

## **When the Room Rivals the Relationship: Servicescape and Relationship Management as Parallel Routes to Customer Retention in Café**

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### **Abstract**

Relationship marketing theory positions the managed interpersonal relationship as the primary engine of customer retention, implicitly casting the physical service environment as a supporting cue. This study confronts that hierarchy in a setting purpose-built to test it the Café, a “third place” where the environment is co-consumed with the product rather than serving as backdrop. Using PLS-SEM (SmartPLS 4) on 115 repeat customers of an Indonesian Café, we model customer relationship management (CRM) and café atmosphere as competing antecedents of retention and test whether atmosphere amplifies the return on CRM. Both routes are strong and significant (CRM  $\beta = 0.460$ ,  $f^2 = 0.248$ ; atmosphere  $\beta = 0.507$ ,  $f^2 = 0.339$ ), jointly explaining 62.1% of retention variance but atmosphere reaches parity with, and descriptively surpasses, the relational route that theory privileges. Critically, the two do not combine: the CRM  $\times$  atmosphere interaction is non-significant ( $\beta = 0.136$ ,  $p = 0.061$ ), and the evidence is consistent with two parallel, partially substitutable routes to retention rather than one reinforcing system. The study repositions the servicescape from a peripheral cue to a co-equal retention currency in low-commitment experiential retail, and shows that managers face a portfolio choice between independent bonds rather than a single lever to optimize.

**Keywords:** Customer Retention, Servicescape, Café Atmosphere, Customer Relationship Management, Relationship Marketing Theory.

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## INTRODUCTION

Café sell two things at once: a relationship and a room. Relationship marketing theory has a clear view of which one retains customers. Since Morgan and Hunt (1994), the field has treated relational bonds—trust and commitment cultivated through managed interaction as the engine of retention, with the surrounding environment relegated to the status of an atmospheric cue that, at most, colors the relational exchange. *Customer relationship management* (CRM) operationalizes this logic, and a large body of evidence confirms its retention payoff in banking, telecommunications, airlines, and hotels (Etim et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2021; Hoolbangpo et al., 2023; Mtamike & Magasi, 2025). What unites these settings is telling: they are high-commitment contexts defined by contracts, accounts, or switching costs, where the relationship is the binding mechanism almost by construction.

The Café violates every one of those conditions, and that is precisely what makes it analytically valuable. There is no contract, switching costs are near zero, the next café is across the street, and the product is largely undifferentiated. If the relationship is what retains, retention here should be hard to manufacture and CRM should carry the burden. Yet the Café is also the prototypical “third place,” where customers do not merely buy a product but inhabit an environment and where the servicescape is co-consumed with, and arguably inseparable from, the offer itself (Rancati & Gordini, 2023). This raises a question relationship marketing theory has not had to answer: when the environment is part of what is consumed rather than the scenery around it, does it remain a subordinate cue, or does it become a retention mechanism in its own right?

Two competing predictions follow, and they have not been forced to compete. The first, native to relationship marketing theory, is an *amplification* logic: a superior atmosphere heightens the salience and emotional encoding of relational efforts, so that the environment multiplies the return on CRM. The second is a *parallel-routes* logic: relational trust and environmental attachment are distinct psychological systems—one cognitive and earned over interactions, the other affective and immediate that supply retention independently and may substitute for one another rather than compound. The amplification view predicts a positive CRM × atmosphere interaction; the parallel-routes view predicts none. Resolving this tension matters because it determines whether the servicescape belongs inside relationship marketing theory as a co-equal bond or remains outside it as context.

This study adjudicates between these accounts using a Café in Cilegon, Indonesia, that has experienced eroding transaction volume a setting where retention is both consequential and difficult. We estimate CRM and *café atmosphere* as simultaneous antecedents of retention and test their interaction directly. The contribution is twofold and deliberately bounded. Theoretically, we show that in low-commitment experiential retail the environmental route reaches parity with the relational route that theory privileges, and that the two operate in parallel rather than in concert repositioning the servicescape from cue to co-equal currency. Practically, this reframes the manager’s problem from optimizing a single relationship lever to allocating across two independent bonds under resource constraints.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

### The relational route to retention

Relationship marketing theory locates retention in the accumulation of trust and commitment: as a firm reliably delivers quality, responsiveness, and problem resolution, customers form expectations that raise the psychological and search costs of defecting (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Arnett & Madhavaram, 2012). CRM is the operational expression of this accrual, spanning product and service quality, enabling technology, employee conduct, and the handling of customer problems (Tifliyah et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2021). The mechanism is cumulative and

cognitive each satisfactory interaction is evidence that the relationship is worth continuing (Lamrhari et al., 2022; Moudud-Ul-Huq et al., 2021). The non-obvious implication for the present setting is that this logic should hold even where exit is effortless: if trust has been earned, the absence of switching costs is irrelevant, because the customer has no motive to leave. We therefore expect CRM to retain customers even in the frictionless coffee market.

H1. *Customer relationship management* has a positive effect on *customer retention*.

### **The environmental route to retention**

The servicescape literature describes atmosphere ambience, aesthetics, lighting, scent, temperature, and layout as a generator of affective response (Rancati & Gordini, 2023; Sartika & Keni, 2023). In the third place, however, its role exceeds mood induction. When customers go to a café to be somewhere to work, meet, or linger the environment is not the container of the experience; it is the experience. Repeated, pleasurable occupancy of a space builds attachment to that space, a bond that is immediate and affective rather than earned and cognitive. This attachment retains customers through a different door than trust: the customer returns not because the relationship is worth continuing but because the place has become theirs. In experiential retail, then, atmosphere is not a cue that decorates the offer but a constitutive part of it.

H2. *Café atmosphere* has a positive effect on *customer retention*.

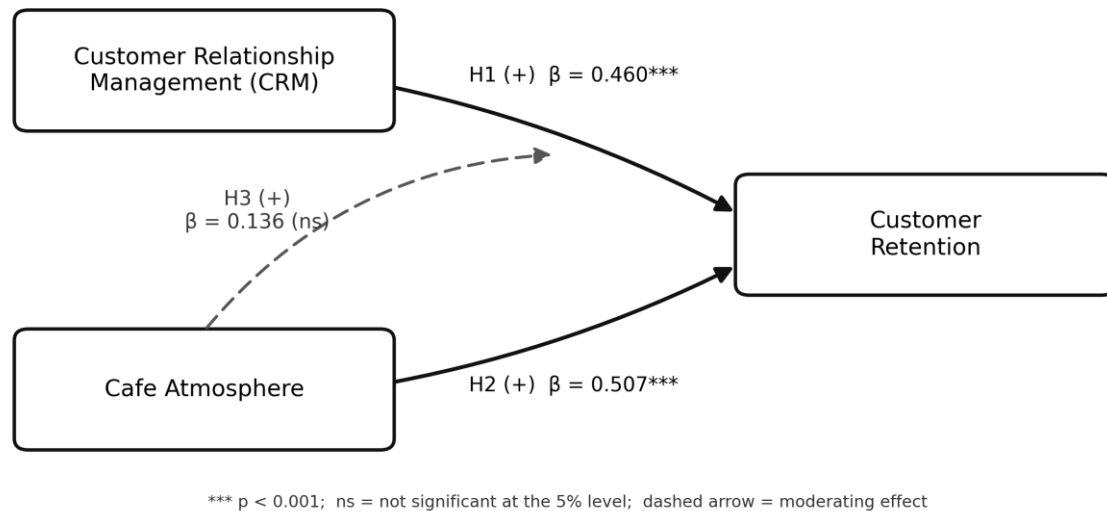
### **Amplification or parallelism? The contested role of atmosphere**

Whether these two routes interact is the theoretically decisive question. The amplification account, implicit in relationship marketing theory's treatment of environment as a relational cue, holds that a pleasant atmosphere raises the perceptual salience and affective weight of relational efforts: the same attentive service registers more strongly, and is more readily encoded as evidence of a valued relationship, in an appealing space.

A clearer distinction between these competing accounts lies in the psychological processes through which they influence customer retention. CRM primarily operates through deliberative cognitive evaluation, whereby customers gradually develop trust by assessing service reliability, responsiveness, and prior relationship experiences (Adnan et al., 2021; Lamrhari et al., 2022). In contrast, café atmosphere primarily operates through affective processing, as environmental cues such as ambience, aesthetics, and spatial comfort generate immediate emotional responses and place attachment during service consumption (Rancati & Gordini, 2023; Sartika & Keni, 2023). Because these mechanisms rely on different psychological systems rather than a single underlying process, they may contribute independently to customer retention instead of reinforcing one another.

The parallel-routes account holds the opposite. If trust (cognitive, cumulative) and place attachment (affective, immediate) are distinct retention systems, each can secure the customer on its own; when one is already high, the marginal retention available through the other shrinks rather than expands. Here the environment is not a multiplier but an alternative the routes substitute rather than compound, yielding no interaction or even a negative one. We test the amplification hypothesis as stated, but treat the parallel-routes alternative as a live competitor, so that the sign and significance of the interaction discriminate between two theories rather than merely confirming one.

H3. *Café atmosphere* positively moderates (amplifies) the effect of *customer relationship management* on *customer retention*.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual research model  
Source : Author (2026)

## METHOD

### Setting, design, and sample

We test the competing accounts in a single Café in Cilegon, Indonesia. The single-site design is a deliberate analytical choice rather than a convenience: holding brand, product range, price, and location constant isolates the CRM-versus-atmosphere contrast from the confounds that routinely contaminate multi-site comparisons. The study is quantitative, explanatory, and cross-sectional. The population comprised repeat customers of the café, whose total number was unknown and for whom no formal sampling frame was available. Accordingly, purposive sampling was employed using predefined eligibility criteria embedded in the questionnaire. Before accessing the main survey, respondents were screened to ensure they had previously dined at the café, had made at least three purchases, were at least 17 years old, and had their own income. The online questionnaire was programmed so that respondents who failed to meet any eligibility criterion were automatically excluded and could not proceed to the substantive survey items. This screening procedure yielded 115 eligible respondents for analysis.. The procedure yielded 115 eligible respondents.

A sensitivity analysis clarifies what this design can and cannot test. It is well-powered for the main effects but underpowered for the interaction: achieved power for the CRM × atmosphere term is 0.43, and detecting an interaction of the observed magnitude at 0.80 power would require roughly 333 respondents. We therefore interpret the interaction as directional evidence rather than a definitive verdict, and foreground this constraint here rather than confine it to the limitations.

### Measurement

All constructs were measured reflectively with indicators adapted from prior work and rated on a 1–10 interval scale. CRM was captured through food and beverage quality, technology, employee behaviour, service quality, and problem solving (Tifliyah et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2021); *café atmosphere* through ambience, aesthetics, lighting, scent, temperature, and layout (Rancati & Gordini, 2023); and *customer retention* through intention to revisit, willingness to recommend, priority choice, and resistance to competitors (Sartika & Keni, 2023; Tifliyah et al., 2021; Opoku et al., 2025).

## Analysis

Estimation used PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4, selected for its predictive–explanatory orientation, accommodation of interaction effects, and suitability for moderate samples without a normality assumption (Hair et al., 2017; Ghazali, 2018). Moderation was modelled via the product-indicator approach. The reflective measurement model was assessed through outer loadings ( $\geq 0.70$ ), average variance extracted (AVE  $\geq 0.50$ ), and reliability (Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability  $\geq 0.70$ ); discriminant validity through the HTMT ratio (conservative threshold 0.85) and the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Hair et al., 2017). Indicators below the loading threshold were removed during purification, so *café atmosphere* retained four of six indicators and CRM four of five. The structural model was evaluated through collinearity (VIF),  $R^2$ ,  $f^2$ , and path significance from two-tailed nonparametric bootstrapping at the 5% level with 95% confidence intervals.

## RESULTS

### Measurement model

All retained indicators loaded above 0.77 and were significant at  $p < 0.001$  (Table 1). Every construct’s AVE exceeded 0.50, and Cronbach’s alpha and composite reliability exceeded 0.84, establishing convergent validity and reliability (Table 2). Discriminant validity held: all HTMT values fell below 0.85, and each construct’s square-root AVE exceeded its inter-construct correlations (Table 3). Respondents rated all constructs uniformly high (item means 9.07–9.43 on the 10-point scale), a ceiling tendency we return to when interpreting the interaction.

**Table 1.** Outer loadings, t-statistics, and convergent validity

Construct	Indicator	Loading	t-stat	p-value
Café Atmosphere	CA1 — Ambience	0.863	25.99	0.000
	CA2 — Aesthetics	0.855	20.09	0.000
	CA3 — Lighting	0.816	13.63	0.000
	CA4 — Scent	0.773	13.17	0.000
CRM	CRM1 — F&B quality	0.839	22.82	0.000
	CRM2 — Technology	0.807	20.08	0.000
	CRM3 — Employee behaviour	0.907	40.65	0.000
	CRM4 — Service quality	0.873	35.55	0.000
Customer Retention	CR1 — Intention to revisit	0.872	27.46	0.000
	CR2 — Willingness to recommend	0.867	28.46	0.000
	CR3 — Priority choice	0.847	28.98	0.000
	CR4 — Resistance to competitors	0.926	53.87	0.000

Source: Author (2026)

**Table 2.** Construct reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Cronbach’s $\alpha$	$\rho_a$	CR ( $\rho_c$ )	AVE
Café Atmosphere	0.846	0.852	0.897	0.685
Customer Relationship Mgmt.	0.880	0.892	0.917	0.735
Customer Retention	0.901	0.908	0.931	0.772

Source: Author (2026)

**Table 3.** Discriminant validity (HTMT and Fornell-Larcker)

	HTMT — CA	HTMT — CRM	HTMT — CR
Café Atmosphere (CA)	—		
Customer Relationship Mgmt. (CRM)	0.808	—	

	HTMT — CA	HTMT — CRM	HTMT — CR
Customer Retention (CR)	0.822	0.768	—

Source: Author (2026)

### Structural model

Two results stand out, and the second is the one theory did not anticipate. First, both routes to retention are not merely significant but strong: together CRM and atmosphere account for 62.1% of the variance in retention ( $R^2 = 0.621$ ), substantial for a two-predictor model of a behavioural outcome, with inner-model VIF between 1.602 and 2.255 ruling out collinearity. Second, and against the expectation that the relational route should dominate, the environmental route is the heavier of the two. Atmosphere carries the larger path coefficient ( $\beta = 0.507$  vs  $0.460$ ) and, more diagnostically, the larger effect size its  $f^2$  of 0.339 is large, whereas CRM's 0.248 is medium (Table 4). We are deliberate here: the coefficients' confidence intervals overlap ( $[0.301, 0.737]$  for atmosphere;  $[0.212, 0.655]$  for CRM), so we do not claim atmosphere is statistically stronger than CRM. The defensible and still striking reading is one of parity: in a setting where relationship marketing theory predicts the relationship should do the retaining, the room does at least as much.

**Table 4.** Structural model results

Path	$\beta$	t	p	95% CI	Decision
CRM → Retention (H1)	0.460	4.087	0.000	[0.212, 0.655]	Supported
Café Atmosphere → Retention (H2)	0.507	4.545	0.000	[0.301, 0.737]	Supported
CA × CRM → Retention (H3)	0.136	1.875	0.061	[-0.023, 0.269]	Not supported

Source: Author (2026).

The interaction sharpens the picture. The CRM × atmosphere term is positive but does not reach significance ( $\beta = 0.136$ ;  $t = 1.875$ ;  $p = 0.061$ ; 95% CI [-0.023, 0.269]). We resist two temptations. We do not declare a marginal effect “essentially significant,” and we do not read the null as proof of no synergy: with achieved power of 0.43 for this term, the test cannot adjudicate a small interaction, and the uniformly high construct scores compress the upper range where amplification would be most visible. What the data do show is the absence of any detectable multiplicative boost on top of two already-large independent effects a pattern consistent with the parallel-routes account and inconsistent with strong amplification. The signal points toward substitutable bonds, not a reinforcing system, while honestly leaving the door ajar for a small synergy that a larger, less ceiling-bound sample might recover.

## Discussion

### Why the room rivals the relationship

That atmosphere matches the relational route is not a quirk of this café; it follows from what a third place is. In high-commitment services, the environment is incidental to a bond that lives in contracts and accounts, so relationship marketing theory's relegation of atmosphere to “cue” is harmless. In experiential retail, the environment is co-consumed: the customer's repeated, embodied occupancy of the space generates an attachment that does the work theory assigned exclusively to the relationship. The parity we observe is therefore a boundary signal it marks the conditions, low commitment and a co-consumed environment, under which the theory's implicit hierarchy inverts. This reframes a long line of CRM–retention findings (Etim et al., 2020; Herman et al., 2021; Mtamike & Magasi, 2025): their relationship-centrism is not a universal law but an artefact of the high-commitment contexts in which CRM was studied. Move

to a setting where exit is free and the environment is the product, and a second, equally powerful retention mechanism appears that those studies had no way to see.

### **Why parallel and not synergistic**

The absence of amplification, provisional as it is, is theoretically coherent rather than anomalous. Trust and place attachment retain customers through different psychological mechanisms. CRM encourages repeat patronage through cumulative cognitive evaluations of relationship quality, whereas café atmosphere promotes retention through immediate affective responses to the physical environment. Because these mechanisms originate from distinct psychological systems, improvements in one do not necessarily strengthen the effectiveness of the other, making parallel rather than synergistic effects theoretically plausible. They are not inputs to a common process that could compound; they are alternative answers to the same question, “why come back?” This is why, once both are high, neither has much left to add to the other. The corollary is unusual for a retention study: the firm is not tuning a single mechanism but holding a portfolio of independent bonds, and a customer secured by the room is, to a first approximation, as retained as one secured by the relationship.

An alternative explanation is that the interaction between CRM and café atmosphere may depend on boundary conditions that were not explicitly modeled in this study. Customer mood at the time of the visit, visit frequency, and time of visit may all influence how customers process relational and environmental cues. For example, first-time or infrequent visitors may rely more heavily on atmospheric impressions, whereas frequent customers may place greater weight on accumulated relationship experiences. Likewise, customers visiting for work during weekdays may evaluate the café differently from those seeking leisure experiences during evenings or weekends. These contextual factors may therefore moderate the relative importance of CRM and atmosphere and help explain why no significant interaction emerged in the present model.

### **What this changes**

Relationship marketing theory can accommodate these results, but only by demoting one of its assumptions. The servicescape must be admitted as a co-equal relational asset rather than a peripheral cue, and “the relationship” must be read as potentially environmental, not only interpersonal. The theory’s center of gravity that retention flows from managed interpersonal bonds holds in the contexts where it was built and may weaken as customer commitment decreases and the physical environment becomes a more central component of the service experience.

Although the empirical setting is an Indonesian café, the theoretical prediction is not inherently country-specific. The proposed parallel-route mechanism is expected to transfer to other low-commitment experiential retail settings where customers consume both the product and the physical environment as part of the overall experience. Coffeehouse cultures in many countries similarly position cafés as places for working, socializing, or spending leisure time rather than merely purchasing beverages, suggesting that environmental attachment may emerge alongside interpersonal relationship quality. Nevertheless, the relative strength of these two routes may vary across cultural contexts because expectations regarding social interaction, service encounters, and the symbolic meaning of cafés differ across societies. Cross-cultural comparative studies are therefore needed to determine whether the balance between relational and environmental retention mechanisms remains stable across different café cultures

### **Managerial Implications**

The parallelism finding rewrites the manager’s problem. Because the two routes do not compound, there is no efficiency to be gained by sequencing them or by perfecting one before

touching the other; each delivers its retention return independently, and neither investment is wasted waiting on the other. Where budget is binding, the effect sizes offer a defensible first move. Atmosphere carries the larger effect ( $f^2 = 0.339$ ) and has a structural advantage CRM lacks: it is a largely fixed, one-time investment lighting, layout, acoustics, scent that retains every customer who enters, whereas CRM's return depends on sustained, staff-by-staff, shift-by-shift consistency that is costly to maintain and easy to break. For an owner-operated Café, capital spent on the room is therefore both higher-yielding and lower-variance than an equivalent spend on service programs. The relational route is not optional, however: at  $\beta = 0.460$  it is an independent path that an atmosphere-only strategy simply forfeits. The actionable hierarchy is thus to secure the environmental bond first, because it is large, durable, and staffing-independent, then build the relational bond as a separate, additive source of retention rather than as a multiplier of the first.

## CONCLUSION

Relationship marketing theory was built where the relationship was the only thing holding the customer. This study went to a place where the customer is held by the room as much as by the relationship and found that, stripped of contracts and switching costs, the environmental route to retention stands level with the relational route the theory privileges, and runs alongside it rather than through it. The contribution is not that atmosphere matters; everyone knew that. It is that in low-commitment experiential retail the servicescape is not a cue that supports the relationship but a co-equal bond that competes with it, and that firms accumulate retention as a portfolio of independent attachments rather than as a single optimized relationship. For cafés and potentially other low-commitment experiential service settings with similar characteristics, the strategic question may shift from simply deepening customer relationships to balancing investments between interpersonal relationships and the physical environment. Whether this parallel-route mechanism extends to other experiential service contexts remains an empirical question for future research

These conclusions are bounded by the study's single site, cross-sectional design, modest sample, and ceiling-prone perceptual measures, which together limit causal and generalizing claims and leave the interaction test underpowered. Future work should test whether the observed parallelism survives a larger, less ceiling-bound sample and a multi-site design, and whether *customer engagement* mediates the relational route without bridging the environmental one which would confirm that these are, indeed, two doors into the same decision to stay (Adnan et al., 2021; Elgarhy, 2023; Arora et al., 2021; Setyono et al., 2021; Qiao & Wei, 2021).

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