

Taste Beyond the Trend: How Service Quality Drives Customer Loyalty in Malaysia's Fast-Service F&B Sector

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This study investigates the impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction and loyalty in Malaysia's fast-service food and beverage (F&B) sector, focusing on Mixue outlets. Guided by the SERVQUAL framework, the research aims to identify which service dimensions most strongly influence satisfaction and how these effects extend to customer loyalty. Data were collected through a survey of 99 Mixue customers, assessing five service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance, alongside satisfaction and loyalty indicators. Using regression analysis, the model explained 81.1% of the variance in satisfaction and 78.8% in loyalty. Tangibles ($\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.01$), reliability ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.01$), empathy ($\beta = 0.280$, $p < 0.01$), and assurance ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.05$) significantly affected satisfaction, while only assurance directly influenced loyalty ($\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.001$). Satisfaction also positively affected loyalty ($\beta = 0.275$, $p < 0.05$), confirming its mediating role. The findings highlight that while multiple service elements enhance satisfaction, loyalty is primarily driven by psychological trust and staff competence. These insights underscore the importance of assurance-based training, customer feedback monitoring, and standardized service accreditation to strengthen long-term loyalty in youth-oriented F&B markets.

Keywords: Assurance; Customer Loyalty; Customer Satisfaction; Service Quality; SERVQUAL

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian food and beverage (F&B) industry has undergone profound transformations over the past decade, largely influenced by changing consumer preferences, rapid technological development, and intensifying market competition (Xiaoming & Fernando, 2019). With the rise of digitalization, globalization, and the dynamic lifestyle of younger generations, the industry has become more innovative and customer-centric. Within this evolving environment, Mixue has emerged as one of the most prominent and recognizable brands. Known for its distinctive snowman mascot, wide selection of soft-serve ice cream and bubble tea, and its consistent affordability, Mixue has quickly attracted the attention of Malaysian consumers, particularly Generation Z and millennials. Its visually appealing store design, strong online presence, and competitive pricing have positioned Mixue as a highly popular option. Yet, the central issue remains whether Mixue's success reflects genuine service quality and value creation or merely a temporary trend fueled by novelty and aggressive marketing.

In today's highly competitive service economy, a company's ability to sustain itself depends not only on the uniqueness of its product offerings but also, and perhaps more critically, on the quality of the service delivered to its customers (Zhao & Di Benedetto, 2013). Modern consumers are becoming increasingly discerning, demanding both affordability and enjoyable experiences that are consistent across interactions. They seek not only products that are attractive and well-priced but also services that create emotional connection, comfort, and reliability. As Natasha et al. (2020) emphasized, service quality plays a fundamental role in shaping customer satisfaction, which in turn strongly influences customer loyalty. In a crowded F&B marketplace such as Malaysia, where alternative options are abundant, exceptional service quality often serves as the differentiating factor that allows businesses to retain their customers and build long-term relationships.

To provide a systematic framework for analyzing service quality, this study adopts the SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which identifies five critical dimensions of service: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. Tangibles cover the physical environment, including the cleanliness of outlets, seating arrangements, and staff appearance. Reliability refers to the consistency and accuracy of the service provided. Responsiveness measures the willingness and speed of employees in assisting customers. Empathy reflects the extent to which staff demonstrate care and attention to individual customer needs. Finally, assurance encompasses employees' competence, courtesy, and ability to instill customer trust. By examining these dimensions, researchers and practitioners can better understand which aspects of service delivery are most valued by consumers in the F&B sector.

In addition to service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty are central constructs in this study. These factors not only influence repeat patronage but also determine the long-term viability and profitability of businesses. Fickry et al. (2020) note that successful organizations are often characterized by visionary leadership and consistently high service standards, which together form the foundation for customer trust and satisfaction. Similarly, Gong and Yi (2018) demonstrated that service quality exerts a substantial impact on customer happiness and loyalty across various high-contact service industries, including hospitality and F&B. Their findings suggest that when customers perceive they are treated with respect, professionalism, and consistency, they are more likely to return, even in the presence of slightly higher prices or increased competition. This indicates that the perception of value in the F&B industry extends beyond product features to encompass holistic service experiences.

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of service quality dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance, on customer satisfaction and loyalty within Mixue Malaysia's fast-service F&B context. The study holds significant value as it addresses a practical concern in Malaysia's increasingly competitive and youth-driven market, where consumer loyalty is volatile and influenced by both service experience and brand trends. Unlike prior studies that generalize service quality across broad F&B categories, this research specifically contextualizes the SERVQUAL framework in a rapidly expanding global franchise that targets digitally active Generation Z and millennial consumers. Its novelty lies in uncovering whether Mixue's popularity stems from authentic service quality or merely from trend-based appeal. The study's contribution extends to both theory and practice: it enriches service marketing literature by integrating emotional and operational elements of service perception within an emerging market context, and it offers actionable insights for practitioners to design assurance-based training, real-time feedback systems, and service quality standards that foster sustained customer loyalty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, and Customer Loyalty

High service quality has long been acknowledged as a critical determinant of organizational success, particularly in customer-centric industries such as F&B (Ramya et al., 2019). Numerous studies affirm that service quality plays a central role in shaping customer satisfaction and fostering loyalty (e.g., Sutrisno et al., 2019). Satisfaction, in this context, reflects a psychological comparison between customers' expectations and the actual service experience (Liao, 2009). Kee et al. (2023) further emphasize that the degree of satisfaction is shaped by the gap between anticipated service and its perceived delivery, highlighting the need for businesses to manage both operational efficiency and customer perception effectively.

Hypotheses Development

Tangibles

Tangibles refer to the physical attributes of service delivery, such as the cleanliness of facilities, the condition of equipment, and the appearance of service personnel (Parasuraman et al., 1988). These visible cues play a pivotal role in shaping customer perceptions, especially in fast-service environments where decisions are made quickly and interaction time is limited. A well-maintained, aesthetically pleasing setting signals professionalism and enhances the overall service experience. Numerous studies have found that tangible service elements significantly contribute to customer satisfaction by influencing first impressions and reinforcing perceived service quality (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2018; Rodríguez et al., 2008; Silaningsih et al., 2024). Collectively, these findings suggest that tangible aspects serve not only a functional role but also a symbolic one in enhancing customer confidence and satisfaction.

Moreover, tangible elements can also foster customer loyalty by shaping positive brand impressions that extend beyond a single service encounter (Rashid et al., 2020). When customers consistently perceive a clean, well-organized, and visually appealing environment, they are more likely to associate the brand with professionalism, trustworthiness, and care. These associations not only contribute to satisfaction but can also build affective commitment and repeat patronage. In service environments such as fast-food chains, where ambience and visual appeal play a strong role in shaping customer expectations, the physical setting often becomes a key reason for return visits and brand advocacy. Thus, tangible aspects of service delivery may directly encourage customers to remain loyal to the brand. Building on these, we hypothesize that:

H1: Tangibles have a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H2: Tangibles have a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Reliability

Reliability is the quality of being trustworthy or dependable (Cynthia & Tuti, 2023). It reflects the extent to which a company fulfills its commitments, be it order accuracy, timely delivery, or consistent service execution. When businesses meet these expectations without errors or disruptions, customers are more likely to develop a sense of trust in the brand's operational capability. Empirical studies have found that reliable service delivery significantly enhances customer satisfaction by reducing service-related frustrations and reinforcing expectations of dependability (e.g., Balinado et al., 2021; Shrestha, 2021; Zygias et al., 2022). Rather than surprising customers with extraordinary service, reliability satisfies them through consistency and the absence of disappointment.

In addition, reliability also extends its impact beyond satisfaction to directly influence customer loyalty. When customers consistently experience dependable service, they are more likely to develop trust and a lasting relationship with the brand. This trust fosters repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Several studies have demonstrated that reliability significantly affects customer loyalty, particularly in the fast-food industry, where service consistency is paramount (e.g., Fadare & Akwikwa, 2024; Villanueva et al., 2023). Therefore, we posit:

H3: Reliability has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H4: Reliability has a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness refers to the willingness and ability of employees to assist customers and provide timely service (Parasuraman et al., 1988). When staff members respond quickly, customers are more likely to feel that the service is both efficient and attentive, which enhances overall satisfaction (Rao & Sahu, 2013). Beyond speed, responsiveness also encompasses friendly, caring, and solution-oriented behavior that demonstrates genuine concern for customer needs. When customers perceive that employees are proactive and eager to help, they tend to develop a stronger sense of being valued. Prior studies have shown that prompt and courteous responses from service staff significantly contribute to increased customer satisfaction by reinforcing a sense of trust and personalized engagement (e.g., Ali & Amir, 2020; Abdullah & Kasmi, 2021; Woldemichael, 2024).

Meanwhile, responsiveness plays a pivotal role in fostering customer loyalty. When customers experience prompt and attentive service, it not only enhances their immediate satisfaction but also builds trust and a sense of being valued, which are critical components of loyalty. In fast-paced service environments, such as fast-food restaurants, the ability of staff to quickly and effectively address customer needs can significantly influence repeat patronage. Empirical studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between service responsiveness and customer loyalty. For instance, research by Villanueva et al. (2023) found that responsiveness significantly affects customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Saad et al. (2022) highlighted that responsiveness, particularly in terms of delivery fulfillment and speed, has a significant impact on customer loyalty in micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Together, we pose that:

H5: Responsiveness has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H6: Responsiveness has a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Empathy

Empathy refers to the ability of service staff to deliver personalized attention and demonstrate a genuine understanding of each customer's specific needs (Parasuraman et al., 1988). This interpersonal quality fosters a sense of being valued, which is essential for enhancing the emotional dimension of the service experience. When service delivery is perceived as caring and tailored, customers are more likely to feel supported and respected. Hussain et al. (2015) emphasize that personalized interactions contribute to a deeper emotional connection between customers and service providers, thereby strengthening satisfaction. This becomes particularly relevant in service environments involving direct and repeated contact between staff and customers. Numerous studies support the notion that empathetic service behavior, such as active listening, individualized communication, and attentiveness, significantly boosts customer satisfaction by creating a sense of psychological comfort and relational warmth (e.g., Bahadur et al., 2020; Balinado et al., 2021; Zygariis et al., 2022).

Empathy not only enhances customer satisfaction but also fosters customer loyalty. When customers feel genuinely understood and valued, they are more likely to develop a strong emotional connection with the brand, leading to repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth referrals. Empathetic interactions signal to customers that the company prioritizes their individual needs and experiences, which can differentiate the brand in competitive markets. Previous studies support this, indicating that empathy significantly contributes to customer loyalty by strengthening the emotional bonds between customers and service providers (e.g., Bahadur et al., 2020; Isitor et al., 2021). In fast-paced service environments like Mixue, where personalized attention can be a differentiating factor, demonstrating empathy can directly influence customers' decisions to return and recommend the brand to others. Based on these, we hypothesize that:

H7: Empathy has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H8: Empathy has a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Assurance

Assurance reflects the extent to which service employees convey trustworthiness through their knowledge, competence, and respectful behavior (Parasuraman et al., 1988). This dimension is especially important in service interactions where customers rely on staff expertise to feel confident and secure. When staff are well-trained, confident in their communication, and courteous, customers are more likely to view the service provider as dependable and reputable. Albarq (2023) emphasizes that strong interpersonal communication and technical know-how foster customer trust, which in turn contributes to satisfaction. Previous studies have supported this view, indicating that assurance-related behaviors, such as clarity of explanation, polite engagement, and demonstrated expertise, positively influence customer satisfaction by strengthening their sense of trust and comfort (e.g., Abdullah & Kasmi, 2021; Alolayyan et al., 2018).

Beyond fostering customer satisfaction, assurance also significantly contributes to building customer loyalty. When service staff consistently demonstrate competence, courtesy, and professionalism, customers are more likely to trust the brand and feel confident in their service experiences. This trust forms the foundation for long-term relationships, encouraging repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth referrals. In the fast-food industry, where service interactions are brief yet frequent, assurance becomes a critical factor in differentiating a brand and retaining customers. Research by Yuqi

(2024) supports this, indicating that assurance has a positive impact on customer loyalty in the fast-food sector. Similarly, a study by Boasiako and Asante (2019) found that assurance was a key determinant of customer loyalty in the restaurant industry. Thus, we pose that:

H9: Assurance has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H10: Assurance has a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

Customer satisfaction is the most important factor in shaping customer loyalty, especially in the F&B industry. The longer a customer remains satisfied, the greater the probability they will return to the same products in the future and recommend the brand to others, rather than buying goods and services from competitors (Kee et al., 2021). Satisfaction is an essential mental state that leads to loyalty through repeated positive experience, according to Oliver (1999). This is supported by Amin et al. (2013), who concluded that in services, higher satisfaction leads to stronger emotional attachment, consequently boosting attitudinal and behavioral loyalty.

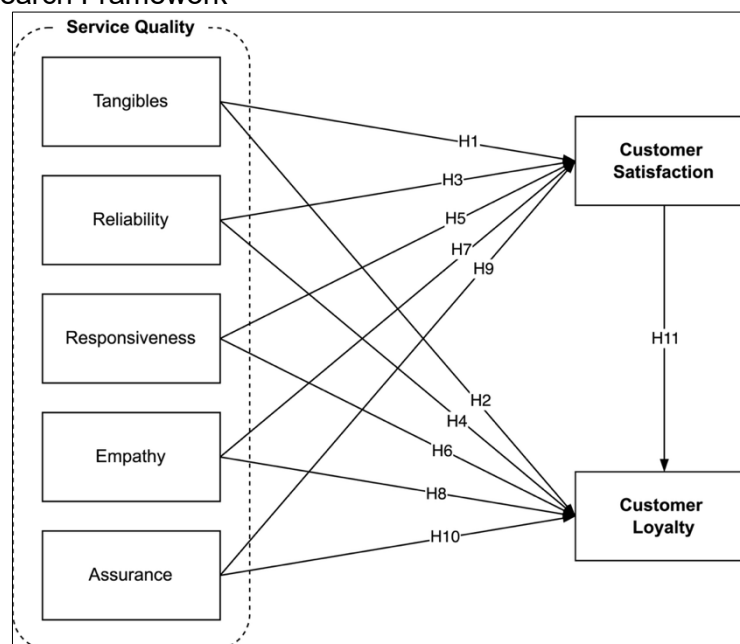
In the scenario of Mixue Malaysia, where consumers have many other choices, satisfaction can be the key to repeat visits. Zeithaml et al. (1996) are convinced that satisfied customers will stay with the company even if the competitors offer similar products. This can be especially used in fast-service environments, where quick and positive service outcomes reinforce a customer's loyalty toward the brand. Research by Han and Ryu (2009) also confirms that satisfaction positively influences word-of-mouth recommendations and willingness to revisit. Accordingly, we propose that:

H11: Customer satisfaction has a positive influence on customer loyalty.

Conceptual Framework

The study framework model is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

Sample and Procedure

We employed a purposive sampling strategy to target customers of Mixue outlets across Malaysia. Participants were required to have prior experience visiting any Mixue branch within the country. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, and the survey link was disseminated through social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram to maximize outreach and diversity of responses. All respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and their responses would be kept confidential. Subsequently, the data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics and R to conduct hypothesis testing and evaluate the research model.

Table 1. Summary of Respondents' Demographic Profile (N=99)

	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Female	55	55.56%
Male	44	44.44%
Race		
Malay	16	16.16%
Chinese	64	64.65%
Indian	11	11.11%
Bumiputera	8	8.08%
Education Level		
Did not attend school	1	1.01%
Secondary school	7	7.07%
High school diploma or equivalent	10	10.10%
Bachelor's degree	77	77.78%
Master's degree	3	3.03%
Doctorate degree	1	1.01%
Employment Status		
Full-time	11	11.11%
Part-time	2	2.02%
Self-employed	10	10.10%
Student	76	76.77%
Monthly Income Level		
B40 (below RM5,249)	69	69.70%
M40 (between RM5,250 and RM11,819)	22	22.22%
T20 (above RM11,820)	8	8.08%

Note. Age is a continuous variable and is therefore not displayed in this table. The mean age is 24.19 years with a standard deviation of 9.84 years.

As a result, a total of 99 valid responses were collected, and respondents' demographic profiles were presented in Table 1. Among these, 55.56% (N=55) were female and 44.44% (N=44) were male. The mean age was 24.19 years (SD = 9.84). Ethnically, most were Chinese (N=64, 64.65%), followed by Malay (N=16, 16.16%), Indian (N=11, 11.11%), and Bumiputera (N=8, 8.08%). A majority held a bachelor's degree (N=77, 77.78%), and 76.77% (N=76) were students. In terms of income, 69.70% (N=69) were from the B40 group, 22.22% (N=22) from M40, and 8.08% (N=8) from T20.

Measures

All survey items in this study were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The complete list of measurement items is provided in the Appendix.

Service Quality

Service quality was measured as a second-order construct by adapting a 22-item scale developed by [Parasuraman et al. \(1988\)](#), comprised of five sections for each dimension. A sample question for each dimension (i.e., tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance) was “The equipment used by Mixue Malaysia is up to date” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.72), “Mixue Malaysia fulfils its promises to deliver services on time” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.83), “Employees of Mixue Malaysia inform customers exactly from services will be performed” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.82), “Mixue Malaysia gives individual attention to customers” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.86), and “Employee behavior of Mixue Malaysia instils confidence in customers” (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.81), respectively.

Customer Satisfaction

To measure customer satisfaction, this study employed a 5-item scale adapted from the scale developed by [Fornell et al. \(1996\)](#) and [Oliver \(1980\)](#) (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.82). An example of the items is: “Overall, I am satisfied with the service and product provided by Mixue Malaysia.”

Customer Loyalty

The construct of customer loyalty was assessed using a 6-item scale, which was adapted from the 6-item measure developed by [Yang and Peterson \(2004\)](#). Sample item includes: “I would say positive things about Mixue Malaysia to other people.” The original scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a reported Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91.

RESULTS

Table 2. Cronbach’s Alpha Reliability Coefficients and Zero-order Correlations for All Study Variables

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Tangibles	0.861						
2	Reliability	0.789***	0.847					
3	Responsiveness	0.664***	0.785***	0.690				
4	Empathy	0.751***	0.841***	0.741***	0.848			
5	Assurance	0.775***	0.886***	0.810***	0.842***	0.843		
6	Customer Satisfaction	0.793***	0.860***	0.684***	0.835***	0.840***	0.908	
7	Customer Loyalty	0.657***	0.804***	0.701***	0.778***	0.874***	0.799***	0.907

Note. N=99; The diagonal entries indicate Cronbach’s alpha coefficients; *p < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

[Table 2](#) presents the Cronbach’s alpha values and zero-order correlations for all study variables. The reliability coefficients (diagonal entries) indicate strong internal consistency for all constructs, with alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 ([Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994](#)), ranging from 0.690 (responsiveness) to 0.908 (customer satisfaction). Although responsiveness is slightly below the ideal cutoff, it remains acceptable in exploratory research. Regarding inter-variable correlations, all zero-order correlations are positive, statistically significant (p < .001), and fall below the commonly accepted multicollinearity threshold of 0.90. The highest observed correlation is between assurance and reliability (r = 0.886), suggesting a strong but acceptable relationship. As all correlations remain below 0.90, concerns of redundancy or multicollinearity among constructs are minimal, indicating that each variable captures a distinct conceptual domain. Therefore, heterogeneity is unlikely to be an issue in this

study, and the constructs are sufficiently discriminant to proceed with further multivariate analyses.

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis

Variables		Customer Satisfaction	Customer Loyalty
1	Tangibles	0.208** (0.078)	-0.192 (0.097)
2	Reliability	0.372** (0.115)	0.071 (0.146)
3	Responsiveness	-0.123 (0.104)	-0.030 (0.091)
4	Empathy	0.280** (0.094)	0.095 (0.118)
5	Assurance	0.220* (0.106)	0.739*** (0.131)
6	Customer Satisfaction		0.275* (0.125)
R ²		0.811	0.788
F-value		80.061	57.001

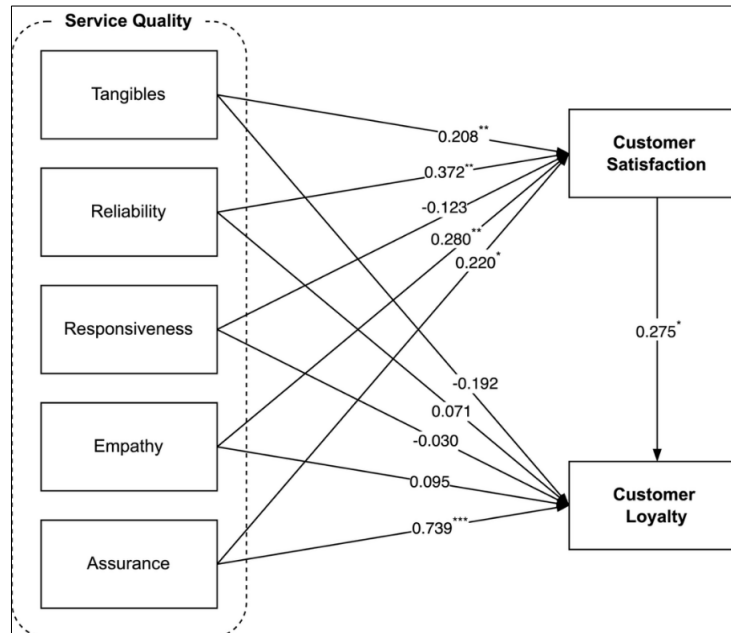
Note. N=99; Standardized estimates were reported; standard errors were in parentheses. *p < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Based on Table 3, the regression analysis provides comprehensive support for several of the proposed hypotheses. The model demonstrates strong explanatory power, explaining 81.1% ($R^2 = 0.811$) of the variance in customer satisfaction and 78.8% ($R^2 = 0.788$) of the variance in customer loyalty, indicating high model reliability. Among the five service quality dimensions, tangibles ($\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.01$), reliability ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.01$), empathy ($\beta = 0.280$, $p < 0.01$), and assurance ($\beta = 0.220$, $p < 0.05$) exert significant positive effects on customer satisfaction, thereby supporting H1, H3, H7, and H9, respectively. However, responsiveness ($\beta = -0.123$, $p > 0.05$) does not significantly influence satisfaction, leading to the rejection of H5.

In contrast, for customer loyalty, only assurance ($\beta = 0.739$, $p < 0.001$) emerges as a significant predictor, confirming H10, while tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy show no significant direct effects, resulting in the rejection of H2, H4, H6, and H8. Additionally, customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.275$, $p < 0.05$) significantly enhances loyalty, supporting H11. These findings collectively suggest that while multiple service quality dimensions contribute to satisfaction, only assurance—reflecting staff competence, confidence, and trustworthiness—directly sustains customer loyalty, with satisfaction serving as a key mediating mechanism in the service–loyalty relationship.

The results of path analysis were presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Research Framework with Path Coefficients



DISCUSSION

Interpretation of Significant Effects on Customer Satisfaction

The finding that tangibles, reliability, empathy, and assurance significantly predict customer satisfaction reinforces the multifaceted nature of service quality in shaping the customer experience. In the fast-service F&B landscape, particularly for trend-driven brands like Mixue, customer satisfaction emerges not from a single outstanding feature but rather from the confluence of sensory, emotional, and cognitive evaluations.

Tangibles, such as the aesthetic cleanliness, modernity of equipment, and staff presentation, carry symbolic value. Customers interpret these physical cues as markers of brand professionalism and operational seriousness. Especially among younger consumers who prioritize “Instagrammable” interiors and visually branded experiences, tangibles are not just operational necessities but cultural signals (Campbell et al., 2022). The result reflects that customers associate visually appealing settings with overall care and attention to detail, a notion consistent with experiential marketing theory (Bernd, 1999).

Reliability, on the other hand, grounds the customer experience in consistency. In an era where consumer patience is limited and expectations are heightened, any deviation from promised service, such as inconsistent wait times or incorrect orders, can be disproportionately damaging. The positive influence of reliability underscores the necessity for standard operating procedures (SOPs) that do not just exist on paper but are rigorously followed.

Empathy captures the personalized emotional layer of service, reminding us that even in a high-speed F&B environment, the human touch matters. Being greeted warmly or having a staff member remember a returning customer’s order creates a sense of personal acknowledgment that transcends the transactional. In collectivist societies like Malaysia (Keshavarz & Baharudin, 2013; Lee et al., 2025), this interpersonal warmth aligns with cultural expectations around hospitality and relational closeness.

Finally, assurance, the ability of staff to inspire confidence through their demeanor, product knowledge, and respectful communication, emerged as a significant contributor to satisfaction. This dimension is often undervalued in lower-tier service contexts but plays a pivotal role in shaping psychological security, especially for first-time or less experienced customers.

These findings call for more than internal SOP refinements; they suggest the need for national-level service quality accreditation schemes for fast-service chains. Government or industry-led certification (similar to hygiene ratings) could publicly recognize outlets that meet high standards across these dimensions, encouraging broader compliance. Furthermore, vocational training programs should embed modules on empathy and interpersonal assurance into F&B curricula to uplift soft-skill capabilities across the sector.

Why Assurance Alone Significantly Influences Customer Loyalty

The finding that assurance was the only service quality dimension to significantly predict customer loyalty, while the others did not, offers a powerful insight into the psychology of customer retention. While satisfaction may be derived from multiple facets of service, loyalty, especially behavioral loyalty, is more selective. Customers do not necessarily return because the chairs were stylish or the service was swift; they return because they trust the people behind the counter and the brand itself.

This underscores that loyalty is an emotional contract rooted in psychological safety. In the context of Mixue, where most customers are young adults and students (Liu et al., 2023), assurance functions as a proxy for brand credibility. These customers may tolerate occasional errors if they feel that the employees are competent and that the business genuinely cares. Assurance taps into the trust-based dimensions of brand equity, making it a cornerstone for repeated engagement.

This insight invites public and private sector stakeholders to prioritize customer trust-building in service standards. For instance, industry guidelines can mandate that F&B businesses disclose staff training levels or certifications (e.g., food safety, customer service). This transparency not only improves consumer trust but can also act as a market differentiator. Additionally, the Malaysian government may consider partnering with retail associations to roll out national training initiatives focused on customer assurance and trustworthiness, especially for front-line service workers.

Interestingly, several hypothesized relationships were not supported by the data. Responsiveness did not significantly influence either satisfaction or loyalty, suggesting that speed and promptness, while important in theory, may be taken for granted in fast-service environments like Mixue, where efficiency is already standardized. Similarly, tangibles, reliability, and empathy failed to show direct effects on loyalty, indicating that while these elements enhance satisfaction, they do not independently secure repeat patronage. This pattern implies that Malaysian consumers may view such attributes as baseline expectations rather than loyalty triggers. In trend-driven markets, emotional assurance, embodied in trust, confidence, and professional interaction, appears to carry greater psychological weight in shaping long-term loyalty behaviors.

Customer Satisfaction as a Key Driver of Loyalty

The significant and positive impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty aligns with long-standing marketing theories but takes on renewed relevance in the contemporary Malaysian F&B scene. In environments like Mixue, where switching

barriers are low and options are abundant, satisfaction is not merely a pleasant by product; it is the currency of customer retention.

Satisfaction is a multi-layered construct, part rational appraisal and part emotional resonance. When customers are satisfied, they perceive that their expectations have been met or exceeded, but they also feel respected, cared for, and affirmed. This psychological satisfaction cultivates a sense of attachment, which translates into attitudinal loyalty (positive word-of-mouth) and behavioral loyalty (revisits and repurchases).

In high-velocity service environments like Mixue, where customer interactions are brief and highly routinized, the ability to create memorable positive experiences is essential. The findings thus suggest that businesses should not only aim for service efficiency but also optimize touchpoints for satisfaction-building. Even a 15-second interaction at the counter can be designed to leave an emotional impact if delivered with consistency, warmth, and competence.

These findings advocate for the institutionalization of customer satisfaction monitoring as part of Malaysia's F&B service quality framework. Regulatory bodies could develop a national benchmark for satisfaction in fast-service settings and offer digital dashboards or audit tools for businesses to self-monitor performance. At the firm level, businesses should adopt real-time feedback systems (e.g., QR-code surveys at receipt printouts) to assess satisfaction on a daily basis, making data-driven improvements more agile and actionable.

CONCLUSION

This study advances understanding of how service quality dimensions shape customer satisfaction and loyalty within Malaysia's rapidly growing F&B franchise sector, focusing on Mixue. Grounded in the SERVQUAL framework, the findings show that tangibles, reliability, empathy, and assurance significantly enhance customer satisfaction, while assurance alone directly strengthens loyalty. Moreover, satisfaction positively influences loyalty, confirming its mediating role in the service loyalty relationship.

These insights reinforce the idea that delivering high-quality service is not a one-dimensional effort but a multidimensional strategy encompassing operational, emotional, and psychological aspects of customer engagement. Tangibles and reliability create strong first impressions, but loyalty stems from a deeper psychological assurance that customers feel when interacting with competent, respectful, and trustworthy staff. In Malaysia's highly competitive and youth-dominated F&B sector, where experiential appeal and interpersonal dynamics converge, brands that inspire confidence are more likely to secure repeat patronage.

The study also offers actionable implications for both practitioners and policymakers. Businesses must embed service training, particularly around assurance and empathy, into staff development programs, while governments and industry bodies can support sector-wide improvements through service accreditation schemes and satisfaction benchmarking tools.

Ultimately, this research underscores that in an era of abundant choices and fleeting brand attention, loyalty is not bought through price alone. It is earned through consistently meeting expectations and delivering emotionally resonant service

experiences. By investing in the pillars of satisfaction and assurance, F&B brands like Mixue can cultivate long-term loyalty in an otherwise trend-sensitive market.

LIMITATION

Despite yielding insightful findings, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size (N=99) is relatively modest and was confined to Malaysian Mixue customers, limiting the generalizability of results across broader F&B markets or international franchises. Second, the use of self-reported data via online surveys may introduce social desirability or recall bias, particularly among younger respondents. Third, while this study employed a cross-sectional design, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to explore how service perceptions and loyalty evolve over time. Additionally, future studies should examine moderating variables such as customer personality traits or technological integration (e.g., mobile ordering) to offer deeper contextual insights into the service quality and loyalty dynamic. Expanding the framework to include brand trust, emotional branding, or digital engagement may also enhance explanatory power in highly competitive service environments.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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