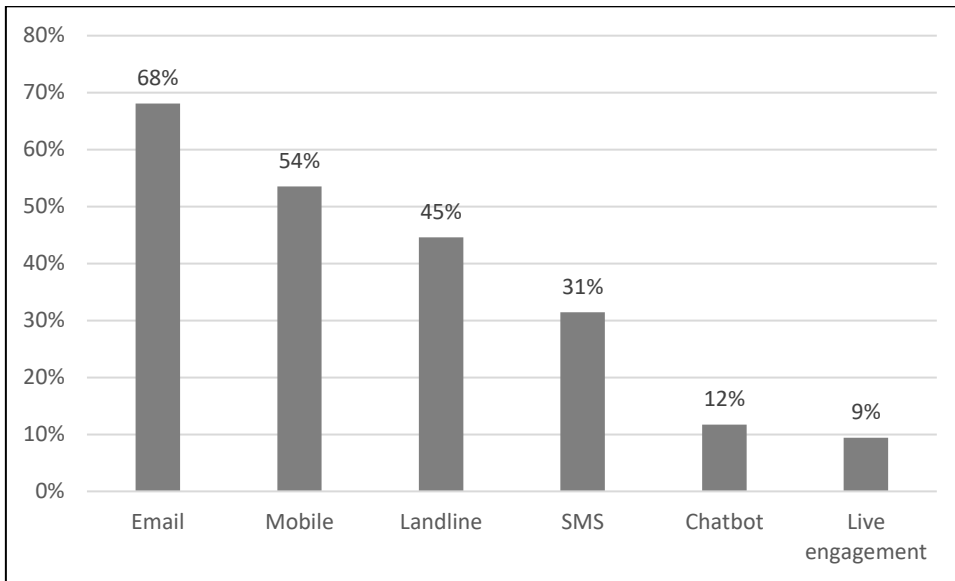
Source: Researcher's own construction

The contact detail preferences of the respondents were further broken down into generational cohorts (refer to Figure 5.24).

Figure 5.24: Contact detail preferences per generational cohort
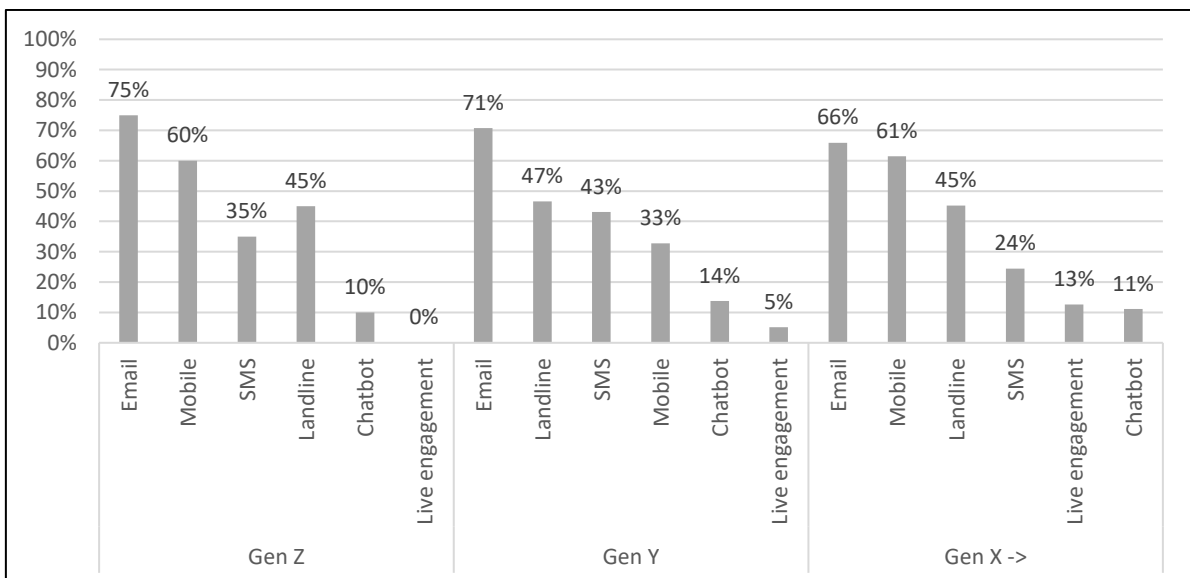
Source: Researcher's own construction

The combined analysis of the contact information gathered from the websites and the respondents' preferences showed only one common value: a landline telephone number (refer to Figure 5.25). An email address is the most preferred contact option amongst all variables. The remainder of the contact details, such as SMS and mobile phone numbers, remains divided mainly by what is depicted on the websites and what respondents prefer. This is a good indication that funeral homes should improve their contact detail options to meet the requirements of possible customers.

Figure 5.25: Analysis of website contact detail
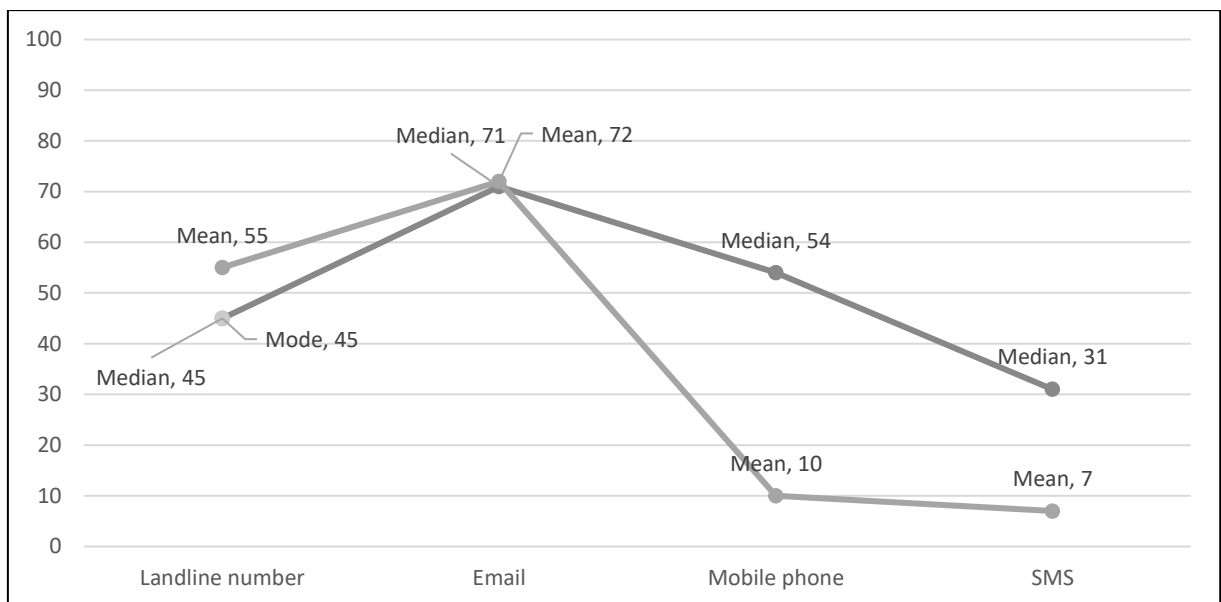
Source: Researcher's own construction

The placement of contact details of the funeral homes was also considered an important aspect as customers might be deterred if they must conduct an elongated search on the website to find the funeral home's contact information (refer to Figure 5.26).

Figure 5.26: Placement of contact details on websites analysed
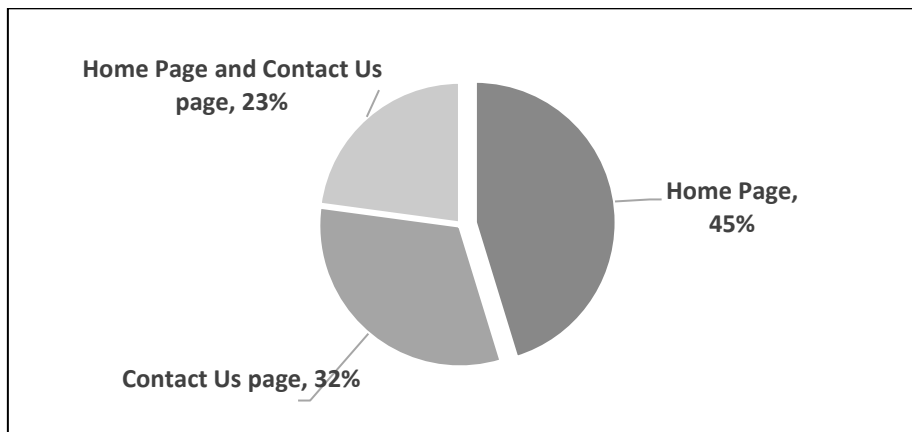
Source: Researcher's own construction

It was subsequently found that 45% of the websites listed their contact details on the website's home page, while 32% of the websites listed their contact details under the navigation button labelled "contact us". 23% of the websites listed their contact details on both the home and contact us pages.

It was determined from the website analyses that 89.25% of the websites contained a physical address (refer to Figure 5.22). Respondents indicated that they would prefer directions to the funeral home in the form of an electronic map (91%) (refer to Figure 5.27). Few respondents preferred written directions (5%) only, while 75% indicated that both written directions and an electronic map would suffice.

Figure 5.27: Respondents' preferences of directions on a website

Written directions, 5%

Both, 75%

Electronic map, 91%
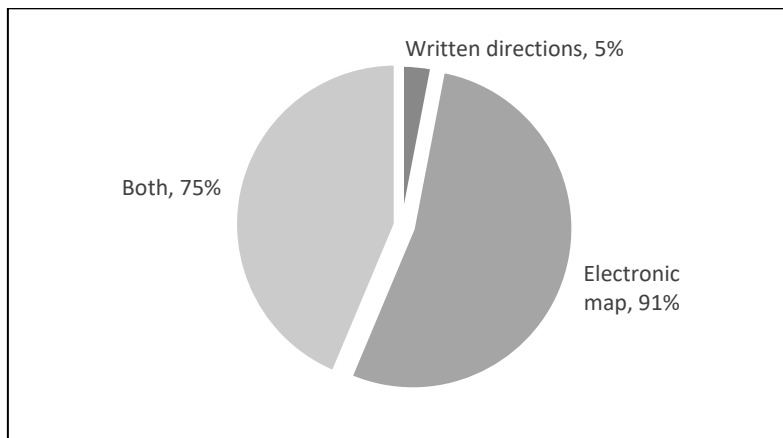
Source: Researcher's own construction

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CONTACT OPTION ON WEBSITES

An evolving, contemporary movement in Customer Relationship Management (CRM) strategies is integrating social media tools in online initiatives such as business websites to capitalise on its relational properties to foster customer interactions (Garrido-Morenoa *et al.*, 2018:94; Harrigan *et al.*, 2015:27). Social media platforms have become one the most dominant outlets for social exchange and information sharing (Foroudi *et al.*, 2017:533), thus contributing to relationship-building strategies. It is also worth noting that social media usage applies to personal use of social media and signifies the importance of social media interaction between a business and its customers. Although social media interaction caused a paradigm shift in the conception and execution of business and customer relationship management strategies (Del Vecchio *et al.*, 2020:799-780), Devereux *et al.* (2020:151) noted that many businesses are either yet to utilise social media or are not using it efficiently.

Part of the analysis of this study was to determine if the funeral homes have social media links on their websites, and if so, which social media sites. The results showed

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that Facebook is the most prominent social media platform on all funeral home websites across all countries (refer to Table 5.4).

Table 5.4: Social media links on websites per country

AU			CA			UK			US			ZA		
Rank	Frequency	Word	Rank	Frequency	Word	Rank	Frequency	Word	Rank	Frequency	Word	Rank	Frequency	Word
1	18	facebook	1	37	facebook	1	25	facebook	1	3	facebook	1	33	facebook
2	9	youtube	2	18	twitter	2	16	twitter	2	2	twitter	2	20	twitter
3	8	linkedin	3	10	linkedin	3	6	instagram	3	2	youtube	3	12	instagram
4	6	instagram	4	8	instagram	4	5	linkedin	4	1	linkedin	4	9	youtube
5	6	twitter	5	4	youtube	5	3	youtube				5	5	google
6	1	pinterest	6	3	pinterest							6	5	linkedin
			7	2	google							7	3	pinterest
			8	1	skype							8	3	whatsapp
			9	1	whatsapp							9	1	flickr
												10	1	skype

Source: Researcher's own construction

The fact that Facebook is the most popular social media platform is *on par* with the latest Statista (2021) social media usage figures (refer to Figure 5.28). However, the Statista (2021) figures indicate YouTube to be the second most popular social media site, followed by WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and Instagram.

Figure 5.28: Global social media usage

Facebook	2 797
YouTube	2 291
WhatsApp	2 000
Facebook Messenger*	1 300
Instagram	1 287
Weixin / WeChat	1 225
TikTok	732
Douyin	600
QQ	595
Telegram	550
Snapchat	528
Sina Weibo	521
Kuaishou	481
Pinterest	459
Reddit*	430
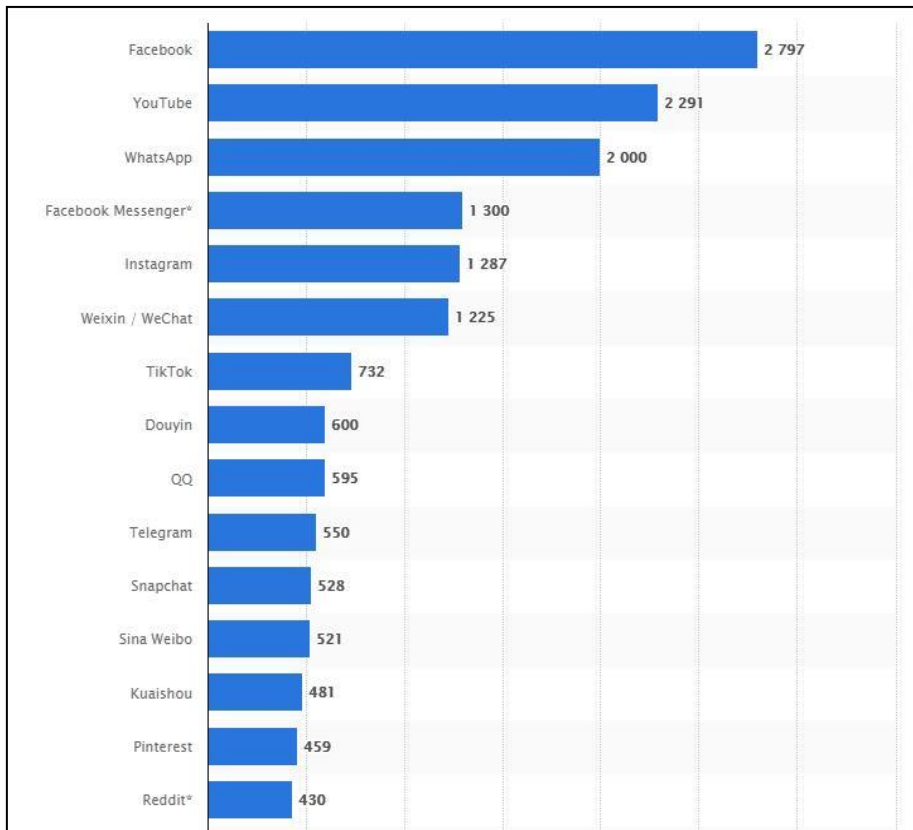
Source: Statista (2021)

Contrary to the Statista (2021) figures, Twitter had the second-highest frequency appearance on the funeral home websites, followed by Instagram and LinkedIn, with YouTube towards the lower end of the frequency range (refer to Table 5.4).

Based on these findings, funeral homes across all five countries could benefit from creating their own YouTube channels and developing professional LinkedIn pages to improve their online CRM strategies.

A third navigation option was investigated, which relates to the placement of the social media links on the websites. This is considered valuable to the research as it could also improve the contact options and visibility aspects of a website (refer to Figure 5.29).

Figure 5.29: Placement of social media links on websites analysed per country

Figure 5.29: Placement of social media links on websites analysed per country

Home Page
- ZA, 90%
- US, 100%
- UK, 96%
- CA, 92%
- AU, 89%

Left
- US, 0%
- UK, 0%
- CA, 16%
- AU, 0%

Bottom
- ZA, 63%
- US, 100%
- UK, 60%
- CA, 76%
- AU, 78%

Top
- ZA, 33%
- US, 0%
- UK, 32%
- CA, 3%
- AU, 11%

Contact us page
- ZA, 7%
- US, 0%
- UK, 0%
- CA, 5%
- AU, 11%

Bottom
- ZA, 7%
- US, 0%
- UK, 0%
- CA, 5%
- AU, 11%
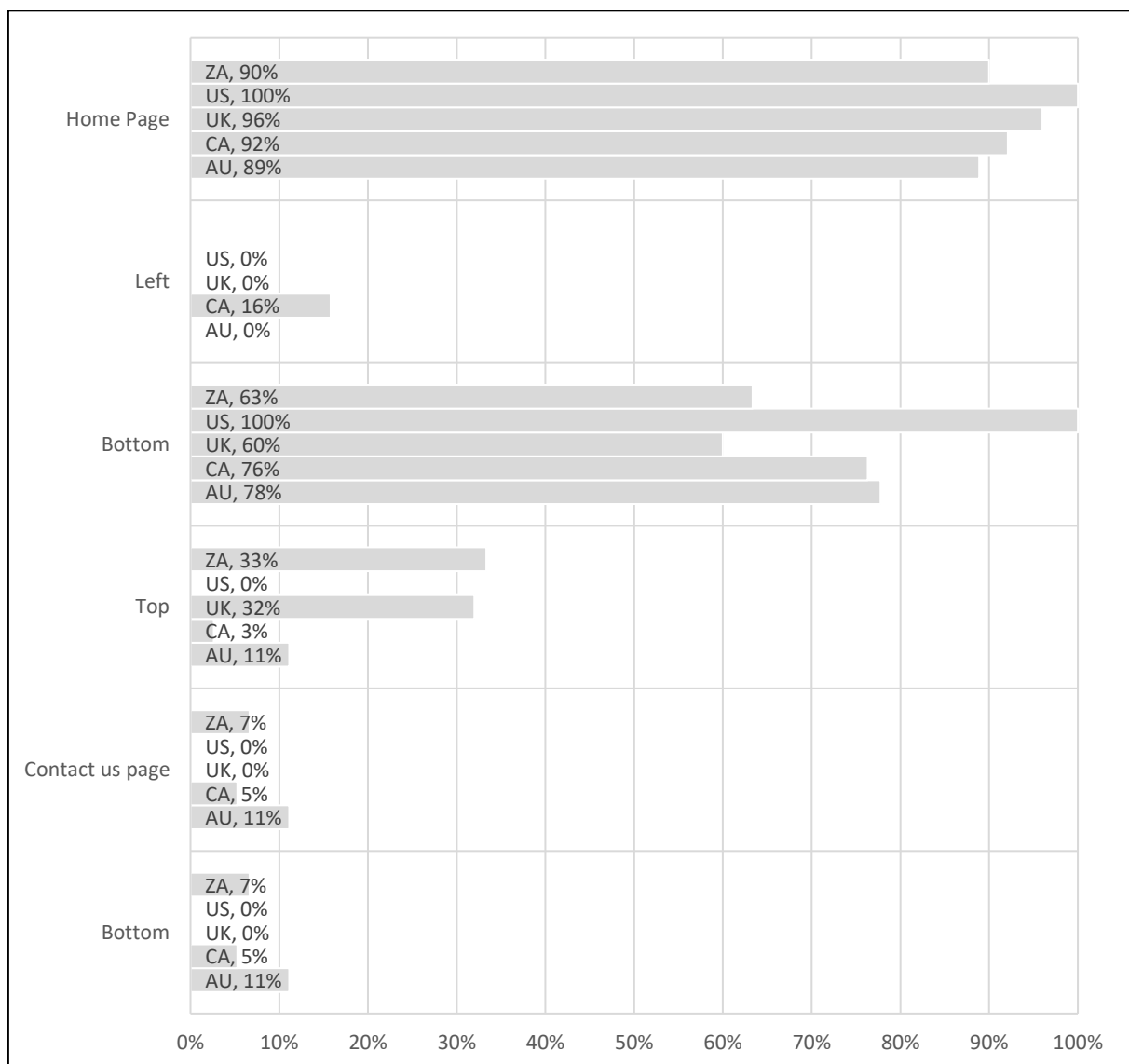
Source: Researcher's own construction

An average of 93% of the funeral homes placed their social media links on the home page of the websites. 75% of these websites placed the social media links at the bottom of the website home page, while 15% of the websites placed their social media links at the top of the home page. 16% of the Canadian websites positioned their social media links on the left-hand side of the home page. An average of 8% among the South African, Canadian and Australian funeral home websites placed their social media links at the bottom of the contact us page.

INTERACTIVITY

In his seminal work, Steuer (1992:86) defined interactivity as a stimulus-driven variable determined by the medium's technological structure. Website interactivity thus allows internet users to interact in real-time with the service provider (Abdullah *et al.*, 2019:48). It becomes a key factor of website quality (Wu, 2019:253), users' perceptions of the website's usefulness (Abdullah *et al.*, 2019:54), and users' attitudes toward websites (Jeon *et al.*, 2017:126).

The survey findings reiterate the value of having a well-structured, interactive website (refer to Figure 5.30). More than 50% of the respondents indicated that they would not engage with the funeral home if:

- the information provided on the website is not clear (53%),
- the information provided on the website is not sufficient (53%), and
- the website will be considered ineffective if they do not find the information they are looking for (64%).

Figure 5.30: Responses to website interactivity
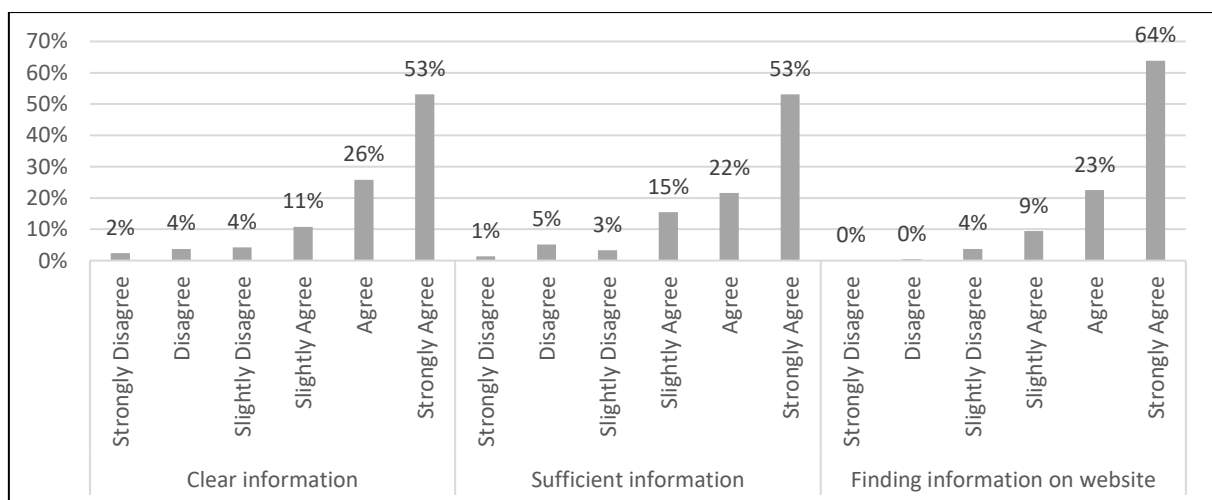
Source: Researcher's own construction

NAVIGABILITY

Ease of navigation is considered a fundamental aspect of a website (Iaia *et al.*, 2017:2297). Navigation is the visual expression of a website's structure (Bidjovski, 2018:65) and therefore links directly to website design, functionality, credibility (Niazi *et al.*, 2020:886), and efficiency (Abifarin *et al.*, 2019:579). Murano (2018:120) noted that a website's user interface's clutter-free and easily navigable design would elicit positive attitudes towards a business and reduce feelings of stress while engaging with the website. This is of particular value for websites of funeral homes considering the three primary conditions presented by Schwartz *et al.* (1986) under which a potential user will engage with a funeral home website, namely negative demand, time pressure and lack of prior information. The navigation of a funeral home website must therefore be designed to be intuitive and sustain interest in a concise amount of time (Abifarin *et al.*, 2019:580).

93% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that for a website to be effective, they must be able to navigate seamlessly between different pages on a website (refer to Figure 5.31).

Figure 5.31: Navigation perceptions of respondents

Slightly Agree, 5%

Disagree, 0%

Strongly Disagree, 0%

Slightly Disagree, 1%

Other, 93%

Agree, 16%

Strongly Agree, 77%
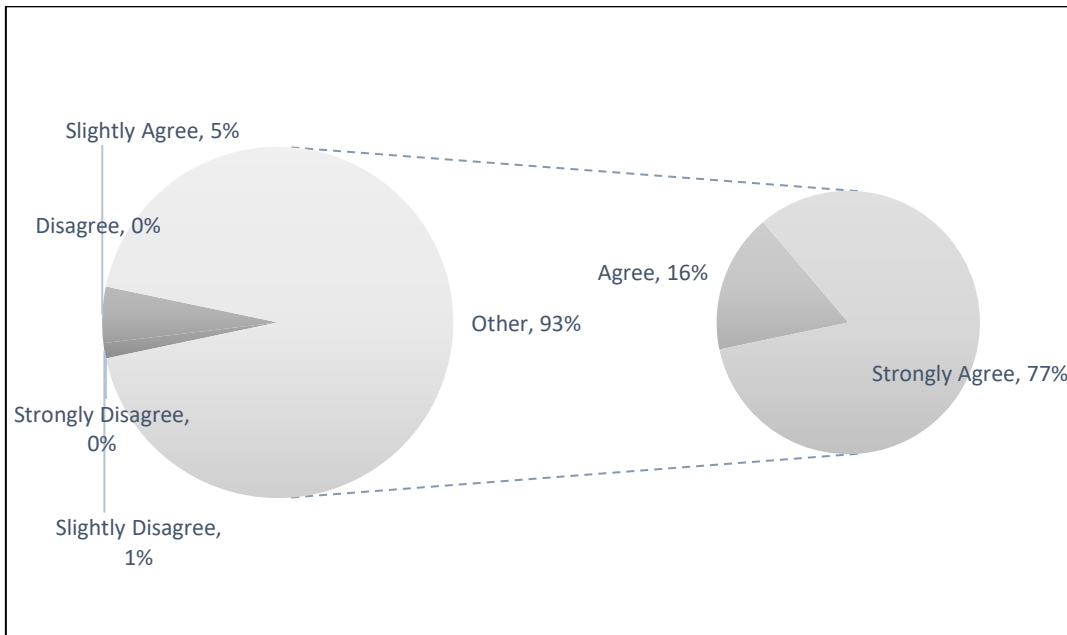
Source: Researcher's own construction

The study further analysed which navigation buttons had the highest occurrence on the websites. Figure 5.32 depicts the ten navigation buttons with the highest frequency from all funeral home websites analysed.

Figure 5.32: Navigation buttons on websites with the highest frequency
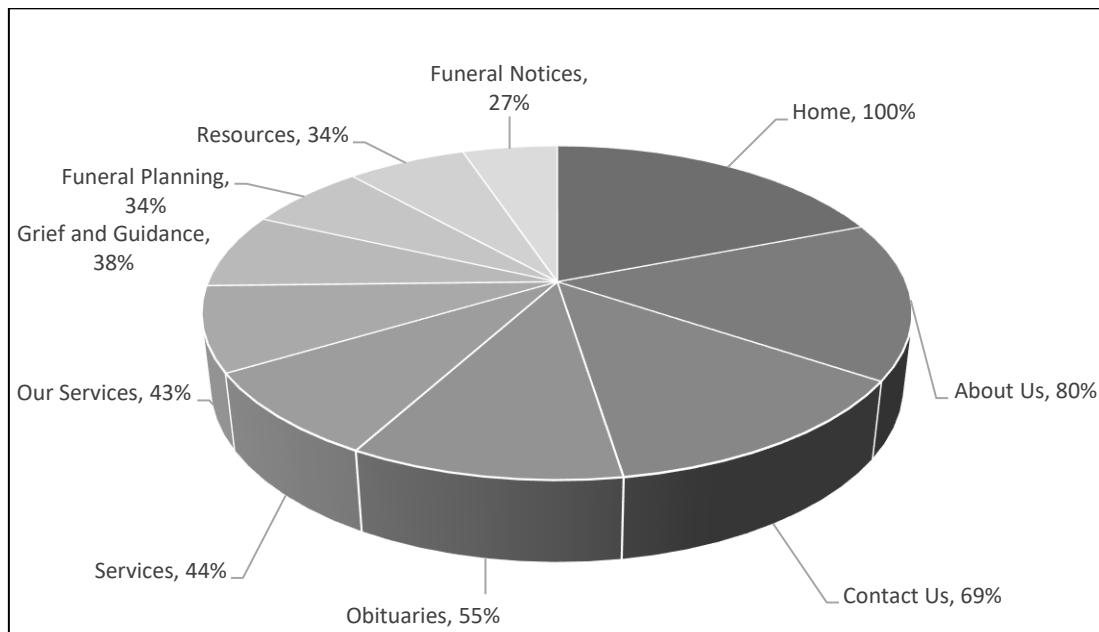
Source: Researcher's own construction

Ochoa (2020:1) states that the design and approach of websites evolved parallel with technology changes, including navigation design and industry-specific terminology. Notable from the navigation buttons on the funeral home websites are industry-specific buttons such as obituaries, grief and guidance, funeral planning and funeral notices. It is most unlikely to find these industry-specific buttons on any other website than that of a funeral home and therefore concurs with Ochoa's (2020) statement. The findings indicate the relevance of the design and structure of a funeral home's website to be industry-relevant and designed to navigate users to specific pages on the website.

Industry-specific navigation buttons also featured in the information retrieved from the respondents (refer to Figure 5.33). The navigation buttons with the highest scores pertained to:

- the pre-arrangement of a funeral (90%),
- a grief and guidance page (80%),
- the possibility to watch a funeral which is live-streamed (77%),

- to be able to send flowers to the bereaved via the funeral home's website (70%), and
- to have a page on the website where messages of condolences (64%) and obituaries (49%) could be placed.

Notices of funerals that the funeral home will be conducting (58%) and information on funeral planning (46%) also received some preferences. The remainder of the preferred navigation buttons, such as contact us, location, and about us, received less than 35% preference.

Figure 5.33: Respondents' preferences of navigation buttons on a funeral home website
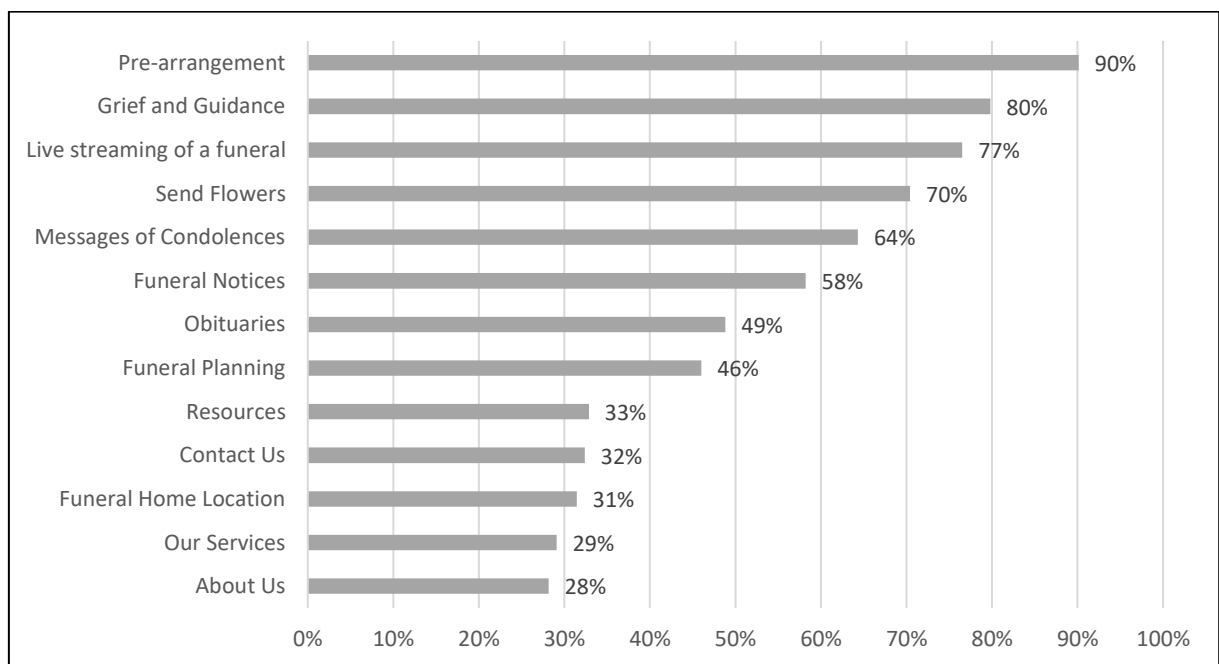
Source: Researcher's own construction

When the navigation button information retrieved from the websites and the respondents' preferences were compared, the results were significantly different based on the websites' highest frequencies (refer to Figure 5.34). The navigation buttons grief and guidance, about us, contact us, and obituaries fall into the 50-59%

bracket, while funeral notices and funeral planning falls into the lower 40-49% bracket. The remainder of the navigation buttons relating to services provided by the funeral homes and their resources fell into the middle 30-39% bracket.

Figure 5.34: Website and respondent navigation button analysis
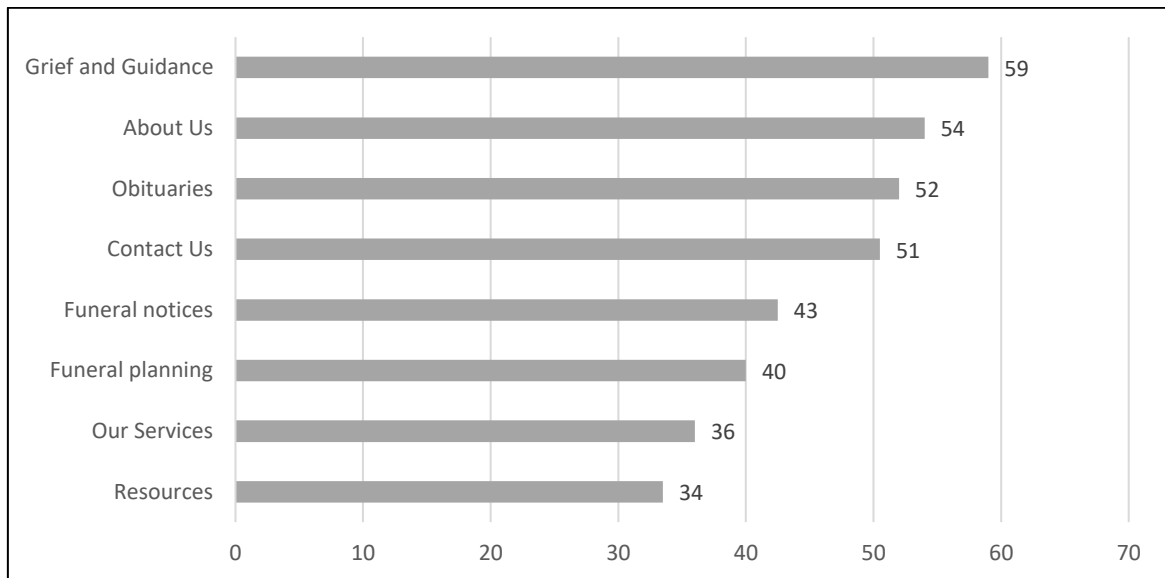
Source: Researcher's own construction

It is evident from the analyses that both operational navigation buttons such as contact us, about us, products and services, and industry-specific navigation buttons such as funeral notices and planning, obituaries and grief guidance should appear on funeral home websites. Having these navigation buttons on the websites will also improve users' perceptions of their usefulness as it would guide them directly to information regarding these aspects on the website.

PLACEMENT OF NAVIGATION BUTTONS ON A WEBSITE

This study also investigated the placement of navigation buttons and social media links on the websites. The placement of links on a website is of particular importance because it serves as reasonable proximity for page complexity and has a significant

implication on website structure (Chen, 2020:739), which is fundamental to effective user navigation because it affects the usability and performance of a website (Ochoa, 2020:3). It is thus important that these aspects also be investigated as they would also influence the user perceptions of a website's navigability and, ultimately, its perceived usefulness.

85% of the navigation buttons are positioned at the top of the website (refer to Figure 5.35).

Figure 5.35: Placement of navigation buttons on websites analysed
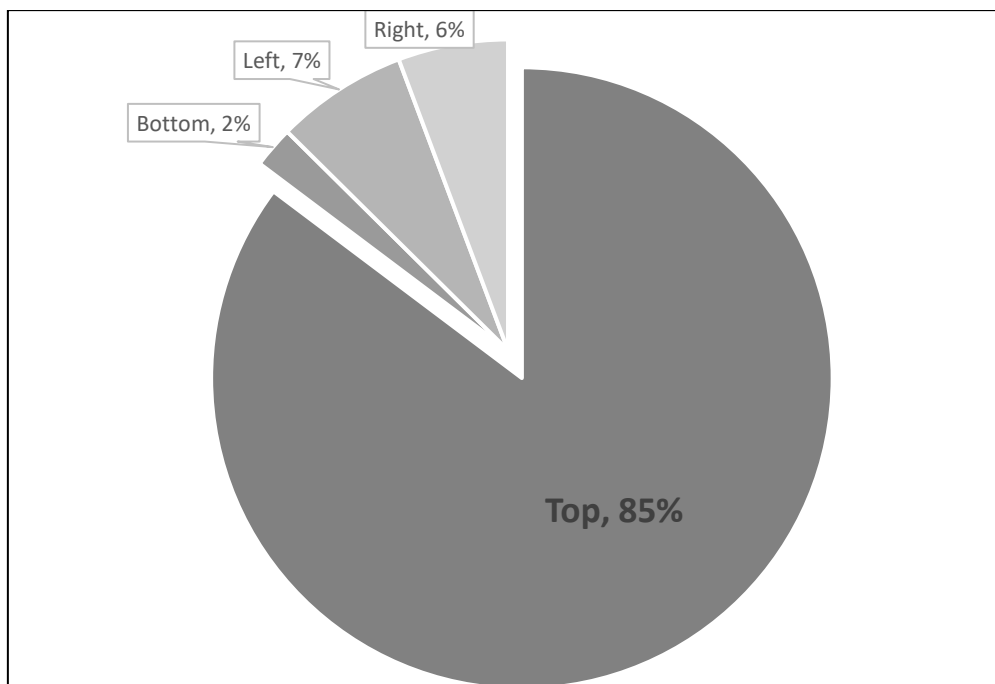
Source: Researcher's own construction

The majority of the navigation buttons (85%) are placed at the top of the website pages of funeral homes. Of the remaining options, 2% is placed at the bottom, 6% on the right-hand side, and 7% on the left-hand side of the web pages. This finding is consistent with that of Thomas (2019:230), who found that navigation information should be located in the upper part of a web page, in either top corner. To this extent, Simon *et al.* (2021:5) concluded that the general need for users to navigate

with sufficient ease to find information in an acceptable timeframe underscores the importance of simplified navigation strategies to improve accessibility.

RQ2: WILL A FUNERAL HOME WEBSITE'S PERCEIVED USEFULNESS IMPACT CUSTOMERS' TRUST BELIEFS IN THE FUNERAL HOME?

The first factor that will impact the PU of a website is its usability. The majority of the respondents indicated that the layout of a website would affect their perception of the website's effectiveness. Sitemaps are an effective tool to support developers in designing website layout and increase navigation and crawling options. The findings indicated that 80% of the websites analysed do contain sitemaps.

The second factor influencing customers' perceptions of usefulness is contacting the funeral home beyond the website. 97% of the respondents indicated the importance of contact information, as they will have to contact the funeral home beyond the website when arranging the funeral. Of the different contact options, respondents across all generations indicated email, mobile phone, and landline telephone numbers to be essential contact options. In addition to these three contact options, the contact details on the websites displayed an added option: a physical address. To this extent, respondents indicated that they would prefer an electronic map rather than written directions to the funeral home. From a design perspective, it was determined that contact details could either be displayed on the home page or the contact us page, or both. The findings only showed a slight variance of 9% between the placement options of contact detail on a website.

Links to social media pages of funeral homes was considered as an extended contact option from the websites. Nearly all the websites had a link to a Facebook page, reflecting the Statista (2021) findings of Facebook being the most preferred social media platform globally. However, compared to the remainder of the Statista (2021)

statistics, funeral homes could benefit from more involvement with YouTube, Instagram and LinkedIn profiles. Regarding the placement of the social media links, it was determined that most of the websites placed the links at the bottom of the home page. This finding could be considered in terms of the placement of the funeral home's contact information as well. It is proposed that a *vice versa* placement of contact details should be considered. The contact details and the social media links must be placed together at the bottom of a website and on the contact us page of a website.

The interactivity and navigability of a website will also have a significant influence on customers' usefulness perceptions. More than 50% of the respondents indicated that they would not interact with the funeral home if the information on the website is not sufficient or if they cannot find information. This finding is consistent with the findings of Abdullah *et al.* (2019:54), Wu (2019:253), and Jeon *et al.* (2017:126) that these factors influence users' perceptions of a website's quality.

The majority of the respondents indicated that their perceptions of a website's usefulness would also be affected by the degree to which they can navigate seamlessly on a website. The findings from both respondents and the websites analysed indicated that operational and industry-specific navigation buttons are required for a funeral home website. Operational navigation buttons refer to the home page, contact us, and about us buttons. Industry-specific buttons are services offered related such as funeral planning, obituaries, and funeral notices. The website analysis also confirmed that the majority (85%) displayed their navigation buttons at the top of the web page. These findings are consistent with Simon *et al.* (2021:5) and Ochoa's (2020:1) statements that website navigation design must include industry-specific terminology and enable users to navigate seamlessly in an acceptable timeframe.

From the information gathered for this section of the study, it is evident that the website's usability, the option to contact the funeral home beyond the website, and the effortless interactivity and navigability of a website will significantly impact users' trust beliefs in a funeral home website.

5.2.3 Perceived value (PV) analysis

Perceived value (PV) is one of the main predictors of purchase intention in online commerce (Molinillo *et al.*, 2020:2). It is classified as a functional belief and is among the most widely accepted technology-related evaluative beliefs (Pourfakhimi *et al.*, 2019:692). PV, therefore, acts as a regulator of behavioural intention and can have a considerable influence on website users' satisfaction perceptions (Chiu & Cho, 2021:1343; 1353) and addresses the third research question: *Will a funeral home website's perceived value impact customers' trust beliefs in the funeral home?*

The variables associated in this study with the PV construct are service interaction, the relevance of information on a funeral home's website, and the quality of services presented on these websites.

SERVICE INTERACTION

An average of 32% of the websites analysed contained a dedicated space for testimonials (refer to Figure 5.36). This finding is somewhat concerning as testimonials are considered a credibility indicator and an important feature on a website through which businesses can develop a positive image (Ageeva *et al.*, 2019:701).

Figure 5.36: Websites containing testimonials

Bar chart showing percentage of websites containing testimonials by country: AU 14%, CA 44%, UK 53%, US 14%, ZA 36%.
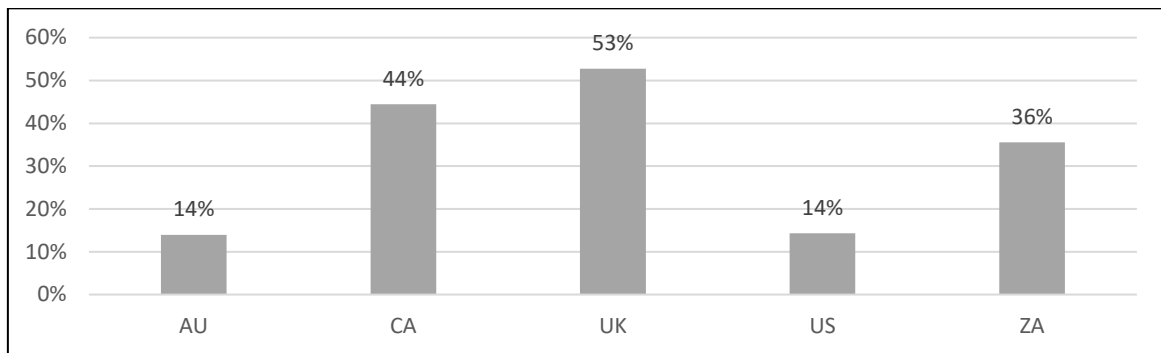
Source: Researcher's own construction

Customer perceptions based on testimonials remains an important determinator of user experience (Hajli, 2020:774). The presence of customers' testimonials on a website can lead to positive, trusting beliefs towards the business (Kaabachi *et al.*, 2019:513; Rollins *et al.*, 2021:2). This is especially of value to a business CRM output. Hossain *et al.* (2021:175) found that CRM performance can be stimulated by promoting interpersonal customer interactions. Their study revealed that all the factors of customers' online interpersonal interactions significantly affect their perceived trust, commitment, and CRM performance. Zhang *et al.* (2020:10) furthermore noted that the rise of online platforms had a significant impact on the traditional CRM model because online CRM focuses on the implications for CRM by considering the consequences of customers' varying levels of engagement on the online platform.

It is evident that funeral homes could benefit significantly from testimonials to increase customer trust and commitment and increase their CRM efforts. This is further validated by the respondents, of which the majority (90%) indicated that they would read testimonials from previous customers before they decide to use the services of a funeral home. Less than 10% of the respondents indicated that testimonials would not deter them from using the services of a funeral home (refer to Figure 5.37).

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Figure 5.37: Respondent's perceptions of testimonials

Testimonials are not important, 10%

Tesitmonials are important, 90%
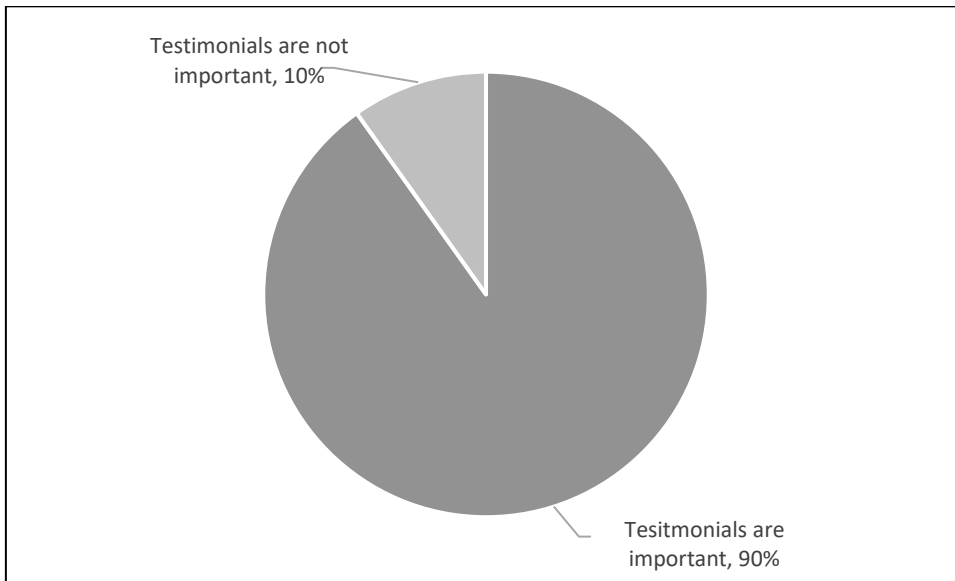
Source: Researcher's own construction

92% of the respondents also indicated that they would review several funeral home websites before they decide to contact a specific funeral home (refer to Figure 5.38).

Figure 5.38: Respondents who will review several websites before deciding

It is not important to review other websites before making a decision, 8%

It is important to review other websites before making a decision, 92%
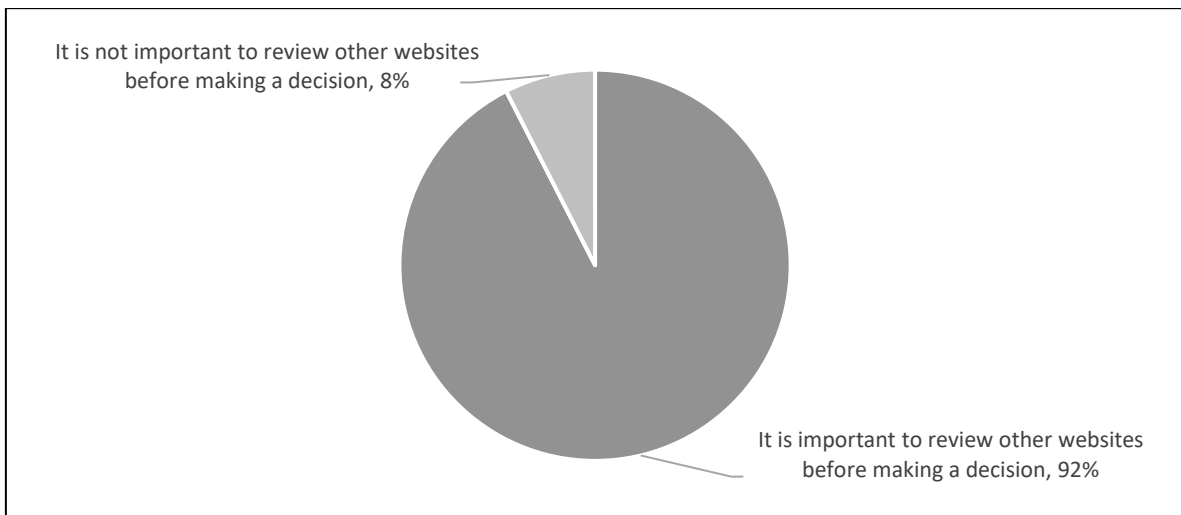
Source: Researcher's own construction

Coupled with positive feedback from other customers on a funeral home's website, the respondents' indication to first browse other websites before deciding to

contact the funeral home is a further indication of the importance of service interaction and building a positive relationship with customers from the moment that they land on a website.

RELEVANCE OF INFORMATION

Relevant and comprehensible information significantly influences customer satisfaction (Noronha & Rao, 2017:169). Online customers' perceptions are affected by an enhanced user experience related to specific, additional text descriptions about the product or service characteristics (Necula *et al.*, 2018:12). Customers, therefore, tend to require detailed and adequate information on a website to validate products or services, which influences their decision to adopt the information (Hwang *et al.*, 2018:362).

Figure 5.39 portrays respondents' perceptions of website information relevancy.

Figure 5.39: Respondents' perceptions of the relevance of website information
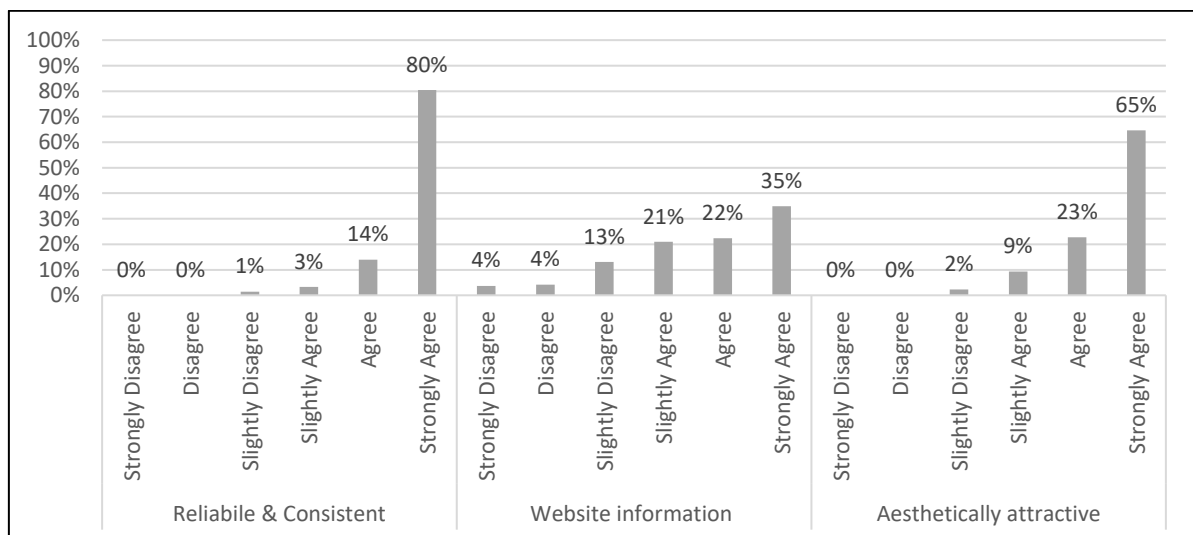
Source: Researcher's own construction

80% strongly agreed that the information on a funeral home website should be consistent and reliable. 78% of the respondents also indicated that they would be cautious about dealing with a funeral home based on its website information. These figures strongly support the theory that detailed and adequate website information will influence website users' perceptions of the funeral home. In addition to being informative and reliable, 97% of the respondents also indicated that the design of the funeral home website should be aesthetically attractive.

However, when asked if the respondents would recommend the services of a funeral home based on the information on the website without physical interaction with the funeral home, an average of only 15% across the generational cohorts agreed. In comparison, 85% disagreed to some extent (refer to Figure 5.40). Despite the requirements related to the relevance of information, the respondents still indicated a reluctance to recommend the services of a funeral home without some level of interaction beyond the website.

Figure 5.40: Recommendation without interaction
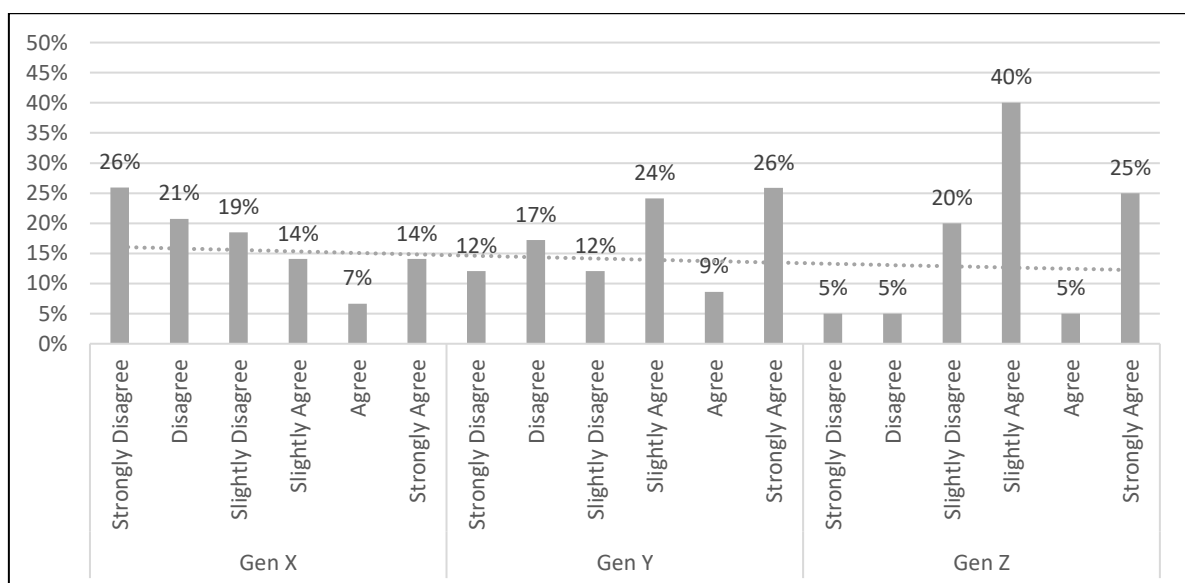
Source: Researcher's own construction

QUALITY OF SERVICES

It must be noted that website service quality in this study refers to the quality of funeral home services portrayed on the websites, not any applications or programming features. In the context of this study, quality of services is defined by Wilson *et al.* (2019:189) as customers' assessment of services provided by a business and if the quality of the services meets or exceeds their expectations. Apart from design, website quality forms one of the key determinants of the success or failure of a website (Tandon *et al.*, 2017:108). Duan *et al.* (2019:3) argued that the degree of trust in a website's services primarily depends on the experience of using the recommended service, which in turn, depends on the similarity of preferences among users and the popularity of recommended services. Therefore, the quality of services as portrayed on the websites plays a significant role in building trust with users.

Another aspect that influences customers' evaluation of services offered by the funeral home is the cost of funerals. A recent movement in the literature refers to the costs of a funeral as "funeral poverty", which indicates the growing awareness of difficulties amongst consumers to afford funerals (Corden & Hirst, 2015:3). Fletcher and Mcgowan (2020:256) state that funeral costs are themselves subject to market forces and will considerably influence customer decision-making when arranging a funeral.

Despite the foregoing factors influencing funeral customers' decision making, 73% of the respondents agreed to some extent that they trust funeral homes to be fair in their conduct due to the unique situation in which the service is delivered (refer to Figure 5.41).

Figure 5.41: Respondents' perception of quality of services
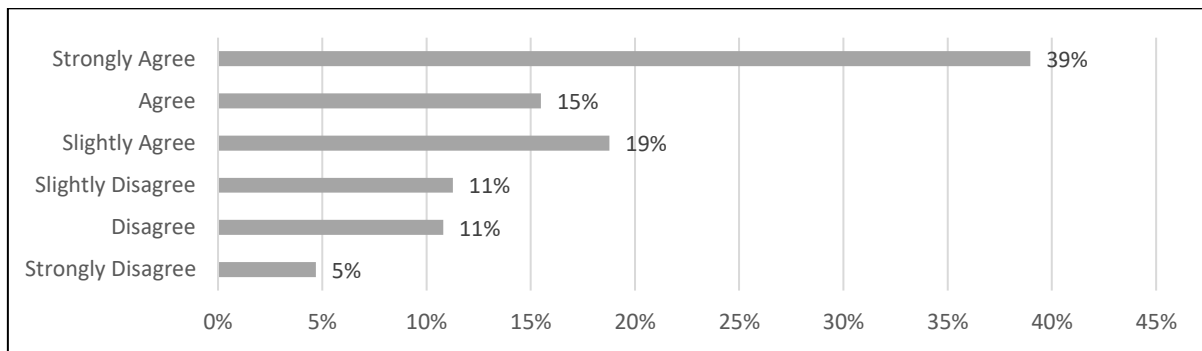
Source: Researcher's own construction

RQ3: WILL A FUNERAL HOME WEBSITE'S PERCEIVED VALUE IMPACT CUSTOMERS' TRUST BELIEFS IN THE FUNERAL HOME?

The variables used in this construct are related to service interaction, the relevance of information and the quality of the funeral home's services.

The first indicator in the PV construct is that 92% of the respondents stated that they will review several funeral home websites before deciding which one to use. This, coupled with the fact that 90% of the respondents indicated that they would read the testimonials on the funeral home website before committing, clearly shows the value of having positive feedback in the form of testimonials on a website. Considering that only 32% of the websites analysed contained testimonials, it shows room for considerable improvement in this area. Despite the high-ranking aspects such as reliable and consistent information and an aesthetically attractive website, respondents still indicated that they would be cautious about dealing with a funeral home based on the website information only. The respondents also clearly stated that they would not recommend the services of a funeral home without physical interaction with the funeral home. This finding reiterates the value of a testimonial for funeral homes. It underscores the relevance of the information on a funeral home's website, as both factors will significantly influence the customers'

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perceptions of the funeral home. The finding correlates with Hwang *et al.'s* (2018:362) statement that detailed and adequate information will affect customers' decision to adopt information on a website. Besides relevance of information, 73% of the respondents require funeral homes to be fair in their conduct due to the unique situation in which the funeral services are delivered.

Overall, the findings from the PV variables support Molinillo *et al.'s* (2020:2) conclusion that it is one of the main predictors of purchase intention in online commerce.

5.2.4 Trust in website

Trust is a significant predictor of purchase intention (Trehan & Sharma, 2020:403). It addresses the fourth research question of the study: *Do customers' trust beliefs in a funeral home website impact their purchase intentions?*

Search engine optimisation (SEO), perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived value (PV) are presented in this study as aggregators of trust in the funeral home website, which in turn, will ultimately affect customers' purchase intentions (PI) of a funeral home's services. The lack of trust is one of the most frequently cited reasons customers would be reluctant to purchase goods or services based on what is presented on a website (Oliveira *et al.*, 2017:153). Two additional questions were added to the integrity dimension based on Choi's (2019:369) moral and ethical principle constructs. Choi (2019:369) specifically focussed on integrity as an approach to ensuring adherence to sound moral and ethical principles in online engagement.

Considering the industry and sensitive nature of the services offered by a funeral home, nearly all respondents (99%) agreed at some level that a funeral home website should project a sense of integrity (refer to Figure 5.42).

Figure 5.42: Respondents' integrity perceptions (a)
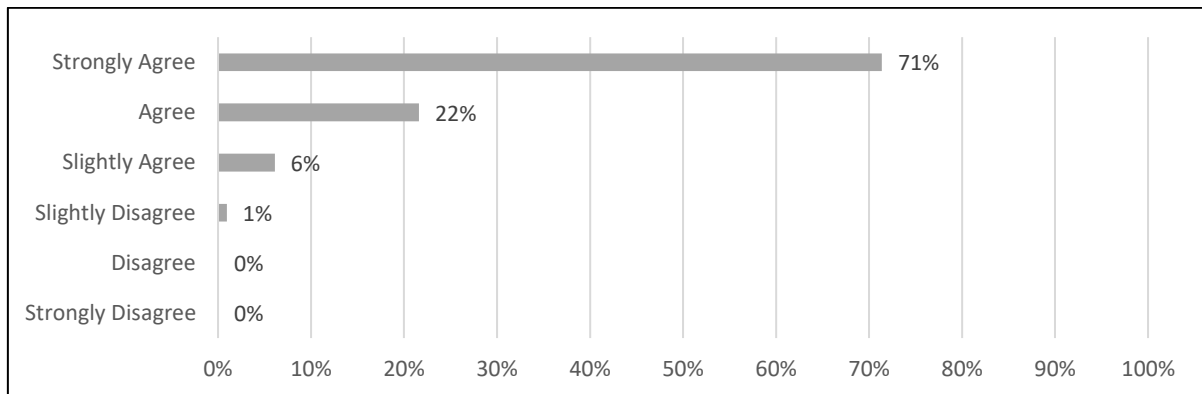
Source: Researcher's own construction

95% of the respondents also indicated that a funeral home website should not only be a marketing tool but should put the customer's needs first (refer to Figure 5.43).

Figure 5.43: Respondents' integrity perceptions (b)
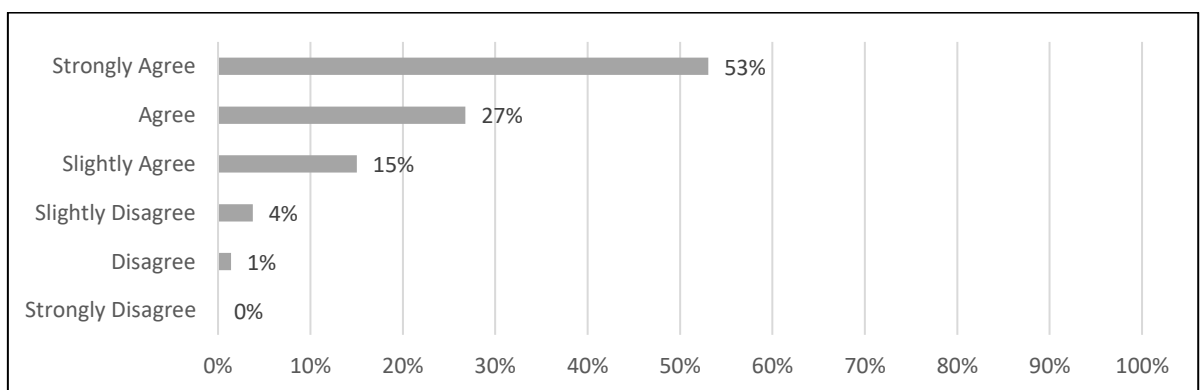
Source: Researcher's own construction

The generational cohort analysis of the trust and integrity perceptions shows that all generations agree that integrity plays a significant role when engaging with funeral home websites (refer to Figure 5.44). Some respondents from Generations X

and Y seem to be less of a determinant, but these figures are less than 15% of the overall responses. These findings confirm that integrity and trust projected from funeral homes is valued across all generations.

Figure 5.44: Generational responses to trust
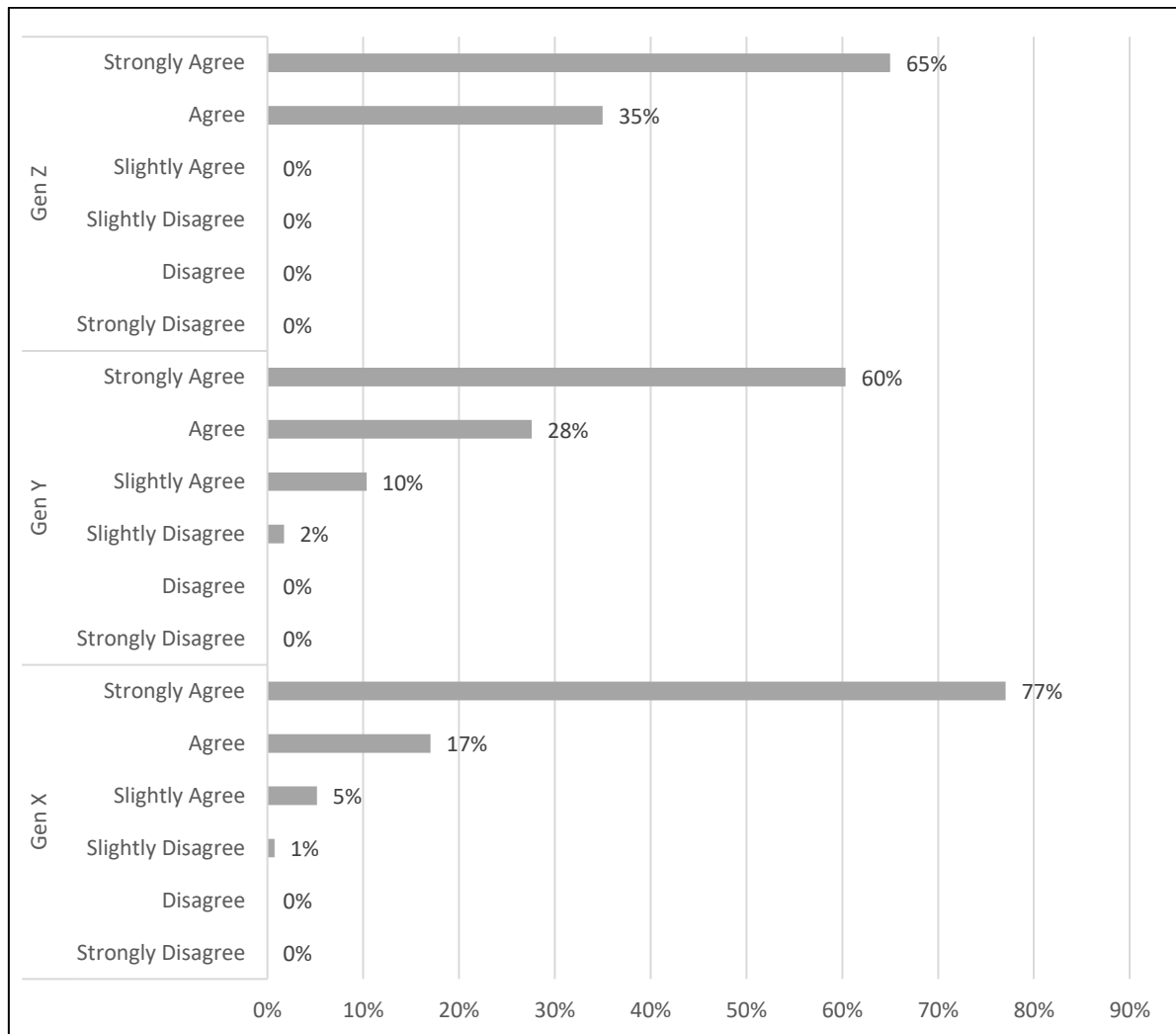
Source: Researcher's own construction

It is evident from the responses that in addition to SEO, PU and PV, sound moral and ethical practices will significantly contribute to building trust with funeral home customers and advancing any CRM activities of the funeral home.

RQ4: DO CUSTOMERS' TRUST BELIEFS IN A FUNERAL HOME WEBSITE IMPACT THEIR PURCHASE INTENTIONS?

Considering the servicescape aggregator variables related to the SEO, PU and PV constructs, it is concluded that the collective would considerably influence customers' trusting beliefs in a funeral home's online offering. Therefore, it is imperative that the websites of funeral homes adhere to these constructs to gain and maintain customers' trust and support the servicescape CRM efforts of the funeral home.

Additional research has also shown that most of the respondents believe that funeral homes should put the customer's needs first and not only use the website as a marketing tool but to build relationships through integrity to create trust in their offerings. These findings concur with Trehan and Sharma's (2020:403) statement that trust is a significant predictor of purchase intention.

5.2.5 Purchase intention

Purchase intention is regarded as a predictor of the actual purchase (Nisar *et al.*, 2020:874) and therefore act as a mediator of purchase behaviour (Lee & Lee, 2015:66). However, customer purchase behaviour is dichotomous and will either result in the customer purchasing or not purchasing the product or service (Dewi *et al.*, 2020:285).

An additional question was posed to respondents relating to purchase intention (refer to Figure 5.45).

Figure 5.45: Respondents' intent to purchase
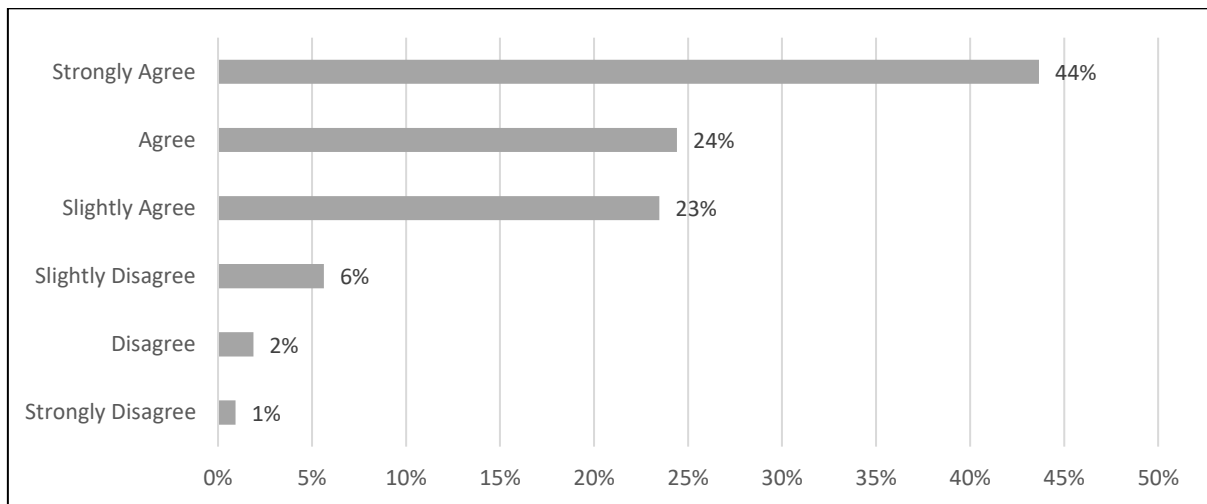
Source: Researcher's own construction

Respondents were asked if they will use the services of a funeral home because they perceive the information on the website as suitable for planning a funeral. 91% of the respondents agreed to some extent. This indicates that the dichotomy of the purchase intention in this instance leans towards the positive rather than the negative, which confirms Nisar *et al.'s* (2020:874) statement that purchase intention acts as a predictor of the actual purchase.

5.7 SUMMARY

This chapter presented the data analysis and discussion of the findings from both website analysis and the survey responses. The discussion followed the conceptual model to discuss the key constructs and their associated variables to determine if it would influence consumers trust and purchase intention of funeral home services. It was found that SEO, PU and PV will affect the trust construct, which will influence customers' purchase intentions of a funeral home's services.

The information from the data analysis will be used to construct a servicescape for funeral industry websites. The servicescape will be presented in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study approached the funeral industry from an online perspective, specifically, from the role of the online servicescape as a moderator for excellence in Customer Relationship Management (CRM). Noted in Chapter 1 is the fact that secondary research pertaining to the topic of the study revealed that this type of investigation has not been conducted before, which makes this a world-first attempt at constructing an online servicescape for funeral industry websites. The original contribution of the study to the greater body of knowledge is the creation of an online servicescape framework for industries which operates in the unsought service environments, such as the funeral industry.

A quantitative, exploratory approach was implemented to determine which factors will significantly contribute to the construction of an online servicescape for the funeral industry. The study depended on Bitner's (1992a:60) seminal model of a servicescape, Harris and Goode's (2010:230-243) model for online servicescapes, and the key constructs of Simon's (1996:141-142) Design Theory to provide a methodological basis to construct the key elements for a funeral industry based online servicescape. Three key constructs were deployed to structure the online servicescape, namely Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), customers' perceived usefulness (PU) and the perceived value (PV) of the website.

The chapter commences by discussing the insights gained pertaining to the three key constructs of the study. Throughout the discussion, wireframes and examples from existing funeral home websites were used to construct the elements of an ideal online servicescape for the funeral industry. The limitations of the study is presented

thereafter, followed by recommendations for future research to refine the servicescape framework for the funeral industry.

6.2. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Building on the website content analyses and survey results, a servicescape framework for the funeral home servicescape is presented in this section based on the research questions posed in Chapter 1.

6.2.1 Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

The first step in the research process was to determine which SEO functions could be applied to improve the visibility of the funeral home on the internet when searches are conducted. The second step was to determine which factors will affect the accessibility to the website from a general online search. These aspects addressed the first research question of the study: *Which aspects of SEO will influence customers' perceptions of a funeral home website?*

IMPROVING SEARCH RESULT VISIBILITY

This study approached visibility from the customer's perspective by searching online for a funeral home. The key takeaway from the data findings indicated that respondents would use generic, industry-related search terms to search for funeral homes online, not the funeral home's name *per se*. The name of the funeral home did not hold a high priority with respondents as they would rather use industry identifiers such as "funeral", "funeral home", "funeral director", and "funeral services" to search for funeral homes. Respondents furthermore indicated that they would use the location (city, area, country) where the funeral home is located, in addition to the industry identifiers, to search for a funeral home. Less than 40% of the

respondents indicated that they would use the services offered by a funeral home to conduct a search. The design implication is that industry-specific keywords should be tagged as primary keywords, and service-related keywords should be tagged as secondary keywords to create higher visibility on SERPs.

Contrary to the survey results, the content analysis of existing funeral home websites showed that 80% of the URLs contained the name of the funeral home. Although contrary to the survey results, this remains a critical finding. If customers become familiar with the name of a funeral home through a referral, a name search would be conducted.

To accommodate all generations from all countries, it was determined that funeral home websites should ensure accessibility on both Microsoft and Mac powered devices. The websites must furthermore be accessible on different devices. Most of the respondents indicated that they access the internet daily from more than one device, specifically mobile devices such as smartphones (94%) and laptops (77%). Accessibility from different devices operating on different systems is of particular importance for funeral homes, as 82% of the respondents indicated that they would use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home. Hence, most respondents indicated that they would consider the website ineffective if they could not access it from a SERP.

The importance of a well-constructed URL becomes paramount for a funeral home because most respondents indicated that they would perceive the funeral home's website as ineffective if they could not find nor access it from a SERP.

To address the issue of the construction of the URL for a funeral home, it is suggested that a funeral home include both the name of the funeral home and an industry specifier. Alternatives to the URL can be constructed to include several

variations (refer to Table 6.1). Note that information from the websites analysed was used to build alternative examples.

Table 6.1: Examples of well-structured URLs

Prefix	Name	Industry Identifier	Suffix
www	windsor	funeralhome	.com.au
www	khulana	funerals	.co.za
www	oneills	funeraldirectors	.co.uk

Source: Researcher's own construction

The URLs in Table 6.1 all include the funeral home's full name plus an industry identifier such as funeral home, funerals or funeral directors, which will make it easier for any crawler to identify. The suffixes .com.au (Australia), .co.za (South Africa), and .co.uk (United Kingdom) will suffice when a search such as "funeral homes australia/southafrica/unitedkingdom" is entered into a search engine.

Table 6.2: Examples of URLs that could be ambiguous

Prefix	Name	Industry Identifier	Suffix
www	wdrose	None	.com.au
www	waldingandson	None	.co.uk
www	baygardens	None	.ca
www	armstrong	fh	.ca

Source: Researcher's own construction

The URL breakdowns in Table 6.2 could be improved to be more efficient. In the instance of wdrose, waldingandson, and baygardens, the industry identifiers could be added to distinguish the businesses like funeral homes. As is, the URLs could portray any type of business in any industry.

On the websites, the full names of these funeral homes are displayed as:
- W.D. Rose Funerals (W.D. Rose Funerals, 2021)
- Walding & Son | Funeral directors (Walding & Son, 2021)

- Bay Gardens Funeral Home (Bay Gardens Funeral Home.ca, 2021)

It is recommended that these funeral homes add the industry identifiers as it is portrayed on their websites to their URLs to increase search visibility. In the instance of armstrongfh, it is suggested that instead of using the abbreviation "fh", that the full, descriptive industry identifier "funeral home" be included in the URL.

Based on the analyses and findings from the survey, it is concluded that a sufficient URL would constitute a clear description of the name of the funeral home followed by an industry descriptor (refer to Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1: Suggested URL construction for funeral homes

$$www.funeralhomenameindustrydescriptor.suffix$$

Source: Researcher's own construction

Once a sufficient URL is constructed, funeral homes must ensure that all available search engines can source the URL. The respondents indicated an array of search engines used to search for information online such as Google, Bing, Safari, Firefox and more. Not only should the URLs be visible on these search engine results pages (SERPs), but it should also open to the funeral home's website to increase reliability perceptions of the customers.

However, URL keywords are not freestanding search indicators. When a crawler collects information from a keyword search, it also looks at several other options. The added keyword options increase the visibility ranking of a funeral home's website on a SERP. These keywords are embedded in the headings and text of the website pages. Additional keywords were identified as main header (H1), metadata (D), and meta keywords (K), or tags in the page titles (T) of a website.

Figure 6.2 suggests some page title tags techniques gathered from the content analysis that a funeral home could apply to its website. The website's main header (H1) should include the name of the funeral home and the industry identifier such as funeral home, director, or undertaker. The title pages are presented as buttons or main headers on a website in Figure 6.2. Each button represents a link to different pages on the website (refer to Figure 6.3). The links to content headers on each page can be added as searchable keywords in the form of title page tags (T). It is also possible to create on-page meta keyword tags (K) from information on these pages to increase the website's searchability. Note that the buttons or links are also referred to as navigation buttons. The navigation on a website is discussed in Section 6.2.2: Interactivity and Navigability. From a design perspective, tagged navigation buttons serve a dual purpose as it supports the navigation of a website and add to the searchability of a website.

Figure 6.2: Suggested main header and page title tags

A Web Page

https://www.name+industrydescriptor.suffix

Logo · About Us · Our Services · Support Services · Funerals · Contact Us
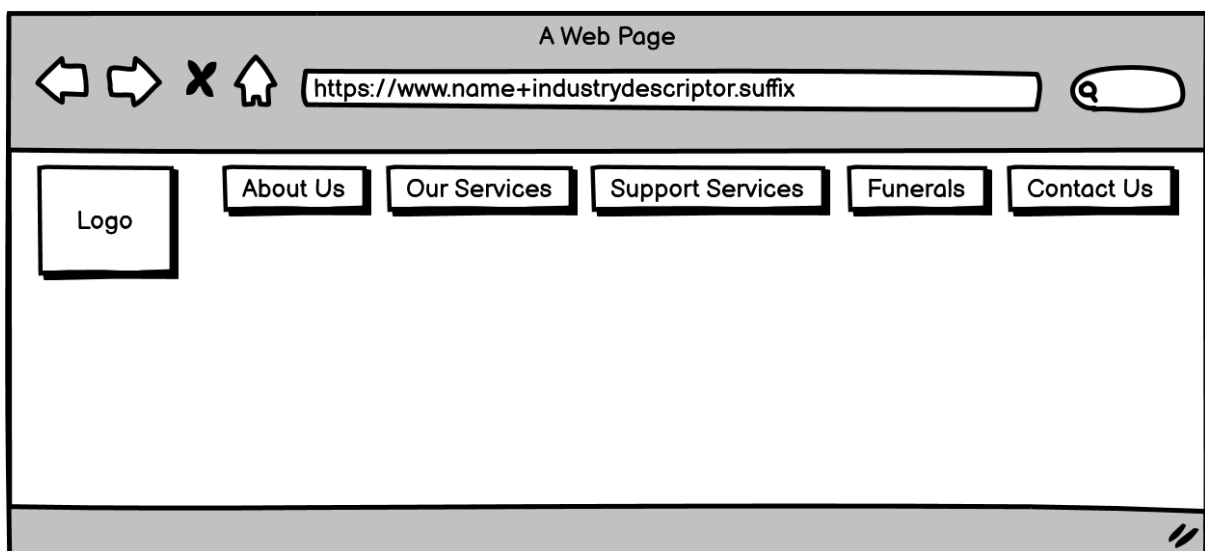
Source: Researcher's own construction

Figure 6.3: Examples of extended page title tags


```
Name + Funeral Home/Director(s)/Undertakers

  ┌──────────┐          ┌──────────┐          ┌──────────────┐
  │ About Us │          │ Services │          │ Contact detail│
  └──────────┘          └──────────┘          └──────────────┘
                    ┌──────────────┐      ┌──────────────────┐
                    │ Cremations   │      │ Location Street  │
                    │ Memorials    │      │ Location Area    │
                    │ Burials      │      │ Location City    │
                    │ Caskets      │      │ Location Country │
                    │              │      │ Phone numbers    │
                    │              │      │ Directions       │
                    └──────────────┘      └──────────────────┘
```
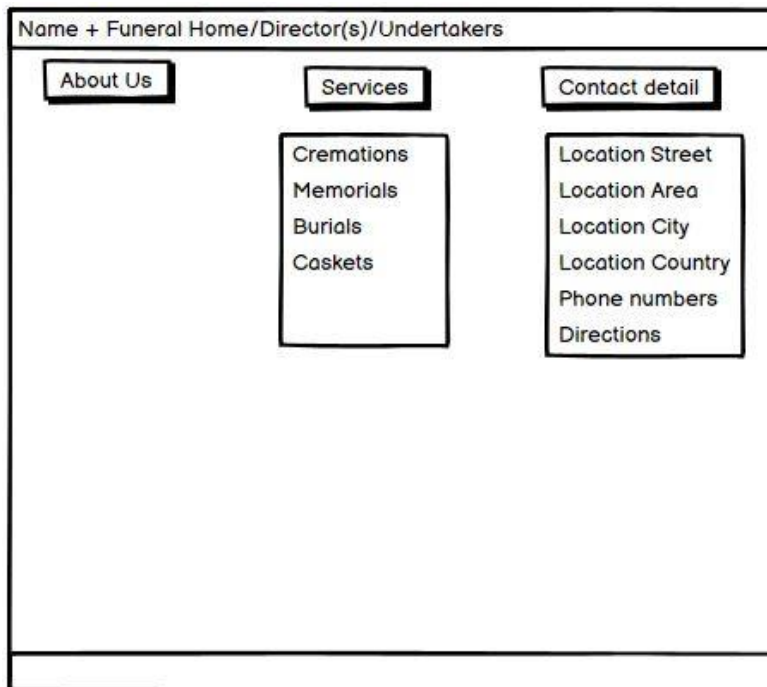
Source: Researcher's own construction

Meta tags (D) provide information about the webpage in the HTML construction of the website. It is not something that is visible to the user and appears behind the website's interface. Although it is not visible on the interface, it can be read by search engines and web crawlers. Search engines use metadata from meta tags to read additional information about the webpage. Figure 6.4 contains an example of how meta tags are created with the HTML language behind the interface.

Figure 6.4: Example of meta tags as it appears behind the interface

```
</script>

    <meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width, initial-scale=1.0">
<meta charset="utf-8" /><script type="text/javascript">window.NREUM||(NREUM={});NREUM.info = {"beacon":"bam.nr-data.net","errorBeacon":"bam.nr
<meta name="format-detection" content="telephone=no" />
    <link rel="shortcut icon" href="/Content/Media/HeritageFuneralCentre/favicon.ico" type="image/x-icon">


<title>Heritage Funeral Centre | Toronto, ON Funeral Home &amp; Cremation</title>
<meta name="description" content="Heritage Funeral Centre in Toronto, ON provides funeral, memorial, aftercare, pre-planning, and cremation se

<script type="application/ld+json">
    {
    "@context" : "http://schema.org",
    "@type" : "Organization",
        "name" : "Heritage Funeral Centre",
    "url" : "https://www.heritagefuneralcentre.ca",
    "sameAs" : [
        "https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Funeral-Service---Cemetery/Heritage-Funeral-Centre-258576670825431/"
    ],
    "contactPoint" :
    { "@type" : "ContactPoint",
    "telephone" : "Phone: (416) 423-1000",
    "faxNumber": ""
    }
    }
</script>
```

Source: Heritage Funeral Centre (2021)

This example includes several funeral industry related content, contact detail, and geographical detail in the meta tags such as Toronto (geographical location), funeral, memorial, aftercare, pre-planning and cremation. The website analyses, combined with the survey responses, suggested that funeral homes' services could be prioritised with meta tags to increase search result visibility. A list of service-related keywords with the highest frequencies extracted from the content analysis is depicted in Figure 6.5.

Figure 6.5: Suggested meta tags for funeral home websites
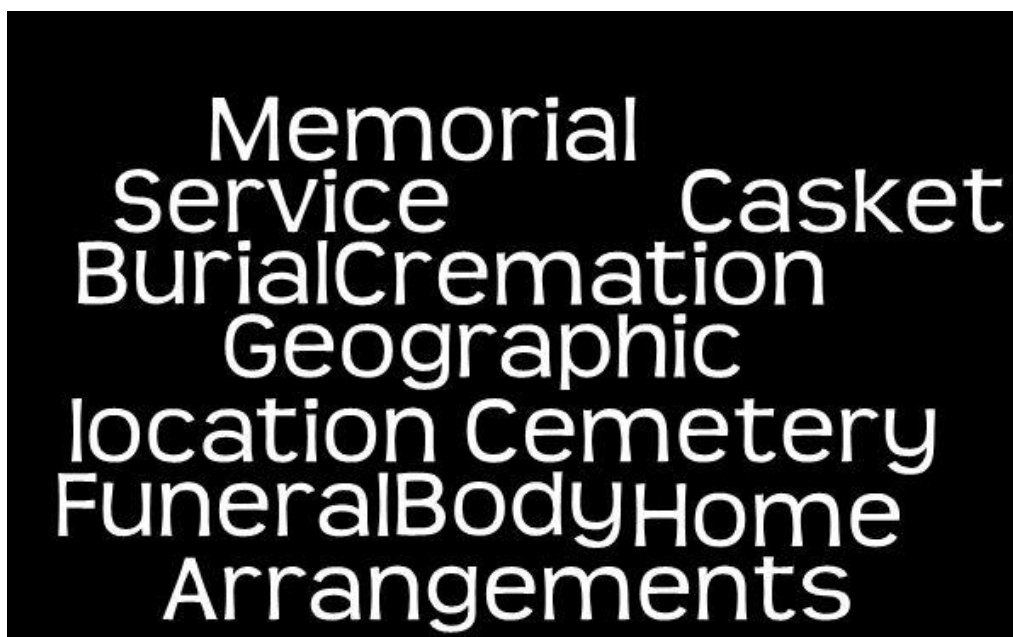
Source: Researcher's own construction

ENSURING SEAMLESS ACCESSIBILITY

The survey responses showed that all generations predominantly use smartphones daily to search for information. 77% of the respondents indicated that they use more than one device, indicating a laptop as their second choice of device to access the internet. Apart from accessing the funeral home's website from a SERP, the customer must also be able to access the funeral home's website from a device of their choice. The implication for the funeral home is to ensure that the design of, and information contained on the website, is adaptable to and accessible on multiple devices.

In addition to the preferred devices, several respondents indicated that they use a wide variety of search engines to access the internet. For instance, Generation Z (65%) indicated that they use Safari as a search engine. Considering that Safari is a MAC operated search engine, just as Microsoft Edge or Google are pre-installed on non-Mac devices, funeral homes should ensure that their websites are accessible via various search engines. Although the website might slightly differ from device to

device because of the interface, the same information on the laptop or desktop should also be available on mobile and tablet versions of the website. Figures 6.6 and 6.7 depict the same funeral home's home page on two different devices.

Figure 6.6: Example of a laptop display of a funeral home page
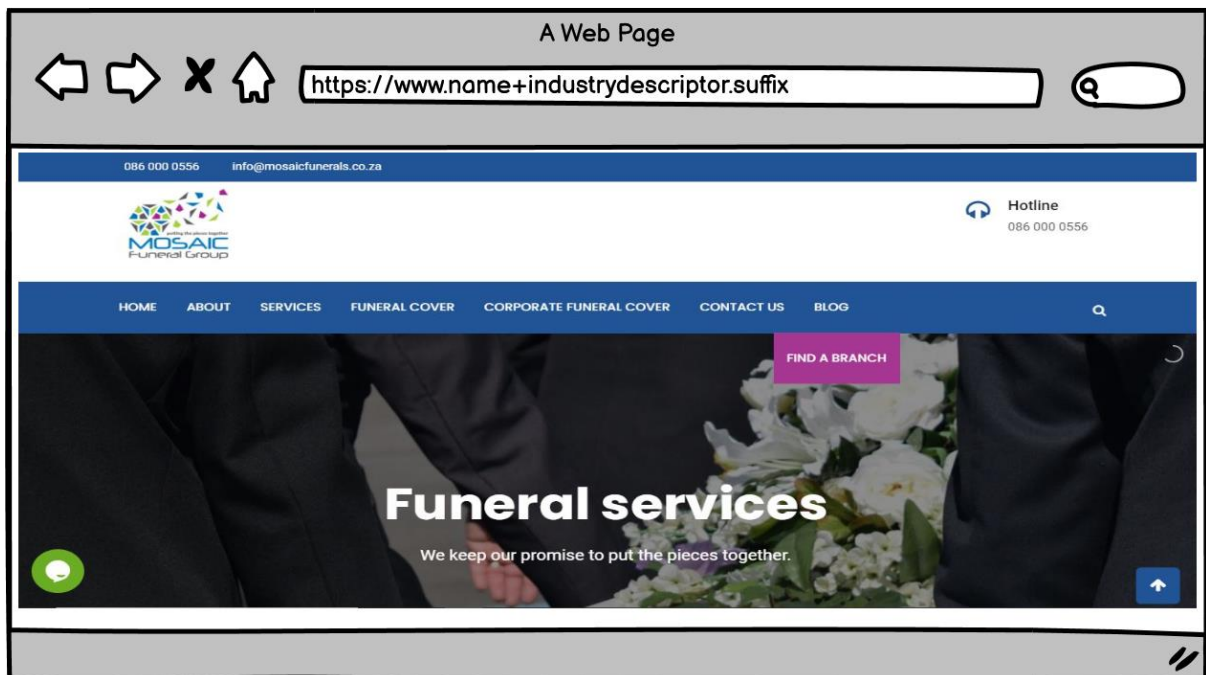
Sources: Mosaic Funerals (2021); Researcher own construction

Figure 6.7: Example of a smartphone display of a funeral home webpage
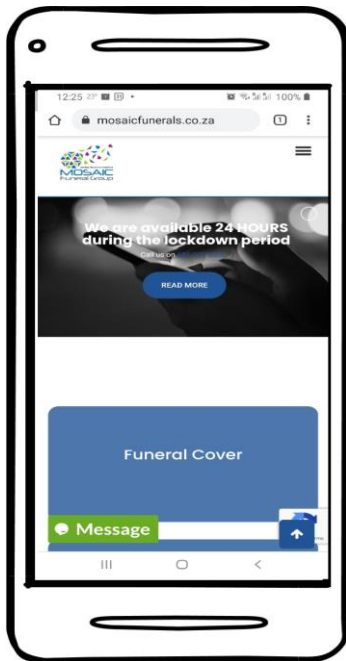
Sources: Mosaic Funerals (2021); Researcher own construction

Accessing a funeral home's website from any device and via any type of search engine will ensure greater visibility and accessibility.

6.2.2 Perceived usefulness (PU)

The study approached a website's perceived usefulness from the contactability, usability, and navigability and perspectives. The second research question addressed these components: *Will a funeral home website's perceived usefulness impact customers' trust beliefs in the funeral home?*

CONTACTABILITY

Most respondents placed a high premium on sufficient contact details on a website. 97% of the respondents placed a high premium on contactability as they most probably will need to contact the funeral home beyond the website when arranging

a funeral. Of the different contact options, respondents across all generations indicated email, mobile phone, and landline telephone numbers to be essential contact options. In addition to these three contact options, the content analysis indicated an added contact option: a physical address. To this extent, respondents indicated that they would prefer an electronic map rather than written directions to the funeral home. From a design perspective, it was determined that contact details could either be displayed on the home page or the website's contact page or both. The findings only showed a slight variance of 9% between the placement options of contact detail on a website.

In both the content analysis and the survey, links to funeral home social media pages were considered an extended contact option. Nearly all the websites had a link to a Facebook page. The information gathered from the data collection indicated that funeral homes could benefit from having additional social media accounts such as YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn profiles as it would extend the reach of the funeral home and allow for more interactivity from customers.

The content analysis indicated that most websites placed their social media links at the bottom of the home page. This finding could be considered in terms of the placement of the funeral home's direct contact information. It is proposed that a *vice versa* placement of contact details should be considered. The contact details and the social media links must be placed together at the bottom of a website's home page and on the contact page of a website. Figure 6.8 presents an online servicescape framework of a funeral home contact detail page.

Figure 6.8: Framework of the contact detail page
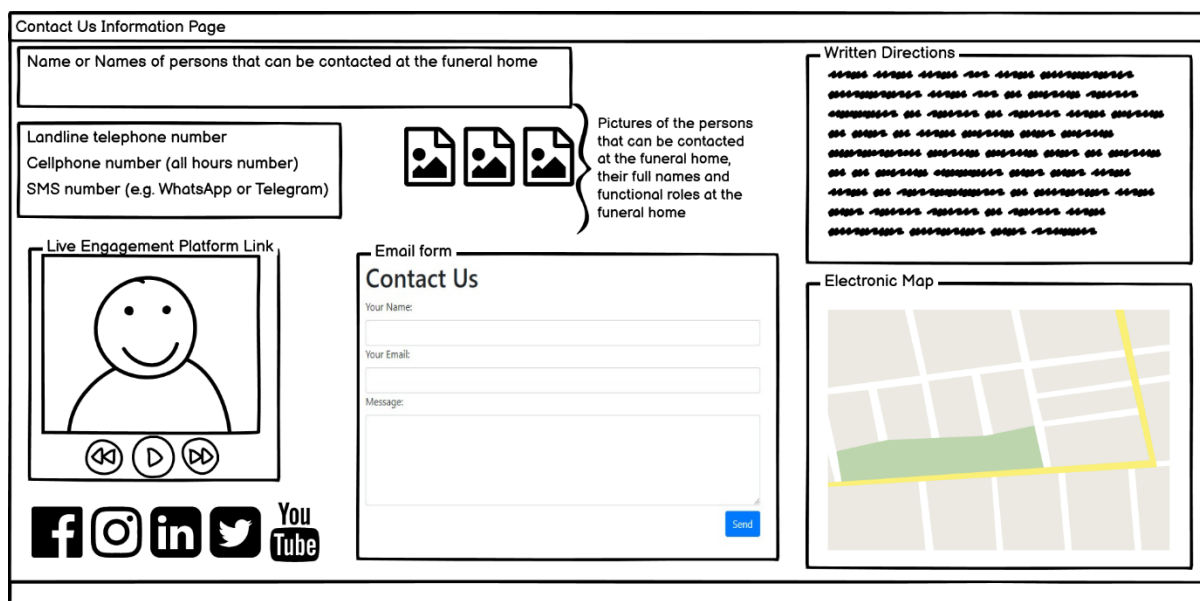
Source: Researcher's own construction

USABILITY

The majority of the respondents indicated that their perceptions of a website's usefulness would be affected by the degree to which they can navigate seamlessly on a website. Sitemaps are practical tools to support developers in designing website layout and increase navigation and crawling options. It is a hierarchical representation of the website content. The content analysis findings indicated that 80% of the websites analysed contain sitemaps, indicating that the developers of the existing funeral home websites pre-plan the design of the websites and provide additional navigational support to customers on the website.

Sitemaps are usually added to the website's interface and placed at the bottom of the home page (refer to Figure 6.9). The user can access the sitemap (refer to Figure 6.10) if they need to find specific information on the website quickly.

Figure 6.9: Placement of a sitemap link on a website's home page
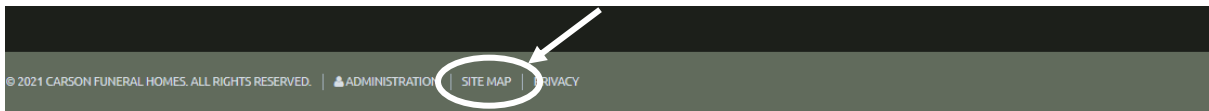
Source: Carson Funeral Home (2021a)

Figure 6.10: Example of a sitemap on a funeral home website
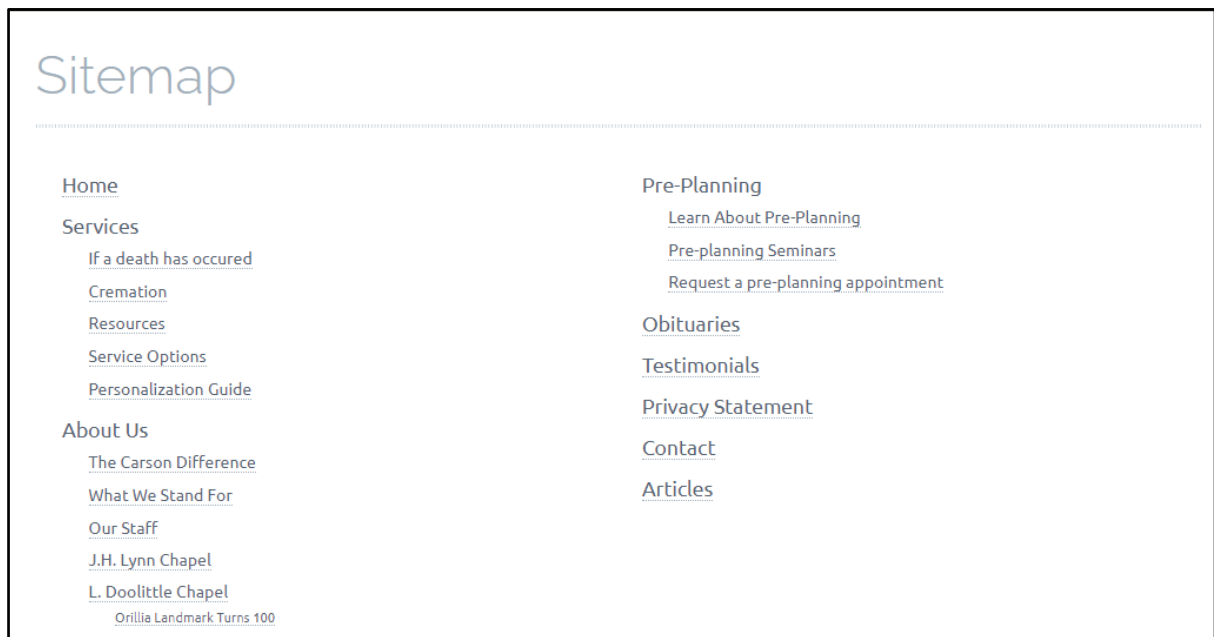
Source: Carson Funeral Home (2021b)

Based on the research findings, a typical sitemap of a funeral home should include the following main pages: home page, comprehensive information about the funeral home (about us), the services offered by the funeral home, obituaries and funeral notices, messages of condolences, support services such as funeral planning and bereavement counselling, and comprehensive contact detail (refer to Figure 6.11).

Figure 6.11: A sitemap for a funeral home website
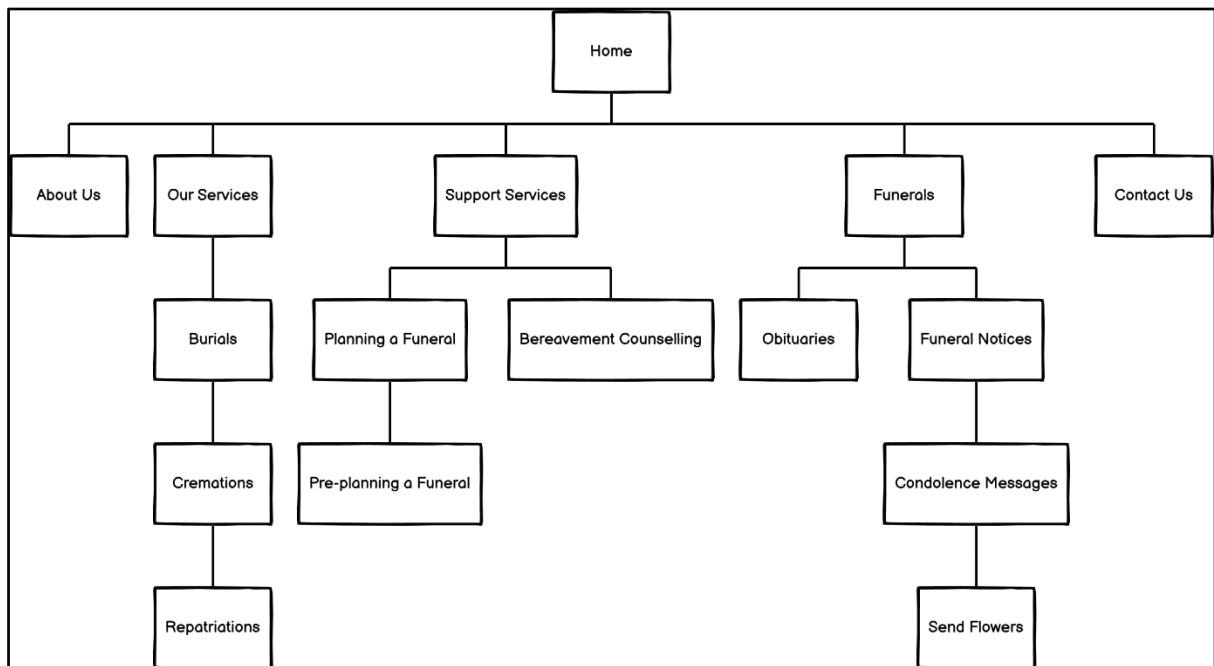
Source: Researcher's own construction

INTERACTIVITY AND NAVIGABILITY

The interactivity and navigability of a website will considerably influence customers' usefulness perceptions. More than 50% of the respondents indicated that they would not interact with the funeral home if the information on the website is not sufficient or if they cannot find information. The respondents rated three critical determinants of interactivity as important: sufficient information, clarity of information, and finding information on a website. The website's design will have a decisive impact on these factors, hence the importance of a sitemap (discussed in Section 6.2.2: Usability). The sitemap is the first step in designing the navigation of the website. Once the sitemap is conceptualised, the web designer can develop the different website pages and their content.

The findings from the survey and the content analysis indicated that both operational and industry-specific navigation buttons are requisites for successful navigation on a funeral home website. Operational navigation buttons refer to the general navigation on a website. In contrast, industry-specific buttons refer to specific services offered by the funeral home, such as funeral planning, obituaries, and funeral notices. Although industry identifiers are unique to the funeral industry, certain design aspects can be generalised to appeal to all users. Terminology such as About Us, Contact Us and Service(s) can be used as main headings to appeal to anyone who visits the website. The placement of navigational buttons is usually at the top or to the left of the website and repeats on every page. The content analysis confirmed that most of the websites (85%) displayed their navigation buttons at the top of the web page.

Figure 6.12 depicts a framework of a funeral home website's key navigation buttons. The information shown in Figure 6.10 is a combination of the highest frequency of appearances on the websites analysed and the survey preference responses.

Figure 6.12: Framework of a funeral home website navigation buttons
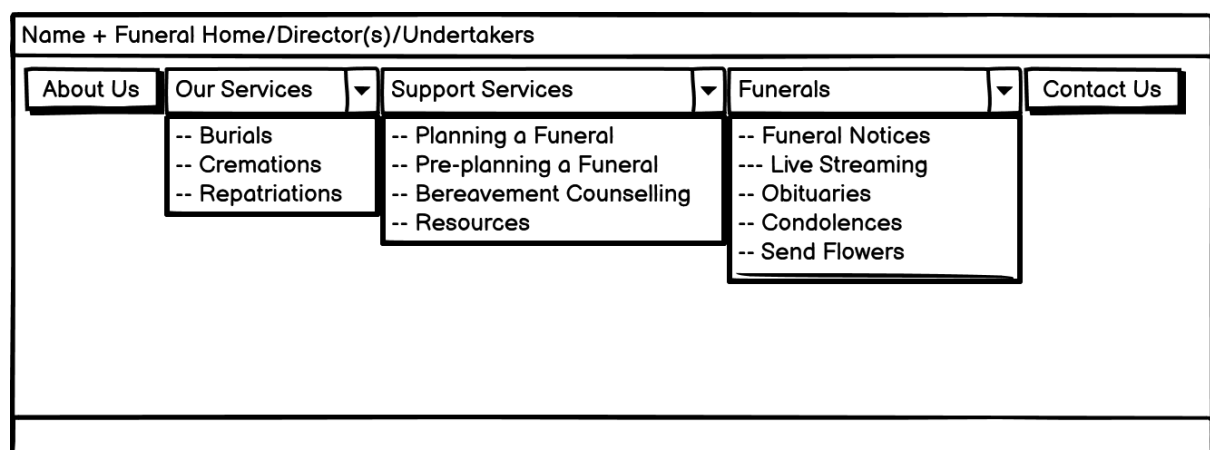
Source: Researcher's own construction

From the information gathered for this section of the study, it is evident that the website's usability, the option to contact the funeral home beyond the website, and

the effortless interactivity and navigability of a website will significantly impact users' trust beliefs in a funeral home website.

6.2.3 Perceived value (PV)

In addition to the SEO construct and perceived usefulness of a website, a funeral home website's perceived value was also assessed. This was based on the third research question of the study: *Will a funeral home website's perceived value impact customers' trust beliefs in the funeral home?*

The variables assessed in this construct are related to service interaction, the relevance of information and the quality of the funeral home's services.

The first value indicator of the perceived value construct showed that 92% of the respondents would review several funeral home websites before deciding which one to use. This, coupled with the fact that 90% of the respondents indicated that they would read the testimonials on the funeral home website before committing, clearly shows the value of having positive feedback in the form of testimonials on a website. Considering that only 32% of the websites analysed contained testimonials, there is considerable room for improvement in this area.

Despite the high-ranking aspects such as reliable and consistent information and an aesthetically attractive website, respondents still indicated that they would be cautious about dealing with a funeral home based on the website information only. The respondents also clearly stated that they would not recommend the services of a funeral home without physical interaction with the funeral home. This finding underscores the relevance of information on a funeral home's website, as it will significantly influence customers' perceptions of the funeral home. Besides relevance of information, 73% of the respondents expected funeral homes to be fair

in their conduct due to the unique situation in which the funeral services are delivered. Therefore, the servicescape must portray a substantial value proposition to customers.

Testimonials will also largely influence respondents' trust in a funeral home, leading to purchase intention. Only 32% of the websites analysed contained a dedicated space on their websites to testimonials. 90% of the respondents indicated they would read testimonials on a website before they decide to engage with a funeral home. Based on these findings, it is suggested that funeral homes add as many, recent testimonials as possible to their website home page and continue to update it to keep it relevant.

Relevancy of information not only relates to recent and updated testimonials, but it is also imperative that all other aspects related to the funeral home be considered. These aspects refer to funeral notices, services offered, contact detail, and information about the funeral home, in general. 80% of the survey respondents valued reliable and consistent information as a determinator of perceived value.

Considering all components investigated in the study, Figure 6.13 presents the framework for an ideal funeral home servicescape. The framework contains a relevant URL, options for tagged keywords that will increase search visibility and accessibility, and clear navigation and usability options. Additional components relate to detailed contact options and factors that increase perceived value, such as testimonials.

Figure 6.13: Framework of a funeral home's online servicescape
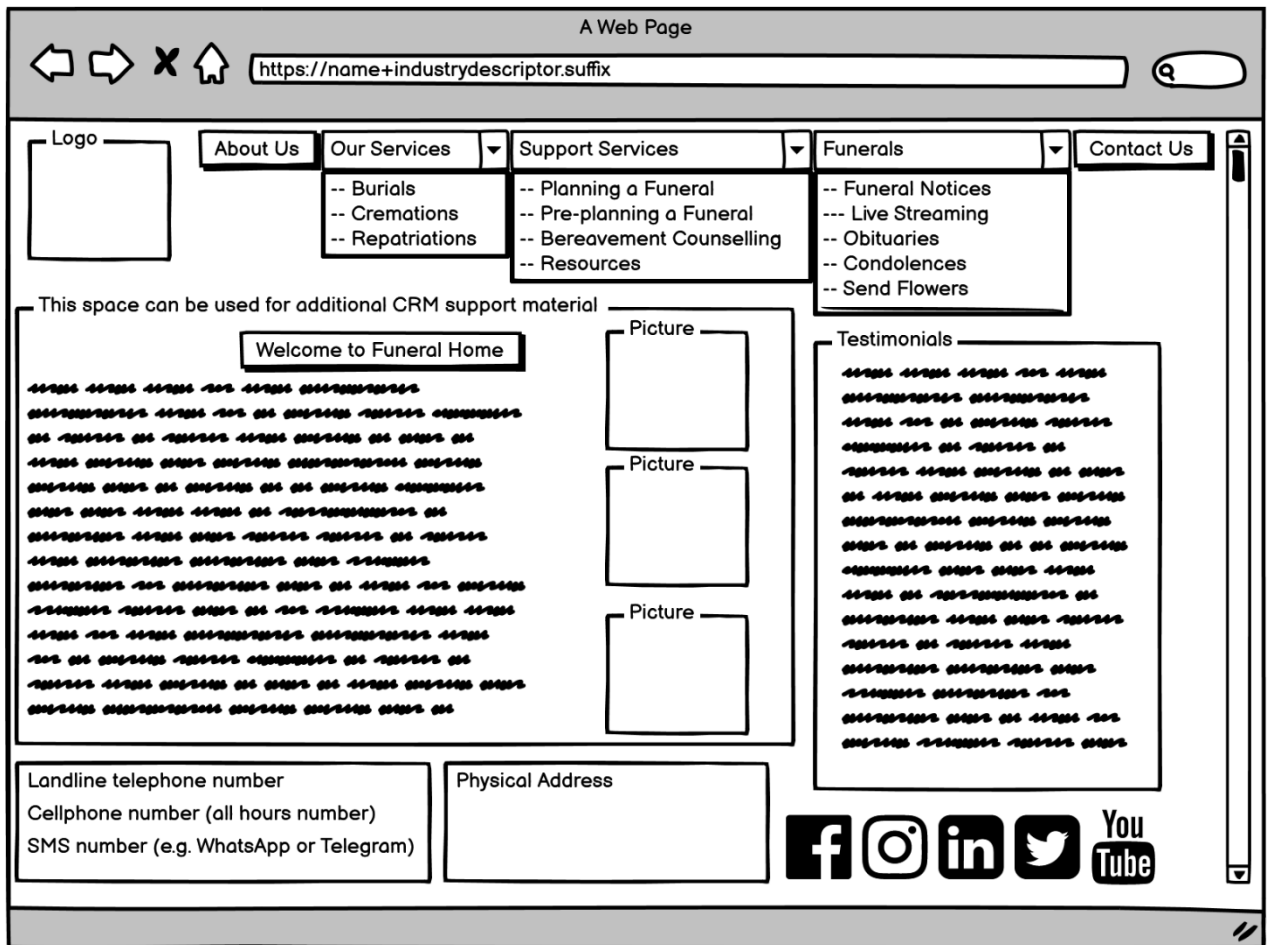
Sources: Researcher's own construction

6.2.4. Trust in the website

Despite the value of a good page design, trust factors will still play a significant role in customers' decision-making process. The trust aspect was based on the fourth research question: *Do customers' trust beliefs in a funeral home website impact their purchase intentions?*

Considering the servicescape aggregator variables related to SEO, perceived usefulness and perceived value constructs, the data indicated that the collective would considerably influence customers' trusting beliefs in a funeral home's online offering. Therefore, it is imperative that the websites of funeral homes adhere to

these constructs to gain and maintain customers' trust and support the servicescape CRM efforts of the funeral home.

Additional research has also shown that most of the respondents believe that funeral homes should put the customer's needs first and use the website as a marketing tool and build relationships through integrity to create trust in their offerings.

6.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's limitations are presented in terms of its design, impact, and statistical limitations.

6.3.1 Research design limitations

A cross-sectional, exploratory design was conducted. Although a cross-sectional design sufficed the purpose of the study's exploratory nature, a longitudinal study might have delivered more insights into the construction of an online servicescape for the funeral industry. A longitudinal study would have allowed the exploration of Bitner's (1992a:60) additional servicescape components such as ambient conditions and signs, symbols, and artefacts. Testing different versions of online servicescape variables over an extended period of time might have yielded more in-depth insights on the core components of an ideal online servicescape for the funeral industry.

6.3.2 Impact limitations

The population of the study focussed on five English speaking countries globally. Although the study only concentrated on the functional and spatial layout of the

servicescape, considering the diverse cultural aspects of potential customers could have provided more insights into the expectations of different cultures from funeral home websites. For example, consider the funeral traditions of diverse cultures. Diverse cultures reside within the current population of each selected country. Including the cultural expectations of different cultures regarding the conduct of a funeral could have provided more detail determine from the content analysis if the funeral homes adhere to or deliver these types of services, and how it should be positioned on the website to accommodate the diversity of customers. These insights could have significantly contributed to the functional and spatial design of the servicescape.

6.3.3 Statistical limitations

Due to lack of funding and subsequent financial restraints, a descriptive analysis of the data was conducted. Although descriptive analysis suffices for an exploratory study, additional statistical analyses such as exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses might have yielded better statistical insights.

Despite repeated efforts to collect responses for the survey, it yielded a low response rate. A more significant response rate to the equation of at least 500 respondents per country could have delivered more insights into customer preferences. Another aspect that influenced the responses was the uneven number of responses received per country and generational cohort. An even response rate to the survey would have allowed for a more in-depth comparison of customer preferences of the website components and device usage.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The recommendations for further research address a gap in the current research model, and extended framework for further research and new contexts that can be explored, which will contribute to funeral homes' overall online CRM efforts.

6.4.1 Addressing a gap in the current model

The study only explored the functional component of Bitner's (1992a:60) seminal model in the online context. The seminal model components that remain to be explored are the emotional (benevolence trust) and physiological (reliability trust) impacts on customers. Considering the nature of the funeral industry and the conditions in which the customer will seek the services of a funeral home, it is recommended that these components also be investigated to construct an online servicescape that includes all the elements pertaining to a servicescape.

6.4.1 An expanded framework

This study focussed on the functional and spatial aspects of an online servicescape that could influence a customer's trust perceptions. A consecutive study should also explore visual elements of a website, such as colour use, imagery, and descriptive content. To this extent, additional research methods could be applied. Either an A/B or multivariate test can be used to determine customers' perceptions in the context of these added components. A/B tests involve testing two versions of the same website or a website page to see which performs better. At the same time, multivariate testing explores multiple website versions to see which combination delivers the best results (Stokes, 2018:528-529). The findings of these tests could provide valuable information to designers, website administrators, and funeral home directors regarding the overall visual presentation of the website.

6.4.2 New Contexts

One aspect that was not explored in this study is how funeral homes integrate second-generation web-based services such as social media and customer-generated media (CGM) to build customer relationships. The integration of social media may generate or increase levels of gratification during the funeral arrangement and execution process that could improve customer relationships, online evaluation, and customer trust in the funeral home. Social media sites have become an online extension of traditional word-of-mouth by their very nature. These interactive platforms are considered an extension of the business' website and are used to influence customers' purchase decisions by enhancing their customer experience and establishing long-lasting relationships with customers (Daga, 2020:1810; Goraya *et al.*, 2021:183). Therefore, it is recommended that further explorations investigate which UGM's will be most suitable to the funeral industry to improve the online CRM efforts of a funeral home.

6.5 CONCLUSION

The study aimed to construct a functional, online servicescape for the funeral industry. Data was collected that would provide clarification as to which factors related to SEO, perceived usefulness and perceived value will influence customers' trust and subsequent purchase intentions. A content analysis was conducted on existing websites from five English speaking countries. Following the content analysis, a survey was conducted in each of the sampled countries that reflected the content analysis variables to a large extent.

The insights gained from data collected guided the process to form a functional, online servicescape for the funeral industry. It was determined that customers would trust a functional servicescape, which will most probably lead to a purchase

situation. However, customers also indicated the opposite if they detect anything on the website that might lead to distrust. It is therefore imperative for a funeral home to ensure that their online servicescape meets the functional needs of customers in order to not only ensure trust and purchase intention but to also be aware of the many customer relationship building options that are built-in along the customer journey when consulting the internet to find and engage with a funeral home.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure 1: Coding Checklist Example

	Coding Checklist: South Africa															
Reference Number	URL	V1,C3,Q5,Q6				V3,C5,Q8	V4,C6,Q9,Q10				V5,C7,Q11,Q12			V6,C8,Q13	V6	
		Website contains social media links	Social media links extracted for analysis	Social Media placement on site	Social Media placement on page	Website contains a sitemap	Website contains contact information	Contact information extrated for analysis	Contact information placement on site	Website contains navigaion buttons	Navigation buttons extracted for analysis	Navigation buttons placement on site	Website contains testimonials	Website contains list of services	List of services extracted for analysis
ZA44	https://egofunerals.co.za/	1	Facebook Twitter	Contact page	Bottom	1	1	Phyical address Landline Cell Fax Email	Contact page	1	Home About Services Showroom Contact	Top	1	1	Cover for the unforeseen Repatration Burial services Coping with grief Registration of death Memorials Grave removals or exhumation Assistance with policy claims
ZA45	http://destinyfunerals.co.za/funeral%20services.html	0		0	0	1	1	Phyical address Landline Emergency number Fax Email	Contact page	1	Home About us Services Gallery Contact	Top	0	1	Funeral services Insurance covers Private cremations Repatriation services
	Totals	33	0			38	43			42			16	43	
	Check	45	8			45	44			45			45	45	

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Annexure 2: Survey Questionnaire

Qualifying question

1. I use the internet to search for information.
☐ Yes
☐ No

Demographical information

2. What is your gender?
☐ Male
☐ Female
☐ Other

3. How old are you?
☐ 19 – 25
☐ 26 – 44
☐ 45 – 56
☐ 57 – 59

4. In which country do you currently reside?
☐ Australia
☐ Canada
☐ South Africa
☐ United Kingdom
☐ United States of America
☐ Other:

> *Please state your current country of residence.*

5. Which browser do you use to search for information on the internet?
☐ Google
☐ Google Chrome
☐ Firefox
☐ Explorer
☐ Safari
☐ Other:

> *Please state the browser you are using to search for*
>
> *information on the internet.*

[Accessibility]

6. Which of the following devices do you primarily use to access the internet?
☐ Desktop computer
☐ Laptop
☐ Tablet

☐ Smartphone
[Accessibility]

7. How regularly do you use the internet to search for information?
☐ Daily
☐ Once a week
☐ Once a month

Funeral Involvement

8. Have you ever arranged a funeral, or participated in some way with the arrangement of a funeral?
☐ Yes
☐ No

9. Have you used the internet to search for a funeral home?
☐ Yes
☐ No

Funeral home website perspective

10. I will use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Intention to use]

11. If the information provided on the website is not clear, I will not engage with the funeral home.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Usability]

12. I will not contact a funeral home if the website does not provide sufficient information.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Usability]

13. Proper contact information on a website is important because I must regularly communicate with the funeral home other than via the website.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Contactability]

14. If I do not find what I am looking for on a website, I consider it as ineffective.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Interactivity]

15. An effective website is easy to navigate between pages.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Interactivity/Navigability]

16. The layout of a website will influence my perception of the funeral home's effectiveness.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Interactivity/Navigability]

17. If I cannot access the website directly from a search page, I consider the funeral home as ineffective.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[SEO]

18. It must be easy to find information on the website with a minimum number of clicks to consider it an effective website.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Interactivity/Navigability]

19. Even though it is a funeral home website, it must still be aesthetically attractive.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Relevance of information]

20. I believe that a funeral home will always be fair in their treatment of customers due to the unique situation in which the service is delivered.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Service quality]

21. I will read testimonials from previous customers on the website before I decide to use a funeral home.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Service quality]

22. I will review several funeral home websites before I decide to contact a specific funeral home.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Service interaction]

23. A funeral home website should project a sense of integrity.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Trust]

24. It is imperative that the information provided on a funeral home website is reliable and consistent.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Trust]

25. I would be cautious to deal with a funeral home based on their website information only.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Trust]

26. A funeral home website must put my interests first and should not only be a marketing tool.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Trust]

27. I would recommend the services of a funeral home based on the information on their website.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Purchase intention]

28. I will use the services of a funeral home if I am convinced that the information on the website is suitable for the funeral I am planning.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Purchase intention]

29. I will use the internet to search for the services of a funeral home.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

[Purchase intention]

Keywords, Navigation buttons, and Contact information

31. Which of the following keywords are you most likely to use when searching for the service of a funeral home online? (Rank from 1-10, one being the most likely) [Visibility]

[*Insert keywords once extracted from websites*]

31. Which of the following navigation buttons do you prefer to see on a funeral home website navigation menu? (Select any of the following) [Usability/Navigability/Interactivity]

[*Insert navigation buttons once extracted from websites*]

32. Which of the following contact information are you most likely to use to contact a funeral home website? (Select any of the following) [Contactability]

☐ Landline telephone number
☐ Mobile telephone number
☐ E-mail address
☐ Electronic map

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☐ Written directions
☐ Instant messaging such as WhatsApp
☐ Live engagement platform such as Slack where you can have a face-to-face conversation with a funeral director
☐ Other:

Please state the communication option that you would prefer to use on the funeral home website.

Annexure 3: Plagiarism Report Summary

Annexure 4: Ethical Clearance Approval

From: Spies, Ursula (Mev) (2nd Avenue Campus)
To: Tait, Madele (Prof) (2nd Ave Campus); Coetzee, Cornelis, (Mr) (s221366598); cemeels.coetzee@gmail.com
Cc: Soji, Zoleka (Prof) (Summerstrand Campus South)
Subject: ACTION_MEMO RECH 21 April 2021 [H21-BES-BMA-019]
Date: 29 April 2021 14:19:25

REFERENCE NUMBER	H21-BES-BMA-019
TITLE	CONSTRUCTING AN ONLINE SERVICESCAPE FOR THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY
DEGREE	DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (BUSINESS MANAGEMENT)
RISK OF STUDY (as per risk assessment sheet)	MEDIUM
PRP	PROF MA TAIT
PI	MR C COETZEE
SUBMISSION DATE	21 APRIL 2021
DATE OF COMMENCEMENT	2021/05/01
DATE OF COMPLETION	2021/08/30
RECOMMENDATION	APPROVED WITH MINOR MODIFICATIONS

RECH RESOLUTION

- That protocol [H21-BES-BMA-019] be granted ethics approval on condition that the recommendations below be addressed and implemented.
- That **PROF Z SOJI** (Faculty: Health Sciences) be available for consultation with the PRP/PI in order to advise regarding the implementation of the recommendations.
- That, once amendments had been made to the satisfaction of the RECH representative, the amended signed electronic application be submitted to RD (Mr I Khan) and the RECH Secretariat (Ms U Spies).

It is the responsibility of the PRP/PI to make contact with the designated RECH representative should he/she require further assistance when attending to the recommendations made by the RECH. The PRP/PI would be given a period of three calendar months from the date of forwarding the RECH resolution by the RECH Secretariat within which to resubmit amendments to the protocol for final ethics approval to the designated RECH representative. Should the submission not be submitted within the said period, the PRP/PI would need to resubmit their application to RECH.

1	GENERAL PARTICULARS
1(d)	Use full stop/dot or period to replace the instruction - Specify here, if "other."
1(k)	• Date of commencement of data collected was indicated as **1 May 2021**. RECH cannot grant retrospective approval and as such, the start date of data collection be adjusted following approvals of minor amendments, RECH approval, and issue of ethics letter. • As ethics approval was only granted for one year, the researcher was reminded to re-apply for ethics clearance on a yearly basis until the data collection phase was complete.
1(l)	• The four secondary objectives were aimed at (i) collecting and synthesising literature against the noted domains, (ii) profiling the funeral industry websites against the noted sub-dimensions, (iii) determining customers perceived trust (sub objective 3) and (iv) determining customers perceived purchase intention (sub objective 4). • Consideration should be given of a further secondary objective that addressed the process of construction/development of the online servicescape.
1(m)	• Consider adding more recent sources to support the rationale and significance of the study. Especially in light of the recent changes to consumer perceptions regarding the funeral industry aligned to the COVID-19 pandemic, which might be an intervening variable to consider in terms of customer perceptions of value and intention to purchase. • Some sources cited by the researcher (PI) dated 1986 and 2010 needed to be revisited.
1(n)	The profile of a respondent would hence be from a predetermined, English-speaking country, between the ages of 18-74, either male or female who had previously consulted the services of a funeral home. Age: An age span of 18-60 years of age was proposed. Were these two different respondent groups? If not, then keep the age span consistent.
2	RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE STUDY
2(a)	• In 1(m), the researcher stated, "A third contributing factor is the emotional state of the