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## Factors Influencing Place Attachment to Middle-Eastern Restaurants in the United States: A Case Study

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors that affect Arab customers' place attachment in relation to an Arabic-designed restaurant in the United States. The Middle Eastern culture, representation, and identity are made explicit in the restaurant. The research is conducted as a case study, and the data-gathering methods involve interviewing the restaurant owner, distributing questionnaires to customers, and taking pictures of the restaurant to record the place identity. Twenty-five Arab customers were selected, using purposive sampling technique, for the questionnaire. In addition, the owner of the restaurant was interviewed in order to obtain in-depth information about the restaurant and the services provided. Because this study focuses on customers' feelings and perceptions of the restaurant, a qualitative method of data collection was employed. The findings illustrated that Layalina Restaurant represents a meaning of place for Arab customers. The main physical characters that contribute to place attachment among participants are representing cultural elements, comfortable seating, and supporting group and personal activities. On the other hand, the psychological and social attributes that influence Arabic customers attachment to the restaurant are safety, comfort, protected personal space, the sense of ownership, networking and socialization which improve occupants' feelings for and attitudes regarding the place. In a globalized world, interior designers need to understand the cultural needs and behavior for those we design for, and this paper tried to contribute to that respect.

### Keywords:

*place attachment*  
*restaurant design*  
*Middle-Eastern restaurant*  
*cultural identity.*

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### Introduction

Persons, behaviors, and places tend to create associations through experiences and thereby acquire meaning. Whether by reputation, physical features, or time, a place evokes sentiments, prompts attitudes, and develops meaning. Although places themselves do not act, they do hold and shape the actions that occur in them; thus, places become strongly associated with these meaningful actions. As a result, individuals develop a sense of and attachment to a place where they associate with others.

The concept of place identity refers to interactions between elements of individuals' characteristics and their physical environment. A sense of place can develop where people feel comfortable and safe (Kopec, 2006). Place identity is a social experience of belonging, which exists independently of any person's attitudes or experiences of a place. Place attachment is a set of emotions that binds individuals to a certain culture or community (Waxman, 2006). Place identity influences customers' perceptions of and attitudes toward a specific environment.

A place acquires meaning through group, cultural, and personal activities. The art of understanding

people in particular environments is vital for designs that are emotionally rewarding and physically satisfying. The feeling of attachment to a restaurant or a coffee shop as "one's own" increases familiarity and thus enhances social intimacy (Beriss, 2007). Various characteristics are renowned for encouraging gathering behavior as well as contributing to public place attachment to restaurants and coffee shops. The social characteristics that enhance place attachment in coffee shops include socialization, networking, sense of community, and the resulting sense of belonging (Waxman, 2006).

Place attachment can be viewed transactionally as a connection that is not made up of separate or self-governing parts or dimensions. Rather, the populace and place interrelate to create the experience. Social groups, family units, community members, and even whole cultures form emotional attachments to places (Lawrence, 1992). Shumaker and Taylor (1983) put forward a person-environment equivalence representation of place attachment. Their model proposed that place attachment entails expectations of constancy, feelings of affirmation, and greater understanding of the environment, in addition to the conduct that

preserves or improves the location. This representation includes the individual's social interaction as a supplier of place connection.

*Layalina* is a Middle-Eastern restaurant run by a Syrian immigrant family in Arlington, Virginia, in the United States. Among many Middle-Eastern restaurants in Arlington, *Layalina* attracts the most Arab patrons. Located in a residential district, it attracts customers mostly at dinnertime. The restaurant starts serving hookah indoors after ten at night and stays open until two in the morning on weekdays and three in the morning on weekends.

### Objective and Significance

The objective of this study is to investigate the mechanisms of place attachment among Arab customers in an Arab-designed restaurant, within an American context. This is important particularly when taking into account the growing number of Arab students and immigrants to the United States who has been increasing dramatically in recent years (Arab American Institute, 2013; ICEF, 2012). This research will benefit designers of Middle-Eastern restaurants as well as restaurant owners who target Arab patrons. Additionally, there is little research done about place attachment and the design of Middle-Eastern restaurants in non-Arab countries. Similarly, in academia it may decipher design elements to facilitate restaurant design in studio courses taught in accredited Interior Design programs in North America.

The Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) is a non-profit organization in North America aims to set standards for accredited interior design programs. CIDA aims to bridge the gap between interior design practice and interior design education by preparing proficient entry-level designers to enter the national market. According to CIDA (2014), as underscored in Standard 2, interior design programs should provide opportunities to students for developing knowledge of other cultures. Thus, this study would have a significant impact on helping interior design educators in North America expressing the Arabic culture in the restaurant environments in their design courses.

#### Research question

What are the factors that contribute to Arab customers place attachment to Middle-Eastern restaurants in the United States?

### Literature Review

#### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was guided by Seamon's Theory of place attachment,

under which study the relationship between humans and their experiences in the physical environment (Seamon, 2014). Place meanings and attachment are influenced by the special qualities, which was originated by interpersonal and communal communication and engagement of building users. Seamon defined place as generator of interaction between building users and the built environment, and factors influenced maintaining or eroding place attachment.

#### Place Attachment and Interior Environment

In order to successfully design spaces that serve as third places (personal or social spaces after home and school or work) and social gathering places, designers should understand the social and physical attributes of interior space that improve the client's experience, that encourage comfort, logic of belonging, and a bond between the populace and place (Waxman, 2006). For instance, Waxman (2004) studied three popular coffee shops in Tallahassee, Florida, that have physical and social qualities that encourage people to gather there. The researcher noted that these coffee shops had in common characteristics such as distinct exterior architectural features, locations close to main roads, access to nearby shops, easy accessibility, and available parking. Moreover, the interior architecture, finish materials, attractive views of outside, interior and natural lighting, music speakers, and movable furniture attracted customers. Waxman (2006) noted that additional interior design features that influence place attachment in coffee shops are appealing aroma, comfortable furniture, and cleanliness.

#### Cultural Influence and Interior Design

A place develops meaning through group, cultural, or personal activities. Place attachment involves individuals' behaviors, self-image, and personal characteristics as well as resources and sense of belonging (Edwards, 2010). Cultural identity and norms greatly influence people's place attachments. In his study, Amor (2006) found that Arab Muslims in the United States design their home interiors in accordance with their cultural traditions and customs, such as privacy and gender segregation, and include religious and cultural artifacts elements. Therefore, the design of a public place targeting Arab customers should incorporate cultural and religious elements to foster the sense of place attachment. Culture in many ways defines a group's identity and thus the identity of the places where they gather (Ujang, 2010). In her study, Napier (2009) concluded that architectural and design elements that reflect ethnic identity help with reconstruction of humans

outside their home country and displacement feelings.

### Customers' behavior and satisfaction

Designing a third place with special emphasis on fostering socialization and networking is essential for the life of the community. Waxman's (2007) investigation of the connection between college students and their campus concluded that they spend most of their time off-campus. Socializing, relaxing, eating, and drinking were the most common reasons for visiting off-campus places. Therefore, restaurant design that enhances socialization and rejuvenation when encourages university students to embrace the place. Opportunities for socialization and networking foster place attachment, which includes a sense of ownership, community, and belonging (Waxman, 2006).

Likewise, Ujang (2010) asserted that attachment develops in places that meet the needs of users. For instance, in designing a restaurant, both the owner and interior designer should focus on what kind of seating and location customers prefer. Enterline and Dickinson (2012) found that customers seated in booths spend more time and money, thereby increasing a restaurant's bottom line. Lyon, Ownbey, Russ, and Drab (2010) found that customers' level of satisfaction increased feelings of place attachment and help with feelings associated with relocation, and consequently the restaurant's. For instance, customers are willing to pay more to be seated where they like, such as anchored tables by walls in order to maintain their privacy and personal space (Yoon, Park, & Hwang, 2009). Thus, the physical environment of a restaurant contributes greatly to its success.

### Methodology

This study, conducted in 2015, used both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires as data collection methods. Because this research focused on customers' feelings about and perceptions of a restaurant, a qualitative method of data collection was employed. Qualitative approaches also maximize the reliability of the study's findings as well as let customers express their attitudes toward the interior environment. Most of the questions were adapted from previously published research (Waxman, 2006; Ujang, 2010); others were developed for the purpose of this study.

### Participants

Twenty-five Arab customers were selected using purposive sampling techniques for the questionnaire. For the purpose of the study, only Arab customers were asked to participate. Since

there were no female patrons during the data collection period in the restaurant, all of the participants were males. Participants were undergraduate and graduate, both Master's and Ph.D, students attending universities on the East Coast of the United States. Participants' ages ranged between 20 and 33 years old. The owner of the restaurant was interviewed to gain in-depth knowledge about the phenomena.

### Data Collection & Analysis

The researcher delivered a self-administered survey questionnaire using open-ended questions to the participants in the restaurant and collected the surveys after the participants completed them. The owner of the restaurant was interviewed to gather in-depth information about the restaurant and the service it provides. In addition to the researcher taking notes, the interview was tape-recorded and the information later extracted from the tape. A pictorial study was conducted in the restaurant to record the place's identity. The data were analyzed using an open-coding technique. During open-coding, the data were broken down into discrete parts. Open-coding is a technique that allows the researcher to read the manuscript closely and code similar words and concepts into themes and patterns. The process of finding similar concepts grouped around the phenomena is called categorizing. The discovered themes represent the key points illustrated by the survey results.

### Findings and Discussion

The findings highlighted many factors contributing to place attachment among Middle-Eastern customers in the restaurant.

#### The physical environment

The restaurant's features gave the sense of being in an Arab country, which was crucial for customers who had been away from their home countries for so long. They appreciated the decorations and flags from their countries. Arab customers had a sense of belonging to the space. In fact, two participants noted that the restaurant design reminded them of their countries (See figure 1).

**Comfortable seating.** The furniture of the restaurant was comfortable and appealingly located around the restaurant, which many of the participants said they appreciated. Some participants said that *Layalina* Restaurant had the most comfortable furniture of all the Arab restaurants in the area. The availability of benches and booths made seating convenient for customers and thus fostered a feeling of being at home.

When asked whether they felt that their personal space (or “territoriality”) was safe, all participants ( $n= 25$ ; 100%) indicated that they felt protected in the environment.

**Background music.** Playing Arab music created a connection between customers and the restaurant, helping them feel at home. Giving customers control over music selection further inspired a sense of ownership among customers. Some customers ( $n=21$ , 84%) noted that having the opportunity to play their favorite songs made them feel especially attached to the restaurant.

**Supporting activities.** The restaurant seating

encouraged both group and personal activities, such as reading and playing cards. Since many of the Arab customers were students, they often chose to do their schoolwork in Layalina. Since playing cards is a popular activity in Arab cultures, it was one of the most common activities in the restaurant. Moreover, the findings revealed that Layalina was a preferred location for gathering with friends and socializing in the local Arab community. When asking participants about their “third place,” the majority of them said they preferred to hang out and meet with friends in Layalina (See figures 1).



Figures 1: The interior environment of Layalina Restaurant.

**Arab community.** Participants were attracted to Layalina because of the Arab clientele, which gave them the feeling of being in their home countries. Since Arab customers are exposed to Arabs in a foreign country, they feel comfortable to that place. Participants indicated that being surrounded by Arab customers allowed them to make friends, reducing the feeling of homesickness.

**Arab food.** The quality of food and drink, participants noted, was essential for their satisfaction. Furthermore, Arab Muslim customers were attracted to Layalina because it serves halal food, which is religiously encouraged or, for some, required. Also, Layalina was popular among Middle-Eastern patrons because of the limited number of Arab restaurants in the United States.

**Comfort and safety.** Arab patrons felt safe and

comfortable while being in Layalina. As Kopec (2006) noted that, a sense of place can develop where people feel comfortable and safe. Thus, having the feeling of comfort and safe in an interior environment can contribute to the sense of attachment to that place.

**Convenience.** The availability of hookah and cigarette smoking indoors after 10 o’clock at night was an additional attraction of Layalina. The restaurant was one of the few places where one could smoke inside since it is banned in most places in the United States. Furthermore, customers appreciate the accessibility of parking. In Arlington, Virginia, parking can be scarce. Thus, meeting this customer needs attracts the targeted patrons to the restaurant.



Figures 2: The Arabic features in Layalina Restaurant

## Owner interview

The analysis of the interview with the restaurant owner revealed several factors that contributed to the place attachment of Layalina Restaurant to Arab patrons, as discussed in the following subsections.

**Arab culture.** Arabs are drawn to representations of their culture in elements of design. All the decorations in the restaurant were brought from countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Also, the restaurant went out of its way to show the hospitality that is typical of Arab culture, making customers feel at home. For instance, the owner noted that one way of showing Arab hospitality is to not offer the check until it is requested, and not to rush customers when it gets late at night. When asked how he tries to represent Arabic culture and tradition in his restaurant, the owner pointed to Arab decorations, clothes, verses from the Holy Quran, providing spoons since Arabs do not eat using forks, and playing Arab music (See figures 2).

**Arab needs.** The owner said that the quality of the Middle-Eastern food met his customers' needs. He noted that the lamb and kabob were his best-selling dishes. But he added that it was important to his customers that he served halal food and set the tables in an Arab fashion, which helped patrons develop an emotional connection to the restaurant (See figures 2).

**Arab community.** Another reason Arab customers stopped by Layalina was because of its convenient and friendly atmosphere. The calm and quiet interior had a strong influence on Arab customers. Also, keeping up Arab community in the restaurant makes Arab patrons embrace the restaurant as a third place.

## Conclusion

*Layalina* Restaurant represented a meaningful place for Arab customers. The main physical characteristics that contributed to place attachment were representing cultural elements, comfortable seating, and supporting group and personal activities. Furthermore, the psychological and social attributes that influence Arab customers' attachment to the restaurant were safety, comfort, and protected personal space, as well as the sense of ownership, community, and belonging, all of which made for good feelings and attitudes toward the place. In addition, the restaurant fostered socialization and networking among its Middle-Eastern patrons, which created a unique cultural and social environment. Thus, it can be said that *Layalina* Restaurant successfully created a third place for its Arab customers.

## Implications

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations and suggestions emerged:

- Interior designers who are designing Middle-Eastern restaurants in non-Arab countries should implement the key findings of the study and utilize them as an evidence-based design approach for their projects.
- Interior design programs accredited by CIDA in North America are required to increase students' awareness and knowledge of Arabic culture when it comes to interior environments. Since the study focuses not only on interior design factors but also on social and psychological factors that contribute to place attachment, the findings of this study could be presented and discussed in interior design courses as a way to teach the philosophy of hospitality design.
- Restaurant owners in non-Arabic countries who plan to run a Middle-Eastern designed resultant should focus on implementing the key findings of the study. Understanding customers' culture and preferences are both crucial to sustained success in the hospitality industry.
- Maintaining high traffic in a globally competitive economy is extremely hard, especially in the hospitality industry. Several factors play important roles in attracting customers to restaurants, two of which are understanding and then meeting clients' desires. This study presented the main patrons' preferences and needs, which attracted Arab customers to this particular restaurant.

## Limitations of the study

This study was limited to those factors influencing Arab customers' place attachment to Middle-Eastern restaurants and the researcher eliminated non-Arab customers visiting the restaurant given the purpose of the study. The study is also limited to factors that shape the interior environment, so that other parts of the hospitality industry, such as service and food, are not discussed.

## Future Study

Further studies should be conducted to determine the factors that contribute to place attachment among female patrons at Middle-Eastern restaurants. Additionally, studies should be replicated to learn whether there are other factors influencing the sense of place attachment among Arab restaurant patrons. Also, further investigations should be conducted to examine the key findings of this study using a quantitative research approach. Another study should be

carried out in a Middle-Eastern restaurant in the west coast area of the United States and compare the findings with this study.

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