

WHAT BRINGS YOU BACK: PERSPECTIVES ON HOW CASUAL RESTAURANT ATTRIBUTES SHAPE MALAYSIAN CUSTOMERS' REVISIT INTENTIONS

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Abstract - In the competitive restaurant industry, especially within casual dining setting, retaining customers retention is fundamental for long-term success. However, as customer preferences and the hospitality landscape change, it's becoming more difficult to understand what drives customers to return. This study determines the customer's perspectives on how restaurant attributes have signifying the revisit intentions of Malaysian customers, focusing specifically on establishments in Johor. This study highlights how attributes like atmosphere, employee service quality, perceived food quality and menu diversity can expressively enhance customer loyalty. Utilizing a quantitative approach, 386 valid responses were retained through convenience sampling. The findings of this study suggest a strong association between various restaurant attributes and customer revisit intentions within Johor's casual dining establishment. Notably, employee service quality (ESQ) and perceived food quality and menu diversity (PFQMD) emerged as significant attributes that signifying the customers' revisit intention (CRI). The findings highlight the significant of these attributes in encouraging repeat visits and offer practical insights for restaurant operators in Johor to improve their offerings and marketing strategies. Moreover, this study adds to the discussion on customer revisit intention in Malaysia and suggests ways to strengthen customer relationships in the competitive casual dining market.

Keywords - Revisit Intention, Casual dining, Restaurant attributes, Customer Perspectives

INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry, a significant contributor to Malaysia's economic growth, (Nazri *et al.*, 2022; Hafiz *et al.*, 2019) plays a pivotal role in unveiling culinary treasures within the nation's gastronomic destinations and hospitality businesses. Over the past decade, the Malaysian restaurant industry has seen significant transformation, with the emergence of a wide variety of establishments, including themed, casual dining, fast-food and café. The growth of these restaurants has been driven by shifts in modern lifestyles, changing social demographics, and the influence of social media (Hassan & Shamsudin, 2019). As customer preferences evolve and the hospitality landscape continues to change, it has become increasingly challenging to determine the factors that encourage customers to return. Casual dining restaurants, offering moderately priced meals in a relaxed setting, are seen as a more affordable alternative to fine dining, making them popular choices for dining out and celebrating events (Verma & Gupta, 2018). In Malaysia, this market has grown substantially, fueled by industrialization and a rising middle class that seeks diverse dining experiences (Ting, Fam, & Liew, 2019). From 2015 to 2020, the casual dining restaurant market grew at a 7.5% annual rate, demonstrating rising popularity and demand (Euromonitor International, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research indicates that a restaurant's key attributes like food quality, service, ambiance, and pricing have significantly influence customers' decisions to return. As understanding why customers return to casual dining restaurants is crucial for long-term profitability, (Jang & Kim, 2021; Chen & Chang, 2022; Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020) highlight that tangible elements like food quality and ambiance, menu selection and service efficiency, significantly affects their likelihood of returning. However, many restaurants find it difficult to determine which of these factors most strongly encourage repeat visits, especially in a culturally diverse market like Malaysia, where customer expectations vary widely. This complexity makes it essential for casual dining establishments to understand the specific attributes that drive customer loyalty.

In the Malaysian context, Johor, a developed city known for its diverse and vibrant casual dining scene, provides an ideal setting for studying customer behavior in the restaurant industry. The food and beverage services sector, as reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019) has been a significant contributor to the country's GDP, encompassing diverse businesses such as restaurants, cafes, and catering services. This sector offers a broad spectrum of casual dining options, ranging from internationally

recognized brands to local eateries that highlight Malaysia's rich culinary heritage. This culinary diversity appeals to a wide spectrum of preferences as well as various populations, from local diners seeking familiar flavors to international tourists wanting to try new culinary delights (Mansor & Awan, 2018). In Johor, where the culinary landscape combines traditional Malay dishes with international cuisines, making understanding what customers value is particularly imperative for casual dining restaurants (Aisyah *et al.*, 2022). This study determines the customer's perspectives on how factors such as atmosphere, decoration, service quality, food quality, and menu variety have signifying the customers' intentions to revisit in Johor's casual dining sector. Building on a constructs and items originally developed by Karamustafa and Ülker (2020) for the impact of tangible and intangible restaurant attributes on overall foreign visitors' experience at Cappadocia region in Turkey, this research adapts the framework to the Malaysian context. This study also aligns with the conference theme of "Synergizing Hospitality Innovation: Unveiling Culinary Treasures in Gastronomic Destinations and Hospitality Businesses," offering insights into enhancing customer loyalty through innovative practices. While previous research has examined broad factors like ambiance and menu options (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020), this study focuses on specific attributes that influence customer retention in Malaysia. Prior studies on casual dining have looked at broad topics like ambiance, decoration, employee service quality, perceived food quality, and menu diversity play critical roles in customer satisfaction and loyalty (by Mathur & Gupta, 2019; Kim, 2011; Lee & Christiani, 2021; Sarmiento & Apritudo, 2022; Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020) and are explored to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these attributes.

Additionally, while previous studies had emphasized the importance of atmosphere in customer satisfaction and revisit intention (Mathur & Gupta, 2019; Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020; Lee & Christiani, 2021), accurate evaluations of individual atmospheric factors in Malaysian settings are limited. Although customer retention is driven by both food perception and service quality (Jang & Kim, 2021; Chen & Chang, 2022), it is unclear how these factors interact in the Malaysian setting. Aside from that, one significant gap in existing research is the impact of employee service quality on customer revisit intention in Malaysia. It is uncertain how high service quality influences the attraction of ordinary food, as well as how poor service might undermine high-quality food. Next, the relationship between perceived food quality and menu diversity suggests that menu variation may have an impact on how well food is viewed (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020; Lee & Christiani, 2021; Mathur & Gupta, 2019). This study focuses on how these combined features have latent effects toward customer revisit intentions in Malaysian casual dining. Similarly, understanding these traits is critical for restaurant performance, as they affect sales income, brand loyalty, operational efficiency, and competitive advantage (Tu & Yu-Yi Chang, 2011; Konuk, 2023; Hussein, 2018; Iliadi, 2023; He, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2008; Puranen & Reismaa, 2020; Mattila, 2001).

Understanding this relationship is not only crucial for improving customer satisfaction but also for ensuring the sustainability and growth of casual dining establishments in Malaysia. By identifying the substance restaurant attributes that motivates the customer revisit intentions, restaurant managers can make informed decisions to enhance their offerings, ultimately creating lasting memories that drive customer loyalty and repeat business.

METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach to highlight how attributes like atmosphere, employee service quality, perceived food quality and menu diversity can expressively enhance customer loyalty. Attributes such as atmosphere, decoration, service quality, food quality, and menu variety are examined to obtain the customers' behavior at casual dining restaurants in Johor. Data were collected through hardcopy and digital questionnaires to reach a broad audience as suggested by Creswell (2014). The target respondents were guests who had dined at casual dining restaurants in Johor within the past year. Screening questions were used to ensure that only eligible participants took part in the survey. From early March to mid-June 2024, a total of 445 questionnaires were collected. After applying basic statistical procedures, 386 valid responses were retained through convenience sampling. This sample size is suitable for behavioral research, where a range of 30 to 500 participants is generally considered adequate (Roscoe, 1975). The questionnaire, adapted from previous studies, consists of 24 items divided into five sections. Section A gathers six demographics information, next, section B, C and D uses modified items from Karamustafa and Ülker (2020) to obtain respondent's perspectives on the established restaurant attributes and the final section assesses the likelihood of revisiting based on adapted questions from prior research. SPSS version 26 was used to conduct both descriptive and inferential analyses. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a pilot study involving 45 respondents yielding values between 0.887 and 0.906, indicating strong reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, a five-point Likert scale ranging from

1 (strongly disagree to 5 with strongly agree) is utilized to gauge level of agreement among the respondents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 depicts the frequency and percentage of gender, age, education level, occupation, respondent's location and frequency of visiting casual dining along with the overall sample size (N:386).

Table 1. Respondents Demographic details

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Gender	Male	125	32.4	32.4	
	Female	261	67.6	67.6	
Age	18-20	109	28.2	28.2	
	21-30	133	34.5	34.5	
	31-40	104	26.9	26.9	
	41-50	37	9.6	9.6	
	51-60	2	0.5	0.5	
	60 and above	1	0.3	0.3	
Educational Level	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM)	83	21.5	21.5	
	Diploma	107	27.7	27.7	
	Bachelor's Degree	128	33.2	33.2	
	Master	39	10.1	10.1	
	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	17	4.4	4.4	
	Others (STPM)	9	2.3	2.3	
	Others (Foundation)	2	0.5	0.5	
Occupation	Others (kerja)	1	0.3	0.3	
	Students	166	43.0	43.0	
	Privates	57	14.8	14.8	
	Government	86	22.3	22.3	
	Self-Employed	33	8.5	8.5	
Respondent's Location	Unemployed	44	11.4	11.4	
	Terengganu	14	3.6	3.6	
	Pahang	22	5.7	5.7	
	Kelantan	18	4.7	4.7	
	Perlis	18	4.7	4.7	
	Pulau Pinang	20	5.2	5.2	
	Kedah	15	3.9	3.9	
	Perak	22	5.7	5.7	
	Negeri Sembilan	26	6.7	6.7	
	Selangor	27	7.0	7.0	
	Melaka	20	5.2	5.2	
	Johor	137	35.5	35.5	
	Sabah	11	2.8	2.8	
	Sarawak	13	3.4	3.4	
	Wilayah Persekutuan Labuan	4	1.0	1.0	
	Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur	11	2.8	2.8	
	Wilayah Persekutuan Putrajaya	8	2.1	2.1	
	Frequency of Visits	Everyday	43	11.1	11.1
		1-2 times a week	89	23.1	23.1
		Several times a month	138	35.8	35.8
Rarely, only a few times a year		116	30.1	30.1	

Source: Study output from SPSS version 26, 2024

Table 2. Descriptive analysis

SECTION B: ATTRIBUTES RELATED TO ATMOSPHERE AND DECORATION		
	Mean Score (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
The interior design, which includes décor and linen decorations, complements the restaurant's theme and improves the dining experience.	4.34	0.795
The background music and lighting offer a relaxing and comfortable setting for informal dining.	4.23	0.899
The restaurant's capacity is sufficient for the number of clients, resulting in a pleasant dining experience.	4.30	0.803
The restaurant's location is convenient and ideal for casual dining.	4.38	0.778
The restaurant is generally clean, including utensils and restrooms	4.44	0.784
The menu display is visually appealing and easy to understand.	4.41	0.782
SECTION C: ATTRIBUTES RELATED TO EMPLOYEES SERVICE QUALITY		
Employees are competent, courteous, and proficient in their duties.	4.33	0.802
Employees are attentive to customer specifications and eager to serve.	4.35	0.765
Employees can empathize with clients and have effective interpersonal communication abilities.	4.31	0.797
Employees maintain excellent personal hygiene.	4.42	0.703
Employees deliver consistent and reliable service that satisfies the customer's expectations.	4.36	0.782
SECTION D: PERCEIVED FOOD QUALITY AND MENU DIVERSITY		
The food and beverages are reasonably priced for my budget and provide good value for the money.	4.27	0.847
The food tastes great, lives up to my expectations, and there are special dietary options available.	4.28	0.825
Nutrition information is displayed on the menu, which also includes creative and well-known/local foods.	4.23	0.862
The food has been prepared hygienically.	4.49	0.681
The menu contains a range of products, including a children's menu, and is visually appealing. (Menu card, digital menu)	4.32	0.834
SECTION E: CUSTOMER REVISIT INTENTION		
How likely are you to revisit the casual dining restaurant in the future?	4.24	0.840
How likely are you to recommend the casual dining restaurant to a friend or colleague?	4.26	0.907

Source: Study findings using SPSS version 26, 2024.

Note to read mean score (M):

(1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Neutral, (4) Agree, (5) Strongly Agree

Table 2 presents the mean scores for the restaurant attributes examined in casual dining settings, including atmosphere and decoration, employee service quality, perceived food quality, and menu diversity. The mean scores range from (4.23) to (4.49), indicating that respondents generally leaned toward agreement or strong agreement with the attributes assessed. Specifically, respondents highly valued the cleanliness of utensils and restrooms (mean score: 4.44). Additionally, they found the menu display visually appealing (mean score: 4.41) and considered the restaurant's location convenient and ideal for casual dining (mean score: 4.38).

Subsequent, Table 2 display on attributes related to employee service quality. Respondents emphasized the employees maintain an excellent personal hygiene (mean score:4.42), employees deliver consistent and reliable service that satisfies the customer's expectations (mean score:4.36) and they are

attentive to customer specifications and eager to serve (mean score 4.35) which all contribute to a nice dining experience.

Additionally, respondents were asked on the opinion regarding the perceived food quality and menu diversity. Noticeably, respondents perceived that the food has been prepared hygienically has the highest mean score value (4.49) with nutrition information is displayed on the menu scored the lowest among other items (mean score:4.23). In this sense, the mean scores indicate that respondents consistently rated all attributes namely: atmosphere and decoration, employee service quality, perceived food quality, and menu diversity positively. Among these, cleanliness emerged as the most highly rated attribute, suggesting that it is the key factor with their positive perception of the casual dining restaurants they have visited.

Table 2 also highlights customers' perceived intentions to revisit. Respondents displayed positive behavior, with high levels of agreement regarding future visits to the casual dining establishments (mean score: 4.24) and recommending the establishments to friends and colleagues (mean score: 4.26). These findings suggest a strong intention to revisit and recommend the restaurants, indicating that customers are likely to return and refer others, validating the positive dining experience at these establishments.

Table 3. Correlation Coefficient

		Correlations Coefficient Analysis			
		ATMOSPHERE AND DECORATION (AD)	EMPLOYEE SERVICE QUALITY (ESQ)	PERCEIVED FOOD QUALITY AND MENU DIVERSITY (PFQMD)	CUSTOMER REVISIT INTENTION (CRI)
ATMOSPHERE AND DECORATION (AD)	Pearson Correlation	1	.754**	.719**	.457**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	386	386	386	386
EMPLOYEE SERVICE QUALITY (ESQ)	Pearson Correlation	.754**	1	.783**	.580**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001		<.001	<.001
	N	386	386	386	386
PERCEIVED FOOD QUALITY AND MENU DIVERSITY (PFQMD)	Pearson Correlation	.719**	.783**	1	.580**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001		<.001
	N	386	386	386	386
CUSTOMER REVISIT INTENTION (CRI)	Pearson Correlation	.457**	.580	.580**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	N	386	386	386	386

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Study outputs using SPSS version 26, 2024

Table 3 above displays the correlation coefficients between the restaurant attributes examined in this study: Atmosphere and Decoration (AD), Employee Service Quality (ESQ), Perceived Food Quality and Menu Diversity (PFQMD), and Customer Revisit Intention (CRI). The findings reveal a positive and moderate to high correlations between all tested variables. In tandem with Cohen (1988), the researcher has suggested that the magnitudes of $r = 0.10$, 0.30 , and 0.50 can be categorized as small, medium, and large, respectively. Notably, ESQ shows a strong correlation with PFQMD ($r = .783$, $p < .001$) and a moderate correlation with CRI ($r = .580$, $p < .001$). Similarly, AD is moderately correlated with ESQ ($r = .754$, $p < .001$) and PFQMD ($r = .719$, $p < .001$). The correlation between AD and CRI is lower but still significant ($r = .457$, $p < .001$). According to the data, the correlation between Atmosphere and Decoration (AD) and Customer Revisit Intention is $.457$, which is considered a moderate correlation with significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.001$). Additionally, the correlation between Employee Service Quality (ESQ) and Customer Revisit Intention is $.580$, indicating a high correlation with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the correlation between Perceived Food Quality and Menu Diversity (PFQMD) and Customer Revisit Intention is $.580$, indicating a high correlation with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.001$). The positive and significant correlations suggest that improvements in atmosphere, employee service quality, and perceived food quality/menu diversity are associated with higher customer revisit intentions in casual dining restaurants.

Referring to Table 2 and Table 3, the findings of this study suggest a strong association between various restaurant attributes and customer revisit intentions within Johor's casual dining establishment. Notably, employee service quality (ESQ) and perceived food quality and menu diversity (PFQMD) emerged as significant attributes that signifying the customers' decisions to return. The finding validates the existing understanding that service quality and revisit intention are positively related (Manyangara *et al.*, 2023; Naibho & Hariyanto, 2022). Besides, Rather and Camilleri (2019), which underscores the critical role that restaurant employees play in fulfilling customer expectations and ensuring satisfaction through quality service will benefited to the establishment in terms of customer revisit intention. Similarly, Karamustafa and Ülker (2020) emphasized that both tangible elements, such as food quality and ambiance, and intangible aspects, like service efficiency, are pivotal in shaping customers' return intentions. This aligns well with the expectancy-disconfirmation theory, as discussed by Lee and Christiarini (2021), which posits that customer satisfaction is derived from the comparison between anticipated and actual service experiences.

Additionally, the physical environment of a restaurant plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining customers. A well-designed setting and clean, menu display and featuring appealing aesthetics, comfortable seating, and a pleasant ambiance, not only draws customers in but also encourages repeat visits. This is consistent with findings by Sha' ari *et al.* (2023) and Wan Nawawi *et al.*, (2021), who noted that the physical environment can serve as a competitive differentiator in the market. Besides, Mohamed *et al.*, (2022) and ŞAHİN (2020) empirically supported that customer behavioral intentions such as re-ordering and repeat visits depends entirely on the customer satisfaction in using digital menus. In this light, customers are more inclined to revisit establishments that provide a visually pleasing and comfortable atmosphere, which further supports the findings of this study. Mathur and Gupta (2019) also highlighted the importance of a restaurant's environment in fostering customer loyalty and subsequently, Nawawi *et al.*, (2018) recognized that the restaurant cleanliness is the most influential factor that prompted the customer behaviour to revisit the establishment in future.

CONCLUSION

This study provides important insights into the factors tied to customer revisit intentions in Johor, Malaysia's casual dining sector. The findings indicate that aspects such as atmosphere and decoration, employee service quality, perceived food quality, and menu diversity are closely related to customers' decisions to return to a restaurant. It's worth noting that the descriptive analysis and correlation used highlights associations, but not direct causal relationships. Nonetheless, the study highlights the importance for restaurateurs to focus on enhancing these attributes to foster customer loyalty and satisfaction. However, the study is not without its limitations. First, the use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. The sample may not fully represent the diverse range of customers in other regions or dining contexts. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific geographical area which is in Johor, Malaysia, thus, further limits the applicability of the findings to other regions or countries. These geographical and sampling constraints suggest that future research should consider a broader and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Despite this, the study still offers meaningful insights for scholars and practitioners in the fields of hospitality research and marketing. The simplicity of the analysis does not detract from the relevance of the findings, which contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that drive customer retention in the casual dining sector. In conclusion, while acknowledging its limitations, this study provides a solid foundation for future research. By addressing the identified constraints and expanding the scope of analysis, future studies can build upon these findings to offer even more comprehensive insights into customer behavior in the hospitality industry.

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