Investigating the Factors Determining Customer Preferences Towards Malay Cuisine Restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: A Conceptual Study

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Abstract: In today's modernized world, the restaurant industry has become highly competitive, offering consumers a wide range of eating options to suit their preferences and lifestyles. Several factors, including technological advancements, changing consumer tastes and demands, and a growing emphasis on dining experiences, drive this increased competitiveness. This conceptual study identifies the factors determining customer preferences toward Malay cuisine restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The study draws on literature related to the hospitality industry, specifically focusing on the factors influencing customer behavior and decision-making in restaurant dining. The study proposes a conceptual framework that includes food quality, ambiance, and service quality, as the key factors influencing customer preferences toward Malay cuisine restaurants. This framework will guide future research in this area and provide valuable insights for restaurant owners and managers in the Malay cuisine restaurant industry in Kuala Lumpur to develop effective strategies to attract and retain customers. The data collected from the survey questionnaire will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage will be used to describe the participants' demographic characteristics and responses to the survey questions. Inferential statistics such as correlation and multiple regression analysis will be used to identify the relationship between the factors and customer choice of Malay cuisine restaurants. Based on the literature review, food quality, price, ambiance, and service quality are expected to be the most important factors influencing customer choice towards Malay cuisine restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. However, the results of this study will provide empirical evidence to support or refute this hypothesis. Overall, this study contributes to understanding customer behaviour and decision-making in restaurant dining, particularly in the Malaysian context, and provides a foundation for further research in this area

Keywords: Food Quality, Restaurant Ambience, Service Quality, Customer Retention, Malay Cuisine

Introduction

Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, is a melting pot of cultures and cuisines. Malay cuisine is one of the most popular cuisines in Kuala Lumpur, offering a range of flavourful dishes, aromatic and rich in spices. This study will investigate the factors determining customer preferences toward Malay cuisine restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. Restaurants have become an important part of the cultural life of a city and offer a comfortable place where customers can enjoy eating, communicating, and doing various other activities. Due to pressure from several factors, including a wide variety of competitors, the restaurant business has become one of the most fiercely competitive industries. (Can, 2021). In today's modernized world, an increase in restaurant company competitiveness suggests that consumers now have more eating options than ever before, ranging from fast food to fine dining establishments, in today's competitive restaurant industry (Chua *et al.*, 2020). At the same time, the trend of eating out is seen as increasing (Hanum *et al.*, 2023).

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The effect of increased competition in the restaurant industry forces customers to seek knowledge in selecting restaurants based on several aspects, especially regarding healthy eating with sufficient nutrition needed by the body (Mathur and Gupta, 2019). Malay cuisine is an integral part of Malaysia's cultural heritage and a popular choice among locals and tourists. Malay cuisine is known for its bold flavors, aromatic spices, and diverse dishes reflecting its multi-ethnic heritage. From Nasi Lemak, Satay, and Rendang, to Mee Goreng, Roti Canai, and Laksa, Malay cuisine offers various dishes that cater to different tastes and preferences. Malay cuisine has also been influenced by Chinese, Indian, and Indonesian cuisines, creating a unique blend of truly Malaysian flavors. As a result, the cuisine here is an interesting fusion of spices, tastes, and cooking methods (Omar, 2018). Malay cuisine is an important part of Malaysia's identity and plays a significant role in the country's tourism and culinary scene. The increase in restaurant company competitiveness has undoubtedly expanded the eating options available to consumers (Sarkodie *et al.*,2022). However, various factors determine customers' choices of restaurants in the community. The related factors are the type of restaurant, the price offered, and the food quality (Sarkodie *et al.*, 2022). Apart from that, the emergence of food trends is also a determining factor for customers' choice of restaurants (Chua *et al.*, 2020).

Problem Statement

Malaysians prefer to eat at home; however, due to today's busy and exhausting lifestyle, eating out more often is becoming the norm. As a result, the "eating out" trend, which can be classified based on a few factors, has emerged as a new trend in Malaysian culinary culture (Omar, 2018). As we all know, everyone has different criteria or feelings about different things, such as criteria for making choices, particularly restaurant selection (Mathur & Gupta, 2019). Several issues related to customer preferences on Malay cuisine among restaurants need to be addressed by restaurant owners and managers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Due to the variety of restaurants available today, most customers find it difficult to choose and decide where to eat (Okumus, 2021). The customer's choice of this restaurant is influenced by several factors that are felt to influence the choice of a customer, including service quality, food quality, price, and ambiance (Chiciudean *et al.*, 2019; Mostafa & Hussein, 2020). However, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) on the belief section states that a person believes that some actions or behaviors will lead to consequences (Nickerson, 2022). This can be linked to the influence of others on our actions, which refers to our decision-making in selecting restaurants based on related factors. Customers are more likely to remain loyal to a business if they are pleased with the service or goods they have received in the past (Aldaihani & Ali, 2018). Addressing these issues can help Malay cuisine restaurants in Kuala Lumpur attract and retain customers, thus helping increase revenue and profitability and enhance the restaurant's reputation.

Purpose of Research and Research Question

The conceptual paper is intended to investigate the factors determining customer preferences towards Malay cuisine restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. As such, the research objectives addressed in this study will focus on the important elements of service quality as an essential role in determining the customer's preferences for Malay cuisine restaurants. This study will also explore the role of food quality factors in influencing customers' preferences for Malay cuisine towards selected restaurants. Furthermore, to understand the actual scenario of this issue, this study also intends to determine the ambiance factor, which is one factor that attracts and drives customers toward restaurants. Since most Malay restaurants offer the same or homogeneous menu of Malay Cuisine, understanding these three elements will give extra advantage towards restaurant competition, hence benefiting in terms of higher revenue and profit.

Literature Review

Service Quality That Determines Customer Preferences Toward Restaurant

The analysis of the available literature showed that Bitner (1990) was the first to investigate the factors influencing service quality from a restaurant perspective. In his study, the author discovered that customer satisfaction with service encounters and the perceived quality that ultimately shapes behavioral intentions are influenced by the physical surroundings (environment) and customer reactions (Lai *et al.*, 2018) timely shapes behavioral. In some early research, service quality was conceptualized as the general perception of consumers about the service's strength or weakness or the degree to which the service meets the demands or expectations of the customers. However, as opposed to "what the provider puts in," the definition of service quality is "what the consumer receives out and is ready to pay for." Service quality may thus be defined as the difference between what is provided and what is anticipated (Ali *et al.*, 2021). As we know, in any job sector, especially in the hospitality industry, service quality is a crucial element that leads to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction makes it important for service providers to understand customer expectations and perceptions and factors that affect their evaluation and satisfaction with the services provided to them (Padlee *et al.*, 2019).

Service quality may be gauged in terms of procedures and procedures in the hospitality field. The tourist sector has created many metrics to assess service quality, including HOLSERV, DINESERV, CASERV, and LODGSERV (Lai *et al.*, 2018). Thus, due to the unique characteristics of services provided by the hospitality sector (such as their incapability to be stored, their inseparability, and their impalpability), a particular model (Services Quality) called SERVQUAL was developed for assessing service quality. The most widely used method for gauging service quality is the SERVQUAL scale (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019). Some academicians believe the SERVQUAL approach is inappropriate for this study paradigm. Since then, several studies on customer satisfaction in restaurants have been conducted using service quality models like SERVQUAL and DINESERV, and some researchers have shown that although these models may still be employed, they are unable to detect critical features (Liu & Tse, 2018). As a result, researchers began to create more complete models that incorporate service quality as a mediator between factors and consumer loyalty and satisfaction (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019)

Food Quality as the Indicator in Customer Preferences

Customers are likely to choose a restaurant that offers high-quality Malay cuisine dishes. The taste, freshness, and food presentation are critical factors influencing customer preferences. This factor can determine the level of customer satisfaction and, ultimately, the success of a restaurant (Chiciudean *et al.*, 2019). When selecting a hotel, patrons of restaurants emphasize services. This refers to the food quality and the welcoming and competent staff (Padlee *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, food and beverage services can affect customers mentally and physically by providing them with joy and satisfaction during consumption, while the taste and variety of food affect the joy and satisfaction of customers (Chua *et al.*, 2020). From there, it shows a positive relationship between food quality and emotions when people eat, and this shows that the food quality factor is one of the determining factors for customers' preferences in selecting a restaurant.

Customers often compare and assess food quality to their expectations with the actual consumption experiences. Hence, it is important to understand customers' perception and evaluation of food quality since their purchase decisions are based on these beliefs related to the Theory of Reasoned Action (Abdullah *et al.*, 2018). Ibrahim *et al.* (2018) hence stress that the word "quality" itself can imply different perceptions depending on how people understand it, and it also depends on different situations. Apart from that, to ensure that the food is of high quality, the level of hygiene is also a critical factor in the provision of quality services, especially in restaurants (Padlee *et al.*, 2019).

Aside from that, food presentation elements must be linked to produce a food of that caliber. Food presentation is the visual aspect of a dish presented to the customer (Zainol *et al.*, 2018). Food presentation is a critical aspect of the quality of a restaurant business, as it can significantly impact the customer's dining experience and influence their decision to return to the restaurant. The presentation of a dish makes the first impression on a customer. A well-presented dish can evoke a sense of excitement and anticipation in the customer, making them eager to taste the food (Zainol *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, the quality and freshness of the ingredients are also important. It is important to serve meals with the correct fresh ingredients and keep them that way while they are consumed and for satisfaction. Using fresh ingredients will be good nutrition for customers (Rozekhi *et al.*, 2018). The conclusion that can be drawn here is that hygiene elements, presentation, and ingredients must all be present to produce high-quality food.

The Influences of Ambience towards Customer Preferences of a Restaurant

Customers increasingly seek services and environments that meet their demands when choosing restaurants since they dine out more often. In the restaurant industry, customer expectations extend beyond the food that is provided. In addition to food and drink, several environmental factors may directly affect how people behave in restaurants (Kement *et al.*, 2021). The ambiance of a restaurant plays a significant role in determining a customer's dining experience and therefore plays a crucial role in influencing their decision to choose a particular restaurant. The atmospherics or ambiance, or the physical and service surroundings, also determine how satisfied customers are with their eating experiences (Liu & Tse, 2018). In his conceptual study, the atmosphere strongly affected consumers' emotions, attitudes, and behavior. The ambiance was the first element that customers encountered when entering a restaurant. At the same time, a positive atmosphere will create a positive feeling or impression in customers (Farouk *et al.*, 2018).

This ambiance can be categorized into various aspects, like smell, temperature, music, sound, and decoration. According to Fathiah *et al.* (2022), when combined with other elements in a restaurant, attractive smells, enjoyable music, a suitable temperature, a low level of noise, and appropriate lighting may cause patrons to have more positive impressions of the restaurant. The ambient dimensions also include spatial layout, which includes instructions, signs, symbols like decor and signage, and circumstances like the arrangement of furniture and equipment, lighting and temperature, music, and aroma. Additionally, intangible background factors may significantly influence customers' perceptions of and reactions to a service provider's surroundings (Fathiah *et al.*, 2022). This shows that atmosphere is important for customers when choosing a restaurant. The physical environment affects the individual's emotional state, forcing the individual to approach the environment or form an avoidance behavior (Fathiah *et al.*, 2022). This clearly shows that there is a positive relationship between the mood and emotions of a customer, leading to a person's preferences for restaurant

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, several research techniques may be utilized to gather research data, including qualitative and quantitative approaches; thus, accomplishing the study's objectives will be possible due to the research data (Apuke *et al.*, 2017). Abdullah *et al.* (2021) used the text analysis for 45 newspaper articles and journal articles highlighting the importance and success of Malay cuisine as the first analysis sources. Okumus (2021), in his study, developed a semi-structured interview question, thus using purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods to identify respondent selection.

From other viewpoints, some researchers use a quantitative approach to conduct their study (Hanum *et al.*, 2023: Fathiah *et al.*, 2022: Chua *et al.*, 2020: Mathur & Gupta, 2019). A quantitative technique will be used for the research's purposes, including creating self-administered questionnaires and distributing them to pertinent respondents physically or online. The methodology of conducting an online survey was used to the analysis of all the data acquired via email to establish the connection that exists between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

Population and Sampling

Customer preference toward Malay cuisine restaurants was the screening articles' main objective. Apart from that, determinants related to food quality, the ambiance of a restaurant, and service quality are also the researcher's primary concerns. In their study, Mathur & Gupta (2019) use purposive sampling, whereby three fast-casual dining restaurants located in the densely populated urban city of Lucknow in North India were selected. The restaurant was selected based on the ranking of popularity among locals and the scale size of the restaurant. Chua *et al.* (2020), using a traditional pencil and paper method, conducted a semi-structured survey at six shopping complexes in Kuala Lumpur and Klang Valley to gather responses on eating-out habits and preferred restaurants among the public. Thus, this convenient sampling method was supported by three screening questions to ensure the respondents were qualified and fit for their study purposes. In her study, Fathiah *et al.* (2022) chose their respondents by selecting ten famous restaurants in Kuala Lumpur nominated by Tripadvisor.com in 2020. The customers of those restaurants were then given a set of questionnaires to assess the atmospheric elements of the restaurant that related to customer satisfaction. Hanum *et al.* (2023) conducted their study among students at UiTM Dungun to investigate the factors that make students choose to eat outside of campus and to study the main factors that influence students in the selection of the restaurant. The 5-Likert scale questionnaire was distributed to 205 students in UiTM Dungun to gather data on the study's objectives.

Abdullah *et al.* (2021) used the text analysis of a qualitative approach focusing on the results from the literature analysis among hospitality, culinary and industry practitioners, which were interviewed by journalists and published were used as their first source of analysis. Okumus (2021), on the other hand, uses purposive sampling to gather diverse demographics among the respondents. Hence, snowball sampling methods were also used in that respondents were asked to recommend their friend or colleague after conducting a 30–45-minute interview with the respondents. By practicing this method, the researchers had a chance to get a higher response rate from selected respondents.

Data Collection Procedure

Journal articles that focus on food quality, service quality, and ambiance are selected prior to the main objective of this study (Abdullah *et al.*, 2018; Liu & Tse, 2018; Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Chua *et al.*, 2020; Ali *et al.*, 2021; Sarkodie *et al.*, 2022). These articles focus on investigating and discussing the attributes of service quality, food quality acceptance, and ambiance in a restaurant setting. Other than that, journals and articles also were selected based on the location or setting of the study. Since this study focuses on Malay cuisine, screening on the list of journals was concerned with those focused topics (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2017; Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018; Omar, 2018; Zainol *et al.*, 2018; Li, 2020; Abdullah *et al.*, 2021; Hanum *et al.*, 2023).

Expected Data Analysis and Results

Previous studies had determined that among three variables, food quality was the primary concern of customers, followed by service quality and ambiance (Abdullah *et al*., 2018; Ahmad *et al*., 2019; Ali *et al*., 2021; Can, 2021; Chua. *et al*., 2020; Fathiah *et al*.,2022; Liu & Tse, 2018; Raji *et al*., 2017; Sarkodie *et al*., 2022). The findings of the study conclude that when customers consider choosing a restaurant, they always rely on the quality of the food offered by the restaurants and the value of money for it. Since most of the restaurants offering Malay cuisine menus offer homogenous products, the critical element to be concerned with is the quality of the food and the services offered. The quality of the food may be interpreted in the sense of the degree of freshness of the raw material, taste, menu presentation, and rareness of the menu. Restaurants that can take advantage of these elements may attract and sustain more customers than competitors (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018; Omar, 2018). A menu such as Nasi Lemak, Satay, Rendang, Mee Goreng, Roti Canai, and Laksa is considered homogenous and can be found anywhere from stalls to fine dining restaurants. The key elements differentiating the item offered between hawker stalls and fine dining restaurants may derive from the quality of raw material used, the plating and presentation of the menu, and the price. Therefore, food service providers should take these considerations seriously to benefit from their competition (Abdullah *et al*., 2021; Hanum *et al*., 2023; Li, 2020).

In conclusion, this conceptual study is being carried out to understand the phenomena of interest on the factors determining customer preferences towards Malay cuisine restaurants, especially in Kuala Lumpur. Lumpur has been selected as the study setting due to the number of restaurants and the stiff competition and purchasing power of the residents. The study underlines the importance and role of food quality, service quality, and ambiance in determining customer preferences toward Malay cuisine restaurants. Nevertheless, this future study can compare the factors influencing customer selection of Malay cuisine restaurants with other ethnic restaurants, such as Chinese, Indian, or Italian restaurants. Other opportunities for this study also, may identify differences in customer selection based on demographic factors, such as age, gender, income, or education level. This study also may identify customers' preferences and expectations for Malay cuisine restaurants, such as specific dishes, cooking styles, or cultural authenticity.

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