

# Customers' Acceptance of Food Served in Malay Restaurants during COVID-19 Pandemic: Study on Food Quality Factors

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## Abstract

COVID-19 outbreak has presented the highly infectious novel coronavirus and has created pertinent questions about the present and future survival of restaurant sector. This research addresses customer acceptance of food being served in Malay restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research design used in this study is quantitative research. A total of 357 respondents were involved in this study. This research used the G-power to collect data and the data was analysed using SPSS version 26. The respondents of this study are customers of Malay-concept restaurants in Pulau Pinang. The set of questionnaires consists of 2 sections which are section a) demographic profile; b) customer acceptance of food being served in Malay restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used in this study to measure food quality such price fairness, presentation of food, and taste. The outcome of the study show that Malay restaurant owners need to carefully plan their business operations to ensure that the restaurants are able to sustain in difficult times such as in this COVID-19 pandemic. Limitations and scope of future research are also discussed.

## ARTICLE INFORMATION

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Restaurant is defined as an organization providing food, beverages, and services at a specific location. The restaurant business is known as the most demanding and complicated businesses to run (Abdullah, et al., 2018). The mushrooming of restaurant industry in Malaysia is known as the fastest growing industry compared to other industries. According to Stanton & Sia (2000), Malaysian consumers prefer to dine in at different ranges of restaurants that are available. These trends have created demands in the Malaysian food service industry and led to inflexible competitions amongst restaurant owners to ensure sustainability of their business (Akbar & Alaudeen, 2012).

Malay restaurants sector is gaining popularity among Malaysians; the Malay-concept restaurants create an environment that fulfills the need and wants of the Malaysian people in getting original Malay food. It is also a platform for the tourists to taste real or original Malaysian food. Food qualities comprise the quality of service, location, ambience (Jalis, et al., 2009), design and concept of the restaurant; identified as very important factors that influence customers to dine out (Ramly, et al., 2003). Other than that, factors such as food type, price, image, atmosphere, the speed of service and the operating hours have also influenced customers to select a restaurant (Akbar & Alaudeen, 2012).

On December 8, 2019, China government identified new virus cases known as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (Bakar N. A. & Rosbi S, 2020). An

extremely infectious respiratory disease, COVID-19 spreads through contact with other infected individuals, with symptoms such as fever, cough, and breathing problems (Yang Y. et al., 2020). These outbreaks affected all businesses directly including restaurant operations. Many restaurants struggled to run their businesses. The normal practice to dine in or take-away was not practical during this time. Many restaurants ran their business on online platforms as it was important for them to gain customers' interest and obtain sales. Online food delivery became a new norm especially during the lockdown periods, and this platform were also used by Malay restaurants. Hence, the objective of this study focuses on determining customers' acceptance of food that were served in Malay restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 2.0 THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

A restaurant with a sustainable operation that achieves various factors such as financial, personal, satisfied customers and committed employees are considered successful. Malay restaurants should emerge with their own strengths and sensible marketing strategies should be applied to compete with other restaurants. According to Ryu & Han (2010), it is important to deliver high quality service that will in turn lead to satisfied customers. Customers play an important role on the success of Malay restaurants. Their perception and acceptance are crucial to ensure the sustainability of these restaurants. In addition, the various types of restaurants especially the theme restaurants are expanding in Malaysia and seem to be growing. Aforesaid, records show that there were 167,490 (which year?) establishments operating in food and beverage services compared to 130,570 establishments in 2010 with annual growth rate of 5.1 percent in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2018). Thus, it is necessary to study customers' needs and wants as well as understand their preferences which will lead to positive perception and acceptance of Malay-concept restaurants.

The Malaysian government announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) in March 2020. Due to the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO), during the first phase all food and beverage businesses' daily and monthly sales dropped drastically. People were advised to stay at home unless for important purposes. For this reason, delivery service played an

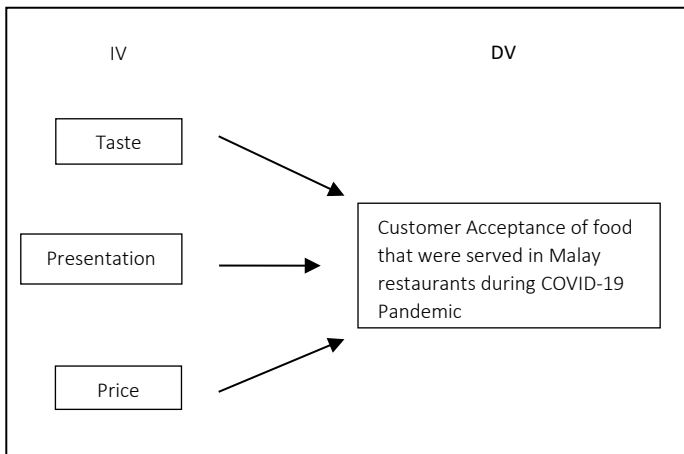
important part and recorded a high demand for safety and convenience reasons; this also changed a normal restaurant business practice (Zufazlin, 2020). Malay restaurant operators faced various challenges to stay stable in business. However, maintaining positive customer perception and acceptance is very important because it can lead to repeat customers and increased sales (Ryu & Han, 2010; Ryu et al., 2012). The unexpected crisis of COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 in Malaysia has boosted a new scenario of customer demand for restaurant services in Malaysia. The pandemic has impacted people's daily life and led to changes in customers' acceptance of food that are being served in restaurants.

There are numerous studies on customer satisfaction towards Malay restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rahim and Yunus (2021) examined the correlation between service quality, food quality and prices at Malay restaurants. Result of their studies showed that customers' perception of these three variables is not similar to before the pandemic. Goh, et al., (2021) stated that throughout the pandemic, customers may have had limited choices of food selection in restaurants, so prices may have not been an issue to them during the pandemic. Other studies have identified several factors that customers considered important in their restaurant selection. Basically, food quality was as the most important factor that may attract customer intentions to any type of restaurant (Joshi, N. 2012). Food quality is very significant in determining customer satisfaction and loyalty.

However, there are insufficient comprehensive studies conducted to distinguish customers' acceptance of food quality in Malay restaurant service during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study will contribute to a better understanding of managerial and theoretical perspectives, which will benefit subsequent research.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine customers' acceptance of food that were being served in Malay restaurants focusing on presentation, price and taste as variables. The framework of this study is shown in figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



### 3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 3.1 Malay Restaurants Service

Malay restaurants are known to provide a variety of food based on Malay cuisine itself and under the strong influences of ethnic groups as Indians, Thais, Javanese and Sumatran (Yoshino, 2010). The Malay cuisine is basically rich with fresh ingredients and strong aromatic herb flavour, spicy in taste with a creamy taste from coconut milk. The trend towards a preference for ethnic foods is influenced by Malaysian tourists who have travelled overseas (Mitchell, 2003).

Thus, this exclusivity of Malaysian food culture that represents each ethnic group has become part and parcel of the Malaysian gastronomic products (Jalis, *et al.*, 2009). In Malaysia, most Malay restaurants operate daily either in the morning or night. Service during the day covers breakfast, lunch, and tea break while at night, dinner and supper. In such approach, to convey the quality of service, it is important for the Malay restaurants to provide prompt, quick service and service responsiveness (Qin *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, being responsive to customers' demands has become a crucial factor for youngsters in Malaysia to patronise Malay restaurants again (Aaijaz & Ibrahim, 2011). As above mentioned, customers' decisions to buy any service or product are strongly related to their perception of the overall experience they had before (Oliver, 1980); significantly affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty, which is critical to Malay restaurants to succeed.

#### 3.2 Food quality

Food quality is an important facet of the overall restaurant experience (Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012; Ha & Jang, 2010; Namkung & Jang, 2007) that influences customer satisfaction, affects customer future behaviours (Kivela *et al.*, 2000; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Sulek and Hensley, 2004; Ha & Jang, 2010) and (Suhartanto, *et al.*, 2019); has a significant impact on customer satisfaction, purchase behaviours and customer acceptance. Food quality has been measured using various attributes of indicators, such as the presentation, taste, selection, nutritional value, food temperature and freshness of the food. This study aims to study on presentation, price and taste of food that were served in Malay restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 3.3 Presentation

Presentation is the art of food on a plate which implies to how pleasantly food is presented, decorated (Namkung & Jang, 2007) and is attributed to dining satisfaction and return clientele (Jaksa *et al.*, 1999, Domingo, 2002; Joanne & Rhonda, 2004, Dube *et al.*, 1994). Presentations include the combination of colour on plate, food plating and the skill of the chef in preparing the dishes as they indicate the first impressions of the food presented to the customer. Presentation is considered as a crucial part in determining customer satisfaction and acceptance. Moreover, customers' concerns about the presentation of the food they ordered is equivalent to their expectations and restaurant choices (Choi, 2010). This became gradually obvious since a year of a pandemic.

#### 3.4 Food taste

The pleasant taste of food play a vital role in outpacing the competitors, also as a factor to increase success in the restaurant business (Jang & Namkung, 2009; Domingo, 2002), as a trait in dining experience, forming customer satisfaction and potential behaviour intentions (Kivela *et al.*, 1999). Nowadays, more customers are knowledgeable and food savvy, thus, the quality and taste of food served in restaurants have gained much importance (Cortese, 2003) and is considered as a critical component which influences customer satisfaction and acceptance (Kivela *et al.*, 1999).

#### 3.5 Price

A meal served to customers should be worth the money that they spend in the restaurant (Suria, S &

Mahmod, S., 2013). Rothenberger (2015) stated that customers' acuities of unfair prices can lead to undesirable outcomes such as dissatisfaction, lower levels of repurchase, negative word of mouth, complaints, while price fairness had a considerable positive outcome on customer satisfaction (Herrmann et al., 2007; Kaura, 2012). In this study, the researcher looked at consumers' perception of whether the food price in Malay restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic was reasonable or justified. Ozbek & Yildirim (2020) stated that acceptance after the COVID-19 pandemic which include restaurant service such as meal presentation, menu selection, menu clarity, food taste and freshness have decreased. Most customers believe that quality and good taste of food is the main concern of restaurant choice.

### 3.6 Customers' Acceptance

There are numerous aspects that influence customers' acceptance of restaurants, such as the individuals, food or the restaurant itself. Other studies have shown that the most frequent factors influencing consumers' acceptance are speed of service, hour of operation (Zainol, et al., 2014), food eye appeal (Zainol, et al, 2018), restaurant reputation, recommendation from friends (Zainol, et al, 2016), several varieties of local Malay dishes and staff attitude. Moreover, the portion of food served was also found to be one of the main reasons to attract customers (MacLaurin, 2000).

### 3.7 COVID-19 Pandemic

Epidemiological outbreak for the first case was reported in a seafood market in Wuhan (Wu et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2020) a city in Hubei province in China (on 12 December 2020), but by the month end of January 2020, the virus had spread and infected around two thousand people in the country (Wu et al., bnm,2020) with higher chances of getting transmitted among human population (Bai et al., 2020). Furthermore, Malaysia for the first few months in 2020 also had one of the highest number of cases (Hassan, et al., 2020). There are no related studies on the factors that caused Malaysia to fall under countries with high numbers of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia. Probably the researcher believed that it is closely related to our daily routine such as meeting people, friends, relatives, and close family gatherings. During this pandemic, the food service industry especially restaurants and cafes is fully affected by the lockdown. Food industry

such as essential business premises, restaurants, food stalls and food delivery services, are only allowed to operate for a specific time given with standard operating procedure (SOP) and are authorized to offer takeaway and delivery services only.

## 4.0 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is quantitative, the outcome of which is numerical evidence. However, the primary data being used for this study are also based on secondary sources from websites, research studies and books. This study is conducted to describe the factors that influence customers' acceptance of food being served in Malay restaurants, in Pulau Pinang. A questionnaire was developed based on customers' acceptance of service at Malay restaurants during COVID-19 pandemic. The three selected food quality factors such fairness in pricing, presentation of food, and taste of food were measured. A 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used in this study to measure abovementioned factors. Before the questionnaire was distributed, four academic experts in the hospitality industry reviewed the questionnaire to ensure content validity. The reliability of dimensions during pilot study was 0.86 above the proposed cutoff of 0.70, indicating internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

### 4.2 Data collection

Data were mainly collected through G-power online questionnaire distribution to respondents randomly selected in Pulau Pinang and the data were analysed using SPSS version 26. The questionnaire was professionally designed using Google document that looks easy to answer. To avoid any uncertainty, the questions were composed in a simple and straightforward manner. Before beginning the research, the questionnaire was prepared in both Malay and English languages to make sure that participants fully understood the research content. The data were randomly collected online in January 2021. In total, 357 volunteers participated in this study. The questionnaire was divided into 3 parts; Section A) Demographic profile, Section B) Customer acceptance of food being served in Malay restaurants during COVID-19 pandemic. A 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used

to measure food quality such as fairness in pricing, presentation of food, and taste of food.

**5.0 POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

Roscoe (1975) proposed that a sample size larger than 30 and less than 500 is the most appropriate for research. A total of 357 respondents and above would be sufficient to give more reliable and significant results. To study the customers’ perception and acceptance of Malay concept restaurants, the population estimated within the area covers 1.78 million people in Pulau Pinang (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). The respondents of this study cover customers of Malay concept restaurants, who live in Pulau Pinang. In this study, the non-probability sampling designs which fit into the broad categories of convenience sampling were used. Convenient sampling is most often used during the exploratory phase of a research project and is perhaps the best way to obtain some basic information quickly and efficiently.

**6.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study presented an insight into customers’ acceptance of food that were served in Malay restaurants during COVID-19 pandemic focusing on food quality variables such taste, presentation and price. The research sample involved 357 respondents. All the respondents who were selected randomly have experience of tasting Malay food by take-away or by dining in Malay restaurants in Pulau Pinang. Most of the respondents completed the survey, but only 52 of them were unable to complete the questionnaire. Questionnaires that contained incomplete or inappropriate answers were excluded from the analysis.

Social demographic of respondents showed that the female respondents consisted of 55.46% (n=198) more than male respondents at 44.54 % (n=159). For age, a large number of respondents 56.3% (n=201) comes from average age of 18 to 24 years old. People from this age group normally had curiosity to explore new concepts, trend, food offered and their spending power. The respondents in the age group of 25 to 34 years old covered 23.53% (n=84). From the age group of 45 to 54 9.24% (n=33), 6.72% (n=24) in the age of 35 to 44 years, below 18 years old with 2.52% (n=9) and ages 55 years old and above 1.68% (n=6). Further, occupation section shows that most of respondents 36.41% (n=130) come from

government sector, 29.13% (n=104), from private sector 29.13%, 19.61% (n=70) were self-employed, while 14.85% (n=53) respondents were students. Table 1 shows the social demographic of respondents.

**Table 1: Background of respondent**

Background	Number of respondent	Percentage %
<b>GENDER:</b>		
Male	159	44.54%
Female	198	55.46%
<b>Total:</b>	357	100%
<b>AGE:</b>		
Below 18 years	9	2.52%
18 - 24 years	201	56.30%
25 - 34 years	84	23.53%
35 - 44 years	24	6.72%
45 - 54 years	33	9.24%
55 years and above	6	1.68%
<b>Total:</b>	357	100%
<b>OCCUPATION:</b>		
Government sector	130	36.41%
Private sector	104	29.13%
Own work	70	19.61%
Student	53	14.85%
<b>Total:</b>	119	100%

**6.1 Customers’ acceptance of food that were served in Malay restaurants**

**6.1.1 Taste**

This study found that for Section B on quality of food taste (QFT), 40% (n=143) respondents agreed that (QFT1) most of the food items were always the same every time, 45% (n=161) respondents thought it was a neutral taste that look the same all the time and 15% (n=53) respondents disagreed with that statement. For (QFT2) a good taste of food served in Malay restaurants; 57% (n=203) respondents strongly agreed, 23% (n=83) respondents disagreed and 20% (n=71) respondents agreed with this statement. (QFT3) 60% (n=214) respondents agreed that they do not mind change in food taste, 35% (n=125) respondents disagreed and 5% (n=18)

respondents responded they do not mind about changes in food taste. Previous studies showed that service significantly contribute to customers' acceptance of restaurant context (Qu, 1997). Ha et al. (2010) highlighted that, customers are getting more knowledgeable about food, and as a result the taste of food in restaurants has become even more important (Bashir et al., 2014)

### 6.1.2 Presentation

For (QFP1) quality of food presentation, most respondents agreed that the food presentation was still visually appealing in Malay restaurants during COVID-19 pandemic 57% (n=206) and 42% (n=151) respondents thought that food presentation looked less appealing in Malay restaurants during COVID-19 pandemic. Result of this study showed that during COVID-19 pandemic, customers care less about food presentation because of limited choices that they had. This finding contradicted with Selvi, et al., (2020) studies where they found that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the presentation of food is a crucial part in influencing customers' acceptance and satisfaction of food that are served in restaurants. (QFP2) 80% (n=287) respondents agreed that the food that were served to them was always at the appropriate temperature and served fresh but 19% (n=70) respondents had opposite view with this statement. 21% (n=74) respondents agreed that the restaurant offers a variety of menu items (QFP3) and 79% (n=283) noticed that during COVID-19 pandemic most Malay restaurants limited the food choices in their restaurants. When the findings were examined, it was observed that there was a slight decrease in the acceptance of the respondents regarding presentation of food in restaurants during COVID-19 because of their concern about restaurants struggling to sustain in business during this pandemic. This result was similar with Ozbek and Yildirim (2020), where both stated that consumers' expectations of menu variety, menu clarity, food taste and freshness have decreased (Ozbek & Yildirim, 2020) for a purpose.

## 6.2 Price

One of the important findings in this study was that quality dimensions of a Malay restaurant and perceived price had positive effects on customer acceptance. It was found that a reasonable price could positively and directly affect customers' acceptance toward quality of a

restaurant. Ryu and Han (2010) argued that price influenced customers' satisfaction and quality assumption dimensions (food, service, and physical environment quality). From the overall total of 357 participants, 19% (n=68) respondents thought that the price of the food at Malay restaurants were reasonable, 25% (n=90) respondents responded that food price at Malay restaurants was fair from before, but the price was still acceptable for them and 55% (n=199) respondents agreed that they could not tolerate the price of food that was offered at Malay restaurants. This finding shows that price fairness has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, and this is significant with other research (Gagić *et al.*, 2013; Kaura, 2012). During the COVID-19 pandemic, customers may have had limited choices of buying that prevented them from comparing the price. However, price was an issue to them because during this period many people lost their jobs and were also affected financially. This finding is supported by Arlanda and Suroso's (2018) study, which revealed that during the critical period, consumers would be satisfied if the food and drink were reasonably priced.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

This research provided benefits for the Malay restaurants and the restaurant industry itself. Malay restaurants should always be creative in this competitive era. Based on the research result, perception and acceptance of Malay restaurants is highly influenced by the food quality that are served to the customers. The outcome of the study shows that there should always be a concern in restaurant industry in Malaysia. The more comfort is offered to the customers, the easier it is for a restaurant to get customers. The service quality, the food product quality and the physical environment of the Malay restaurants will attract customers and sustain the business. In addition, the service of the restaurants is the second chosen by the customers in determining their perception and acceptance of Malay restaurants. This includes food time prepared, the interaction with customers, the needs and wants of customers. All these factors contribute to customers' perception and acceptance.

Qin et al. (2009) stated that service is one of the antecedents of customer acceptance of a Malay restaurant. Service is a cognitive evaluation; therefore, a positive service perception can lead to positive customer

acceptance at Malay restaurants. The customers' perceptions are greatly affected by the performance of service provider (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Quality and taste are two major factors considered by respondents when selecting a restaurant (Joshi, N., 2012). Nonetheless, our findings indicated that customers' perceptions and acceptance of food quality based on price, taste of food and presentation of food in Malay restaurants differ from pre-pandemic era which shows that customers' views exist differently with regards to food consumption. This study will contribute to a better understanding of managerial and theoretical perspectives, which will be beneficial for subsequent research.

To ensure that Malay restaurants can nurture ahead in any situation such COVID-19 pandemic a few suggestions such as 1) restaurants ought to sustain the hygiene and service of the restaurants; 2) the Malay restaurants should offer price that is worth the food and its quality; 3) the service quality should be improved to enhance customers perception and acceptance; 4) restaurants have to emphasis on digital marketing and social media platforms to gain customer interest. People today spend more time on the internet, so restaurant owners should make use of these platforms to post advertisements and menu offers on social media. According to Liu and Jang (2009), restaurants should offer services which are consistent, efficient, and genuine to fulfil customers' satisfaction because these factors are most important to an organization. Service also may affect the perception and acceptance of customers towards quality of food (Caceres & Paparoidamis, 2007) that are being served in Malay restaurant.

## 8.0 LIMITATION OF STUDY AND ADVICE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study makes important contributions to both academia and practice, it was limited in some ways, therefore future research is encouraged. Importantly, limitation that should be addressed is that the perspectives reported in the study are from Pulau Pinang only. Random samples from distinct district, state and culture may contribute towards newer findings. This study only focused on Malay restaurants in Pulau Pinang, perhaps other researchers could address various types of food outlets such as café, stalls, food court and fast food to get valid data.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** None

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