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FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' DINING CHOICES IN CAMPUS CAFETERIAS: EVIDENCE FROM A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

Campus cafeterias play an important role in supporting students' daily routines, yet students' dining choices are shaped by more than food availability alone. This study examines factors influencing students' dining choices in campus cafeterias by focusing on four key determinants: ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality. A quantitative, cross-sectional research design was employed using a

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structured questionnaire distributed to students at a Malaysian public university. A total of 368 valid responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis. The findings show that ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality were significantly related to students' dining choices and emerged as significant predictors in the regression analysis. Among these factors, service quality recorded the strongest predictive effect, followed by food quality, food price, and ambience. These results suggest that students place considerable importance on friendly, responsive, and respectful service, as well as food that is appealing, varied, and perceived as worth the price paid. Although ambience recorded the lowest predictive strength, aspects such as cleanliness, seating comfort, noise level, and lighting remain relevant in shaping students' overall dining experience. This study contributes to the growing literature on university foodservice by providing empirical evidence on the determinants of students' dining choices within a Malaysian public university context, where affordability, service experience, and food quality are important considerations in students' daily campus life. Practically, the findings offer useful insights for campus cafeteria operators and university administrators in improving foodservice quality, strengthening student satisfaction, and encouraging continued patronage of campus cafeterias.

DOI:10.35631/JTHER.1145034 **Keyword:**

Ambience; Campus Cafeterias; Food Price; Food Quality; Service Quality; Students' Dining Choices



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Introduction

University cafeterias play a significant role on campus, allowing students to take short breaks between activities, eat meals and socialise. In addition to delivering food, food environments can affect food-related behaviour more generally, as campus settings in which food is available, food policies are in place, and environments are designed can shape how students choose food (Bailey et al., 2020). Cafeterias are much more than just places to eat for many students, particularly those who spend long hours on campus; they also contribute to the overall campus environment, which affects comfort, routine, and the student experience. Studies that have used cafeteria transaction data have demonstrated that food choices and dietary patterns in university canteens can provide valuable insights for food decision research, thus reinforcing the need to focus food research in the campus context (Lorenzoni et al., 2021). Past research has also revealed that students' perceptions of on-campus foodservice operations can affect their satisfaction with the experience, how often they eat there, and the overall university experience (Smith et al., 2020). Therefore, it is in the interest of both foodservice operators and university administrators who want to make their campus environment more supportive for students to know the reasons students choose a campus foodservice dining location.

Students' food selections are motivated by a number of interrelated factors. This is in line with the literature on food choice, which indicates that young consumers' food choices depend on personal tastes, prices, peer pressure, and food accessibility (Dilistan-Shipman, 2020). In a systematic review of the literature, Li et al. (2022) identified taste, food availability, and price as key determinants of students' food behaviours in university food environments. Likewise, Mensah and Oyeboode (2022) confirmed that emerging adults' food outlet selection is influenced by price, budget, food quantity, accessibility, ambience, hygiene, food quality, taste preferences, variety, and peer influence. These results suggest that a single factor is seldom the basis for students' cafeteria choices. Rather, their decisions are a mix of economic factors, food-related expectations, physical environments, and experiences with the service.

An important consideration for student dining is affordability. Students at the college and university have restricted budgets; therefore, perceived value and price are important factors in their food purchasing decisions. While some students may be familiar with healthier food choices, recent evidence suggests that students perceive healthier foods as costlier and less accessible, particularly when they have limited financial resources (Kanosvamhira, 2025). This situation emphasises the importance of balancing cafeteria food costs with food quality, variety, and nutritional content. As campuses simultaneously strive for healthier eating habits and different dietary patterns, campus cafeterias can play a role in promoting better and more consistent nutrition, particularly under time pressures, academic stress, and limited appropriate food choices for students (Almoraie et al., 2025; Wongprawmas et al., 2022).

In addition to the price and availability of food, the overall dining experience is also a function of the quality of food and service, as well as the dining environment, particularly the physical cafeteria environment. Food quality, service quality, perceived price, and physical environment quality are commonly associated with customer satisfaction and behavioural intention in foodservice settings (Zhong & Moon, 2020). These are all pertinent in the campus setting and, for students, define diners' expectations of the food, the comfort of the food court, pricing, and the quality of service from the food staff. Youth café choices across studies also reveal that the lighting, ambience, spatial layout and aesthetics of the facility can influence students' decisions and overall experience of visiting a café (Justinus et al., 2024).

While previous research has focused on students' learning behaviours regarding food consumption, the food environment, and satisfaction with foodservice, there has yet to be an empirical study of the factors that affect students' dining choices in campus foodservice, especially in Malaysia. This is significant because, in public universities in Malaysia, students face different dining restrictions than in commercial or private school environments. Public college students often operate on a day-to-day budget and can rely on assistance from relatives, scholarships, student loans, or other financial aid. Thus, affordability, value for money, food quality, service experience, and accessibility of campus eateries might become important factors in their daily food choices. There are a number of studies that discuss eating habits, food waste, or food habits as a whole. However, fewer studies specifically examine the effects of combinations of ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality on students' cafeteria selection. Hence, this study aims to examine the factors influencing students' dining preferences in the campus cafeterias of a public university in Malaysia. In particular, it examines how ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality impact students' choice behaviour when entering campus cafeterias. The study offers practical recommendations to improve student satisfaction with campus canteen services and ensure continued patronage, given the above factors.

Literature Review

Various foodservice quality and customer evaluation perspectives help conceptually drive the study, including the logic of SERVQUAL and DINESERV, which holds that customer evaluation of service experiences is determined by tangible and intangible attributes. What is key for the customer in the food-service context is not just food, but the restaurant/food establishment's furnishings and decor, food prices, employee courtesy and success in pleasing, service consistency, and quality of the service/meal experience. Uslu and Eren (2020) found that the models used to gain insights into customer satisfaction and loyalty in restaurant service are mostly service quality models, including SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, and DINESERV. Also, Zhong and Moon (2020) found that four factors, including food quality, service quality, perceived price, and physical environment quality, contribute to customers' satisfaction and behavioural intention. Given this study's context, these views provide a solid basis for exploring the relationships among ambience, food price, food quality, service quality, and students' dining options in campus cafeterias.

Various factors, such as the environment, cost, food, and service, influence students' food purchases in campus cafeterias. In previous studies on satisfaction with the university canteen, it was determined that the features that affect student satisfaction are the quality and variety of the food, satisfaction with prices, ambience, and staff service (Akter et al., 2020). At the university level, students may choose their meals for functional reasons such as time, cost, course timing, peer pressure, and meal options. University food environments can impact students' food behaviours, food outlet preferences, and satisfaction with food service operations (Li et al., 2022; Mensah & Oyeboode, 2022; Smith et al., 2020). This study focuses on four determinants: ambience, food price, food quality and service quality.

Ambience

Ambience is the physical and sensory attributes of the dining environment, such as cleanliness, lighting, seat comfort, noise level, canteen spatial design, and overall canteen ambience. Ambience is a factor, as students come to the cafeteria not just to eat, but also to rest between meals, socialise, complete tasks, and take breaks between classes in campus foodservice environments. Having a comfortable dining area might therefore enhance the dining experience and help retain students in the campus foodservice system.

Research on the foodservice and café sector indicates that ambience may affect customers' emotions, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. On the other hand, Zhong and Moon (2020) identified positive impacts of the physical environment on customer satisfaction in restaurants, as well as on service quality, food quality, and perceived price. Justinus et al. (2024) revealed that, in the context of a youth café, atmospheric dimensions such as facility appearance, illumination, ambience, spatial layout, and ambient intelligence influenced students' intentions to patronise different cafés at the university. Likewise, Vanhatalo et al. (2022) revealed that the restaurant ambience could affect customers' emotions, stress recovery, food choices, and sustainable actions. In all, these data indicate that ambience is not "just decoration," a component of dining that simply exists without having an impact; it is a component that may influence students' perceptions and selection of a foodservice outlet.

"Ambience" can be significant in university cafeterias, as comparisons between university canteens and outside food outlets are a shared concern among students. If the cafeteria is clean, comfortable, and good, students might be more inclined to eat there. However, when on-campus eating areas are noisy, poorly maintained, crowded, or uncomfortable, students may find off-campus alternatives attractive. Thus, it is assumed that ambience will affect students' food choices in the campus cafeteria.

Food Price

Many university students have limited funds when choosing food, so price is an important factor to consider. Important factors in the university context that affect food choices are price, food quality, location, sensory appeal, and value for money (Lima et al., 2021). When the campus is a foodservice operation, students' price assessment of the food product is not limited to how cheap or expensive it is, but also includes consideration of the value for what they paid. This covers price perceptions of affordability, portion size, good value for money, and fairness of pricing. Students are more likely to have positive perceptions of the meal program when they believe the cafeteria food is reasonably priced and consistently of good quality and quantity.

Past research has consistently found that both food prices and students' ability to afford them affect their food outlet selection. In a University Food Environment, food price, budget, and the quantity of food were found to be key drivers of emerging adults' choices of food outlets to buy from, according to Mensah and Oyeboode (2022). Their results imply that students tend to consider both satiety and affordability, especially when deciding where to eat. Likewise, Kanosvamhira (2025) found that proximity, convenience, and affordability clearly influenced students' decisions about what to order at the campus café, whereas healthier food options were often considered less manageable due to their higher cost. This means that even when students know there are healthier or higher-quality foods, price remains a factor to consider.

In foodservice research, perceived price is more closely related to satisfaction because it reflects whether the value received is commensurate with the price paid. In fast-food restaurants, Zhong and Moon (2020) found that, in addition to food, service, and physical environment quality, perceived price also had a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Similarly, in the university foodservice environment, Bremantie et al. (2026) reported that price perceptions, such as Price-to-Benefit and Price-to-Affordability, had a significant impact on college students' satisfaction with the university food service environment. These studies corroborate the notion that food prices are both an economic concern and an integral component of students' assessment of the nutritional cost of the pleasure they obtain from the cafeteria.

So, it is expected that food prices would affect students' food choices in the cafeteria in the present study. Students select a campus cafeteria when they think the food is good value, prices are clear, and the cost is reasonable for the quality and quantity of the food offered.

Food Quality

There is no denying that the quality of food plays a major role in selecting food items and directly influences students' satisfaction with the food offered by the campus canteen. General aspects of food quality are taste, freshness, variety, appearance, temperature, food hygiene, and

nutrition. If a school's cafeteria is part of its daily routine, the quality of the food is a key factor in students' learning environment and satisfaction.

Several studies have shown that food quality is one of the main factors of satisfaction in the foodservice environment. However, Smith et al. (2020) found that the elements of food quality, ambience, food and beverage options, value for money, and service quality were important influences on students' satisfaction and dining frequency at on-campus foodservice operations. Li et al. (2022), in the context of a university food environment, also identified taste as one of the most significant factors influencing students' food choices, followed by food availability and price. This research indicates that although students have been found to be practical in their food choices, the chosen food should also be fun, accessible, and of acceptable quality.

Variety and perceived healthiness are also vital qualities of food quality. Wongprawmas et al. (2022) identified limited food variety, time-consuming preparation, limited financial resources, and unhealthy food consumption as issues regarding healthy eating among students during their college studies. Likewise, Almoraie et al. (2025) highlighted the need for the availability, accessibility, affordability, and labelling of more nutritious food options in university food environments to promote healthy eating habits. These findings are relevant because students' food choices can be influenced when campus cafeterias fail to offer meals that are varied, appealing, reasonably priced, and nutritious.

Of course, in the campus cafeteria context, food quality is not a determining factor, and it creates a willingness to look elsewhere for food off campus if it is seen as tasting better, offering more variety, looking better, or being cheaper. However, a cafeteria that features delicious, clean, fresh, aesthetically pleasing and diverse meals can boost students' desire to have lunch inside the cafeteria. So, it is anticipated that food quality will strongly influence students' food choices in the campus canteen.

Service Quality

Service quality is the extent to which a foodservice employee responds to customers' needs during dining. As to service quality in campus cafeterias, it can be manifested in personnel amiability, responsiveness, reliability, respectfulness, efficiency, and the ability to meet students' needs. Students may end up with first pick of the cafeteria due to food quality or cost but can have a very powerful experience related to how they are treated during food service.

The importance of service quality in inducing satisfaction or future behavioural actions in the context of restaurants and foodservices is well documented in the restaurant and foodservice literature. Further, Uslu and Eren (2020) reported that service quality in restaurants is closely linked to satisfaction and loyalty, and that SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, and DINESERV are among the most frequently used approaches for measuring service quality. In a similar vein, Zhong and Moon (2020) indicated that service quality positively influenced not only customer satisfaction but also perceived price, food quality, and physical environment quality. On a larger scale, Hidayat et al. (2020) found that food and service quality significantly affected customer satisfaction and repurchase intention, indicating that meeting consumers' expectations across both food and service attributes may influence their food choices. These results indicate that service quality, in its entirety, is an important factor in the customer dining experience and can affect their likelihood of returning.

Service quality is also essential in university foodservice operations because students have frequent contact with foodservice personnel during the school year. The significance of service quality as an influencing factor of students' satisfaction with on-campus foodservice operations was identified by Smith et al. (2020). In a recent study, Bremantie et al. (2026) showed that Empathy is one of the Service Quality variables and that it had a significant positive influence on students' satisfaction with college foodservice. This indicates that students appreciate quick service as well as courteous, thoughtful interactions with foodservice employees.

Enhancing service quality can contribute to a more conducive and secure eating environment for campus food service. Students may eat more often at the campus food service operation if it is run by friendly, helpful employees who serve quickly and show courtesy and concern for the individual student. However, if the service is poor, it can impact pupil satisfaction regardless of the food's price or quality. Hence, it can be assumed that the quality of service would affect the students' dining decisions at a campus cafeteria.

Generally speaking, the literature suggests that a mix of ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality influences students' dining decisions. Each of these factors contributes to students' perceptions of comfort, value, satisfaction, and convenience when choosing their campus dining location. Based on this discussion, the present study will focus on the effect of these four determinants on students' decisions to eat outside campus cafeterias.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed, this study proposes a conceptual framework to explain why students make these dining decisions in campus cafeterias, grounded in four determinants: ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality. The framework draws on the concepts of foodservice quality and customer judgment, which involve customers' evaluations based on tangible and intangible elements, particularly the logic of SERVQUAL and DINESERV. In this research, ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality are considered independent variables, and students' dining selections are considered dependent variables.

The theory is that students' decision to use the campus cafeterias for their meals is a result of their overall dining experience. Ambience refers to the physical and sensory surroundings of the cafeteria, such as cleanliness, lighting, seating comfort, and spatial layout. Students' perceptions of affordability, fairness, and value for money are reflected in food prices. Food quality is based on pupils' judgements of taste, freshness, variety, appearance, hygiene and meals' acceptability. Service quality describes how friendly, responsive, reliable, respectful and efficient staff are to students. Together, these four factors embody aspects of the cafeteria environment which could affect a student's meal decision.

The inclusion of these variables has been supported by recent studies in the fields of foodservice and university dining. In a foodservice context, the quality of the physical environment, perceived price, food quality, and service quality have been shown to affect satisfaction and behavioural intention (Zhong & Moon, 2020). For students, food quality, ambience, value for money, food and beverage options, service quality, affordability, and convenience have similarly been related to their satisfaction and dining habits in campus and university food service settings (Bremantie et al., 2026; Kanosvamaha, 2025; and Smith et al., 2020). In this regard, the framework proposed in this study provides a stronger foundation for

studying the relationships among Ambience, Food Price, Food Quality, and Service Quality and Students' Dining Choices in the Campus Canteen.

Based on these relationships, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Ambience significantly influences students' dining choices in campus cafeterias.

H2: Food price significantly influences students' dining choices in campus cafeterias.

H3: Food quality significantly influences students' dining choices in campus cafeterias.

H4: Service quality significantly influences students' dining choices in campus cafeterias.

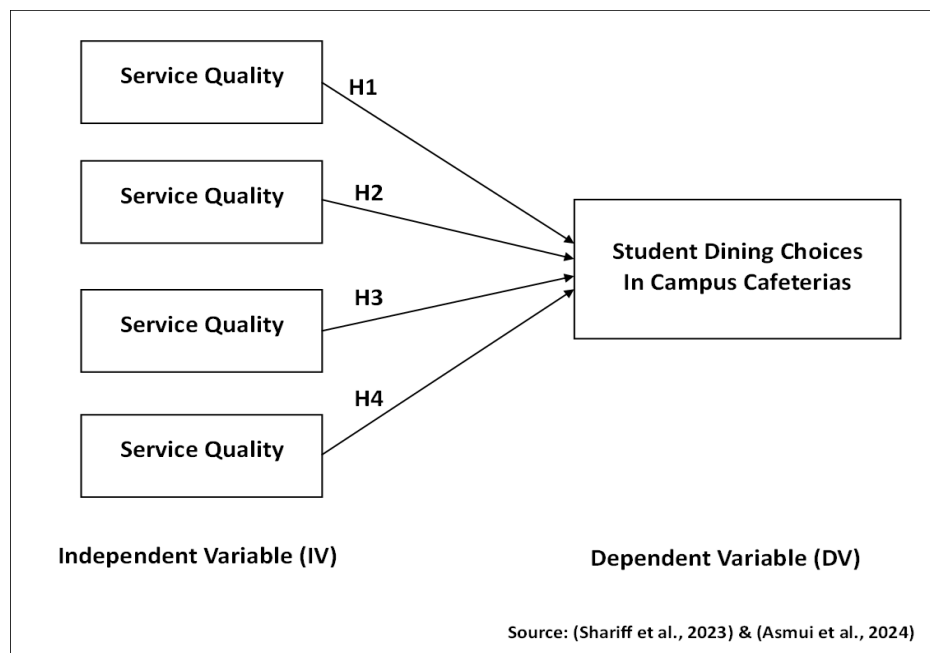


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the relationships between ambience, food price, food quality, service quality, and students' dining choices in campus cafeterias. A structured questionnaire was used to gather data from students at a public university in Malaysia who had experience patronising campus cafeterias. Non-probability purposive sampling was adopted for this study as it was deliberate and specific to the described target group, students with familiarity with campus cafeteria services and able to give relevant responses based on their eating habits experience. The questionnaire was divided into screening items, demographic items and measurement items of the 4 independent variables and the dependent variable. Respondents' level of "agreement" was measured using a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The population size and sample size guidelines of Krejcie and Morgan (1970) were followed, yielding 368 valid responses, which were considered suitable for analysis. The pilot test of this instrument was conducted with 33 respondents to assess its reliability before data collection. The Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.882 to 0.946, indicating good to excellent internal consistency among the constructs.

The collected data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were employed to provide information on the respondents' profile and the mean scores of the study variables. Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the

relationships among ambience, food price, food quality, service quality, and students' dining choices. The results of the multiple regression showed that the four independent variables predicted students' dining choices in the campus cafeterias. Ethical issues have been addressed throughout the research. The participants were briefed on the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses, which would be used solely for academic studies.

Findings

There were 368 valid responses used in this study. According to the results in Table 1, most respondents were female (327; 88.9%), while 41 (11.1%) were male. By age, the majority of respondents were in the 18-20 age group, with 276 respondents (75.0% of the total). This was followed by individuals aged 21–23 years, who responded with 78 individuals (21.2%), and individuals aged 24–26 years, who responded with 14 (3.8%). The majority of respondents were Diploma students (265, 72.0%), and the remainder were bachelor's degree students (103, 28.0%).

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	327	88.9
	Male	41	11.1
Age	18–20 years old	276	75.0
	21–23 years old	78	21.2
	24–26 years old	14	3.8
Education Level	Diploma	265	72.0
	Bachelor's Degree	103	28.0

The descriptive analysis was used to investigate respondents' perceptions of ambience, food price, food quality, service quality and students' dining choices. As shown in Table 2, the mean scores for all constructs fell within the moderate-to-high range, indicating positive perceptions among respondents of the campus cafeteria experience. Ambience recorded the highest overall mean score ($M = 3.7133$), followed closely by service quality ($M = 3.7052$), food quality ($M = 3.6399$), students' dining choices ($M = 3.6033$), and food price ($M = 3.5224$). It means that the respondents had a positive perception of the cafeteria environment, especially in the lighting rating, and that the food price received the lowest mean rating among the constructs.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Constructs

Construct	Number of Items	Mean Range	Overall Mean	Highest-Rated Item
Ambience	4	3.5625–3.8750	3.7133	The lighting is bright and makes the space feel pleasant.
Food Price	4	3.4348–3.6332	3.5224	The price paid matches the price shown on the menu.
Food Quality	4	3.5462–3.7853	3.6399	The cafeteria offers a wide variety of menu items.
Service Quality	4	3.6712–3.7310	3.7052	The staff treat customers with respect.

Students' Dining Choices	4	3.5380– 3.6658	3.6033	Students are satisfied with the ambience of the cafeteria.
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Pearson correlation between ambience and food price, food quality, service quality and students' dining choices was investigated. As indicated in Table 3, all four independent variables had a positive and significant relationship with students' dining choices. Service quality was found to be most closely correlated with students' dining decisions, followed by food quality. The relationships between Ambience and Food price were also strong and positive. From these outcomes, it can be concluded that the food Canteen service has both tangible and experiential dimensions that influence students' dining choices.

Next, a multiple regression analysis was performed to assess how well each determinant predicted students' dining options. The findings reveal that all four variables contributed significantly to predicting students' dining choices. The strongest were service quality, followed by food quality, food price, and ambience. From this, it can be deduced that the quality of service, such as friendliness, responsiveness, respect, and understanding of students' needs, had the greatest influence on the dining choice in campus cafeterias. The second-highest predictor was food quality, indicating that quality in terms of taste, variety, presentation, and food state continues to be important to students when they make their cafeteria choices. Food price and ambience were both predictive, with the former being weaker than the latter but still salient to the students' dining behaviours.

Table 3: Correlation and Regression Results

Independent Variable	Correlation with Students' Dining Choices (r)	Standardised Beta (β)	p-value	Hypothesis Decision
Ambience	.747**	.088	.015	Supported
Food Price	.741**	.117	.001	Supported
Food Quality	.843**	.378	< .001	Supported
Service Quality	.850**	.420	< .001	Supported

Note: $p < .01$ for correlation results. Regression results are significant at $p < .05$.

The overall results show that ambience, food price, food quality, and service quality were significant predictors of students' dining preferences for campus cafeterias. Of these factors, service quality and food quality seem to be the most significant predictors, while the remaining factors (food price and ambience) also make meaningful contributions to students' cafeteria dining decisions. Thus, the study objectives are achieved by demonstrating that each determinant contributes significantly to students' dining decisions.

Discussion

This study revealed that ambience, food price, food quality and service quality significantly contributed to predicting students' dining choice in the campus cafeteria. This suggests that students' cafeteria choices are influenced by environmental, economic, food, and service factors. The findings align with previous research that revealed that students' dining behaviours in the university food environment are related to price, food availability, food quality, ambience, convenience, and service experience (Li et al., 2022; Mensah & Oyebode, 2022; Smith et al., 2020). This result has also confirmed the idea that campus cafeterias should be

seen not only as places that provide food but also as part of broader student support systems within higher education institutions.

The strongest determinant of dining choice among students was the quality of service. This indicates that students place great importance on how they are treated while eating. The dining service staff, if they are friendly, respectful, responsive, and helpful, can help make a more positive impression for the cafeteria and may deter students from going off campus. This result agrees with the study by Smith et al. (2020), which found that service quality had a significant effect on residents' satisfaction and dining frequency in an on-campus foodservice program. It is also in line with Uslu and Eren (2020), who emphasised that service quality in restaurants is closely related to customer satisfaction and loyalty. In the campus cafeteria context, service quality appears to be more than a supporting factor; it is a key part of the overall dining experience and can influence students' willingness to return.

The second-biggest factor influencing students' cafeteria food choices was the food's quality. The discovery suggests that students have positive relationships with palatable, diverse, attractively presented, good-smelling, and good-condition food. Students, while price-sensitive, still want campus cafeterias to offer meals that are satisfactory in terms of quality and satisfaction. The findings were consistent with those of Smith et al. (2020), who showed that food quality significantly affected students' satisfaction with on-campus foodservice. This result is echoed by Li et al. (2022), who identified taste as one of the most critical factors influencing students' food selection in university food provision; a similar result was also revealed by the earlier studies presented in this review. On the contrary, food quality should not be neglected; otherwise, even if students have food on campus, they may seek alternatives off campus due to poor quality.

Food price was also a strong predictor of students' dining choices, but not as strong as service quality or food quality. This implies that price competitiveness and perceived value are important, but students might be open to exploring other factors in dining decisions. Students are likely to judge how much they pay for the food, check whether there are enough bits, and feel happy about the food. They agree with the findings of Mensah and Oyeboade (2022), who found that students' food outlet choice depended on food price, budget, and food quantity. It also corroborates the above findings, as Kanosvamhira (2025) found that perceptions of the price of a healthier or higher-quality alternative significantly influenced students' food choices at the campus café. Accordingly, the campus canteens should offer low prices and meals that students consider worth the price.

Among the four variables, Ambience was the least predictive, yet it remained significant in predicting students' eating decisions. Even if ambience is not a primary factor influencing students' dining decisions, this study indicates that it remains relevant in dining contexts. Comfortable seating, lighting, noise levels, space, and cleanliness can determine whether students are comfortable while eating, resting, or simply playing in the canteen. This discovery confirms the findings of Justinus et al. (2024), which stated that atmospheric factors, including lighting, ambience, facilities, appearance, and the arrangement of facilities, affect youths' intention to visit cafés. This aligns with the findings of Vanhatalo et al. (2022) that the restaurant environment can affect consumers' emotions and food characteristics. Ambience can be particularly significant in campus use, where students may consider whether their on-campus cafeterias serve their needs, versus off-campus food service establishments that provide a more appealing ambience.

The results indicated that functional and experiential aspects should be considered when looking at ways to improve the services provided in campus cafes. Service quality and Food quality should receive the highest priority due to their strongest predictive power over students' dining choices. But food cost and ambience should not be overlooked, as they affect students' views of value and comfort. A cafeteria that provides good food, a good environment, good service, good prices, and good respect will be able to maintain student patronage and provide a positive dining experience while students are on campus. These findings are significant for the University Administration in monitoring the cafés, not only regarding food supply but also service standards, menu quality, fair prices, and the cafés' physical condition.

Conclusion

The study sought to understand the importance of ambience, food price, and food and service quality in students' dining decisions in a campus cafeteria. The results indicate that all four factors were significantly related to students' dining choices, with service quality as the most important predictor, followed by food quality, food price, and ambience. From these results, it could be inferred that, apart from food availability, the level of service, food acceptability, the perceived fairness of food prices, and the comfort of the dining environment also influence students' meal choices when dining in the campus cafeteria.

This study is a valuable addition to the literature on university foodservice, as it provides empirical evidence on the factors influencing students' dining decisions at a Malaysian public university. It further expands the ongoing debates about campus dining development by revealing that service and food quality have a specific impact on students' dining choices. In practical terms, the findings show the importance of service improvements in "friendliness", "responsiveness", "respect", and "sensitivity to student needs" by cafeteria operators or the university administration to enhance service. Meanwhile, maintaining high food quality, reasonable prices, and a neat, comfortable campus canteen environment will encourage students to continue using it. These enhancements can increase student satisfaction, promote healthier practices, and reduce students' reliance on off-campus food establishments.

This study has a number of limitations. The subjects were students from a single public university in Malaysia; generalisation to other universities, study areas, and the like in the country is limited. Further, the study design was cross-sectional; thus, the results reflect a single point in time regarding the perceptions of educational students. Future studies can be conducted with students from multiple universities to enable comparisons of foodservice across various campus settings. Additional factors such as menu variety, availability of healthy food, food safety, convenience, peer influence, and frequency of food consumption may also be included in future studies to provide a fuller picture of students' campus dining behaviour.

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- Ethics Statement:** This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards for studies involving human participants. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Jawatankuasa Penyelidikan Negeri (JPN), UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, with Minimal Risk approval granted through JPN Meeting Bil. 08/2025 held on 8 May 2025. The approval reference number is 100-UiTMCTKD(PJI.23/4)JPN. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.
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