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## The Fast-Food Experience: Key Determinants of Satisfaction and Loyalty Among University Students

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### Abstract

Drawing on signaling theory, this study aims to understand how food quality, price fairness and service quality drive customer satisfaction. Furthermore, it also examines the subsequent effect of customer satisfaction on fostering customer loyalty. The extant literature reveals a scarcity of studies exploring the determinants of customer loyalty in Pakistan's fast-food sector, with most prior research predominantly focusing on fast-food establishments in developed countries. This study addresses these gaps in the literature. Convenience sampling was employed, and data were collected from 180 students of Malakand University through structured questionnaire. Regression analysis results indicated significant relationships between food quality, price fairness, service quality, and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated a substantial and positive customer satisfaction association between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. This study presents significant implications for restaurant operators seeking to comprehend the pivotal roles of food quality, service quality, and price fairness in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty. It underscores the importance of prioritizing high-quality food at fair prices while enhancing service quality. The service staff plays a crucial role in delivering exceptional dining experiences, thereby enhancing customer satisfaction and promoting customer loyalty. In addition, the paper critically examines the study's limitations and calls for future research.

**Keywords:** Food quality, Price fairness, Service quality, Fast-food restaurants, Pakistan.

### 1. Introduction

Prepackaged meals or ready-to-eat food is referred to as fast food, or convenience food occasionally (Harrison & Marske, 2005; Shetu, 2024). It is defined as food that has a low to non-existent nutritional value but an excessive amount of fat and calories (Majid et al., 2024). Due to its quick preparation, affordable pricing, and accessibility as a substitute for home-cooked meals, fast food is one of the food categories that is currently seeing the fastest growth (Goyal & Singh, 2007). Adolescent fast-food intake has increased over the last thirty years (Ahmed et al., 2019; Shetu, 2024). The fast-food sector provides chances for visitors, families, and friends to combine leisure and recreational activities with meals. It is recommended that fast-food firms make strategic use of their natural strengths and resources to develop marketing plans that will raise consumer satisfaction and total sales (Dandis et al., 2023; Santos & Sotelo-Drequito, 2024). One of the many

advantages that fast food provides to customers is time savings, which is, in particular, helpful for travelers (Chan, Opoku, & Choe, 2024; Kim & Huh, 1998) as well as walkers. High service quality engages and retain customers, ensures survival and growth (Ezeh & Nkamnebe, 2023). Conscious and subconscious factors impact a person's restaurant preference. Customers process the value attributed to these dining attributes in their thoughts before making a purchase (Anjum, Akram, & Murtaza, 2024). A positive dining experience gives consumers a greater sense of value and competitive advantage to a business (Slack et al., 2021). Previous studies have identified a number of factors that greatly increase patron satisfaction in the restaurant industry. For example, customer satisfaction is determined, for instance, by factors such as food quality (Ababneh et al., 2022; Majid et al., 2024), service quality (Alzaydi, 2023; Khoo, 2022; Timo & Djawahir, 2019; Zhong & Moon, 2020) and price fairness (Konuk, 2018; Nathalia & Diayudha, 2024; Opata et al., 2021). Other studies (Cahaya, Winarti & Erasashanti, 2023; Namin, 2017; Yapp & Tohari, 2021) highlighted customer satisfaction as a determinant of customer loyalty. A review of existing literature indicated a limited number of studies exploring the factors driving customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants within developing countries, including Pakistan. Most research on this topic has been carried out in Australia United states of America (USA) and Europe (Majid et al., 2024). This study aims to explore how service quality, price fairness, and food quality in the context of Pakistan's fast-food restaurants enhance customer satisfaction and foster customer loyalty with specific focus on university students. This study is also aimed to provide useful recommendations for fast-food restaurant operators/ managers to effectively design their customer' centric strategies to capitalize on the existing market opportunities. Additionally, this study supports the Government of Pakistan initiative to boost the hospitality industry, contributing to broader economic development efforts.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Food Quality and Customer Satisfaction**

Some of the common characteristics of high-quality food include presentation, flavor, freshness, temperature, and healthfulness (Hanaysha, 2016). Imran and Ramli (2019) describe customer satisfaction as an individual's favourable feelings about how their expectations and the really goods or services match their perspective. When deciding whether to eat at a fast-food restaurant, customers' decisions are frequently influenced by the quality of the food, thus it is important to take this into account (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020). Signaling theory (Spence, 1974) explains that cues serve as tangible information for consumers. These signals include reasonable or fair pricing, excellent service quality, and attractive physical environment. In service industry, signaling is crucial for distinguishing companies from competitors and attracting customer preference (Byun & Jang, 2019; Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). According to Peri (2006), meeting the demands and expectations of customers at restaurants requires only the highest quality food. According to certain research studies, food quality determines consumer satisfaction in a fast-food restaurant setting (Joung, Choi, & Goh, 2015; Zhong and Moon 2020). Lee and Madanoglu (2018) examined impact of consumer satisfaction on performance in the Swedish hotel business. According to their investigation, customers were more satisfied with the hotel's food quality, reception, and reservation service. Chun and Nyam-Ochir (2020) concluded that the likelihood of recommending both Mongolian and international fast-food restaurants are influenced by service quality, price, food quality, and restaurant ambiance. Additionally, customer satisfaction has a positive effect on both revisit intention and likelihood of recommendation for these restaurant types. In fast-food restaurants in the United Arab Emirates, Similar findings were made by Veas-González et al. (2024), who discovered that among Chilean fast-food patrons, service quality,

physical environment, and product quality affect consumer satisfaction and building customer loyalty. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesized the following;

**H1.** Food Quality positively affects customer satisfaction.

## **2.2 Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction**

Without the ability to bring in and retain a sizable number of happy clients, no business can thrive. A business's success is contingent upon its capacity to generate distinctive value in its services for clients (Namin, 2017). Service quality is the overall assessment of the excellence and effectiveness of a service (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Customers seek four dimensions of service quality in a restaurant: staff friendliness, courteousness, waiting time, and quick service (Molinillo, Ekinci, & Japutra, 2019). They form positive perceptions of the product and quality that align with their expectations (da Costa Oliveira, Saldanha, & Vong, 2020). These positive perceptions result in a satisfying dining experience that affects patron satisfaction, referrals, and good word-of-mouth. Bode, Lindemann, & Wagner (2011) highlighted that interactions between customers and employees during service encounters have a significant effect on how well people perceive their experiences. Ponnaiyan, Ababneh, and Prybutok (2021) highlighted that fast-food manager, despite operating in challenging environments with limited resources, can retain and expand their customer bases by enhancing service quality in fast-food restaurants (FFRs). Qin and Prybutok (2010) highlighted that assessing service quality provides crucial information for improving business performance and strategic market positioning. A considerable body of research confirms the significant influence which the service quality has on the customer satisfaction (Alzaydi, 2024; Khoo, 2022; Timo et al., 2019; Zhong & Moon, 2020). Based on these findings, following is hypothesized;

**H2.** Service quality positively affects customer satisfaction.

## **2.3 Price Fairness and Customer Satisfaction**

A customer pays in the form of price for what he/she receives, for example; food, service etc. Price fairness Judgments are based on a customer's assessment of whether the price is reasonable in comparison to alternative price points (Xia et al., 2004). Price significantly shapes customer expectations regarding products or services and is a crucial element of the marketing mix, influencing a product's or service's market position among competitors (Raab et al., 2009). Consumers assess price fairness based on whether they consider the seller's price reasonable, acceptable, and fair (Rothenberger, 2015). Companies should examine consumer perceptions of cost and price levels to determine what is considered acceptable and fair (Konuk, 2018; Martín-Ruiz & Rondán-Cataluña, 2008). Price unfairness negatively impacts customer satisfaction (Opata et al., 2021). Customers perceive price increases as fair if they result from higher costs and unfair if they appear aimed at increasing profit (Bolton, Warlop, & Alba, 2003). Past prices, competitor prices, and product costs are key factors in forming judgments of price fairness, according to these authors. Price fairness is a critical determinant in choosing dining options and is closely associated with customer satisfaction. For instance, Konuk (2018) found that price fairness positively impacts customer satisfaction with organic food in Turkey. In Ghana's automobile industry, Opata et al. (2021) demonstrated that price fairness practices enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, Nathalia and Diayudha (2024) examined the impact of perceived service quality, pricing fairness and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in Jakarta, Indonesia. Their research provided that both superior service quality and price fairness play a crucial role in shaping

customer satisfaction, with each exhibiting a positive and significant influence. Thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize the following;

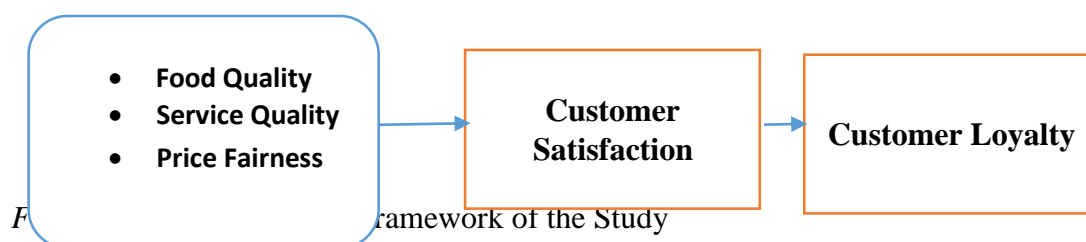
**H3.** Price fairness positively affects customer satisfaction.

## 2.4 Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

The enduring commitment of a customer to a company's products or services which reflects his/her sustained preference and repeated patronage is known as customer loyalty (Cahaya et al., 2023). Oliver (1999) defines it as customers' consistent choice of a particular brand or service over time, regardless of competitors' offerings or innovations, and without feeling pressured to switch. Zeithaml et al. (1996) proposed that customer loyalty is exemplified through two key indicators: First: willingly recommend a service or/ and a product to others. Second: their intention to visit the business again. Customer loyalty serves as a critical measure of business success, particularly within the service industry, including the food and beverage sector (Hafidz & Huriyahnuryi, 2023). Restaurant owners and managers increasingly recognize loyal customers as those willing to spend more than new patrons. This loyalty extends beyond repeat purchases to include actively promoting the restaurant (Mobarak, Nassar, & Barakat, 2024). Previous research consistently emphasizes that customer satisfaction plays a significant role in enhancing customer loyalty within the fast-food industry (Cahaya et al., 2023; Yapp & Tohari, 2021). Han and Ryu (2009) demonstrated that customer satisfaction determines customer loyalty in the restaurant industry. Namin (2017) argued that satisfied customers are more likely to exhibit loyalty, provide constructive feedback regarding the service and the business, as well as spread positive word-of-mouth. The findings conclude that a good experience with a restaurant not only keep a consumer continue patronizing the business but also motivates him or her to recommend the restaurant to friends and family members. A study conducted by Zhong and Moon's (2020) in a Western fast-food context revealed that customer satisfaction and happiness improve a sense of loyalty. Thus, in light of findings of the previous studies, the following is hypothesized;

**H4.** Customer satisfaction positively influences customer loyalty.

## Theoretical Framework



## 3. Research Methods

### 3.1 Data Collection and Sampling

Population of current study included all the students of University of Malakand who had recently a dining experience in a fast-food restaurant. Fast food chains, hotels and roadside food stalls were excluded from the scope of the current study. Participants were given a definition of a fast-food restaurant and requested to answer the questions based on a restaurant that matched this description and where they had dined in the past 30 days. The questionnaire defined a fast-food restaurant as "a place that serves food prepared in large quantities in advance. The food is kept hot and packaged for take away. Fast food restaurant provides minimal table service". Using convenience sampling,

200 respondents participated in the survey. Out of these, 20 responses were excluded due to being inconsistent or incomplete. Thus, the final sample size was 180. Among them, 60% were male and 40% were female. More specifically, the largest age category was 20-22 (61.1%), followed by 17-19 (30.6%), and 23 & above (8.3%). Furthermore, 65 (36.1%) students were enrolled in their third year of BS degree followed by 54 (30%) in fourth year, 40 (22.2%) in second year and 30 (16.7%) were in their first year.

### 3.2 Measurement Tools

Food quality and price fairness constructs of the study were measured with four and three items respectively. These scales adapted from Hanaysha (2016). To measure service quality, four items were adapted from Kasiri, Cheng, Sambasivan, and Sidin (2017). To assess the customer satisfaction construct and customer loyalty, three and four items' scales were adapted from Biswas & Verma (2023) respectively. Likert scale on five points from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was employed capturing respondents' insights on constructs of the study.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used in this study. Correlation analysis showed correlations between variables, whereas multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between variables used under study and to identify the factors influencing customer satisfaction within the context of fast-food restaurant by employing SPSS version-20.

## 4 Results of the Study

### 4.1 Factor Analysis

Factor analysis methods is widely applicable in social science research. It is used to establish high quality measures of those constructs which are not directly observable and cannot be captured by observation (Tavakol, & Wetzel, 2020). Factor analysis using Principal Component Analysis (PCA) enabled the researchers to determine the factor loading of each item across all variables, as shown in Table 4.1. The results provided that all the items had the standardized factor loadings above 0.5 as suggested by Vaala (2014) and Long et al., (2024). Thus, all of the items were retained. The Alpha values ( $\alpha$ ) were found for variables of the study above the threshold value of 0.6 as suggested by Nunnally (1978). Thus, the research instrument was found reliable for the data analysis.

**Table 4.1: Reliability of the Measurement Instrument**

	Factor	Factor Loading	No. of Items	( $\alpha$ )
Service Quality	SQ1	.806	04	.71
	SQ2	.785		
	SQ3	.909		
	SQ4	.896		
Food Quality	FQ1	.677	04	.75
	FQ2	.835		
	FQ3	.945		
	FQ4	.872		
Price Fairness	PF1	.684	03	.68
	PF2	.886		
	PF3	.656		
	CS1	.806	04	.87

Customer Satisfaction	CS2	.583		
	CS3	.830		
	CS4	.704		
Customer Loyalty	CL1	.916	03	.86
	CL2	.859		
	CL3	.956		

#### 4.2 Pearson Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis refers to the association or link between two or more quantitative variables (Gopi & Samat, 2020). Results of the correlation analysis reported in Table 4.2 indicated that food quality ( $r = .797$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), service quality ( $r = .832$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), price fairness ( $r = .719$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and customer loyalty was ( $r = .698$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) were positively related with customer satisfaction. The results are shown in Table 4.2.

No.	Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1	Customer Loyalty	1				
2	Customer Satisfaction	.698**	1			
3	Food Quality	.833**	.797**	1		
4	Service Quality	.873**	.832	.898	1	
5	Price Fairness	.442**	.719	.546	.555	1

Note(s): \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

#### 4.3 Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to investigate the associations among the variables under investigation and to determine the most significant factors affecting customer satisfaction as presented in Table 4.4. Based on the results, it can be concluded that that price fairness has the most substantial unit contribution to customer satisfaction, with a coefficient of ( $\beta = 0.358$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, food quality ( $\beta = 0.356$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and service quality ( $\beta = 0.302$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) exhibited comparatively lower coefficients. The results validate the hypotheses formulated earlier in this study. The adjusted R-square value of 0.786 indicates that 78.6% of the variation in customer satisfaction is explained by these three factors as shown in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3: Regression analysis toward Customer Satisfaction**

Variables	Customer Satisfaction
Food Quality	0.356
Price Fairness	0.358
Service Quality	0.302
R-square	0.789
Adjusted R-square	0,786
F-change	219.701
Significant F-change	0.000
Durbin– Watson	2.022

Additionally, Table 4.4 presents the results of the regression analysis between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. After regressing customer loyalty with customer satisfaction, it was found that a significant relationship exists between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty ( $\beta = 0.698$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Adjusted R-square value of 0.484 indicates that 48.4% of the variation in customer loyalty can be attributed to customer satisfaction

**Table 4.4: Regression Analysis toward Customer Loyalty**

Variables	Customer Satisfaction
Customer Satisfaction	.698
R-square	.487
Adjusted R-square	.484
F-change	168.973
Significant F-change	0.000
Durbin– Watson	2.184

## 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This study is aimed to analyze the relationship between food attributes- specifically price fairness, food quality and service quality- on customer satisfaction as well as their subsequent impact on customer loyalty. The first objective was to investigate the relationship between food quality and customer satisfaction. Results indicated that food quality significantly and positively affects customer satisfaction. Results are consistent with the existing studies (Chun & Nyam-Ochir, 2020; Lee & Madanoglu, 2018) which identified that food quality predicts customer satisfaction. The current study also supports the findings of previous studies (Veas-González et al. 2024; Joung et al., 2015; Zhong and Moon 2020) indicating food quality determines customer satisfaction. Thus, the results of the current study receive support for the first hypothesis of the study (H1). The second objective was to examine how service quality influences customer satisfaction. The study found that service quality positively impacts customer satisfaction, consistent with Bode et al. (2011) who concluded that interactions between customers and employees during service encounters have a significant effect on how well people perceive their experiences. This finding is also supported by Ponnaiyan et al. (2021) who provided that fast-food manager, despite operating in challenging environments with limited resources, can retain and expand their customer bases by enhancing service quality in fast-food restaurants (FFRs). In addition, the findings of current study are in line with previous studies (Alzaydi, 2024; Khoo, 2022; Timo et al, 2019; Zhong & Moon, 2020) providing that service quality predicts customer satisfaction. Thus, the results of the current study receive support for the second hypothesis of the study (H2). The third objective was to evaluate the relationship between price fairness and customer satisfaction. The results indicated that price fairness positively affects customer satisfaction. This finding is in line with Konuk (2018); Opatá et al., (2021) and Singh et al. (2022) who provided that fairness in price improves customer satisfaction. Thus, the third hypothesis (H3) is supported. The fourth objective of the study was assessing the influence of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. The results provided that a positive influence exist between the customer satisfaction-loyalty link. The findings of this study are in line with the previous studies (Cahaya et al., 2023; Yapp & Tohari, 2021) indicating that customer satisfaction plays a significant role in enhancing customer loyalty within the fast-food industry. This receives support for our fourth hypothesis (H4).

## 6 Conclusion

This study highlighted the impact of food attributes- specifically price fairness, food quality and service quality- on customer satisfaction and loyalty among university students in Pakistan. The findings indicated that these factors serve as key determinants of customer satisfaction and loyalty. It provides valuable insights for restaurant managers, emphasizing the need to consistently prioritize delivery of quality food at competitive service with improved service quality. This study reinforces the findings of previous research, demonstrating that service staff has the pivotal role in providing customers with enhanced dining experience and leads to customer repeat purchases. Also, this study provides insights into the significance of conducting market research for restaurant operators. This will enable to differentiate themselves from the competitors and expand their current customers' base. Knowing the importance of each factor in determining the customer satisfaction will ensure their survival and will help them grow. Customers will be more satisfied when they obtain high-quality service. Consequently, a differentiated marketing strategy them to achieve greater sales volumes, generate more positive word-of-mouth and secure repeat business, enhance operational efficiency and attract a growing customer base (Ezeh & Nkamnebe, 2023). This study guides the restaurant operators that they should not overlook one factor and over emphasize another one, but rather bring improvement in all aspects to deliver a memorable experience to the patrons. The limitations of this study present potential avenues for future research to build upon and explore further. Firstly, this study examined the factors affecting customer satisfaction among the university students with respect to fast-food restaurants. Future studies should take into account other factors like ambience, location of the restaurant and convenience to gauge the true nature of customer satisfaction construct. Secondly, future research is advised to expand the sample size and include respondents from across the country to gain in-depth insights regarding the nature of the constructs of the study. Third, future research is encouraged to explore interplay between variables examined in this study within the context of mid-scale restaurants. Comparative analyses with the current findings could yield deeper insights to the practitioners and readers regarding the subject matter. Finally, cross-sectional data was used in the current study. It would be valuable if longitudinal data is used to a deeper understanding on the factor(s) which drives customer satisfaction and loyalty the most.

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