Service quality and customer satisfaction using SERVQUAL Model: restaurant industry in Malaysia

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Abstract

The quality of service is crucial for a restaurant's success. When customers are pleased with the services provided, they are more likely to return. Service quality appears to be a significant factor influencing customers' decisions to eat at a restaurant. Therefore, this paper primarily aims to determine which aspect of service quality is most important to customers. In this research, the authors employed a descriptive correlational research design, involving 300 students from private universities in Malaysia as participants. Convenience sampling was utilized to select the respondents. The findings reveal that customers generally have a positive perception of the service quality offered by fast food chains in Malaysia. Additionally, the results suggest that customer trust partially mediates the relationship between the dimensions of tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. Service quality significantly contributes to customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry by enhancing the dining experience, building customer loyalty, and differentiating the brand in a competitive market. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for restaurant managers, particularly those operating fast food chains in Malaysia. Understanding that customers positively perceive service quality and that this perception is linked to customer satisfaction and trust highlights the need for continuous investment in service improvement.

1. Introduction

The foodservice industry is described as the fastest-growing industry in the global market [1]. The foodservice sector is an essential industry globally, contributing significantly to economic growth and job creation [2]. The restaurant sector of the global economy is increasing swiftly, Wan Zainuddin et al. [3]. Sabir et al. [4] report that the restaurant business ranks among the most financially successful industries worldwide. Research and Markets estimates that the size of the global foodservice market was USD 3.4 trillion in 2018 and is projected to grow to USD 4.2 trillion by 2024, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 3.6% from 2019 to 2024 [5]. The restaurant sector in Malaysia is also a major contributor to the country's economic development [6]. Although the restaurant industry has made significant advancements, it continues to confront the major challenge of a fiercely competitive market in order to uphold and sustain its services [7].

The restaurant industry in Malaysia has recently undergone significant growth and changes [5]. As a major component of Malaysia's economy, the restaurant industry holds considerable importance [2]. In 2018, the restaurant industry in Malaysia generated revenue of USD 12.6 billion, with a compound annual growth rate of 5.5% from 2014 to 2018. This makes it the largest subsector in the country's foodservice industry, Abdullah et al. [5]. Jensen et al. [8] revealed restaurant industry in Malaysia is among the major industries contributing to the nation's economic growth. The Malaysian restaurant industry represents a dynamic and significant sector within the national economy, experiencing considerable growth and transformation in recent years [9]. This sector not only contributes substantially to Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product but also provides extensive employment opportunities, underscoring its vital role in the country's economic landscape. Given the economic weight of this industry, understanding the factors that drive its success, particularly customer satisfaction and service quality, is of paramount importance, with potential ramifications for the broader Malaysian economy [9].

The Malaysian food and beverage industry is divided into three main categories: food services, beverage services, and event catering. Within the food services category, restaurants hold the largest market share, followed by cafes and bars [10]. The restaurant industry is a significant sector that has contributed substantially to Malaysia's economic development [11]. The multicultural background of Malaysia, with its distinctive fusion of foods, has also contributed to the growth of the restaurant industry. As the restaurant sector expands, competition among restaurants is expected to increase. This heightened competition will lead to increased economic pressures within the industry [12]. Furthermore, when there are more restaurants than customers, there is a high supply of restaurants, which creates a highly competitive atmosphere [10]. In today's fiercely competitive economic environment, restaurants face a high risk of failure [10]. Consequently, to navigate this intense competition, they must focus on their customers by implementing marketing strategies that address consumer needs, thereby enhancing satisfaction [11].

The restaurant industry is one of the industries that has been developing rapidly in response to the needs and wants of customers [13]. The rapid growth of restaurants has given consumers the opportunity to make the best choices that satisfy them [9]. The main task for restaurant managers now is to work on enhancing their services to achieve greater customer satisfaction [12]. They need to keep up to date with the latest trends, as food is a vital component for restaurants to provide their customers with the best experience [14]. However, trends can be fickle and tend to change over time. The one common factor faced by the restaurant industry worldwide is providing good quality services that attract customers and help restaurateurs stand out among competitors [13]. High-quality food and courteous, efficient service are crucial [12]. Therefore, a restaurant's success or failure hinges on the standards it sets for both food and service [13].

In Malaysia, the dining industry is characterized by intense competition, with both local and global establishments striving to enhance their presence in the market [2]. In today's market, businesses face challenges in staying afloat within the competitive restaurant sector [7]. According to Gilbert et al. [15], a significant portion of business strategies is focused on drawing in more customers by offering specialized services and high-quality food, which in turn fosters customer loyalty and enhances satisfaction by elevating service quality. In the foodservice sector, service quality is a frequently discussed topic, and many restaurant owners concur that it serves as a competitive edge, allowing them to attract customers and stand out against rivals [2]. By enhancing service quality, a restaurant can boost customer satisfaction, increase profits, draw in more patrons, and foster customer loyalty [16]. Excelling in service quality is a fundamental strategy for survival

and sustained growth in a challenging environment [10]. Achieving business success depends on providing exceptional services and ensuring customer satisfaction. Consequently, it is vital to understand the preferences of restaurant customers and to recognize the importance of service attributes as key factors in gaining a competitive advantage in the restaurant sector [17]. Achieving customer satisfaction offers a competitive edge to businesses and encourages positive behavioral intentions to revisit [18]. Conversely, dissatisfied customers can tarnish a restaurant's reputation and diminish customer loyalty [19]. While a satisfying dining experience can boost a consumer's intention to return, there is a notable lack of empirical research on how customer satisfaction relates to service quality in restaurants [18].

Over the last twenty years, research on service quality has expanded; however, the majority of studies have concentrated on developed nations, with relatively little focus on developing countries [20]. This poses a challenge because consumer behavior in service contexts can differ across cultural settings Bougoure and Neu [20]. Bin [10] suggests that in the pursuit of maximizing short-term profits, restaurants frequently neglect customer satisfaction when implementing revenue management strategies. As a result, studies on customer satisfaction continue to be prevalent and significant in general business literature. The study of consumer behavior has evolved into a vital measure of the overall customer experience with products and services across various business research initiatives [21]. In this context, the service will be deemed excellent if it surpasses expectations; it will be considered satisfactory or acceptable if it merely meets expectations; and it will be labeled as poor, inadequate, or lacking if it falls short. Therefore, service quality is associated with the notion of perceptions [22]. From this viewpoint, Parasuraman et al. [23] created a scale to assess service quality, widely recognized as SERVQUAL. This scale measures service quality by determining the gap between expectations and perceptions, assessing both to represent five dimensions of service quality: 'tangibles,' 'reliability,' 'responsiveness,' 'assurance,' and 'empathy.' [22]. Therefore, this study aims to provide a comprehensive investigation into the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction within the Malaysian restaurant industry. By synthesizing existing research and relevant literature, this analysis seeks to define the key dimensions of service quality in the Malaysian context, understand how customer satisfaction is conceptualized and measured in this industry.

When examining how customer trust acts as a mediator between service quality and customer satisfaction, there are significant gaps, especially in understanding the contextual elements that affect this relationship in various food and beverage settings. Although the existing research consistently shows that trust plays a crucial mediating role between service quality and customer satisfaction, empirical results often show discrepancies, revealing variations influenced by demographic, cultural, and contextual factors [24]. Furthermore, there is insufficient exploration of how varying levels of service quality impact customer perceptions of trust across different restaurant types, such as fast food, casual dining, and fine dining, resulting in an incomplete understanding of this pivotal relationship [25], especially in Malaysia. Given the critical role that both service quality and customer satisfaction play in driving customer loyalty and retention, addressing these gaps is essential to develop a more comprehensive understanding of trust as a mediator, thereby guiding strategic improvements in service delivery across the restaurant industry.

2. Literature Review

Ensuring a high standard of service is crucial for businesses in the service sector. Much like the restaurant industry, it faces intense competition among various restaurant brands and must meet the growing expectations of customers Abd Rashid et al. [6]. Ali and Abdullah [26] noted that the restaurant sector in Malaysia has undergone a significant transformation with the emergence of diverse restaurant types, such as fine dining, fast food, casual, themed, and ethnic eateries, over the last decade. The coexistence of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, has played a role in the evolution of the country's restaurant industry [1, 6]. Known for its multiculturalism and rich culinary heritage, Malaysia is often referred to as a food paradise for both local and international visitors [13]. Therefore, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the restaurant industry is crucial, as Yap and Kew [27] pointed out that a similar situation is evident in Malaysia, demonstrated by the rapid growth of this sector and the increasing number of restaurant brands across the nation. This competitive market is influenced by changes in customer preferences, which are inevitable [7]. Patrons have the right and option to seek out new experiences with the services offered at the restaurant. In this regard, a customer anticipates receiving high-quality service that leaves them feeling satisfied Razak et al. [7]. Jensen et al. [8] suggested that service quality can solve problems caused by stiff competition in the restaurant industry. In pursuit of enhanced service, both researchers and industry experts have employed the principles of service quality and customer satisfaction [28]. As a result, these concepts are pivotal subjects in marketing theories and investigations [29].

2.1. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is one of the most frequently used and oldest terms in marketing literature [30]. Providing satisfying experiences to customers is critical to sustain a restaurant's business [6]. Ensuring customer satisfaction is a primary goal for all businesses. This subject has also received significant attention in academic research. [28]. According to Naik et al. [22], high levels of customer satisfaction positively impact the profitability of almost every company. Companies understand that retaining existing customers is more cost-effective than acquiring new ones to replace those who leave [22]. Even a slight increase in customer retention rates can boost profits by 25 percent or more [31]. According to the expectation-disconfirmation theory [32], consumers should assess their actual experiences with products and services against their expectations. Customers are more likely to feel satisfied if their experiences meet or exceed their expectations based on the overall performance of the firm [11]. When customers experience unsatisfactory service, they often share their negative experiences with around fifteen to twenty other people. On average, American companies tend to lose about 15 to 20 percent of their customer base annually [22]. According to Gitomer [33], acquiring a new customer is ten times more

expensive than retaining an existing satisfied one. Moreover, if the service quality is exceptionally poor, 91% of retail customers are unlikely to revisit the store [33]. Hence, to satisfy customers, firms need to meet their expectations. If managers can identify determinants of customer satisfaction, they may be able to improve the factors to maximize customer' satisfaction [11].

Satisfaction is a positive assessment by the customer regarding the use or consumption of a product or service [30]. It evaluates the accuracy of consumer expectations and perceptions of the product or service and assesses whether the outcome aligns with what customers anticipated [34]. Satisfaction involves a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service as a whole, has provided (or is providing) a gratifying level of consumption fulfillment, which includes instances of both under-fulfillment and over-fulfillment [29]. Customer satisfaction is a way to measure how well a consumer's purchase of goods or services meets their expectations [35]. If the product or service does not meet the customer's expectations or needs, the customer will feel let down. Conversely, if it does, the customer will be satisfied and content, Nguyen et al. [36]. Bashir [37] describes customer satisfaction as a psychological concept that encompasses the feeling of contentment and pleasure derived from obtaining what one desires and anticipates from a desirable product or service. Customer satisfaction can be described as an emotion that someone feels when the service offered meets their expectations [13]. Measuring customer satisfaction is crucial for businesses, as the customer satisfaction variable provides a quantifiable metric for further improvement.

According to Torres [28], customer satisfaction is a psychological notion that encompasses the sense of well-being and pleasure derived from achieving what one anticipates and desires from an attractive product or service. Schiffman et al. [38] explained satisfaction as the individual's perception of how a product or service performs in comparison to their expectations. Thus, when a customer receives service that aligns with their expectations, those expectations are met [28]. One issue with expectations is that they differ among individuals because satisfaction is subjective and varies from person to person, making it essential to balance perceived quality with service [13]. Customer satisfaction with a service can differ based on their preconceived ideas [28]. Hence, analyzing customer satisfaction has undeniably become one of the biggest challenges for businesses [39].

2.2. Service Quality

Service quality has emerged as a prominent topic of discussion in marketing literature [40]. It refers to the value that customers perceive when they interact with an organization's offerings [6]. The concept of service quality is described as the overall gap between what customers expect and what they perceive during their service experience [19]. Service quality can also be viewed in terms of physical quality, interactive quality, and corporate quality [37]. According to researchers, achieving the desired level of service requires that the services offered meet customer expectations [23]. Many studies on service quality have utilized the Service Quality (SERVQUAL) theory to assess service quality across various sectors, including the foodservice industry. Introduced by Parasuraman et al. [23], the SERVQUAL model comprises five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The SERVQUAL tool evaluates service quality by comparing customers' expectations with their perceptions of the service received [19]. Consequently, it is essential for service providers to assess their services at every critical stage of delivery to enhance their marketing strategies [40].

Tangibility. The tangible elements of services, including physical tools, model equipment, employees in uniform, and visually appealing materials, can illustrate the tangible aspect of service quality [30]. According to Ahmad et al. [9] the service quality dimension of tangibility represents the restaurant's physical attributes that are commonly noticed by the customers at first when they enter the restaurant. Relatively, as referred to Parasuraman et al. [23], the tangibility of service quality includes physical facilities such as adequate parking areas and decor that reflects the image of the restaurant. According to Sulek and Hensley [41], the quality of food should be considered when measuring the quality of service, as it subsequently impacts customer satisfaction. The tangibility of the food can be defined as the tastiness of the food presented and the variety of the menu offered. According to Raajpoot [42], the tangibility aspects of the food cover in terms of food presentation, menu design, and portion size, as well as healthy food options. According to Abd Rashid et al. [6], the primary indicators of service quality in the restaurant industry are based on both tangible and intangible elements, with a particular emphasis on the interactions between customers and the restaurant staff.

Reliability: As highlighted by Zhang et al. [43], reliability is a pivotal element affecting customer satisfaction in the context of service quality. It entails a dedication to delivering on service commitments and supports operational accuracy [30]. Reliability can be meant as the consistency of the performance [9]. Reliability is defined as the ability to deliver a promised service to clients consistently and accurately [37]. It also involves how the service provider addresses customer issues, executes the required service correctly, and fulfills commitments on time [19]. Reliability pertains to the dependable and accurate provision of services to customers [7]. Consistency and accuracy in service provision are the hallmark traits of any reliable service [30]. According to Bashir [37], reliability is one of the resilient components of service quality, which entails properly delivering promised services to clients. In the context of restaurant operations, it is essential that the service provides precise information regarding customer orders and offerings. The information and service provided to customers should align with what the restaurant advertises and practices [7].

Responsiveness: Responsiveness refers to the willingness or promptness of organizations to deliver service [37]. Responsiveness is evaluated by the willingness of the service provider or employees to address customers' service requests promptly [19]. Responsiveness can be defined as the willingness of employees to provide the service instantly [44]. Additionally, it was linked to the ability to swiftly address customer orders. Many dining establishments impose a deadline for completing customer requests [19]. Responsiveness can be the main element in the model that includes vital points such

as providing prompt and quick services and also giving extra efforts to handle customers' special requests [45]. Responsiveness involves the willingness to provide assistance to customers. The restaurant typically takes responsibility and is attentive to customer needs to ensure and uphold their satisfaction [7].

Assurance: Assurance is characterized by the politeness and expertise of employees, as well as their ability to instill confidence and trust in customers [46]. To enhance the assurance of their services, a service provider should swiftly resolve customer concerns [37]. The assurance can be established if the service-providing employees are highly skilled in providing customers with high-quality service that exceeds customers' expectations [47]. The assurance dimension encompasses employees' preparedness to respond to inquiries, their willingness to exert additional effort in accommodating special requests, and the overall safety of customers [48]. The aspects of assurance also include the server's knowledge of food and drink, as well as the ability to make good recommendations to customers [9]. Assurance refers to the expectation that patrons of a restaurant can rely on the recommendations provided by the staff, have confidence in the safety and cleanliness of the food served, and express any concerns without apprehension [48]. Numerous studies have indicated a significantly positive correlation between assurance and customer satisfaction [30]. Good knowledge of food and the ability to suggest good food from the menu as one of the aspects of service will increase their satisfaction with the service quality of the restaurant [9].

Empathy: The empathy dimension of service quality in the context of service marketing primarily emphasizes elements such as communication, consumer expectations, and positive behavior [30]. Empathy is characterized by a genuine concern for customers, the provision of personalized attention, and the delivery of services that cater to their needs [46]. According to Bougoure and Neu [20] empathy involves the provision of personalized and caring attention to customers by a company. In a similar vein, Murray et al. [49] define empathy as the ability to comprehend and respond to the mental, emotional, behavioral, and experiential states and situations of others. Empathy helps customers to provide a favorable judgment of the company [37]. According to Tripathi and Dave [50], the employees of the restaurant should consider the need to be empathic with the restaurant's customers [9]. When employees in service environments demonstrate empathy towards customers, it results in higher customer satisfaction [51]. Therefore, it is very important for any business related to food service to prioritize service quality for customers.

2.3. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is closely tied to the quality of service provided. High-quality service often results in high customer satisfaction, while poor service quality typically leads to lower satisfaction levels [30]. Many scholars have established a significant connection between service quality and customer' satisfaction [40, 46, 52]. Improving service quality is a tactic that enhances a restaurant's operational effectiveness, competitiveness, and flexibility. It acts as a method to guarantee full customer satisfaction [53]. As noted by Damit et al. [54], maintaining a competitive edge relies heavily on delivering superior service quality, which in turn leads to customer satisfaction. The level of service quality is determined by the difference between the service expected and the service perceived [55]. If a customer perceives the products as high quality, then the customer may have a high satisfaction level regarding the services delivered [9]. Satisfied customers will indirectly tell others or make recommendations about the restaurant through word-of-mouth. When the customer is satisfied, the likelihood of telling others is high, and thus it will result in increasing the profitability of the restaurant [9].

Several types of research have been conducted on factors that influence consumers to choose a particular restaurant. The quality of service has been described as the most important factor that makes customers satisfied [1]. Ensuring that customers have satisfying experiences is essential for the success of a restaurant's business. Yap and Kew [27] note that assessing service quality in the restaurant industry is difficult until customers actually visit the establishment. This is because the level of service can vary with each visit, potentially influencing customers' satisfaction with the restaurant brand [6]. In research conducted on full-service restaurants in Malaysia, Rezai et al. [56] found that service quality, the restaurant's physical environment (such as a clean, comfortable, and relaxing atmosphere), and the ingredients used in meal preparation are crucial in attracting and satisfying customers.

In the literature of service marketing, service quality and customer satisfaction have been considered as independent but closely connected constructs, and they are often used interchangeably in various service industries Bashir [37]. Chahal and Dutta [57] reported that customer satisfaction is expressed as the judgment of appraisal of the service based on the benefit it provides and the cost it takes to obtain the service. Service quality is a key factor in achieving customer satisfaction, as noted by Devesh [58]. According to Cronin Jr and Taylor [59], customer satisfaction generally precedes service quality, with the latter being just one of the elements that contribute to the former. Both service quality and customer satisfaction are undeniably essential concepts in the theory of services marketing, and their interconnection has garnered growing research interest over time [20]. Numerous researchers in the field of service quality have examined the positive correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction [30, 60]. There is debate with proposals of a causal link from service quality to customer satisfaction [61-63]. There are some researchers who believe that service quality is not necessarily important to gratify the customers [64]. The ongoing debate in the literature has prompted numerous appeals for additional investigation into this connection [20].

2.4. Trust as a Mediator

Trust is regarded as an important tool necessary for success in any industry and is developed through interactions with others in a practical manner [65]. It involves the assurance of an individual's dependability within a specific exchange relationship [66]. Trust is a logical process that is consciously established, nurtured, and sustained, undergoing evaluation over time [67]. It reflects a company's perceived competence and worth in the eyes of its customers [68], and is related to

the willingness to engage in transactions despite known risks Dewi and Praswati [69]. Ayunda et al. [70] highlight trust as a vital foundation in business interactions, as it plays a key role in ensuring the reliability of the parties engaged in transactions. Customer trust is associated with their expectations regarding the services offered by companies [66]. Consumers frequently evaluate sales based on the services rendered and the conduct of delivery personnel. These expectations are grounded in the firms' ability, honesty, and competence [66]. Based on expectation disconfirmation theory, Sari et al. [71] state that expectations, service perceptions, and quality perceptions affect consumer satisfaction when they assess a service or product [72]. Previous research found that trust has a positive effect on customer satisfaction [70, 73].

Customer trust acts as an intermediary between service quality and customer satisfaction, demonstrating varying degrees of effectiveness. While most research indicates positive mediation effects, some studies reveal either insignificant or negative results. For example, Sihombing et al. [74] and Kundu and Datta [75] reported significant positive indirect effects through trust. Zaid et al. [76] asserted that trust can enhance the impact of SERVQUAL on customer satisfaction, and it can also serve as a mediator for the indirect influence of SERVQUAL on customer satisfaction in the context of delivery services. The study by Krisnanto and Natanugraha [77] found that brand trust did not significantly mediate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Similarly, Dewi and Praswati [69] reported non-significant or negative mediation effects in beauty clinic users. Based on the preceding discussion, we propose the following hypothesis:

H_1: *It is hypothesized that tangibility has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_2: *It is hypothesized that reliability has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_3: *It is hypothesized that responsiveness has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_4: *It is hypothesized that assurance has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_5: *It is hypothesized that empathy has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_6: *It is hypothesized that customer trust has a significant effect on customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_7: *It is hypothesized that tangibility has a significant effect on customer trust in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_8: *It is hypothesized that reliability has a significant effect on customer trust in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_9: *It is hypothesized that responsiveness has a significant effect on customer trust in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{10}: *It is hypothesized that assurance has a significant effect on customer trust in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{11}: *It is hypothesized that empathy has a significant effect on customer trust in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{12}: *Customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between tangibility and customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{13}: *Customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{14}: *Customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between responsiveness and customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{15}: *Customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between assurance and customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
H_{16}: *Customer trust significantly mediates the relationship between empathy and customer satisfaction in Malaysian restaurants.*
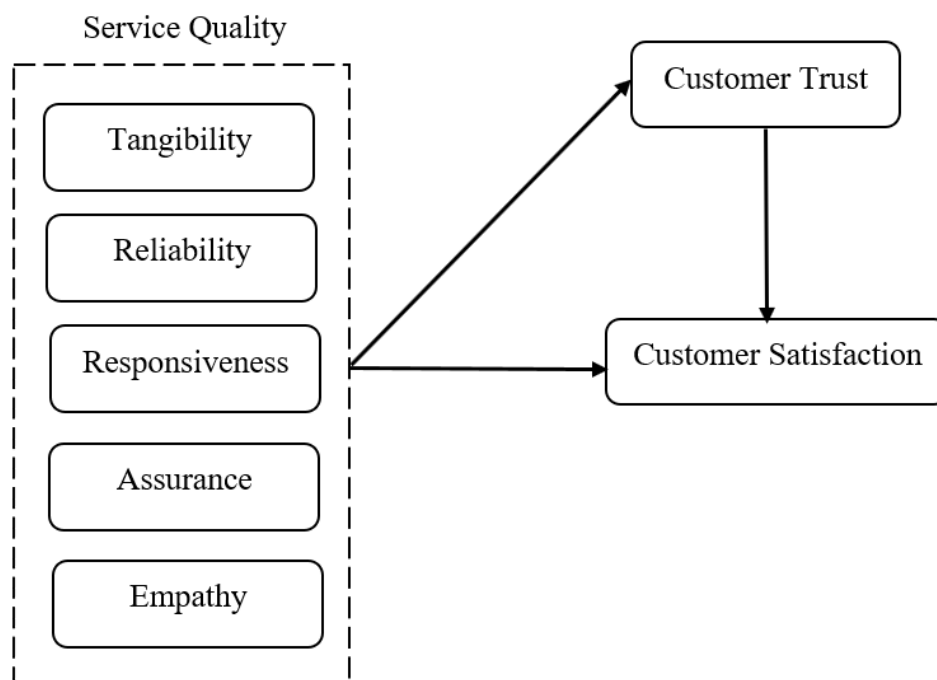

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework.

3. Methodology

This research utilizes a descriptive correlational design to investigate how different aspects of service quality relate to customer satisfaction, with special attention given to the mediating effect of customer trust. Unlike many earlier studies that either examined broad consumer groups or mainly used qualitative methods like interviews, often limiting the applicability of their results, this study employs a quantitative, survey-based methodology focused on a clearly defined group: university students. Furthermore, while previous research often relied on descriptive analysis and rarely considered mediating variables, this study incorporates mediation analysis to reveal the processes by which service quality impacts customer satisfaction. By positioning customer trust as a mediator, the research offers a more thorough and statistically robust insight into customer behavior within the fast-food sector, addressing both psychological and relational elements that are frequently neglected in qualitative studies.

3.1. Design of the Study

A correlational research design was selected to assess whether and to what degree service quality is linked to customer satisfaction within the Malaysian restaurant sector. According to Queirós et al. [78] a correlational study aims to explore the strength of the connection between two or more variables and the extent to which a statistical relationship exists among them.

3.2. Sampling

This study focuses on customer satisfaction with top ten chain restaurants in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, examining the influence of service quality and customer trust. In line with previous research on restaurant services, a questionnaire was crafted to explore the theoretical concepts of this study. From a sample of customers at chain restaurants within private universities, 300 valid questionnaires were collected. These questionnaires were distributed in English, as it is the language of instruction in Malaysian universities. Students were chosen as an appropriate sampling group for this research because they constitute a significant market segment for restaurant services, with expenditures reaching millions annually [20].

3.3. Instrument

The questionnaire incorporated measurement items that were derived from previous research by Wang et al. [30], Mohi [79] and Carranza et al. [80]. Since all the questions were designed to be closed-ended, the data gathered can be easily subjected to statistical analysis. Wang et al. [30] reported the 5-item empathy, assurance, responsiveness and reliability scale and the 6-item Tangibility scale. Furthermore, Mohi [79] reported a 3-item customer satisfaction scale. The items are "Highly satisfied with the food and beverages I ordered"; "Has operating hours that are convenient"; "Overall, I am pleased I chose to dine in this restaurant". 6 items adopted fromCarranza et al. [80] to measure customer trust. The example items for customer trust are "I think that this restaurant usually fulfills the commitments it assumes"; "I affirm that the details shared by this restaurant are accurate"; "I trust the commitments made by this restaurant's website"; "I regard the information provided by this restaurant as genuine and truthful"; "I believe this fast-food restaurant would not deliberately act in a way that harms the customer"; "I am confident that this restaurant is attentive to its customers' needs and provides them with all necessary information".

3.4. Data Analysis

For the statistical analysis in this research, data coding and assumption verification were conducted using the Social Package for Social Science (SPSS, v.26). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed with SMART Partial Least Squares (PLS 4), facilitating the validation of the measurement model and the analysis of path estimation. Recently, PLS has emerged as the most popular method for multivariate analysis across various fields [81]. PLS-SEM, a variance-based approach in structural equation modeling, was utilized due to its strengths and the exploratory nature of the study [82]. A two-step model encompassing both measurement and structural aspects was proposed and identified as the standard for presenting PLS-SEM results [83]. The model's complexity, which assesses 16 relationships among the variables, serves as another rationale for employing PLS-SEM [82].

4. Results

This study employed PLS-SEM path modeling to evaluate the proposed theoretical model. This approach was chosen for several reasons. First, it is widely utilized and has seen extensive application in management and related fields [84]. Second, given that the study's objective is to analyze the outcome variable, the PLS path was deemed an appropriate method [85]. Finally, this approach is considered the most advanced and commonly used [84]. As a result, Smart PLS 4 was utilized for this research. This research utilizes a dual-phase method: initially assessing the measurement model, followed by an evaluation of the structural model [86, 87].

4.1. Measurement Model Assessment

According to Hair Jr et al. [88] and Henseler et al. [86] it is essential for researchers to assess the measurement model by considering several critical elements. These elements include the reliability of each individual item, internal consistency, content validity, as well as convergent and discriminant validity. This evaluation process is vital to ensure the strength and reliability of the research methodology.

Table 1.
Measurement model results.

| Construct	Items	Loadings	Alpha	CR(rho_a)	CR(rho_c)	AVE
Customer Satisfaction	CSN_01	0.888	0.867	0.868	0.919	0.790
	CSN_02	0.876				
	CSN_03	0.902				
Customer Trust	CT_01	0.827	0.905	0.905	0.927	0.678
	CT_02	0.838				
	CT_03	0.823				
	CT_04	0.813				
	CT_05	0.825				
	CT_06	0.814				
Tangibility	TANG_01	0.827	0.888	0.888	0.911	0.630
	TANG_02	0.791				
	TANG_03	0.775				
	TANG_04	0.794				
	TANG_05	0.783				
	TANG_06	0.790				
Reliability	RLY_01	0.757	0.851	0.872	0.892	0.624
	RLY_02	0.792				
	RLY_03	0.834				
	RLY_04	0.769				
	RLY_05	0.794				
Responsiveness	RPS_01	0.796	0.859	0.860	0.899	0.639
	RPS_02	0.781				
	RPS_03	0.819				
	RPS_04	0.803				
	RPS_05	0.799				
Assurance	ASC_01	0.797	0.908	1.493	0.918	0.693
	ASC_02	0.813				
	ASC_03	0.941				
	ASC_04	0.783				
	ASC_05	0.810				
Empathy	EMY_01	0.926	0.918	1.132	0.934	0.739
	EMY_02	0.853				
	EMY_03	0.870				
	EMY_04	0.834				
	EMY_05	0.812				
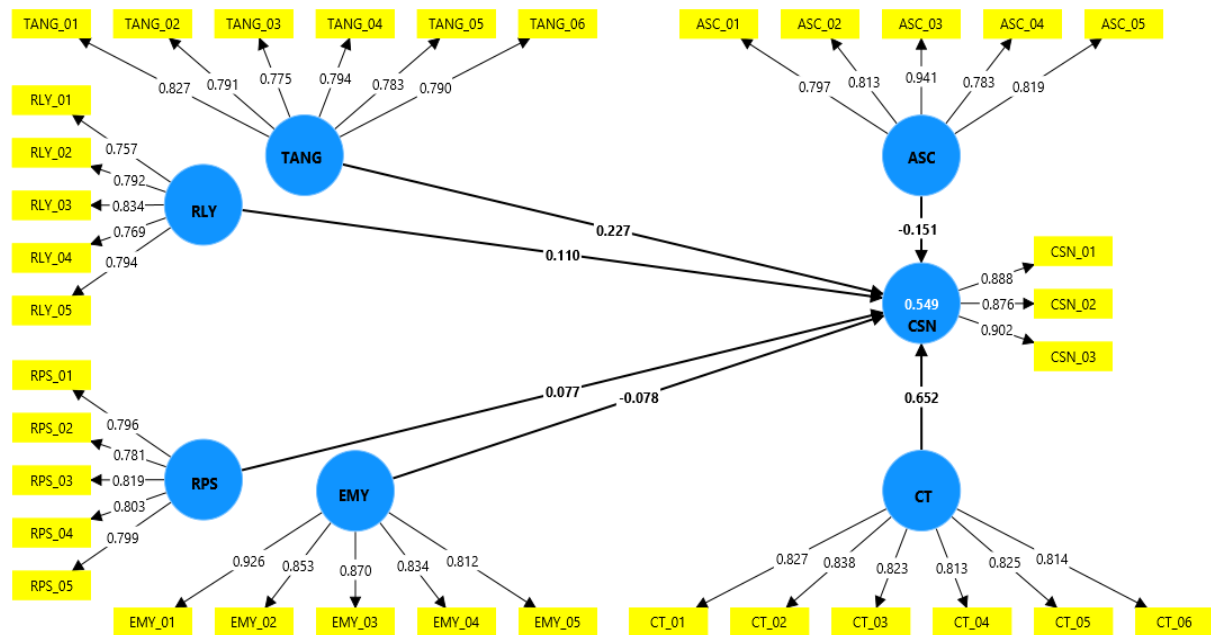
Figure 2.
Measurement Model.

4.2. Individual Item Reliability

According to Hair et al. [89] and Duarte and Raposo [90], assessing the reliability of individual items involves examining the outer loadings for each measure across all constructs. Furthermore, it is generally advised to retain items with reliability scores ranging from 0.40 to 0.70. In line with this recommendation, the outer loadings for all items in this study are found to be 0.5 or above (refer to Table 1), demonstrating that our study satisfies the criteria for acceptable item reliability.

4.3. Internal Consistency Reliability

As stated by Bagozzi and Yi [91] and Hair et al. [92], there is an established guideline for interpreting the composite reliability (CR) coefficient, suggesting it should be 0.7 or higher. The coefficients of CR (rho_a, rho_c) and Cronbach's alpha are also important indicators, are given in Table 1. These values have acceptable consistency.

4.4. Convergent Validity

This research focused on assessing convergent validity to determine AVE values. According to Henseler et al. [93], an AVE values of 0.50 or higher indicate that at least 50% of the indicator variance is explained. In this study, all AVE values exceeded the 0.50 threshold, confirming convergent validity.

4.5. Discriminant Validity Through Fornell- Larcker

This study assessed the Fornell–Larcker ratio to test discriminant validity [94]. According to Table 2 the Fornell and Larcker test values exceed the correlations between the variables

Table 2.
Discriminant validity through Fornell-Larcker.

	ASC	CSN	CT	EMY	RLY	RPS	TANG
ASC	0.832						
CSN	0.055	0.889					
CT	0.207	0.677	0.823				
EMY	-0.660	0.067	0.054	0.860			
RLY	-0.003	0.320	0.222	-0.069	0.790		
RPS	0.208	0.516	0.649	0.061	0.333	0.800	
TANG	0.021	0.203	-0.058	0.054	0.152	0.068	0.794

4.6. Discriminant Validity Through Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

This research employed the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, following the recommendations of Henseler et al. [93]. According to their criterion, the HTMT values fell below the 0.90 threshold (refer to Table 3 for specific values). Consequently, discriminant validity was not identified as an issue in this investigation. These findings support the discriminant validity of the current study.

Table 3.
Discriminant validity (HTMT).

	ASC	CSN	CT	EMY	RLY	RPS	TANG
ASC							
CSN	0.048						
CT	0.224	0.764					
EMY	0.750	0.061	0.052				
RLY	0.066	0.360	0.243	0.078			
RPS	0.234	0.595	0.735	0.071	0.386		
TANG	0.040	0.229	0.071	0.069	0.178	0.077	

4.7. Multicollinearity

This research examined the problem of multicollinearity in the dataset by employing the variance inflation factor (VIF). As highlighted by Becker et al. [95], VIF values should be less than 5. This study observed VIF values that fell within this recommended range, indicating that there is no multicollinearity issue in the data (Table 4).

Table 4.
Collinearity statistics (VIF values)

	VIF		VIF		VIF
ASC_01	2.552	EMY_01	2.693	RPS_05	1.858
ASC_02	2.519	EMY_02	2.681	TANG_01	2.156
ASC_03	2.348	EMY_03	2.728	TANG_02	1.845
ASC_04	2.550	EMY_04	2.753	TANG_03	1.989
ASC_05	2.445	EMY_05	2.426	TANG_04	1.917
CSN_01	2.248	RLY_01	1.810	TANG_05	1.972
CSN_02	2.141	RLY_02	1.826	TANG_06	1.884
CSN_03	2.439	RLY_03	1.832		
CT_01	2.260	RLY_04	1.687		
CT_02	2.340	RLY_05	1.812		
CT_03	2.210	RPS_01	1.862		
CT_04	2.150	RPS_02	1.766		
CT_05	2.251	RPS_03	1.969		
CT_06	2.128	RPS_04	1.806		

4.8. Structural Equation Modelling

After validating the measurement model, the structural model was assessed to examine underlying relationships. The model's fit was evaluated using the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), which should be below 0.08 for samples exceeding 100 [86]. This study demonstrated a significant model fit (0.042). Endogenous latent variables with coefficients of determination (R^2) of 0.554 and 0.451 can be categorized as substantial [92, 96]. Figure 3 indicates R^2 (Customer trust) = 0.451 and R^2 (Customer satisfaction) = 0.554, suggesting the structural model possesses satisfactory in-sample predictive power. Additionally, the Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs were over zero (Customer satisfaction=0.298) and (Customer trust=0.433); hence, predictive relevance was established. The findings of this research fall within the significance threshold, confirming the model's predictive validity [97]. Additionally, the researchers assessed the magnitude and significance of the path coefficients that represent the hypotheses. To determine the significance of these coefficients, they employed a bootstrapping technique (utilizing 5000 samples). The outcomes of the structural model are depicted in Figure 3. A comprehensive overview of the path coefficients, along with their standard deviations, t-statistics, and p-values, is presented in Table 5.
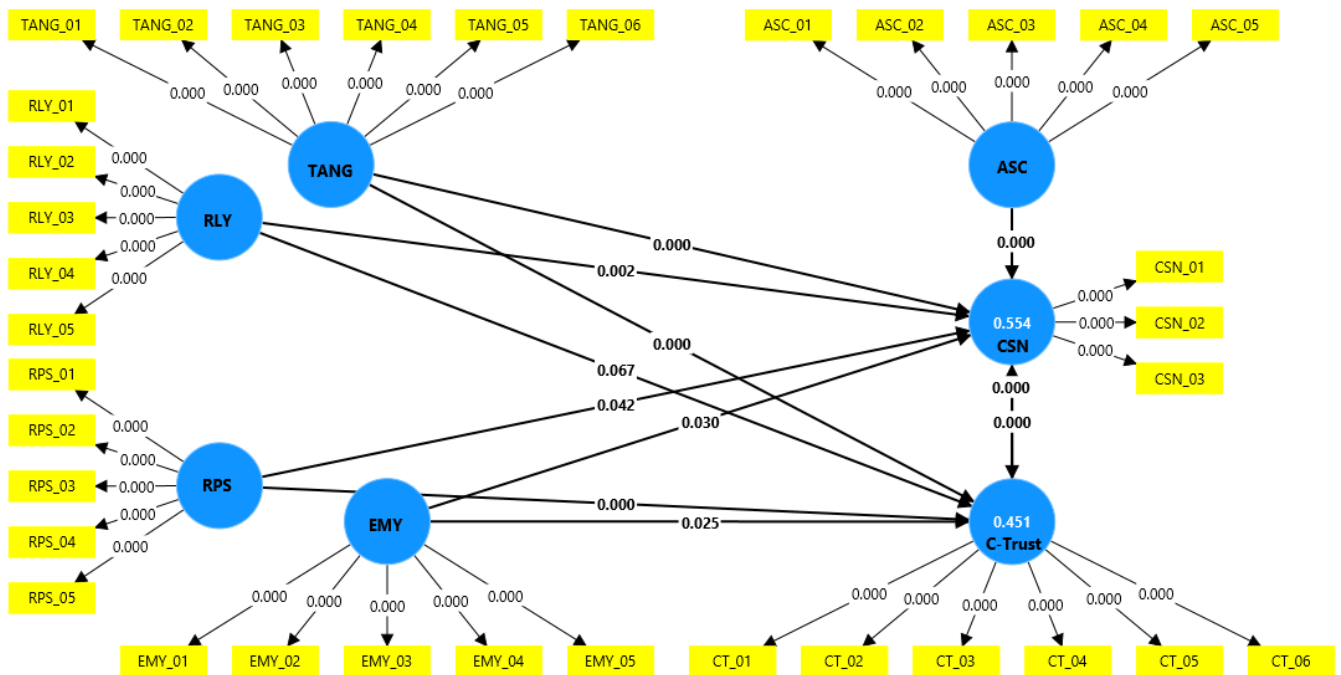
Figure 3.
Structural Model.

Table 5.
Path coefficients.

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values
ASC -> C-Trust	0.196	0.189	0.053	3.664	0.000
ASC -> CSN	-0.191	-0.177	0.050	3.786	0.000
C-Trust -> CSN	0.659	0.658	0.034	19.236	0.000
EMY -> C-Trust	0.163	0.154	0.073	2.236	0.025
EMY -> CSN	-0.108	-0.093	0.050	2.168	0.030
RLY -> C-Trust	0.061	0.060	0.033	1.831	0.067
RLY -> CSN	0.099	0.104	0.032	3.041	0.002
RPS -> C-Trust	0.587	0.588	0.040	14.807	0.000
RPS -> CSN	0.085	0.081	0.042	2.037	0.042
TANG -> C-Trust	-0.120	-0.118	0.033	3.636	0.000
TANG -> CSN	0.230	0.231	0.037	6.242	0.000

Based on the PLS–SEM analysis, the direct effects of service quality dimensions assurance, empathy, reliability, responsiveness, and tangibility on customer satisfaction were examined (H1-H5). The findings demonstrated a significant connection between each of these variables and customer satisfaction. Additionally, H6 identified a notable link between customer trust and customer satisfaction (β = 0.659, t = 19.236, p = 0.000). Consequently, hypotheses H1 through H7 were validated. Moreover, hypotheses H7 to H11 showed that the service quality dimensions of assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibility significantly influence customer trust, with the exception of reliability (β = 0.061, t = 1.831, p = 0.067).

Table 5.
Mediation Analysis.

	Original sample	Sample mean	SD	T statistics	P values
ASC -> C-Trust -> CSN	0.129	0.124	0.036	3.557	0.000
EMY -> C-Trust -> CSN	0.107	0.101	0.048	2.226	0.026
RLY -> C-Trust -> CSN	0.040	0.040	0.022	1.841	0.066
RPS -> C-Trust -> CSN	0.386	0.386	0.031	12.389	0.000
TANG -> C-Trust -> CSN	-0.079	-0.078	0.023	3.391	0.001

Regarding mediating effects, there were notable indirect effects of assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and tangibility on customer satisfaction through customer trust. Consequently, it was determined that customer trust partially mediated the connections between all service quality dimensions, except for reliability, and customer satisfaction. Thus, H2, H14, H15,

and H16 were confirmed. However, customer trust did not mediate the relationship between reliability and customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.040$, t = 1.841, p = 0.066), leading to the rejection of H13.

5. Discussion

This study empirically tested the SERVQUAL model in the restaurant service industry. The findings from the analysis reveal that service quality significantly enhances customer satisfaction. This aligns with earlier research by Sari et al. [71] and Tannus and Andreani [98], which also demonstrated a strong positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Additionally, the analysis indicates that service quality significantly boosts trust, suggesting that higher service quality leads to increased trust, encouraging consumers to rely on the beauty clinic for their treatments. This is consistent with the conclusions of Rizan et al. [72], who found that service quality positively influences trust. Furthermore, the analysis shows that trust has a significant and positive impact on customer satisfaction. Dewi and Praswati [69] emphasize that trust is crucial as it forms the foundation for future cooperative relationships, implying that restaurants should focus on maintaining consumer trust by enhancing service and food quality. This is in agreement with the findings of Resika et al. [73], who also identified a positive and significant effect of trust on customer satisfaction.

The service quality dimensions proposed in this study are significantly related to the respective endogenous variables. Understanding the elements that influence customer satisfaction is crucial in marketing because it enables marketers to develop effective strategies to enhance customer trust and satisfaction. The result of reliability, tangibility and assurance is supported by Alnaser et al. [99]. Similarly, the results of the study by Bashir [37] found that service quality has a positive relationship with customer satisfaction in the banking sector in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the findings of this study align with those of Carranza et al. [80], indicating a significant link between service quality and customer satisfaction. Similarly, research by Budaharini et al. [100] at CV Power Hearing Bali, it was found that service quality positively and significantly influences customer satisfaction. This suggests that enhanced service quality results in increased customer satisfaction. There is a connection between service quality and customer satisfaction, as customers tend to be satisfied when they receive excellent service. In essence, high-quality service is crucial for a company's sustainability because it fosters customer satisfaction.

Wang et al. [30] provide evidence that in Bangladeshi non-banking financial institutions, reliability plays a crucial role in enhancing customer satisfaction. The findings are consistent with previous studies [101-103]. According to Parasuraman et al. [104], reliability refers to the client's ability to provide services. Tangibility positively impacts customer satisfaction, as the empirical evidence suggests. These findings are in agreement with earlier research [101, 102, 105, 106] and but contradict a study by Wang et al. [107] which claims the opposite regarding customer satisfaction. Wang et al. [107] found that the tangibility dimension of service quality had an insignificant or even negative effect on customer satisfaction within the Chinese telecommunications sector. However, this study suggests that the better the physical appearance and the smarter the employee attire and equipment used in service delivery, the higher the likelihood of satisfying customers. The discrepancy highlights how the impact of service quality dimensions like tangibility can vary across industries and cultural settings.

The anticipated positive correlation between empathy and customer satisfaction has been confirmed. In other words, empathy has a favorable impact on customer satisfaction, which is consistent with findings from previous research [108-110]. Proper communication, a strong insight into customer preferences, and friendly behavior ensure empathy. The result of this study is against the study of Wang et al. [30]. Furthermore, the way employees respond plays a crucial role in determining customer satisfaction. The findings confirm that staff responsiveness can achieve customer satisfaction, aligning with previous studies [23, 37, 111-114]. Employees must be eager to assist customers. Therefore, being responsive is crucial for being ready to provide support and service to customers, as the waiting time for assistance and replies is a significant concern for them. Improved speed and swift responses to customers result in their satisfaction [30]. Additionally, the assurance aspect had a strong and positive influence on customer satisfaction. Numerous studies [37, 101, 115, 116] corroborate these findings. This research also aligns with this perspective.

Numerous authors have highlighted the complex nature of service quality and the connections between customer satisfaction and trust. This study aimed to explore the links between e-service quality, customer satisfaction, and trust within the restaurant sector. This study, utilizing a sample of patrons from chain restaurants, aimed to explore the role of trust as a mediator between service quality and customer satisfaction. It examines whether the hypothesized causal links between service quality and customer satisfaction differ within the same customer group. The findings of this research indicate that service quality, trust, and customer satisfaction are significantly interconnected, with trust serving as a partial mediator in the relationship between service quality and satisfaction. The study revealed that customer trust partially mediates the connections involving tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. However, no mediation was observed between reliability and customer trust. Similarly, Kundu and Datta [75] and Zaid et al. [76] found that customer trust mediates the relationship between e-service quality and customer satisfaction.

6. Implications

This research is likely to capture the attention of those investigating satisfaction within the restaurant industry, especially concerning major chain restaurants in Malaysia. While earlier research on chain restaurants has focused on customer satisfaction by considering service quality as a single factor without evaluating its various dimensions, this study demonstrates the feasibility of analyzing different scales to assess a restaurant's service quality. Consequently, this research makes a significant contribution to the literature on traditional variables like satisfaction and trust, as well as to the domain

of chain restaurants and service quality. It employs a model that combines multiple elements that have been previously examined in the literature, either in pairs or individually. This study will aid scholars in broadening their exploration of restaurant service attributes. From a methodological standpoint, it contributes to the PLS-SEM field, where recent works [80] have introduced new conceptualizations and updates.

This study expands the current research on customer satisfaction and service quality. Earlier empirical investigations have concentrated on service sectors such as consumer goods, higher education, healthcare facilities, and the tourism and travel industries in Malaysia. While several investigations have been conducted in fast food and Mamak restaurants, there has been a notable scarcity of research on top chain restaurants. This study indicates that improving the quality of restaurant attributes increases trust and customer satisfaction and can serve as a guide for managers of both small and large chain restaurants. The results show that tangibility is the most important element in the service quality of the restaurant. Consequently, these findings provide actionable advice for managers of chain restaurants. Evaluating the quality of the products offered is deemed crucial, as it can elevate perceived quality for customers, thereby boosting their satisfaction and trust. Future researchers are expected to advance further in this area.

7. Limitations and Recommendations

Various researchers have expanded the SERVQUAL model, yet many of these studies have overlooked cultural factors. Future investigations could incorporate additional cultural dimensions, such as image and perception. This research gathered data from top chain restaurants in Selangor, Malaysia. In subsequent studies, researchers should consider including fast-food establishments and ensure that the sample of respondents reflects a wide range of diversity to explore potential differences in customer behavior.

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