



ENHANCING CUSTOMER RETENTION THROUGH SERVICESCAPE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR COFFEE SHOP BUSINESSES

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual study examines the critical issue of customer retention in the coffee shop business, particularly in the northern part of Malaysia, where competition is intensifying. Although the importance of servicescape and customer retention is acknowledged across many businesses, empirical studies examining their joint impact in the coffee shop environment are few. The primary objective of this study is to present a conceptual framework outlining the impact of various servicescape qualities on customer retention. A deep literature review was conducted to accomplish this. The finding will underscore the imperative for coffee shop proprietors to create an inviting, pleasant environment that fosters customer satisfaction and, in turn, enhances retention. Finally, this conceptual study provides significant theoretical insights and practical implications for practitioners seeking to enhance performance and maintain competitiveness in the coffee shop business.

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Introduction

The coffee shop business has grown considerably worldwide as more individuals seek high-quality products and a satisfying service experience (Muflikh *et al.*, 2024). As competition increases, retaining customers is becoming essential for a company's long-term survival (Rahmah *et al.*, 2023). The servicescape concept is a potential solution currently receiving significant attention in the coffee shop industry. Service interactions take place in this physical and symbolic setting (Servín-Juárez *et al.*, 2021). This environment shapes customer perceptions and directly influences customer satisfaction, loyalty, and repeat business.

Rapid urbanisation and the rise of a richer middle class in Southeast Asia have accelerated the development of coffee culture, particularly among younger consumers (Zybareva *et al.*,

2022). As customer preferences change, nations like Vietnam and Indonesia have started to consciously employ servicescape elements that emphasise ambiance, lighting, and aesthetic appeal (Rahardjo *et al.*, 2020; Kokins *et al.*, 2021). Due to these advancements, traditional cafés have had to change to stay relevant.

Malaysia reflects many of these regional patterns. In 2022, the country recorded more than 4,780 cafés and bars, with projections suggesting this number will exceed 5,540 by 2026 (Statista, 2023). Malaysia is also listed among the world's top 50 coffee-consuming nations (Ali *et al.*, 2021). Importantly, coffee shops in the country are not just places of consumption; they are increasingly viewed as social spaces that foster community interaction (Khandaker *et al.*, 2020). This evolution highlights the importance of

business owners enhancing their servicescapes to stand out in a competitive market.

Previous research has shown that the physical environment may influence customers' behaviour and repeat visits. However, much of this work has focused on urban locations or other service industries such as those widely explored in finance and hospitality (Intan *et al.*, 2022). Studies by Lee *et al.* (2020) and Li *et al.* (2021), for example, point out how ambience and design shape customer experiences. Nevertheless, there is still limited research examining servicescape and customer retention specifically within the coffee shops field, focusing on rural or semi-urban areas (Kavita, 2022; Ren *et al.*, 2023).

This gap matters because expectations in rural settings may differ from those in urban spaces (Sekolah Kopi, 2024). Neglecting this dimension risks poor customer experiences, negative word of mouth, and eventual revenue losses (Grewal *et al.*, 2019). Addressing this concern, the present study proposes a conceptual framework to investigate how servicescape can be leveraged to strengthen customer retention in Malaysian coffee shop businesses.

This article aims to answer two main questions: (1) What do servicescape attributes influence customer retention? (2) What are the key point servicescape elements that most significantly shape loyalty within the coffee shop context? The following sections provide the research background, review relevant literature, introduce the conceptual framework, and suggest a methodology for future validation.

The outline of this article is structured as follows. Section 1 introduces the research background and objectives. Section 2 presents the literature review, offering a rationale for the study and establishing the theoretical basis. Meanwhile, Section 3 outlines the proposed conceptual framework, and Section 4 describes the research methodology. Finally, Section 5 concludes the article by highlighting its contributions to both academic research and practical applications, and by suggesting directions for future study.

Literature Review

This part of the literature review examines past research on customer retention, how coffee shop businesses operate and the role of the servicescape. Three areas of the servicescape are used here as a guide: The atmosphere of the space, its arrangement, and the design choices that give it character.

Customer Retention

Customer retention is about making sure people choose to return rather than try somewhere else. According to Goel *et al.* (2022), this indicates that trust has been built and that the customer sees value in remaining loyal. Suryadi (2023) notes that retaining a current customer is usually cheaper than attracting a new one, partly because less money is spent on marketing and partly because repeat customers often spend more over time (Wibowo *et al.*, 2021).

Businesses that hold on to their customers tend to focus on three things: Making customers happy, earning their trust, and creating a connection that feels personal. When these are in place, customers not only stay but also often speak well of the brand to others (Kusuma *et al.*, 2022). In busy markets like coffee shops, this loyalty can determine which businesses survive. A friendly barista who remembers a regular's order, or a layout that makes it easy to sit and relax, may significantly impact a business's success. Looking closely at how such details in the physical space and the overall experience influence behaviour, it helps explain why some places keep their customers while others watch them drift away (Tarigan, 2020).

Coffee Shop Businesses

Coffee shops occupy a distinctive niche in the food and beverage world, offering more than just a caffeine solution. They combine practical benefits such as providing a place to get a drink or snack, with experiences that people often seek out deliberately. Many people have been described as "third places" (Suhud *et al.*, 2021). This setting sits somewhere between home and the office. In these environments, customers

might relax with friends, work on a laptop, study, or enjoy a quiet moment alone (Song *et al.*, 2019).

Due to these various roles, coffee shops are especially influenced by their servicescape, where the look, feel, and atmosphere can matter as much as the coffee's flavour (Hwang *et al.*, 2021). Nowadays, most independent coffee shops rely on their local identity to set themselves apart and create a unique experience. They might incorporate cultural elements in their interior design, focus on personalised service, and create an inviting mood that encourages longer stays (Han *et al.*, 2020).

It has become essential when studying the effects of particular servicescape elements on retention, as the focus shifts from just selling coffee to creating experiences. There will be more happiness, more future visits, and stronger relationships when the environment aligns with what customers value emotionally (Revilla *et al.*, 2020).

Bitner Servicescape Model

Kotler's (1974) study of service businesses emphasised the importance of visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory elements in creating an atmosphere that appeals to the senses. Service businesses have used this concept and strategy successfully for years, with the physical environment influencing customer assessments (Kotler, 1994). In comparison, Bitner (1992) coined the term "servicescape" to characterise the amalgamation of physical and atmospheric conditions in which services are provided. The term encompasses things that are easy to see such as the layout and furniture inside the coffee shop, as well as less obvious factors such as the smell of the coffee beans, the warm lighting, and even the way the barista and customers interact (Gadilkar, 2024).

A study by Rashid Radha *et al.* (2024) found that a well-designed servicescape may encourage customers to stay longer, spend more without worry, and form stronger emotional ties with a company and its brand. In terms of model structure, Başaran (2024) simplifies the model into three main dimensions, which

are (1) ambient conditions, (2) spatial layout, and (3) symbolic design elements. Each component shows something unique to the customer experience. However, when matched with consumer expectations, the servicescape becomes more than just decoration. It evolves into a strategic tool for increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and, eventually, retention.

Ambient Conditions

Ambient conditions refer to background features such as lighting, temperature, sound, and scent. People often do not immediately recognise ambient conditions, yet they significantly impact how individuals feel in an environment (Bitner, 1992). A study by Perera (2024) found that this element may influence customer satisfaction and the whole service experience.

For instance, gentle lighting may make people feel peaceful, while energetic music might make the ambiance more dynamic. The experience is better when the atmosphere aligns with customers' expectations and imagination (Elmashhara *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the customer could feel worried if anything is wrong and uncomfortable in the coffee shop (Lončarić, 2021). However, this matter can be resolved if the coffee shop uses warm lighting, the fragrance of freshly brewed coffee, and slow background music, all of which might make people want to stay longer. Peng *et al.* (2020) contend that these sensory stimuli significantly influence emotional reactions, thereby enhancing consumer engagement.

Meanwhile, a study by Mumin *et al.* (2024) found that a suitable room temperature fosters emotional connections. In contrast, Lee *et al.* (2021) and Yin *et al.* (2023) indicated that careful design of the physical environment may enhance attitudes and retention. Therefore, the overall findings suggest that coffee shops may induce customers to return by controlling the sensory aspects of their shops (Al-ghifari *et al.*, 2021).

H1: There is a significant relationship between ambient conditions and customer retention in coffee shop businesses.

Spatial Layout

Spatial layout is defined as the arrangement of furniture, pathways, service areas, and other physical components within a service environment (Bitner, 1992). Kim *et al.* (2023) noted that the design and functionality of these spaces play an essential role in shaping how customers interact with their surroundings.

A well-planned and organised spatial layout enables customers to navigate easily and identify areas suited to their needs, whether for focused work, social gatherings, or quiet relaxation. It increases both comfort and convenience (Artuğer, 2020). Kampani *et al.* (2022) stated that an effective arrangement within the coffee shop can significantly contribute to customer satisfaction and retention. In the coffee shop, the spatial layouts were primarily designed to be flexible and supportive of a variety of activities, from casual meetings and social events to independent work. This is important to assist various customer segments, thereby encouraging longer stays and repeat visits.

In the studies by Lee *et al.* (2019) and Dhanyat (2020), it was found that well-organised areas reduce crowding and make it easier to move around, thereby increasing happiness and retention. Hamzah *et al.* (2020) also discussed in a study that physical patterns may influence how people feel about the service. Samsa *et al.* (2024) agreed that customers are more likely to return to the coffee shop if it has places where it is easy to move around and meet new people.

The study by Waryono *et al.* (2020) found that, in limited space, the main objective of spatial arrangement, as introduced by Bitner (1992) is to provide a welcoming environment. The ease of getting around and the convenience of the area are linked to increased relaxation and enjoyment, which, in turn, lead to greater emotional involvement. This reflection is supported by Vonika *et al.* (2020), who argue that a sense of comfort not only enhances the overall customer experience but also indirectly supports business retention.

H2: There is a significant relationship between spatial layout and customer retention in coffee shop businesses.

Symbolic Design Elements

Symbolic design elements include décor, branding, and cultural references that communicate a café's identity. Lin *et al.* (2024) explain that these elements help a business project its values and personality. A carefully chosen theme or design makes the place memorable and helps it stand apart from competitors (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Examples can be found in both rural and global settings. A small café in a village might use rustic furniture or artwork that reflects local traditions, creating a sense of belonging (Al-Habib & Albari, 2024). Global chains like Starbucks, on the other hand, maintain consistent branding across outlets so customers know what to expect (Wong *et al.*, 2023). Both approaches rely on symbolic design to build recognition and trust.

Symbolic features often shape emotional responses. Young (2020) stresses that décor and signage influence how customers perceive a business, while Ryu *et al.* (2022) found that branding and interior design foster emotional attachment. Holtzhausen *et al.* (2022) add that aesthetic appeal encourages repeat visits. In short, when customers feel connected to a café's identity, whether through culture or brand consistency, they are more likely to stay loyal (Kim, 2024). Hamid *et al.* (2023) also argue that brand identity and symbolic cues form emotional ties that strengthen retention. By designing an atmosphere that resonates with its target audience, the coffee shop not only enhances experience but also nurtures long-term loyalty (McCamley *et al.*, 2021).

H3: There is a significant relationship between symbolic design elements and customer retention in coffee shop businesses.

Overall, this literature review highlights the strategic importance of aligning servicescape design with customer expectations. By prioritising ambient conditions, spatial layout,

and symbolic design elements, managers or owners can create memorable and distinctive experiences that foster customer satisfaction and encourage repeat visits. In an increasingly competitive market, such an arrangement is essential for sustaining trustworthiness and securing long-term retention.

Conceptual Framework

The researcher proposed the conceptual framework to help us better understand how the variables in this study are related (Sekaran,

2003). This framework was developed from the preceding literature review, outlining three independent variables and one dependent variable.

Figure 1 shows how different parts of a coffee shop’s servicescape such as lighting, space layout, and symbolic design features, are related to customer retention. In summary, the servicescape model proposed in this study indicates that the physical environment, including both tangible and intangible features, affects how customers feel, which, in turn, shapes their behaviour.

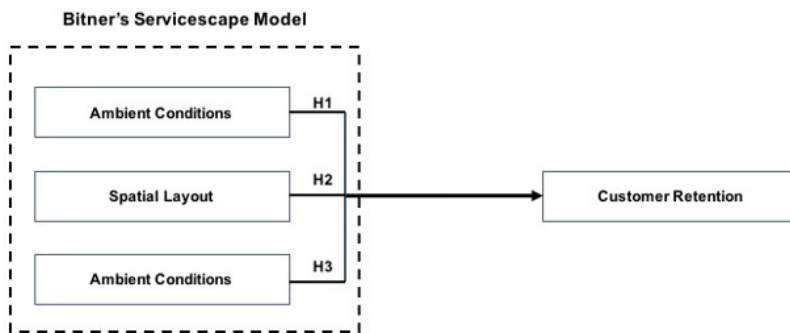


Figure 1: The conceptual framework

Research Methodology for Future Research

This section provides a description of the proposed research design and methodology for the future study to validate the model. The methodology, including the research design, sampling strategy, data collection, and analysis techniques is outlined. A cross-sectional correlational design is suggested to investigate customer behaviour when choosing coffee shop businesses at a specific point in time. This design enables the analysis of natural, non-manipulated responses. It is well-suited for quantifying the influence of ambient conditions, spatial layout, and symbolic design on customer retention.

Given that the actual population of coffee shop customers is unknown, it is recommended to use G*Power to determine an appropriate sample size. Assuming a medium effect size, a 95% confidence level, and a statistical power

of 0.80, a minimum sample of 384 respondents is considered sufficient to support robust statistical analysis. The study should adopt convenience sampling, selecting participants based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Although this approach may limit the generalisability of findings, it is practical for exploratory research. It ensures that customers’ perspectives are captured in real-life coffee shop settings.

Data collection in this study will use digital self-administered questionnaires distributed via platforms such as Google Forms and promoted through targeted social media campaigns. The suggested collection site is an urban area, specifically the George Town Conurbation, which is an appropriate initial focus given its varied customer demographic. A clear, easy,

and organised questionnaire will be used to measure perceptions on a five-point Likert scale. Additionally, a pilot test with 30 participants should be conducted beforehand to ensure that the proposed questions are clear and the items are reliable before the full survey is implemented.

To confirm methodological rigour, content validity should be evaluated by identified subject-matter experts in this field. At the same time, internal consistency should be assessed using Cronbach's alpha. These steps will help researchers ensure that the data gathered is accurate and trustworthy. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) software is the best approach for analysing data because it handles complex models and small sample sizes effectively (Chatzopoulou *et al.*, 2021).

A model with 25 indicators would require a minimum sample size of approximately 250 respondents, based on the 10-times rule. Before hypothesis testing, the dataset should be examined and cleaned to ensure it is in good condition and can be used to assess convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability within acceptable limits. Lastly, the proposed methodology in this conceptual study will provide a systematic framework for future empirical validation, practical significance, and ensuring analytical accuracy when assessing the effect of servicescape elements on customer retention.

Conclusions

When you walk into a coffee shop, you might notice how the soft hum of conversation, the choice of furniture, or even the smell in the background can change the mood. Researchers call these small details a "servicescape", meaning they are not random. Therefore, this study treats the concept as a deliberate strategy for encouraging customers to keep coming back. Instead of looking at décor, staff behaviour, and symbolic cues separately, they are combined to see how they influence what customers feel, how satisfied they are, and whether they decide to return. This approach adds another layer to

what has been written before, while leaving space for future research to test the ideas in real-world settings. For those running a coffee shop, the ideas presented here can serve as a practical checklist and a way to view their space with fresh eyes, making changes that help build trust and long-term loyalty.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges its limitations. This work focuses only on coffee shop businesses, so the ideas and strategies here may not translate perfectly to other types of businesses. In addition, it leans heavily on well-established theories, which could miss newer cultural shifts or subtle changes in customer behaviour. The next step is to test the model in the real world, ideally in settings that differ by culture, customer profile, and market size. Doing so would not only sharpen the theoretical picture but also give owners of coffee shop businesses a clearer set of actions for building loyalty over time.

Ultimately, this study opens the door to more practical questions: How might the same servicescape ideas be adapted for other service spaces, from boutique hotels to co-working hubs? Looking at the question across different industries and cultural settings could deepen academic understanding while giving designers and managers fresh tools and ideas to work with. When linked to broader market trends, the framework proposed here serves as a reminder that a business's physical and social setting can still be a powerful lever for shaping experience, reinforcing brand loyalty, and sustaining performance in the long run.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefit, commercial, or financial conflicts and declare that there are no conflicts of interest with the funders.

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