

BEYOND THE MENU: UNRAVELLING THE FACTORS BEHIND RESTAURANT SELECTIONS

Izdam Shah bin Izmi¹, Nurbaidura Salim^{2*},
& Noor Syarafina Sallehuddin³
*Corresponding Author

^{1,2,3}Department of Built Environment Studies and Technology,
College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA,
Perak Branch, 32610, Seri Iskandar, Perak, MALAYSIA
idzham151@uitm.edu.my

*nurbaidura@uitm.edu.my, noorsyara_ina@uitm.edu.my

Received: 22 August 2024

Accepted: 25 September 2024

Published: 31 March 2024

ABSTRACT

This study investigates determinant factors in restaurant selection while dining out in Ipoh city. Through a structured questionnaire survey administered to 100 respondents, data was collected on various factors including price, ambiance, service, food quality, location and dietary preferences. Statistical analysis techniques including regression analysis and correlation analysis, were employed to identify the significant factors influencing restaurant selection and explore the relationship between these factors. Findings revealed that price, food quality and social media influence are the most influential factors in costumers' restaurant selection decisions. Additionally, demographic variables such as age and income were found to significantly influenced costumers' preferences of restaurants. This research provides valuable insights for restaurateurs and marketers in tailoring their offerings to meet costumers' demands effectively. The implications of these findings extend beyond the scope of this study, offering further exploration into the dynamic landscape of restaurant selection behavior.

Keywords: Restaurant choice, Consumer behavior, Full-service restaurant, Consumer preferences, Determinant factors



INTRODUCTION

Benzer (2018) mentioned that the term ‘restaurant’ comes from the ‘restoratives’, the name of the first restaurant owner, A. Boulanger, a soup vendor who started his business in France in 1765. The growth of food industry has contributed to millions in revenue annually, leading to huge competitive among industrial players. With a wide range of competitiveness, customers have a broad range of dining options, ranging from fast foods to fusion dining restaurants (Skinner et al., 2020). In Malaysia, the increase numbers food and beverages restaurants has led to a change of lifestyles among Malaysians. Rapid urbanization and increased used of advanced technology have shifted Malaysians’ ways in selecting restaurants to dine in. One of the prominent issues related to restaurant marketing is the relationship between customers and services provided by the restauranteurs. The gap between customer’s expectations and what a restaurant can serve them can be an opportunity and a challenge for restauranteurs. Dissatisfied customers may do more harm by giving feedback about their bad experience at the visited restaurant to their families or friends, undoing the cultivated brand image of a particular restaurant. Therefore, ensuring positive feedback from the customers is important for maintaining business sustainability. Many restaurant owners can avoid bankruptcy if they understand theories of service quality and factors involved that influence restaurant’s selection among customers.

In order to provide customers with a wide range of food selection, restaurants must focus on the standard of their service quality, hygienic environment and ensuring that the premises are in line with standard operational procedures. Agbenyegah et al. (2022) argues that apart from cleanliness, external factors such as ambiance, interior design within the premise play an important factor in providing good customer experience, affecting their restaurant choice. Saji (2020) argued that customers’ preferences are commonly based on their acceptance towards the products they purchased. Location preference, food quality, staff friendliness and convenience are among the variables that affect restaurant preferences. This was supported by Wall and Berry (2007) on how restaurant services significantly impact customer satisfaction and loyalty, demonstrating that these factors collectively influence the overall dining experience and patrons’ likelihood of returning to a restaurant. In general, service provided by a

restaurant is always associated with client satisfaction. When dining in a restaurant, customers are not only anticipating in what they received, but also pursue dining experiences. In this case, experience is the thorough evaluation of a product or service throughout the meal, considering other multiple factors. For instance, friendly gestures from the staffs will increase customer's dining experience, generating positive responses from the customers. Customers with positive responses and experience with the service provided, tend to have a better repurchase intention (Zanetta et al., 2024; Norazha et al., 2022). Poor service quality, on the other hand, will influence their choice of restaurant in the future. Thus, experience is the pivotal outcome for a competitive advantage in the restaurant industry.

Despite various factors that can influence restaurant selection, socio-demographic variables also play a crucial role in determining customer's restaurant selection. Family structure affects restaurant selection, particularly for those dining with children (Azman & Majid, 2023). Parents with children often opt for a restaurant with kids-friendly menus, family-friendly restaurants that provide amenities such as welcoming atmosphere for families. In addition, parents with autistic child may opt for restaurants with soothing ambiance as some autistic children may appear to be overly sensitive in a socially crowded area. According to Verbeke & López, (2005), the level of education also has an impact on food intake because the highly educated spend more money because they want quality food with value for money spent. The factors of the tourist's state of origin, age, occupation and income influence customers in choosing a restaurant. This is because, each tourist is usually from a different state and has different tastes, such as tourists who come from Negeri Sembilan prefer to eat spicy food while Kelantan prefer sweet food. In addition, age is also a key factor in choosing a restaurant because the suitability of the type of restaurant plays a role for each age category such as younger people like to go to instagrammable restaurants while older people would go the restaurants with peaceful environment. Hence, this paper aims to answer these research questions; what are the important factors that influence customers to select and be satisfied with a restaurant? This paper provides a comprehensive analysis on the factors that influenced customer's choice of restaurants and their restaurants experience. In this sense, this paper helps to assist restaurateurs and entrepreneurs in developing better strategies and improve customer's experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The decision-making process of selecting places to dine is multi-faceted and complex, involving various factors such as quality of the food, location, price, service quality, ambiance and others to be named. Understanding these factors are essential for restaurateurs to attract and retain patrons to their premises. Namkung and Jang (2007) consistently highlighted food quality as a primary factor that influence choice of restaurant. Their research finding indicates that food quality directly affects diners' perceived value and their intention of revisit a restaurant. When mentioning about food quality, indicators such as meal freshness, food presentation and healthiness of the food significantly affect customer satisfaction and loyalty to the restaurant. Research by Ha and Jang (2021) showed that customers are increasingly valuing health-conscious options and sustainable sourcing. Similarly, Namkung and Jang (2020) found that innovations in menu offerings, such as plant-based dishes, are gaining popularity and influencing dining decisions.

Service quality continues to be a critical factor in restaurant selection. Elements such as staff friendliness, attentiveness, and service speed play pivotal roles. A recent study by DiPietro and Renzi (2021) highlights that personalized service and the ability to accommodate special requests are becoming increasingly important. The researchers also noted the growing impact of digital service enhancements, such as app-based ordering and table management systems, on customer satisfaction and loyalty. The ambiance and atmosphere of a restaurant significantly influence customer choices. Factors such as interior design, lighting, music, and overall environment create a sensory experience that affects dining enjoyment. Ryu and Han (2021) demonstrated that a well-curated ambiance positively impacts customers' emotional responses and satisfaction, leading to higher patronage. Additionally, Lin and Mattila (2019) found that thematic and culturally immersive environments attract specific customer segments seeking unique dining experiences.

Besides that, price sensitivity and perceived value for money are crucial considerations for many customers. Recent research by Heung and Gu (2020) indicates that diners are looking for a balance between cost and quality. Their study found that transparent pricing, value-added services, and promotions significantly influence restaurant choice. Moreover, Hwang

and Hyun (2021) suggest that loyalty programs and discounts can enhance perceived value, encouraging repeat visits. Convenience and location are pivotal factors, especially in urban settings. Studies by Yoon and Uysal (2020) show that proximity to customers' homes or workplaces, ease of access, and parking availability are key determinants. The rise of food delivery services has also shifted some focus from physical location to delivery efficiency and reliability, as highlighted by Cho et al. (2021).

In addition, the integration of technology in dining experiences is increasingly shaping customer preferences. McCarroll et al. (2021) noted that the adoption of digital menus, mobile ordering, and online reservation systems enhances convenience and satisfaction. Furthermore, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) experiences are emerging trends that attract tech-savvy diners looking for unique and engaging dining experiences. Food quality, service quality, ambiance, price, convenience, health and safety, technology, and sustainability all play significant roles. Understanding these factors and their interplay is crucial for restaurateurs seeking to meet customer expectations and achieve competitive advantage.

METHODOLOGY

The research primarily focused on Ipoh City, which is located approximately 207km from Kuala Lumpur. To ensure comprehensive insights, this research employs a quantitative approach exclusively, utilizing questionnaire as its primary method to collect, analyze and report data. The data is then analysed using regression and correlation analysis to identify the relationship between different factors and restaurant choices. This data collection is from a population of visitors to Ipoh City, both from within Perak and outside Perak. The sampling method used for this technique is convenience sampling, as no sampling frame is available. Using this method, the sample is taken from a group of people who are easily reachable and available (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2012). For this research, convenience sampling is the most suitable and only possible option to select the respondents.

In this study, probability sampling was employed using non-list based random sampling via Google Forms and social media platforms. The type of probability sampling used is systematic sampling. The sample size

calculation was conducted using the Krejcie and Morgan method (Januszky et al., 2011). For this research, the sample size was 106 respondents who visited Ipoh, Perak.

Analysis of this paper described the importance of each factor in choosing a restaurant in Ipoh from a visitor's point of view. The study uses regression analysis and crosstabulation analysis of the percentage. The questionnaire consists of four (4) sections and 17 questions. For part A, it involves the respondent's profile, which is about gender, age, race and origin. Part B focuses on the respondents' visit information, while part C focuses on visitors' perception of the importance of factors in choosing a restaurant. Lastly but not least, part D gathered views and suggestions from the respondents on how restaurants can become one of the pull factors in improving destination image in Ipoh.

The final stage involves drawing conclusions and formulating recommendations based on the findings from the data analysis. In this case, the researchers would identify and discuss the key factors that influence visitors' restaurant choices in Ipoh City. The recommendations could be targeted at restaurant owners, policymakers, and other stakeholders, providing actionable insights to enhance the pro experience and attract more visitors to restaurants in Ipoh City.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' Profile

This part is analysed based on the respondents' profile which include the age, marital status, race, origin, employment, and household income. It shows that most of the respondents are single (64%) and 86% of them are Malays. Most of the respondents (22%) are from Perak followed by Selangor 18% and Kedah 14%, it shows that the visitors came from nearby states. More than 60% of the total respondents have the household income of less than RM2,500 per month.

Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Respondents	Profiles	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	56	53
	Male	50	47
Age	18-23	28	26
	24-29	44	42
	30-39	20	19
	40 and above	14	13
Marital status	Married	38	36
	Single	68	64
Ethnicity	Malay	91	86
	Chinese	9	9
	Indian	6	6
State of Origin	Perak	23	22
	Selangor	19	18
	Kedah	15	14
	Melaka	12	11
	Pulau Pinang	10	9
	Kuala Lumpur	8	8
	Johor	6	6
	Kelantan	4	4
	Negeri Sembilan	4	4
	Pahang	4	4
Sarawak	1	1	
Household Income	Less than RM2,500	66	62
	RM2,501-3,170	19	18
	RM3,171-3,970	17	16
	RM3,971-RM4,850	2	2
	More than RM4,851	2	2

Source: Author

Respondents Visit Information

Table 2 shows the frequency of respondents that visits Ipoh City. 72% of the respondents visited the area a few times a year. It shows that visitors are occasionally going to Ipoh City because Ipoh is the nearest city with educational center area like UiTM Seri Iskandar and UTP at Seri

Iskandar,Perak. Ipoh is also the largest city in Perak.

Most of the visitors (58%) visited to Ipoh for vacation and leisure time. Primary source of information for discovering new restaurants in Ipoh City is through social media promotion with total of 65%. followed by people recommendations with 35%. This result shows the strength of social media like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter can give strong factor to visitors in choosing restaurant. Cafe is the most popular restaurant was chosen by respondent with 40% and followed by 25% respondents going to the local cuisine restaurant. The third restaurant is local cuisine restaurant with 24%. The fast food and chain restaurant get 8% respondent because this type of restaurant already has many locations outside from Ipoh City. Food truck and the street stalls is the lowest result. This is because there are not many food truck locations in Ipoh City.

Table 2. Respondents' Visit Information

Category	Profiles	Frequency	Percentage (%)
How often do you visit Ipoh City?	First-time visitor	8	8
	Occasionally (a few times a year)	76	72
	Regularly (several times a year)	22	21
Purpose of coming to Ipoh Town	Incentive travel	2	2
	Official affairs, business, education, work purpose	8	8
	Vacation & leisure time	62	58
	Visit relatives and friends	34	32
Primary source of information for discovering new restaurants in Ipoh City	People's recommendations	37	35
	Social media and promotion	69	65
What kind of restaurants do you visit often?	Cafe	42	40
	Fine Dining Restaurants	27	25
	Local Cuisine Restaurants	25	24
	Fast Food and Chain Restaurants	8	8
	Food truck	3	3
	Street Stalls	1	1

Source: Author

Factors That Influence Restaurant Selection

Table 3 shows the aspects that respondent consider when choosing a restaurant at Ipoh City. Based on the table, 97% of respondents have chosen the quality of food as the main aspect when choosing a restaurant. Meanwhile, 92% from respondent also choose a price aspect to come visited the restaurant after quality of food. That percentage showed almost respondent did not worried about the price if the quality of food is good and worth for their money and sense of taste. Otherwise, interior designs aspect also got the highest pick which is 88% and followed by viral places with 65% respondent. This shows that visitors like to try a new restaurant when it became viral. Hence, social media plays an important role in promoting a restaurant.

Table 3. Factors That Influence Restaurant Selection

Profiles	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Quality of food	103	97
Price affordability	97	92
Interior design of restaurant (ambiance)	93	88
Viral places (influence by social media)	69	65
Staff friendliness	31	29
OKU Friendly Environment	17	16

Source: Author

Restaurant Selection Factors by Categories

The analysis of the important of factor driving visitor restaurant selection in Ipoh is also conducted to identify the most influence visitor choices. The result is summarized in Table 4. Based on questionnaire survey, the lowest mean score factor is pet friendly policies (3.68) with 32% of respondent does not choose this factor as important factor. The highest mean score is outdoor seating of the restaurant (4.38), short waiting time (4.28), menu variety (4.24) and accessibility (4.03) which is most of respondents choose the restaurant.

Category	Factors	Mean	SD	Percentage (100%)
Before going to the restaurant	Parking space	3.80	0.82	22
	Recommendations from friends and family	3.86	0.84	22
	Location	3.92	0.93	24
	Proximity to tourist attractions	3.94	0.80	20
	Accessibility	4.03	0.62	16
Service during the restaurant	Ambiance	3.89	0.89	23
	Special offers and discounts	3.60	0.84	23
	Branding of the restaurant	3.90	0.63	16
	Price affordability	4.11	0.87	21
	Hygiene	4.15	0.83	20
	Variety of menu and cuisine	4.24	0.51	12
Facilities at the restaurant	Pet-Friendly Policies	3.68	1.18	32
	Entertainment	3.73	0.82	22
	Language Support	3.77	0.62	16
	Disabled people-Friendly Facilities	3.77	0.84	22
	Child-Friendly Facilities	4.13	0.52	13
	Restrooms	4.24	0.61	14
	Private Dining and Event Spaces	4.24	0.61	14
	Wi-Fi / Charging Stations	4.37	0.72	16
Outdoor Seating of the restaurant	4.38	0.68	16	

Note: ** Mean scores are based on a 5-point scale, with categories 1 = 'not at all important', 2 = 'not important', 3=' neutral', 4 = ' important', and 5 = ' very important'

Relationship Between Demographic Characteristics and Factors of Restaurant Selection

Based on data from the crosstabulation analysis, some demographic factors were selected to examine the relationship between the mean factors and demographics such as age, gender, marital status, and household income (refer to Table 5). The results of the analysis found that four main factors namely accessibility, cuisine and menu variety, short waiting time, and outdoor seating of the restaurant have become visitor factors in choosing a restaurant in Ipoh, Perak. In fact, the social demographics found that the female gender is more influential on the previously mentioned factors. Meanwhile, for age, visitors aged 24 to 29 years are more influential to factors such as cuisine and menu variety. Next, marital status favours single people who are influenced by factors such as accessibility, menu variety,

short waiting times, and outdoor seating. In addition, under the employment category, people who work in the private sector are also affected by the factor of short waiting time and outdoor seating in the restaurants. Finally, the gender of single women aged 24 to 29 years who earn RM2,500 or less are social demographic that is influenced by the most important factors.

		*Factor (Accessibility)			Total
		3	4	5	
Gender	Female	14	31	11	56
	Male	5	34	11	50
Age	> 40 years	4	10	0	14
	18 - 23 years	5	13	10	28
	24 - 29 years	1	31	12	44
	30 - 39 years	9	11	0	20
Marital Status	Married	5	27	6	38
	Single	14	38	16	68
Household Income	<RM 2,500	7	45	14	66
	> RM 4,851	0	1	1	2
	RM 2,501 -RM 3,170	7	8	4	19
	RM 3,171 -RM 3,970	5	10	2	17
	RM 3,971-RM 4,850	0	1	1	2
Race	Chinese	5	2	2	9
	India	0	6	0	6
	Malay	14	57	20	91
		*Factor (Cuisine & Menu variety)			Total
		3	4	5	
Gender	Female	2	36	18	56
	Male	2	37	11	50
Age	> 40 years	0	13	1	14
	18 - 23 years	1	15	12	28
	24 - 29 years	2	30	12	44
	30 - 39 years	1	15	4	20
Marital Status	Married	2	28	8	38
	Single	2	45	21	68

Household Income	<RM 2,500	1	49	16	66
	> RM 4,851	0	0	2	2
	RM 2,501 - RM 3,170	2	12	5	19
	RM 3,171 - RM 3,970	1	11	5	17
Race	Chinese	0	7	2	9
	India	0	0	6	6
	Malay	4	66	21	91
		*Factor (Short Waiting Time)			Total
		3	4	5	
Gender	Female	2	4	29	56
	Male	0	2	29	50
Age	> 40 years	0	10	4	14
	18 - 23 years	3	8	17	28
	24 - 29 years	2	26	16	44
	30 - 39 years	1	14	3	20
Marital Status	Married	2	22	12	38
	Single	4	36	28	68
Household Income	<RM 2,500	2	37	25	66
	> RM 4,851	0	2	0	2
	RM 2,501 - RM 3,170	2	10	7	19
	RM 3,171 - RM 3,970	0	9	8	17
	RM 3,971- RM 4,850	2	0	0	2
Employment	Government	2	3	2	7
	Not Working	0	4	0	4
	Private	0	23	11	34
	Retired	0	3	7	10
	Self- Employed	1	6	1	10
	Student	3	19	19	41
		*Factor (Outdoor Seating of the restaurant)			Total
		3	4	5	
Gender	Female	4	34	16	56
	Male	2	14	34	50

Age	> 40 years	0	9	5	14
	18 - 23 years	3	15	10	28
	24 - 29 years	2	10	32	44
	30 - 39 years	1	14	3	20
Marital Status	Married	1	16	19	38
	Single	5	32	31	68
Employment	Government	1	1	5	7
	Not Working	0	4	0	4
	Private	1	13	20	34
	Retired	0	7	3	10
	Self-				
	Employed	1	5	2	10
	Student	3	18	20	41

Note: * Mean factors selection; 3 = 'neutral', 4 = 'important', and 5 = 'very important'

Source: Author

This discussion delves into the myriad factors that influence customer choices when selecting a restaurant in this vibrant city. In this study, one of the primary factors influencing restaurant selection is the culinary reputation and quality of food. In Ipoh, renowned for its local delicacies such as Ipoh white coffee, hor fun (rice noodle soup), and bean sprout chicken, the authenticity and taste of these dishes play a critical role. Word-of-mouth recommendations and online reviews significantly impact diners' choices, as customers seek out places reputed for their delicious and high-quality food. 65% of the respondents relies on the recommendations or reviews from the social media to check out potential dining options. This is consistent with the previous study by Umur (2023) who stated that social media plays a crucial role in the students' decision making when eating out. Social media allows people to share their dining experiences easily. Based on the result presented, social media platforms function as a digital version of traditional word-of-mouth communication. Positive or negative reviews from friends or influencers carry more weight than traditional advertising because people trust recommendations from their social network. Social media reviews act as a crucial factor in the decision-making process by offering visual content, peer recommendations, and real-time reviews that cater to a wide audience. This helps potential customers make informed choices based on their specific preferences.

Affordability is another critical factor in selecting a dining place.

Consumers with limited budget options tend to opt for restaurants that offer value for money, fitting their budget constraints. Affordability is not always about the lowest and cheapest prices, but also about the perceived value of money. Some consumers weight cost of dining against the experience, quality, portion sizes, and overall satisfaction. Research by Chua et al., (2020) argue that customers tend to rely on the prices when there are a huge number of restaurant options with similar product or service offerings within a restaurant segment. In this study, majority of the respondents seek for price affordability to assist them in the decision-making process when dining out, suggesting a need for effective pricing strategies. Restauranters should adopt principles of marketing communication strategies to assist consumers in the decision-making process. The restauranters and business owners may help consumers to recognize the eating-out benefits they receive for the price they pay. For example, some restaurants offer free meals for certain people (pregnant women, OKU people, children below three years olds, etc) to attract more consumers to their restaurant. This supports the assertion that customers have distinctive reasons when visiting restaurants to dine in.

CONCLUSION

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed in the future research. First, this study is conducted in the Ipoh city only, thus limiting the generalisation of the conclusion. Future research should expand the study on other cities in Malaysia to obtain comparable results. Second, this study only gathered data from the local people (Malaysians) points of view. Future research should expand in the context of international tourists to understand their preferences in selecting dining options. This can help restauranters to better position their business in the global market.

Understanding consumers' preferences in selecting restaurants to dine in not only can help restauranters to understand the consumers' preferences, but also form suitable strategies to attract existing and potentials customers and outperform competitors. This research identified three main factors that will influence people's choice of restaurants to dine in. The food quality is perceived as the most important factor when consumers choose a restaurant to eat-out. Price affordability is also a crucial factor in selecting dining options. The significant growth of the hospitality industry in Malaysia and

the similarity of restaurant offerings might unveil on the importance of price affordability in customers' choice of restaurant.

FUNDING

There is no funding for this research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the design of the research, the questionnaire, and the write-up. The on-line survey, data cleaning and tabulation was undertaken by Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak Branch. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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