

Physical Evidence and Customer Patronage of Restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the effect of physical evidence on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State. The cross-sectional survey research design was used to obtain the primary data. The target population of this study comprised customers of selected restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The sample size of 336 respondents was selected using a non-probability purposive sampling technique. Hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression model at 0.05 level of significance with $p < 0.05$ indicating statistical significance. Data analyses were enhanced using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. The simple linear regression results revealed that there is a positive significant effect of physical evidence-ambience, layout, and service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State. It was concluded that physical evidence plays a crucial role in enhancing customers' patronage, satisfaction and loyalty. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the operators of restaurant business should make ambience elements specific and use it as a major tool to have competitive advantage in the market. They should concentrate on providing ambience variables such as good lighting, music, scent, cleanliness, hygiene, etc. to create the desired atmosphere in the restaurants and influence customers' experience and patronage. The operators of restaurant business should pay more attention to layout as a strategic arrangement of the restaurant space to provide for easy movement of employees and customers. Finally, the operators of restaurant business should improve on training their service staff on interpersonal relationship to develop interpersonal skills such as friendliness, attentiveness, sociability, and effective communication to enhance customers' patronage, satisfaction and loyalty.

Keywords: Physical evidence, Ambience, Layout, Service staff, Customer patronage

INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive business environment, physical evidence has become increasingly important to service industry. It plays a crucial role in enhancing customer patronage of any service business, such as a restaurant. Customers consider physical facilities offered by service providers' right from their first contact with the organization and they often let their first impressions to guide their evaluations of a business. Physical evidence is the tangible element of organization that facilitates the performance and delivery of service. Services are intangible in nature and customers are looking for tangible (physical) evidence to evaluate, measure or judge service quality. According to Pawar and Srikanth (2025), physical evidence, as one of the elements of service marketing mix, offers a comprehensive framework for service businesses seeking to thrive in the dynamic competitive business environment.

Physical evidence variables such as seating comfort, ambience, interior design, lighting, layout, aesthetic, and service staff all play a vital role in shaping the customers' perception of the establishment. In the same vein, Kumar (2022) asserted that physical evidence plays a crucial role in enhancing and shaping customers' perceptions and influencing their purchasing decisions. It can create emotional connection with the brand and also create a memorable experience for customers. Visually appealing variables can all contribute to creating a positive image of the brand in the customers' mind. Therefore, it is imperative to create positive atmosphere and increase satisfaction (Almohammad et al., 2025). The framework of physical evidence is important in business because of the fact that pre-purchase assessment of service is difficult (Udonde & Ekong, 2023).

This study focuses on the physical evidence variables such as ambience, layout, and service staff. Ambience is the quality of the surrounding space that is perceived by customers. According to Kotler (1974), ambience is the conscious designing of space to produce specific emotional effects in the buyers that enhance their purchase probability. Ambience in restaurant is made up of a set of elements such as interior decoration, aroma, room temperature, lighting, music, scent, etc. Layout is the strategic arrangement of a place, for example, a restaurant. It includes seating arrangement, and proper placement of goods in displays. Service staff is described as those who interact and deliver service directly to the customers. Service staff competence is essential in the hospitality industry, especially as restaurant staff interacts with customers daily. According to Gunawardana et al. (2024), the success of the restaurant business depends on several factors including the competence of service staff. Despite the importance of physical evidence to enhance the employees' productivity, improve customers' experience, loyalty, and increase revenue, customers have experienced challenges in restaurants such as poor lighting, poor attention by service staff at the service points, unfriendly service staff and poor seating arrangement. Therefore, this study seeks to empirically determine the effect of physical evidence, namely, ambience, layout, service staff on customer patronage of selected restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study was to determine the effect of physical evidence on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The specific objectives were:

1. To ascertain the effect of ambience on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.
2. To find out the effect of layout on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.
3. To examine the effect of service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the objectives of the study, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H₀₁: There is no significant effect of ambience on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of layout on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

H₀₃: There is no significant effect of service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Scope of the Study

The study on physical evidence and customer patronage of restaurants was restricted to Akwa Ibom State. It focused on three proxies of physical evidence-ambience, layout and service staff as independent variables and customer patronage as dependent variable. The unit of analysis was the customers of selected restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Physical Evidence

Physical evidence is the tangible element of organization that facilitates the performance and delivery of service. Gbegeh et al.(2020) described physical evidence as physical environment in which service is delivered, the elements that facilitate the service delivery, the organization of these elements and other physical components. The physical evidence elements assist to influence customers on how they perceive and evaluate the performance and delivery of service. According to Udonde and Ekong (2023), physical evidence represents the surroundings in which service is offered and where the company and customers interact combined with tangible elements that facilitate performance of the service. Zeithmal and Bitner (2003) considered physical evidence as the environment in which the service is delivered, which the firm interact with the tangible component that facilitates performance of the service.

Pawar and Srikanth (2025) described physical evidence as the tangible and visual elements within a business environment that profoundly shape customer perceptions. According to Asiegbu et al. (2011), physical evidence includes the appearance of physical structure, landscaping, interior furnishing, equipment, signs, printed material and other visible cues that provide indication of service quality. Kerjn and Hartly (2023) noted that the appearance of the environment in which the service is delivered and where the firm and customer interact can influence the customer's perception of the service. The physical evidence of the service includes all the tangibles surrounding the service: the buildings, the landscaping, vehicles, furnishings, signage, brochures, and equipment. Service firms need to manage physical evidence carefully and systematically to convey the proper impression of the service.

Proxies of Physical Evidence

Some of the proxies of physical evidence include the following:

Ambience: Ambience refers to the distinctive atmosphere, mood, or character of a place, created by its surroundings, lighting, sounds, and overall feeling, making to feel a certain way. Ambient conditions include background characteristics of the environment such as temperature, lighting, noise, and scent (Akpan & Eno, 2021). According to Crismariu and Tigu (2019), the ambience of a restaurant is represented by the material, social or moral environment in which its customers can enjoy the offered services. It contains the main aspects that influence the customers' experience such as interior design, lighting, music, cleanliness, hygiene, the staff's appearance, the appearance of the dishes, the quality of the furniture, and the attitude of the staff.

Choudhury (2023) asserted that the restaurant identity is denoted by its art, decoration and equipment. The creation of ambience is dependent on the right choice of decoration, furnishing, layout, linen, tableware, small equipment, and glassware; everything should harmonize with each other to give a balanced experience. According to Biswas et al. (2019), it is not easy to forecast the ambience effect on the customer, however, all extreme elements, such as highly bright light or shallow temperature represents the ambience. A comfortable ambience acts to enhance customers' satisfaction, serves to ensure behavioural intentions towards the service environment and positive reviews about the service, and creates a favourable image of the service or brand in the mind of the customer (Akpan & Eno, 2021). Ambience is the atmosphere of a place created by its surroundings. Therefore, ambience conditions should be made specific and used by the operators of restaurants as major tools to have competitive advantage in the market.

Layout: Layout refers to the spatial arrangement of physical elements such as furniture, equipment and fixtures within a service environment (Almohammad et al., 2025). Layout represents the strategic arrangement of a place. It includes interior decoration, seating arrangement and proper placement of goods in displays. Chukundah et al. (2020) described the design and arrangement of service environment in restaurants, service equipment such as tables and chairs including space provided for easy entry and exit. Walfield and Blodgett (2005) noted that the arrangement of equipment, including the provision of space among them is for easy movement of employees and customers.

Service Staff: Service staff is referred to those who provide services and interact directly with the customers. According to Kement et al. (2021), the behaviour and professionalism of service staff significantly shape customers' appearance, responsiveness and the ability to provide timely, accurate and courteous service. Equally important are interpersonal traits such as friendliness, attentiveness and effective communication, all of which influence how customers evaluate their dining experience (Almohammad et al., 2025). Ha and Jang (2010) emphasized that social cues such as the number of employees can shape emotional responsiveness, further underscoring the role of staff in the overall service management. Staff competence is essential in the service organization as the staff interacts with customers daily. The success of the restaurant business relies on several factors including the quality of dishes; the quality of the services provided, the facilities offered and the competence of the staff (Gunawardana et al., 2024).

Customer patronage

Customer patronage is the act of individual regularly buying a particular brand/product (Attih, 2020). The author opined that customers' impression, brand image, and positive attitude are the foundations of their patronage.

Njelita and Anyasor (2020) described customer patronage as the purchase of goods and services from a particular vendor by a customer. According to Udo et al. (2024), customer patronage is the approval or backing provided by customers concerning a particular brand. Jones and Sasser (1995) described customer patronage as the habitual purchasing behaviour of customers who regularly choose a particular brand or business over others, often driven by satisfaction, brand loyalty, and a positive perception of the company's offerings.

Review of empirical studies

Pawar and Srikanth (2025) examined the impact of physical evidence on consumer behaviour. A comparative study of leading clothing retail brands in Karnataka. The descriptive research design was used and the primary data were gathered through a structured questionnaire administered to the respondents. The sample size of 216 shoppers was selected using convenience sampling technique to ensure diverse representation of Karnataka's consumer base. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square test to examine the relationships. Findings revealed significant relationship between physical evidence and buying behaviour. It was concluded that physical evidence plays a particular crucial role, in enhancing and influencing the consumer behaviour.

Almohammad et al. (2025) investigated the impact of physical environment of customer loyalty in upscale restaurants in Turkey. The survey research design was used in the study. The sample size of 305 customers participated in the survey was selected using a non-probability convenience sampling method. The data obtained for the study were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to determine the relationships. The results showed the positive significant effect of aesthetics, lighting, ambience, spatial layouts, table settings and service staff on customers' loyalty in upscale restaurants. It was concluded that physical environment plays a crucial role in enhancing customers' satisfaction and loyalty.

Gbegeh and Ahmed (2020) examined physical evidence and customer patronage of hospitality firms in Rivers state, Nigeria. The survey research design was employed in the study. The sample size of 340 customers was selected for the study. The hypotheses for the study were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The findings revealed that physical evidence has positive and statistically significant relationship with customer patronage. It was concluded that physical evidence plays a crucial role in influencing customer patronage.

Udonde and Ekong (2023) conducted a study on physical evidence and customer patronage in health care services in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The survey research design was used in the study. The population was the customers of five (5) selected public health care facilities in Uyo metropolis and its environs. The Topman formula was used to select a sample size of 358 respondents. The hypotheses stated were tested using simple linear regression model. The finding revealed that physical evidence components, architectural design, ambient conditions and corporate identity have significant effect on customer patronage of health care services in Uyo. It was concluded that physical evidence of health care has a significant effect on the customer patronage and that customers will frequently revisit a health facility if the environment meets their expectations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section focused on methods and procedures used in collection and analyzing data for the study. The cross-sectional survey research design was used to obtain primary data. This research design was used because it helped the researcher to collect first-hand information from the respondents using a structured questionnaire. The target population of this study comprised customers of selected restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The sample size of 336 respondents was selected using a non-probability purposive sampling technique. The research instrument (questionnaire) was based on a Likert scaling method range from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

To test the reliability of the research instrument, Cronbach's Alpha was used. The results showed reliability coefficients of 0.75 for the independent variables and 0.80 for dependent variable. The reliability coefficients are greater than the 0.70 recommended threshold, which implies that the instrument is reliable. Hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression model at 0.05 level of significance with $p < 0.05$ indicating statistical significance. Data analyses were enhanced using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 23).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Test of Hypothesis One

H₀₁: There is no significant effect of ambience on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 4.1: Simple linear regression results showing the effect of ambience on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Variable	Parameters	Coefficient	Std error	Tcal – value
Constant	β_0	2.653	0.180	14.7613***
Ambience(X ₁)	β_1	0.202	0.052	3.912***
R-Square (R ²)		0.145		
Adjusted R – Square (R ⁻²)		0.141		
F – Statistics		73.149		
F – Probability		0.000		
Durbin-Watson Stat.		2.158		

Note: If calculated value > tabular value, reject null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. Otherwise accept the null hypothesis. (** = 5%) denotes significance of coefficient; t-tab value = 1.968, df = 334, Dependent Variable: customer patronage, Predictors: (Constant), ambience

Source: Field Survey, 2026 (Version 23 of SPSS computation)

Simple linear regression analysis was used to test hypothesis 1 and the result is as follows: the coefficient of ambience(X) was statistically significant to customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State at 1% level. Implying that, increase in ambience condition, holding other variables constant, will lead to increase in customer patronage of restaurants by 0.202 units. From the result, the t-calculated value of ambience was 3.912; and the t-tabulated value of 1.968. Since the t-calculated value of digital self-service software is greater than t-tabulated value in absolute terms, the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of alternative, there is significant effect of ambience on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

The coefficient of multiple determination (R²) was 0.145, which implies that 14.5% changes in the dependent variable was explained by changes in the independent variable, while 86.5% was unexplained by stochastic terms in the model. Thus, the independent variable (ambience) can only explain 14.5 percent of changes in customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State leaving 86.5% unexplained. The R⁻² adjusted was 14.1% indicating a goodness of fit of the regression model adopted in this study which is statistically significant at 5% probability level. The Durbin-Watson statistical value of 2.158 was observed which falls within 1.8 to 2.5, implying that there is no evidence of autocorrelation in the data analysis. More so, the f-statistical (calculated) value of 73.149 was observed in the analysis which is greater than 1.968 t-table value; and f-probability value of 0.000 was observed from the analysis which is less than 0.05 (95% of freedom), indicating that estimated regression model adopted in this study is statistically significant at 5% level. With this, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis and accept alternative hypothesis hence, there is significant effect of ambience on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Test of Hypothesis Two:

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of layout on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 4.2: Simple linear regression results showing the effect of layout on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Variable	Parameters	Coefficient	Std error	Tcal – value
Constant	β_0	7.157	0.235	30.434***
Layout(X_1)	β_1	0.830	0.066	12.635***
R-Square (R^2)		0.323		
Adjusted R – Square (R^{-2})		0.321		
F – Statistics		159.636		
F – Probability		0.000		
Durbin-Watson Stat.		1.939		

Note: If calculated value > tabular value, reject null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. Otherwise accept the null hypothesis. (** = 5%) denotes significance of coefficient; t-tab value = 1.968, df = 334, Dependent Variable: customer patronage, Predictors: (Constant), layout

Source: Field Survey, 2026 (Version 23 of SPSS computation)

The estimated value of layout(X_1) was statistically significant to customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State at 1% level. Statistically, the t-calculated value of layout was 12.635; and the t-tabulated value of 1.968. Since the t-calculated value is greater than t-tabulated value in absolute terms, the null hypothesis was rejected in favour of alternative; there is significant effect of layout on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

The coefficient of multiple determination (R^2) was 0.323, which implies that 32.3% changes in the dependent variable was explained by changes in the independent variable, while 67.7% was unexplained by the stochastic terms in the model. Thus, the independent variable (layout) can only explain 32.3 percent customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, leaving 67.7% was unexplained. The R^{-2} adjusted was 32.1% indicating a goodness of fit of the regression model adopted in this study which is statistically significant at 5% probability level. More so, the f-statistical (calculated) value of 159.636 which is greater than 1.968 t-table value; and f-probability value of 0.000 was observed from the analysis which is less than 0.05 (95% of freedom), indicating that estimated regression model adopted in this study is statistically significant at 5% level. With this, the researcher rejected the null hypothesis and accept alternative hypothesis hence, there is significant effect of layout on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Test of Hypothesis Three

H₀₃: There is no significant effect of service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Table 4.3: Simple linear regression results showing the effect service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

Variable	Parameters	Coefficient	Std error	Tcal – value
Constant	β_0	5.260	0.479	10.975***
Service staff (X_1)	β_1	0.320	0.123	2.604***

R-Square (R ²)		0.164		
Adjusted R-Square (R ²)		0.159		
F – Statistics		15.191		
F – Probability		0.003		
Durbin-Watson stat		1.859		

Note: If calculated value > tabular value, reject null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis. Otherwise accept the null hypothesis. (** = 5%) denotes significance of coefficient; t-tab value = 1.968, df = 334, Dependent Variable: customer patronage, Predictors: (Constant), staff service

Source: Field Survey, 2026 (Version 23 of SPSS computation)

Simple linear regression analysis was used to test hypothesis 3 and the result is as follows: the coefficient of service staff (X₁) was statistically significant and positively related to customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State at 1% level. Implying that a unit increase in staff services, holding other variables constant, will lead to increase in customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State by 0.320 units. From the result, the t-calculated value of service staff was 2.604; and the t-tabulated value of 1.968 at 0.5 degree of freedom, since the t-calculated value is greater than t-tabulated value in absolute terms, the researcher upheld alternative hypothesis which states that, there is positive and significant effect of service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

The coefficient of multiple determination (R²) was 0.164, which implies that 16.4% changes in the dependent variable was explained by changes in the independent variable, while 83.6% was unexplained by the stochastic (error) terms in the model. Thus, the independent variable (service staff) can only explain 16.4 percent of changes in customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, leaving 83.6% unexplained. The R² adjusted was 15.9% indicating a goodness of fit of the regression model adopted in this study which is statistically significant at 5% probability level. The Durbin-Watson statistical value of 1.859 was observed in the analysis which is within 1.8 to 2.5, implying that there is no evidence of autocorrelation. More so, the f-statistical (calculated) value of 15.191 which is greater than 1.968 t-table value; and f-probability value of 0.003 was observed from the analysis which is less than 0.05 (95% degree of freedom), indicating that estimated regression model adopted in this study is statistically significant at 5% level. With this, the researcher upheld alternative hypothesis, thus there is positive and significant effect of service staff on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was on physical evidence and customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The results revealed that ambience, layout and service staff enhanced customer preference and patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State. The study revealed that physical evidence – ambience, layout and service staff have positive significant effect on customer patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State. Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that physical evidence plays a crucial role in enhancing customer satisfaction, loyalty and patronage of restaurants in Akwa Ibom State. Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The operators of restaurant business should make ambience elements specific and use a major tool to have competitive advantage in the market. They should concentrate on providing ambience variables such as good lighting, music, scent, cleanliness, hygiene, etc. to create the desired atmosphere in the restaurants and influence customers' experience and patronage.
2. The operators of restaurants business should pay more attention to layout as a strategic arrangement of the restaurant space to provide for easy movement of employees and customers.

3. The operators of restaurant business should improve on training of service staff on interpersonal relationship to develop interpersonal skills such as friendliness, attentiveness, sociability, and effective communication to enhance customers' satisfaction, loyalty, and patronage.

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