



A better investment in luxury restaurants: Environmental or non-environmental cues?



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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study were (1) to examine the impact of environmental and non-environmental cues on patrons' emotional responses and (2) to examine the influence of emotions on patrons' behavioral intentions, as moderated by motivational orientation and hedonism. Based on a thorough literature review, 11 theoretical hypotheses were proposed and a structural model was developed. The model was then tested using data collected from 379 actual luxury restaurant patrons residing in the United States. According to the results of data analysis, it was revealed that both environmental and non-environmental cues induce patrons' arousal in the luxury restaurant setting; however, environmental cues have a stronger impact on arousal than do non-environmental cues. More importantly, among the various environmental cues, ambient conditions were found to be the most powerful element that drives patrons' arousal. Data analysis also revealed the positive effect of arousal on pleasure and the positive effect of pleasure on behavioral intentions. Thus, it can be interpreted that arousal is a required condition in inducing patrons' pleasure. The moderating roles of motivational orientation and hedonism were also supported. Theoretical and practical implications based on the findings are discussed in the latter part of the study.

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1. Introduction

Patrons' emotional responses have long been an important topic in restaurant marketing research (e.g. Han et al., 2010; Kim and Lee, 2010; Lee et al., 2009; Mattila and Ro, 2008). Customer surveys commonly find that large percentages of revisiting patrons are patrons who had positive emotional responses (e.g. pleasure and arousal) during previous visits (Han et al., 2009; Jang and Namkung, 2009; Kim and Moon, 2009). It has also been argued that positive emotional responses significantly increase patrons' perceived value (Hyun et al., 2011) and satisfaction levels (Lin and Mattila, 2010; Mattila and Ro, 2008), thus helping to create patron loyalty (Bowden and Dagger, 2011; Lee et al., 2009).

For these reasons, factors inducing positive emotional responses have been an issue of great importance in the restaurant industry. Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) M–R model theorizes that environmental cues play a critical role in inducing an individual's emotional responses. For instance, a restaurant's lighting, background music,

temperature, food aromas, interior decorating, and layout induce patrons' positive or negative emotional responses, thus influencing the overall dining experience and revisit intentions. However, our understanding of the mechanisms by which environmental cues induce patrons' positive emotions is relatively weak in the restaurant industry. The current restaurant literature focuses heavily on the impact of non-environmental cues (such as food quality, service quality, price, and location) on patrons' satisfaction and revisit intentions (e.g. Chow et al., 2007; Hyun, 2010; Law et al., 2008). Considering that a luxury restaurant is a specialized type of restaurant operation that invests relatively high expenditures on a superior physical environment (Kim et al., 2006, 2011), investigating the role of environmental cues on emotional responses in the luxury restaurant setting is an issue of great importance.

However, luxury restaurant owners/managers do not currently have a practical model demonstrating the link between a restaurant's environmental and non-environmental cues and patrons' emotional responses. Therefore, upper-level luxury restaurant personnel have been under constant pressure to find more effective investments that can induce patrons' positive emotions. Specifically, it is critical to determine whether investment in environmental cues (e.g. lighting, furniture, interior decoration, renovations) or non-environmental cues (e.g. food quality

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improvements, service quality improvements, and pricing strategies) is more effective.

Therefore, the purpose of this research was to simultaneously examine the impact of both environmental and non-environmental cues on patrons' emotional responses in order to provide investment guidelines for luxury restaurant owners and managers. During the research process, it was also hypothesized that patrons' emotional responses could be strengthened and/or weakened by their dining motivation, which refers to motivational orientation. Lastly, since a large number of luxury restaurant patrons seek hedonic benefits from their luxury dining experiences (Hwang and Hyun, 2012), this study also theoretically proposes the moderating role of hedonism.

In summary, the purposes of this study were (1) to examine the impact of environmental and non-environmental cues on patrons' emotional responses and (2) to examine the influence of emotion on patrons' behavioral intentions, as moderated by motivational orientation and hedonism.

2. Literature review

2.1. The M–R model

The M–R model (1974) theorized that environmental stimuli influence an individual's behavioral intentions, with the impact mediated by emotional responses (Mehrabian and Russel, 1974). According to the existing literature on emotion, an individual's experience of emotion is a multi-dimensional construct composed of two sub-dimensions: (1) pleasure and (2) arousal (Walsh et al., 2011; Jang and Namkung, 2009). Pleasure refers to the degree of an individual's feeling in a situation (e.g. happy, joyful, or good), whereas arousal refers to the degree to which an individual feels excited, stimulated, or active in a situation (Ladhari, 2007).

In the history of emotion research, arousal is the first emotional response that an individual has when facing a certain situation (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Lazarus, 1982). Accordingly, emotion researchers have postulated that arousal occurs prior to pleasure (e.g. Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006). This causal relationship between arousal and pleasure will be further explained in the later section of behavioral intentions (the consequence of emotional responses).

Environmental stimuli include various physical cues such as design, music, layout, and décor (Koo and Kim, 2013). According to the M–R model, when customers are exposed to such environmental stimuli, they experience emotional responses (i.e. pleasure, arousal), particularly in the hedonic consumption that relates to positively emotive aspects of the consumption experience (Lucas, 2003; Ryu and Jang, 2007). Consequently, such emotional responses lead to behavioral intentions (Hyun et al., 2011). Due to the critical impact of environmental stimuli on customers' emotions and behavioral intentions, a large number of studies have examined the role of in-store environmental cues in retail settings (e.g. Spangenberg et al., 2005; Sweeney and Wyber, 2002; Yalch and Spangenberg, 2000).

Expanding the M–R model, Baker et al. (2002) investigated the role of non-environmental stimuli in the formation of customers' emotional responses and behavioral intentions. According to their study, an individual's emotional response is determined by two categories of store-related cognitions: (1) store environmental cues and (2) store-choice criteria that relate to non-environmental cues. Walsh et al.'s (2011) study further supports this argument. They empirically verified that both environmental and non-environmental cues significantly influence customer emotions and behavioral intentions.

According to the cognitive appraisal theory, a person's subjective evaluation is influenced by the environmental cues in which

he or she is situated (Lazarus, 1991). Similarly, in the restaurant context, patrons' dining out experiences/evaluations should theoretically be influenced by their cognitive appraisal of environmental cues consisting of décor and artifacts, spatial layout, and ambient conditions (Han and Ryu, 2009; Jang and Namkung, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2007). The existing literature supports the theory that non-environmental store-choice criteria induce customers' emotions, thus influencing behavioral intentions (Jang and Namkung, 2009; Walsh et al., 2011). In the restaurant context, non-environmental criteria typically involve four elements: food quality, service quality, price, and location (Hyun, 2010; Soriano, 2002).

Based on the above discussion, it can be theorized that both environmental cues and non-environmental cues positively influence patrons' emotional responses. More specially, this study postulated and tested the impact of such predictors on arousal, which is a required condition for the pleasure (Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006).

2.2. Restaurant environmental cues

Han and Ryu (2009) emphasized the critical role of environment in influencing patron behaviors in the restaurant industry. Restaurant environment is defined as the physical surroundings established by and controlled by the restaurateurs (Kim and Moon, 2009). Because patrons are consciously and/or unconsciously influenced by their physical surroundings throughout their dining experiences (e.g. before, during, and after their meals), an attractive restaurant environment affects overall patron satisfaction and future behaviors (Han and Ryu, 2009; Lin, 2004). Moreover, when patrons make dining-out decisions, they consider the physical surroundings of a restaurant as much as the food and service (Lee et al., 2008). Thus, a comfortable, creative, and innovative store design in a restaurant is a key component in inducing positive evaluations and emotional responses and consequently in influencing ongoing patronage (Ryu and Han, 2011; Wu and Liang, 2009).

Ryu and Jang (2007) examined the effects of restaurant environmental cues on patrons' emotions in upscale restaurants. Their study employed five DINESCAPE constructs that included only internal environmental cues: facility esthetics, lighting, ambience, layout, and dining equipment. Jang and Namkung (2009) employed space, design, color, and music as the elements of restaurant environmental cues in full-service restaurants. Integrating those previous studies and using the luxury restaurant setting, Han and Ryu (2009) comprehensively proposed three essential constructs of restaurant environmental cues: (1) décor and artifacts, (2) spatial layout, and (3) ambient conditions. The three constructs have been identified as key signals that determine restaurant environment quality (Kim and Moon, 2009; Wall and Berry, 2007). Since Han and Ryu (2009) comprehensively integrated sufficient measurements for the physical environment, which are pertinent to the luxury restaurant industry (which is the boundary of the present study), this study employed the environmental cues of décor and artifacts, spatial layout, and ambient conditions to measure the effects of such cues in the luxury restaurant context.

2.2.1. Décor and artifacts

Décor and artifacts are the essential components for generating the attractiveness of the physical environment in restaurant settings (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Nguyen and Leblanc, 2002). Restaurant customers consciously and/or subconsciously evaluate the pleasant environment of a restaurant through tangible cues such as the quality of construction materials, artwork, and interior designs and decorations (Han and Ryu, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2007). More specifically, these tangible cues include "the color schemes of the dining area, ceiling/wall decorations, pictures/paintings, plants/flowers, tableware (e.g. glass and silverware), linens (e.g.

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