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The Influence of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction: An Empirical Study in the Fast-Food Industry

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Abstract: Service quality (SERVQUAL) is crucial in knowing whether customers receive the level of services they expect and whether such services affect their satisfaction. This study examines the relationship between customer satisfaction and SERVQUAL dimensions of the A&W outlet at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka. 300 respondents were involved in this study, and the data were collected from the distribution of questionnaires. It was found that there was a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and SERVQUAL dimensions of A&W outlet Aeon Bandaraya Melaka, and SERVQUAL remains a critical factor for A&W. Thus, this study suggests that future research could be carried out in diverse cultural or regional settings to evaluate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction across international marketplaces. This will assist the other fast-food industry to overcome the SERVQUAL issues and maintain the sustainability of the fast-food economy.

Keywords: *Customer Satisfaction, Service Quality (SERVQUAL), A&W outlet, Assurance, Empathy*

1. Introduction

Malaysians are known to be enthusiastic and selective when choosing places to eat, particularly in fast-food restaurants. With the increasing number of fast-food chains in the market and high preference for fast food and convenience, people have more options to choose from any of these restaurants to fulfil their needs and wants (Ganatra, et al., 2021; Md Ismail, et al., 2019). Statistically, Malaysians eat fast food one to three times a week, and at least 6.7% of Malaysians eat fast food every month (Man, et al., 2021; Shamsudin et al., 2020). Furthermore, various fast-food restaurants provide outstanding service to establish a competitive advantage because they want to retain their customers and also increase their profits (Kocabulu & Albayrak, 2019; Kumolu-Johnson, 2024; Manani et. al., 2013). The restaurant owners themselves always maintain and keep attracting customers with good service quality who keep coming to their eateries to ensure the sustainability of their businesses. Hence, winning customer loyalty is vital to refrain customers from switching to other restaurants.

Service quality (SERVQUAL) and customer satisfaction are the important elements to acquire and maintain customer loyalty (Slack & Singh, 2020). Excellent service quality will help to satisfy the customers, and they will stay loyal to the preferred restaurants (Saravanan & Rao, 2007; Rane, et al., 2023). Nowadays, most restaurants concentrate on delivering outstanding customer service as well as improving their SERVQUAL to satisfy their customers. This will prevent any negative feedback, bad reviews and complaints among the customers who always visit fast-food restaurants. As Sanchez-Hernandez et. al., (2010) mentioned, a customer who is unhappy with the service received will tend to spread negative feedback and bad experience to others, while a happy customer spreads the good about the service received.

A&W Malaysia Sdn. Bhd. is one of the first well-established fast-food industries in Malaysia since 1963. A&W has a wide variety of fast food such as supreme coney, zesty burgers, chicken sandwiches, and waffles and the most famous one is root beer float with ice cream. A&W possesses a few franchises throughout Malaysia and is well-known among its customers in every age (A&W Malaysia, 2020). Nonetheless, today, A&W has to compete with other fast-food restaurants such as Mcdonald's and KFC to sustain itself in the industry. A&W at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka is one of the branches that is an outlet available in the shopping mall. However, customers have been complaining about the service received in this A&W outlet. According to the restaurant manager,

they receive customer complaints almost every day regarding their poor SERVQUAL (Mohamad Zamzamil, 2015). Even though the complaints have never been formally compiled, this outlet ascertains that the complaints will influence the satisfaction level of the customers and directly affect its image in the fast-food industry. Hence, the negative feedback on SERVQUAL could cause customer satisfaction to decrease. This could cause loyal customers to stay away and switch to another fast-food restaurant (Uslu & Eren, 2020).

Today, the fast-food industry is having a big impact on the economy's growth. The fast-food industry's performance is now becoming crucial to lead the economy's sustainability (León-Bravo et. al., 2019). In Malaysia, the growth of Malaysia fast-food outlets is increasing and is expected to increase to 9,720 outlets by the year 2026 (Siddharta, 2024). It is proven that restaurants and the fast-food industry are the main sectors that are significantly contributing to Malaysia's economic growth (Mohd Nazri et al., 2022; Zubir, et al., 2023). Therefore, this study aims to determine the relationship between customer satisfaction and SERVQUAL dimensions of the A&W outlet at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka. There is a need to comprehend whether customers are receiving the expected services and whether such services influence their satisfaction. The findings will contribute to and assist the A&W outlet at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka to improve its SERVQUAL and reduce the number of customer complaints. Not only that, the findings could also help other fast-food restaurants in overcoming customer dissatisfaction issues in the fast-food industry and indirectly help Malaysia's fast-food industry economy to be sustained.

2. Literature Review

Customer Satisfaction

Satisfaction is defined as the feeling that arises when outcomes align with expectations, fulfilling the needs and wants associated with a purchase decision (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). In essence, products must meet customers' needs, wants, and expectations to achieve satisfaction. Hunjra et al. (2011) stated that customer satisfaction reflects a customer's attitude or feelings toward a product or service. Satisfied customers are likely to make repeat purchases and continue using the product, whereas dissatisfied customers will switch to other brands or services to fulfil their needs and wants. Sridhar et al. (2009) noted that customers evaluate their satisfaction with a service provider based on the company's grievance management process, and their perception of fairness during this process can enhance their repurchase intentions.

Recent studies continue to emphasize the importance of customer satisfaction in today's competitive market. For instance, Amat et al. (2023) discovered that achieving customer satisfaction leads to customers repeatedly using the service and becoming valuable communicators for the company at no additional cost. The key factors influencing customer satisfaction include perceived quality and overall perceived price. Similarly, Liu and Tse (2018) highlighted that one of the key criteria for customer satisfaction is prompt service. They found that timely responses and swift service delivery significantly enhance customer satisfaction by meeting their expectations for efficiency and reliability. This promptness not only improves the overall customer experience but also strengthens the likelihood of repeat business and positive word-of-mouth.

Service Quality

SERVQUAL, an acronym for service quality, is a multi-dimensional survey tool designed to assess consumers' expectations and perceptions across five dimensions: tangibility, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. This instrument is based on the expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm, which posits that service quality is determined by comparing customers' pre-use expectations with their actual perceptions post-use. Since its development by Parasuraman in 1988, the SERVQUAL survey has been widely employed to measure service quality across various industries, contexts, and cultural settings (Galeeva, 2016).

As exerted by Yap and Kew (2007), service quality is all about the consumer's feelings toward the organisation's adequacy, supremacy and services. Besides, service quality has been recognised as the driver to achieve strategic benefits in an organisation to increase customer retention rates, thus gaining more competitive advantage and increasing customer satisfaction toward the product and services (Hunjra et al., 2011). Tazreen (2012) mentioned that service quality is the difference between customer expectations and perception of service received. This can be seen when the customers always have high expectations of the service to be received and high perceptions of the service being received. If the service quality does not meet expectations,

this means that the perceived quality is unsatisfactory, hence leading to customer dissatisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1985). On the other hand, if the service quality meets customer satisfaction, the perception will change and customer satisfaction will increase (Seetharaman et al., 2013).

Moreover, the link between service quality and business outcomes remains strong. Mittal and Sridhar (2020) demonstrated that high service quality directly correlates with increased customer retention, positive word-of-mouth, and higher profitability. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped many aspects of service delivery. Research by Villanueva et al. (2023) indicates that the pandemic has heightened customer expectations for cleanliness, safety, and flexibility.

The SERVQUAL model, which consists of five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy), is commonly employed to assess service quality in many industries (Akdere et al., 2018; Alzoubi et al., 2021; Jusufbasic & Stevic, 2023; Maulida, 2020; Rahmawati et al., 2023; Sularto, 2021). The model has been utilised in various studies to assess data provider services in Indonesia (Sularto, 2021), tourism travel agencies (Maulida, 2020), logistics services (Jusufbasic & Stevic, 2023), hospitality (Alzoubi et al., 2021), healthcare (Akdere et al., 2018; Alomari., 2021), banking industry (Sugiarto & Octaviana., 2021), and university learning processes (Rahmawati et al., 2023). The model facilitates the identification of discrepancies between customer expectations and perceptions, frequently uncovering opportunities for enhancement.

For example, data provider services (Sularto, 2021) and logistics services (Jusufbasic & Stevic, 2023) exhibited negative gap values, which suggests that customers were dissatisfied. Within the university setting, the assurance dimension obtained the highest score, whereas tangibles received the lowest score (Rahmawati et al., 2023). Moreover, Chatterjee et al. (2023) proposed an innovative approach using text mining and machine learning techniques to measure SERVQUAL dimensions from online customer reviews, bridging the gap between traditional survey-based methods and user-generated content analysis. These findings illustrate the adaptability of the SERVQUAL model in identifying specific areas for improving service quality in various industries.

Tangibles

Tangible aspects are something that an organisation can improve to satisfy its customers (Jonkisz et al., 2022). Tangibles relate to visible substances like the equipment used, the building structure and the physical appearance of the personnel (Alomari, 2021; Tazreen, 2012). As stated by Sugiarto and Octaviana (2021), Jusufbasic and Stevic (2023), and Goumairi et al. (2020), physical evidence such as excellent interior arrangement, neatness, cleanliness of the place, technical installations, and advanced technology would lead to greater user satisfaction and loyalty. Furthermore, Bitner and Hubert (1990) and Goula et al. (2021) believed that the personnel's physical appearance might influence customer satisfaction. If all personnel look appealing in their appearance, it will indirectly attract more customers and create a pleasant environment.

According to Wainwright (2012), tangibles are also related to the organisation's environment and it is a crucial aspect to convey to the customers. Therefore, in this study, it is imperative for A&W as a company to not only showcase its products and services but also provide customers with a glimpse inside their restaurant environment. Furthermore, their meal presentation is visually pleasing and captivating to customers. Therefore, based on the relevant literature, the following hypothesis was developed:
H_1: Tangibles positively affect customer satisfaction at A&W Outlet.

Reliability

Reliability is defined as the possibility of any object that will be functioning according to its specific functions smoothly without failure under given conditions for a specified period. Reliability also relates to the personnel's ability to execute the service meticulously and consistently in an organisation (Kincaid et al., 2010). Reliability entails setting rational expectations and, at that point, meeting or exceeding them. Furthermore, it implies that employees will consistently strive to perform their tasks to the best of their abilities (Wainwright, 2012). Customers will prefer very reliable services, depending on their level of satisfaction with the goods and services they use (Mrabet et al., 2022).

Reliability is critical in evaluating the provided services. Garvin (1988), Alomari (2021), and Goula et al. (2021) demonstrate that reliability is an element that tends to show up in service evaluation. Alomari (2021) found that the widest negative gap in healthcare services was associated with hospital staff's listening skills and their ability to spend adequate time with patients. Similarly, Parasuraman et al. (1988) asserted that the conversion of the word from a negative to a positive one determines the importance of this element for customers. Negative wording consistency leads to customers misinterpreting the situation. Furthermore, it is believed that excellent reliability will indirectly lead to high customer satisfaction with the services provided by the employees (Walker, 1995). Therefore, in this study, A&W workers must understand that the reliability of their services will determine whether they achieve customer satisfaction. Based on the relevant literature, the following hypothesis was developed:
H_2: Reliability positively affects customer satisfaction at A&W Outlet.

Responsiveness
Responsiveness is the preparedness of the staff to assist and give fast responses to customers' needs and wants (Hunjra et al., 2011). In addition, it can also mean the readiness of the staff or employees to provide timely service to the customers (Kincaid et al., 2010). Based on past studies, it was found that responsiveness was more significant in contributing to user satisfaction in the areas of healthcare (Alomari, 2021; Jonkisz et al., 2022; Mrabet et al., 2022), higher education (Alam & Mezbah, 2021; Sibai et al., 2021), and hospitality (Alzoubi et al., 2021). For instance, responsiveness can be seen when the employees confidently inform the promised time to perform the service and quickly respond to any further request by the customers (Parasuraman et al., 1985).

On the other hand, responsiveness also means that the company accepts negotiation and can provide fast feedback, but also in a reasonable amount of time by communicating with the customer through the process (Wainwright, 2012). In addition, the expectations set by the customer will be compared to the services they receive when the company can respond to the customer immediately. As a result, A&W outlets must demonstrate responsiveness when giving feedback to customers to meet their needs and wants. Therefore, based on the relevant literature, the following hypothesis was developed:
H_3: Responsiveness positively affects customer satisfaction at A&W Outlet.

Assurance
Assurance is defined as the ability of the employees to encourage confidence and build trust in themselves and the customers (Hunjra et al., 2011). This is evident in the employee's ability to exude confidence and establish trust with their customers. According to Kincaid et al. (2010) and Goula et al. (2021), they agreed that assurance is also a courtesy of employees, as in their abilities to build trust and confidence in customers' minds. Assurance can be possessed when employees are knowledgeable and always well-mannered to attract and retain customers. Parasuraman et al. (1985) supported this by stating that being courteous is the primary element of assurance, as it not only instils confidence in employees but also enhances their knowledge.

Extending this, Wainwright (2012) added that assurance occurs when an employee is capable of performing their tasks. Hence, assurance can also be defined as the act of expressing confidence, the state of being certain, or the process of making certain. As mentioned Alzoubi et al. (2021), suggested that service performance through hiring qualified and competent staff as well as further educating and training them can help to meet customer satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, the staff must be courteous and professional when dealing with their customers to gain their trust. Hence, A&W should ensure that the products and services that they offer are exactly what the customers expect. With that, customers will have trust in A&W's goods and services. Thus, based on the relevant literature, the following hypothesis was developed:
H_4: Assurance positively affects customer satisfaction at A&W Outlet.

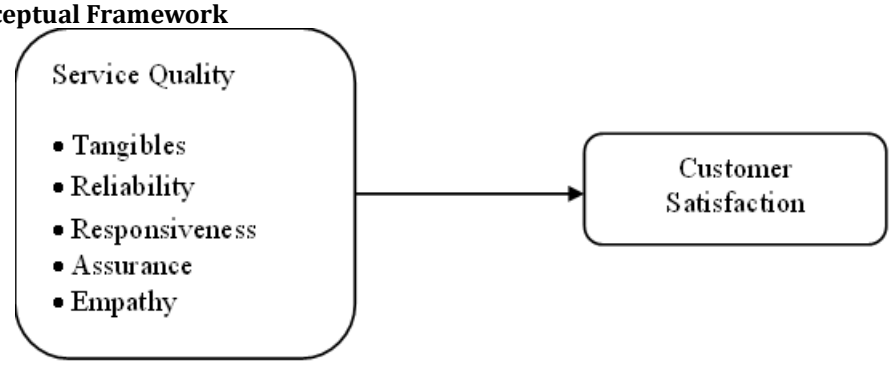
Empathy
Empathy is generally defined as the ability to accept another's perspective, to understand feelings and to respond to the experience given. Hunjra et al. (2011) mentioned that empathy is the extent to which employees understand and give kind individualised service to the customers. In simple words, empathy is the attention given to individual customers (Kincaid et al., 2010) during and after they have experienced the services given.

Besides that, Tazreen (2012) defined empathy as an extension or rejection decision by customers on the service given. Thus, empathy is important and could prolong customer satisfaction.

In a study conducted by Alzoubi et al. (2021) in UAE five-star hotels, it was revealed that the personal contact of employees significantly enhances guest satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, empathy is also parallel with reassurance. According to Wainwright (2012), empathy could also help the organisation to apprehend the customers' derivation. Empathy will occur when an organisation can relate their organisation experiences to customers feeling. As a result, the organisation can understand the customers very well. Therefore, A&W staff must possess empathy to effectively entertain customers and achieve customer satisfaction. Thus, based on the relevant literature, the following hypothesis was developed:
H_5: Empathy positively affects customer satisfaction at A&W Outlet.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1*:* Conceptual Framework



Source: "Relationship between Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction in the case of Customer-Centric Group CO" [Parasuraman et. al., (1985) in Dehghan (2012)].

3. Methodology

The research design for this study is a descriptive study, aimed at describing the characteristics of variables related to A&W customer satisfaction using the SERVQUAL model. Conducted in a natural setting at A&W Aeon Bandaraya Melaka, the study focused on individual customers' responses to the services provided. Data was collected cross-sectionally, within a specified period. The population targeted was A&W customers, including families, mall staff, and students who were willing to answer the questionnaires. The sampling design used was non-probability sampling, specifically convenience sampling through mall intercepts due to the absence of a sampling frame. Therefore, researchers distributed 300 questionnaires, in line with the recommendation for a sample size greater than 30 but less than 500 which is suitable for most behavioural studies (Memon, et al., 2020; Roscoe,1975).

4. Findings

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Items		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	130	43
	Female	170	57
Race	Malays	247	82
	Chinese	39	13
	Indians	14	5
Age	18 years and below	16	5
	19 to 36 years	209	70
	37 to 47 years	48	16
	48 years and above	27	9

Occupation	Student	59	20
	Working / Self-employed	224	74
	Unemployed	10	3
	Retired	7	2
Individual Income per Month (RM)	1500 and below	100	33
	1501 to 2000	37	12
	2001 to 3000	53	18
	3001 to 4000	58	19
	4001 to 5000	30	10
	5000 and above	22	7
Last visit to A&W Aeon Bandaraya Melaka	Less than 1 week ago	24	8
	1 to 2 weeks ago	43	14
	3 to 4 weeks ago	39	13
	More than 4 weeks ago	139	46
	This is my first visit	55	18

Source: Authors' Compilation

Table 1 outlines six demographic variables of the 300 respondents: gender, race, age, occupation, monthly income, and their last visit to A&W Aeon Bandaraya Melaka. Among the respondents, 57% were female and 43% were male. The racial composition was predominantly Malays (82%), followed by Chinese (13%) and Indians (5%). The age distribution showed that 70% were aged 19-36, 16% were aged 37-47, 9% were 48 and above, and 5% were 18 and below. In terms of occupation, 74% of them were working or self-employed, 20% were students, 3% were unemployed, and 2% were retired. Income levels varied, with 33% earning RM1500 or less per month, 19% earning RM3001-RM4000, 18% earning RM2001-RM3000, 12% earning RM1501-RM2000, 10% earning RM4001-RM5000, and 7% earning RM5001 or more. Regarding the frequency of visits, 46% of respondents last visited A&W more than four weeks ago, 18% were first-time visitors, 14% visited one to two weeks ago, 13% visited three to four weeks ago, and 8% visited less than one week ago. These findings suggested a significant proportion of repeat visitors, indicating a likely level of satisfaction with the services provided at A&W Aeon Bandaraya Melaka.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistic

No.	Items for Customer Satisfaction	N	Means	Standard Deviation
1	I am happy with the service provided by this A&W outlet.	300	3.62	0.7198
2	I plan to come to this A&W outlet again in the future.	300	3.57	0.73922
3	Every time I visit this A&W outlet, I feel that I am appreciated.	300	3.28	0.80325
4	If I were completely free to choose, I would prefer to choose this A&W over another fast-food outlet.	300	3.13	0.86541
5	If there are other restaurants nearby, I may still choose A&W.	300	2.99	0.87696
	Total		3.32	

Table 2 indicates that the average mean for the variable customer satisfaction is 3.32. It was positively skewed even though just a little above the neutral scale. The highest mean was for the statement, "I am happy with the service provided by this A&W outlet" which indicated certain measures of satisfaction.

Table 3: Level of Customer Satisfaction

Dimension	Mean Perception
Tangibles	3.42
Reliability	3.34
Responsiveness	3.40
Assurance	3.41
Empathy	3.33
Total	3.38

The highest mean (Table 3) for service quality was tangibles with a mean of 3.42. With a 5-point scale, the mean was still skewed to the positive scale which means that customers appeared to have a positive perception of this A&W outlet as the physical appearance of A&W at Aeon Bandaraya Melaka is generally pleasing and relatively clean. Overall, the total mean for service quality perception was 3.38, which was still skewed to the positive scale.

Table 4: Reliability Analysis - Cronbach Alpha's Value

Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha
Customer Satisfaction	0.855
Tangibles	0.810
Reliability	0.860
Responsiveness	0.845
Assurance	0.874
Empathy	0.814

The value of Cronbach's Alpha in Table 4 for customer satisfaction at A&W Aeon Bandaraya Melaka was 0.855. This means that the constancy of each item in the variable is measured as good. Additionally, for service quality dimension, had relatively high reliability values of 0.8 and above. For customers' perceptions, the dimension 'assurance' was found to be the most reliable (.874), followed by 'reliability' (.860), 'responsiveness' (.845), 'empathy' (.814), and the dimension 'tangibles' (.810) was the least reliable among the five dimensions. Conclusively, these values indicated that all five dimensions had relatively high reliability thus making all of them reliable.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Customer Satisfaction	1					
Tangibles	.230**	1				
Reliability	.490**	.439**	1			
Responsiveness	.485**	.344**	.738**	1		
Assurance	.544**	.364**	.755**	.769**	1	
Empathy	.485**	.440**	.663**	.703**	.789**	1

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

From Table 5, the result of the correlation test showed that the relationship between customer satisfaction and tangibles was 0.230 and the P value was 0.000 at the level of <0.01 (2-tailed). The result demonstrated a positive but very low significant correlation. Tangibility for a fast-food outlet like A&W appeared to be important but only to a lower extent. The second dimension of service quality was reliability. It had a significant positive relationship result of the correlation test that was 0.490 and the P value was 0.000 at the level of <0.01 (2-tailed). This showed that the relationship between customer satisfaction and reliability was moderate even though it was still positive and significant.

In addition, the correlation result between customer satisfaction and responsiveness was 0.485 and the P value was 0.000 at the level of < 0.01 (2-tailed). This result showed a positive and weak significant correlation. Even though it is an important element in the service quality dimension, it had a moderate positive correlation with satisfaction. Table 5 also depicted that customer satisfaction had a significant positive and moderate relationship with assurance at 0.544. Meanwhile, for empathy, the result of the correlation test showed that the correlation between customer satisfaction was 0.485. Both elements had having significant P value of 0.000 at the level of < 0.01 (2-tailed) which also indicated a positive and moderate relationship.

Table 6: Hypotheses testing

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.324	.193		6.849	.000
Tangibles	-.013	.049	-.015	-.270	.787
Reliability	.138	.080	.142	1.731	.085
Responsiveness	.079	.076	.086	1.035	.302
Assurance	.290	.095	.292	3.051	.002
Empathy	.097	.076	.107	1.276	.203

Table 7: Coefficient of determination

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.564[a]	.318	.306	.53239

Table 6 shows the result of the hypotheses testing for the service quality dimension affecting customer satisfaction. It revealed that tangibles (H_1), Responsiveness (H_3), and Empathy (H_5) were not supported, as their coefficients (-0.013, 0.079, and 0.097, respectively) were not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The only significant for service quality dimensions was assurance with a positive coefficient of 0.290 ($p = 0.002$), thus supporting H_4. These findings suggested that enhancing assurance should be prioritised to improve customer satisfaction, while the other dimensions may have less direct impact or require further investigation. For the model, the adjusted R-squared value of 0.306 indicated that approximately 30.6% of the variance in customer satisfaction can be explained by the independent variables of SERVQUAL dimensions (Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, and Empathy). This value is considered a moderate relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings indicated that the correlation for all independent variables related to service quality dimensions had a positive relationship with customer satisfaction at A&W Aeon Bandaraya Melaka. Although the correlation ranges from weak to moderate, service quality remains a critical factor for an outlet like A&W. While for hypotheses testing, only assurance had a significant effect on customer satisfaction. Thus, a good service provider promptly delivers quality service to customers, and it is the manager's responsibility to ensure that service quality meets customer expectations. Providing immediate and appropriate service is also essential for customer satisfaction. Besides that, assurance plays a significant role as it enhances employees' ability to gain customers' trust and confidence. Service providers and employees must demonstrate courtesy in their interactions to foster trust and confidence among customers. In many service organisations, empathy is crucial for service staff, enabling them to better engage with customers. Through empathy, managers can assess whether customers are accepting or rejecting the provided service, allowing for continuous improvement in service quality. Additionally, regular training and feedback mechanisms should be implemented to maintain and enhance service standards, ultimately leading to higher customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Recommendations

This study significantly contributes to the understanding of the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry. Despite the correlation ranges from weak to moderate and moderate coefficient of determination, service quality remains a critical factor for an outlet like A&W. Concentrating on these factors, might offer sophisticated perspectives on how to optimise methods for service quality that are specific to various industries and regions, thereby improving overall customer satisfaction. The findings of this study have significant policy implications for fast-food chains and government agencies in charge of food industry services. Future research could be carried out in diverse cultural or regional settings to evaluate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction across international marketplaces. Incorporating longitudinal research may also provide a dynamic perspective on customer expectations and industry advancements by shedding light on how customer satisfaction varies over time in response to shifts in food service quality.

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