

Are Indian Muslim or Mamak Restaurants Stealing the Spotlight from Malay Restaurants in Malaysia's Urban Areas?

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Abstract: The primary objective of a restaurant operation is to attain profitability by cultivating customer loyalty through outstanding service, unforgettable dining experiences, and strong connections that encourage repeat visits. This study investigates whether Indian Muslim or Mamak restaurants are outshining Malay restaurants in urban areas. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 120 customers at selected popular Mamak restaurants in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. These interviews aimed to understand customers' viewpoints and dining experiences. The findings reveal that Mamak restaurants have successfully adapted to shifting consumer preferences, establishing themselves as a resilient and favored dining option, particularly in urban settings. Their continuous innovation, technology integration, and extended operating hours have reinforced their appeal, slightly overshadowing Malay restaurants in these areas. The study highlights the importance of restaurant operators adopting proactive strategies that align with changing consumer demands and market dynamics to remain competitive and sustainable.

Keywords: *Mamak, Malay, Restaurants, Urban area*

1. Introduction

The restaurant has become one of the fastest-growing sectors in Malaysia's foodservice landscape, driven by the rise of trendy and unconventional dining venues strategically positioned in diverse spaces (Kraak, 2019; Ishak et al., 2024; Sujangi et al., 2023). Often located near bustling nightlife hubs, these establishments reflect a dynamic shift in consumer behavior, shaped by evolving tastes, dining habits, and Malaysia's rich multicultural heritage. The nation's ethnic diversity deeply influences its culinary landscape, infusing it with distinctive flavors and traditions. Taheri & Gannon (2021) highlight that these cultural and social transformations have fueled a rising demand for diverse dining experiences tailored to evolving preferences. The industry now spans a broad spectrum, from upscale fine-dining establishments to cozy cafés, coffee shops, hawker stalls, and even mobile pushcarts, significantly expanding consumer choices. However, this study specifically focuses on medium-scale ethnic restaurants, which serve as vibrant cultural hubs, offering authentic Malaysian cuisine while balancing affordability and quality. Medium ethnic restaurants are positioned between small family-run eateries and large restaurant chains. These establishments cater to larger customer bases and are most popular among and preserve Malaysia's culinary heritage while seamlessly aligning with modern consumer expectations.

Medium-scale ethnic restaurants in Malaysia are predominantly shaped by the nation's three major ethnic groups—Malay, Chinese, and Indian, encompassing both Indian Hindu and Indian Muslim communities. These establishments are deeply embedded in Malaysia's rich gastronomic heritage, seamlessly blending culinary traditions to create a distinctively Malaysian dining experience. Renowned for their ability to harmonize diverse flavors, these restaurants serve as cultural melting pots, embodying the nation's multicultural identity. To remain competitive and meet evolving consumer preferences, many have expanded their menus, venturing beyond traditional offerings (Abdullah et al., 2024; Postova, 2021). Malay restaurants, known for their bold and spicy flavors in dishes like nasi lemak, rendang, and noodle-based delicacies, are increasingly incorporating broader culinary influences to attract a wider audience (Alias et al., 2024; Rahma et al., 2024; Shariff et al., 2024). Likewise, Chinese and Indian restaurants, while staying true to their traditional recipes and cooking techniques, are adopting fusion flavors that resonate with other ethnic groups (Tang, 2024; Fikri et al., 2021; Tan & Tan, 2024). Iconic offerings such as Chinese-style chicken rice and sweet and sour soup, alongside Indian favorites like idli and roti prata, have transcended cultural boundaries, reflecting the dynamic evolution of Malaysia's culinary landscape.

Despite ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity, Chinese and Indian Hindu restaurants in Malaysia continue to attract a predominantly ethnic-specific patronage. A key factor driving this trend is the large Muslim population, which places a strong emphasis on halal compliance in food consumption (Shahrom et al., 2024, Pauzi et al., 2025). While not all Chinese and Indian Hindu restaurants fail to meet halal standards, a widespread perception persists among Malay Muslims that these establishments may not strictly adhere to halal guidelines (Halim et al., 2024; Pauzi et al., 2025; Akbar et al., 2023). Consequently, Indian Muslim (Mamak) and Malay restaurants, which explicitly align with halal requirements, dominate competition for customers in the Malaysian market. Originating from the Indian Muslim community, Mamak restaurants are characterized by their informal, open-air dining concept, affordability, quick service, and vibrant social atmosphere. Rajendran et al. (2024) highlight that Mamak restaurants have successfully positioned themselves as trusted halal food providers by integrating halal certifications and visibly practicing Islamic values in their operations. Similarly, Malay restaurants capitalize on their intrinsic cultural connection to Islamic dietary laws, attracting customers seeking halal assurance. However, Mamak restaurants command a broader and more diverse patronage across Malaysia, surpassing Malay restaurants in most states, except Kelantan and Terengganu, where Malay eateries maintain stronger dominance (Jalis & Husin, 2019; Hashim et al., 2021).

The most obvious scenario is that Mamak restaurants offer diverse menus including iconic dishes such as *roti canai* (flatbread served with dhal or curry), *nasi kandar* (rice served with an assortment of curries and side dishes), and *mee goreng mamak* (stir-fried noodles with spices, vegetables), classic *teh tarik* (pulled tea) to refreshing iced drinks and fruit juices. These dishes reflect the rich culinary heritage of Indian Muslim cuisine while incorporating flavors and ingredients familiar to Malaysian palates. In addition, this restaurant provides an inclusive ambiance and round-the-clock operations, adapted to modern consumer preferences by incorporating features like live sports broadcasts, brightly lit interiors, and comfortable seating (Hashim et al., 2021). Most importantly, the Mamak restaurants maintain steady customer patronization throughout breakfast, lunch, and dinner hours compared to Malay restaurants, which typically see peak customer volumes during specific mealtimes. Not to overstate that Mamak food is widely considered acceptable to most Malaysian palates. These scenarios spur a critical question: Are Mamak restaurants' foods stealing the spotlight from Malay restaurant food? This is aligned with Ngo (2024), which states that one of the key issues in the restaurant industry is the need for differentiation and competitive advantage through diverse flavors and customizable options to boost customer acceptance and patronization. Cristina (2024) lauded that research is needed to examine the extent to which menu innovation impacts customer retention across different cultural and demographic segments. Hubbard (2018) found that chain restaurants often dominate independent eateries by leveraging marketing power and consistency; there remains a gap in understanding how independent restaurants effectively counteract this advantage. Aligning with this, the highlighted issue necessitates empirical investigation, as it will provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by restaurants, particularly those operated by minority groups, in adapting to changing customer preferences, evolving dining trends, and competitive market dynamics.

In addition, many available studies on Mamak restaurant centrally focusing on hygiene (Nderitu & Mutinda, 2024), service quality and manpower (Othman et al., 2018), customer satisfaction and consumer behavior (Hashim et al., 2021; Othman et al., 2018), success factor (Othman et al. 2018; Ramly et al., 2003) and service delivery (Vasani et al., 2024) however, none has touched on impact of Mamak food on Malay culinary tradition from restaurant perspective. Thus, this study is exploring whether Mamak Restaurants is stealing the Spotlight from Malay Restaurants in the urban areas. Ultimately, customers are the best individuals to answer this question through their preferences and dining habits, which reflect the demand and appeal of different culinary options.

2. Literature Review

Restaurant Market Dynamics

Restaurant market dynamics are shaped by a complex interplay of consumer behavior, economic forces, technological advancements, sustainability initiatives, cultural influences, and competitive pressures, all of which drive the strategic direction of restaurant establishments (Nie et al., 2025; Coe, 2024). Consumer behavior, in particular, plays a pivotal role in shaping industry trends. Jayasinghe et al. (2025) emphasize that the rising demand for healthier, sustainable, and culturally diverse food options has compelled restaurants to

innovate their menus to align with evolving customer expectations. This shift has intensified the focus on food transparency, ethical sourcing, and high-quality ingredients, as consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability-driven dining experiences (Calza et al., 2023; Prasanna et al., 2024). The willingness to pay for eco-conscious menus has led restaurants to embrace waste reduction, biodegradable packaging, and environmentally responsible practices (Mahasuweerachai & Suttikun, 2022; Yong et al., 2024). Jusuf (2021) highlights that young consumers, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, are key influencers in reshaping market trends due to their digital engagement, sustainability awareness, and value-driven dining choices. These demographics not only seek ethically sourced food but actively support restaurants that align with their environmental and social values (Su et al., 2019; Agustina et al., 2024). As a result, restaurant businesses must continuously adapt to remain competitive in an industry where consumer expectations and ethical considerations are driving long-term transformation (Davydenkov et al., 2024; Olsen & Zhao, 2014).

According to Jordaan (2023), economic forces play a critical role in shaping the growth and sustainability of restaurant businesses. Positive economic trends, such as rising consumer income, urbanization, and tourism expansion, drive increased patronage and profitability (Adedoyin et al., 2022). Additionally, favorable financial conditions, including lower interest rates and government incentives, foster restaurant expansion and innovation. However, economic downturns present formidable challenges—rising inflation inflates ingredient and labor costs, forcing restaurants to raise prices and potentially diminishing consumer demand (Ramírez, 2022; Saleem & Ghai, 2023). Recessions further restrict discretionary spending, leading to sales declines and business closures (Amel et al., 2020; Koh et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the relentless pace of technological advancement has become a focal point in academic discourse, fundamentally transforming restaurant market dynamics, consumer engagement, and competitive strategies (Jasonos & McCormick, 2017; Abdul Majid et al., 2024; Buhalis et al., 2019). Alt (2021) underscores the impact of digitalization, highlighting how mobile ordering, AI-powered chatbots, smart kitchen technologies, and mobile payment systems enhance customer experiences. Khan (2020) further emphasizes the disruptive role of food delivery platforms in redefining traditional dining, making convenience a primary driver of customer satisfaction. Additionally, AI-driven personalization and big data analytics allow restaurants to tailor offerings to consumer preferences, fostering loyalty and engagement (Rasool & Bhat, 2025). Blockchain technology, as noted by Katsikouli et al. (2021), enhances transparency in food sourcing and supply chains, building trust with ethically conscious consumers. As technology continues to evolve, it remains a dominant force in reshaping restaurant industry trends, compelling businesses to adapt and innovate for long-term success (Can, 2021; Lee et al., 2024).

Cultural diversity has become a defining factor in the restaurant industry, driven by globalization and demographic shifts that have fueled a rising demand for multicultural cuisine. As Nor & Zahari (2025) observe, restaurants are expanding their offerings to cater to increasingly diverse consumer preferences. Kulshrestha (2025) emphasizes that globalization has not only increased exposure to international flavors but also encouraged restaurants to incorporate multicultural elements into their menus. Additionally, migration patterns and international travel have spurred culinary innovation, with fusion cuisine and authentic regional flavors becoming key strategies for attracting a broader customer base (Rajan, 2023; Kulshrestha, 2025).

Market competition further intensifies these dynamics as restaurants navigate challenges posed by both established industry players and emerging niche entrants. The rise of independent restaurants offering unique and curated dining experiences has added complexity to the competitive landscape (Dhamija, 2024; Sayed, 2022). Ishak et al. (2024) argue that differentiation strategies, such as thematic dining and immersive experiences, have become essential for survival in an oversaturated market. Simultaneously, franchising remains a dominant expansion model, enabling established brands to sustain global reach while adapting to local culinary preferences (Zhang & Kurbanbaeva, 2024; Siebert, 2024). As the industry evolves, restaurant market dynamics are increasingly shaped by the intersection of cultural influences, competitive pressures, and shifting consumer behaviors. To remain relevant and thrive, restaurants must continuously innovate, embrace diversity, and adapt to ever-changing market conditions.

Consumer Preferences and Restaurants in the Modern Era

Consumer preferences for modern restaurants are increasingly shaped by a holistic dining experience, where service efficiency, ambiance, entertainment, and technological integration play pivotal roles in influencing customer satisfaction (Chiang & Yen, 2024; Zanetta et al., 2024; Baid & Madhwani, 2024). Research highlights

that consumers gravitate toward restaurants that seamlessly combine personalized service, aesthetic interiors, and interactive features, such as live performances or digital ordering systems (Yoon & Yu, 2022). Moreover, sustainability and ethical sourcing have become crucial factors in dining choices, reinforcing the shift toward socially responsible consumption (Shiri & Jafari-Sadeghi, 2023; Tomasella et al., 2024). Salim (2022) underscored the evolving expectations of restaurant-goers, emphasizing that dining extends beyond food to immersive and memorable experiences. Their findings revealed that customers actively seek unique atmospheres, interactive dining, and multisensory engagement, fostering brand loyalty and overall satisfaction. Alshamsi et al. (2021) and Al-Tit (2015) further validated the impact of outstanding customer service, demonstrating that attentiveness, efficiency, and personalized interactions significantly enhance repeat visits. Goodman (2019) examined proactive service strategies, emphasizing responsiveness in addressing dietary preferences and swiftly resolving complaints, which positively influence customer retention. However, Manhas et al. (2024) found that not all consumers prioritize immersive experiences; urban diners often value efficiency, affordability, and speed. Okumus et al. (2021) corroborated the rising appeal of fast casual and self-service models, particularly among younger demographics and busy professionals who prioritize convenience over traditional hospitality.

Food quality and diversity play a crucial role in shaping consumer preferences, as modern diners increasingly seek fresh, locally sourced, and sustainable ingredients (Ganesh, 2024; Talukder et al., 2025; Mishra, 2023). Ganesh (2024) underscores the rising demand for healthier menu options, highlighting a shift toward ethically sourced and environmentally sustainable ingredients as a defining trend in the food industry. This aligns with Azlie et al. (2023) findings, which reveal that restaurants incorporating organic and locally sourced ingredients appeal to health-conscious consumers who prioritize both nutritional value and ethical sourcing. Furthermore, Nor & Zahari (2022) examine the influence of cultural and regional diversity on food choices, demonstrating that diners not only seek high-quality ingredients but also crave a variety of global flavors tailored to their dietary preferences. Collectively, these insights underscore the evolving expectations of modern consumers, reinforcing the necessity for restaurants to embrace quality, sustainability, and culinary diversity to remain competitive in an increasingly discerning market.

Menu innovation is a key driver of customer preferences, directly shaping dining experiences and satisfaction (Baiomy et al., 2019, Mohamed et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2023). Caporaso (2021) highlighted the transformative impact of culinary innovation in modern gastronomy, demonstrating how sensory elements, presentation techniques, and ingredient combinations shape customer perceptions. Engaging multiple senses beyond taste, through visual appeal, texture contrast, aroma, and even auditory cues like sizzling food, significantly enhances diners' overall experience. Feldman & Wunderlich (2023) examined cultural influences on taste preferences, revealing that while consumers gravitate toward familiar culinary traditions, they are also increasingly receptive to fusion cuisine that blends elements from different cultures. Restaurants that integrate culturally inspired flavors and localized menu adaptations experience higher customer engagement and satisfaction. Salzberg et al. (2019) explored sustainable menu innovation, emphasizing the growing appeal of eco-friendly ingredients, ethical sourcing, and plant-based alternatives. Their findings underscore that sustainability-driven menu innovations not only align with environmental and health-conscious consumer trends but also enhance restaurant competitiveness. Collectively, these insights reinforce that strategic menu innovation, through sensory engagement, cultural adaptation, and sustainability, plays a vital role in shaping modern dining preferences and driving long-term customer loyalty.

Technological integration significantly influences customer preferences toward specific restaurants by enhancing convenience, personalization, and efficiency. Zatsu et al. (2024) highlighted the transformative impact of artificial intelligence (AI) in menu innovation, demonstrating that AI-driven recommendations and personalization significantly elevate customer engagement and influence dining choices. Jeon et al. (2020) investigated self-service technologies, revealing that interactive kiosks and mobile ordering systems streamline operations, enhance customer convenience, and improve overall satisfaction. Similarly, Oliinyk (2024) analyzed online reservation systems, emphasizing how digital booking platforms not only minimize wait times but also strengthen customer loyalty by optimizing service efficiency. More recently, Wong et al. (2022) explored the impact of smart restaurant technologies, such as digital menus, automated service robots, and contactless payment systems, showing that tech-enhanced dining environments improve convenience and elevate perceived value. Collectively, these studies reinforce that restaurants that embrace technological

advancements gain a competitive edge by delivering seamless, efficient, and highly personalized dining experiences that align with evolving consumer expectations.

Several studies have examined the association between ambiance and consumer preferences toward specific restaurants, highlighting the importance of environmental factors in shaping dining experiences. Nyamekye et al. (2023) explored how restaurant ambiance, including lighting, music, and interior design, influences customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Their findings suggested that a well-designed atmosphere enhances dining enjoyment and increases repeat visits. Similarly, Tvaltvadze (2024) investigated the role of ambient factors in ethnic restaurants, concluding that elements such as cultural décor and background music significantly impact customer perceptions and willingness to try unfamiliar cuisines. Nyamekye et al. (2023) examined the emotional responses triggered by restaurant ambiance, demonstrating that a pleasant environment fosters positive emotions and strengthens brand loyalty. Anaam (2024) emphasized that ambiance not only affects consumer preferences but also plays a crucial role in shaping overall dining expectations and perceived value. Collectively, these studies underscore the significant role of ambiance in influencing restaurant choice, suggesting that businesses should carefully design their physical and sensory environments to enhance customer satisfaction and competitive advantage.

Demographic factors and location are powerful forces shaping consumer preferences, directly influencing restaurant selection based on age, income, cultural background, and proximity. Fouad & Mokhtar (2025) revealed that younger consumers favor trendy, tech-driven dining experiences, whereas older patrons prioritize comfort and high-quality service. Income levels also play a decisive role, with high-income customers gravitating toward fine dining and premium culinary experiences (Lim et al., 2022; Baumann et al., 2019). Cultural background further dictates dining choices, as consumers tend to prefer cuisines that align with their culinary heritage (Jayasinghe et al., 2025; Yasmeen & Fischer, 2024). Location is equally impactful—urban restaurants thrive by offering diverse, globally inspired menus to multicultural customer bases, while rural establishments succeed by catering to localized tastes (Rawson & Shore, 2019). Additionally, accessibility and convenience significantly influence decisions, with high-traffic locations attracting spontaneous diners and optimizing customer flow (Chua et al., 2020; Liu & Tse, 2018). Collectively, these insights emphasize the critical need for restaurants to align their strategies with demographic and geographic dynamics, ensuring sustained relevance and competitive advantage in a rapidly evolving market.

3. Methodology

Sample and Population

This exploratory inquiry utilizes an inductive method as it explores and understands complex phenomena as opposed to verifying pre-existing theories. The study employs a qualitative research methodology complemented by purposive sampling to ensure the selection of participants who are most relevant to the research objectives. The unit of analysis focuses on Malaysian customers within a specific age range who are frequent patrons of mamak restaurants. This aligned with Decrop (1999), who stated that in a qualitative inquiry, the researchers deliberately selected the participants who were knowledgeable and experienced within the area of investigation and were willing to participate.

Interview questions

Semi-structured interview questions were employed to gather comprehensive data and gain insight into the research phenomenon. These open-ended inquiries were chosen to prevent potential bias in responses and to explore rather than dictate information. The formulation of the research guide was guided by the study specifications and relevant literature review. In Table I, a compilation of primary questions derived from the research guide is presented. The interview questions cover a range of topics, including respondents' demographic profiles, the underlying reasons for choosing to dine, and the popularity or overshadowing of other restaurants. The questions are primarily adapted and specifically modified to align with the study's context based on Othman et al. (2018), who conducted a comparative study on restaurant service delivery attributes and customer patronization. Due to variations in educational levels among participants, the Malay language version of the semi-structured questions was utilized, having been translated from the English version provided by a language expert.

Table 1: Primary questions from the research guide

	Research Objectives	Primary Questions
RO1:	To identify the underlying reasons customers choose to dine at Mamak restaurants over Malay restaurants.	What factors influence your preference for dining at Mamak restaurants compared to Malay restaurants? Do any other related aspects contribute to your decision to dine?
RO2:	To examine customers' perspectives on whether the popularity of Mamak restaurants' food is overshadowing the Malay restaurants' food	Do you perceive that the popularity of Mamak restaurant food impacts the visibility and demand for traditional Malay restaurant food? Do you think that Mamak restaurant food is overshadowing the Malay restaurant's food?

Information Gathering and Analysis

Before actual data collection, eight identified popular Mamak restaurant operators in the Klang Valley, comprising Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Shah Alam, were contacted to acquire permission to undertake interviews at their premises. To ensure that customers' dining experience remained undisturbed, the interview process was carefully planned and took place only after they had finished their meals. This approach allowed diners to enjoy their food without interruptions, maintaining a pleasant and relaxed atmosphere. Once they had completed their meals, they were politely approached and invited to participate in the interview, ensuring that their responses were given in a comfortable and unpressured setting. The initial screening was conducted to confirm their regular patronage. This approach ensured that the selected participants were well-suited to provide relevant insights for the study. Before each interview session, participants were explicitly informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement, assuring them of strict confidentiality and anonymity. Written consent was diligently obtained. The interviews were meticulously tape-recorded and averaged 45 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, develop trust, and encourage the interviewee to provide full information, the interviewer disguised the respondent's name. In the end, 120 respondents were successfully interviewed. Aligning with Bryman's (2016) imperative regarding the timeliness of transcription, the recorded data were promptly transcribed post in-depth interviews. Beyond capturing the exact words of core respondents, crucial contextual elements like hesitation, ambient noise, and linguistic nuances were meticulously documented to preclude data outliers, biased judgments, and other potential impacts on findings. The subsequent manual coding process, coupled with qualitative analysis using ATLAS.ti version 8, followed by an inductive approach. Thematic and narrative analysis is used where understanding subjective experiences and the complexity of human behavior is essential. Ensuring content validity involves thorough verification procedures encompassing generational respondents, well-documented processes, and meticulous documentation. Inter-rater reliability tests were scrutinized and deemed acceptable. To uphold confidentiality, the identities of the participants remain undisclosed. They are consistently referred to as "Respondents" throughout the analysis process, and their overall responses are presented in verbatim quotations rather than attributed to individuals. The respondents ranged in age from 23 to 56 years, with the majority being male rather than female. Most respondents were Malays, followed by Chinese and Indian respondents.

4. Findings and Results

The underlying reasons for choosing Mamak restaurants

Two questions were designed to address the first objective of the study, which investigates the underlying reasons for choosing Mamak restaurants.

Determinants that influence preference for dining at Mamak restaurants compared to Malay restaurants

The feedback from respondents reveals a notable preference for dining at Mamak restaurants over Malay restaurants, attributed to several interrelated factors, including food variety, speed of service and attentiveness, the overall dining atmosphere, and better value for money. These factors collectively forge a distinct competitive advantage for Mamak establishments, solidifying their widespread appeal across diverse demographics. The comparison between these two types of restaurants reveals deeper insights into

respondents' preferences and the cultural dynamics at play. According to respondents, Mamak restaurants are praised for their extensive menu, offering everything from flavorful curries for hearty meals to breads and snacks as light options, along with beloved Malaysian favorites available around the clock. This versatility appeals to customers seeking quick, convenient meals without sacrificing variety. In contrast, Malay restaurants, while celebrated for their authentic, culturally rich comfort food, are seen by respondents as less appealing due to their limited availability of snacks and light meals and their restricted operating hours, creating less appeal to those seeking diverse dining options.

It is intriguing to observe that respondents consistently emphasize the superior speed of service and attentiveness at Mamak restaurants compared to their Malay counterparts. The swift preparation and delivery of meals showcase their efficiency and customer-focused approach, ensuring prompt service even during peak hours. This rapid service aligns seamlessly with the fast-paced lifestyles of modern diners. Additionally, the proactive engagement and quick responsiveness of staff create a sense of being valued, enhancing the overall dining experience. Some respondents noted that this combination of speed and attentiveness not only maximizes convenience but also fosters customer loyalty, cementing Mamak restaurants' reputation for exceptional service quality.

Another obvious difference, although not all, is the overall dining atmosphere in Mamak restaurants as posited by respondents is often regarded as superior to that of Malay restaurants, and several factors substantiate their claim. Mamak establishments are typically characterized by a vibrant, lively environment that reflects their inclusive and welcoming ethos. The open layout seating arrangements, often extending to outdoor spaces, create a casual and communal setting where people from all walks of life gather to enjoy a meal. This fosters a sense of connection and community, making Mamak restaurants popular among diverse demographics. The dynamic energy of Mamak restaurants is further amplified by their round-the-clock availability, ensuring a bustling atmosphere at any hour. Respondents mention that the informal yet friendly vibe makes these establishments ideal for both quick meals and relaxed social gatherings. The combination of diverse patrons, engaging conversations, and the ever-present aroma of freshly prepared dishes enhances the sensory appeal of the dining experience. In contrast, respondents claim that Malay restaurants, while often more traditional and serene, may lack the lively and interactive charm that Mamak restaurants provide. Their atmosphere is perceived as slightly lacking the dynamic energy that encourages social interaction and engagement. The limited seating arrangements and restrictive operating hours reduce their accessibility, especially for diners seeking convenience and flexibility.

Value for money is associated with the balance between the quality, benefits, and satisfaction received from a product or service compared to the cost spent. It reflects how well a purchase meets expectations in terms of affordability, durability, functionality, and overall satisfaction. In this regard, the majority of respondents acknowledge that value for money is often aligned closely in Mamak and Malay restaurants as both types of establishments generally offer hearty meals, in particular at affordable prices. This is typically judged by the balance between the quality, portion size, and cost of the food. Nevertheless, when it comes to light meals, availability, and services, respondents again lauded that Mamak restaurants hold a distinct advantage in terms of overall value for money, making them a close favorite among customers. Their extended operating hours, often round-the-clock, cater to convenience, ensuring meals are accessible at any time of the day or night. Respondents claim that customers, in general, seek value for money when restaurants deliver tangible and intangible rewards that justify the expense, ensuring a sense of worth and practicality in their spending decisions. Below are the overall responses.

"Although Mamak restaurants primarily offer curry-based dishes, their extended operating hours and the availability of food and snacks like bread make them more popular among customers compared to Malay restaurants."

"For us, speed of service and attentiveness play a crucial role in gaining customer confidence. In the mornings and afternoons, customers are usually in a rush. Despite employing foreign workers, most Mamak restaurants can provide fast and efficient service."

"Nowadays, Mamak restaurants have transformed significantly. They have adopted an approach where ambiance, including seating and entertainment, is not overlooked. These have become an attraction for customers who prioritize comfort, which is generally less emphasized in Malay restaurants."

Other related Aspects

In analyzing the feedback, besides food variety, speed of service and attentiveness, dining atmosphere and better value for money, majority of the respondents posit that it becomes evident that technological advancements have significantly reshaped the way some of popular mamak restaurants operate in which tablet menu ordering, point-of-sale (POS) systems, and cashless payment methods becoming integral to them. Some of the respondents claim that tablet menu ordering, whether through digital devices like tablets or customers' smartphones, enhances their dining experience that creating convenience and efficiency. This approach allows them to browse the menu at their own pace, customize their orders, and place them directly without waiting for a server. Respondents admitted that it reduces errors in communication and speeds up the overall ordering process, especially during peak hours, ensuring customer satisfaction. This is not so obvious when applied in Malay restaurants, except for a few.

The adoption of modern POS systems used by the Mamak restaurant, according to respondents, streamlined restaurant operations. These systems not only process transactions efficiently but also manage customer relationships. The majority of respondents claim that offering real-time data and analytics and POS systems enables them to streamline the ordering and payment process, reducing waiting times and ensuring orders are accurately communicated to the kitchen. According to some of the respondents, the modern POS system is still not widely applied in mid-scale Malay restaurants as opposed to Mamak restaurants. However, it is interesting to note that there is no significant difference in cashless payment methods perceived by respondents between Mamak and Malay restaurants as both have adapted to the growing demand for modern payment systems. Although mamak restaurants cater to diverse customers and provide convenience and efficiency in terms of services, respondents acknowledge that both restaurants make cashless payments a standard feature and emphasize payment convenience and practicality for customers.

".....Tablet menus applied in some of the popular mamak restaurants make it so much easier to see all the options, and we love that there are pictures of the dishes—it helps us decide faster."

"..... POS systems are great because everything is processed faster, especially when it gets busy, and appreciate the accuracy with these systems—there are fewer mistakes in billing compared to handwritten orders."

".... Cashless payment is so convenient in both restaurants, and we don't have to worry about carrying cash or waiting for change. We love using my e-wallet or credit card; it feels safer and faster than handling cash."

The popularity of Mamak restaurants is overshadowing the Malay restaurants

To address the second objective, two questions were used: the first focused on how the perceived popularity of Mamak restaurant food affects the visibility and demand for Malay restaurant food, while the second examined whether Mamak restaurant is overshadowing the appeal of Malay restaurants.

Mamak food's popularity impacts visibility and demand for Malay food.

In responding to this question, respondents generally emphasized that in this modern era, customers have evolving expectations that go beyond just food quality, shaping their dining preferences and influencing their choice of food establishments. Convenience, which encompasses accessibility, flexible operating hours, and efficient service, is crucial in attracting customer patronage. Respondents lauded that they increasingly value restaurants that accommodate their busy schedules, offering meals at any time of the day or night. As modern diners, they seek variety to satisfy their diverse tastes and dietary preferences. With globalization and exposure to different cuisines, the combination of traditional dishes with contemporary ones catering to both familiarity and exploration also matters.

It is imperative to note that respondents claim that the dining experience itself has become a significant factor for them. They, especially the young generations, expect a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere where they can socialize, work, or simply unwind. This includes casual seating arrangements, free-flowing spaces, and amenities such as Wi-Fi, which align with modern lifestyles. Respondents claim that personalization and inclusivity are crucial expectations. As modern diners, inclusivity ensures that the restaurant caters to customers of all cultural and religious backgrounds, providing halal or allergen-free food. Although not as important as the preceding elements, sustainability is also gaining importance as environmentally conscious consumers increasingly prefer restaurants that adopt eco-friendly practices, such as reducing food waste, using biodegradable packaging, or sourcing ingredients locally. All those factors boost the visibility and create

demand among diverse customers; thus, although not too obvious, mamak restaurants surpass most Malay restaurants overall.

We appreciate restaurants that fit into our busy lifestyle. Whether it's late at night or early in the morning, having the flexibility to grab a meal anytime makes all the difference. Quick service and accessible locations are what keep us coming back."

"It's important for us that a restaurant caters to everyone, regardless of their cultural or dietary needs. Offering halal options or allergen-free meals makes us feel valued as customers. It's not just about the food—it's about feeling included."

"The dining experience means more than just eating good food. We love places where we can relax, hang out with friends, or even get some work done. Comfortable seating, a welcoming vibe, and Wi-Fi make it much easier to enjoy our time there."

Mamak restaurant is overshadowing the Malay restaurants.

In this regard, respondents expressed some intriguing views, highlighting the growing prominence of Mamak restaurants, particularly in the Klang Valley, and their consistent progress in gaining widespread customer acceptance and support. This rise in popularity, however, is closely tied to the strategic locations of these establishments, particularly in urban areas. Mamak restaurants have emerged as a vibrant cultural phenomenon in urban areas, becoming a popular dining and socializing hub that attracts a diverse range of customers. Their ability to cater to such a broad demographic underscores their inclusive appeal and adaptability to the ever-changing dynamics of modern dining preferences. According to some of the respondents, Malay restaurants, while steadily making their presence felt in urban areas, tend to have a stronger foothold in suburban regions and predominantly Malay-populated neighborhoods. Although they cater to a loyal customer base and their growth is relatively rapid, customer visits are slightly ahead at Mamak restaurants, reflecting the diverse preferences and cultural dynamics of Malaysia's population.

Despite this, some respondents argued that the nearly round-the-clock operations of Mamak restaurants, compared to Malay restaurants, set them apart, establishing them as a unique category within the local dining landscape. This extended availability not only serves the needs of night owls, shift workers, and students burning the midnight oil but also fosters a sense of inclusivity and convenience that resonates across different demographics. This operational flexibility also makes Mamak restaurants a social hub for spontaneous meetups, late-night discussions, and even post-event gatherings, firmly cementing their reputation as a dynamic and essential part of urban life. In sum, the combination of factors such as customer diversity, convenience, efficiency, a welcoming environment, and round-the-clock operations has solidified the position of Mamak restaurants not only as a preferred dining choice but also as slightly overshadowing Malay restaurants, particularly in more advanced areas like the Klang Valley.

"Mamak restaurants are everywhere in the city, and that makes them so convenient. We love how they bring people from all walks of life together. Whether you're a local or someone new to the area, you can always find something familiar and welcoming at a Mamak."

"The fact that Mamak restaurants are open almost all the time is a lifesaver. Whether it's a late-night study session, a quick bite after work, or just hanging out with friends after an event, it's always there for you. It's like a go-to spot for everyone, anytime."

"What we love about Mamak restaurants is how lively and versatile they are. It's not just about the food—it's the vibe. You can have a casual chat, grab a meal, or just sit and enjoy the atmosphere. They're such an essential part of city life, and it's hard to imagine urban areas without them."

Discussion

A restaurant is fundamentally established to generate profit by winning customer loyalty, encouraging repeat patronage, building strong customer relationships, and exceeding expectations, which is essential for sustained success (Suchánek & Králová, 2023; Tahir, 2022; Antoshkova, 2022). This is accomplished by creating a memorable dining experience through food variety, speed of service, attentiveness, the overall dining atmosphere, and better value for money. The resilience and long-term success of a restaurant depend on its ability to sustain or enhance these factors (Tehrani & Ulubay, 2022; Sari et al., 2024; Amidi et al., 2022). Failure to do so can lead to unmet customer expectations, dissatisfaction, and a decline in repeat visits. Moreover, subpar service delivery can hinder a restaurant's ability to attract new customers and, more critically, retain regular patrons, ultimately jeopardizing its operations (Fowler, 2023; Al-Gasawneh & Dalain, 2023).

This study underscores that Indian Muslim or mamak restaurants have effectively adapted to evolving consumer trends, positioning themselves, especially in urban areas, as a resilient and popular dining option. Continuously innovating their offerings and responding to changing customer preferences enables them to manage and maintain strong customer loyalty and high levels of customer patronage. Their ability to balance affordability, efficiency, and a vibrant dining atmosphere further strengthens their appeal. Additionally, Mamak restaurants have integrated modern service enhancements while preserving their cultural and traditional essence, demonstrating that adaptability and customer-centric strategies are key to long-term operational success. This manifestly supports scholars' notion that responsiveness to consumer needs and trends is critical in fostering a modern restaurant business (Timokhovich, 2024; Fedorova, 2020; Ćirić et al., 2014). In addition to fundamental elements and the unstoppable advancements in technology, the adaptation of restaurant technology cannot be ignored, as it significantly contributes to the sustainability and success of restaurant operations. The integration of technology has become a necessity in meeting evolving consumer expectations, improving operational efficiency, and enhancing overall dining experiences (Jadhav et al., 2024; Kaur et al., 2023). Findings from this study indicate that Mamak restaurants, in particular, have demonstrated a competitive edge by strategically embracing technological advancements. They are slightly ahead of their competitors, who struggle to balance technology with tradition. Their ability to integrate modern digital tools creates convenience, particularly for tech-savvy customers. This strengthens the argument of Mardatiilah & Rosmayani (2023) that restaurants capable of setting themselves apart from competitors can successfully coexist with modernization while preserving cultural heritage, thereby creating a sustainable and thriving business model.

One of the remarkable findings emerging from this study is that flexible operating hours play a crucial role in the success of urban restaurants in warm-climate countries. As noted by Chinedu & Edenkwo (2024), businesses that align with consumer lifestyles gain a competitive advantage, particularly in bustling metropolitan areas where dynamic consumer behavior shapes market trends. This trend is especially evident among young consumers, who are inclined to seek social dining experiences late at night, whether for casual gatherings, study sessions, or post-work relaxation (Fan & Huo, 2020; Verma & Gupta, 2018). Extended operating hours are aligned with the fast-paced, convenience-driven expectations of urban populations (Ansai et al., 2023; Rahman & Khan, 2014). Young consumers, who often juggle work, studies, and social commitments, appreciate restaurants that accommodate their irregular schedules (Nongkhai et al., 2023; Protasiuk, 2024). The availability of food beyond conventional mealtimes not only increases foot traffic but also fosters brand loyalty, as customers come to rely on the restaurant's accessibility (Searight, 2023). Flexible hours enable restaurants to capitalize on multiple revenue streams, catering to different market segments throughout the day and night (Yousuf et al., 2023; Agustin et al., 2023). This strategic adaptability demonstrates that operational flexibility is not merely a convenience but a key driver of business sustainability and customer retention in tropical urban settings. These criteria are met in Mamak restaurants compared to Malay restaurants, reinforcing the importance of extended service hours as a competitive strategy.

In a nutshell, key factors such as food variety, speed of service, attentiveness, overall dining atmosphere, and better value for money, when supported by technology applications and flexible operating hours, significantly enhance a restaurant's appeal and competitiveness. These elements allow certain establishments to stand out from their counterparts, particularly in the case of Mamak and Malay restaurants, which Mamak can cater to diverse customer preferences and evolving dining habits. This aligns well with scholarly notions on consumer behavior, service quality, and restaurant competitiveness that service quality dimensions (responsiveness, reliability, and assurance) is shaping customer satisfaction (Zeithaml et al., 1988; Zainuddin et al., 2023), experience-based differentiation resulted from ability to cater to diverse preferences (Warde et al., 2019), technology applications on dining experience enhanced the operations (Tuncer, 2020). while flexible hours and social dining experiences significantly influence consumer decisions, particularly among young consumers (Zhang & Yao, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The overall findings of this study have far-reaching practical consequences for restaurant operators. To remain competitive and sustainable, restaurant operators must adopt proactive strategies that align with evolving consumer preferences and market trends. First, enhancing service quality, responsiveness, attentiveness, and

efficiency is crucial for ensuring high customer satisfaction and long-term loyalty. Customers value prompt and friendly service as it creates a positive dining experience and fosters repeat visits. Well-trained staff who can efficiently handle orders, address customer concerns, and provide personalized recommendations contribute to a memorable experience. Second, leveraging technology is essential for operational efficiency and customer convenience. Restaurants should integrate technology to streamline the service and improve the user experience. Third, offering flexible operating hours can help restaurants tap into different customer segments, particularly young urban dwellers who prefer late-night dining. Fourth, menu innovation and customization are crucial to attracting diverse customers. Providing flexible portion sizes and customizable meal options further enhances customer engagement. Finally, creating a memorable dining atmosphere fosters customer retention. By embracing these proactive measures, restaurant operators can sustain long-term competitiveness while meeting the demands of modern diners.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of restaurant customer behavior and the corresponding adaptations made by restaurant operators. It also underscores the importance of continuous innovation, customer relationship management, and operational flexibility as key drivers of success in an increasingly competitive market. Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on adaptive business strategies in the restaurant industry, offering empirical evidence that can guide future research in hospitality and tourism. In addition, it provides new knowledge in the Malaysian context that enriches the discourse on consumer decision-making, service innovation, and strategic adaptability in the restaurant industry. Ultimately, with new perspectives on customer behavior and restaurant management, this study serves as a critical resource for both theoretical advancements and practical applications.

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