



Determining the role of service quality and customer loyalty in Malaysian SMEs in the food and beverage sector: The mediating influence of customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

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In today's competitive landscape, the food and beverage industries face challenges in maintaining their current customer base. Malaysian SMEs in Mamak restaurants are striving to deliver outstanding service to consumers, as customer satisfaction is crucial for fostering loyalty. The study focused on investigating how different aspects of service quality influence customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction serving as a mediating factor. A convenience sampling technique was employed to select participants who met the study's criteria. Data collection was carried out through questionnaires, and the analysis was conducted using SmartPLS version 4.0. The findings reveal that all service quality dimensions, except for reliability, have a positive and significant impact on customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between reliability, responsiveness, and tangibility. The findings of this study enhance the understanding of service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. They carry important managerial implications within the highly competitive environment of Malaysian Mamak restaurants and the wider foodservice industry. These insights guide restaurant managers in prioritizing service improvements.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical insights into the differential impact of service quality dimensions on customer loyalty, highlighting the mediating role of customer satisfaction, and offering practical managerial implications for enhancing service strategies in Malaysian Mamak restaurants and the broader foodservice industry.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's food and beverage industry is recognized as a rapidly growing market and plays a crucial role in enhancing the country's economy (Abd Rashid, Hamzah, Shobri, & Hashim, 2019). The majority of businesses in this sector are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Zubir et al., 2023). The food and beverage industry is thriving due to its status as a basic necessity. The widespread availability of food outlets operating from early morning until late at night encourages customers to choose dining at restaurants (Ahmad, Zulkifli, Abd Rawi, Engku Fauzi, & Engku Fauzi, 2024). According to the World Tourism Organization (2021), food and beverage services represent over 30% of total tourist expenditure, making them a significant contributor to the global tourism sector (Abdullah, Isa, & Arifin, 2023). Additionally, the foodservice industry in Malaysia employs over one million people and generates annual sales exceeding RM80 billion (approximately US\$20 billion) (Abdullah et al., 2023). This trend highlights the necessity of understanding the distinct features of the restaurant industry, especially within the full-service sector, as it requires more interaction between customers and service providers compared to other types of restaurants (Abd Rashid et al., 2019). Lately, this sector has been the focus of extensive academic research aimed at understanding various operational aspects. Despite this, it continues to struggle with meeting the rising consumer demand for healthy and sustainable food options (Zubir et al., 2023).

The food service sector is expected to rebound from RM 64.9 billion in 2020 to achieve RM 109.08 billion in gross output by 2025, with an annual growth rate of 10.9% (Bin, 2022). Considering the constant growth of competition, it has reflected the significant need to identify feasible solutions to sustain the operation of the F&B sector in Malaysia (Bin, 2022). When the number of restaurants exceeds the number of customers, there is an oversupply of dining establishments, leading to a highly competitive environment (Lee, Hallak, & Sardeshmukh, 2019; Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). As competition intensifies in the restaurant sector, financial challenges also grow (Saporna & Claveria, 2019). Due to this competitive economic climate, SMEs restaurants face a significant risk of failure (Bin, 2022). In this highly competitive market, restaurant operators, especially small and medium enterprises (SMEs), struggle even more to stay afloat (Bin, 2022). However, amidst intense competition, businesses can still thrive by concentrating on customer loyalty and the quality of their services (Ramadhan, Edward, & Ariesa, 2022).

While SMEs in the F&B, accommodation, and retail sectors achieved the highest workforce growth, these SMEs had the lowest annual revenue growth (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2020). In Malaysia, small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the food and beverage industry encounter a range of challenges that significantly influence their operational processes (Bin, 2022). SMEs encounter a lack of infrastructure, knowledge transmission, and government incentives, which put them in a less favorable position in the local business environment (Saleh, Caputi, & Harvie, 2008). Further, SMEs have limited capacity to maximize the productivity of human resources due to unperceived demand (Ab Wahab, Halim, Rashid, & Adam, 2017). Therefore, SMEs are less capable and efficient in competing with established F&B franchises and chains. Besides that, the location, management style, competitive advantage, and branding strategy of SMEs influence their sustainability in Malaysia (Foo, Bajuri, & Wong, 2013).

With the restaurant industry experiencing growth as more individuals choose to eat out, the focus on service quality has become increasingly prominent (Mohi, 2012). Scholars and restaurant marketers are dedicating their efforts to enhancing service quality levels, particularly by exploring how restaurant patrons perceive service quality and how these perceptions influence customer loyalty (Mohi, 2012). In this context, fostering customer loyalty has become a primary objective for numerous restaurants. Devoted patrons serve as representatives for the establishment, acting as referral sources and promoting the business and its offerings through positive word of mouth (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). Loyalty is crucial for driving sales and profits, making it essential to continuously enhance it both in the short and long term. Profit serves as the primary motivation and is vital for sustaining business stability, as it ensures the smooth operation of all business activities, from products to services (Ramadhan et al., 2022). Consistent improvement over time leads to increased profits, which in turn strengthens consumer loyalty. A significant benefit of this loyalty is that satisfied customers often engage in word-of-mouth marketing, promoting the business to

potential new customers (Ramadhan et al., 2022). Moreover, loyalty results in increased barriers to competition, increased sales, profitability, and market share (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). As a result, there is increasing curiosity about understanding customer loyalty (Ferreira, Jalali, Meidutė-Kavaliauskienė, & Viana, 2015; Wang, 2010).

While the role of customer satisfaction as a mediator is widely recognized across various industries (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018; Kundu & Datta, 2015; Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017), research in the food and beverage industry often neglects to explore how customer satisfaction mediates the link between service quality and customer loyalty. Many existing studies measure satisfaction using broad metrics that may not capture the nuances of consumer experience related to food quality and service speed, among other factors. For example, while Makanyeza and Chikazhe (2017) assert the significance of customer satisfaction as a mediator; they do not delve into specific facets of service quality that most impact satisfaction in a fast food setting. Moreover, while multiple studies affirm that customer satisfaction acts as a mediator between service quality and customer loyalty, the focus has overwhelmingly been on certain regions or specific restaurants, such as KFC (Lin, 2023; Zamani et al., 2020). The context of Malaysian restaurants remains underexplored, particularly regarding local chain versus international franchise dynamics. This gap invites further empirical investigation into the specific dynamics of Malaysian restaurants, potentially influenced by local customer preferences and behaviors.

In the realm of food and beverages, achieving business success hinges on several essential factors, with the foremost being the quality of service, customer satisfaction, and their loyalty (Abeykoon, 2024). Dam and Dam (2021) highlighted that service quality has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth in recent years. Given the swift changes in lifestyles, the economy, society, and technological advancements, understanding consumer perceptions of service quality is essential (Abeykoon, 2024). According to Yaqub, Halim, and Shehzad (2019), service quality enables companies to effectively compete with their rivals. Moreover, high service quality naturally results in increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Suciptawati, Paramita, & Aristayasa, 2019). However, current literature often focuses on singular aspects of service quality, such as food quality, employee interactions, and speed of service, typically addressing them in isolation (Singh et al., 2021; Villanueva, Alejandro, & Ga-An, 2023; Yaqub et al., 2019; Zamani et al., 2020). However, comprehensive models that integrate these various dimensions into a holistic view of service quality are scarce.

The food and beverage industry is a crucial component of a nation's economy, as it significantly contributes to fulfilling the dietary requirements of the populace while reducing reliance on imported food. Restaurants in Malaysia play a vital role in conserving and promoting traditional cuisine for both residents and visitors (Abdullah et al., 2023). Its significance is underscored by its size, growth, and performance compared to other sectors. This industry stands out as one of the most lucrative in terms of revenue and job creation, surpassing other manufacturing sectors. Therefore, analyzing the aspects of service quality that affect customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction as a mediator, can enhance the profitability of companies within the food and beverage sector.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With globalization and changes in population demographics and lifestyles, people are cooking and eating at home less frequently than before due to their busy work schedules (Uslu, 2020). As a result, individuals tend to spend more time and purchase more services from food and beverage establishments. As restaurants expand the variety of products they offer, customers' expectations from these businesses also rise accordingly (Uslu, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial for service businesses to effectively meet customer expectations and ensure their satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Providing satisfying experiences to customers is critical to sustaining a restaurant's business (Abd Rashid et al., 2019). In other words, the enhanced quality of service, increased customer satisfaction, and bolstered customer loyalty indicate the success of the business (Lin et al., 2023).

Businesses that focus on fulfilling customer expectations by delivering quality service, sincerity, and customer-centric behavior tend to sustain their operations (Uslu, 2020). Delivering high-quality service in restaurants is just as critical as in other service industries (Marković, Raspor, & Šegarić, 2010). Over the last two decades, there has been increasing attention to researching service quality and related concepts such as customer satisfaction and loyalty. Yap and Kew (2007) suggests that assessing service quality in the restaurant sector is difficult until customers actually visit the establishment. This is because each visit may offer a different level of service, influencing their satisfaction with the restaurant brand (Abd Rashid et al., 2019). Consequently, there is ongoing debate in the service marketing literature regarding how to conceptualize and measure customers' perceptions of these constructs (Mohi, 2012).

Malaysia is a nation characterized by its diverse ethnicities and religions, where the food and beverage sector flourishes with both local and global culinary offerings (Abd Rashid et al., 2019). A significant portion of this industry must adhere to specific guidelines, such as acquiring a 'Halal' certification to cater to Muslim consumers. Conversely, non-halal dining establishments are widespread across the country, alongside numerous vegetarian eateries that accommodate various dietary preferences (Sujangi, Salim, Deraman, Ismail, & Deraman, 2023). Over the years, Malaysian restaurants have crafted distinct brands to remain competitive, offering a wide array of products, pricing, service standards, and dining atmospheres to suit all preferences. This diversity provides consumers with a broad selection and the opportunity to assess whether their expectations are met, influencing their decision to revisit these establishments (Sujangi et al., 2023). To foster customer loyalty, Malaysian restaurants must consistently deliver satisfaction and exceptional experiences to their patrons (Sujangi et al., 2023). Therefore, it involves aspects of price, quality, and value of money for the food, as well as the service variables (Sabir, Ghafoor, Hafeez, Akhtar, & Rehman, 2014).

2.1. Customer Loyalty

In marketing research, there has been a substantial focus on understanding the concept of customer loyalty and its underlying factors (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). Both marketing scholars and professionals have indicated that enhancing customer loyalty is the strategic objective of the organization (Yaqub et al., 2019). Customer loyalty is viewed as a recurring behavior that stems from psychological decision-making and evaluation processes, driven by positive actions (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). From a behavioral standpoint, customer loyalty is defined by repeated purchases, where a customer consistently chooses the same product or service within a specific category more frequently than other customers in that category (Neal, 1999). Organizations benefit greatly from loyal customers, as they contribute to a reliable profit stream and help lower marketing and promotional costs (Uslu & Eren, 2020). Loyal customers offer significant benefits to organizations by ensuring a steady profit stream and reducing marketing and promotion expenses (Lin et al., 2023). The core of a company's long-term success lies in boosting and sustaining its base of loyal customers (Taghipourian & Bakhsh, 2015). Customer loyalty is characterized by a strong dedication to repeatedly purchasing or returning to a preferred product or service in the future. This results in consumers consistently choosing the same brand or collection of brands, even when external factors and marketing strategies might encourage selecting a different option (Abu-Alhaija, Hussein, & Allan, 2019; Uslu & Eren, 2020).

Customer loyalty has long been a pivotal element in marketing theories and practices (Oliver, 1999). As a research domain, it continues to be a primary concern for marketing professionals and academic scholars due to its strong connection to profitability, organizational survival, and growth (Yaqub et al., 2019). Customer loyalty can be defined in several ways, one of which describes it as the behavior exhibited by customers, known as repurchase behavior. This behavior reflects all the experiences that customers encounter when interacting with the products and services provided by companies (Fida, Ahmed, Al-Balushi, & Singh, 2020). In the realm of business, customer loyalty is vital for a company as it retains customers, enhances financial performance, and ensures the company's sustainability (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018). Fostering customer loyalty is a crucial objective in strategic market planning and in establishing a lasting competitive edge, as cultivating loyal customers and nurturing significant relationships with

them can lead to sustained profitability (Durandis, 2024; Torabi, Hamidi, & Safaie, 2021). Hence, this is the primary reason a company focuses on keeping its customers (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018).

Numerous studies have been carried out to gain a deeper understanding of how consumers develop loyalty to services (Ozdemir, Zhang, Gupta, & Bebek, 2020). To foster customer loyalty, companies must consistently deliver top-notch quality across all their products and services and cultivate a strong perception of quality in customers' minds, which serves as a key indicator of both current and future business success (Arslan, 2020). Essentially, the effort to secure customer loyalty can be achieved through the company's commitment to high-quality offerings (Durandis, 2024). Panjaitan (2017) suggests that the quality of a company's products and services, along with customer satisfaction, can significantly impact customer loyalty. Arora and Narula (2018), analyzing the components of service quality can significantly aid organizations, ultimately improving the services delivered to customers. Therefore, securing long-term customer loyalty in the service sector is crucial; otherwise, customers may choose to shop elsewhere, switch to a competitor, or decide not to repurchase (Hawkins & Hoon, 2019). Both scholars and marketers concur that an organization cannot thrive and maintain its success without a base of loyal customers (Saidin, Rahman, Nafi, Saad, & Mokhtar, 2022).

2.2. Service Quality

In the swiftly expanding and evolving service industry, the notion of quality holds significant importance for restaurants, just as it does for all service-producing enterprises (Marković et al., 2010). Service quality is an assessment of how effectively an organization understands and fulfills its customers' requirements (Lin et al., 2023). Essentially, service quality emphasizes efforts to satisfy customer needs and ensure precise delivery to align with customer expectations (Abadi, Nursyamsi, & Syamsuddin, 2020). Companies that deliver high-quality services differentiate themselves from competitors by expanding their market share, boosting profit opportunities, and strengthening customer loyalty (Uslu, 2020). For a company to excel in the competitive market, it must focus on delivering superior products, as customer satisfaction is rooted in the quality of the products offered (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018).

The concept of service quality is characterized by the overall gap between what customers expect and what they perceive during their service experience (Sahak, Mohamad, Abdul Samad, & Faizul, 2018). Quality depends on customers' expectations and desires, along with the social framework, cultural development, and customary practices of the community (Uslu, 2020). Anwar and Abdullah (2021) identify two factors that shape consumer perceptions: expectations and quality standards. Expectations refer to what customers anticipate receiving from a service provider (Anwar & Shukur, 2015). Quality is determined by the consumer's perspective, meaning it is defined by what the buyer perceives as quality (Abdullah & Abdul Rahman, 2015). The quality of service is determined by the difference between clients' expectations of the service provider and their assessment of the services they actually receive (Ali et al., 2021). Research indicates that service quality can be interpreted as how well a company satisfies the demands or expectations of its consumers (Wang et al., 2023). It is also characterized as the customer's overall impression of whether the programs are comparatively better or worse (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). Cronin Jr and Taylor (1992) identified customer opinion as the most crucial element in determining service quality.

The quality of service plays a vital role in shaping customer satisfaction (Lőke, Kovács, & Bacsı, 2018) and their likelihood of returning (Uslu & Eren, 2020). Delivering excellent service leads to favorable word of mouth, boosts customer satisfaction, enhances the company's reputation, draws in new clients, encourages repeat visits, and elevates business performance (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). The quality of products or services is linked to a company's long-term success. By improving quality, a company can grow and capture a larger market share (Wang et al., 2023). The impact of a product's service quality is vital for a company's strategy to remain competitive and succeed (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018). According to Uslu (2020), it is essential for businesses to understand how customers perceive service quality in order to remain competitive and sustainable. For a service business to thrive, it is crucial to deliver

customer experiences effectively (Ali & Raza, 2017). Focusing on outstanding service can lead to customer satisfaction and retention, as well as foster empowerment and innovation in services (Wang et al., 2023). Therefore, companies must be mindful of and actively work on enhancing the quality of their services or offerings (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018).

Building on Gronroos (1988) disconfirmation model, Parasuraman et al. (1985) introduced a novel approach to evaluating service quality by examining the gap between perceived and expected service. This model was later refined and named SERVQUAL by Parasuraman et al. (1985). SERVQUAL encompasses five dimensions to measure service quality: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Specifically, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibility pertain to the delivery of service, while reliability is primarily associated with the service outcome (Wang et al., 2023). The SERVQUAL tool evaluates service quality by comparing what customers expect with their perceptions of the service they receive (Sahak et al., 2018). The model plays a crucial role in identifying the gaps in customer-focused quality assessment (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991). The SERVQUAL model identifies “Empathy, Reliability, Assurance, Responsiveness, and Tangibility” as the key components in its multi-item scale for evaluating service quality (Parasuraman et al., 1988). This research posits that these dimensions of service quality are pertinent and adaptable for forecasting customer satisfaction and loyalty within Malaysia's food and beverage industry. This model explains service quality through five distinct dimensions.

Reliability serves as proof of the capability to deliver the promised service effectively and appropriately (Lin et al., 2023). This aspect of reliability highlights two main elements: the promptness of service and compliance with established service standards (Lupiyoadi, 2018). Reliability involves fulfilling service commitments to customers in a trustworthy and precise way (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). Tangibles encompass the physical infrastructure, tools, staff, and communication channels (Lin et al., 2023). The visual elements such as equipment and staff, the layout of the service environment, and the communication resources available to the organization have the potential to enhance customer satisfaction (Paul, Mittal, & Srivastav, 2016). Tangibility pertains to the physical aspects that customers can assess to judge the quality of a service. This includes the facilities, written documents, or the appearance of the service provider's staff (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 2012). The tangible components of service quality are typically described as the physical attributes of the services offered. This includes the company's tools and equipment, physical infrastructure, surrounding environment, and communication materials, along with other related elements (Fida et al., 2020).

Responsiveness is another aspect of service quality, typically assessing how readily and swiftly a company or firm can address customer needs (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Responsiveness embodies the willingness and eagerness to support clients by offering prompt service and relevant information on various matters. The core of being responsive lies in employees swiftly attending to customers and consistently being available to assist, without being preoccupied (Ludeña, Pires, & Pires, 2016). Responsiveness pertains to a company's readiness to assist its customers and provide swift service (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). Empathy, the fourth dimension of service quality, is defined by Parasuraman et al. (1985) as a company's ability, through its employees, to deliver suitable care to clients, address their unique and personal concerns, and understand their requirements. Empathy reflects the firm's capacity to show concern and deliver personalized attention to its clients (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). The last dimension is the assurance dimension.

Assurance involves the politeness and breadth of knowledge of the staff, along with their ability to enhance customer trust. The core of the assurance dimension lies in how employees conduct themselves and their proficiency in adhering to established standards while attending to each customer (Lin et al., 2023). According to Wang and Shieh (2006), assurance is characterized by the staff's knowledge and politeness, which instills a sense of confidence and trust in customers. The assurance aspect aims to offer customers a sense of security and protection, thereby reducing their concerns and fears about the services they receive (Fida et al., 2020).

2.3. Relationship between Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Service quality is recognized as a key element that affects both customer satisfaction and loyalty (Syah, Alimwidodo, Lianti, & Hatta, 2022). Research indicates that when service quality is high, there is a greater likelihood of enhanced satisfaction and loyalty (Izogo & Ogba, 2015; Kuo, Chang, Cheng, & Lai, 2013). Nonetheless, Khan and Fasih (2014) point out that in today's rapidly changing and competitive business landscape, particularly in the service industry, achieving high levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty has become increasingly challenging for companies (Abeykoon, 2024). A study conducted in Pakistan focusing on Islamic banks revealed that the dimension of service quality significantly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty, utilizing a modified SERVQUAL model (Alnaser, Ghani, Rahi, Mansour, & Abed, 2017). The research conducted by Pasha and Waleed (2016) demonstrated that in Pakistan's banking industry, factors such as perceived value, service quality, and brand significantly influence customer quality. According to Shetty et al. (2022), in the context of Indian public sector banks, the dimensions of service quality such as assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibility were identified as having a significant correlation with service quality. In a similar manner, the quality of service directly boosts customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction acting as an intermediary factor (Fida et al., 2020). Research interest in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has increased tremendously over the years. The aim of service quality is to meet customer satisfaction regarding the services provided (Zamani et al., 2020). The level of customer satisfaction is influenced by the quality of service at the restaurant (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). Numerous studies have demonstrated that the quality of service has a positive impact on customer satisfaction (Deng, Lu, Wei, & Zhang, 2010; Yang, Wu, & Wang, 2009; Zameer, Tara, Kausar, & Mohsin, 2015). Service quality is often intertwined with and mistaken for customer satisfaction (Hussain, Al Nasser, & Hussain, 2015). When a restaurant customer perceives the service quality positively, they are likely to express high satisfaction levels, which in turn fosters favorable behavioral intentions, such as repeat purchases or visits and positive word-of-mouth (Mohi, 2012). Consequently, Kuo, Wu, and Deng (2009) argue that improving service quality is crucial for gaining a competitive edge and achieving overall business success, as it ultimately leads to customer satisfaction (Makanyeza & Chikazhe, 2017). If high service quality is provided, the result will be higher customer satisfaction (Zamani et al., 2020). To remain competitive and succeed in the market, it is crucial to offer and sustain high-quality service for customers, as their dissatisfaction could drive them to seek alternatives with rival companies (Abeykoon, 2024).

2.4. Customer Satisfaction as a Mediator

With the rise in competition, where an increasing number of manufacturers are engaged in catering to customer needs and desires, companies are focusing on making customer satisfaction their top priority (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018). Businesses identify customer needs and develop strategies to satisfy them, leading to customer satisfaction (Sochenda, 2021). The growing trend of companies incorporating a pledge to customer satisfaction in their mission statements, marketing efforts, and public relations is evident (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018). Customer satisfaction is described as an assessment that gauges how pleased customers are with a company's offerings, services, and abilities (Lin et al., 2023). The level of quality of a product or service, along with how customers perceive that quality, influences their satisfaction (Tse & Wilton, 1988). This satisfaction is vital in determining customers' future purchasing intentions (Saporna & Claveria, 2019). As stated by Sabir et al. (2014), achieving customer satisfaction is crucial for the prosperity of any business, regardless of whether it offers products or services. Thus, enhancing customer satisfaction is essential in the current economic climate (Durandis, 2024). The literature often addresses customer loyalty and customer satisfaction as two related topics (Uslu, 2020). Customer satisfaction is closely linked to loyalty, and loyal customers are more likely to become promoters of a brand (Reichheld, 2003). It is proposed that customer satisfaction influences a company's future earnings by enhancing revenue and lowering costs (Bhattacharya, Morgan, & Rego, 2021). In terms of practical loyalty, consumers develop a strong commitment to repurchasing the company's products, effectively shielding themselves from the potential impact of competitors and their brands

(Durandis, 2024). When customers experience a high degree of satisfaction after assessing their purchase of products or services, it influences their loyalty towards those products or services (Fernandes & Solimun, 2018). Customer loyalty is often seen as a consequence of customer satisfaction, as individuals who have positive interactions with a company's services are likely to continue engaging with the company, perceiving it as less risky, which in turn fosters loyalty and rational decision-making (Fida et al., 2020). An examination of literature on customer satisfaction and loyalty reveals that customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer loyalty. As such, customer satisfaction is widely regarded as the antecedent of customer loyalty (Abu-Alhaija et al., 2019; Carranza, Díaz, & Martín-Consuegra, 2018). As a result, assessing customer satisfaction is vital for any company or service provider striving to obtain and uphold a competitive advantage (Ramlawati & Putra, 2018). According to Izogo and Ogba (2015), there is a positive relationship between service quality and satisfaction, which subsequently has a favorable impact on loyalty. Makanyeza and Chikazhe (2017) noted that in Zimbabwe's banking industry, customer satisfaction serves as an intermediary between service quality and customer loyalty. Bei and Chiao (2001) found that in Japan, satisfaction plays a mediating role in the relationship between perceived service quality and loyalty. Kim (2011) highlighted a notable indirect effect of service quality on customer loyalty through satisfaction among customers of casual dining restaurants in Korea. Opata, Xiao, Nusenu, Tetteh, and Asante Boadi (2021) propose that enhanced customer satisfaction with service quality results in greater brand loyalty. Previous studies have consistently shown a strong positive correlation between service quality and customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction acting as a mediating factor (Fida et al., 2020). Although numerous studies have emphasized the important mediating role of customer satisfaction in the link between service quality and customer loyalty across various industries, there is a significant research gap in examining this mediation specifically within Malaysia's food and beverage sector. Figure 1 presents the study's conceptual framework, outlining how the various dimensions of service quality relate to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

H₂: There is a significant relationship between reliability and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

H₃: There is a significant relationship between responsiveness and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

H₄: There is a significant relationship between assurance and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

H₅: There is a significant relationship between empathy and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

H₆: There is a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

H₇: Customer satisfaction significantly mediates the relationship between service quality (Tangibility, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy) and customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Malaysia.

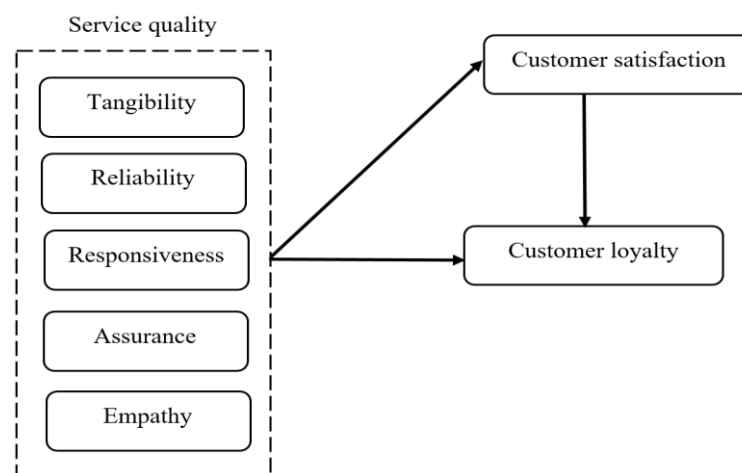


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This research adopted a quantitative approach, employing a carefully crafted survey questionnaire to assess the SERVQUAL model. The quantitative approach was utilized to explore the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. As noted by Abeykoon (2024), quantitative research offers several advantages, including the capacity to collect comprehensive data, being less time-intensive, ease of analysis, and the reliability and validity of the findings. A quantitative approach was employed to examine the data collected by the researcher. To facilitate the analysis of the current study, the researcher utilized a questionnaire. The research collected its data through a questionnaire that participants completed on their own (Gaik et al., 2024). A survey was conducted among patrons dining at Mamak restaurants in the Klang Valley area, Kuala Lumpur. The study primarily employed convenience sampling, with an equal distribution among the customers. This method was chosen because the respondents were easily accessible and in close proximity to the researcher (Fida et al., 2020). In the period from May to June 2024, data was gathered from 237 participants. After discarding incomplete responses, 205 samples were chosen for further examination.

3.2. Research Instrument

To address the questions and determine the level of responses, five Likert-type scales were used, each with corresponding numerical values and interpretations (Fida et al., 2020) ranging 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree. The questions were all designed to be closed-ended, allowing for straightforward statistical analysis of the gathered data. The constructs of empathy, assurance, responsiveness, and reliability (5 items) were obtained from Wang et al. (2023). Tangibility, which contains 6 items (Wang et al., 2023), and three items of customer satisfaction were extracted from Mohi (2012). Three items of customer loyalty were adopted from a previous study by Alnaser et al. (2017).

Table 1. Construct validity and reliability.

Constructs	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
ASC_01	0.854	0.908	0.910	0.932	0.731	2.552
ASC_02	0.862					2.519
ASC_03	0.849					2.348
ASC_04	0.864					2.550
ASC_05	0.847					2.445
CLT_01	0.867	0.838	0.839	0.903	0.756	1.956
CLT_02	0.878					2.026
CLT_03	0.863					1.924
CSN_01	0.889	0.867	0.869	0.919	0.790	2.248
CSN_02	0.874					2.141
CSN_03	0.903					2.439
EMY_01	0.926	0.918	1.120	0.932	0.733	2.693
EMY_02	0.821					2.681
EMY_03	0.886					2.728
EMY_04	0.823					2.753
EMY_05	0.820					2.426
RLY_01	0.767	0.851	0.873	0.892	0.624	1.810
RLY_02	0.805					1.826
RLY_03	0.834					1.832
RLY_04	0.762					1.687
RLY_05	0.779					1.812
RPS_01	0.794	0.859	0.860	0.899	0.640	1.862
RPS_02	0.789					1.766
RPS_03	0.818					1.969
RPS_04	0.796					1.806
RPS_05	0.801					1.858

Constructs	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	rho_A	CR	AVE	VIF
TANG_01	0.854	0.883	0.932	0.907	0.621	2.156
TANG_02	0.736					1.845
TANG_03	0.812					1.989
TANG_04	0.725					1.917
TANG_05	0.833					1.972
TANG_06	0.760					1.884

Note: TANG: Tangibility; RPS: Responsiveness; RLY: Reliability; EMY: Empathy; CSN: Customer Satisfaction; CLT: Customer Loyalty; ASC: Assurance.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Measurement Model

Figure 2 displays the measurement model, illustrating how the observed indicators are linked to their respective latent constructs. Convergent validity was the initial criterion assessed during the appraisal of the measurement model. According to Hair et al. (2021), indicators with outer loadings below 0.40 were eliminated to enhance composite reliability and AVE. Table 1 shows that every item loading exceeded the necessary minimum limit, and the average variance extracted achieved and surpassed the 0.50 threshold. This outcome indicates that the corresponding construct accounted for over half of the variance in each indicator, reinforcing the evidence of convergent validity. These findings indicate that each item successfully assessed its relevant constructs (Lim, O'Connor, Nair, Soleimani, & Rasul, 2023). The examination demonstrated strong figures for Cronbach's alpha, Dillon-Goldstein's rho, and composite reliability, all surpassing the threshold of 0.70 (Do Valle & Assaker, 2016; Hair et al., 2021). This shows that the relationship between the indicators and their constructs is strong, as illustrated in Table 1.

Discriminant validity was then assessed (Hair et al., 2021). As shown in Table 2, each construct's square root of the AVE is greater than its correlation coefficient with all other constructs. This indicates that each construct is more strongly related to its own indicators than to other constructs, validating the inclusion of each construct as a distinct entity in the measurement model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Because of the constraints of this technique in evaluating discriminant validity, Hair et al. (2021) recommend using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) of correlations for a more accurate assessment. In this approach, a threshold of 0.85 is established for HTMT values (Hair et al., 2021). According to Table 3, every HTMT value meets this criterion.

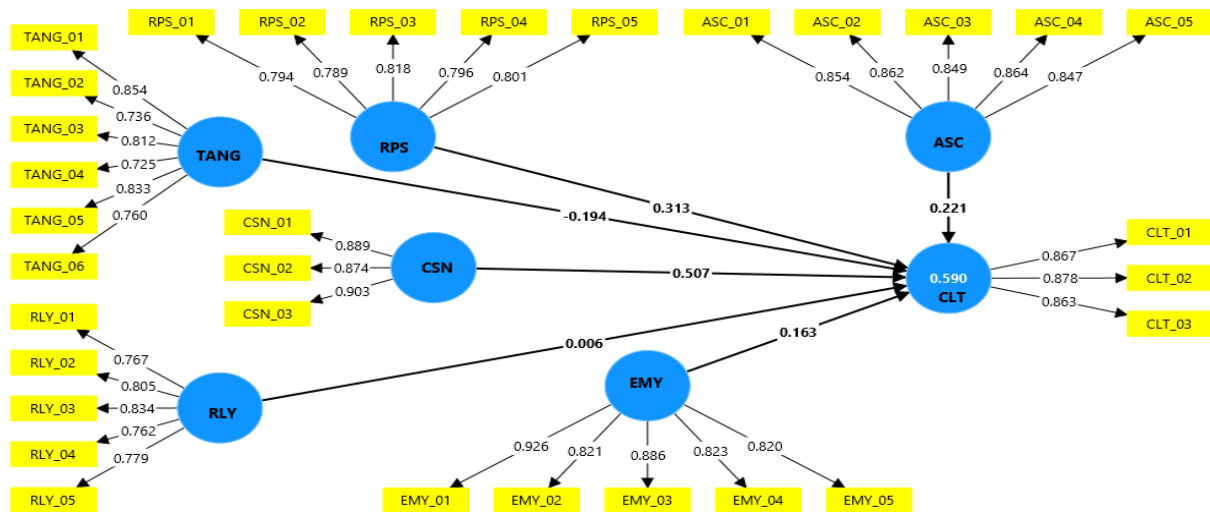


Figure 2. Measurement model.

Table 2. Discriminant validity - Fornell-Larcker criterion.

	ASC	CLT	CSN	EMY	RLY	RPS	TANG
ASC	0.855						
CLT	0.191	0.869					
CSN	0.035	0.652	0.889				
EMY	-0.673	0.056	0.068	0.856			
RLY	-0.025	0.229	0.318	-0.068	0.790		
RPS	0.206	0.620	0.515	0.059	0.335	0.800	
TANG	0.011	-0.066	0.193	0.055	0.141	0.059	0.788

Note: The bold values represent the square root of AVE.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT).

	ASC	CLT	CSN	EMY	RLY	RPS	TANG
ASC							
CLT	0.218						
CSN	0.048	0.764					
EMY	0.75	0.053	0.061				
RLY	0.066	0.261	0.36	0.078			
RPS	0.234	0.73	0.595	0.071	0.386		
TANG	0.04	0.071	0.229	0.069	0.178	0.077	

Note: TANG: Tangibility; RPS: Responsiveness; RLY: Reliability; EMY: Empathy; CSN: Customer Satisfaction; CLT: Customer Loyalty; ASC: Assurance.

4.2. Structural Model

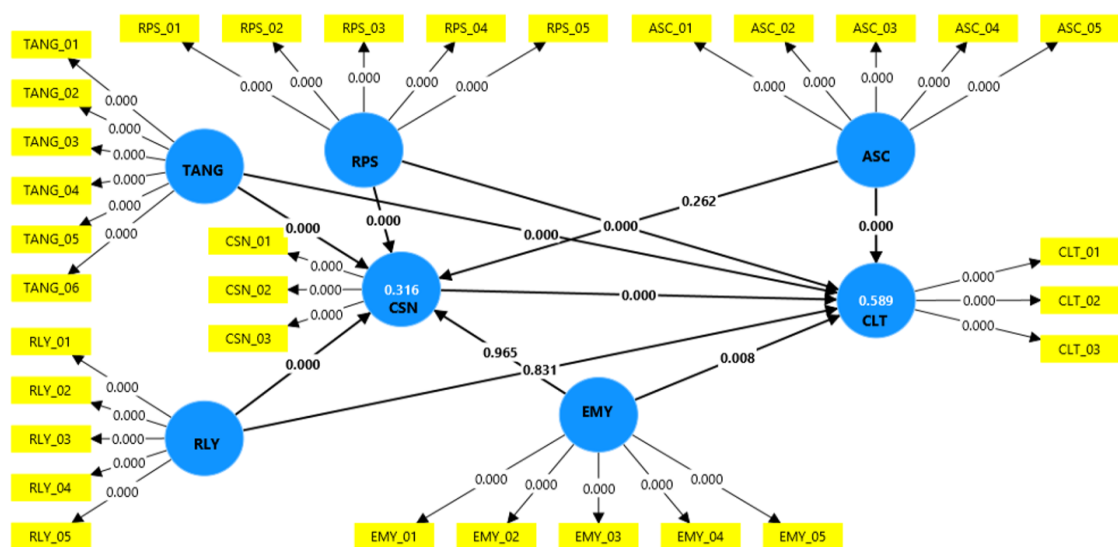
To assess the structural model (Figure 3), collinearity, beta, t-values, standard deviations, and p-values were investigated following the assessment of the measurement model according to Hair et al. (2021). To assess whether the structural model is lacking collinearity, this research utilized the variance inflation factor (VIF), which ought to remain below three (Hair et al., 2021). The VIF values for every indicator in Table 1 show that there are no issues with collinearity, enabling the research to proceed (Lim et al., 2023).

The results indicate that empathy and assurance do not significantly impact customer satisfaction ($\beta = -0.064$; $p = 0.262$) and ($\beta = -0.003$; $p = 0.965$). Nevertheless, all aspects of service quality, except for reliability ($\beta = 0.007$; $p = 0.831$), significantly affect customer loyalty. Consequently, H1, H3, H4, and H5 are validated in this study (Table 4).

Table 4. Path coefficient.

	Beta	SD	T statistics	P values
ASC -> CLT	0.221	0.049	4.499	0.000
ASC -> CSN	-0.064	0.057	1.121	0.262
CSN -> CLT	0.509	0.037	13.595	0.000
EMY -> CLT	0.161	0.060	2.663	0.008
EMY -> CSN	-0.003	0.063	0.043	0.965
RLY -> CLT	0.007	0.033	0.213	0.831
RLY -> CSN	0.137	0.034	3.991	0.000
RPS -> CLT	0.313	0.046	6.884	0.000
RPS -> CSN	0.473	0.040	11.871	0.000
TANG -> CLT	-0.195	0.033	5.936	0.000
TANG -> CSN	0.152	0.043	3.542	0.000

Note: TANG: Tangibility; RPS: Responsiveness; RLY: Reliability; EMY: Empathy; CSN: Customer Satisfaction; CLT: Customer Loyalty; ASC: Assurance.

**Figure 3.** Structural model.

4.3. Mediation Analysis

Table 5 presents the mediation effect of customer satisfaction on the relationship between different service quality dimensions and customer loyalty. The mediation results reveal that reliability, responsiveness, and tangibility have a significant indirect impact on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction, as evidenced by the positive beta coefficients and significant p-values ($p < 0.001$). This suggests that customer satisfaction is crucial in mediating the relationship between reliability, responsiveness, and tangibility. The findings indicate that customer satisfaction serves as a partial mediator in the connection between reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, and customer loyalty. Nonetheless, customer satisfaction does not mediate the association between empathy, assurance, and customer loyalty.

Table 5. Mediation effect of customer satisfaction.

	Beta	SD	T statistics	P values
EMY -> CSN -> CLT	-0.001	0.032	0.043	0.965
RLY -> CSN -> CLT	0.070	0.018	3.862	0.000
RPS -> CSN -> CLT	0.241	0.026	9.365	0.000
TANG -> CSN -> CLT	0.077	0.022	3.549	0.000
ASC -> CSN -> CLT	-0.032	0.029	1.114	0.265

5. DISCUSSION

This research aims to investigate how service quality influences customer loyalty, with customer satisfaction acting as an intermediary, in Malaysian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the food and beverage sector. The results of this study demonstrated that tangibility has a significant effect on customer loyalty. In the apparel retail sector, tangibles, which include the store environment and physical appearance, have been identified as a crucial quality dimension for achieving customer satisfaction (Saricam, 2022). Previous studies indicated that an increase in tangibility factors leads to a rise in customer loyalty (Abeykoon, 2024). Therefore, Mamak restaurants can enhance loyalty by ensuring staff are well-groomed, restrooms are clean, and the dining area is appealing. Conversely, a study by Saricam (2022) and Ahmad et al. (2025) did not find a significant relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty. Additionally, the findings of this research indicated that responsiveness significantly affects customer loyalty, as supported by Abeykoon (2024), which is not in line with Saricam (2022). Ahmad et al. (2025) reported that responsiveness does not have a significant relationship with client loyalty in Klang Valley domestic commercial banks.

Upon analyzing the results, it was determined that reliability does not significantly influence customer loyalty, which is in line with Alafeshat and Alola (2018), who reported the positive relationships between the dimensions of service quality and customer satisfaction, as well as customer loyalty (except for the reliability dimension). In contrast, studies, such as those by Koay, Cheah, and Chang (2022); Ahmad et al. (2025), and Abeykoon (2024) have reported a positive impact of reliability on customer loyalty. However, other research, including Saricam (2022) and Al Sukri, Miran, Cakranegara, and Prihastuti (2022), found no link between reliability and customer loyalty. The study by Alam (2019) aimed to explore how the service quality dimensions of RSQS relate to customer loyalty of Generation Y within the context of superstore retailing in Bangladesh. The findings revealed that reliability significantly impacts loyalty. Consequently, Mamak restaurants should work on improving their reliability to enhance customer loyalty. However, data analysis revealed that assurance and empathy significantly impact customer loyalty. Some research, such as that by Abeykoon (2024) and Ahmad et al. (2025), supports the idea that assurance greatly affects customer loyalty, whereas other studies, like (Saricam, 2022) argue there is no effect. Similarly, while some studies, including (Abeykoon, 2024) suggest empathy plays a crucial role in customer loyalty, others, like Ahmad et al. (2025), claim it has no impact. The result of this study indicated that tangibility has a significant effect on customer satisfaction, which is supported by Abeykoon (2024). Other research has also found that tangibility directly and positively affects customer satisfaction in the restaurant and fast-food sectors (Nguyen, Nisar, Knox, & Prabhakar, 2018; Sajanga,

Massie, & Saerang, 2022). Research by Heung, Wong, and Qu (2000) and Khan, Hussain, and Yaqoob (2013) demonstrated that 'tangibles' positively influence customer satisfaction in both Hong Kong's restaurant sector and Pakistan's fast food industry. Similarly, Qin and Prybutok (2009) contended that the physical environment of a fast food restaurant directly influences the customer experience and the quality of service delivered. Conversely, in the context of service quality and customer satisfaction within the banking sector, Pham and Nguyen (2012) claimed that tangible elements do not correlate with customer satisfaction. Ezeh, Okeke, and Nkamnebe (2022) discovered a negative yet significant relationship between tangibility and guest satisfaction in hotels. The differing results could be attributed to the geographical locations where the studies were conducted. (Nguyen et al., 2018) even suggest that outcomes can vary between developed and developing countries. Data from Mamak restaurants indicate that customers generally agree that most tangible factors meet their standards. Analysis revealed that reliability significantly enhances customer satisfaction. Various studies across industries have demonstrated that reliability greatly affects customer satisfaction (Abeykoon, 2024; Alafeshat & Alola, 2018; Sajanga et al., 2022). Research by Ezeh et al. (2022) suggests that reliability has a negative but significant influence on hotel users' satisfaction. These differing outcomes may be attributed to variations in geographical regions, business types or sectors, and the lifestyles of the consumers or respondents. Moreover, responsiveness exerts a positive and notable impact on customer satisfaction. Additional studies have also highlighted that responsiveness significantly affects and positively correlates with customer satisfaction (Alafeshat & Alola, 2018; Ghimire, Shahu, & Thapa, 2021). Nonetheless, research conducted by Ezeh et al. (2022) suggests that responsiveness has a negligible effect on satisfaction with hotel services.

The research results revealed that there is no notable connection between assurance and customer satisfaction. This result aligns with most of the existing research. For example, Suki (2014) found that both male and female tourists generally assign less significance to the assurance component of hotel service quality. Likewise, the findings from Juhari, Bhatti, and Piaralal (2016) showed that assurance was not significantly associated with customer satisfaction and loyalty. However, earlier research has demonstrated a significant direct impact of assurance on customer satisfaction (Ezeh et al., 2022; Sajanga et al., 2022). Ezeh et al. (2022) found that assurance was the most influential factor affecting customer satisfaction. In the context of Mamak restaurants, the staff are not adequately trained to fully address customer inquiries, particularly those from foreign patrons. It is essential to provide training to foster polite interactions between customers and staff. When customers are consistently greeted in a courteous setting where they feel secure, their satisfaction tends to rise. Therefore, Mamak restaurants should implement strategies to enhance their assurance factor. In a similar vein, this study's findings indicate that empathy does not significantly affect customer satisfaction, aligning with Juhari et al. (2016), who also noted that empathy lacks significance in influencing customer satisfaction within the Malaysian Islamic insurance sector. Conversely, earlier studies acknowledge that empathy positively impacts customer satisfaction (Ezeh et al., 2022; Sajanga et al., 2022; Saricam, 2022). Ezeh et al. (2022) suggest that customer satisfaction in the hotel industry is achieved when operators comprehend the unique requirements of their guests and demonstrate genuine interest during service delivery. As a result, Mamak restaurant managers should implement a comprehensive customer relationship management strategy to help Mamak employees better understand and express customer needs. When Mamak staff are well-informed about customer sentiments, it can lead to valuable management initiatives that enhance restaurant productivity. Mamak, a restaurant that interacts with consumers daily, must prioritize the empathy factor.

The results of this study demonstrate that customer satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on customer loyalty, aligning with the findings of Abadi et al. (2020) and Al Sukri et al. (2022). The results of this study are similar to those of Antanegoro, Sanusi, and Surya (2017); Laemonta and Padmalia (2017), and Sinurat, Lumanauw, and Roring (2017), that service quality will affect customer satisfaction. According to Ghimire, Shahu, and Thapa (2021), there exists a positive correlation between the dimensions of service quality and customer loyalty within Nepal's commercial banking industry. Service quality serves as a crucial tool for achieving excellence in companies, particularly those in the service sector. It acts as a catalyst for a company's success across various areas. Both

manufacturing and service companies are obligated to maintain high service quality. Continuously delivering quality services and ensuring customer satisfaction is essential, even when the number of complaints is relatively low.

According to Abadi et al. (2020), the analysis of the customer value path reveals a positive and significant impact on customer loyalty, mediated by customer satisfaction. Similarly, the analysis of the experiential marketing path also shows a positive and significant influence on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. Therefore, the study suggests that customer satisfaction partially mediates the connection between customer value, experiential marketing, and customer loyalty. Budaharini, Kusuma, Widayani, Sujana, and Villaceran (2022) concluded that service quality has a positive and significant effect on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. Similarly, Ghimire, Shahu, and Thapa (2021) and Alafeshat and Alola (2018) reported that customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between service quality. A study by Juhari et al. (2016) indicates that customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between three dimensions of service quality: tangible, responsiveness, and reliability. According to Al Sukri et al. (2022), service quality does not directly affect customer loyalty. However, their study found that service quality has a significant impact on customer loyalty when mediated by customer satisfaction, specifically for Honda motorcycles in Kampar Regency.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Service quality is of paramount importance in the food and beverage sector. Consequently, managers need to focus on all elements of service quality that have been proven to improve the offerings of Mamak restaurants. This study's findings offer managers and professionals valuable insights into how customers view various service quality dimensions and their effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty. It suggests that managers should prioritize enhancing tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy to boost customer loyalty and increase organizational profits. For instance, management should focus on the tangible aspect, which involves improving the restaurant's design and equipment to create a pleasant atmosphere for customers. Additionally, management is encouraged to regularly conduct training programs for employees to enhance their skills in customer interaction and problem-solving to better meet customer needs. However, service providers should concentrate on the five dimensions of service quality—tangibility, empathy, responsiveness, reliability, and assurance—to enhance customer satisfaction. Improving customer satisfaction can result in increased customer loyalty, which is a crucial business outcome. By recognizing the positive link between product quality and customer loyalty, where customer satisfaction acts as a partial mediator, businesses can gain valuable insights into boosting customer loyalty.

7. LIMITATIONS

The research was limited to examining customer satisfaction as a mediating factor, without delving into potential moderators or other variables that might impact the connection between service quality and customer loyalty. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling rather than employing a random sampling method. The study utilized a cross-sectional design instead of a longitudinal one. The applicability of the findings may be restricted to the food and beverage industry, suggesting that future research could extend to other sectors.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Limkokwing University, Malaysia has granted approval for this study on 26 September 2023 (Ref No. 1100152023).

Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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