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Are Customers Happy? A Study of Satisfaction in Sarawak's Fast-Food Restaurants

Adakah Pelanggan Gembira? Satu Kajian Mengenai Kepuasan di Restoran Makanan Segera di Sarawak

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Abstract: Fast food restaurants play a significant role in contemporary dining culture, offering convenience and quick service to customers. Understanding the factors that contribute to customer satisfaction and happiness within this sector is crucial for both businesses and researchers. Customer satisfaction in fast food restaurants is often influenced by various factors such as perceived price, service quality, food quality, and the physical environment of the premises. This study investigated the determinants of customer satisfaction and happiness towards fast food restaurants in Sarawak, Malaysia. Data from 414 respondents aged 18 and above were analysed using SPSS through Spearman's correlation and simple linear regression analysis. The findings showed that all variables, perceived price, service quality, food quality, and physical environment quality had significant correlations with customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction was also found to influence customer happiness positively. The results of this study show that the best method to increase customer satisfaction is to offer a fair price and improve the quality of the service, food, and physical environment of the premises. All these factors consequently affect customer happiness with fast food restaurants. These findings provide valuable insights into customer perceptions and behaviour in the fast-food sector in Sarawak. Identifying key determinants of satisfaction and happiness offers the basis for strategic decision-making and service improvement initiatives to optimize the dining experience for consumers.

Keywords: Customer happiness, Customer satisfaction, Fast-Food Industry, Food quality Sarawak, Service quality;

Abstrak: Restoran makanan segera memainkan peranan penting dalam budaya makanan kontemporari, menawarkan keselesaan dan perkhidmatan yang pantas kepada pelanggan. Memahami faktor-faktor yang menyumbang kepada kepuasan dan kebahagiaan pelanggan dalam sektor ini adalah penting bagi kedua-dua perniagaan dan penyelidik. Kepuasan pelanggan di restoran makanan segera sering dipengaruhi oleh pelbagai faktor seperti harga, kualiti perkhidmatan, kualiti makanan, dan persekitaran fizikal premis. Kajian ini mengkaji penentu-penentu kepuasan dan kegembiraan pelanggan terhadap restoran makanan segera di Sarawak, Malaysia. Data daripada 414 responden berumur 18 tahun ke atas dianalisis menggunakan SPSS melalui korelasi Spearman dan analisis regresi linear mudah. Penemuan menunjukkan bahawa semua pembolehubah, harga, kualiti perkhidmatan, kualiti makanan, dan kualiti persekitaran fizikal

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mempunyai korelasi yang signifikan dengan kepuasan pelanggan. Kepuasan pelanggan juga didapati mempengaruhi kegembiraan pelanggan secara positif. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa kaedah terbaik untuk meningkatkan kepuasan pelanggan adalah dengan menawarkan harga yang adil dan meningkatkan kualiti perkhidmatan, makanan, dan persekitaran fizikal premis. Semua faktor ini seterusnya mempengaruhi kegembiraan pelanggan terhadap restoran makanan segera. Penemuan ini memberikan pandangan yang berharga mengenai persepsi dan tingkah laku pelanggan dalam sektor makanan segera di Sarawak. Mengenal pasti penentu-penentu utama kepuasan dan kebahagiaan, menyediakan landasan untuk membuat keputusan strategik dan inisiatif penambahbaikan perkhidmatan untuk mengoptimumkan pengalaman makanan kepada pengguna.

Kata kunci: Kegembiraan pelanggan, Kepuasan pelanggan, Industri makanan segera, Kualiti makanan, Sarawak, Kualiti servis;

Introduction

The development of multinational corporations in the fast-food industry has seen rapid growth, with successful fast-food establishments emerging worldwide. The fast-food industry operates on a global scale, primarily dominated by American franchises, which have established a strong identity in global marketing. In today's competitive market, fast-food restaurants must recognize and fulfill customer demands to enhance satisfaction. Bertram (1975) defines fast food as food prepared and served quickly, enabling fast consumption. In Malaysia, the first fast-food restaurant, A&W, was established in 1963, marking the beginning of the country's fast-food industry. Since 1999, the fast-food industry in Malaysia has expanded significantly, with the number of fast-food chains rising to 7.72 thousand in 2022, up from nearly 7 thousand the previous year. The fast-food restaurant industry in Malaysia is experiencing rapid growth and faces heightened competition in the local business market. Buying fast food from these restaurants has become widespread due to lifestyle changes, eating out habits, dining habits, increased household income, employment status, and the time constraints faced by working individuals (Saporna & Claveria, 2019). Busy working schedules and limited home meal preparation time significantly influence consumer eating habits. Moreover, the increase in living standards and the trend of dining out have led to shifts in Malaysians' food consumption patterns, habits, and purchasing trends (Bougoure & Neu, 2010).

In order to thrive in this sector, businesses must vie for customers' attention and loyalty. Consequently, fast-food operators must leverage their business strengths and enhance management strategies, including pricing, food quality, service delivery, and physical ambience, to ensure a positive customer experience. Customers prioritise food quality, physical environment, and employee service when assessing restaurant service quality. Maintaining a positive customer experience is paramount for achieving satisfaction in the fast-food industry and influencing repeat purchases and loyalty. However, the industry faces persistent challenges in maintaining customer satisfaction and happiness, which is fundamental for business success (Al Masud et al., 2017). Malaysian fast-food restaurants often grapple with poor service quality issues, long waiting times, inaccurate orders, and staff rudeness (Zamani et al., 2020). Such shortcomings directly undermine customer experiences, leading to dissatisfaction and diminished loyalty.

Food quality represents another significant concern, encompassing taste, freshness, presentation, and hygiene. Reports indicate instances of subpar food quality in Malaysian fast-food establishments, including inadequately cooked food and hygiene lapses (Berita RTM, 2023). These lapses erode customer trust and compromise public health and safety standards. Furthermore, the quality of the physical environment plays a critical role in shaping customer perceptions and experiences. Cleanliness, comfort, and ambience significantly influence customer satisfaction and happiness. However, unhygienic restaurant environments and uncomfortable dining spaces have been reported in Malaysia (Zamani et al., 2020), exacerbating customer dissatisfaction. Moreover, the lack of menu variety and options for individuals with dietary restrictions further compounds the challenges faced by fast-food

restaurants. Limited food options alienate certain customer segments and detract from the overall dining experience. This study aimed to investigate factors influencing customer satisfaction and happiness at major local and international fast-food restaurants in Sarawak, including customer-perceived price, service quality, food quality, and physical environment quality. Additionally, the study sought to examine the significant relationships between these factors and overall customer satisfaction within these fast-food establishments. The research examined the extent to which the quality of fast-food restaurants met customers' needs, desires, satisfaction, and happiness based on various factors.

Literature Review

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction refers to the satisfaction customers experience based on their interaction with a product and service in the business industry and can be measured by customer repurchase behaviour (Rahman et al., 2019). Customer satisfaction estimates how products and services within a business industry meet or exceed customer expectations. According to Kotler and Keller (2011), customer satisfaction is personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction resulting from comparing actual performance with an individual's expectations towards a product or service provider. Similarly, Eisyami et al. (2022) mention that customer satisfaction refers to the satisfaction experienced by individuals who have experienced a business industry's service performance that has met customer expectations.

Customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry has been discussed in various studies by many researchers, highlighting the connection between critical elements and factors such as customer-perceived price, service quality, food quality, and atmosphere quality in the restaurant (Chian, 2020). The study has identified how all quality factors contribute to or detract from customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is vital in the business sector, especially in the fast-food industry. Factors such as setting the price of the product or service, service quality, product quality, and environmental characteristics are essential aspects that need to be considered by restaurants, which can affect customer satisfaction (Edeh et al., 2021). Satisfied customers play an important role in shaping customer happiness, loyalty, and long-term sustainability of business success, particularly in economic performance (Fornell et al., 2006). Customer who has a positive experience in the restaurant can affect customer happiness, repeat transactions or returns for future purchases, and customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction can also influence social interaction and act as a brand advocate in fast-food restaurant outlets by sharing their positive experiences, reviews, and feedback and giving recommendations to partners, friends, family, and online communities (Khadka & Maharjan, 2017).

As highlighted by Othman et al. (2020), customer satisfaction, within a marketing context, served as a measure to evaluate overall customer experiences when purchasing a product or service from a service provider. It was achieved when customers had positive experiences and met customer expectations regarding a product and service purchased (Islam et al., 2019). In other words, customer satisfaction is assessed based on how well a product or service fulfilled customer expectations, brought happiness, assisted in achieving goals, and avoided any difficulties that could have led to customer dissatisfaction. Anas (2019) proposes that the business industry, particularly the fast-food sector, should be concerned about quality aspects, including service and product quality, to enhance customer satisfaction. When customers expressed satisfaction with the products and services offered by fast-food restaurants, it fostered customer loyalty. It increased the likelihood of repeat purchases, influencing customer return frequency.

Customer Happiness

According to Alexander (2010), happiness is a vital part of the food service industry as it could influence customer loyalty and the repurchase of products or services. Customer happiness could be considered a perceived higher level of customer emotion when customers meet satisfaction. Customer happiness occurs when customers feel delighted with the experience of using a product or service. Happiness generally means feeling good, enjoying life, and considering life as wonderful for an individual, reflecting positive emotions in the context of human mood changes (Layard, 2002). Customer happiness could be evaluated through the aspects or factors perceived by customers until they feel highly satisfied, and it was related to quality aspects, including service quality and product quality. Happiness leads to a positive bias in memory

selection, which can influence recall by retrieving situational cues in the experienced situation, thereby affecting customer satisfaction (Rust & Oliver, 2000). Purchasing experience can enhance customer happiness, which leads to repeated consumption activities for greater satisfaction (Zhong & Moon, 2020).

Customer Perceived Price and Customer Satisfaction

Price can be described as the monetary amount customers spend to purchase a product or service or the assigned value of a product or service in the business industry. Price plays an imperative role in the business as it relates to the financial measure of profitability, affecting the return on capital and profit earned from sales. In the case of the fast-food industry, they need to employ appropriate pricing strategies and make adjustments to ensure that customers receive a fair price for the product. Hasbullah et al. (2021) found that price and customer satisfaction have a positive relationship. Customers prioritise the price of the fast-food product before making a purchase. In other words, the cost of the product and service plays a significant role in influencing customers' choices regarding fast-food restaurants, and customers tend to be satisfied if they perceive the price to be reasonable and affordable. Customers usually felt satisfied when they perceived the product's price was worth spending, affordable, fair, and offered at a favourable price (Arlanda & Suroso, 2018).

Saxena and Taneja (2020) mention that pricing significantly impacts customer satisfaction in fast-food purchases. Price fairness directly impacts customer satisfaction and perceptions of fast-food restaurant quality (Zhong & Moon, 2020). Raduzzi and Massey (2019) imply that higher-priced products can lead customers to have high expectations regarding the quality of products and services in fast-food restaurants. Hanaysha (2016a) reveals a highly significant relationship between price fairness and restaurant customer satisfaction. This study mentioned that customers experiencing positive fairness in product pricing tend to feel satisfied with fast-food restaurants. Moreover, if the price of a product is reasonable, customers are more likely to purchase and repurchase. Customers experiencing satisfaction further contributes to customer retention because they feel satisfied with the product in fast-food restaurants (Dastane & Fazlin, 2017).

H1a: Perceived price has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Nowadays, customers are primarily focused on the standard of service quality because it can influence the customer experience, level of satisfaction, and happiness, which can lead to positive feedback and repurchasing and customer loyalty to the fast-food industry. Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggested that the most effective way to measure service quality is through the SERVQUAL instrument using the RATER model, which consists of five components: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness. Aftab et al. (2016) identified five service quality categories, including tangibility, reliability, assurance, empathy, and responsiveness, as fundamentals contributing to the success of fast-food restaurants.

Kristiawan et al. (2021) state that service quality significantly influences customer satisfaction. They addressed that fast-food restaurant marketers must be concerned about service quality because it can affect customer satisfaction. Maintaining the quality of service in fast-food restaurants can create a positive impression, positive expectations, and a good experience for customers who visit the fast-food restaurant. Chian (2020) mentions that higher service quality increases customer satisfaction. Most customers were satisfied with the service quality in Malaysian fast-food restaurants, highlighting the effective service provided by the restaurant (Zamani et al., 2020). Saneva and Chortoseva (2020) state that improving service quality can influence customer satisfaction, increasing customer loyalty, empathy guarantee, and reliability.

Gong and Yi (2018) highlight that quality of service significantly enhances customer satisfaction, loyalty, and happiness. Service providers should offer sufficient seating and space for customers to ensure their comfort and satisfaction with the service. Numerous studies have substantiated the noteworthy correlation between service quality and customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants, as evidenced by Saporna and Claveria (2019), Rahman et al. (2019), Chun and Nyam-Orchir (2020), and Zhong and Moon (2020). High-quality service delivery, encompassing the proficiency of staff and restaurant operators, holds the potential to mitigate customer complaints and foster contented patrons. Food accuracy is another pivotal aspect in taking the customer's order and

delivering the order accurately to the customer to maintain customer satisfaction. Food accuracy can influence the overall customer experience and satisfaction with fast-food restaurant services.

H1b: Service quality has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.

Food Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Food quality refers to the characteristics and attributes of food that can influence customer acceptability and depending on any specific criteria consumers need and want (Rothenberger, 2015). Food quality, including food presentation, menu diversity, flavour and taste, food nutritional content and healthiness, food freshness, and food safety, can influence customer choices, satisfaction, loyalty, and willingness to purchase the product items (Hanaysha, 2016b). Maintaining a high level of food quality, particularly in fast-food restaurants, is essential to a marketing business strategy to meet customer expectations. A high degree of food quality can also influence consumer satisfaction and happiness, leading to future purchases.

There is a plethora of studies revealed that food quality significantly impacts customer satisfaction, such as Richardson et al. (2019), Shamsudin et al. (2020), Zhong and Moon (2020), Raduzzi and Massey (2019) and Rahman et al. (2019). All these studies confirmed the significant role of food quality in shaping customer satisfaction. Food quality, including food taste, food temperature, and food presentation, has a significant influence on customer satisfaction. Zamani et al. (2020) state that most customers were satisfied with the food quality in Malaysian fast-food restaurants, which became why they visited them. Fast-food restaurants concerned about customer satisfaction and customer-positive experience must maintain high standards in managing food quality.

H1c: Food quality has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.

Physical Environment Quality and Customer Satisfaction

The physical environment is defined as the restaurant's atmosphere that creates an expectation for the dining experience (Young et al., 2007). Ryu and Jang (2008) propose the DINESCAPE theory for the physical environment. This theory was a measurement scale designed to assess the restaurant's dining areas, including the manufactured physical environment and the human surroundings of dining areas. The DINESCAPE theory comprises six dimensions: aesthetic facility, lighting, ambience, layout, table settings, and service staff. These dimensions influence the overall customer experience, perception, and satisfaction. Fast-food restaurants must understand the relationship between the quality of the physical environment and customer satisfaction. This understanding is crucial for any service-oriented restaurant, as it can contribute to providing a positive expectation and enjoyable experience for customers dining in the restaurant (Canny, 2014).

A few researchers have highlighted the positive relationship between physical environment quality and customer satisfaction; for instance, Nguyen et al. (2019), Najhan et al. (2022), Raduzzi and Massey (2019), Chian (2020), Rahman et al. (2019). According to their findings, creating a pleasant dining environment in the restaurant could increase sales and generate more profits from customers. Restaurant atmosphere, including facility aesthetics, ambience appeal, the spatial layout of the dining, proper lighting, and dining temperature, plays an important role in influencing overall customer satisfaction and experience. When customers had a positive dining experience and expectations regarding the restaurant atmosphere, it enhanced their positive feelings, met customer satisfaction, and made them more interested in revisiting the restaurant.

Fast-food marketers need to be concerned about the quality of the environment by improving the dining area, such as creating a specific restaurant theme and incorporating decorations to build a positive ambience and visual appeal. The restaurant must also keep the premises clean and provide a comfortable environment to enhance customer satisfaction with fast-food restaurants (Chian, 2020). These factors could influence customer experience, satisfaction, and retention.

H1d: Physical environment quality has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.

Customer Satisfaction and Customer Happiness

Customer happiness refers to the feelings and emotions experienced by the customer when they feel satisfied with the purchase and consumption of the product or service (Lee & Lee, 2013). The level of happiness in customers can be achieved when the

customer reaches a high level of satisfaction with the product or service (Alexander, 2010). When customers are satisfied with a product or service, it fulfils their expectations and needs, resulting in a positive emotional state and overall happiness. Oliver (1981) proposes the expectancy-disconfirmation model to relate customer satisfaction and happiness. His study defined customer satisfaction by comparing customers' expectations and perceived performance or service quality. He implied customer satisfaction occurred when they were entirely pleased with a product or service that fulfilled their needs and desires, leading to a sense of happiness.

The relationship between customer satisfaction and customer happiness has been discussed in various studies by many researchers. Zhong and Moon (2020) reveal that customer satisfaction positively influences customer happiness. Customer happiness occurs when customers are satisfied with their current situation or experience. Customers who feel happy and satisfied with the experience could upsurge customer loyalty, and they will recommend the restaurant to their family or friends. A satisfied customer is also likely to share their happiness, provide feedback, and promote the restaurant to others on social media (Rita et al., 2019). Gong and Yi (2018) stated that a satisfied and happy customer could create a positive experience that contributes to a welcoming atmosphere in that place.

In their study, Rahman et al. (2019) reveals a high positive correlation between customer satisfaction and customer happiness, suggesting that happiness occurs when customers are satisfied with a product or service. They summarise that the contexts of feelings such as happiness, acceptance, delight, and pleasure could be used to explain customer satisfaction. Similarly, Nicolao et al. (2009) emphasise that the purchase experience, including positive social interactions with others, is a primary source of happiness. Customers who feel satisfied and happy with the purchasing experience are more loyal and encouraged to purchase the product and service repeatedly.

H2: Customer satisfaction has a significant effect on customer happiness.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, the quantitative method was employed as the research approach to collect primary data. The quantitative research method involved collecting and analysing numerical data obtained through survey responses to relational questions of variables within the research. This was done to describe relationships and find correlations or test hypotheses (Creswell, 2003). This study used the IBM SPSS version 23 for data analysis. Two statistical data analyses, consisting of the Spearman correlation coefficient, were employed to analyse the relationship between four independent variables: customer-perceived price, service quality, food quality, physical environment quality, and customer satisfaction. Additionally, simple linear regression was used to analyse whether customer satisfaction significantly influences customer happiness.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Sarawak, Malaysia, the largest state located on the northwest coast of Borneo. Sarawak was chosen as the research site for several important reasons. First, there is limited research on the factors influencing customer satisfaction and happiness in fast-food restaurants within the region, specifically regarding price, service quality, food quality, and the physical environment. Additionally, the fast-food industry in Sarawak has seen significant growth in urban areas, making it a relevant location for this study. The research focuses on popular fast-food chains such as KFC, McDonald's, SugarBun, Burger King, Subway, Pizza Hut, MarryBrown, Kenny Rogers Roasters, and Domino's Pizza. Lastly, shifts in lifestyle, such as increased eating-out habits, higher household incomes, employment trends, and limited time for working individuals, have driven the rising popularity of fast-food dining in Sarawak.

Population and Sample Size

This study's target population is consumers with dining experience in fast-food restaurants in Sarawak and aged 18 and above. The fast-food establishments considered in this study include Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Sugar Bun, McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, Pizza Hut, Marry Brown, Kenny Rogers Roasters, and Domino's Pizza. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), Sarawak has a population of 2,453,677, with individuals aged 18 and above consisting of 1,728,741. The researcher used Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formulas for the categorical data type to determine the sample size. Based on the formula, this

study requires a minimum sample size of 384 respondents. The targeted sample consisted of consumers who had visited and experienced fast-food services in any fast-food restaurant in Sarawak. Another criterion for respondents is that they were either Sarawak citizens or individuals currently residing in Sarawak. The sample was selected based on their availability, interests, and willingness to participate in this study.

Data Collection and Research Instrument

This study utilised an online questionnaire survey conducted through Google Forms to gather data. The questionnaires were distributed online to targeted respondents who had patronised fast-food restaurants in Sarawak, Malaysia. The questionnaire comprised seven sections. Section A solicited information on respondent demographics, including personal background and general details. Sections B to E focused on perceived price, service quality, food quality, and physical environment quality in the fast-food industry, respectively. Section F gauged customer satisfaction with fast-food restaurants, while Section G assessed customer happiness.

This study employed a five-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 5 indicating "strongly agree". The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies by Zhong and Moon (2020), Hanaysha (2016a), Han and Kim (2009), Shaharudin et al. (2011), Ryu and Jang (2008), Gong and Yi (2018) and Qin and Prybutok (2009) which carefully designed to make it clear and easy for the respondents to understand.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The data collection process spanned three months, from July to October 2023, and 414 responses were gathered through Google Forms. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. The majority were female, with 278 respondents (67.1%), while 136 (32.9%) were male. Most respondents (82.4%) were aged between 18 and 35, followed by 14.5% in the 36 to 50 age group, and 3.1% aged 51 and above. In terms of education, 54.3% held a bachelor's degree, 21.5% a diploma or equivalent certificate, 8% had master's degrees, 6.5% completed secondary school or pre-university, 1.9% held a PhD, and 1.2% had completed only primary education. Regarding employment, 74.1% were students, while 24.6% were employed in government or private sectors. Additionally, 2.5% were unemployed, and 2.2% reported other occupations. Concerning income, 69.3% of respondents earned RM1,500 or below monthly, 11.4% earned between RM1,501 and RM3,000, 10.9% earned between RM3,001 and RM5,000, while fewer than 10% reported incomes above RM5,000.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	278	67.1
	Male	136	32.9
Age	18-35 years	341	82.4
	36-50 years	60	14.5
	51 years and above	13	3.1
Education Level	Primary school	5	1.2
	Secondary school/Pre-university	27	6.5
	Diploma or equivalent certificate	89	21.5
	Bachelor's degree	225	54.3
	Master's degree	33	8.0
	Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	8	1.9
Occupation	Student	307	74.1
	Employed (Government/Private)	102	24.6
	Unemployed	10	2.5
	Other	9	2.2
Monthly Personal Income	RM1,500 or below	287	69.3
	RM1,501 – RM3,000	47	11.4

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	RM3,001 – RM5,000	45	10.9
	Above RM5,000	35	8.4

Reliability Test

Table 2 shows the reliability testing to identify and analyse the consistency of all six variables in this study. It shows the value of Cronbach's alpha of all constructs within a range from 0.847 to 0.933, which exceeds the acceptable cut-off point by at least the alpha values of 0.6 and above. All variables employed in this study are internally consistent and adequate and could be considered good reliability for a survey instrument.

Table 2. Reliability test results

Constructs	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Standard Deviation
Customer Perceived Price	5	0.921	3.5459	0.86300
Service Quality	6	0.933	4.1135	0.74922
Food Quality	6	0.875	4.1816	0.64397
Physical Environment Quality	6	0.929	4.1981	0.74288
Customer Satisfaction	7	0.930	4.0511	0.72049
Customer Happiness	3	0.847	4.0845	0.80427

Spearman Correlation Coefficient

This study utilised the Spearman correlation analysis to determine and investigate the relationship between customer satisfaction and happiness in the fast-food industry. The results of the analysis are reported in Tables 3 and 4. According to the analysis, the correlation between customer-perceived price and customer satisfaction showed significant results ($r = 0.584$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, the correlation between food quality and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.575$, $p < 0.001$), food quality and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.666$, $p < 0.001$), and physical environment quality and customer satisfaction ($r = 0.627$, $p < 0.001$) all show significant positive correlations. Thus, all the hypotheses H1a, H1b, H1c, and H1d were supported.

Table 3. Spearman's correlation coefficient results

	Code	Items		Customer Satisfaction (CS)
Spearman's rho	CPP	Customer Perceived Price	Correlation Coefficient	0.584
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
			N	414
	SQ	Service Quality	Correlation Coefficient	0.575
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
			N	414
	FQ	Food Quality	Correlation Coefficient	0.666
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
			N	414
	PEQ	Physical Environment Quality	Correlation Coefficient	0.627
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
			N	414

Table 4. Results of research hypothesis H1a- H1d

H_x	Hypothesis Path	Hypothesis	Results
H1a	CPP→ CS	Customer-perceived price has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.	Supported
H1b	SQ → CS	Service quality has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.	Supported

H1c	FQ → CS	Food quality has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.	Supported
H1d	PEQ → CS	Physical environment quality has a significant correlation with customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants.	Supported

Simple Linear Regression

Table 5 and Table 6 present the results of simple linear regression. The simple linear regression analysis revealed a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer happiness (r=0.719, R^2=0.516, p<0.001). This indicates a strong positive linear relationship, implying that as customer satisfaction increases, customer happiness also increases. The ANOVA results confirmed the significance of the regression model (F=439.900, p<0.001). The R^2 value of 0.516 indicates that approximately 51.6% of the variance in customer happiness can be explained by the variance in customer satisfaction. This suggests that more than half of the variability in customer happiness scores can be attributed to variations in customer satisfaction levels, demonstrating a substantial association between the two variables in the context of the study. As presented in Table 7, the result indicated that the hypothesis, H2, is supported.

Table 5. ANOVA results for simple correlation

ANOVA[a]					
Model	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	137.951	1	137.951	439.900	.000[b]
Residual	129.201	412	.314		
Total	267.152	413			

a. Dependent variable: Mean customer happiness

b. Predictors: (Constant), Mean customer satisfaction

Table 6. Simple correlation coefficient result

Coefficients[a]									
Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Torelance	VIF
Constant	.835	.157		5.306	.000	.526	1.144		
Mean customer satisfaction	.802	.038	.719	20.974	.000	.727	.877	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent variable: Mean customer happiness

Table 7. Results of research hypothesis H2

H_x	Hypothesis path	Hypothesis	Results
H2	CS → CH	Customer satisfaction has a significant effect on customer happiness	Supported

Discussion

The first objective of this study is to investigate the correlation between perceived price, service quality, food quality, physical environment quality, and customer satisfaction. Consistent with prior research findings, this study also reveals that those variables, as mentioned above, significantly correlate with customer satisfaction among respondents in Sarawak. The customer-perceived price is found to have a significant positive correlation with customer satisfaction. This result is in line with previous research by Hasbullah et al. (2021), Dastane and Fazlin (2017), and Raduzzi and Massey (2019). Customer satisfaction occurs when customers feel that the price is justified and that it is worth spending money to purchase food and beverage products at a fast-food restaurant. Customers' perception of price fairness positively influences their satisfaction with fast-food restaurants.

Service quality appeared to have a positive significant correlation with customer satisfaction. This statement signifies that the higher the quality of service, the higher the customer satisfaction level. This result aligns with Chian's (2020) and Kristiawan et al. (2021) research. Customers feel satisfied if the fast-food restaurant is concerned about the quality of service according to customer's needs and wants. Fast-food restaurants should proactively address customers' complaints and make improvements to minimise customer negative feedback. Fast-food restaurants must show a sincere interest in solving the problem to maintain customer satisfaction and encourage customers to revisit and increase customer loyalty. The fast-food employees should demonstrate a good attitude when serving the customers. Staff friendliness is important in the fast-food industry because it can create a welcoming environment and a comfortable feeling for customers purchasing the fast-food product. Staff also should demonstrate a willingness to help the team members among the staff to maintain service efficiency and speed. Food quality significantly correlates with customer satisfaction among customers in Sarawak. The findings are supported by Raduzzi and Massey (2019), Sabir et al. (2014), and Hasbullah et al. (2021), who agreed that food taste, presentation, and temperature are among the food quality components that can affect customer satisfaction. A positive eating experience could increase customer satisfaction and their intention to repurchase the fast-food product in the future.

This study found a positive relationship between physical environment quality and customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry. Several researchers, such as Najhan et al. (2022), Raduzzi and Massey (2019), Chian (2020), and Nguyen et al. (2019), also found similar results. Facility aesthetics, such as interior design, decoration, floor cleanliness, and other accessories, are crucial in creating a pleasant-looking physical environment. It is an important factor in improving and maintaining customer satisfaction in the restaurant. Besides that, cleanliness, appealing interior design, and a comfortable environment positively influence customer satisfaction. Spatial layout, which is `related to the arrangement of seating positions in the restaurant, can affect customer's comfort and satisfaction when they dine there. The arrangement of seating areas, food service lines, and walkways in the restaurant dining area is essential in influencing customer experience and feelings.

As stated earlier, this study also endeavours to determine the effect of customer satisfaction on customer happiness. The simple linear regression showed that customer satisfaction significantly affects customer happiness. The result is consistent with studies by Zhong and Moon (2020) and Rita et al. (2019). Customer happiness occurs when customers achieve a higher level of satisfaction. Customer happiness also occurs when the customer's positive emotions align with their expectation, purchasing experience, and dining experience in a fast-food restaurant. Customer satisfaction and happiness can lead to loyalty in a fast-food restaurant, which builds a strong connection between customers and various fast-food franchises. This connection can enhance their intention to return or repurchase the fast-food product. Happiness can be related to the quality of social life, where the enjoyment of fast food is not only about the food or service itself but also about the social experience context. This involves factors such as visiting and dining in a fast-food restaurant with friends or family members. They can spend time together to create happiness and enjoyable moments in fast-food restaurants, where they have an opportunity to share meals, engage in conversation, and build some memories together.

Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed significant positive correlations between various factors—customer-perceived price, service quality, food quality, and physical environment quality—and

customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants in Sarawak, Malaysia, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.575 to 0.666 ($p < 0.001$). These results support all hypotheses related to these factors, indicating their substantial role in enhancing customer satisfaction. The strong correlation between price, service, and food quality with customer satisfaction highlights that consumer in Sarawak place high importance on the value for money, efficient service, and food standards when evaluating their dining experiences. The physical environment, though still positively correlated, shows a relatively weaker impact compared to the other factors. This could suggest that customers prioritize the tangible aspects of the service (e.g., food and price) over ambiance when making decisions about where to eat.

A key gap highlighted by these findings is the lower-than-expected influence of the physical environment. This could indicate a need for further research to understand why the ambiance or restaurant setting plays a smaller role in shaping customer satisfaction in Sarawak compared to other regions or industries, where it is more influential. Additionally, while the study establishes a significant link between customer satisfaction and happiness, the underlying mechanisms—such as emotional or psychological factors—connecting these two constructs warrant further exploration to build a more comprehensive framework for improving customer well-being. Highlighting these gaps provides opportunities for future research to delve into aspects like customer expectations of the physical environment, the role of emotional engagement in dining experiences, and regional preferences in fast-food service, all of which could offer new insights into enhancing customer satisfaction in Sarawak.

Research Implications

Implications for Theory

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on customer satisfaction and happiness in the context of fast-food restaurants. The findings offer theoretical insights into how key factors such as food quality, service standards, price perceptions, and the physical environment influence customer satisfaction. The study highlights the significance of pricing strategies, demonstrating that perceived price fairness is intricately linked to customer expectations and perceptions of quality. This reinforces existing theories on consumer behaviour, particularly the value-perception model, where customers evaluate their dining experiences by balancing the quality of food and services with the costs incurred.

Implications for Policy Makers

From a policy-making perspective, these findings suggest that regulators should focus on promoting fair competition within the fast-food sector, particularly concerning pricing transparency and customer value. Given the current economic environment and rising living costs, policy interventions aimed at protecting consumers from price inflation or unethical pricing practices could enhance customer trust and overall satisfaction. Additionally, policies that incentivize fast-food outlets to maintain high standards in food quality, safety, and hygiene will support public health goals while simultaneously improving customer experiences. As the demand for fast-food restaurants grows due to shifting occupational patterns, policymakers should also consider promoting accessibility initiatives, including support for businesses that invest in inclusive, disabled-friendly, and senior-friendly services.

Implications for Industry Practitioners

For industry practitioners, this study provides actionable insights into how fast-food restaurant marketers can enhance customer satisfaction and happiness. Practitioners should prioritize creating value-driven pricing strategies that align with consumer expectations, especially in the current economic climate where customers are highly price-sensitive. Developing competitive pricing strategies that balance affordability with quality can increase customer loyalty and satisfaction. Furthermore, investments in service quality improvements, such as self-service kiosks, digital payment options, and enhanced accessibility features, will not only provide convenience but also cater to a broader customer base, including individuals with disabilities and the elderly. Practitioners must also recognize the growing trend of time-constrained customers preferring fast-food restaurants, and continue to innovate in offering a diverse menu that appeals to changing consumer preferences while maintaining operational efficiency. By addressing these factors, fast-food outlets can achieve higher customer satisfaction and happiness, leading to improved profitability, return on investment, and market share.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study has limitations worth noting for future research. It focused only on four factors influencing customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry: perceived price, service quality, food quality, and physical environment quality. The findings may not apply universally across Malaysia; they were conducted solely in Sarawak, Malaysia, and limited to nine specific fast-food brands. The sample size of 384 respondents from Sarawak alone may not fully represent Malaysia's broader population of fast-food customers. Additionally, the study's reliance on an online Google Form questionnaire may have restricted data collection. Future research could consider hybrid methods to gather more comprehensive insights.

Future research should explore the evolving relationship between customer satisfaction and happiness in the fast-food industry through longitudinal studies. Considering the limited literature on this topic, deeper insights are needed into how these concepts influence each other over time. Incorporating customer socio-demographic profiles and expanding the study beyond Sarawak, Malaysia, to other states is recommended for a comprehensive understanding. Investigating impact variables like perceived price, service, food quality, environment, revisit intention, and customer behaviour could provide valuable insights. Increasing the sample size would enhance the study's accuracy and reliability, allowing for more precise inferences and broader generalizability.

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