Effect of the External Physical Environment on Customer Loyalty in Restaurant Services: Evidence from Mwanza City, Tanzania

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Abstract

The external physical environment has become a central determinant of customer experience and loyalty in hospitality settings, particularly in rapidly growing urban contexts in Africa. This study examined how external environmental features influence customer loyalty in selected restaurants in Mwanza City, Tanzania. Guided by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the study adopted an interpretivist philosophy and a phenomenological research design to capture customers' lived experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, non- participant observations, and document reviews involving 26 participants (22 customers and 4 restaurant staff). Thematic analysis revealed three dominant dimensions shaping customer loyalty: perceived security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience. Perceived security including adequate lighting, visible security personnel, and safe parking emerged as a foundational factor influencing emotional comfort and revisit intentions. Aesthetic appeal, expressed through exterior cleanliness, landscaping, signage, and lighting aesthetics, shaped customers' first impressions and evoked positive emotional responses that reinforced loyalty. Convenience, reflected in accessibility, parking availability, and clear entry pathways, reduced customer effort and enhanced pre-entry satisfaction. Collectively, these environmental stimuli triggered emotional and cognitive evaluations that significantly shaped behavioural loyalty outcomes. The study contributes to hospitality literature by offering context-specific qualitative insights from an African urban setting, demonstrating that customer loyalty in restaurant services extends beyond internal service attributes to include external environmental cues. Practical recommendations for restaurant managers, urban planners, and policymakers are provided.

Keywords: Customer loyalty; External physical environment; Security; Aesthetic appeal; Convenience; Restaurant services; Mwanza City; Tanzania.

1. INTRODUCTION

Customer experience has become a central differentiator in the hospitality and restaurant industry, where increasing competition and changing consumer expectations require businesses to go beyond traditional elements such as food quality, pricing, and service efficiency. A growing body of research demonstrates that customers evaluate dining experiences holistically, beginning with their first visual and physical interaction with the restaurant environment even before entering the premises. This shift aligns with contemporary service environment literature, which acknowledges that the external physical environment plays a pivotal role in shaping customer perceptions, emotional responses, and subsequent loyalty behaviours (Ryu, Lee & Kim, 2020). Elements such as security presence, aesthetic appeal, accessibility, and convenience increasingly influence customers' judgments about service quality, trust, and satisfaction.

Globally, empirical evidence highlights the significance of the external physical environment in both developed and developing economies. For example, studies show that customers often rely on environmental cues such as lighting,
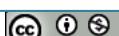
landscaping, cleanliness, and design to form expectations about service quality (Bitner, 1992; Purwanto et al., 2020). In hospitality settings, security has also emerged as an essential factor influencing customers' comfort and revisit intentions, especially in urban environments where safety concerns are prevalent (Ali & Anwar, 2024). Aesthetic appeal likewise contributes to emotional engagement and brand positioning, shaping customers' internal evaluations long before they experience the food or service (Motowilowa et al., 2024). Convenience including visibility, parking availability, and ease of entry—reduces the cognitive and physical effort associated with dining out, thereby enhancing customers' likelihood of returning (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2023).

In many African cities, the dynamics of urban development, infrastructural limitations, and increasing competition in the hospitality industry have heightened the importance of external environmental factors. Studies conducted in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa demonstrate that customers are highly sensitive to the physical conditions surrounding hospitality outlets (Amoako et al., 2021; Adeola & Evans, 2023). Inadequate lighting, poor accessibility, and limited parking often discourage customers, while attractive and well-secured environments enhance perceived value and loyalty. These insights underscore the need to examine the external physical environment as a strategic component of restaurant management within African urban settings.

Despite the growing recognition of environmental influences on customer behaviour, evidence from Tanzania remains limited. Existing hospitality studies in the country have predominantly focused on internal service quality dimensions such as food quality, service delivery, and customer satisfaction (Kimaro & Mbwambo, 2020). There is minimal empirical work exploring how external physical environmental cues shape customer loyalty in restaurant settings, particularly within rapidly expanding cities such as Mwanza. Mwanza City Tanzania's second-largest urban economy has experienced substantial growth in its hospitality sector due to increased tourism, expanding middle- income populations, and rising urban consumption patterns. However, many restaurants operate in environments with inconsistent security measures, limited parking facilities, uneven lighting, and varying aesthetic standards. These issues raise important questions about how customers interpret external environments and how such interpretations influence their loyalty decisions.

The selected restaurant in Mwanza offers an illustrative case where external environmental features including well-designed outdoor spaces, strategic lighting, and visible security appear to contribute to strong customer retention. Yet, there is a lack of systematic research explaining how customers perceive these features and how they shape loyalty behaviours. This gap signals an important research opportunity, particularly given the rise of experience-driven consumption and the increasing importance of environmental branding in hospitality.

Theoretically, the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R)

framework provides a suitable lens for examining how customers interpret environmental cues. The model posits that external stimuli (e.g., lighting, security presence, aesthetic design, and convenience) trigger internal emotional and cognitive responses, which subsequently influence behavioural outcomes such as loyalty or avoidance (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In restaurant contexts, customers may perceive secure, clean, aesthetically appealing, and accessible environments as signals of professionalism and service quality, prompting positive internal reactions that strengthen loyalty. Conversely, environments perceived as unsafe, unattractive, or inconvenient may evoke negative emotions and discourage revisit intentions. Applying the S-O-R framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how customers' internal evaluations mediate the relationship between environmental stimuli and behavioural outcomes.

Given the above, this study seeks to address the limited empirical engagement with external physical environments in Tanzanian hospitality research by qualitatively exploring how customers in Mwanza City experience and interpret environmental features outside restaurant premises. By focusing on three interrelated dimensions security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience the study provides fresh insights into how external cues influence customers' emotional responses and loyalty behaviours. The qualitative design also allows for deeper exploration of lived experiences, contributing to a more contextualised understanding of hospitality environments within an African urban context.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature in three distinct ways. First, it expands the scope of customer loyalty research in Tanzania by incorporating external physical environmental factors rather than restricting analysis to internal service attributes. Second, it applies a phenomenological approach, offering rich experiential narratives that are often missing from hospitality studies in developing countries. Third, the findings provide practical implications for restaurant managers, urban planners, and policymakers seeking to improve customer retention, enhance environmental attractiveness, and strengthen the competitiveness of hospitality establishments in Mwanza and similar urban contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Overview

The external physical environment has gained increasing scholarly attention in hospitality research as a determinant of customer experience and behavioural loyalty. This section critically reviews the literature on three key dimensions security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience and their linkages to customer loyalty. It synthesizes existing knowledge across global, regional, and African contexts, identifying conceptual gaps that justify the present study.

2.2 External Physical Environment and Customer Behaviour

The physical environment surrounding hospitality establishments shapes customer perceptions, emotional

responses, and behavioural outcomes long before service encounters occur. The seminal work of Bitner (1992) established the role of the "servicescape" in influencing customer expectations and satisfaction. Although the majority of hospitality literature has focused on interior environments such as ambience, décor, and service staff interactions recent studies highlight the importance of exterior factors, including signage, lighting, layout, and spatial design (Ryu, Lee & Kim, 2020).

Hospitality scholars argue that external environmental cues operate as symbolic indicators of quality and professionalism, enabling customers to infer service standards even without direct interaction (Purwanto et al., 2020). In developing contexts, where infrastructural quality is variable, customers rely strongly on these visible cues to assess safety, hygiene, and value (Amoako et al., 2021; Adeola & Evans, 2023). This growing body of evidence motivates deeper inquiry into how external environments influence behavioural loyalty.

Despite this trend, external environments in Sub-Saharan African cities remain under- researched relative to interior service elements. This gap is particularly evident in Tanzania, where empirical studies on hospitality largely centre on food quality, pricing, and interpersonal service (Kimaro & Mbwambo, 2020). The present study contributes to addressing this omission by foregrounding customers' experiential perspectives of external restaurant environments.

2.3 Security and Customer Loyalty

Security has emerged as a fundamental determinant of customer perceptions in hospitality settings, especially in urban regions where safety concerns are prevalent. Recent studies show that customers assess safety through observable environmental cues, including lighting, presence of security personnel, surveillance systems, and condition of the surrounding neighbourhood (Ali & Anwar, 2024). These cues influence customers' emotional comfort, trust, and willingness to revisit.

In African contexts, security-related concerns often outweigh aesthetic or convenience factors, reflecting broader socio-economic conditions that shape customer expectations. Adeola and Evans (2023), in a qualitative study of hospitality establishments in Nigeria and South Africa, found that customers interpreted visible security measures as indicators of managerial competence and care. Secure parking, lighting, and surveillance were essential for enhancing customer confidence, especially during evening visits.

Similarly, Amoako et al. (2021) discovered that Ghanaian restaurant customers viewed security as encompassing not only protection from crime but also orderliness, controlled access, and environmental hygiene. Their findings highlight security as both a functional and symbolic construct that shapes emotional reassurance.

Studies outside Africa also affirm the role of perceived safety in influencing revisit intentions. Han and Hyun (2022), using phenomenological interviews in South Korea, demonstrated that customers avoided restaurants with inadequate lighting or ambiguous entry points due to heightened vulnerability. Wu and Liang (2020) further argue that safety cues produce cognitive evaluations that mediate emotional comfort, which then predicts loyalty.

While quantitative studies have explored cyber-security or online safety in hospitality (Chowdhury, 2023; Mercan et al., 2020), research on physical environmental security in restaurant settings remains limited. Furthermore, Tanzanian studies rarely isolate external security as an independent construct influencing customer loyalty. This gap underscores the importance of the present study, which situates security as a central experiential element in restaurant services.

2.4 Aesthetic Appeal and Emotional Engagement

Aesthetic appeal is one of the most powerful yet under examined dimensions of the external physical environment. Research consistently demonstrates that visual attributes such as landscaping, architectural style, cleanliness, colour schemes, and signage create first impressions that shape customers' expectations and emotional responses.

Motowilowa, Omondi, and Chukwu (2024) found that customers in Sub-Saharan African restaurants formed emotional connections with visually appealing exteriors, describing them as inviting, relaxing, and professional. These affective responses positively influenced revisit intentions, supporting the broader theoretical premise that aesthetics evoke pleasure and cognitive appraisal.

Purwanto et al. (2020), in their mixed-methods study of Indonesian restaurants, showed that external beautification enhances perceived value and satisfaction. Although much of the literature combines interior and exterior aesthetics, Fanelli and Di Nocera (2018) argue that the external appearance of a restaurant carries symbolic meaning that shapes consumer identity and pride.

Kim and Moon (2009) similarly emphasize that customers evaluate atmospheric cues at the point of approach, long before entering the premises. This suggests that the exterior environment plays a critical role in expectation formation and subsequent loyalty behaviours.

In the African context, studies note that aesthetic appeal is increasingly used as a strategic branding tool due to rising competition in urban hospitality sectors (Patel & Shah, 2023). However, such studies often focus on upscale establishments or fail to distinguish aesthetic features from broader environmental factors.

In Tanzania, scholarly work on restaurant aesthetics remains sparse, with limited research addressing how customers interpret external visual cues and how these perceptions translate into loyalty. This study contributes to this under explored domain by examining aesthetic appeal as a qualitative experiential construct.

2.5 Convenience and Customer Effort Reduction

Convenience refers to the ease with which customers can locate, access, and navigate a hospitality establishment. It encompasses accessibility from major roads, parking

availability, signage clarity, and unobstructed entryways. Convenience reduces cognitive and physical effort, influences perceived efficiency, and shapes customers' willingness to revisit (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2023).

Studies demonstrate that customers prefer dining environments that minimize stress, uncertainty, and search effort. Rahmawati and Pratiwi (2022) found that convenient access significantly predicts revisit intention in café settings. Wang et al. (2020), using customer journey mapping in Taiwanese restaurants, argue that convenience shapes the entire service encounter beginning with arrival.

In Kenya's urban restaurant sector, Njoroge and Wanyoike (2023) highlight that customers value ease of access, safe walkways, and visible signage elements that enhance satisfaction even before consumption. This supports the notion that convenience is a pre-consumption driver of loyalty.

However, existing studies often focus on digital convenience (such as online ordering or mobile reservations) rather than physical convenience related to the external environment (Kim & Lee, 2021). This creates a conceptual imbalance, particularly in developing contexts where infrastructural challenges make physical convenience more salient.

In Tanzania, studies examining convenience in hospitality are extremely limited, with most focusing on service delivery at the point of consumption rather than pre-entry experiences. This research therefore fills an important empirical and contextual gap by exploring how customers in Mwanza interpret convenience and how these interpretations influence loyalty.

2.6 Identified Gaps in the Literature

Across the reviewed literature, several gaps justify the present study. First, there is limited focus on external physical environments in Tanzanian hospitality research, with most local studies prioritizing internal service factors. Second, qualitative research capturing customers' lived experiences is scarce, as many African hospitality studies rely heavily on surveys, reducing the depth of interpretation. Third, existing research often fails to distinguish clearly between security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience, with many studies merging these constructs or examining only one dimension. Fourth, there is a lack of context-specific insights from rapidly growing urban cities such as Mwanza, where environmental features vary widely and require localized investigation. Finally, there has been minimal application of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O- R) framework to African restaurant exteriors, despite its suitability for interpreting how environmental stimuli shape customer behaviour. Collectively, these gaps provide a strong rationale for the present phenomenological study, which explores how customers in Mwanza City interpret external environmental cues security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience and how these interpretations influence loyalty.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Model

The present study is anchored in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model, originally introduced by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) to explain how environmental stimuli trigger internal psychological states that ultimately shape behavioural responses. The model has been widely applied in environmental psychology and hospitality research to understand how customers interpret service environments, particularly in settings where physical surroundings strongly influence experience formation.

3.1.1 Stimulus (S): External Environmental Cues

In hospitality contexts, stimuli refer to the physical features customers encounter before and during a service interaction. In this study, the external physical environment specifically security features, aesthetic appeal, and convenience functions as the primary set of stimuli. These cues include lighting, signage, landscaping, surveillance systems, building design, accessibility, and parking. Customers approaching a restaurant evaluate these attributes visually and sensorially, forming initial perceptions before engaging in any service encounter.

3.1.2 Organism (O): Internal Cognitive and Emotional Processing

The organism component captures internal reactions triggered by environmental stimuli. These include emotional states (e.g., comfort, pleasure, anxiety, excitement) and cognitive evaluations (e.g., perceived safety, trust, expected quality). When customers encounter well-secured, visually appealing, and accessible environments, they experience positive internal states such as reassurance, delight, and confidence. Conversely, poor lighting, unattractive surroundings, or difficult entry pathways may evoke negative emotions or cognitive fatigue. These internal responses mediate the link between external stimuli and behavioural outcomes.

3.1.3 Response (R): Behavioural Outcomes

The response dimension represents observable behavioural intentions or actions such as loyalty, revisit intention, word-of-mouth referrals, or alternatively, avoidance. In restaurant contexts, customers who experience positive internal reactions to the external environment are more likely to return, feel emotionally attached to the establishment, and recommend it to others. Negative internal states reduce the likelihood of revisits and may diminish brand perceptions.

3.2 Relevance of the S-O-R Model to This Study

The S-O-R framework is particularly suitable for examining restaurant environments in Mwanza City because it accommodates the subjective, interpretive nature of environmental experiences aligning well with the study's qualitative, phenomenological orientation. Customers in urban Tanzanian contexts often navigate environments with varying infrastructural quality, safety conditions, and aesthetic standards; thus, their interpretations of external stimuli significantly shape consumption choices.

Moreover, the S-O-R model enables the study to explain how and why environmental factors influence loyalty, not merely

whether such a relationship exists. By highlighting the mediating role of internal emotional and cognitive states, the model enhances understanding of the psychological mechanisms that connect external physical environments to customer loyalty.

3.3 Critiques and Justification

While the S-O-R model has been critiqued for oversimplifying human–environment interaction by assuming a linear progression from stimulus to response, scholars argue that its flexibility allows adaptation to complex service settings. Recent extensions of the model incorporate cultural, social, and situational moderators, making it particularly applicable in diverse contexts such as Sub-Saharan Africa (Li & Chen, 2024). Its capacity to integrate symbolic, emotional, and behavioural elements makes it a strong theoretical foundation for exploring customer loyalty in restaurant services.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopted an interpretivist research philosophy to explore how customers experience and assign meaning to the external physical environment of restaurants in Mwanza City. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' subjective interpretations rather than through objective measurement (Schwandt, 1994). This philosophical orientation aligns with the purpose of the study, which seeks to uncover how customers perceive environmental cues security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience—and how these perceptions influence their loyalty behaviours.

To operationalize this perspective, the study employed a phenomenological research design, enabling a deep exploration of participants' lived experiences. Phenomenology is particularly suited to hospitality research where experiences, emotions, and sensory impressions shape consumer behaviour. Drawing on Smith et al. (2012), phenomenology allows the researcher to engage closely with participants' narratives to identify the essence of their experiences in approaching and entering restaurant environments. This design aligns with the S-O-R framework by examining how external stimuli trigger internal emotional and cognitive reactions that influence behavioural intentions.

4.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Mwanza City, Tanzania, a rapidly developing urban centre with a growing hospitality sector. Mwanza's diverse socio-economic population and expanding restaurant industry make it an ideal context for examining how customers interpret external environmental cues. Restaurants in the city vary significantly in terms of accessibility, aesthetic presentation, and security features, offering a rich context for exploring customer perceptions and loyalty decisions. The selected restaurant for this study was chosen due to its high customer traffic and observable external environmental attributes, making it a suitable case for examining experiential responses.

4.3 Target Population

The target population comprised restaurant customers the primary subjects experiencing the external physical environment and restaurant staff, who hold experiential and operational knowledge of customer interactions and environmental conditions. Customers were selected because they directly engage with the environment and make loyalty decisions, while staff provided managerial perspectives and contextual background on environmental strategies and challenges.

4.4 Sampling Procedure

A combination of purposive sampling and maximum variation sampling was used to ensure rich, diverse, and relevant participant contributions. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of individuals who had visited the restaurant at least twice, ensuring familiarity with its external environment. Additional criteria included willingness to participate, ability to articulate experiences, and exposure to environmental features such as lighting, parking, signage, and pathways.

To capture diverse viewpoints, maximum variation sampling targeted participants of different ages, genders, occupations, and visit frequencies. This diversity allowed for identification of common perceptual patterns as well as unique experiential insights across customer groups. A total of 26 participants were included: 22 customers and 4 restaurant staff members (manager, supervisor, and frontline personnel).

4.5 Sample Size

Qualitative research emphasizes depth of insight rather than numerical representativeness; hence, the final sample size was determined by data saturation. Interviews continued until no new themes emerged, consistent with Malterud et al. (2016). The sample of 26 participants achieved saturation and provided sufficient depth for thematic analysis.

4.6 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using three complementary methods:

4.6.1 In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews served as the primary data collection tool, enabling participants to express experiences in their own words. Open-ended questions explored perceptions of security, aesthetic appeal, convenience, and loyalty. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted 30–45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent. This method ensured rich experiential narratives aligned with phenomenological inquiry.

4.6.2 Non-Participant Observations

Observations were conducted at different times of day to document actual environmental conditions, customer behaviours, and interactions with external features such as parking, entry points, lighting, and signage. Field notes captured environmental cues and behavioural patterns that complemented interview data and enhanced triangulation.

4.6.3 Document Review

Municipal by-laws, restaurant promotional materials, and hospitality guidelines were reviewed to contextualize environmental standards and regulatory expectations. This method validated insights from interviews and observations

by linking them to operational and institutional frameworks.

Together, these methods provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

4.7 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

(i) Familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts and field notes.

(ii) Initial coding using descriptive and interpretive codes related to perceptions, emotions, and behavioural intentions.

(iii) Theme development by grouping related codes.

(iv) Reviewing themes to ensure internal coherence and alignment with research objectives.

(v) Defining and naming themes based on experiential significance.

(vi) Producing the narrative report with illustrative quotes, observations, and literature integration.

This analytic approach enabled the identification of three central themes: perceived security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience.

4.8 Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

i. Credibility: Achieved through triangulation of methods, member checking, and prolonged engagement.

ii. Transferability: Ensured through thick descriptions of context and participants.

iii. Dependability: Supported by a detailed audit trail documenting methodological decisions.

iv. Confirmability: Maintained through reflexive journaling and secure storage of raw data to minimize researcher bias.

4.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate university authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality of the study before providing written or verbal consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and all data were stored securely. Care was taken to avoid harm or discomfort, and interviews were conducted at times convenient for participants.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of interview transcripts, observational data, and reviewed documents revealed three dominant and interrelated themes that explain how customers interpret and experience the external physical environment of restaurants in Mwanza City: (1) Perceived Security as the Foundation for Comfort and Trust, (2) Aesthetic Appeal as a Driver of Emotional Engagement, and (3) Convenience as a Catalyst for Effortless Access and Revisit Intention. These themes demonstrate how external stimuli generate internal cognitive and emotional

states that shape customer loyalty responses, consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework.

5.1 Perceived Security as the Foundation for Comfort and Trust

5.1.1 Security as a Non-Negotiable Requirement

Security emerged as the most frequently cited and strongly emphasized factor influencing customers' willingness to visit or revisit a restaurant. Customers described security not merely as a physical condition but as an emotional state characterized by feelings of comfort, reassurance, and reduced vulnerability. Many participants noted that they often assess safety before evaluating any other aspect of the restaurant.

One customer explained:

> *"When I arrive here, the first thing I look at is whether the place feels safe. If I don't see enough lights or a guard, I immediately feel uncomfortable."*

Another participant described security as the gateway to the dining experience:

> *"If I feel unsafe outside, I can't enjoy the food or even relax. Security outside sets the tone for everything."*

These narratives indicate that perceived security is foundational; without it, other environmental features cannot fully compensate.

5.1.2 Security Cues that Shape Emotional Comfort

Participants consistently identified specific external security cues that triggered feelings of comfort and trust:

i. Adequate lighting, especially during evening hours
ii. Visible, uniformed security guards
iii. Functioning CCTV cameras
iv. Safe, well-organized parking areas
v. Orderly surroundings with controlled access

Observations supported these views. Restaurants with bright lighting and active security presence exhibited smoother customer flow, while dimly lit access paths caused hesitancy among potential customers.

A participant emphasized:

> *"The lighting here makes me feel like nothing bad can happen. It's bright, open, and you can see everything."*

Another added:

> *"The presence of a guard immediately gives me confidence. I feel the restaurant cares about us."*

5.1.3 Security as a Determinant of Loyalty

Security was directly linked to customer loyalty. Participants reported avoiding or discontinuing visits to restaurants perceived as unsafe, regardless of food quality or service.

As one customer noted:

> *"I stopped going to a place I liked because the area became unsafe. Good food means nothing if I don't feel secure."*

This indicates that perceived security is not just a hygiene factor but a strategic driver of revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

5.2 Aesthetic Appeal as a Driver of Emotional Engagement

5.2.1 Visual Impressions as Signals of Quality

Aesthetic appeal emerged as a powerful emotional stimulus shaping first impressions and expectations. Customers interpreted visual qualities cleanliness, architectural design, landscaping, and lighting décor as indicators of professionalism, hygiene, and service quality.

One participant shared:

"Before I go inside, the outside already tells me what kind of service to expect. If it looks clean and beautiful, I feel confident I will have a good experience."

Another added:

"The flowers, the colours, and the lights make the place feel warm and special. It excites me even before I enter."

These findings show that aesthetic execution influences customers' anticipatory emotions and primes them for positive service evaluations.

5.2.2 Aesthetic Features that Influence Emotions

Participants consistently highlighted several aesthetic components that shaped their emotional engagement:

(i) Landscaping and greenery
(ii) Exterior cleanliness and maintenance
(iii) Colour coordination and building design
(iv) Attractive, visible signage
(v) Decorative lighting

Observations revealed that customers were visibly drawn to well-maintained exteriors. Some paused to appreciate landscaping or took photos a behaviour aligned with literature noting the increasing social and symbolic value of aesthetically appealing hospitality spaces.

5.2.3 Aesthetic Appeal as Emotional Bonding

Aesthetic appeal was linked to deeper emotional attachment. Customers felt "proud," "relaxed," or "excited" when approaching visually pleasing restaurants.

As one participant described:

"It's not just about food. I come here because the place gives me a calm, beautiful feeling. It's like an escape."

This emotional bond translated into loyalty behaviours, including repeat visits and enthusiastic recommendations.

5.3 Convenience as a Catalyst for Effortless Access and Revisit Intention

5.3.1 Convenience as Effort Reduction

Convenience defined as ease of access, navigation, and parking emerged as a crucial determinant of revisit intention. Customers repeatedly expressed that they prefer establishments that minimize effort and frustration.

A customer stated:

"If getting into a restaurant is a struggle whether parking, traffic, or finding the entrance I lose interest immediately."

Another added:

"I choose places where I can drive in easily, park easily, and walk in without confusion."

These findings emphasized that convenience shapes customers' psychological readiness for the dining experience.

5.3.2 Key Convenience Features Identified

Participants described four main convenience-related features influencing their decisions:

(i) Location accessibility—proximity to major roads
(ii) Parking availability and organization
(iii) Clear, visible signage
(iv) Unobstructed, clearly marked entry points

Observational data confirmed that restaurants with spacious, organized parking and clear signage had smoother customer flow and fewer cases of visible hesitation.

One staff member confirmed:

"When customers struggle with parking or identifying the entrance, they come in already frustrated. It affects their whole mood."

5.3.3 Convenience and Loyalty Formation

Convenience was linked directly to revisit intention, with customers repeatedly choosing restaurants that offered a seamless arrival experience.

A customer summarized this connection succinctly:
"When getting in is easy, everything else feels easy too."

This supports the S-O-R notion that environmental ease reduces cognitive load, leading to positive emotional states that reinforce loyalty.

5.4 Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the three themes illustrate that customer loyalty is shaped by:

(i) Emotional reassurance (security)
(ii) Emotional pleasure (aesthetics)
(iii) Effort reduction (convenience)

These findings confirm that customers evaluate restaurants holistically, beginning with the moment they approach the premises. The external physical environment is therefore not peripheral but central to customer experience and loyalty formation in restaurant settings.

5.5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how the external physical environment influences customer loyalty in selected restaurants in Mwanza City, Tanzania. Guided by the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, the findings reveal that perceived security, aesthetic appeal, and convenience play pivotal and interrelated roles in shaping

customers' cognitive and emotional evaluations, which in turn influence revisit intentions and loyalty behaviours. This section interprets the findings in relation to existing literature and highlights the study's theoretical and contextual contributions.

5.5.1 Security as a Psychological and Behavioural Catalyst

The findings demonstrate that perceived security is not only a functional necessity but also a psychological catalyst influencing customer loyalty. Participants described how external security features such as adequate lighting, visible guards, surveillance cameras, and safe parking shaped their sense of comfort and emotional readiness to enter the restaurant. When these cues were present, customers felt reassured and relaxed; when absent, they expressed anxiety or avoidance.

These findings strongly align with Ali and Anwar (2024) and Adeola and Evans (2023), who argue that security in hospitality settings serves both utilitarian and symbolic purposes. Even in environments where actual crime risks may be low, perceived vulnerability shapes emotional states and behavioural outcomes. The present study deepens this insight by demonstrating that in urban African contexts where safety concerns are often heightened external security becomes a prerequisite for customer engagement, outweighing other factors such as food quality or service interactions.

The findings also reinforce Wu and Liang's (2020) argument that perceived safety acts as an environmental stimulus triggering internal emotional comfort, which subsequently enhances satisfaction and loyalty. Within the S-O-R model, security stimuli evoke organismic responses (e.g., reduced anxiety), leading to behavioural outcomes such as revisit intention. The current study extends these theoretical applications by showing that customers interpret security through holistic environmental cues including lighting, orderliness, and visible monitoring rather than through isolated features.

Moreover, the findings contrast with digital-oriented security studies such as Chowdhury (2023) and Mercan et al. (2020), highlighting that physical environmental security—in contrast to cyber-security is a more salient determinant of loyalty in in-person restaurant settings. This contextual understanding is particularly relevant for the Tanzanian hospitality sector, where physical conditions strongly shape customer decisions.

5.5.2 Aesthetic Appeal as an Emotional and Symbolic Driver of Loyalty

The study reveals that aesthetic appeal of the restaurant exterior plays a significant role in shaping emotional engagement and expectation formation. Customers interpreted well-maintained landscaping, attractive lighting, colour coordination, and exterior cleanliness as reflections of professionalism, hygiene, and service quality. These findings echo earlier work by Motowilowa et al. (2024) and Purwanto et al. (2020), who emphasize that aesthetics serve as psychological triggers capable of shaping customer pleasure, excitement, and affinity with a service environment.

Notably, the findings highlight that aesthetic cues do more than enhance visual pleasure—they help construct customers' projected identity and social meaning. Participants reported feeling "proud" or "excited" to bring guests to aesthetically appealing restaurants. This aligns with Fanelli and Di Nocera (2018), who observed that aesthetic spaces carry symbolic value that enhances customers' sense of belonging and social expression. The present study offers contextual confirmation of this phenomenon within Tanzanian hospitality settings.

Furthermore, consistent with Kim and Moon (2009), the findings show that customers form expectations of service quality before entering the restaurant, based solely on external cues. This suggests that aesthetic appeal functions as a heuristic for evaluating anticipated satisfaction, reinforcing the argument that customers assess the broader brand promise through external visuals.

The theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that aesthetic stimuli activate both cognitive evaluations (e.g., "this place is clean and professional") and affective states (e.g., "I feel excited," "I feel calm"), which subsequently influence behavioural loyalty. This dual activation within the S-O-R framework adds nuance to existing hospitality literature, especially within the African context where aesthetic standards vary widely across establishments.

5.5.3 Convenience and Effort Reduction as Predictors of Revisit Intention

The findings highlight convenience including accessibility, clear signage, unobstructed entryways, and adequate parking as a critical determinant of revisit intention. Customers valued environments that reduced physical and cognitive effort, expressing frustration when navigating poorly marked entrances or congested parking spaces. These observations align with the conclusions of Adu-Gyamfi et al. (2023) and Rahmawati & Pratiwi (2022), who emphasize that convenience significantly predicts customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions in hospitality settings.

Unlike studies focusing on technological convenience (e.g., online reservations and mobile ordering), such as Kim & Lee (2021), this study underscores the importance of physical convenience in contexts where urban infrastructure may pose barriers to movement. For Mwanza City, characterized by rapid but uneven infrastructural development, external convenience becomes a meaningful differentiator that shapes customer choice and loyalty.

The findings strongly support Wang et al. (2020), who argue that ease of access influences the pre-consumption phase of the customer journey, thereby shaping expectations before service delivery. The present study extends this by showing that convenience not only shapes satisfaction but also fosters emotional states such as relief and ease, which reinforce loyalty.

Within the S-O-R framework, convenience functions as a stimulus that reduces cognitive load, prompting organismic responses such as comfort and positive anticipation. These, in turn, lead to behavioural outcomes like repeat visits. This

psychological interpretation extends previous hospitality studies by providing a nuanced understanding of customer decision-making in East African urban environments.

4.1.1 Integrated Interpretation: How External Environment Shapes Loyalty

Synthesizing the three themes reveals that customers evaluate restaurant environments holistically, integrating perceptions of security, aesthetics, and convenience into an overall emotional judgment that shapes loyalty. The findings show that:

(i) Security evokes reassurance
(ii) Aesthetic appeal evokes pleasure
(iii) Convenience evokes ease and reduced effort

Together, these stimuli generate internal organismic states such as comfort, trust, confidence, and satisfaction strong predictors of revisit intention and recommendation behaviour.

This synthesis underscores the study's contribution to hospitality literature by demonstrating that external environments are not peripheral but central to customer loyalty formation. In the Tanzanian context, where urbanization and competitive pressures are reshaping hospitality standards, understanding these experiential dimensions becomes essential for managerial strategy and policy formulation.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how the external physical environment influences customer loyalty in selected restaurants in Mwanza City, Tanzania. Using the Stimulus–Organism– Response (S-O-R) framework and a phenomenological research design, the findings demonstrate that customer loyalty extends far beyond food quality or interpersonal service interactions. Rather, customers' behavioural intentions are significantly shaped by how they perceive and emotionally respond to the external physical environment before entering the restaurant.

Three major conclusions emerge. First, perceived security is the most foundational environmental factor shaping customer loyalty. Visible security guards, adequate lighting, surveillance systems, and safe parking areas evoke emotional reassurance and trust, enabling customers to relax and engage confidently in the dining experience. In the absence of perceived safety, customers hesitate, avoid entering, or discontinue visits regardless of the restaurant's internal service quality.

Second, aesthetic appeal plays a powerful role in shaping emotional engagement and expectations. Cleanliness, landscaping, signage, and exterior design contribute to customers' first impressions and evoke feelings of pride, pleasure, and anticipation. Aesthetically appealing environments symbolically communicate professionalism and quality, positively influencing loyalty behaviours such as revisit intention and word-of- mouth referrals.

Third, convenience manifested in accessibility, organised parking, clear signage, and unobstructed entryways—reduces cognitive and physical effort. Customers prefer restaurants that offer seamless arrival experiences, interpreting convenience as a sign of operational efficiency and customer orientation. Convenience directly influences customers' likelihood of returning and recommending the restaurant to others.

Overall, the study concludes that the external physical environment is a strategic component of restaurant competitiveness in urban Tanzania. As customers' expectations evolve in a rapidly urbanizing context, restaurants that invest in secure, aesthetically appealing, and convenient exteriors are more likely to foster strong emotional connections, satisfaction, and loyalty. The findings emphasize the need for managers, urban planners, and policymakers to prioritize environmental design as part of customer experience and hospitality development strategies.

5.2 Implications

The implications of this study span managerial, policy, and theoretical domains. For restaurant managers, the findings highlight the need to prioritize visible security measures—such as lighting, CCTV, trained guards, and safe parking—as these are essential for customer comfort and loyalty. Aesthetic enhancements, including clean exteriors, landscaping, attractive lighting, and consistent signage, also emerged as critical drivers of emotional engagement and positive expectations. Additionally, improving convenience through accessible locations, organized parking, and clear entry points can reduce customer effort and enhance satisfaction, while consistent maintenance of external standards is crucial for sustaining loyalty. At the policy level, the study suggests that local authorities should strengthen urban safety infrastructure, enforce environmental and building standards, and promote public–private partnerships to improve the physical conditions surrounding hospitality areas. Theoretically, the study extends the S-O-R framework by demonstrating how external stimuli—security, aesthetics, and convenience—shape emotional and cognitive responses that inform loyalty. It further advances qualitative perspectives in African hospitality research by offering rich insights into customers' lived experiences and positions the external environment as a strategic driver of loyalty. Finally, it highlights the culturally specific ways customers interpret environmental cues, contributing to contextually grounded hospitality behaviour theories.

Acknowledgments

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