The Relationship between Restaurant Ambience and Customers' Satisfaction in Shah Alam Arabic Restaurants, Selangor

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A R T I C L E I N F O	**A B S T R A C T**
	Restaurant ambience plays an important role in establishing a restaurant image, and to attract customers to dine. Exterior and interior design that is eye-catching will pull the customer to visit the restaurants. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between restaurant ambience and customer satisfaction in the Arabic restaurants. This study also seeks to determine which restaurant ambience elements highly influence customer satisfaction. The elements of spatial layout, interior design, colour and music were measured. Quantitative data were collected from 411 respondents in Shah Alam, Selangor. It was found that colour is the element that is significantly and mostly influences customers' satisfaction. More detailed findings and implications are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, scholars have expressed interest in the role of the physical environment, or "ambience" on customer perceptions of quality and subsequent responses [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]. To gain a competitive advantage in today's market, restaurants have attempted to offer the best value of meals in a favourable ambience [6]. A restaurant that provides a pleasing ambience is more likely to attract customers in spending more time and money. On the other hand, ignoring the significance of a pleasing ambience will result in lower repeat-purchase intentions and a decline in customer confidence and patronage [7]. According to Rande [8] the ambience of the restaurant is made up of everything that makes an impression on the people such as design of the building, interior, colour scheme, texture of the walls and décor or decoration. The concept in casual dining restaurants is to create an ambience that will make the customers relax, and enjoy themselves. This concept partly aims at pleasing guests enough to make them want to return to the establishment. According to Horeco [9] ambience is a simple decoration that can give restaurants a competitive edge. The menu should match with your restaurant's concept or theme, ambience, your guest's expectations and kitchen's capacity to pull it all off [10]. Thus, it is worth to critically understand and create the restaurant ambience appropriately to enhance the restaurant image and revenue. In determining the concept, Wood and Munoz [11] emphasized that greater attention is required for the selection of a restaurant's decor, ambience and culture artefacts. Additionally, Guinness [12] supported elements such as restaurant design, employees, cultural artefacts, food, drink, and entertainment music are needed in order to be successful in restaurant businesses.

Currently, Arabic restaurant is one of the most famous restaurants in Malaysia. Since the tragedy of 11th September 2001 in America the Arab tourists visit Malaysia frequently especially during the summer. The tragedy had changed the global tourism scenario greatly including in Malaysia and other Islamic countries. According to Salleh, Redzuan, Abu, Mohd and Mohd [13] tourists especially from the Muslim countries are becoming more careful and selective in choosing their destinations for holiday. The statistic showed that the arrival of Middle East tourists to the United States had decreased sharply after the incident. In 2000, about 249,260 Middle East tourists visited the States but in 2002 and 2005, the numbers had decreased tremendously

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to 126,613 and 144,131, respectively. Similarly, the number of tourists' arrival at the United Kingdom, during the same period, declined from 429,000 to 360,000 and 380,000, respectively [14]. The increasing number of tourists from the Middle East indirectly impacted the increasing number of Arabic restaurants in Malaysia. The Statistic of tourists' arrival in 2010 shows that the number of tourists from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran that visit Malaysia is 86,771, 25,645 and 116,252 respectively. Meanwhile in 2011, the number showed an increase of about 15.6% tourist visit from Saudi Arabia; 87,693, UAE; 24,212 and Iran; 139,617 (Tourism Malaysia, 2012). United Federation of Travel Agents's Association (2012) stated that Malaysia recorded an overall growth of 1.2% tourist arrivals with 9,438,592 tourists for the first five months of 2012 as compared to 9,323,827 for the same period last year [14]. The data also showed the increasing number of tourists from Saudi Arabia of about 50.7%. The former Minister of Tourism Malaysia, Dato' Sri Dr. Ng Yen Yen said in Malaysia Tourism Transformation Plan 2020, Malaysia targets to achieve 36 million tourists and 168 billion in revenues by 2020 [13].

The increasing number of tourists arrival from the Middle East and the increasing number of Arabic restaurants in Malaysia perhaps has caused the Arabic restaurants becomes popular and well accepted by the Malaysian citizens. To sustain this theme restaurant and enhance the revenue, investigating the attributes that contribute to the actual concept of these restaurants is worth to be carried out. Although there are numerous studies regarding the Arab tourists and their behaviours, very few of the existing studies focus on the Arabic restaurants ambience. Hence, this study is very important to figure out what are the factors that satisfy customers in the Arabic restaurants ambience. In order to study customers' satisfaction with Arabic restaurant ambience elements, several objectives are developed as a guidance for this research, and these are: (i) to examine the relationship between spatial layout and customers' satisfaction in Arabic restaurants, (ii) to examine the relationship between interior design and customers' satisfaction in Arabic restaurants, (iii) to examine the relationship between colour and customers' satisfaction in Arabic restaurants, (iv) to examine the relationship between music and customers' satisfaction in Arabic restaurants and (v) to determine which attribute is the best predictor that influences customers' satisfaction in Arabic restaurants.

Literature review:
Customer satisfaction:

Zeithaml & Bitner [15] define satisfaction as a judgment that a product or service feature and provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment. Pizam and Ellis [16] define customers' satisfaction as the feeling of well-being and pleasure that results from obtaining what one hopes for and expects from an appealing product and/or service. Choi and Chu [17] consider satisfaction as an evaluation by customers that the food or service they have received is at least as good as it is supposed to be. Customers' satisfaction is defined as a post-purchase evaluative judgement concerning the purchase decision [18]. Oliver [19] also considered customers' satisfaction as "the consumer fulfilment response, the degree to which the level of fulfilment is pleasant or unpleasant", suggesting that satisfaction reflects the impact of the performance of the service provider on the customer's feeling state. Although customers' satisfaction has been defined differently, the underlying fact is that satisfaction is not a single entity, but comes in different states or levels.

Customer satisfaction is critically significant because it reflects subjective customer evaluations of the attribute performance associated with the consumption experience [20]. The nature of the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has received much attention in the services marketing literature [21, 22, 23, 24, 25]. As for customer's outcome behaviours, loyalty was measured using positive word of mouth, revisit intention and willingness to recommend, which were taken from Mattila [26] and Evanschitzky et al. [27]. Zeithaml [28] indicated that perceived value plays an important role in the consumer purchase decision making, suggesting that behavioural intentions are consequences of perceived value. When customers perceive high levels of value from consumption experiences, they tend to express positive behavioural intentions. Customers who have previous experiences that they perceive as highly valuable in terms of efficient and economical aspects will be more likely to have revisit intentions [29].

Restaurant ambience:

Ambience is the quality of the surrounding space that perceived by customers [30]. According to Kotler [2], it is the conscious designing of space to produce specific emotional effects in buyers that enhance their purchase probability. Ambience is made up of a set of elements, such as lighting, music, scent and colour. Research in environmental psychology has suggested that ambience have a powerful impact on customer's attitudes, emotions and behaviour. Mehrabian and Russell [31] first introduced a theoretical model to explain the impact of environmental stimuli on individual behaviour. Ryu and Jang [32] found that ambience (e.g. music, temperature and aroma) and employee appearance had the most important influence on customers' emotional responses, which in turn affected customers' post-dining behavioural intentions.

The food alone may not bring people to a restaurant at the first time but the lure might be an eye-catching of exterior design, a great media review, or a word of mouth recommendation will pull the customer to visit the

restaurants. The decor, ambience and service standards must all contribute to the customer's perception of the dining experience [33]. Jang and Ha [34] discovered that interior design of Korean culture (hereafter, interior design), traditional aspects of Korean foods, and fun and unique layout and facilities aesthetics (hereafter, layout and facilities aesthetics), was significantly related to customer satisfaction, whereas perceived value evoked by the entertaining effect of Korean music (hereafter, Korean music) and the exotic mood of the restaurant (hereafter, mood).

According to Zeithaml & Bitner, [15] the ambient conditions in a restaurants include the background characteristics of the restaurant environment such as interior decoration, exterior appearance, room temperature, lighting, music, noise and odour. Wakefield and Blodgett [3] point out that, customers may not return to a restaurant if they are not satisfied with the ambient conditions. Ambient factors profoundly affect how people feel, think and evaluate the ambience of a particular restaurant. Owing to the importance of ambient factors, the section below focuses on each of them separately and briefly.

Restaurant ambience attributes:

One of the elements in restaurant ambience is spatial layout. Spatial layout refers to the way in which an equipment, facility and furnishings are arranged, the size and shape of these items, and the spatial relationships among them [15]. Meanwhile, functionality means the ability of the aforesaid items to facilitate the customers' enjoyment and comfort. For instance, an effective layout and functionality will provide for ease of entry and exit, and will make ancillary areas such as restrooms more accessible [3]. According to Heung and Gu [35] a restaurant with a good layout helps to avoid overcrowding, which in turn creates a positive impression among restaurant patrons, and is therefore considered a key atmospheric element in enhancing the dining experience [36].

The exterior of the restaurant provides the first impression to the customer. The exterior of the restaurant will not only attract and invite guests to eat, but also influence their experience of the meal [8, 37]. To elaborate, as patrons approach the restaurant, they will scrutinize its exterior in terms of location and parking area, which determine security of the restaurant. Patrons are also concerned with the attractiveness and upkeep of the exterior of the restaurant in terms colour of the building, windows, curtains, type of entrance and flowers [8, 37]. A sign on the exterior of the restaurant with burned-out lights and flaking paint or a run-down building may cause the customer to think less of the entire operation [8].

Signs, symbols and artefacts are used to enhance a certain image or to direct customers to desired destinations. Signs displayed on the interior and exterior of a restaurant serve as explicit signals that communicate about the restaurant to guests [15]. Signs may be used as labels (e.g. name of a restaurant), for directional purposes (entrances, exits), and to communicate the rules of behaviour (e.g. no smoking, children must be accompanied by adults). Symbols and artefacts communicate less directly than signs, giving implicit cues to patrons about a restaurant [15]. White tablecloths and subdued lighting, for example, convey symbolic meaning of full service and relatively high prices. Zeithaml and Bitner [15] explain that signs, symbols and artefacts are particularly important for communicating new service concepts and in forming first impressions.

According to Jordaan and Prinsloo [37] lighting can help to set the pace, tone and mood of the service encounter. Customers tend to talk more softly when lights are dim. Yuksel and Yuksel [38] stated that people are less self-conscious and less inhibited when lights are low, therefore, eat more in dimmer light (e.g. at night). Bright light, typical of fast-food restaurants, are installed to influence customers to eat their meals quickly [37, 38]. Moreover, research indicates that there is the relationship between lighting level preferences and individuals' emotional responses and approach-avoidance behaviours. Areni and Kim [39] identified the impact of in-store lighting on various aspects of shopping behaviour (e.g., consumer behaviour, amount of time spent, and total sales) in a retail store setting. Lighting can be one of the most powerful physical stimuli in restaurants, particularly in upscale restaurants. While bright lighting at fast-food restaurants (e.g., McDonald's) may symbolize quick service and relatively low prices, subdued and warm lighting may symbolically convey full service and high prices.

The temperature of the restaurant affects customers physiologically [40]. If the temperature is too cold or too hot in the restaurant, customers will feel uncomfortable. Their discomfort will be reflected through their avoidance behaviour [15]. They will likely choose another restaurant for the next visit and may even leave the current restaurant sooner than expected. Similarly, employees working under these conditions will become irritable and not provide the level of customer service they should [40].

Decoration is one of the elements that are significant to the restaurant ambience. Once a patron has entered the restaurant, the decoration of the interior of the restaurant is evaluated. Customers often judge the interior décor in terms of colour schemes [37, 40]. Colours such as red, yellow and orange are classified as warm colours while green, blue and violet are cool colours. Warm colours give customers the impression of a warm, comfortable service environment [37, 40]. Cool colours tend to create a formal type of service environment. By properly using colours, a restaurant can create almost any type of environment that suits its clientele. For instance, to create an exciting environment for young customers, using some combination of the warm and

bright colours would be best. However, to create the same exciting environment for adults would require the warm colours to be of softer tones [40]. Bright colours tend to stimulate and arouse whereas warm and cool colours seem to promote relaxation [41]. Other items that contribute to interior décor include the signs that are posted, the furniture and equipment that are used, the level of lighting, as well as pictures and fixtures [3, 40].

Zeithaml and Bitner [15] reported that many studies have focused on the effects of music on customers. Based on these studies, Zeithaml and Bitner [15] point out that customers tend to perceive they spend less time in the restaurant when there is music than when there is no music. This is because slower music tempos at lower volumes tend to make diners more leisurely than fast music. Diners also spend more time and money when the music matches or "fits" with their musical tastes [15]. Rande [8] points out that different people have different tastes in music. Thus, one must, therefore, be careful not to offend one group while trying to satisfy another with any type of music.

In studies of restaurants and supermarkets, it has been illustrated that music tempo can affect the pace of shopping, length of stay, and amount of money spent [42, 43]. In another study, familiarity of music played in a department store setting was found to affect the shopper's perceptions of how long they spent shopping; when the music was unfamiliar to subjects, they believed they had spent more time shopping [44]. While the food and the service should be of acceptable quality, pleasing physical surroundings (e.g., music) may determine to a large extent the degree of overall satisfaction and subsequent behaviour in the restaurant industry [45]. Furthermore, atmospheric music was found to affect the customer perceptions of business places [46] customer satisfaction and relaxation [47] and purchase intentions [48].
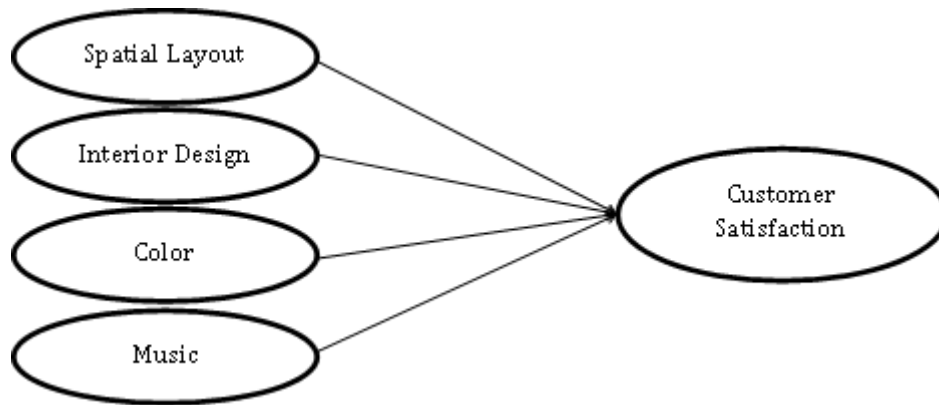

Fig. 1: Conceptual Framework. *Source: Adapted from Kasapila (2006), Namkung & Jang (2008), Jang & Liu (2008), Jang & Ha (2009) and Chen & Hu (2010)*

Research hypotheses:

Based on the conceptual framework (figure 1) above, the researcher has identified four independent variables namely spatial layout, interior design, colour and music. The dependent variable is customer satisfaction. From the framework, four hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is a relationship between spatial layout and customer satisfaction

H2: There is a relationship between interior design and customer satisfaction

H3: There is a relationship between colour and customer satisfaction

H4: There is a relationship between music and customer satisfaction

Methodology:

The questionnaire started with a letter from the researcher that informs the respondents regarding the study. The letter stated that the data gathered will be treated as confidential and the respondents need to answer the questionnaire in approximately 10 minutes. The questionnaire is personally self-administered by the respondent. The questionnaire comprises three sections and it was divided into two parts. The first part, questions answer research objectives, research questions and research hypotheses of this study and the second part was about the respondents' profile. The first part consists of four sections namely spatial layout (8 items), interior design (5 items), colour (5 items) and music (4 items). It used a five point Likert scale in the questionnaire to measure the relationship between restaurant ambience and customer satisfaction. It ranges from (1) strongly dissatisfied to (5) strongly satisfied. Most of the items are adapted from Jang and Liu [30], Ha and Jang [34], Chen and Hu [49], Namkung and Jang [5] and Kasapila [50]. Section two asks questions regarding customer satisfaction towards the restaurants offered. The items for customer satisfaction are adapted from Jani and Han [51], Jang and Ha [34], Jang and Namkung [52], Kim, Han, and Ryu [53], Kasapila [50] and Boulding et al. [54].

Similarly, it used five points Likert scale and ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The total items in this section were 16 items. Lastly, section three asks questions regarding the demographic profile of respondents that consists of gender, age, race and frequency of dining in a month. This study focuses on the individual satisfaction about the restaurant ambience in Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia Arabic Restaurants.

Results:
Respondents Demography:

Table 1 provides the demographic profile of respondents who took part in the study. More female respondents (64.2%) answered the questionnaire compared to male (35.8%). Most of the respondent age between 21-30 years old (37.5%) answered the questionnaire followed by 31-40 years old (30.2%) and the lowest were above 41 years old (11.2%). Most of the respondents were Malay (88.6%) followed by Chinese 6.6%, Indian 4.4% and lastly 0.5% from other races. Only 2.7% of the respondents dined at Arabic Restaurants at a frequency of more than 6 times per month. 19% of the respondents dined at Arabic restaurants between 3 to 5 times in a month, while the majority of the respondents only dined at Arabic Restaurants at a rate of 1 to 2 times a month.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents.

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	147	35.8
	Female	264	64.2
Age	20 years old and below	87	21.2
	21-30 years old	154	37.5
	31-40 years old	124	30.2
	41-50 year old	46	11.2
Race	Malay	364	88.6
	Chinese	27	6.6
	Indian	18	4.4
	Other	2	.5
Frequency of dining in a month	1-2 times	322	78.3
	3-5 times	78	19.0
	More than 6 times	11	2.7

Relationship between restaurant ambience attributes and customer satisfaction:

Based on Pearson Correlation test result in Table 2, the correlation of each independent variable (spatial layout, interior design, colour and music) is significant at 0.01 levels, two- tailed toward customer satisfaction. The result shows that there are positive relationship between all independent variables and customer satisfaction. The value between spatial layout and customer satisfaction is 0.711, interior design is 0.684, colour is 0.731 and music is 0.620. Colour shows the strongest positive relationship with customer satisfaction (r= 0.731), followed by the spatial layout (r= 0.711) and interior design (r= 0.684). Music has the lowest positive relationship with customer satisfaction (r= 0.620).

Table 2: The relationship between restaurant ambience attributes and customer satisfaction.

Attributes	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	n
Spatial Layout	.711[**]	.000	411
Interior Design	.684[**]	.000	411
Color	.731[**]	.000	411
Music	.620[**]	.000	411

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Simple Linear Regression:

Simple linear regression analysis was made to test how well the measure of restaurant ambience attributes influence customer satisfaction. Overall, restaurant ambience attributes were found significant (sig. value = $0.000 < \alpha = 0.05$); thus the model can be used for explanation or prediction of customer satisfaction. However, one of the variable was found to be insignificant to be included in the model (sig. value $> \alpha = 0.05$). Therefore, this variable was considered to be removed in order to improve the model. In addition, Beta coefficient indicates which variables are important to the model by looking at the largest value derived. Prediction of customer satisfaction is explained in Table 3. The most significant and largest unique contribution to the model is restaurant colour (ß = .386, $p < 0.01$), followed by spatial layout (ß = .311, $p < 0.01$), and music (ß = .202, $p < 0.01$). However, interior design is omitted due to its insignificant function played (ß = -.027, $p < 0.05$). The model is significant [$F_{(4,406)} = 158$, $p < .001$], with the predictors explaining 61% of the customers' satisfaction in the Arabic restaurants. The remaining 39% is explained by other predictor variables.

Table 3: Simple linear regression.

Model	B	SE B	ß	t	Sig.
(Constant)	11.937	2.008		5.945	.000
Spatial layout	.644	.118	.311	5.438	.000
Interior design	-.080	.201	-.027	-.400	.689
Color	1.141	.177	.386	6.434	.000
Music	.585	.122	.202	4.795	.000

(Note: R^2 = .61, *p < .001)

Discussion, implication and conclusion:

Based on the results, hypothesis 1 is supported and indicating a significant relationship between spatial layout and customer satisfaction. This shows that customers are satisfied with spatial layout that arranged by the restaurant operators. This is consistent with previous studies which stated that spatial layout is one of the important elements that contribute to customer satisfaction [5, 30]. Furthermore, spatial layout perception can convey a sense of coziness and intimacy [55] and help consumers form a mental picture before any emotional response or judgment of specific service environments [56]. Thus, the restaurant operator must make sure that; facility layout, lighting, temperature, odor, menu design and arrangement of chairs and tables at their restaurant is always maintained, and at optimum level in order to satisfy the customers.

Hypothesis 2, the relationship between interior design and customer satisfaction is supported. Although simple linear regression result indicates that it does not significantly contribute to the model, Pearson correlation test result shows that the hypothesis is supported. The positive relationship between interior design and customer satisfaction is consistent with Namkung and Jang [5] and Jang and Liu [30] who stated attractive interior design critically determine customer satisfaction.

The third hypothesis, the relationship between restaurant colour and customer satisfaction is also supported and shows a strong positive relationship. Colour made largest unique contribution to the model. This means, customers are highly agreed and like the colour scheme used by the restaurants. It shows that the colour used by the restaurant operators is suitable with customers' taste. This indicates that the colour used by the restaurant operators make them feel pleasant, comfortable and hungry. This is in line with a few studies by Namkung & Jang [5], Kasapila [50] and Bellizzi and Hite [57].

Lastly, hypothesis 4 indicates the positive relationship between music and customer satisfaction. In line with Namkung & Jang [5] music appeared to be a significant attribute that elicits customer satisfaction. Thus, appropriate music is deemed necessary to add spice to restaurants. Furthermore Kasapila [50] and Ha and Jang [34] suggest that music played is pleasant, suitable and entertaining. Restaurant operator therefore needs to make sure that their music played is meeting with the customers' preference. According to Dube et al., [58], Mattila and Wirtz, [26] and Milliman, [42, 43] music is a positive auditory cue for stimulating emotions and behaviors in service settings.

As a conclusion, this study shows that spatial layout, interior design, colour and music have significant relationships with customers' satisfaction. The largest contribution is colour followed by spatial layout, music and interior design. Colour scheme choose by restaurant operators meet customers want and satisfied them, thus the restaurant operators must make sure that their restaurant colour is always beautiful. The lowest contribution was interior design. This shows that customers dislike the interior design created by the restaurant operators. So, the restaurants operators must change the current interior design in order to satisfy customers and make them return to the restaurant. This result showed that the objectives of this study are achieved. However, there are still elements that need to be improved especially on interior design that has been discussed in this study.

Although this study has provided useful information about the customers' experience with the restaurant ambience of the Arabic restaurant, there are a few limitations in this study that need to be dealt with in future research. The first limitation is the location of data gathering. This study was conducted in Shah Alam area only, thus the data obtained may not represent all Malaysian. Hence, for future study, researchers can distribute and collect data in Kuala Lumpur as Kuala Lumpur has more Arabic restaurants. Secondly, this study uses convenience sampling, in which the findings could not be generalized. Perhaps in future studies, researchers may use other sampling methods. Thirdly, this study is conducted at any Arabic restaurants and the researchers did not have any specific requirements whether the restaurants are from the high end or from the lower end groups. Hence, future study may focus on specific criteria and preferably among restaurants in the high end category. Finally the relationship between interior design and customer satisfaction that is found significant in Pearson Correlation but insignificant in simple linear regression indicates the need for future studies to run factor analysis in order to refine the questionnaire prior to data collection.

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