

interior designs, many struggle to maintain long-term customer loyalty. Empirical evidence suggests that although these cafes successfully trigger initial visits through visual appeal, they often fail to provide a consistent and resonant atmosphere, comprising lighting, music, seating comfort, and cleanliness, that meets the escalating expectations of diverse consumer segments. This inconsistency leads to high switching behavior, where customers easily migrate to newer competitors, indicating that many cafes have not yet optimized their atmosphere to create a sustainable emotional attachment (Simarmata et al., 2021; Surya et al., 2026).

Despite the abundance of literature on store atmospherics, several research gaps remain that justify this study. First, an empirical gap exists due to inconsistent findings in recent studies; while (Alfiansyah et al., 2024; Madiawati, 2023) suggest that store atmosphere significantly drives loyalty, other research indicates that its impact may be limited or entirely dependent on mediating variables such as customer satisfaction (Wesilaturrohimieh & Vania, 2024; Wijana & Rahanatha, 2025). Second, a practical gap is observed in Pematangsiantar, where a discrepancy exists between the high investment in physical aesthetics and the actual retention rates of customers. Third, while previous research by (Prianda & Azizah, 2025; Sabilla & Kurniawati, 2023) focus on metropolitan hubs like Jakarta or Surabaya, emphasizes aesthetic trends, this study focuses on a secondary city context where social proximity may alter how patrons perceive and respond to environmental cues.

Therefore, this research aims to address the following problem: How does the multidimensional construct of cafe atmosphere influence customer loyalty within the unique competitive environment of Pematangsiantar? Specifically, this study seeks to identify which atmospheric elements are most effective in mitigating switching behavior and fostering a loyal customer base. The primary objective of this study is to examine and analyze the relationship between cafe atmosphere and customer loyalty using a quantitative approach (Candra et al., 2021).

This study offers significant research contributions. Theoretically, it enriches the literature on consumer behavior and marketing management by extending the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework within the context of MSMEs in secondary cities (Halim et al., 2021; Soleman et al., 2025). Practically, it provides actionable insights for cafe owners and managers in Pematangsiantar to strategically manage their physical environment. By understanding the specific atmospheric drivers that resonate with local patrons, businesses can move beyond temporary trends and build a differentiated, sustainable competitive advantage that secures long-term loyalty (Wijaya et al., 2025).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)

The theoretical underpinning of this research is the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, which posits that environmental cues act as stimuli (S) that affect an individual's internal state (O), subsequently driving behavioral responses (R) (Sisca et al., 2021). In the context of the hospitality industry, the Cafe Atmosphere serves as the multi-sensory stimulus. This stimulus influences the customer's internal evaluation (such as satisfaction or emotional attachment), which ultimately manifests in Customer Loyalty, characterized by repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth (Simarmata et al., 2021).

2.2. Cafe Atmosphere

Cafe atmosphere, often referred to as servicescape or store atmosphere, is defined as the intentional design of space to create specific emotional effects in the buyer that enhance purchase probability (Halim et al., 2021). According to (Sisca et al., 2021), atmosphere is a multidimensional construct comprising visual cues (interior design, color schemes, and lighting;

auditory cues (background music and noise levels); olfactory cues (scents and aromas); and tactile cues (seating comfort and temperature). Recent literature emphasizes that for modern consumers, especially Generation Z, the atmosphere must not only be functional but also instagrammable to satisfy social identity needs (Budiman & Dananjoyo, 2021). However, the challenge for MSMEs is maintaining consistency across these elements to ensure the environment does not become a source of cognitive dissonance (Siregar et al., 2024).

2.3. Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is a deeply held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product or service consistently in the future (Simarmata et al., 2021). In the highly competitive cafe sector, loyalty is categorized into attitudinal loyalty (emotional attachment) and behavioral loyalty (repeat patronage). As noted by (Wijaya et al., 2025), building loyalty in the era of modern competition requires more than just high-quality products; it requires a unique value proposition that creates a psychological switching barrier for the customer.

2.4. The Relationship Between Cafe Atmosphere and Customer Loyalty

Based on the S-O-R logic, the physical environment of a cafe in Pematangsiantar acts as a primary stimulus. When a customer perceives the interior design, music, and comfort as superior, it creates a positive emotional state. This psychological comfort reduces the tendency for switching behavior and fosters long-term commitment (Priandana & Azizah, 2025; Sriyanti et al., 2023). In an environment where many cafes offer similar menus, the atmosphere becomes the primary driver of the experience that leads to loyalty.

Empirical studies on the relationship between atmosphere and loyalty have yielded significant, albeit nuanced, results. (Alfiansyah et al., 2024; Madiawati, 2023) demonstrate that a well-optimized store atmosphere directly enhances customer loyalty by creating a memorable experience. Similarly, (Surya et al., 2026) highlight that in competitive retail and cafe environments, atmosphere serves as a critical differentiator that prevents customers from switching to competitors.

However, some scholars suggest that the direct link might be complex. Such as (Wesilaturohimieh & Vania, 2024) argue that atmosphere's impact on loyalty is sometimes limited unless it is successfully mediated by customer satisfaction. This is echoed by (Soleman et al., 2025; Wijana & Rahanatha, 2025), who found that while atmosphere triggers the initial interest, the organism (satisfaction/experience) must be positive for loyalty to materialize. Despite these nuances, the prevailing consensus in marketing management remains that a superior atmosphere is a foundational prerequisite for loyalty (Risal et al., 2025; Sabilla & Kurniawati, 2023).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_a: Cafe Atmosphere has a positive and significant effect on Customer Loyalty

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts a quantitative-explanatory design, which aims to clarify the relationship and influence between the defined variables (Candra et al., 2021). The population comprises all individuals who have visited and made purchases at cafes in Pematangsiantar. Following the methodological framework proposed by (Hair, 2014), the sample size was determined by multiplying the total number of research indicators by five ($16 \times 5 = 80$). These subjects are characterized as active consumers aged 17 and above who have visited the specific cafe at least twice, ensuring they can provide an objective assessment of the atmosphere and their subsequent loyalty.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The research instrument comprises 16 measurement items, with 8 items

Model Summary^b

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.626 ^a	.392	.384	4.519

a. Predictors: (Constant), Store Atmosphere

b. Dependent Variable: Customer Loyalty

Furthermore, the model summary indicates a correlation coefficient (R) = 0.626, representing a moderately high correlation. The Coefficient of Determination (R^2) = 0.392, suggesting that 39.2% of the variance in Customer Loyalty is explained by the Store Atmosphere, while the remaining 60.8% is influenced by other factors outside the scope of this model.

4.3. Discussion

The finding that cafe atmosphere significantly enhances customer loyalty ($B = 0.709$) highlights the critical role of environmental psychology in the hospitality sector. Under the S-O-R framework, the physical environment functions as a high-impact stimulus that modulates the patron's internal emotional state. When consumers perceive a consistent and memorable atmosphere, it reduces the cognitive effort required to evaluate the service, thereby fostering a psychological attachment that manifests as loyalty (Simarmata et al., 2021). The high t-statistic (7.091) suggests that in Pematangsiantar, the atmosphere is not merely a supplementary feature but a primary driver of retention. This trend occurs because, in secondary cities where cafe options are rapidly expanding, consumers often perceive functional offerings (like coffee taste) as standardized. Consequently, the experience provided by the physical space becomes the definitive differentiator that prevents switching behavior.

This study's findings align with the work of (Alfiansyah et al., 2024; Madiawati, 2023), who argued that optimizing the physical environment is essential for building sustainable consumer relationships. Specifically, the strong R^2 of 39.2% supports the assertion by (Surya et al., 2026) that in local competitive landscapes, store atmospherics serve as a formidable tool for increasing competitive advantage. However, this research offers a more optimistic perspective compared to (Wesilaturrohimieh & Vania, 2024), who suggested that the impact of atmosphere on loyalty is limited. In the context of Pematangsiantar, the atmosphere proves to be a robust predictor of loyalty even without examining mediation, suggesting that the local market places a higher premium on social space and aesthetic comfort. This discrepancy highlights that in less saturated urban markets, the visual and sensory novelty of a cafe remains a dominant factor in securing repeat visits, echoing the findings of (Priananda & Azizah, 2025) regarding the importance of experiential marketing in driving long-term commitment.

The results imply that cafe managers in Pematangsiantar should prioritize the holistic atmosphere over purely visual trends. While an instagrammable design may attract initial visits, the unstandardized coefficient of 0.709 indicates that every unit improvement in the atmospheric quality, including aspects like cleanliness and acoustic comfort, significantly boosts the probability of customer retention. As noted by (Wijaya et al., 2025), building MSME resilience in a modern competitive era requires a strategic focus on creating an environment that resonates emotionally with the target demographic, transforming a simple purchase into a repeatable lifestyle experience.

5. CONCLUSION

This research concludes that cafe atmosphere serves as a pivotal strategic instrument in cultivating customer loyalty within the competitive hospitality landscape of Pematangsiantar, thereby successfully validating the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework in a secondary-city context. The findings confirm that a well-curated physical

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