

# Investigating Customer Loyalty: Can Fast-Food Restaurants Keep Them Coming Back?

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## Abstract

In the realm of fast-food restaurants, the primary objective revolves around the establishment and nurturing of customer loyalty. This loyalty holds the potential to significantly impact the long-term sustainability and profitability. This study seeks to investigate the factors contributing to the development of customer loyalty within fast-food restaurants. A quantitative research approach was employed, and a questionnaire was utilized to investigate the influence of specific factors, focusing on restaurant atmosphere, food quality, and service quality, in enhancing customer loyalty within fast-food establishments located in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. Data collection was carried out through convenience sampling, involving 150 respondents, and the collected data underwent analysis through

multiple regression techniques. The outcomes of this study clearly underscore the pivotal role played by service quality in shaping customer loyalty within the context of fast-food restaurants. Consequently, it is evident that further research endeavours, incorporating additional data and broader perspectives, are imperative to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted factors that wield influence over customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants. This research aspires to provide empirical insights that can empower both scholars and industry professionals to formulate finely tuned marketing and operational strategies aimed at optimizing customer loyalty within the fast-food sector.

### **Keywords:**

Customer loyalty, Fast-food, Restaurant atmosphere, Service quality, Food quality

## **1 Introduction**

In today's world, many people prefer buying ready-made meals because it saves time, especially for those who have long workdays of over 8 hours. When we suddenly crave a quick bite or an unplanned meal, fast food is often the choice because it satisfies our hunger without making us wait too long (Ghosh, 2020). Over the past few years, eating out has become a regular part of many people's lives. This includes those who are busy with work and do not have the time to cook, families looking to celebrate special occasions and individuals who want to relax and enjoy their favourite snacks (Lacap et al., 2023).

Fast food can be defined as food that is readily available and served promptly. Alternatively, it can be characterised as food with minimal to no nutritional value but instead contains excessive calories and fat (Elkhateeb & Alrshidi, 2018). Nevertheless, fast food is renowned for being a rapidly growing sector in the global food industry, owing to its recurring popularity, customer convenience, and appealing taste combined with reasonable pricing. Fast-food restaurants are widespread and can be found nationwide compared to other industries. Their expansion has been rapid, and they have garnered significant favour among consumers (Ganatra et al., 2021). Despite the relative significance of fast food in the global food-service sector and the acknowledged importance of customer loyalty for fast-food providers, previous research in this area has primarily focused on the United States (Namin, 2017), the United Kingdom (Nguyen et al., 2018), and Europe (Carranza et al., 2018).

In Malaysia, the fast-food sector is experiencing rapid growth, particularly in urban regions. In order to remain competitive, the fast-food industry has customised its flavours, preparation methods, and ingredients to align with local cultural preferences, thereby increasing its appeal to Malaysian consumers (Habib et al., 2011). The proliferation of fast-food restaurants can be attributed to the prevalence of dual-income households with children, the demanding nature of modern lifestyles, and time constraints. Given the intense competition and the abundance of alternative dining choices, industry marketers actively seek strategies to attract and retain their customer base (Chang, 2013).

The ongoing and rapid expansion of the fast-food industry across various geographical, national, and cultural boundaries, as noted by Gabriel (2001), is primarily

fuelled by global shifts in consumer lifestyles, increased household income levels, and a growing preference for the convenience offered by "fast" food choices, as highlighted by Rahkovsky et al. (2018). This heightened demand for fast food has intensified competition within the sector, emphasising the importance of retaining customers for fast-food restaurants, as Ha and Jang (2012) emphasised. Nonetheless, for marketing strategies and responses to effectively optimise customer loyalty, fast-food proprietors must comprehensively understand the factors motivating consumers to choose fast-food meals, as highlighted by Shahzadi et al. (2018).

Furthermore, they must also grasp these factors' intricate and interconnected influence in developing customer loyalty within fast-food restaurants, as Singh et al. (2021) discussed. Additionally, shifts and transformations in individuals' lifestyles and dietary preferences have led to a growing inclination among people from various age demographics, particularly younger generations, to opt for fast food consumption. In light of their heavy work schedules, these individuals prioritise convenience and favour quick food and service in their bustling daily routines (Azman et al., 2023). Consequently, fast-food restaurants have emerged as the favoured dining option for most Malaysian residents due to the expeditious nature of service, enabling them to consume meals in a limited timeframe. Given the evolving consumer lifestyle trends, the fast-food industry in Malaysia is poised for significant growth and expansion opportunities (Xiao et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant behavioural changes driven by widespread uncertainty, anxiety, and disruption of routines (Zeybek et al., 2020). Customer attitudes and behaviours have also shifted, with many eateries adapting by suspending operations, downsizing staff, and expanding takeout services (Yeşilyurt & Kurnaz, 2021). In-person restaurant dining declined by 85.2%, prompting fast-food restaurants to adopt technology for safer meal access (Wali & Idenedo, 2021). Customers now expect higher product quality post-pandemic (Hoang & Suleri, 2021). These changes reflect businesses' adaptive responses to thrive in a competitive environment (Lacap et al., 2023).

Given the intense and ever-increasing competition in today's business landscape, fostering customer loyalty has emerged as a paramount concern for organisations aiming to survive and thrive within their respective industries (Al Masud et al., 2017). Consequently, all enterprises must prioritise the cultivation of customer loyalty as a means to bolster profitability and maintain viability within the business market. Within the fast-food industry, which is experiencing rapid growth, all fast-food restaurants must gain a deeper understanding and insight into the elements that resonate with and engender loyalty among their patrons. Identifying these crucial factors that contribute to customer loyalty can enable them to retain their loyal customer base and safeguard their market standing against formidable competitors within the industry (Ganatra et al., 2021).

The hospitality sector, particularly restaurants, is navigating a highly competitive landscape marked by a discerning consumer base (Rhou & Singal, 2020). Consumers are

increasingly discerning when evaluating factors such as food quality, restaurant service quality, and the physical ambience of fast-food restaurants. In this context, consumers tend to switch allegiances following even a single unsatisfactory experience. Consequently, fast-food restaurants face the dual challenge of attracting new customers while preserving their existing clientele (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). In light of these considerations, in the context of fast-food restaurants, the ambience, food quality, and service quality play pivotal roles in shaping the factors that influence customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty significantly impacts a company's performance, driven by customer satisfaction and positive effects on earnings. It is a key factor for restaurant companies, supported by studies indicating that satisfied customers tend to remain loyal. However, limited research explores various interconnected factors like service quality (e.g., food quality, environment, and service), pricing, brand perception, customer satisfaction, and brand trust in the fast-food sector (Singh et al., 2021). A contented customer often leads to future loyalty and is crucial for a business's sustained viability. This research investigates the relationship between four vital variables: restaurant atmosphere, food quality, service quality, and customer loyalty.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the factors or components that influence customer loyalty, specifically in the context of fast-food restaurants, with a particular focus on international companies operating in these regions. Additionally, this study holds significance as it seeks to bridge existing knowledge gaps within the literature review, particularly concerning the dynamics of customer loyalty and its determinants within the fast-food restaurant domain. In practical terms, the research endeavours to provide empirical insights that can assist academic scholars and industry practitioners in formulating refined marketing and operational strategies to optimise customer loyalty within the fast-food restaurant sector.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section provides literature on the Malaysian fast-food industry, followed by the four main variables (customer loyalty, restaurant atmosphere, food quality, and service quality) discussed in this study. Subsequently, the study's hypotheses and the proposed conceptual framework are elucidated. The methodological approach and the data collection process are then summarised, and the results of hypothesis testing are presented. Finally, the paper concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for theory and practice, acknowledging its limitations, and delineating potential avenues for future research.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Fast-food restaurants**

Fast-food restaurants represent a prominent and noteworthy development within the Malaysian foodservice industry. Prominent fast-food brands popular among Malaysians include KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Subway, Burger King, and Texas Chicken, predominantly comprising American franchises. The intense competition in today's fast-food market, coupled with the saturation of market share among these establishments,

has intensified their rivalry (Al Masud et al., 2018). Additionally, local fast-food franchises like Hot and Roll and Marry brown are experiencing significant growth and garnering popularity among Malaysians (Quoquab et al., 2019).

In conjunction with the expansion of American and local fast-food chains, there has been a rapid proliferation of Asian fast-food franchises offering local and regional cuisine. Consequently, South Korean fast-food brands such as KyoChon, BBQ Chicken, Street Churros, Sweetree, and Singaporean-based franchises like Stuff'd and Franco have established operations in Malaysia in response to heightened consumer demand (Quoquab et al., 2019). Notably, local and foreign-owned fast-food chains generally adhere to a business model centred on product standardization. This approach is rooted in the expectation of delivering consistent products and maintaining uniform standards across product and service quality, as well as the physical environment and ambience within their restaurants (Wilkins et al., 2017).

Despite the fiercely competitive landscape of the fast-food industry, numerous prominent fast-food brands in Malaysia continue to experience substantial growth. This prompts the question of how these brands thrive in the competitive food industry. One key determinant contributing to the long-term success of these fast-food restaurants is customer loyalty (Akhter et al., 2010). This is due to the fact that fast-food restaurants boasting a substantial base of loyal patrons can capture a significant portion of the market share and outperform their competitors (Al Masud et al., 2017). Consequently, all participants in the Malaysian fast-food industry must meticulously assess the factors influencing customer loyalty within fast-food restaurants (Ganatra et al., 2021).

## **2.2 Customer loyalty**

Loyalty serves as a fundamental principle that we apply in our personal lives to assess the strength of our relationships. In business, loyalty is the connection between a firm and its customer base. It goes beyond merely gauging the extent to which consumers enjoy a brand; instead, it represents a concept that, when effectively managed, can enhance profitability and attract a more extensive organisational customer base. Specifically, loyalty denotes the steadfast patronage and support exhibited by individuals who avail themselves of an organisation's services (Easwari & Nadarajan, 2016). Furthermore, customer loyalty entails the behavioural disposition of customers who prefer a particular business and its products, demonstrating a willingness to engage in repeated future purchases (Rosadi et al., 2020; Ran, 2019). Recognised as one of the pivotal components of business success, loyalty positively influences the marketing endeavours of service-based businesses (Boakye & Meng, 2019).

Additionally, customer loyalty is instrumental in enabling businesses to generate profits (Chayomchai, 2021). It can also be quantified by considering the number of repurchases made by consumers within a specified period (Mercadé-Melé et al., 2018), and it stands as a critical factor impacting a company's competitiveness and overall success (Fatmawati & Fauzan, 2021). Jones et al. (1995) elucidate customer loyalty as a

sentiment of attachment or fondness for a business's goods, services, and stakeholders. It entails a sustained commitment to repeated patronage and maintaining a favourable disposition (Dick & Basu, 1994; Stank et al., 1999). In the business context, loyalty can be characterised as the willingness of a customer to engage with a particular company, make frequent purchases of their offerings, and advocate for their products and services, among others (McIlroy & Barnett, 2000).

In various service sectors, particularly within the hospitality industry, the primary focal point of competition lies in cultivating customer loyalty. Managers and proprietors of restaurants firmly believe that loyal customers hold significantly greater value than occasional customers, even though both categories constitute customers (Espinosa et al., 2018). A regular customer is an individual who frequently procures products or services from a particular person or business. Within the restaurant industry, enhancing the perceived value of offerings contributes to an enjoyable customer experience, consequently heightening satisfaction levels. This heightened satisfaction, in turn, fosters and ensures customer loyalty (Ali et al., 2018; Ryu & Han, 2011).

Customer loyalty can be defined as the measurement of a customer's willingness to sustain their engagement with and continued purchase of a business's products or services (Ripton, 2021). Customer loyalty is significant in establishing robust customer relationships (Al Ansi et al., 2018). Moreover, within the restaurant business, customer loyalty is regarded as one of the most pivotal elements contributing to its success (Al Masud et al., 2017). Lim et al. (2020) underscored that a favourable organisational culture can catalyse fostering customer loyalty. In the fast-food sector, customers typically repeat purchases once they develop an attachment to a particular restaurant and have had a positive and memorable experience there (Shamsudin et al., 2020).

### **2.3 Relationship between restaurant atmosphere and customer loyalty**

The atmosphere of a restaurant significantly influences customer loyalty. Within the foodservice sector, the term "physical environment" now encompasses all facets of the restaurant's physical setting. Customers today have a heightened awareness of the environment in which they dine. Consequently, restaurant proprietors are increasingly tasked with expanding efforts in designing and furnishing their establishments to offer patrons a more comfortable and pleasant atmosphere. Indeed, the restaurant's environment can be just as pivotal as its food quality. Various factors, such as interior design, temperature, cleanliness, music, and table arrangement, collectively shape the restaurant's ambience. Customers inherently seek a dining experience that is satisfying and includes a high-quality physical environment. Such a quality environment not only fulfils the needs of existing customers but also serves as a magnet for new patrons, ultimately bolstering financial performance and creating memorable dining experiences. Additionally, customers gauge a restaurant's quality based on several factors, including its cleanliness, distinctive ambience, welcoming atmosphere, and other amenities that contribute to the overall dining environment (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020).

Furthermore, modern customers increasingly gravitate towards dining establishments that offer a pleasant and comfortable ambience, underscoring the restaurant environment as a critical variable influencing their perceptions of dining venues. This implies that an inviting environment enhances the dining experience and encourages patrons to spend more time in the restaurant (Xiao et al., 2019). In fact, more is needed for enterprises in the food and beverage service industry to address the physical requirements of their customers. There is a growing imperative to provide an environment that not only caters to customers' physical needs but also appeals to their emotional, intellectual, and spiritual sensibilities, offering them a pleasurable and relaxing experience that saves time (Harrington et al., 2015; Longart et al., 2017; Badem & Öztel, 2018). Consequently, this discourse leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis, as articulated below:

*H1: There is a positive relationship between restaurant atmosphere and customer loyalty*

#### **2.4 Relationship between food quality and customer loyalty**

Food quality stands as another influential factor shaping customer loyalty. Within the foodservice industry, customer loyalty comprises two dimensions: intangible and tangible. While service quality embodies an intangible dimension, food quality is tangible. In essence, food quality refers to the standards of food that meet consumers' expectations. Grunert (2005) underscores that food quality holds a pivotal position in the perception of food by customers and their food choices, while Peri (2006) asserts that food quality is indispensable in meeting the needs and anticipations of customers. Rajput and Gahfoor (2020) affirm that food quality is a fundamental component of the restaurant experience and significantly impacts consumers' intentions to revisit. In fast food, food quality is intrinsically linked to customer satisfaction and is a crucial predictor of behavioural intentions.

Furthermore, food quality is critical in providing customers with the safest and most preferred food tailored to their preferences (Liu et al., 2020). Additionally, it wields considerable influence over customer loyalty towards the products and services offered by the restaurant. Food quality is closely tied to customers' perceived value, and their satisfaction levels manifest clearly during their dining experiences (Suhartanto et al., 2018). Consequently, food quality is a key determinant of customer loyalty, particularly in terms of regular visits to the restaurant (Tsang et al., 2018).

Besides, food quality stands as the paramount factor when customers select a restaurant and is substantially linked to customer satisfaction. This is because it directly impacts customer loyalty, with customers evaluating a restaurant primarily based on the quality of its food. Commonly, food quality encompasses factors such as taste, presentation, temperature, freshness, nutritional value, and menu variety. Consequently, it significantly influences customers' decisions to return to the restaurant (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). Essentially, as indicated by Zhong and Moon (2020), food quality holds immense significance in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty. High levels of food quality constitute a pivotal marketing strategy that can satisfy and retain

customers, ensuring a positive purchasing experience. While there may not be direct research linking food quality to customer loyalty, several studies explore the relationship between food quality and customer satisfaction (Ganatra et al., 2021). As a result, the following hypothesis was formulated:

*H2: There is a positive relationship between food quality and customer loyalty*

## **2.5 Relationship between service quality and customer loyalty**

Service quality pertains to the degree of excellence in service provision. It is the evaluation made by consumers based on their experiences with the service, shaping their perceptions as either positive or negative. However, as Kincaid et al. (2009) noted, quantifying service quality is challenging due to its inherently subjective and elusive nature, making it difficult to establish a precise definition. In reality, service quality encompasses tangible and intangible elements that directly influence customer loyalty. Service quality is a critical measure of excellence across various industries, including travel, retail, hotels, airlines, and restaurants. In the restaurant sector, service quality significantly impacts customers' dining experiences, leaving a lasting impression and shaping their perceptions of quality. The service industry places a premium on providing high service quality to secure a sustainable competitive advantage, as customer satisfaction hinges on the quality of service delivered at the restaurant (Jalilvand et al., 2017). Service quality encompasses attributes such as pricing, friendliness, cleanliness, attentiveness, variety, service speed, and consistency in food preparation as per the menu. It is pivotal in increasing customer revisits and shaping their behavioural intentions in the hospitality sector (Sadeghi et al., 2017).

Service quality can be defined as the disparity between customer expectations and their perceived level of service, as delineated by Birajdar and Joshi (2016). It is a critical determinant of success in service-oriented businesses (Boakye & Meng, 2019). Businesses in the service sector that consistently deliver high-quality service can expand their market share, in alignment with the findings of Shaiful and Achmad (2020). Consequently, the growth and success of service-based enterprises hinge on their target customers' perspectives, attitudes, and experiences (Chayomchai, 2021). Research has indicated that customers harbour multiple service quality expectations, including prompt responses, request responsiveness, and service reliability. In line with the study by Shaiful and Achmad (2020), providing good service quality significantly impacts customer retention, amplifies market share, and contributes to business success. Fast-food restaurants continually endeavour to enhance the overall quality of their service to maintain customer satisfaction, thereby fostering customer loyalty. Consequently, the following research hypothesis is formulated based on the previously mentioned literature studies:

*H3: There is a positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty*



## 2.6 Conceptual framework and hypotheses development

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among the variables influencing factors that affect customer loyalty within the fast-food restaurant context. The model encompasses several independent variables: restaurant atmosphere, food quality, and service quality. Simultaneously, the dependent variable is the degree of customer loyalty towards the fast-food restaurant.

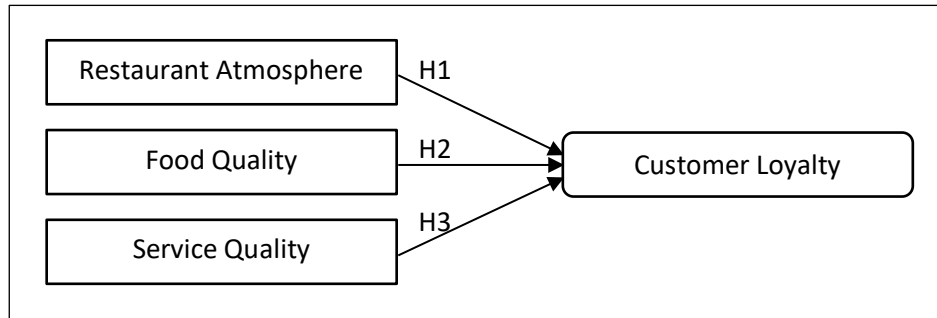


Figure 1: The conceptual framework

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

This study employed quantitative research methods to gather extensive data on factors affecting customer loyalty at fast-food restaurants. Surveys were the primary data collection tool, and structured closed-ended questionnaires were distributed electronically to the chosen sample within the region. These questionnaires aimed to capture respondents' views on customer loyalty in the context of fast-food restaurants and focused on meeting the research objectives by exploring individuals' perceptions of the factors influencing loyalty in this setting.

This study focused on individuals who are regular customers of fast-food restaurants in Kuala Terengganu. Non-probability sampling methods were employed to select these participants, resulting in a sample size of 150 fast-food restaurant customers. Researchers utilised convenience sampling to collect questionnaire responses, ensuring that participants willingly provided complete answers. Researchers utilized a structured, closed-ended questionnaire as our primary data collection tool due to the study's quantitative nature. This questionnaire, adapted from prior research (Zaki et al., 2021; Chow et al., 2013), and divided into two sections. Part A gathered demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, income level, and smoking status. The next section consists of 20 items assessing food quality, service quality, restaurant atmosphere, and customer loyalty. Researchers used five-point Likert scale in the questionnaire, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### 3.2 Pilot study

Prior to the commencement of extensive data collection, the researchers conducted a pilot study. In this preliminary phase, 31 respondents actively participated to ascertain

the suitability of the questionnaire and to ensure respondents' comprehension of the inquiries. Measures were implemented to prevent individuals who participated in the pilot study from participating in the main study. Additionally, a reliability analysis was carried out to evaluate the internal consistency of the questionnaire items. The reliability analysis results are presented in Table 1, encompassing the four variables examined during the pilot study. The findings revealed that all Cronbach's alpha values in this study exceeded the threshold of 0.80. Following established guidelines, Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.60 are deemed acceptable (Hair et al., 2007). Consequently, these outcomes affirm the retention and utilization of all questionnaire items in the subsequent main data collection phase.

Table 1: Reliability statistics

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>Number of Items</b>
Food Quality	0.813	5
Service Quality	0.876	5
Restaurant Atmosphere	0.898	5
Customer Loyalty	0.908	5

*N=150*

### 3.3 Data collection procedures

Data for this study was collected at fast-food restaurants in Kuala Terengganu, focusing on customers during the data collection period. Questionnaires were distributed through traditional and online methods via Google Forms. Researchers provided the questionnaires to customers within the chosen focus group and allowed them to complete it independently at their convenience. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed and subsequently processed and analysed using SPSS software. This entire process, from questionnaire distribution to data analysis, took approximately one month.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Demographic profile

Table 2: The demographic profile of respondents

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Gender	Male	39	26.0
	Female	111	74.0
Age group	Below 18	6	4.0
	18-24	121	80.7
	25-34	17	11.3
	24-44	6	4.0
Race	Malay	145	96.7
	Chinese	1	0.7
	Indian	1	0.7
	Other	3	2.0
Income range (RM)	Below 2000	135	90.0

2001-4000	14	9.3
60001 and above	1	0.7

*N*=150

According to the survey results presented in Table 2, female customers were more represented than male customers. Out of the 150 respondents, the majority, 74.0% (*N*=111), were female, while the remaining 26.0% (*N*=39) were male. Moreover, the age distribution of respondents indicated that the largest group fell within the 18 to 24 years old bracket, comprising 80.7% (*N*=121) of the total. The age range of 25 to 34 accounted for 11.3% (*N*=17) of respondents, followed by 4.0% (*N*=6) for the 35 to 44 years old category. The lowest age group, below 18 years old, represented 4.0% (*N*=6) of the respondents. Regarding ethnicity, most respondents identified as Malays, totalling 96.7% (*N*=145). Chinese and Indian respondents each constituted 0.7% (*N*=1), while the remaining 2.0% (*N*=3) identified as belonging to other ethnic groups. Regarding income, the highest percentage of respondents reported an income range below RM2000, accounting for 90.0% (*N*=135). A smaller proportion, 9.3% (*N*=14), fell within the income bracket of RM2001 to RM4000, and merely 0.7% (*N*=1) reported an income range of RM6001 and above. Further analysis of the respondents' status revealed that students represented the most significant percentage, constituting 60.7% (*N*=91). Employees comprised 31.3% (*N*=47) of the respondents, while the remaining 8.0% (*N*=12) identified as unemployed.

## 4.2 Regression analysis

In this study, a multiple linear regression analysis was employed to investigate the associations among the variables under investigation and to pinpoint the most significant factors affecting customer loyalty in the context of fast-food restaurants. This analytical approach addressed the research objectives and tested the formulated hypotheses. The summary of the regression analysis is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Summary of regression analysis

	<b>B</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Constant</b>	.411	.471		.385
<b>Restaurant atmosphere</b>	.250	.133	.189	.061
<b>Food quality</b>	.111	.142	.077	.435
<b>Service quality</b>	.472	.144	.362	.001

Note:  $R^2 = .328$ ,  $p < 0.05$

Based on the outcomes presented in Table 3, it can be deduced that service quality has the most substantial unit contribution to customer loyalty, with a coefficient of ( $\beta = .362$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Subsequently, restaurant atmosphere ( $\beta = .189$ ) and food quality ( $\beta = .077$ ) exhibited comparatively lower coefficients, rendering these two variables statistically insignificant concerning customer loyalty towards fast-food restaurants since ( $p > 0.05$ ). Consequently, these findings validate the hypotheses posited earlier in this study, with only H3 receiving support. Conversely, H1 and H2 hypotheses were not substantiated. Therefore, the summarized findings are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of hypotheses testing

<b>Proposed hypothesis</b>	<b>Result</b>
H1: There is a positive relationship between restaurant atmosphere and customer loyalty	Not supported
H2: There is a positive relationship between food quality and customer loyalty	Not supported
H3: There is a positive relationship between service quality and customer loyalty	Supported

## 5 Discussion

This study's main purpose is to determine the factors influencing customer loyalty towards fast-food restaurants in Kuala Terengganu. A total of 150 people has completed the survey forms. Referring to Table 4, the results show that only one independent variable has a positive relationship with customer loyalty, which is service quality. However, restaurant atmosphere and food quality do not significantly correlate with customer loyalty towards fast-food restaurants. The regression analysis demonstrated that service quality was the main factor influencing customer loyalty, followed by restaurant atmosphere and food quality.

In contrast to hypothesis H1, which posited a substantial positive relationship between restaurant atmosphere and customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants, the findings of this study rejected H1. The study reveals an insignificant relationship between restaurant atmosphere and customer loyalty within fast-food restaurants. This outcome implies that factors such as cleanliness, overall tidiness, pleasant fragrances, temperature control, and adequate ventilation within the restaurant environment do not influence customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants. This study's findings deviate from prior research, often suggesting a positive impact of restaurant ambience and environment on the dining experience (Azman & Majid, 2023; Agbenyegah et al., 2022; Oh et al., 2021). While many studies have reported a favourable impact of restaurant atmosphere on customer loyalty, the present results align with those of Singh et al. (2021), who determined that the physical environment of fast-food restaurants does not significantly affect customer satisfaction. This result might be attributed to the specific context of the physical environment in the fast-food restaurants under investigation, where many of these establishments do not provide seating for customers, primarily catering to take-out orders. Nonetheless, a clean and inviting facility can still contribute to making a positive initial impression on customers and potentially foster loyalty (Norazha et al., 2022).

Furthermore, hypothesis H2 has been rejected as it signifies an insignificant association between food quality and customer loyalty within fast-food restaurants. Despite numerous prior studies underscoring the pivotal role of food quality across various types of restaurants, this investigation has not substantiated that food quality in fast-food restaurants adequately addresses customers' functional requirements, leading to satisfaction, which contradicts prior research findings (Parid et al., 2023; Singh

et al., 2021; Solunoğlu, 2020). Although customers have consistently identified taste, freshness, temperature, and food presentation as critical indicators of food quality within fast-food restaurants, the outcomes of this study differ, implying that customer loyalty remains unaffected by food quality. Notably, restaurant managers must exercise diligence in selecting only fresh ingredients for food preparation and ensuring meals are served at the appropriate temperature (Ganatra et al., 2021). It is somewhat unexpected that food quality was not found to influence customer satisfaction. These findings align with the research results conducted by Djayapranata and Setyawan (2023). This inconsistency may be attributed to the context of this study, where fast food is widely acknowledged as a type of cuisine associated with lower nutritional value and often high cholesterol content, potentially impacting health. Consequently, the study area may exhibit a lower perception of food quality despite fast-food restaurants adhering to established standards. Nonetheless, food quality remains important in enhancing customer satisfaction, a factor closely tied to customer loyalty.

Conversely, hypothesis H3 was supported as it establishes a noteworthy relationship between service quality and customer loyalty within fast-food restaurants, with service quality emerging as the primary contributing factor in this study. This outcome signifies those customers positively acknowledged the timely delivery of accurately prepared food and the provision of swift service as key attributes of good service quality. This result aligns with earlier research findings (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020; Hidayat et al., 2020; Parid et al., 2023). Assessing customer perceptions of service quality is a pivotal concern within the restaurant industry. Majid et al. (2018) have highlighted that failing to deliver satisfactory service will unlikely foster improved customer loyalty. Furthermore, excellent services have been demonstrated to enhance customer perceptions and retention within the fast-food restaurant context (Oh et al., 2021). Consequently, this implies that the fast-food restaurants within the selected region of this study meet the criteria of providing swift services to customers in a rush and seeking a quick meal. Moreover, foodservice establishments should ensure that they not only meet but exceed customer's needs and expectations in delivering their services and products (Okumus et al., 2020). In line with this, Akgunduz (2023) has proposed that ascertaining customer expectations is essential for tailoring products and services to align with restaurant customer preferences. As a result, service quality significantly impacts customer loyalty, as the delivery of superior restaurant services leads to heightened customer satisfaction, ultimately bolstering customer turnover.

## **6 Conclusion**

The present study was designed to determine the factors influencing customer loyalty towards fast-food restaurants in Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. The findings highlight that service quality emerges as the predominant driver of customer loyalty within the fast-food restaurant context. Specifically, service quality is identified as the primary and potentially influential factor impacting customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants. Customers increasingly favour fast-food restaurants and exhibit loyalty because they cater to their diverse needs, particularly individuals with busy lifestyles

and the time constraints associated with modern living. This is significant for local fast-food enterprises seeking to compete in this fiercely competitive industry. Maintaining competitiveness in the market hinges on fostering customer loyalty.

Monitoring factors impacting customer loyalty requires a profound grasp of the key drivers shaping customer preferences and food quality. These findings offer insights for future researchers studying loyalty drivers. Our study highlights fast food's appeal, where fast-food chains' control improves customer satisfaction in terms of time, service, and food quality. This contributes to the existing literature on customer loyalty to fast-food brands. However, it is crucial to acknowledge limitations, including potential respondent biases. The study needed a preliminary investigation into loyalty's impact on fast-food restaurants. Therefore, future research should explore these factors further, including the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty, as well as price and trust. In summary, our study provides a foundational reference in the food and beverage field, particularly in the fast-food industry.

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