



**JOURNAL OF TOURISM,
HOSPITALITY AND
ENVIRONMENT MANAGEMENT
(JTHEM)**
www.jthem.com



EXPLORING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN HOTEL RESTAURANTS: THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED VALUE AND THE MODERATING EFFECT OF COVID-19 FEAR

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 28.07.2025

Revised date: 18.08.2025

Accepted date: 15.09.2025

Published date: 30.09.2025

To cite this document:

Lee, D., Kasa, M., & Yatim, A. (2025). Exploring Customer Satisfaction in Hotel Restaurants: The Role of Perceived Value and the Moderating Effect of COVID-19 Fear. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Environment Management*, 10 (41), 502-520.

DOI: 10.35631/JTHEM.1041034

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Abstract:

This study examined how perceived value dimensions (physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, and price) influence customer satisfaction in hotel restaurants in Kuching, Malaysia. This study also explored the moderating role of COVID-19 fear on these relationships. Using data from 285 structured questionnaire responses, the findings reveal that all value dimensions are positively associated with customer satisfaction. Additionally, it was suggested that COVID-19 fear is positively related to customer satisfaction and significantly moderates the effects of the physical environment and corporate reputation, but not trust or price, on satisfaction. This research integrates perceived value theory with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model to provide new insights into customer behaviour in the post-pandemic hospitality context. The results offer actionable implications for hotel restaurant managers seeking to rebuild consumer trust, optimise service value, and adapt to customers' heightened health and safety concerns in the wake of COVID-19.

Keywords:

Customer Satisfaction, Hotel Restaurants, Covid-19, Value Dimensions, Perceived Value Theory, Stimulus-Organism-Response Model

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the global economy, particularly the tourism and hospitality sectors. International and domestic travel restrictions led to a sharp decline in hotel bookings and restaurant patronage, resulting in both temporary and permanent business closures. In Malaysia, the enforcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) caused an estimated 90% revenue loss in the food and beverage industry, with approximately 30% of restaurants closing since the onset of the pandemic (Malaysian Association of Hotels [MAH], 2021). This phenomenon has been echoed globally, with countries such as the United States experiencing similar downturns in restaurant demand (Kim et al., 2021).

With the easing of restrictions and reopening of borders, hotel occupancy rates improved. Yet, restaurants within hotel properties continue to face significant challenges. Despite the resumption of travel, many customers remain cautious about dining out due to lingering health and safety concerns. As such, hotel restaurants cannot rely solely on takeaway and delivery services to sustain their operations. In this environment, regaining and maintaining customer trust and loyalty is crucial.

To succeed in the post-pandemic era, it is generally accepted that hotel restaurants must prioritise producing high-quality food, providing efficient service, and guaranteeing a safe and comfortable dining ambience. Customer satisfaction has become more critical than ever, with perceived value playing a key role in shaping customer behaviour (Wang et al., 2024). Based on the current scenario, factors such as the physical environment, trust in health protocols, corporate reputation, and price fairness are now deemed central to customer evaluations.

The pandemic has elevated awareness around hygiene and safety. Customers are increasingly concerned about health risks, and establishments that implement strict sanitation measures are more likely to inspire confidence and satisfaction (Chen et al., 2024). Trust has emerged as a vital factor in customers' decision-making, influencing whether they perceive a dining experience as safe (Lin et al., 2024). Additionally, a restaurant's corporate reputation can shape consumer perceptions and affect their likelihood of return. Price fairness is also significant, especially as many consumers face financial constraints; perceived value for money can directly impact satisfaction and loyalty.

This research aims to examine the relationships between physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, and price with customer satisfaction in the hotel restaurant context, with COVID-19 fear acting as a moderating variable. By investigating these factors, the study seeks to provide insights into how hotel restaurants can adapt and thrive in a transformed hospitality landscape.

The research also addresses theoretical, empirical, and practical gaps in the literature. It extends the Theory of Perceived Value and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model to better understand customer behaviour during and after the pandemic. Under this theory and model, it is postulated that hotel restaurants' customers' satisfaction is affected by perceived value and their interpretation of the stimulus that is in their immediate environment whilst patronising the hotel restaurant. The study focuses specifically on Sarawak, Malaysia, where cultural and regional factors may influence customer perceptions.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 crisis has reshaped customer expectations and behaviour in the hospitality sector. Understanding the drivers of customer satisfaction under these new conditions is essential for the resilience and success of hotel restaurants. This study further contributes to that understanding and supports the ongoing recovery and transformation of the industry.

Literature Review

This section covers the literature review for each variable and the development of the research hypotheses.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a central focus in the restaurant industry and is closely linked to service quality. Eshghi et al. (2008) argued that service quality is among the most influential factors affecting customer satisfaction, highlighting the importance of fulfilling customer needs and expectations. As such, satisfaction is not only shaped by tangible service outcomes but also by customers' subjective evaluations of their overall experiences.

Parasuraman et al. (1998) asserted that customers assess service quality through perceived value, which comprises multiple dimensions such as responsiveness, assurance, reliability, empathy, and tangibles. Accordingly, restaurants must not only meet these service quality standards but also manage and exceed customer expectations to foster greater satisfaction.

Physical Environment

The physical environment, often referred to as the servicescape, plays a pivotal role in influencing customer perceptions and behaviours. According to Zhong and Moon (2020), servicescape refers to the physical surroundings managed by an organisation that can affect both employees and customers. Key elements include ambience, décor, cleanliness, spatial layout, and overall visual appeal.

Prior research indicated that a pleasant and distinctive environment enhances the dining experience and attracts repeat visits. Canny (2013) found that an attractive atmosphere positively contributes to customer satisfaction and loyalty. As such, investment in creating a clean, comfortable, and aesthetically appealing environment is essential for competitive advantage in the restaurant sector.

Corporate Reputation

Hannington (2004) defined corporate reputation as the collective perception of an organisation's ability to meet stakeholder expectations. This perception includes various dimensions such as product and service quality, leadership, social responsibility, and emotional appeal. With that in mind, corporate reputation is a crucial determinant of customer loyalty and trust, particularly in service industries such as hospitality.

Bartikowski and Walsh (2011) emphasized that a favourable corporate reputation enhances customer loyalty and strengthens commitment to the brand. This is because a strong reputation not only influences initial customer choices but also supports long-term relationships and financial sustainability. In uncertain times such as the post COVID-19 era, a trusted reputation can significantly affect consumer confidence.

Trust

Kotler and Keller (2012) described trust as an attitude of confidence in the reliability and benefit of a product, service, or brand. In the restaurant context, trust mediates the relationship between brand image, perceived risk, and customer satisfaction. Thus, it can be concluded that trust is a foundational element in building and maintaining effective customer relationships.

This viewpoint is supported by Akbar and Parvez (2009), who argued that trust is a key driver of customer loyalty and long-term engagement, while Chirico and Presti (2008) highlighted its role in problem resolution and service recovery. As observed during public health crises, customers need to trust that restaurants uphold safety and hygiene standards; making trust an even more critical factor in the dining experience.

Price

Price is a major influence on consumer decision-making in the restaurant industry. Perceptions of price fairness significantly affect both customer satisfaction and loyalty, as seen in previous studies. Hoang and Suleri (2021) suggested that customers evaluate price in relation to perceived value, which includes factors such as quality, service, ambience, and safety.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened price sensitivity, with many consumers experiencing financial constraints. Subsequently, Gursoy et al. (2020) noted that some customers are willing to pay more for enhanced safety measures. Following that, restaurants must strike a balance between affordability and value to meet evolving customer expectations. Understanding pricing strategies and their effects on satisfaction is crucial in maintaining competitiveness in the post-pandemic hospitality industry.

Hypothesis Development

This study explores key predictors of customer satisfaction in hotel restaurants, with a specific focus on the role of perceived value. Furthermore, it examines how fear towards COVID-19 moderates these relationships. The hypotheses are developed as below:

Physical Environment and Customer Satisfaction

The physical environment of a restaurant (ambience, cleanliness, lighting, and décor) plays a vital role in shaping customers' sensory and emotional experiences. According to the concept of servicescape (Zhong & Moon, 2020), the design and condition of a service setting influence customers' perceptions and satisfaction levels. A pleasant and well-maintained environment can enhance emotional comfort, leading to higher customer satisfaction (Canny, 2013).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between the physical environment and customer satisfaction.

Trust and Customer Satisfaction

Trust is a fundamental element in building successful customer relationships. It includes perceptions of the service provider's competence, integrity, and benevolence. When customers trust the restaurant to deliver on promises and maintain high standards consistently, they are more likely to feel secure and valued, contributing to higher satisfaction levels (Kotler & Keller, 2012).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: There is a significant relationship between trust and customer satisfaction.

Corporate Reputation and Customer Satisfaction

Corporate reputation reflects public perceptions of an organisation's service quality, ethical conduct, financial performance, and social responsibility. A favourable reputation can increase customer confidence and emotional attachment, ultimately influencing their overall satisfaction and loyalty (Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: There is a significant relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.

Price and Customer Satisfaction

Price is a key determinant of perceived value and strongly influences customer satisfaction. Customers evaluate whether the price they pay matches the quality and experience received. When perceived as fair and reasonable, pricing enhances satisfaction, whereas high price sensitivity or perceptions of overpricing may diminish it (Hoang & Suleri, 2021).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: There is a significant relationship between price and customer satisfaction.

Moderating Role of COVID-19 Fear

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered consumer behaviour, particularly in the hospitality sector. Fear related to health risks, hygiene standards, and financial instability may influence how customers evaluate service experiences. Thus, this study examines whether COVID-19 fear moderates the relationships between key predictors and customer satisfaction.

COVID-19 Fear as a Moderator Between Physical Environment and Customer Satisfaction

During the pandemic, heightened health and safety concerns have increased the importance of physical surroundings. Cleanliness, ventilation, and spatial arrangements have become critical factors in shaping customer confidence and comfort. Consequently, COVID-19 fear may amplify the impact of the physical environment on satisfaction (Yang et al., 2020).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₅: COVID-19 fear moderates the relationship between the physical environment and customer satisfaction.

COVID-19 Fear as a Moderator Between Trust and Customer Satisfaction

In times of crisis, trust becomes even more vital as customers seek reassurance from service providers. Transparent communication, visible hygiene practices, and professionalism contribute to trust-building, especially under pandemic-related uncertainties. To that end, COVID-19 fear may influence how strongly trust affects satisfaction (Jian et al., 2020).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₆: COVID-19 fear moderates the relationship between trust and customer satisfaction.

COVID-19 Fear as a Moderator Between Corporate Reputation and Customer Satisfaction

A strong corporate reputation that reflects health-conscious, ethical, and socially responsible behavior may be more influential during public health crises. Customers may rely on reputation more heavily when they feel uncertain or at risk, making it a potential moderator in satisfaction formation (Nguyen et al., 2022; Fombrun & Foss, 2001).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₇: COVID-19 fear moderates the relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.

COVID-19 Fear as a Moderator Between Price and Customer Satisfaction

Economic uncertainties and increased financial caution caused by the pandemic may affect how customers perceive pricing. Fear related to COVID-19 may make customers more price-sensitive or more appreciative of added value (e.g., safety measures), potentially changing how price influences satisfaction (Gursoy et al., 2020).

Based on the above justification, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₈: COVID-19 fear moderates the relationship between price and customer satisfaction.

Collectively, these hypotheses offer a structured framework for examining the relationships between key determinants of customer satisfaction and the moderating role of COVID-19 fear in the hotel restaurant setting. The following section outlines the methodology employed to test these hypotheses empirically.

Methodology

This study was conducted to examine the relationships between customer satisfaction and its influencing factors (physical environment, price, corporate reputation, and trust) with the moderating effect of COVID-19 fear. As noted by Easterby-Smith et al. (2002), a sound research design is crucial for obtaining accurate and valid answers to research questions, which applies to this study.

Accordingly, a quantitative, cross-sectional design was adopted, employing a structured questionnaire as the primary data collection tool. This design aligns with the study's objectives and is well-suited to the post-COVID-19 context. Questionnaires are recognised for their efficiency in collecting standardised data and encouraging truthful responses (Sekaran, 2007).

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of individuals aged 18 to 55 who had dined at 4-star hotel restaurants in Kuching City. This age range was selected in consideration of COVID-19 health risks among older adults and adolescents (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2020), and to focus on working adults or tourists more likely to visit such establishments.

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was used, with the questionnaire distributed via Google Forms and social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. Roscoe (1975) recommends a sample size between 30 and 500 for most behavioural studies, providing a guideline for this study's sampling range.

Research Instrument

The research instrument comprised a structured questionnaire with three sections:

- Section A: Demographic information
- Section B: Items measuring independent variables (physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, and price), adapted from validated sources
- Section C: Items measuring the dependent variable (customer satisfaction) and the moderator (COVID-19 fear)

All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A pilot test was conducted to assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the questionnaire. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, and normality tests confirmed the data's suitability for parametric analysis.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was carried out using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive analysis was used to summarise demographic profiles and variable distributions. Inferential analysis included:

- Pearson's correlation to examine the strength of relationships between variables
- Multiple regression analysis to assess the impact of independent variables on customer satisfaction
- Moderation analysis to evaluate the moderating effect of COVID-19 fear

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, assured of confidentiality, and given the right to withdraw at any time. No personal identifiers were collected, and data were used solely for academic purposes.

Summary

In summary, this study adopts a quantitative approach using structured questionnaires and statistical analysis to investigate the complex dynamics of customer satisfaction and its predictors. By incorporating rigorous sampling, measurement, and ethical procedures, the research provides a robust methodological foundation for examining the moderating role of COVID-19 fear in the context of hotel restaurants in Kuching City.

The conceptual framework of this study can be seen in the figure below.

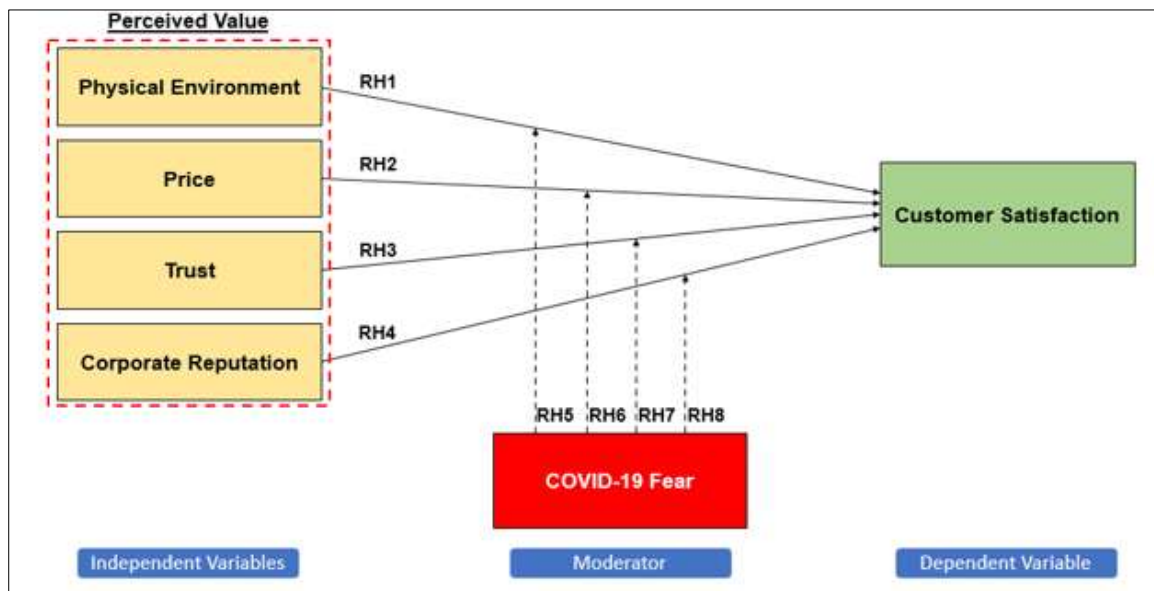


Figure 1: Study's Conceptual Framework

Source: (Developed from the Study)

Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

The sample consisted of 66% female and 34% male respondents. The largest age group was 21–30 years old (38%), followed by 20 and below (28%) and 31–40 years old (24%). In terms of marital status, the majority were single (63%), followed by married (35%), and widowed/divorced (2%). Regarding monthly income, most respondents earned below

RM2,000 (53%), followed by RM2,000–RM3,000 (29%), and RM3,001–RM4,000 (17%), with only a small percentage earning above RM4,000. In terms of education level, 42% held university-level qualifications, followed by secondary education (32%), college diplomas (18%), and primary school education (9%). For employment status, 58% were employed, 22% were students, 18% were self-employed, and 3% were retired. The most frequently visited hotel restaurant was The Quad Restaurant (27%), followed by Hua Yi Yuan (12%) and Puzzle Restaurant (11%).

Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

The means and standard deviations of the core constructs are presented below:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Constructs

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
COVID-19 Fear	3.492	0.912
Physical Environment	3.613	1.246
Trust	3.771	1.299
Corporate Reputation	6.874	0.996
Price	2.781	1.643
Customer Satisfaction	6.242	1.943

Source: (Data from the Study)

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha revealed that all constructs demonstrated high internal consistency. The alpha values ranged from 0.703 to 0.884, exceeding the minimum acceptable threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010), confirming the reliability of the measurement scales.

Normality Test

Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests. All constructs yielded p-values greater than 0.05, indicating that the data were normally distributed and appropriate for parametric statistical analyses.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships between the independent variables and customer satisfaction. All five constructs—physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, price, and COVID-19 fear—were found to have significant positive correlations with customer satisfaction ($p < 0.05$).

- Physical environment showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.798$), followed by corporate reputation and price.
- Trust demonstrated the weakest yet still significant correlation ($r = 0.478$).

These results provide preliminary support for the hypothesised relationships and suggest that various dimensions of perceived value influence customer satisfaction in hotel restaurants.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the influence of the independent variables on customer satisfaction.

The multiple regression model was statistically significant, $F(4, 280) = 38.283$, $p < .001$, and explained 68% of the variance in customer satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.68$). This indicates that the model provides a good fit for the data, and the independent variables—physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, and price—collectively have a strong predictive effect on customer satisfaction.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis

Predictor	Unstandardized β	Standardized β	t	p-value
Physical Environment	0.45	0.52	7.30	< .001
Trust	0.18	0.21	2.80	< .01
Corporate Reputation	0.24	0.26	3.50	< .01
Price	0.15	0.17	2.40	< .05

Source: (Data from the Study)

All predictors had a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction, with physical environment being the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$).

Moderation Analysis

To assess the moderating role of COVID-19 fear, interaction terms were created (e.g., Physical Environment \times COVID-19 Fear), and a hierarchical regression analysis was performed.

Table 3: Moderation Analysis

Interaction Term	β	t	p-value	Effect
COVID-19 Fear \times Physical Environment	-0.19	-2.90	< .01	Significant (Negative)
COVID-19 Fear \times Trust	-0.05	-1.20	> .05	Not significant
COVID-19 Fear \times Corporate Reputation	-0.14	-2.30	< .05	Significant (Negative)
COVID-19 Fear \times Price	-0.07	-1.50	> .05	Not significant

Source: (Data from the Study)

The results show that COVID-19 fear significantly moderates the relationships between:

- Physical environment and customer satisfaction (weakening the effect)
- Corporate reputation and customer satisfaction (weakening the effect)

However, there were no significant moderations found for the relationships involving trust and price.

Table 4: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H ₁	Physical environment \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	Supported
H ₂	Trust \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	Supported
H ₃	Corporate reputation \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	Supported
H ₄	Price \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	Supported
H ₅	COVID-19 fear moderates Physical environment \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	Supported
H ₆	COVID-19 fear moderates Trust \rightarrow Customer satisfaction	Not supported

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H ₇	COVID-19 fear moderates Corporate reputation → Customer satisfaction	Supported
H ₈	COVID-19 fear moderates Price → Customer satisfaction	Not supported

Source: (Data from the Study)

Hypothesis Testing Summary and Interpretation

The results of this study provided empirical support for the proposed hypotheses, establishing significant relationships between the dimensions of perceived value (physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, and price) and customer satisfaction. Additionally, the moderating role of fear of COVID-19 was partially confirmed, affecting selected relationships. The interpretations below are grounded in both theoretical and empirical foundations.

Physical Environment and Customer Satisfaction (H₁)

The physical environment was found to have a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction. This finding supports Bitner's (1992) Servicescape Theory, which posits that the physical surroundings of a service setting can directly influence customer perceptions and evaluations. In the context of hotel restaurants, elements such as ambience, cleanliness, layout, and safety protocols serve as physical environmental cues that reassure customers and enhance their satisfaction levels. The heightened health awareness resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasised the importance of a hygienic and well-maintained dining environment (Zhong & Moon, 2020).

Trust and Customer Satisfaction (H₂)

Trust was also positively associated with customer satisfaction, aligning with prior studies in the service and hospitality sectors (e.g., Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Kotler & Keller, 2012). Trust, comprising perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence, serves as a foundational element of relationship quality. In the context of the pandemic, trust extends to perceptions of the restaurant's compliance with health regulations, transparency in communication, and consistency in service delivery, all of which are critical to fostering customer confidence and satisfaction. Furthermore, courteous, attentive, and professional service staff contribute significantly to customers' trust, strengthening the relational bond between the restaurant and its patrons.

Corporate Reputation and Customer Satisfaction (H₃)

Corporate reputation showed a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction, consistent with existing literature that positions reputation as a key antecedent of loyalty and satisfaction (Bartikowski & Walsh, 2011). A favourable reputation based on service reliability, ethical conduct, and social responsibility enhances the credibility of the establishment. In the post-COVID-19 context, public perception regarding a business's response to health crises and its social contributions has become an essential component of reputation (Fombrun & Foss, 2001), thereby influencing customer satisfaction. Additionally, positive word-of-mouth stemming from excellent service experiences reinforces the restaurant's reputation and strengthens customer loyalty.

Price and Customer Satisfaction (H₄)

Price fairness was found to be significantly related to customer satisfaction, in line with equity theory and the concept of perceived value. As suggested by Zeithaml (1988), customers assess the benefits received relative to the cost incurred. During economic uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, sensitivity to pricing increases, and customers become more critical of whether the dining experience justifies the cost. Fair pricing is therefore interpreted not only as financial value but also as a reflection of the restaurant's respect for customer circumstances (Hoang & Suleri, 2021). Importantly, when high service quality accompanies fair pricing, customers are more likely to perceive the experience as worth their expenditure, thereby enhancing satisfaction.

In summary, excellent service delivery including staff professionalism, responsiveness, and empathy interacts synergistically with the identified dimensions of perceived value to shape the customer experience (Chen et al., 2024; Venkatesh et al., 2003). These service elements are integral to shaping customer satisfaction, especially during times of heightened sensitivity such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moderating Effects of Fear of COVID-19

This study further examined whether fear of COVID-19 moderated the relationships between the four dimensions of perceived value and customer satisfaction. The findings provide partial support for moderation.

Moderation of the Relationship Between Physical Environment and Customer Satisfaction (H₅)

Fear of COVID-19 was found to significantly moderate the relationship between physical environment and customer satisfaction. Specifically, the strength of this relationship weakened under conditions of high fear. This indicates that customers experiencing greater anxiety may require more than a clean and aesthetically pleasing environment; they also seek visible and consistent health and safety measures to feel secure (Yang et al., 2020). The psychological burden of fear reduces the effectiveness of environmental cues unless those cues directly address health-related concerns.

Moderation of the Relationship Between Trust and Customer Satisfaction (H₆)

The moderating effect of fear of COVID-19 on the relationship between trust and customer satisfaction was not statistically significant. This result suggests that trust serves as a stable and resilient determinant of satisfaction. Once established, trust may continue to exert a positive influence regardless of external threats or customer fear levels, particularly when supported by consistent and ethical service delivery (Kim et al., 2021).

Moderation of the Relationship Between Corporate Reputation and Customer Satisfaction (H₇)

Fear of COVID-19 significantly moderated the relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction. Customers with heightened fear may scrutinise organisational behaviour more critically, placing greater emphasis on visible health measures and evidence of corporate responsibility. While a positive reputation typically enhances satisfaction, its effect may be diminished if customers perceive inadequate responsiveness to current health risks (Lin et al., 2024; Fombrun & Foss, 2001).

Moderation of the Relationship Between Price and Customer Satisfaction (H₈)

No significant moderation effect of fear of COVID-19 was observed on the price-satisfaction relationship. This result indicates that perceived price fairness remains a robust determinant of satisfaction, even among customers with elevated health concerns. Price continues to be evaluated based on value and fairness, rather than being influenced by emotional fear. This is supported by findings from Prasetyo et al. (2021), who observed that price remained a critical satisfaction factor even during the heightened uncertainties of the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the factors shaping customer satisfaction in hotel restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings highlight that physical environment, trust, corporate reputation, and price fairness each significantly contribute to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, fear of COVID-19 was shown to moderate certain relationships, particularly those involving physical environment and corporate reputation.

In the context of heightened health awareness, these findings reinforce the need for restaurants to adapt their services and environments to meet evolving customer expectations. Restaurant managers should prioritise cleanliness, safety, communication, transparency, ethical practices, and value-based pricing to maintain customer trust and satisfaction. Moreover, emphasis must be placed on exceptional service delivery, as the interaction between staff and customers remains a central aspect of the hospitality experience.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be made to improve customer satisfaction in hotel restaurants during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. First, restaurants should enhance the physical environment by maintaining high standards of cleanliness and hygiene, ensuring visible safety practices, and adapting layouts to promote customer comfort and safety. Second, building and sustaining trust is essential; this can be achieved through transparent communication and consistent service delivery, supported by well-trained staff who can clearly explain and uphold safety protocols. Third, corporate reputation should be strengthened by engaging in socially responsible behaviour and publicly communicating these efforts. Such activities may include community support initiatives and maintaining ethical business practices. Fourth, ensuring price fairness is crucial, especially as customers become more sensitive to economic pressures. Restaurants must offer prices that reflect both quality and perceived value. Lastly, prioritising service quality is vital. Service staff should be trained to provide friendly, empathetic, and responsive service, as their interactions with customers significantly influence the overall dining experience and satisfaction, particularly in times of heightened health awareness. In summary, the findings should be able to improve customer satisfaction in hotel restaurants, which in turn would improve patronage to, at the very minimum, equivalent to pre-pandemic times.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study focused on a specific location (Kuching), which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand to other cities or regions to compare customer behaviour across different contexts. Additionally, it would be beneficial to investigate other relevant factors influencing customer satisfaction, such as food quality, service speed, staff behaviour, and menu variety. Longitudinal studies could further assess how customer satisfaction determinants evolve over time, especially as the hospitality industry adapts to a

post-pandemic landscape. Exploring customers' emotional responses and experiences with digital service innovations such as online ordering and contactless service also able to offers deeper insights into changing consumer expectations and behaviours that have emerged during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding and responding to customer needs in the post-COVID-19 period remains critical for the long-term success and resilience of hotel restaurants.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Global Academic Excellence (M) Sdn Bhd for facilitating the publication process. However, this project did not receive any financial support or grant funding.

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