A Study to Analyze the Determinants of Fast-food Restaurant Customer Loyalty through Mediating Impact of Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract   *Fast-food consumption has been raised tremendously recently and improving customer loyalty is the need of the hour. This study aims to analyze the factors that impact the loyalty of customers in fast-food restaurants. A theoretical model incorporated food quality, brand image, brand trust, and physical environment and analyze their influence on loyalty through the inventing construct of customer satisfaction. Total 240 complete responses were collected from consumers of three big fast-food international chains operating in Pakistan. The statistical tool SmartPLS 3.2.8 has been utilized to do partial least square-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that food quality, brand image, brand trust significantly impact customer loyalty, while the physical environment found an insignificant effect. The present study delivers practical guidelines to managers and owners of fast-food chains by providing critical factors that enhance customers' loyalty.*

Introduction

The fast-food sector proliferated in the last few years due to people becoming very busy in their daily routine life, and they want easy to cook processed food or easy to take away, which is also termed fast food (Singh et al., 2021). This enormous demand for fast food increases pressure on restaurants to provide better services, leading to improved customer loyalty (Shahzadi et al., 2018). The fast-food industry is a customer-centric sector that has direct relation between seller and consumer. As a result, the fast-food sector faces customer retention challenges. An unsatisfied customer can easily switch to another fast food restaurant if he perceives fast food services are not up to the mark (Nguyen et al., 2018).

The lifestyle of the consumer has changed worldwide the customer becomes more convenient and don't want to indulge in some laborious work. This changing

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lifestyle pattern increases the demand for fast food, and people are willing to pay for fast food (Rajput & Gahfoor, 2020). Still, in return, they want delicious food with efficient services that create a good image in the customer's mind that ultimately increases the customer's loyalty (Uddin, 2019). The customer perception about the environment leads to more retention. Competition among fast-food restaurants compels them to think beyond the food quality and enhance customer trust to improve customer satisfaction.

Fast-food restaurant management is keen to adopt the latest marketing strategies that synchronize with changing food market dynamics. Therefore, they engage with consumers and analyze the determinants that enhance customer satisfaction and improve customer loyalty. Satisfaction has specific tangible and intangible antecedents that enhance customer perception. The physical environment positively impacts customer behavior and feels comfortable while eating food. Similarly, brand image is another antecedent of customer satisfaction. It is intangible that customer is willing to attach to that fast food brand due to their positive image and ready to re-purchase from that particular restaurant.

Pakistan is ranked top five populated countries worldwide, having a 2.8% of the total world share (world meter, 2021). Pakistan has a high food consumption level, and moving from rural to urban increases fast food feasting. Numerous international fast food chains are working in Pakistan and providing the best food to clients. However, research is scarce in developing countries on fast food customer loyalty (Shahzadi et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2021; Slack et al., 2020). The present study provides numerous contributions by providing the factors that influence customer loyalty using the theory of reasoned action. The earlier mentioned literature postulated the following research questions:

1. Do food quality, brand image, brand trust, and physical environment significantly influence customer satisfaction?
2. Does customer satisfaction has a significant influence on customer loyalty?
3. Does customer satisfaction mediate the path between food quality, brand image, brand trust, the physical environment, and customer loyalty?

Literature Review

Food Quality and Customers' Satisfaction

Recent research suggested that restaurant service includes food quality as the most critical element. Customers use food quality attributes to judge a restaurant's presentation. Therefore, customers' perceptions of quality and service are the most important factors influencing their restaurant choice, restaurant experience, and satisfaction (Konuk, 2019). The quality of food is judged by customers based on many factors such as taste, nutrition value, and processing (Zhong & Moon, 2020). Therefore, better food quality leads to a satisfied customer. It can therefore be hypothesized:

H1: Food quality significantly influences the customers' satisfaction.

Brand Image and Customers' Satisfaction

Brand image is defined as consumers' practices, concepts, and insights—customers' decision-making about the dining experience. Brand image critically influences the customers' behavior (Espinosa et al., 2018). Past literature suggested that the reputation of a restaurant matters a lot for a customer.

The well-reputed restaurant catches more clients. In the same way, the modern look of the restaurant also enhances the attraction to clients. The more familiar with clients bring more satisfaction. Hence, a satisfied client can be shaped through a positive image of a restaurant. The cited above proposed the mentioned below hypothesis:

H2: Brand image significantly influences the customers' satisfaction.

Brand Trust and Customer Satisfaction

The customer decisions while choosing fast food restaurants depend upon certain factors, including trust as a vital element (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019). The customer requires the restaurant to meet the expectation. In case of failure, the customer may lose faith in the restaurant (Rather et al., 2019). While some time food is not up to the mark and may happen other than customers require compensation from the restaurant and in the matter of international fast-food chains prioritize consumer preferences and compensate in any issue. This helps to build the trust of customers in fast food global chains and improve their loyalty. The literature above helps to cite the following hypothesis:

H3: Brand trust significantly influences the customers' satisfaction.

Physical Environment and Customer satisfaction

The restaurant's physical environment depicts the services level of staff, cleanliness, staff behavior, and their unique services style to handle customers (Singh et al., 2021). The clients are very conscious about the atmosphere of a restaurant. A satisfied customer requires better and efficient services from restaurant staff, in case of delay and

inappropriate services may lead to an unhappy client (Asniwaty et al., 2019). Some restaurants provide clients with a unique environment that they feel comfortable in while suiting there and enjoying their food. This improves their satisfaction level and further recommends the restaurants to other clients. International fast-food chains have established an average level of the physical environment by providing standard services across all chains and delivering food with a unique style, and providing a comfortable physical environment to clients that lead to satisfied consumers (Zhong & Moon, 2020). The stated above derived the following hypothesis:

H4: Physical environment significantly influences the customers' satisfaction.

Customer Satisfaction and Customer Loyalty

The literature witnessed the association between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Cha & Borchgrevink, 2019; Uddin, 2019). Numerous researchers stated the significant influence of customer satisfaction on loyalty (Ing et al., 2019; Lau et al., 2019). Particularly in the services sector, customer satisfaction plays a vital role in enhancing the retention of clients. The fast-food chains are facilitating their clients inefficient ways to become satisfied and retain their brand. For the current research, customer satisfaction works as an antecedent of loyalty when a happy client from fast food restaurant quality then commitment developed. Hence, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H5: "Customer satisfaction significantly influences the loyalty of the customers in a fast-food restaurant".

Intervening Role of Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction demonstrates the client's overall experience with the services provided by the vendor (Abdullah et al., 2018). When services meet the customers' expectations, he is willing to avail the services again from the same service provider; however, if failing to deliver the expected services, the client becomes unhappy and less concerned about getting benefits from the same seller (Shahid Iqbal et al., 2018). In the fast-food industry, customer satisfaction has become the main issue for management because acquiring new customers is expensive than keeping existing satisfied customers in the services industry (Uddin, 2019; Yen et al., 2020). Satisfied customers suggest the services to his social circle without spending money on the restaurants is more influential than spending billions on advertising. In the food industry, personal recommendations are more valuable than print or electronic media. Literature witnessed that customer satisfaction intervene the quality of food, image, trust, physical environment, and loyalty of customers. The following hypotheses can be inferred as follows:

H6: "Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty."

H7: "Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand image and customer loyalty."

H8: "Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between brand trust and customer loyalty".

H9: "Customer satisfaction mediates the relationship between the physical environment and customer loyalty".

Theoretical Framework

Theory of reasoned action (TRA) underpinned the theoretical framework, as shown in figure 1. TRA, stated by Fishbein & Ajzen (1977), proved a solid framework to analyze the factors that affect human behavior. This theory narrates that individual preferences are based on rational decisions depending availability of data, and they select outcomes based on their interests. Past research used TRA to explain the consumers' behaviors related to the food industry (Singh et al., 2021). The current study utilized the TRA to analyze a brand image, brand trust, the physical environment, and food quality.
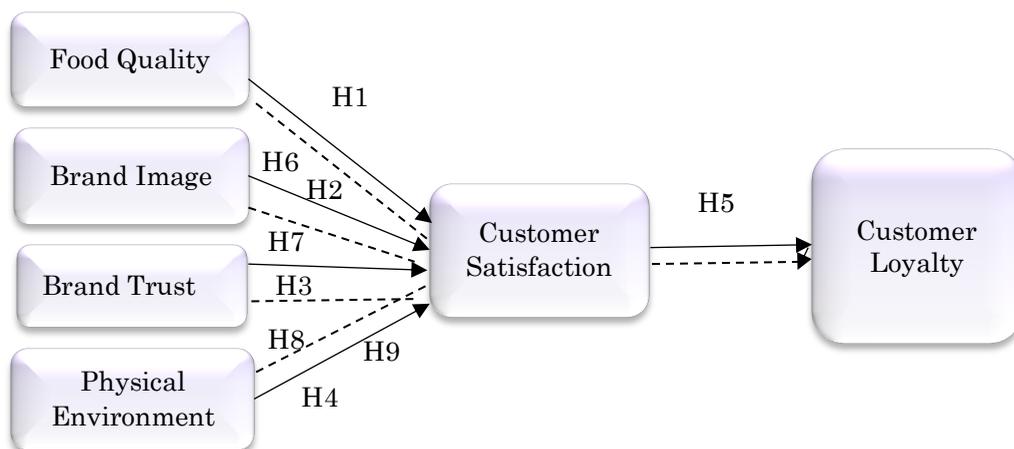
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Methodology

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire all items were adopted through literature. The 5-point Likert scale was utilized to measure the items ranging from 1 to 5. The Likert scale is suitable to measure consumer perception-based surveys. A partial least square structural equation modeling technique was utilized through SmartPLS 3.2.8 software to examine the significance of paths and influence of customer satisfaction antecedents that leads to customer loyalty. The interrelated measures were analyzed through PLS-SEM. The PLS-SEM method is suitable when research is predictive and exploratory to provide new insights about the phenomenon under investigation.

Data Collection

The respondents include those who eat fast food from three international chains, including McDonald's, Pizza Hut, KFC.

Most of these international fast-food franchises exist in Punjab, Pakistan. Hence Punjab was considered for the sampling of study. The convenience sampling method was adopted. Data was filled from the respondents using the public intercept survey method where customers who were exiting through restaurants were asked to fill the form. A total of 527 responses was distributed where only 300 were returned. Whereas from 300 total of 240 answers were filled that proceeded for further analysis.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The respondent profile depicted that most respondents were male, showing 63.6%. The age bracket shows that the majority are between 20-30 frame offers 35%. Hence, the figures depict that most respondents belong to youth because they are fond of fast food.

Table 1. Sampling Profiler

Demographic Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	152	63.3%
Female	88	36.7%
Age		
Below 20	56	23.3%
20-30 years	84	35.0%
31-40 years	70	29.2%
41years and Above	30	12.5%

Assessment of Measurement Model

The current research has five constructs reliability, mobile application design, trust, e-satisfaction, and e-loyalty. Where all construct items are reflective and adopted through previous studies. The loading, composite reliability is used to measure reliability and internal consistency (Hair et al., 2017).
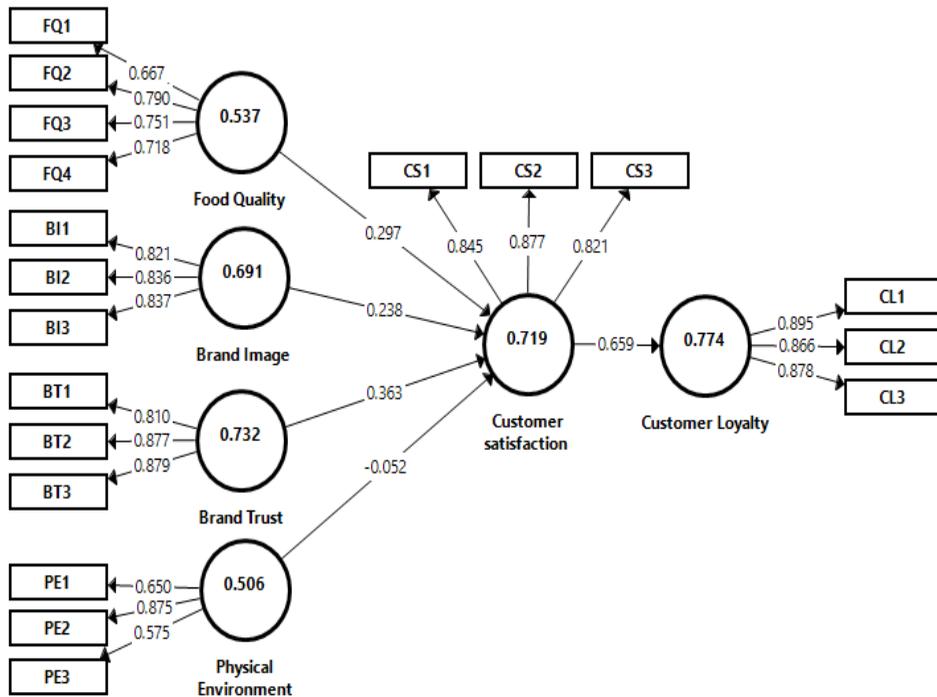
Figure 2: Measurement Model

Reliability and Validity Assessment

Table 2 reflects the numbers of reliability and validity using SmartPLS. All five constructs loadings are more significant than 0.40 shows that all variables are internally consistent. The composite reliability values of all constructs are higher than 0.7, indicating no reliability issue in constructs (Hair Jr et al., 2020). While the average variance extracted value is more significant than 0.5, the ll variables of the current study are valid, and the model is reliable and accurate for further investigation (Hair et al., 2014; Sarstedt et al., 2017).

Table 2. Reliability and Validity Assessment

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Brand Image (BI)	BI1	0.821	0.870	0.691
	BI2	0.836		
	BI3	0.837		
Brand Trust (BT)	BT1	0.810	0.891	0.732
	BT2	0.877		
	BT3	0.879		
Customer Loyalty (CL)	CL1	0.895	0.911	0.774
	CL2	0.866		
	CL3	0.878		
Customer satisfaction (CS)	CS1	0.845	0.885	0.719
	CS2	0.877		

Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
	CS3	0.821		
Food Quality (FQ)	FQ1	0.667	0.822	0.537
	FQ2	0.790		
	FQ3	0.751		
	FQ4	0.718		
Physical Environment (PE)	PE1	0.650	0.748	0.506
	PE2	0.875		
	PE3	0.575		

*"Note : CR =Composite reliability , AVE =Average variance extracted"*

Discriminant Validity

Fornell and lacker's (1981) criteria were used to analyze the discriminant validity of the model. This method analyzes in a matrix where average variance extracted values are mentioned in diagonal places that must be higher than other competing values in rows and comments. For example, in table 3, all diagonal values square root of AVE are higher, showing there is no discriminant validity issued in the model.

Table 3. Fornell and Larcker Criterion

	BI	BT	CL	CS	FQ	PE
Brand Image (BI)	0.831					
Brand Trust (BT)	0.573	0.856				
Customer Loyalty (CT)	0.547	0.634	0.88			
Customer satisfaction (CS)	0.617	0.682	0.659	0.848		
Food Quality (FQ)	0.559	0.59	0.605	0.651	0.733	
Physical Environment (PE)	-0.089	-0.147	-0.136	-0.164	-0.128	0.711
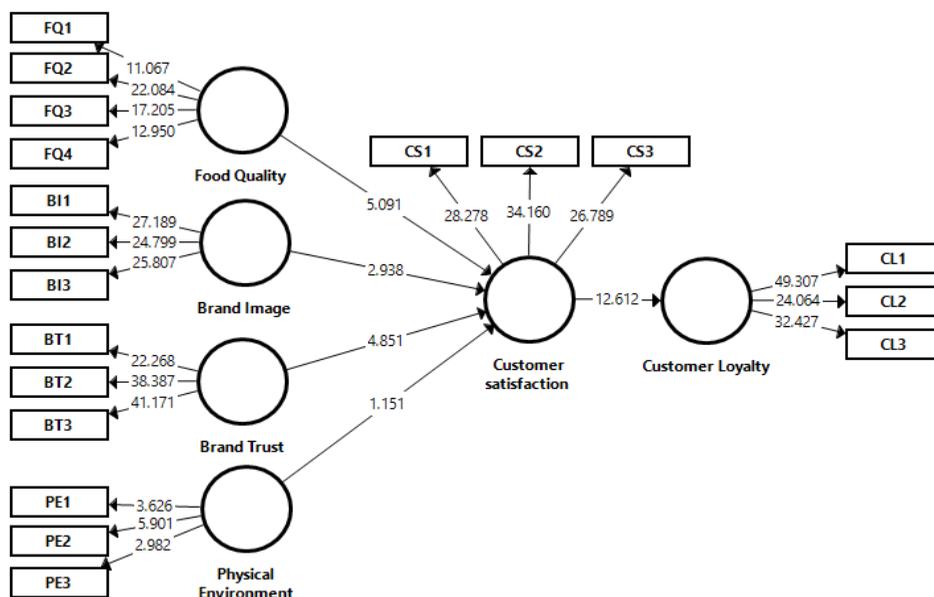
Figure 3: Structural Model

Structural Model Assessment

The outer model comprises the paths between the constructs that reflect the model's hypothesis examined in the structural model assessment. The researcher utilized the bootstrap method used to analyze the direct as well indirect paths in the model. The significance of the links was analyzed through beta values, T-values, P-values, and other effects size and R square value were examined.

Direct Hypotheses Testing

The result shows in Table 4 (ß= 0.238,t value =2.938 p-values <0.05) that reflects hypothesis 1 is supported . The more the quality of the food, the higher the satisfaction of the customers in the restaurants. In hypothesis 2, brand image and customer satisfaction, the goodness of the brands a higher level of the satisfaction as the result show (ß= 0.363,t value =4.851 p-values <0.05), as the

supporting hypothesis 2. In hypothesis 3, there is a significant positive relationship between brand trust and customer satisfaction as the results shows (ß= 0.659 t value =12.612 p-value <0.05) as the results support the higher the level of the trust in the brands, particularly increase the level of the satisfaction in the fast-food restaurants. In hypothesis 4, physical environment on customer satisfaction, there is an insignificant relationship as results show (ß= 0.297,t value =5.091 p-value <0.007); hence, hypothesis 4 is not supported. In hypothesis 5, the effect of customer satisfaction is significant on customer loyalty (ß= 0.362,t value =1.51 p-value <0.005) that shows hypothesis 5 is supported. The values of R^2 are greater than 0.26 that depicting the framework as substantial. While the value of Q^2 is more than zero, that witness the existence of predictive relevance in a model (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 4. Direct Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	T value	P Values	2.50%	97.50%	Decision	R2	f2	Q2
H1	FQ-> CS	0.238	0.081	2.938	0.003	0.085	0.391	Supported		0.084	
H2	BI -> CS	0.363	0.075	4.851	0.000	0.221	0.506	Supported	0.597	0.183	0.327
H3	BT-> CS	0.659	0.052	12.612	0.000	0.551	0.747	Supported	0.435	0.768	0.410
H4	PE-> CS	-0.297	0.058	5.091	0.007	0.185	0.411	Not Supported		0.127	
H5	CS -> CL	0.362	0.045	1.151	0.000	-0.138	0.040	Supported		0.006	

Mediation Analysis

Bias corrected accelerated method using Bootstrap adopted in the present study to analyze the indirect paths of intervening variable customer satisfaction (Preacher

& Hayes, 2008). The numbers depict that hypotheses 6, 7, and 9 were supported, while hypothesis 8 was rejected because p values are higher than 0.05 and zero straddles between the upper and lower limits.

Table 6. Indirect Hypotheses testing (Mediation analysis)

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std. Beta	Std. Error	T value	P Values	2.50%	97.50%	Decision
H6	FQ-> CS-> CL	0.239	0.056	4.264	0.000	0.138	0.359	Supported
H7	BI -> CS-> CL	0.196	0.042	4.675	0.000	0.117	0.280	Supported
H8	BT-> CS-> CL	-0.034	0.030	1.138	0.256	-0.093	0.027	Not Supported
H9	PE-> CS-> CL	0.157	0.055	2.868	0.004	0.057	0.262	Supported

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with past literature, the current study shows that food quality significantly influences customer satisfaction (Zhong & Moon, 2020). It means that food quality matters a lot in a fast-food restaurant chain that satisfies clients and revisits the particular restaurant. While brand image also found a significant influence on customer satisfaction consistent with the literature (Espinosa et al., 2018). That depicts the modern style, and service delivery is vital for customer satisfaction in fast-food settings. Moreover, brand trust also significantly impacts customer satisfaction who frequently visit the fast-food chain (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019). That brings insights into customers' willingness to re-purchase from a fast-food chain because it has confidence in that brand.

In contrast, the physical environment had an insignificant impact on customer satisfaction, which is also in line with past studies on Fiji fast-food customers (Singh et al., 2021). Researchers also found that the physical environment doesn't matter to the client's satisfaction when food quality, image, and trust are higher. Furthermore, the findings revealed that customer satisfaction is a strong determinant of customer loyalty. The mediating hypotheses between food quality, physical environment, brand image, and customer loyalty were supported through the intervening role of customer satisfaction while mediating the relationship of customer satisfaction between brand trust and customer loyalty not supported.

Implications of the Study

This study offers valuable insights from a theoretical and managerial standpoint. Theory of reasoned action (TRA) has been deployed to underpin the research model. Knowledge is contributed by extending through the intervening role of customer satisfaction, representing the impact on human behavior by analyzing customer loyalty patterns. Moreover, the present study was conducted in a developing country that provides new insights about examining customer behavior using international fast-food chains in a developing country context. That provides vital factors that act as determinants of customer satisfaction that further enhance customer loyalty that is another theoretical contribution in existing literature regarding fast-food consumers. The present study provides numerous guidelines for managing fast-food chains operating in a developing country to improve customer loyalty. It highlights the vital factors, including food quality, brand image, and brand trust, that build customer satisfaction further retain them to a particular chain. The findings show that fast-food restaurants and marketers need to develop appropriate branding to address the adverse effects of the physical environment at fast-food restaurants on customer satisfaction. This will improve brand trust and customer loyalty. Practitioners must first understand the nature and drivers of their branded products and services. A fast-food restaurant's confidence, satisfaction, commitment, and brand image must have various attributes to create brand loyalty.

The strategy should include redesigning fast-food restaurants that offer customers the opportunity to dine in, improve customer satisfaction, and increase customer loyalty.

Limitations and future Research Directions

The present study has specific limitations that also provide future guidelines. First, the non-probability convenience sampling method adopted in the current research to gather data from respondents may hamper the generalization of recent research findings. In the future, probability sampling techniques like random sampling may be adopted to generalize the results. Second, this study only utilized the survey method survey for data gathering. In the future, other methods like interviews can be arranged to explore in-depth findings and incorporate new factors in future research models. Certain factors influence customers' loyalty in fast-food restaurants that are yet to be explored through qualitative methods. Third, the present study only considers three international fast-food chains, while in future comparison between local and international fast-food chain loyalty factors may contribute to knowledge.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Food Quality (Gummesson 2011)

- FQI This restaurant serves healthy food,
- FQ2 Food items are tasty.
- FQ3 This restaurant provides fresh food.
- FQ4 It maintains proper food temperature.

Brand Image (Marinkovic et al., 2015)

- BI 1 Fast-food restaurants have a fashionable image
- BI 2 Fast-food restaurants have a good reputation
- BI 3 Fast-food restaurants are familiar to me

Brand Trust (Jin et al., 2013)

- BT 1 I have confidence in fast-food restaurants
- BT2 Fast-food restaurants meet my expectations
- BT3 Fast-food restaurants would compensate me in some way for a problem with their food

Physical Environment (Jin et al., 2012)

- PE1 Staff members of this restaurant are polite and friendly.
- PE2 Staff members are knowledgeable about their foods and services.
- PE3 This restaurant provides speedy and desirable services.
- PE4 This restaurant has a unique service style.

Customer Satisfaction (Xia et al., 2004)

- CS1 I think I have rightly chosen this restaurant.
- CS2 I think this restaurant successfully provides the value of the money.
- CS3 I am satisfied with this restaurant

Customer Loyalty (Oliver, 1997)

- CLI I will continue visiting this restaurant in the future.
- CL2 I will recommend this restaurant to someone else
- CL3 I will consume varieties of the food items mentioned in the menu of this restaurant
- CL4 For me, this restaurant is the best alternative