

From Refueling the Tank to Refilling the Stomach: The Predictors of Gas Station Foodservice Outlets towards Customer Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of the physical environment on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in quick-service restaurants (QSRs) and gas stations. The purpose is to investigate how atmospherics such as layout, lighting, and decor influence customer perceptions and behaviors across these service environments. A quantitative approach was employed, utilizing a structured questionnaire administered to 400 respondents. They are customers of gas station food service outlets in Klang Valley. Findings reveal a significant positive correlation between favorable food quality, service quality, service convenience, and atmosphere towards customer perspective, and intention to revisit QSRs in the gas stations. The implications suggest that managers in these sectors should prioritize enhancing their physical surroundings to improve customer experience and loyalty. This study contributes to the literature by offering empirical insights into the role of ambiance beyond traditional service factors in influencing consumer behavior across diverse service contexts.

Keywords: Gas station, Foodservice outlets, Service quality, Food quality, Service convenience, Atmospheric, Customer perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Gas station food outlets (GSFOs) represent a nonconventional segment of the fast-food market, distinct from traditional fast-food giants like McDonald's and Burger King. Recently, major gas station chains in Malaysia, such as Petronas, Petron, and Shell, have ventured into this segment by creating dedicated spaces for food preparation and renovating dining areas. These initiatives include launching outlets like Treats Café, Mesra Café, and Deli N Go Café, aimed at catering to the busy lifestyles of Malaysians.

The expansion of gas stations into the food service industry reflects a broader trend seen in consumer behavior. In the US, spending on fast-food meals has surged, with quick-service restaurant (QSR) sales rising from \$273 billion in 2015 to \$299.6 billion in 2018 (Statistica, 2019). This growing demand for diverse dining options has intensified competition among fast-food establishments, prompting the emergence of new concepts as operators vie for market share (Shepherd and Ahmed, 2000; Mathe-Souleik et al., 2015).

Previous studies have explored the impact of customer experience on overall satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Fornell et al., 1996; Richardson et al., 2019). Factors such as food quality, service quality, convenience, and atmosphere have been identified as key influencers of customer satisfaction. However, there is a notable gap in research regarding the dining experience at unconventional food service outlets,

such as gas stations. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the unique elements of the dining experience at GSFOs and their impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

LITERATURE GAP

A. Research Gap

Gas station food outlets (GSFOs) are increasingly becoming a prominent part of the fast-food landscape due to heightened consumer demand for convenience and a variety of dining options. The fast-paced, busy lifestyles of modern consumers have significantly driven the need for quick, accessible meals, which in turn has prompted gas stations to broaden their services beyond merely offering fuel (NPD Group, 2017). Furthermore, the highly competitive nature of the fast-food market has spurred innovation and diversification among food service providers (Shepherd & Ahmed, 2000). GSFOs effectively cater to on-the-go consumers by offering a one-stop solution where they can refuel their vehicles and enjoy a meal, thereby enhancing overall customer satisfaction and loyalty (Mathe-Soulek et al., 2015). These combined factors have contributed to the growing presence and significance of GSFOs within the food service industry.

B. Food Quality

"Food quality" refers to the characteristics of a food item that consumers find acceptable, including size, shape, gloss, color, consistency, texture, flavor, and nutritional value. In gas station foodservice outlets, managing food safety is challenging due to cross-contamination, temperature control, hygiene, and shelf life. High personnel turnover demands straightforward staff training and oversight. Minimizing staff's handling and preparation is essential, starting with suppliers and using an efficient delivery system. Collaboration with suppliers to design product-specific equipment with automated fail-safe technology and limited shelf lives improves in-store preparation efficiency (Shepherd & Ahmed, 2000; Mathe-Soulek et al., 2015). Unlike traditional restaurants, gas station food service outlets cater to a broad range of consumer demographics by offering a wide variety of food and beverage options. These can include grab-and-go items, heat-and-serve, or retail-packaged goods. Implementing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for each delivery option highlights the complexity of managing food safety at these outlets (NPD Group, 2017).

Food quality significantly impacts customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Factors like taste, presentation, temperature, healthy options, and freshness are crucial (Ophuis & Van Trijp, 1995; Chamhuri & Batt, 2015; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Recent studies show increasing consumer interest in food freshness and origin (Savellie et al., 2017; Chamhuri & Batt, 2015). High food quality enhances customer satisfaction, likelihood of return, and willingness to recommend (Bihamta et al., 2017; Ha & Jang, 2010; Mathe-Soulek et al., 2015; Namin, 2017). This study examines how various aspects of the dining experience at gas stations affect overall customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. High food quality is crucial for increasing overall happiness, psychological stimulation, and the desire to eat similar dishes in the future (Bujisic et al., 2014; Li & Petrick, 2010; Muskat et al., 2019).

C. Service Quality

Service quality, defined as "the customer's assessment of a product's total excellence or superiority" (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 3), plays a crucial role in customer satisfaction and the likelihood of return visits to fast-food restaurants (Liu & Tse, 2018). Previous studies have underscored the significance of both food and service quality in enhancing overall satisfaction and customer retention in these settings (Johns & Pine, 2002; Jun et al., 2017; Nguyen et al., 2018; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Oliver, 1996; Soriano, 2002).

Moreover, the success of food service establishments hinges directly on service quality. Barnes (2016a, 2016b) argues that prioritizing customer satisfaction and service quality can lead to competitive advantages and increased consumer spending. Recognizing its impact on customers' perceptions of their overall dining

experience, service quality remains a critical factor in the food service industry (Ihtiyar et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2019)

D. Service Convenience

Convenience, defined as the provision of goods or services with minimal effort or risk to the consumer (Adiele & Kenneth-Adiele, 2017), plays a crucial role in customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in fast-food settings. Service convenience, as described by Chang et al. (2010), emphasizes how efficient service providers help customers achieve their goals. Similarly, convenience in dining contexts, highlighted by Scholliers (2015) and Hertz & Halkier (2017), focuses on saving customers' time and energy during meal purchases at fast-food outlets. Lin et al. (2015) and Mehmood and Najmi (2017) underscore that customers value fast food for its convenience compared to cooking at home.

Several studies have established a direct link between convenience, customer satisfaction, and future purchase intentions (Bellotti et al., 2015; Mohlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah, 2016; Wong & Zhao, 2016). This study emphasizes the importance of convenience in enhancing overall dining experiences and influencing consumer behavior positively.

E. Atmospheric

Atmospherics, defined as environmental elements deliberately designed to evoke specific emotional responses in customers, are recognized as pivotal in the restaurant industry. These elements encompass air quality, lighting, temperature, decor, and other sensory cues that collectively influence customers' dining experiences and behaviors at the point of purchase (Kotler, 1973; Bitner, 1992). Studies consistently demonstrate that atmospherics play a critical role comparable to service quality and food offerings in shaping customer perceptions and behavioral intentions (Chang et al., 2015; Ha & Jang, 2010).

Research by Barnes et al. (2016a, 2016b), Canny (2014), and Swimberghe and Wooldridge (2014) underscore the significant impact of atmospherics on overall customer satisfaction. For instance, factors such as air quality, service design, and aesthetic appeal contribute not only to customer enjoyment but also to their likelihood of recommending the establishment and returning for future visits (Ali et al., 2016; Hyun et al., 2018). Understanding and effectively managing atmospherics thus remain crucial for enhancing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth in the competitive food service industry.

F. Customer Perspective

Previous research has consistently highlighted that the physical environment, service quality, food quality, and convenience are paramount in shaping patrons' overall satisfaction and influencing their likelihood of returning to food service establishments (Han & Hyun, 2017; Richardson et al., 2019). Customer satisfaction not only reflects customers' perspectives but also significantly impacts a firm's success (Han & Hyun, 2017). Consumer behavior, encompassing decisions related to acquiring, consuming, and disposing of products and services, plays a fundamental role across societies and cultures (Jacoby, 2001).

In the context of the food service industry, behavioral intention denotes customers' inclination to revisit establishments (Bujisic et al., 2014). Lower prices at fast-food venues tend to attract value-conscious customers, influencing their decision to return and recommend these establishments (Mathe-Soulek et al., 2015). Given the affordability of quick-service meals at gas station food service outlets compared to traditional restaurants, these locations are increasingly preferred by customers during their daily routines. This study examines how various dining experience elements at gas station food service outlets influence customers' behavioral intentions, with a particular focus on whether overall satisfaction mediates this relationship.

Based on the literature review, four hypotheses were proposed:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between food quality and customer's perspective.

H₂: There is a significant relationship between service quality and customer's perspective.

H₃: There is a significant relationship between service convenience and customer's perspective.

H₄: There is a significant relationship between atmospherics and customer's perspective.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers utilized a closed-ended questionnaire as their primary data collection tool, developed using Google Forms and distributed through social media platforms such as Telegram, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions divided into six sections. The first section gathered demographic information including gender, age, education, marital status, and profession using multiple-choice questions.

The subsequent sections addressed the variables in the research framework: consumer food quality, service quality, convenience, and atmosphere at non-traditional fast-food outlets in gas stations within Klang Valley. Likert scales ranging from 1 to 5 were employed to gauge respondents' perspectives. The final section assessed overall customer perspectives on return intentions and recommendations, also using a Likert scale.

All questionnaire items were adapted from established studies (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Bellotti et al., 2015; Mohlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah, 2016; Wong & Zhao, 2016; Bitner, 1992; Bujisic et al., 2014). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 20, incorporating both descriptive (frequency) and inferential analysis techniques. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to test the strength of each predictor.

A total of 400 respondents, who were customers of gas station food service outlets in Klang Valley, participated in the study. The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, the most common measure of internal consistency. According to Hair et al. (2003), an alpha value above 0.6 indicates acceptable reliability, while a value below 0.6 is considered unacceptable. The results of the reliability test for this study are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1 RELIABILITY STATISTICS OF VARIABLES

Variables	No of items	Cronbach Alpha
Food Quality	6	0.78
Service Quality	2	0.77
Convenience	3	0.78
Atmospheric	5	0.90
Consumer Perspectives	2	0.76

RESULTS

A. Food Quality

TABLE 2 PEARSON CORRELATION OF FOOD QUALITY AND CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES

		Food Quality	Consumer Perspectives
Food Quality	Pearson Correlation	1	.384**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.001
	N	400	400

Consumer Perspective	Pearson Correlation	.178**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	400	400

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 2 above shows that the result of the Pearson Correlation test has been conducted between food quality and customer perspective of non-traditional fast-food outlets at the gas station. There is a significant correlation between these two variables. The result shows that the Pearson Correlation is ($r = .384$, $n = 400$). This correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, which can mean 99 percent confidants. According to Pallant (2005), if the value of between 0.3 to 0.4, the value is indicated as low correlated. 0.387 was considered as a low degree of correlation between food quality and customer perspective. This value clarified that 38% of service quality has a significant relationship to customer perspective of non-traditional fast-food outlets at the gas station

B. Service Quality

TABLE 3 PEARSON CORRELATION OF SERVICE QUALITY AND CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES

		Service Quality	Consumer Perspectives
Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	1	.500**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.002
	N		400
Consumer Perspective	Pearson Correlation	.500**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	400	400

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3 above shows that the result of the Pearson Correlation test has been conducted between service quality and customer perspective of non-traditional fast-food outlets at the gas station. There is a significant correlation between these two variables. The result shows that the Pearson Correlation is ($r = .500$, $n = 400$). This correlation is significant at the 0.01 level, which can mean 99 percent confidants. According to Pallant (2005), if the value lies between 0.4 to 0.59, the value is indicated as a moderate degree of correlation. 0.500 was considered as a low degree of correlation between service quality and customer perspective. This value clarified that 50% of service quality has a significant relationship to the customer perspective of non-traditional fast-food outlets at the gas station.

C. Convenience

TABLE 4 PEARSON CORRELATION OF SERVICE CONVENIENCE AND CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES

		Service Convenience	Consumer Perspectives
Convenience	Pearson Correlation	1	.367**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.001
	N		400
Consumer Perspective	Pearson Correlation	.367**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	400	400

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4 above shows that the result of the Pearson Correlation test has been conducted between service convenience and customer perspective of non-traditional fast-food outlets at the gas station. There is a significant correlation between these two variables. The result shows that the Pearson Correlation is ($r = 0.367$, $n = 400$). This correlation is significant at the 0.01 level which can mean that 99 percent confident. According to Pallant (2005), if the value lies between 0.3 to 0.4, the value is indicated as a low degree of correlation. 0.367 was considered as a low degree of correlation between service quality and customer perspective. This value clarified that 36% of the convenience of restaurants at the gas stations has a significant relationship towards the customer perspective of non-traditional fast-food outlets at the gas station.

D. Atmospheric

TABLE 5 PEARSON CORRELATION OF ATMOSPHERIC AND CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES

		Atmospheric	Consumer Perspectives
Atmospheric	Pearson Correlation	1	.357**
	Sig (2-tailed)		.001
	N	400	400
Consumer Perspective	Pearson Correlation	.357**	1
	Sig (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	400	400

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 5 above shows that the result of the Pearson Correlation test has been conducted between atmospheric of dining at the gas station and the customer perspective. There is a significant correlation between these two variables. The result shows that the Pearson Correlation is ($r = 0.357$, $n = 400$). This correlation is significant at the 0.01 level which can mean that 99 percent confident. According to Pallant (2005), if the value lies between 0.3 to 0.4, the value is indicated as a low degree of correlation. 0.357 was considered as a low degree of correlation between service quality and customer perspective. This value clarified that 35% of atmospheric restaurants at gas stations have a significant relationship with the customer perspective.

TABLE 6 RESULT OF PEARSON CORRELATION AND INDICATION

Variable of	Pearson Correlation	Indication
Food Quality	0.384	Low Correlation
Service Quality	0.500	Moderately Correlation
Convenience	0.367	Low Correlation
Atmospheric	0.357	Low Correlation

E. Hypotheses Testing

The method of hypothesis is used as an assumption of a population parameter. This indicates an assumption whether it is possible to be true or not. A hypothesis is a formal procedure used by statisticians to accept or reject statistical analysis. The result was conducted by using the Pearson Coefficient Correlation method in SPSS software to determine whether the hypothesis was accepted or rejected.

Based on the table below, the result of the hypothesis was concluded that the entire hypothesis was supported. Based on table 7, it shows that all the results were below 0.05 at the significance level ($p = 0.01$). The first hypothesis was related to the food quality of restaurants at the gas station ($r = 0.84$) and has significance towards consumer perspective, second hypothesis which was service quality of restaurants at the

gas station ($r=0.500$) has significance towards consumer perspective, third convenience of the gas station restaurant ($r=0.367$) has significance towards consumer perspective and lastly atmospheric of the gas station restaurant ($r=0.357$) has significance towards consumer perspective towards dining experience in the gas station restaurant.

TABLE 7 HYPOTHESES RESULTS

Indicator	Statement of Hypothesis	Remark (Consumer Behavior Perspective)
H ₁	There is a significant positive relationship between food quality and customer's perspective	Supported
H ₂	There is a significant positive relationship between service quality and the customer's perspective	Supported
H ₃	There is a significant positive relationship between service convenience and the customer's perspective	Supported
H ₄	There is a significant positive relationship between atmospherics and the customer's perspective	Supported

DISCUSSION

A. Food Quality

The results indicate that food quality significantly impacts customer perspective, with a probability value of less than 0.05 supporting the first hypothesis. This suggests that perceived quality is a key factor influencing customers' decisions to return to and revisit gas station restaurants.

Contrary to Chow et al. (2013), who found that food freshness and presentation affect customer satisfaction and return likelihood, this study aligns with Bihanta et al. (2017), Ha and Jang (2010), Mathe-Souleik et al. (2015), and Namin (2017). These studies highlight that food quality is crucial in shaping dining experiences, enhancing customer pleasure, and encouraging return visits and recommendations. This research reveals a strong correlation between perceived quality and consumer satisfaction, suggesting that higher food quality positively influences customers' intentions to return and recommend the restaurant to others, such as family and friends.

B. Service Quality

The results show that the p-value is less than 0.05, indicating the hypothesis is supported and there is a significant relationship between service quality and customers' intention to return to dine at gas station restaurants. Kim (2013) found a positive relationship between service quality and purchasing behavior, while Aptaguna and Pitaloka (2016) demonstrated that service quality positively influences customer perspectives. Barnes (2016a, 2016b) argued that prioritizing customer satisfaction and service quality leads to competitive advantages and increased consumer spending in food service establishments. The importance of service quality in shaping customers' overall service experience is crucial (Ihtiyar et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2019). Thus, service quality is a key factor influencing customer satisfaction and perspectives.

C. Service Convenience

The results indicated that the probability value for service convenience was 0.001, which is below the 0.05 threshold, supporting the hypothesis that convenience influences customer behavior. This suggests that when a restaurant offers convenient services, customers are more likely to return and dine again at the gas station restaurant. Several studies have directly linked convenience, satisfaction, and consumers' behavioral

intentions, such as future purchases of goods and services (Belloti et al., 2015; Mohlmann, 2015; Tussyadiah, 2016; Wong & Zhao, 2016). This study confirms that convenience is essential for enhancing diners' experiences.

D. Atmospheric

The results indicate that the quality of the atmospheric has a significant probability value of 0.01, which is less than 0.05, supporting the hypothesis that the atmosphere of a gas station restaurant influences customers' likelihood to return and revisit. This study concludes that the physical environment, service quality, food quality, and convenience significantly impact patrons' overall satisfaction (Han & Hyun, 2017; Richardson et al., 2019). Customer satisfaction is a predictor of their intention to return, revisit, and recommend the restaurant to others. Therefore, the atmosphere of a restaurant plays a crucial role in enhancing customer satisfaction when dining at gas station restaurants.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, enhancing service quality at gas station dining outlets is crucial for influencing customer satisfaction and perspective. Upgrading services and adopting a "grab and go" food concept can cater to customers' preferences for convenience and minimize wait times, thereby encouraging return visits. Managers should focus on attracting customers by improving food quality and offering trendy, customizable, and healthy food options to appeal to health-conscious consumers. To compete effectively with fast-food giants like KFC and McDonald's located in gas stations, differentiation through friendly service, mobile app integration, seating options, and delivery services is recommended. Investing in continuous improvement based on customer feedback will foster loyalty and strengthen the business by adapting to evolving food service trends and customer preferences.

This approach aligns with studies emphasizing the impact of service quality, food quality, and convenience on customer satisfaction and loyalty in fast-casual dining settings (Richardson & Hyun, 2019). Gas station outlets can leverage these strategies to not only meet but exceed customer expectations, enhancing their overall dining experience and competitive edge in the market.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it is recommended that all gas stations in Klang Valley upgrade their non-traditional restaurant offerings. The trend of combining convenience stores with fast food outlets presents an opportunity for gas stations to enhance profitability and attract more customers. Convenience is a key driver for consumers choosing gas station outlets for dining, as it aligns with the "grab and go" trend in food service. However, competition from traditional fast-food restaurants remains a challenge. This study underscores the significant influence of food quality, service quality, convenience, and atmosphere on customers' dining experiences. Positive experiences increase customer loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. To sustain success, gas station restaurants should prioritize convenience by simplifying ordering processes, ensuring quick service, and minimizing wait times.

Previous research highlights that customers prioritize food knowledge, ingredient transparency, and food quality (Savelli et al., 2017). Given that gas stations often serve as rest stops during long journeys, offering high-quality, healthy options with fresh ingredients, appealing flavors, and optimal temperature is crucial for encouraging repeat visits and enhancing the dining experience.

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