

Factors Affecting Customer Preference in Selecting Family Restaurant in Langkawi

Ana Batriysia Azman, Mohd Aliff Abdul Majid

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 42300 Puncak Alam,
Selangor, Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: mhaliff@uitm.edu.my

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Abstract

The restaurants' ambience, service quality and food quality highly influence the customer preference in choosing a family restaurant. Thus, this study aims to identify the main contributor that effecting customers' preferences in choosing the restaurants and to investigate the level of customer perception on customer preference in selecting the restaurants. A cross-sectional, quantitative research approach consisting of a closed-ended structured questionnaire was employed. The items that were used to measure the variables were modified from earlier research and specifically constructed for the study. A total of 167 usable data was analysed using regression analysis. The findings highlighted that ambience, service quality and food quality have a significant relationship with customer preferences in selecting the restaurant. Taking these factors into account, in the upcoming study, additional data is needed to fully determine the level of customer preferences in selecting restaurants. Hence, this study can provide a unique insight into the foodservice industry on customer behaviour in choosing a restaurant for dining.

Keywords: Ambience, Customer Preference, Family Restaurant, Food Quality, Service Quality.

Introduction

The restaurant industry, which is part of the food and beverage industry, is acknowledged as the most competitive commercial sector (Maze, 2013). One of the categories that has grown the most is the restaurant sector. According to estimates, restaurants employ millions of people worldwide and earn billions of dollars in revenue annually. Its origins date back to the 1700s. The term "restaurant" comes from the word "restoratives," which was also the name of the first restaurant owner, A. Boulanger, a soup vendor who started his business in Paris in 1765 (Bendarz, 2018). A surge of competitiveness suggests that customers now have more dining options, ranging from fast food to fine dining restaurants, in today's competitive restaurant industry (Hwang et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2020).

The rise in the number of dining-out activities has been affected by changes in lifestyle (Majid et al., 2018). Due to the growing urbanisation of society, Malaysia is experiencing the emergence of a new dimension in the culture of eating out (Ghaffar et al., 2020). Rapid urbanisation and economic development have altered Malaysians' way of life, forcing both parents to work (Ali & Abdullah, 2012). Besides, fast food is more commonly consumed by families with children in Malaysia than home-cooked meals because of their hectic schedules and long workdays (Habib et al., 2011).

Other than that, in addition to providing clients with a wide selection of food, restaurants must also focus on the standard of their services and other factors that have a significant impact on the environment. For instances, general restaurant cleanliness and environmental characteristics, which greatly affect customer preferences, including external elements and interior ambience, are additional factors that affect the choice of a restaurant (Agbenyegah et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, the majority of individuals are picky about where they eat because it might influence how they feel about the business as a whole.

In defining customer preference, Saji (2020) refers to the consumer's preferences based on their acceptance of the product they have purchased. There are a few factors that influenced the restaurant preferences of patrons such as location preference, meal quality, restaurant ambience, convenience, and employee behaviour are the most abstract variables that affect restaurant choice. Moreover, 60% of customers return to the same restaurant as a result of their positive experience (Deloitte Consulting LLP, 2020). Prior studies have also noted that service, food, and ambience are the top three characteristics of a high quality restaurant (Manan et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2021; Khamis et al., 2022). Therefore, this study uses ambience, service, and food quality as the variables influencing customer preference in family restaurants.

The selection of restaurants available to customers is expanding quickly over time, leaving them more options for where to eat. Although the industry's quantity is well represented, customer expectations still need to be met because diners always foresee and demand more from their eating experiences (Agbenyegah et al., 2022). In addition, customers are restricted in their ability to select the restaurant of their choice. With so many restaurant elements to be considered while determining their preferences, customers frequently struggle to make a decision. Of course, customers favour dining establishments with a pleasant ambience. In fact, Rahman et al (2019) noted that it would be fascinating to pinpoint the problem because the ambience is one of the aspects that would affect consumer happiness. Therefore, in order to succeed, restaurant managers must cultivate a friendly work environment and offer their patrons the highest quality of service (Solunoğlu, 2020).

Apart from that, service quality is frequently considered the result of the restaurant service delivery system and it is associated with client satisfaction (Norazha et al., 2022). According to Grönroos (1984); Thompson (2019), customers are not only interested in what they received, but also seek out dining experiences like the friendly greets from the staff, which will give them a favourable opinion of the restaurant. However, poor service quality will influence the customer's choice of restaurant. This was supported by Wall and Berry (2007) that how personnel behave during a service will have a significant impact on how customers perceive the quality of the service are consistent with this. Despite all of these efforts, there is always a need for new research to quantify service quality because it is so important for businesses (Mejia et al., 2020).

Besides, customers' happiness towards a restaurant will increase with better food quality served (Hidayat et al., 2020). Along with service quality, which affects customer loyalty and shapes future behaviours, food quality also has been recognised as a crucial component of consumers' eating experiences (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Indeed, one of the most dominant elements influencing a restaurant's popularity is the food quality and the selection of fresh ingredients (Söderlund & Rosengren, 2008). As a result, it is not surprising that a restaurant serving high-quality food will experience high client demand (Solunolu, 2020). In light of this, the notion argues that in the setting of a family restaurant, ambience, service quality, and food quality are critical in determining customer preference.

Therewithal, this study aims to identify the relationship between the study's variables and the main contributor affecting customers' preferences in choosing restaurants. Viably, the study's findings add to our understanding of the significance of ambience, service, and food quality in influencing consumers' preferences for family restaurants as dining destinations, particularly in Langkawi.

Literature Review

Family Restaurant

Customers are notoriously more impolite in the hospitality and tourism sector, which includes the restaurant sector, than in other sectors (Arasli & Namin, 2018). Family-style dining sometimes referred to as casual dining, typically involves serving the meal on sizable platters or serving dishes rather than individually plating it. Then, when the dishes have been passed around the table, each guest serves themselves. Family-style restaurant dining, on the other hand, harkens back to the time when meals were typically served every day in the kitchen or at the dining room table.

The restaurants also provide tableside service and non-disposable meals, while also maintaining a moderately priced menu (Kim & Qu, 2019). Family restaurants in the US serve reasonably priced dishes from menus that mix classic cuisines and are frequently customised with special sauces, dips, or other toppings. For instance, Olive Garden created one of the most effective marketing efforts around its family-style eating with the slogan "When you're here, you're family," providing limitless breadsticks and salad on huge platters for the entire dining group (Mealey, 2018).

The tradition of eating out has contributed to Malaysia's restaurant business growth (Salleh et al., 2015). Due to the hectic lifestyle in big cities and salary growth, consumers are dining out more frequently than they are cooking and eating at home, whether it be during the week or even on the weekends. This is one of the reasons why there are more informal dining establishments in Malaysia (Nasir & Ghazali, 2019). Byrd and Almanza (2018) state that "Casual dining can be any kind of theme, from Italian to Thai, and some examples of casual dining restaurants in Malaysia are Secret Recipe, Kenny Rogers Roaster, Nando's, and Absolute Thai Restaurant."

Family-style dining is a popular restaurant trend that has roots in many different cultures. A leading indicator of total restaurant selection is customer preference (Yost et al., 2020). Family-style dining emphasises the fact that eating is a social event rather than a private one. In essence, family-style dining strives to bring people together with the shared objective of selecting the ideal mixture of meals to satisfy everyone's preferences (The Fork Manager, 2022). Therefore, in order to forecast future sales, develop marketing strategies to match customer demand and improve restaurant performance, restaurateurs and food suppliers

must understand and take into consideration consumer perceptions and preferences (Nguyen et al., 2022).

Past Research on Restaurant Ambience and Customer Preference

Customer expectations and restaurant ambience quality are positively correlated, hence raising ambience standards resulting in more customers intending to revisit the restaurant (Norazha et al., 2022). The aesthetic features of a restaurant's ambience include visible factors like physical décor and intangible elements like temperature, music, fragrance, and atmosphere (Desiyanti et al., 2018; Heung & Gu, 2012; Jalil et al., 2016; Kement et al., 2021; Tuzunkan & Albayrak, 2016). Similar to this, a study suggests that a restaurant's ambience and staff appearance influence how customers view their eating experience and their behaviour afterwards (Ryu & Jang, 2007; Wade, 2008).

As a restaurant's ambience influences customers' emotional reactions to how they feel and evaluate the service, it is also related to customer turnover and return intention (Çetinsöz, 2019; Karki & Panthi, 2018; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994). According to other studies, the ambience produced a welcoming environment, while quality staff interactions and other factors might influence diners' emotional reactions and restaurant satisfaction (Lim & Park, 2010; Marinkovic et al., 2014). The following was formed as the first research hypothesis in light of the literature studies previously mentioned:

H1: Restaurant ambience is significantly related to customer preference.

Past Research on Service Quality and Customer Preference

Researchers and academics have conducted a small number of studies in the past to examine service quality in the hotel and restaurant industries. According to some research, the quality of the service was more crucial to overall dining satisfaction than the quality of the meal. One of the most important factors in the analysis of a restaurant or other food facility is the quality of the service, which is reliant on the attitudes of the workers there (Norazha et al., 2022). Additionally, Monther and Mahadevan (2019) discovered that customer preference and satisfaction are positively and significantly impacted by service quality.

Furthermore, restaurant owners need to focus more on showing a readiness to help patrons, waiting times, and other responsiveness aspects, and consistently use new techniques that can improve the quality of services provided (Monther & Mahadevan, 2019). Customers compare their expectations with the actual service to form an opinion on the establishment's level of customer service. Because of its distinctive qualities—perishability, inseparability, intangibility, variety, and lack of ownership—measuring service quality is difficult (Bateson, 1977; Clemes et al., 2000; Edgett & Parkinson, 1993; Judd, 1964; Rathmell, 1966; Regan, 1963; Sasser, 1976; Shostack, 1977; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Zeithaml et al., 1985). This discussion led to the following hypothesis as stated below:

H2: Service quality is significantly related to customer preference.

Past Research on Food Quality and Customer Preference

Food quality refers to the aspects of the food that the consumer accepts (Awi & Chaipoopirutana, 2014). Based on their tastes, it is essential in making the safest food for the consumers (Liu et al., 2020). Numerous studies have been conducted on the relationship between consumer preferences for dining out and the quality of the meal. Food quality is the

whole state of the food's features and characteristics, including its nutritional value, temperature, texture, appearance, portion size, and consistency (Norazha et al., 2022). Several studies have shown that, to date, prospective customers form expectations about the quality of food based on customer reviews. If the food quality does not meet the perceived value created by reading prior customer reviews, this will significantly convince or deflect customers and affect customer expectations (Gilbert et al., 2004; Lee & Kim, 2020; Qazi et al., 2017; Qin & Prybutok, 2009; Zhang et al., 2021). Customers like to visit a restaurant based on their personal preferences and the standard of the food offered. Therefore, it is important to identify the key factor, such as food quality, in deciding customer preference. As a result, the following hypothesis was developed:

H3: Food quality is significantly related to customer preference.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the factors affecting the customer's preference in selecting the family restaurant in Langkawi, Malaysia. The factors (independent variables) shown in the model are restaurant ambience, service quality and food quality. Meanwhile, the dependent variable is customer preference toward the family restaurant.

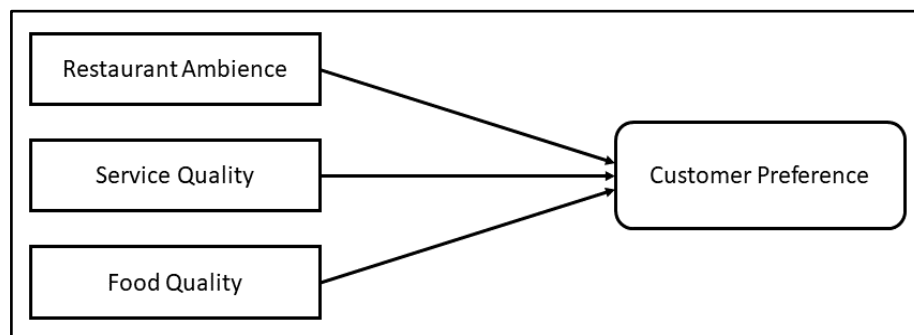


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, the quantitative research approach was used to gather all the information related to finding the factor that affects customers in choosing a restaurant or dining place. The researchers used descriptive research as the method to collect the data of the study. Besides that, the cross-sectional study was selected as the data collection process by the researchers because the data collection needs to be collected one time to help the researchers analyse the data.

Instrumentation

As the research is quantitative in nature, the closed-ended structured questionnaire was employed to gather primary data. The questionnaire was modified from the previous studies (Karki & Panthi, 2018; Sukalakamala, 2004; Torlak et al., 2019). The questionnaire was divided into five sections. Section A dealt with the respondents' demographic profiles while section B consisted of questions based on customer preference. The next three sections, Section C, D and E focused on the restaurants' ambience, service quality and food quality, respectively.

Each of the questions was measured by using the five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree.

Pilot Study

Researchers conducted a pilot study prior to major data collection. 30 respondents participated in the pilot study and reliability analysis was performed to assess the internal consistency of the items. The results showed preferable alpha values ranging from 0.746 to 0.942 (Hair et al, 2010), indicating all items were retained and used in the major data collection. Table 1 presents the reliability results from the pilot study.

Table 1

Reliability statistics

Dimension	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Customer Preferences	3	0.746
Restaurant Ambience	6	0.859
Service Quality	6	0.942
Food Quality	6	0.912

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers performed the data collection at the family restaurants in Langkawi. This empirical study focused on customers who dine in at the time of data collection at the selected family-style restaurants in Langkawi. There were three participating restaurants namely Restaurant Jom Ikan Bakar, Restaurant EE Burger and Restaurant Kak Wan. The questionnaire was distributed using a conventional method where the researchers approached available customers at the participating restaurants with the aid of Google Forms. Researchers created a QR code that provides a link and redirected the respondents to the online questionnaire. 167 respondents participated in the study and researchers analysed the usable data using SPSS.

Data Analysis and Results**Demographic Profiles**

Table 2

Demographic profiles

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	93	55.7
	Female	74	44.3
Age group	12-17 years	2	1.2
	18-35 years	104	62.3
	36-55 years	57	34.1
	56 years and above	4	2.4
Marital status	Single	96	57.5
	Married	71	42.5
Occupation	Student	74	44.3
	Employed	82	49.1
	Unemployed	11	6.6
Income (MYR)	Below 1000	79	47.3
	1000-3000	24	14.4
	3000-5000	26	15.5
	Above 5000	38	22.8

Based on the result of the survey, the gender distribution for the male respondents is more than the female respondents. Among the 167 respondents, 55.7% were male while the remaining (44.3%) were female. The option provides for the age in the survey are teenagers (12-17 years old), young adults (18-35 years old), adults (36-55 years old), and older adults (above 56). The least number of respondents are teenagers (1.2%) followed by older adults (2.4%) with the total number of respondents being 2 and 4. Meanwhile for adults is 34.1%. The majority of respondents are young adults with the number of respondents are 62.3 (N=104).

Based on the result of the survey, the marital status for the respondents is 57.5% for single which is the amount of 96 respondents. The rest of the respondents are married which is 42.5%. The occupation of respondents is mostly employed which is a total of 84 respondents (49.1%). The respondents who are students were 44.3% while unemployed is 6.6%. The result of the survey shows that the income of the respondents is mostly below MYR1000 which is 47.3%. For income MYR1000 to MYR 3000, the number of respondents is 24 respondents which are 14.4% out of the total respondent followed by income MYR 3000 to MYR 5000 which is 15.5%. For income MYR 5000 and above, the number of respondents is 38 which is 22.8% of the total respondents.

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression was performed to examine the relationship between the study's variables and identify the main contributor to customer preference. Research objectives and hypotheses were using this analysis. The following table displays the summary of the regression analysis.

Table 3
Summary of regression analysis

	B	SE	β
Constant	1.509	.351	
Restaurant Ambience	.322	.127	.300*
Service Quality	-.108	.143	-.106
Food Quality	.358	.135	.323**

Note: $R^2=.24$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.001$

Researchers analysed all variables simultaneously and showed different results. The results indicate that restaurant ambience and food quality were significantly related to customer preference. However, service quality had the opposite result. At the same time, these results proved the hypotheses statements made earlier in this study. Similarly, H1 and H3 statements are supported, while H2 is not supported. The summary of hypotheses testing are presented in Table 4. Moreover, regression analysis demonstrated that food quality was the main contributor to customer preference, followed by restaurant ambience and service quality.

Table 4
Summary of hypotheses testing

Proposed Hypothesis	Result
H1: Restaurant ambience is significantly related to customer preference	Supported
H2: Service quality is significantly related to customer preference	Not supported
H3: Food quality is significantly related to customer preference	Supported

Discussions and Conclusion

Discussions and Implications

The main objective of this study is to identify the relationship between the study's variables and the main contributor affecting customers' preferences. By referring to Table 4, the results show that two independent variables have a significant relationship with customer preference which are ambience and food quality. Therefore, both hypotheses of the study, H1 and H3 were supported. This study provides strong evidence to support the notion that ambience and food quality has influenced customer preference in choosing a family restaurant.

Based on the analysis done, food quality shows to be the most contributor that affects customer preference in choosing a family restaurant ($\beta= .323$, $p> 0.05$) as shown in Table 3. The researcher reported that customers would visit a restaurant that served fresh and high-quality food as well as the taste. Hidayat et al (2020) highlight that managers should pay close attention to the quality of cuisine to increase customer satisfaction which attracts their preferences to go to the restaurant. In addition, the customers stated that the food was served at a suitable temperature and they were well-presented to look appealing. This statement was further supported by Canny (2014) that food quality is considered the main product of restaurants since customers' judgement on food quality is based on the criteria

such as proper freshness, appropriate temperature, variety, flavour quality, and pleasing presentation. Moreover, the customer also found that an attractive menu will reflect the restaurant's image. Kivela et al (2000) also highlighted that it is significant to provide healthy food with a sufficient nutritious menu as one of the fundamental aspects of building customer dining satisfaction. Therefore, it shows that customers fancy a restaurant with high food quality in their preference towards selecting a family restaurant.

From the results shown in Table 3, restaurant ambience is also a strong contributor to the factors affecting customer preferences ($\beta = .300$, $p > 0.05$). The researcher found that the customers would prefer to choose a restaurant ambience that has appealing interior design and decoration. According to Pecotic et al (2014), interior design has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Other than that, the customer agrees that the temperature in the restaurant can make them comfortable and temperature can create a warm atmosphere. Besides, the environment such as sound and temperature in the restaurant gives satisfaction to the dining experience (Namkung & Jang, 2007). The customer also agreed that the cleanliness of the restaurant's furniture also affected their preferences. This is because cleanliness and sanitation are the essential aspects of customers' first impression and evaluation in determining the restaurant's quality that will create a perception of the establishment as stated by (Norazha et al., 2022). Thus, it shows that restaurant ambience with a clean and calming environment reflects customer preference in choosing their desired family restaurant.

However, the findings also underlined that service quality is not significantly related to customer preference ($\beta = -.106$, $p < 0.05$) as shown in Table 4. The results indicate that service quality is not a major contributor to customer preference in choosing a family restaurant. Therefore, the results partially supported H2 and addressed the research objectives. This is because employees' behaviour, such as being friendly, polite, helpful, and available does not influence the service quality towards customer preferences (Hanafi, 2019). Polat (2022) asserts that a customer's perception of service quality will be a comprehensive analysis of their dining experience. In contrast, Norazha et al (2022) indicate that the quality of the service at a restaurant is directly impacted by the personnel skills. According to the findings of the study, service quality is not a crucial factor in determining a customer's preference when choosing a family restaurant.

Hence, this study extends the understanding of the level of customer perception in choosing restaurants in Langkawi, Malaysia. The results revealed that restaurant ambience and food quality are key determinants of customer preference, which has considerable managerial implications. More precisely, the results imply that food quality is the most crucial element and is likely to have a significant impact on customer preference when selecting a family restaurant. Furthermore, the customers would prefer on going to the restaurant that they are familiar with because of a favourable correlation between word-of-mouth and customer spending as reported by (Trusov et al., 2009). It was supported by Mannan et al (2019), which stated that food quality is valued as one of the most critical determinants of a customer's decision to return to the selected restaurant. Thus, customers would likely to revisit a restaurant due to the quality of food and fresh ingredients. Eventually, customers would rather prefer a description of the food on the menu in detail. This is because they will get ideas for their decision of food choices by reading the menu description as stated by (Trementa, 2021). To meet customers' expectations and further reaffirm their preference for family restaurants in particular, restaurant owners could alter and enrich the quality of their meals. Thus, this will increase customers' likelihood of returning to the restaurant.

Future Research Suggestions and Conclusion

Future research may be able to take advantage of some constraints in this study because it is thought that the insights and findings may be more applicable to family eateries. This study offers proof of significant elements influencing consumer preference in only three family restaurants in Langkawi. As a result, it seems to be probable that the findings will apply to several other family-friendly businesses. Additionally, it would be important to expand the study's variables to include restaurants with alternative menus and ambiances to see if the same dimensions are achieved. Another limitation was that most of the responders to the survey were working, single young people. As a result, the evidence might not directly support the research findings. Future studies that include married couples with children might provide restaurateurs with more insights. As customers with children are more inclined to prefer family restaurants, an extension of this research could lead to more accurate findings.

This study has found that ambience and food quality have a positive and significant impact on the customer preference for selecting family restaurants in Langkawi. The customers indeed have a high level of acceptance of these factors as they will affect their restaurant selections. Customers at the family restaurant have high expectations for the ambience and cuisine they want to enjoy, which is why this is the concern of the study. Family restaurants should therefore devise a laid-back ambience where customers have greater influence over what they eat and how long they would stay.

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Corresponding Author

Mohd Aliff Bin Abdul Majid, PhD

Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi Mara Puncak Alam, Selangor Campus, Malaysia

Email: mhaliff@uitm.edu.my

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