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CONSUMERS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS "MAMAK" FOOD IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is a unique country. There are various races and ethnics of people living together in harmony and as such there are many ethnic foods for example "Mamak" food. "Mamak" food is popular among Malaysian and can be found from roadside stalls to café or bistro concept restaurants. The objective of this study is to provide an insight into customers dining intention to "Mamak" restaurants measuring the service quality and food attributes. A questionnaire survey was administered in this study and result showed that only one of the factor of service quality that is assurance and one variable of food attributes that is aroma, have greater influence on customers dining intention. The findings in this study can be used by other concepts restaurants to develop a competitive advantage that will further promote Malaysia as an interesting and colorful gastronomic tourism destination in the world.

Field of Research: *"Mamak" restaurant, restaurant, dining intention, service quality, food attributes.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Eating out is a part of Malaysian culture. Malaysia is a well known as a food heaven not only for locals but also for tourists. Kuala Lumpur is one place where the customers can eat any types of local food from all over Malaysia without going to the origin destination such as "Nasi Kerabu" from Kelantan, "Laksa Utara" from Kedah, "Asam Pedas" from Melaka and "Beriyani Gam" that is very popular in Johor. Another popular food among the Malaysians is "Mamak" food.

In Malaysia, the term "Mamak" refers to Tamil Muslims who generally are the owners and also the operators of such restaurants. Traditionally, these food operators will sell their food at the road side stalls but due to the high demand from the locals and tourists, many of the owners has changed from stalls to bistro or café concept for their food establishments. In this study we sum up all bistro and café concept outlets as "Mamak" restaurants. "Mamak" restaurants are popular due to variety food and beverages they serve. These restaurants usually operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. People of all races, religions and ages frequently dine at "Mamak" restaurants to meet up with friends or family or just there to watch football games on a big flat screen television with colleagues while enjoying the very popular glass of "Teh Tarik" (a beverage) and eating "Roti Canai" (most famous "Mamak" food). As said earlier, eating out is a very popular activity in Malaysia. With the trend of eating out with no specific time give an advantage to "Mamak" restaurants. They can provide variety of food and beverages that is available from breakfast to supper hence these are able to fulfill the needs and wants of the customers.

The restaurant industry is a highly competitive business environment. Many food operators compete among themselves in attracting future customers and retaining existing customers to their restaurant. This can be seen where most of the "Mamak" food operators will compete to open their branch or outlet in any new township and sell all types of food to cater their target market. In this robust market, many "Mamak" food operators create their competitive advantage in order to sustain in this challenging business world. As the restaurant industry is highly competitive and in order to attract and retain customers, restaurant operators need to have a deep understanding of the wants, needs, and perceptions of customers who have the likelihood of choosing their establishment (Gregoire et al., 1995).

There have been a number of published papers analyzing the hotels and other service organizations which focus only in service quality. The study on the impact of service quality and food attributes towards themed or ethnic restaurants success such as "Mamak" restaurants in Malaysia are hardly measured by researchers except by Josiam, Sohail and Monteiro, 2007 who examined Curry Cuisine: Perceptions of Indian Restaurants in Malaysia. This paper seek an insight into customers dining intention to "Mamak" restaurants measuring the service quality and food attributes. Both service quality and food attributes are important elements to the intention of customers to dine at "Mamak" restaurants.

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2. SERVICE QUALITY

The leading researchers in service quality are primarily responsible for creating the first instrument to measure this construct are Parasuraman, Zeithalm, and Berry (1985, 1988, 1991).Further research by Parasuraman et al. (1988) identified levels of overlap among some of the dimensions identified earlier in 1985. They therefore merged the ten dimensions into five: (1) Tangibles – facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel; (2) Reliability – ability to perform the promised service; (3) Responsiveness – willingness to provide the service promptly; (4) Assurance – knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence; (5) Empathy – caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The SERVQUAL model analyzes the level of service quality by evaluating the gaps between customers' expectations and perceptions of service. The smaller the gaps, the higher the level of service quality said Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (1999). SERVQUAL has been validated and tested in a variety of industries including banks, credit card companies, repairs and maintenance firms and long distance telephone companies (Parasuraman et al. 1988, 1991).

Babakus and Mangold studied hospital services in 1991 and a research in hospitality services have been conducted by Farouk and Ryan (1991), Bojanic and Rosen (1994), and also Seidman (2001) using the SERVQUAL model. Although altered by subsequent researchers, the SERVQUAL instrument has maintained the fundamental five dimensions and has had high levels reliability and validity throughout all tests (Seidman, 2001).

In restaurant businesses, low levels of service quality will create unfavorable behavioral intentions to dine, which in turn will decrease relationships with establishments (Alexandris, Dimitriadis, and Markata, 2002; Zethalm et al., 1996). This study chooses to study the factor of service quality as a measurement to dining intention of consumers.

3. FOOD ATTRIBUTES

Attributes can be defined as the product features that differ from those of competitors' products (Lewis. 1983). This definition of attributes can be directly applied to food attributes since food attributes are features that differentiate one type of food from other food. Lewis (1993) proposed that several specific attributes are involved in food such as taste, healthiness, social status and cost. Menkaus et al. (1988) reported that health-related factors and visual differences were evaluated as significant in the purchase of branded beef.

Further, Lin (1991) examined the five food attributes that may affect oyster consumption: taste, nutritional value, freshness, cost and safety. A review of the literature suggests that food attributes, such as taste, perceived value

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(which includes price and portion size) and perceived nutrition, have been considered significant within the food choice decision making process (Glanz et al., 1998 and French et al., 1991).

The literature also suggested that the evaluation of food vary depending on each of these attributes. Verbeke and Lopez (2005) further examined customer food preferences based on nine food attributes and they are search (price, color, appeal), experience (taste, spiciness, convenience), and credence attributes (leanness, safety, and healthiness).

Food attributes are important elements to food served in any restaurant. This study seeks to identify the elements of food attributes that are important to customers that dine at "Mamak" restaurant

4. BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

The study of behavioral patterns and responds can be traced to Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) who stated that behaviour can be predicted from intentions that correspond to a certain behavior (Baker and Crompton, 2000). Research demonstrates that a dissatisfied customer can informed their own dissatisfaction to an average of 10 – 20 other people (Brown, 1997; Shaw – Ching Liu, Furrer, and Sudarshan, 2001; Tax, Brown and Chandrashekaren, 1996).

Customers who are dissatisfied with a service that they have experienced, may take a variety of different actions such as treating it as their last visit to the restaurant or worse is by sharing their bad experienced with friends or what we call word of mouth in negative manner. They can voice their opinion to management, they can say nothing and just not return to that organization, or they can continue patronizing the organization and not say anything (Susskind, 2002).

In 1996, Zeithalm et al. showed that behavioral intentions are intervening variables between service quality and financial gain or loss of an organization. We can say that if more patrons have dining intentions to "Mamak" restaurant hence the business can be sustain and still exist from generation after generation.

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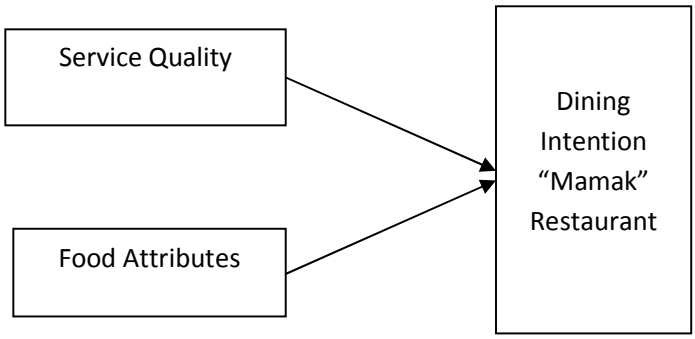
5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework of The Study



Based on the objective of this study that is to examine the service quality and food attributes on the dining intentions of "Mamak" restaurant , the above theoretical framework was developed (Figure 1). The theoretical model has been supported in all studies conducted since 1996 with its inception (Blomer et al., 1999; Baker and Crompton, 2000; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000; Athanassopolous et al., 2001; Shaw – Ching Liu et al., 2001; Alexandris et al., 2002)

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Sample and Data Collection Method

The study was conducted in Klang Valley using non probability and convenience sampling. Klang Valley is an area consists of Kuala Lumpur and its suburbs of Petaling Jaya and Klang. Klang Valley was chosen due to the large number of "Mamak" restaurants concepts and also its highly dense population (Euromonitor, 2010). Kuala Lumpur is not only a heaven to the investors from all around the world but also as the melting pot for all types of people from all parts of Malaysia.

A convenient sampling approach was adopted, with the population defined as people living in the Klang Valley who are aware or knows of "Mamak" restaurant. The survey were set in the same manner, adding a Likert type scale with a range of 1, = "extremely disagree" to 6, = "extremely agree" with each item. The questionnaires survey was decided as the best method to obtain the data required and self administered questionnaires were distributed. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed to people who are aware or knows of "Mamak" restaurant and only 288 questionnaires were collected, representing a response rate of 82.9% which compares favourably to other hospitality studies (Barsky and Huxley, 1992; Danaher and Haddrell, 1996)

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6.2 Instrumentation

The first independent variables is service quality, a construct that has been tested and validated across many different industries including the hospitality industry (Parasuraman et al. , 1988, 1999; Faouk and Ryan, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Knutson et al. , 1990; Stevans et al. , 1995). The five dimensions of service quality are again defined as follows: (1) Reliability, the ability to perform the promised dependably and accurately; (2) Assurance, knowledge and courtesy of employee and their ability to convey trust and confidence; (3) Responsiveness, willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; (4) Tangible, physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel; (5) Empathy, caring, individualized attention (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

The second dependent variables are food attributes which have been adapted and adopted on a previous studies (Jain and Etgar., 1977), (Letarte et al., 1997) and (Rozin and Vollmecke., 2001).

The dependent variable for this study was measured using the Behavioral Intentions Battery develop by Zeithalm et al. 1996) and the most recently used by others (Alexandris, Dimitriadis and Markata, 2002; Athanassopoulos, Gounaris and Stathakopoulos 2001; Baker and Crompton, 2000; Bloemer, deRuyter, and Wetzels, 1999; Shaw-Ching Liu, Furrer, and Sudharshan, 2001). Zeithalm, et al. (1996) indentified five behavioral dimensions which affect intentions: loyalty to the company (Loyalty); propensity to switch (Switch); willingness to pay more (Pay more); external response to a problem or situation (External response); and internal response to a situation or problem (Internal response).

7. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

7.1 Respondent's profile

The questionnaire has been randomly distributed among people who are aware or knows of "Mamak" restaurant. From the study, most of "Mamak"s customers were people from younger age groups that are below 25 years old and the numbers of people based on gender are about the same. Please refer to Table 1 for the statistics.

There are 55.3% female and 44.7% or 130 male respondents. More than half of respondents aged below than 25 years old while only 4 respondents aged between 56 – 65 years old. It can be said that most of "Mamak"s customers are from younger aged groups same as reported in pilot study done earlier. 46% of "Mamak"s customers are Chinese, followed by Malay, 38.5%, Indian 8.2% and others 7.2%. Most of respondents are single and students with 67.7% and 46.4% respectively.

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From the findings, it can be conclude that majority of "Mamak" restaurant customers are from the younger age groups with the lower income and most of the respondents are still single.

Table 1: Respondents' Statistics

Profile	Characteristics	Frequency (N=291)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	130	44.7
	Female	161	55.3
Age	Below 18 years old	6	2.1
	18 - 25 years old	161	55.3
	26 - 30 years old	39	13.4
	31 - 35 years old	29	10.0
	36 - 40 years old	13	4.5
	41 - 45 years old	14	4.8
	46 - 50 years old	12	4.1
	51 - 55 years old	13	4.5
	56 - 60 years old	2	0.7
	61 - 65 years old	2	0.7
Ethnicity	Malay	112	38.5
	Chinese	134	46.0
	Indian	24	8.2
	Others	21	7.2
Marital Status	Married with children	73	25.1
	Married without children	16	5.5
	Single parent	2	0.7
	Single	197	67.7
	Others	3	1.0
Current Position	Top management	8	2.7
	Middle management	33	11.3
	First-line management	36	12.4
	Operational	38	13.1
	Students	135	46.4
	Housewife	10	3.4
	Pensioner	2	0.7
	Others	29	10.0

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Monthly Income	Below RM 1500	140	48.1
	RM1501 - RM3000	57	19.6
	RM3001 - RM4500	35	12.0
	RM4501 - RM6000	37	12.7
	RM6001 - RM7500	8	2.7
	RM7501 - RM10500	7	2.4
	RM10501 - RM12000	5	1.7
	RM12001 - RM13500	1	0.3
	RM15001 - RM18000	1	0.3

7.2 Reliability Test

Cronbach's Alpha is calculated to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The data is reliable because the value of Cronbach's Alpha is nearly 1 i.e. 0.927. To study whether the variables used in the questionnaire is reliable, the Cronbach's Alpha has been analyzed for Service quality, Food attributes and Dining intention. The results are in Table 2. The value of Cronbach's Alpha for each part is high which more than 0.8.

Table 2: Reliability Test

Part	Cronbach's Alpha
Service quality	0.913
Food attributes	0.889
Dining intention	0.936

7.3 Test of Bivariate – Pearson Correlations

7.3.1 Service quality is related to dining intention in "Mamak" restaurant

Refer to Table 3.1, it can be said that service quality will not be affected by dining intention in "Mamak" restaurant. This is because of the significant value is higher than 0.05.

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Table 3.1: Test of Correlation to Check either Service Quality Relates to Dining Intention

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error(a)	Approx. T(b)	Approx. Sig.
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.066	.063	1.113	.267(c)
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.106	.059	1.796	.074(c)
N of Valid Cases		288			

7.3.2 Food Attributes is related to dining intention in "Mamak" restaurant

Refer to table 3.2, it can be said that food attributes is not related to dining intention. This is because the significant value of Pearson correlation is higher than 0.05.

Table 3.2: Test of Correlation to check either Food Attributes is related to Dining Intention

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error(a)	Approx. T(b)	Approx. Sig.
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.098	.061	1.666	.097(c)
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.119	.059	2.029	.043(c)
N of Valid Cases		288			

7.4 Regression Analysis

7.4.1 Regression between service quality and dining intention in "Mamak" restaurant

According to Table 3.3 the most important factor of service quality is assurance. There is a negative relationship between dining intention and tangible. It is also a negative relationship with empathy and also reliability.

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Table 3.3: Results of Regression Analysis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	3.163	.248		12.733	.000
	Reliability	.001	.066	.001	.008	.993
	Assurance	.235	.069	.286	3.413	.001
	Empathy	.011	.060	.016	.191	.848
	Tangible	-.178	.101	-.185	-1.760	.080

a Dependent Variable: Dining Intention

7.4.2 Regression between food attributes and dining intention in "Mamak" restaurant

There are 9 statements in this part that are taste of food, price, spiciness, personal reference, appearance of the food, familiarity with the dishes, aroma/ smell, texture and temperature. The most important variable of food attributes is aroma/ smell.

The factors that show negative values are price, appearance of food and familiarity with the food. It shows that if the price of the food at "Mamak" restaurant is lower, customer's intention to go to "Mamak" restaurant will be higher. Customers are not so particular with appearance of food and familiarity of food. The other factors that also important or attract customers to "Mamak" restaurant are spiciness.

Table 2.4: Results of Regression Analysis

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	3.140	.244		12.841	.000
	Taste of food	.044	.053	.063	.833	.406
	Price	-.104	.048	-.167	-2.144	.033
	Spiciness	.099	.042	.169	2.341	.020
	Personal preference	.006	.056	.008	.102	.918
	Appearance of the food	-.039	.052	-.063	-.744	.458
	Familiarity with dishes	-.108	.054	-.160	-1.986	.048

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Aroma/ smell	.116	.058	.179	2.013	.045
Texture	.049	.061	.074	.806	.421
Temperature	.023	.050	.037	.466	.642

a Dependent Variable: Dining Intention

8 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

"Mamak" restaurants do play an important role in the food service industry in Malaysia as it contribution in assisting the country's economic growth. Many customers choose this type of restaurant when dining out. It cannot be denied that most of the customers dining in "Mamak" restaurants due to their friendly service as some of the waiters even can remember the repeat customers' favorites drink or food when dining in their restaurant. This is one example of personalized service, where most of the service industries practice it in their daily operation. This shows that the element of assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence) is the elements that lead to the success of "Mamak" restaurant service quality and thus, encourage patronage.

Although this study proves that even some of the factors of service quality have not reached the minimum level of customers' satisfaction but the "Mamak" restaurant still can survive in the business due to its popularity among the young people. There is a possibility that these young people are not too concern of service quality but are more interested to a place that serves good food and a venue to hang out with their peers in a casual setting.

Customers dine at "Mamak" restaurant primarily because of the food aroma (based on the analysis result). Hence foods served in "Mamak" restaurant are popular due to its strong aroma of Indian spices such as cloves, star anise, cardamom, coriander and curry powder. The aroma also enhances the taste of all the tasty dishes served. The cooks themselves are from India, this gives the authenticity touch to the food. These cooks are knowledgeable in mixing certain types of spices to cook the gravy of dishes for example Fish Head Curry or "Chicken or Lamb Beriyani", giving them the special aroma that can attract customers. Due to the popularity of the food served, it is not a surprised to have many well known people dining at "Mamak" restaurant. Some well known "Mamak" restaurants such as D Kayu and Pelita have already reached a high level in the culinary ranking where many high profile people dines at these restaurants such as the Malaysian Prime Minister and popular international artist. Dining out in expensive restaurants convey the characteristics of status and prestige that customers want to acquire through food consumption (Senauer, 2001).

Future studies for this hospitality industry may include similar studies with other types of restaurants for example Thai, Korean and Chinese Muslim restaurants. This is because these restaurants are popular or are gaining popularity among Malaysian and tourist alike. This study on "Mamak" restaurant could also have a mixture of qualitative methodology where interviews or focus group discussions can be conducted with the "Mamak" restaurant owners and operators. This will give a more holistic picture to the study of these restaurants.

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