Improved waiting area design increases customer comfort, study finds

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Many diners cringe at the thought of waiting for a table in a crowded restaurant, while restaurant managers hope they do not lose customers due to long waits. Now, a University of Missouri researcher has studied restaurant design and has recommendations for how restaurateurs can design waiting areas to be more comfortable, thus increasing diners' willingness to wait for a table.

"Our study shows that waiting area design has an effect on diners," said So-Yeon Yoon, associate professor of architectural studies in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "By redesigning waiting areas, restaurant owners can make more money, and customers can have a more enjoyable experience."

Yoon provides the following recommendations to increase customer comfort and privacy:

- Design waiting areas with outward curving or angled walls, as opposed to open square rooms, so customers cannot see all waiting patrons at once;
- Provide several waiting areas for customers, possibly on different sides of the restaurant, etc;
- Visually divide the waiting space using plants or decorative elements to give diners more privacy and less sense of crowding.

Yoon conducted the study using a virtual reality environment.

Participants were presented with one of two randomly selected types of waiting areas in a virtual restaurant, each with a different level of crowding. Then, they navigated through the virtual environment. Following the experiment, participants self-reported how the different crowding environments made them feel. Yoon found that participants who could see many waiting patrons felt less comfortable and were more likely to leave than those with fewer patrons waiting in close proximity.

In the future, Yoon plans to continue her research in the recently opened Immersive Visualization Lab (iLab). The MU iLab incorporates three large high-definition projection screens aligned side-by-side to create one continuous, horizontal viewing screen. Wearing special "active shutter" glasses, students are able to view their computer-generated architectural and interior designs on the screen in 3-D. The immersive effect of the large screen gives students the sensation of standing inside the buildings they are designing.

More information: Yoon's study was published in the *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management.*

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia