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## **Restaurant Service Delivery Attributes and Customer Patronization: Comparison of Two Malaysian Ethnic Restaurants**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the extent of restaurant service delivery attributes influences Malaysian customers' patronization. Customers' assessment, through their dining experiences of the service delivery attributes and intention of re-patronization in two types of ethnic restaurants (Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants) are also investigated. Besides quality of food, efficient and consistent of service are the major factors contribute to customers' propensity of patronizing restaurants follows by the availability of snack food and opening hours. These elements are mostly met in the Indian Muslim restaurants compared to Malay restaurants. These differences have given significant impact and implications to Malay restaurant operators. Finding of this study also provides information for the potential restaurant operators that effective operation management techniques improved customer satisfaction thus lead to repeat patronization and attaining customer satisfaction through efficient service delivery is a key to survival in today's sophisticated restaurant businesses.

*Keywords:* Service delivery, patronization, customer, restaurant, Indian Muslim, Malay

### **Introduction**

Restaurant businesses are seen now as one of the fastest growing sectors within the foodservice industry in Malaysia. A chic unconventional restaurants mushrooming all over the place occupying strategic corner of shop lots, housing estates, heritage bungalows, near popular nightspots even the disused building (Nadzri, 2005). The changes in demand of customers' tastes, eating out habits and multi-culture patterns of ethnic group through a magnificent blend of foods probably caused of this boom. From this, the choices of restaurants are becoming unlimited either for upscale, medium scale restaurants, café, coffee shop to a hawker stalls and pushcarts. For this paper focus is only be given to medium scale of ethnic restaurants.

Medium scale ethnic restaurants in Malaysia are made up of three major ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese and Indian (Indian Hindu and Indian Muslim). They are well accepted as most of these restaurants incorporate cuisines from each ethnic group and form a unique Malaysian gastronomic heritage. Many of these restaurants now do a little bit of everything to keep up with changing trends and satisfy customers' wide-ranging tastes. Malay restaurants for instance are often described as serving spicy and flavourful food ranging from the famous varieties rice to a variety of noodles dishes and are no longer concentrating on their treasures of cuisines. Similarly, the Chinese and Indian restaurants are broadening their horizons by combining flavours and tastes to suit other ethnic favourites, although the cuisines are still greatly influenced by their ancestors. Clear examples can be seen in chicken rice, sweet and sour soup, idlee, phrata and many more. However, despite these changes most of the Chinese and Indian Hindu restaurants are more popular among their own ethnic groups. This probably because the Malays who represent a large Muslim population are concerned about 'halal' food they consume. This is not to generalize that all Chinese and Indian Hindu restaurants in Malaysia of serving 'non-halal' food.

The above scenario has given Malay and Indian Muslim restaurant popularly known as "Mamak" restaurants competing with each other in attracting customers, especially among the Malays. Nevertheless, Indian Muslim restaurants are seen to be fully packed with customers most of the time (breakfast, lunch and dinner) compared to Malay restaurants which only having large customers at one meal period. Besides that this ethnic restaurant has been sustained over a much longer period compared to Malay restaurants. Most of the Malay restaurants with a few exceptions are reported of gaining customers at the beginning of their business operation, but are unable to sustain them after a few years compared to Indian Muslim restaurants (Euromonitor, 2004).

Based on the literature from other parts of the world, many migrant ethnic restaurants are criticized for providing inconsistent or poor service delivery to their customers compared to other types of restaurants (Josiam & Monteiro, 2004; Verbeke & Lopéz, 2005). Pang (2002) for instance, reported that the positive acceptance of Chinese restaurants in Belgium has been tarnished by the poor service provided by the restaurant operators. Verbeke and Lopez (2005) argued that ethnic restaurants in that country are continuing to develop rapidly but are still having problems in terms of service, particularly in waiting times for food to be delivered to the customers. The same scenario has occurred in Chinese restaurants in Germany where customers demand not just great food but also expect efficient service in delivering the food (Leung, 2002). Jamal (1996) found that despite positive acceptance by British customers of ethnic restaurants, most commented that the service provided by the migrant ethnic restaurant operators was not consistent. They were also criticized for the lack of hygiene practices and professionalism in handling both food and services among customer contact employees (Collins, 2002; Bailey & Tian, 2002; Josiam & Monteiro, 2004). Many of them were found unable to sustain their business operations over a long period of time.

To date, a number of studies have focused on the quality of food, menu choices, customer satisfaction and service quality of restaurant businesses (Sill, 1991; Schlesinger

& Heskett, 1991; Danaher & Mattsson, 1994; Church & Newman, 2000; Walsh, 2002; Bowen & Ford, 2004). Nevertheless, there has been very limited analysis of the relationship between service delivery attributes given by the provider which Edwardson (1997) refer to food, service, operating and human dimension and customer perception of those services, particularly in the ethnic restaurants. In other words, the extent to which customers are influenced by the service delivery attributes, and how those perceptions influence their propensity to patronize such restaurants have not yet been widely researched. In fact, no published or unpublished research related to Malaysia has been identified. With that the objectives of this study is therefore to;

1. to identify to what extent the restaurant service delivery attributes (food, service, operating environment, human dimensions) influences Malaysian customers' patronization;
2. to asses service delivery attributes (food, service, operating environment, human dimensions) between Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants through customer dining experience;
3. to asses customers intention of repeat patronization.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

In gaining customer views about the extent of service delivery attributes influence their restaurant patronization and intention to repeat patronization, a self reported experience through a questionnaire survey was chosen. This approach was selected to ensure that the result would be based upon actual customer experiences of dining at particular types of restaurants. This involved customers who had visited and experienced dining at Malay and Indian Muslim restaurant in Shah Alam city Malaysia. This city is chosen due to the intensification of Indian Muslim restaurants and their strong business survival compared to most of the Malay restaurant despite Malays constituting 80 percent of the total population.

Owing to the large restaurant customers in Shah Alam, a convenience sample approach was used by selecting customers at random at three popular supermarkets and shopping complexes as they were the most highly visited places in the city neighborhood. Following the same approach of Jones and Peppiatt (1996), potential respondents were initially approached and asked if they had experienced of dining in a Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants? If the customers reported having had such experience they were invited to take part in the study.

The survey questionnaire was divided into three major sections. Each section contained questions addressing the variables suit to the research objectives. The first section (A) comprised thirteen questions using nominal scale and focused on respondent demographic profile. Thirty three items were used in section B to assess respondents view on the important elements for them to patronizing the restaurants. Respondents were required to translate their view on a five type Likert scale ranging from 1 with "No

importance” to 5 “Very important”. Thirty nine items in section C used to compare the perceptions and preferences of respondents between Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants with regard to service delivery system attributes (food, service, operating environment and human element) and their repeat patronization on a five point type Likert scale ranging from 1 with “totally disagree” and 5 “totally agree”.

Survey was conducted each weekend in October 2008 at the selected shopping complexes and supermarkets by researchers and two other assistants. Potential respondents were intercepted before entering the Mall or supermarket. There were several incidents whereby some respondents were reluctant to participate in the survey as they claimed to have no time and were busy shopping. Despite this difficulty, a total of 617 questionnaires were collected and 600 were found useable. The non-useable responses (17) were excluded due to the incompleteness of a few sections, especially Sections B and C of the questionnaires which are important for the study.

## Analysis and Results

The characteristics of the sample are reported in Table 1. The number of male respondents exceeded the female with 70.8 percent (n= 425) against 29.2 percent (n= 175). This is expected, as males are seen as patronizing the restaurants more often than the females especially during peak periods. Malays constituted around 74.5 percent (n= 447) of the total respondents, with 16.3 percent Chinese (n= 98), 5.3 percent Indian (n= 32) and 3.8 percent (n= 23) from other ethnic groups. This proportion did provide a reasonable representation of the ethnic ratio in the Shah Alam city, which consists of 85 percent Malay communities, 10 percent Chinese, 3 percent Indians and 2 percent other races. The age of the respondents were well distributed across the given choices with 23.2 percent (n= 139) in the range of 25 years and below, 32.0 percent (n=192) between 26 and 35 years, 32.8 percent (n=197) between 36 and 45 years, 9.8 percent (n=59) between 46 and 55 years and 2.2 percent (n=13) above 56 years of age.

**Table 1: Showing the number and percentage (%) of overall respondents reported by gender, ethnicity, age, education, occupation, income, frequent of dining out, average spend per visit in the data collection**

VARIABLES	ALL	
	n	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	425	70.8
Female	175	29.2
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Malay	447	74.5
Chinese	98	16.3
Indian	32	5.3
Others	23	3.8
<b>Age</b>		
25 years and below	139	23.2

26 – 35 years	192	32.0
36 – 45 years	197	32.8
46 – 55 years	59	9.8
56 years and above	13	2.2
<b>Education</b>		
High school	62	10.3
Diploma	207	34.5
Bachelor's degree	213	35.5
Master's degree or higher	102	17.0
Others	16	2.7
<b>Occupation</b>		
Student	193	32.2
Self-employed	40	6.7
Government sector	254	42.3
Private sector	109	18.2
Others	4	0.7
<b>Income</b>		
Below RM 1000	174	29.0
RM 1001 – RM 3000	237	39.5
RM 3001 – RM 5000	116	19.3
RM 5001 – RM 7000	69	11.5
RM 7001 and above	4	0.7
<b>Frequent of dining out</b>		
Once	18	3.0
2 – 3 times	354	59.0
4 – 5 times	222	37.0
None	6	1.0
<b>Average spend per visit</b>		
Below RM 4.99	46	7.7
RM 5.00 – RM 9.99	119	19.8
RM 10.00 – RM 19.99	423	70.5
RM 20.00 and above	12	2.0

On level of education, 10.3 percent (n= 62) of the respondents had obtained high school qualifications, 34.5 percent (n= 207) had diplomas, 35.5 percent (n= 213) possessed bachelor's degrees, 17.0 percent ( n= 102) had master's degrees and 2.7 percent (n= 16) had other educational backgrounds. 42.3 percent (n= 254) of the total respondents were government servants, 32.2 percent (n= 193) were students in higher institutions, 18.2 percent ( n=109) worked in the private sector, 6.7 percent (n= 40) were self employed and 0.7 percent (n= 4) was others. This is not surprising since many government offices, higher institutions and some factories are located in the Shah Alam area. In terms of income, 29.0 percent ( n= 174) received a monthly income below RM 1000, 39.5 percent (n= 237) between RM 1001-RM 3000, 19.3 percent ( n= 116) between RM 3001-RM 5000, 11.5 percent ( n= 69)between RM 5001-RM 7000 and 0.7

percent (n= 4) had a monthly income level above RM 7001. The frequency of visits by customer to the restaurants is also shown that 59.0 percent (n= 354) of respondents dined between 2 and 3 times weekly, followed by 37.0 percent (n= 222) between 4 and 5 times, 3.0 percent (n= 18) dined only once a week and 1.0 percent (n=6) stated did not dine at any restaurants at all on a weekly basis. 70.5 percent (n= 423) claimed to spend between RM 11.00 and RM 20,00, followed by 19.8 percent (n= 119) spending between RM 6.00 to RM 11.00 and RM, 7.7 percent ( n=46) spent below RM 5.00 and 2.0 percent (n= 12) spent above RM 21.00 per visit.

### Analysis of Overall Responses

A descriptive statistic looking at the mean scores was employed to identify important factors influencing customers' of patronizing the restaurants. The findings are presented in Table 2 in descending order.

Table 2: Showing the mean of importance to respondents of patronizing restaurants

Items	n	Rank	Mean	S.D
Taste of food	600	1	4.64	.544
Provides fast service	600	2	4.35	.857
Varieties of food	600	3	4.33	.761
Fast <i>a la carte</i> service	600	4	4.29	.849
Quality of food	600	5	4.23	.850
Availability of snack food	600	6	4.20	1.138
Consistent service	600	7	4.12	1.103
Fast service during peak periods	600	8	4.04	1.202
Efficient counter and table service	600	9	3.90	1.043
Delivering the food correctly	600	10	3.88	.842
Sufficient service staff	600	11	3.80	1.054
Attentiveness toward customers	600	12	3.77	1.105
Friendliness of service	600	13	3.70	.977
Presentation of food	600	14	3.69	.665
Freshly prepared food	600	15	3.65	.931
Temperature of food	600	16	3.65	.872
Reasonable price of food	600	17	3.64	.970
Hygiene and cleanliness	600	18	3.63	.824
Concept and setup	600	19	3.56	1.069
Conducive dining environment	600	20	3.55	.949
Entertainment	600	21	3.55	1.079
Brightly lit atmosphere	600	22	3.51	.787
Word of mouth	600	23	3.50	.742
Accepting customer comment	600	24	3.50	.937
Clear menu board	600	25	3.49	.746
Strategic location	600	26	3.49	.710
Accessibility	600	27	3.46	.650
Ample parking space	600	28	3.40	.548
Varieties of beverage	600	29	3.39	1.168
Suitable for meeting friends	600	30	3.31	.737
Discussion place	600	31	3.29	.798
Large crowd influence	600	32	3.23	.611
Friends' influence	600	33	3.20	.960

Looking at the pattern of the mean scores of the listed items, food elements are perceived

as far more important in influencing customers to patronize the restaurant with the greater mean score given related to the taste of food (4.64, rank 1), variety of food (4.33, rank 3) and quality of food (4.23, rank 5). This is not surprising as customers generally patronize restaurants with the intention of having the best food of high quality and obtaining value for their money spent. The item related to the availability of snack food (4.20, rank 6) was also rated important as the taste and quality of food. This finding indicates that regardless of time customers generally have high expectations of the availability of food in the restaurants including snack food or quick items. This contention is in line with other researchers' findings (Pang, 2002; Leung, 2002; Josiam and Monteiro, 2004; Verbeke and Lopez, 2005) that food dimensions among the major determinants in influencing customers to patronize restaurants.

Despite this, service attributes were also found to be important in attracting customers. This is evidence as most of the items related to major service elements received higher ratings from the respondents. Among all, fast service has a significant influence on customers' inclination (4.35, rank 2). In the context of this study, fast service refers to the overall service of food products. As such, most of the respondents reported higher degrees of importance on *a la carte* service (4.29, rank 4), consistency of service (4.12, rank 7), fast service during peak periods (4.04, rank 8) and efficient counter and table service (3.90, rank 9). Respondents were also consistently positive on all other items closely related to service and food such as;

- 1) Delivery of the food correctly ( 3.88, rank 10)
- 2) Sufficient service staff (3.80, rank 11)
- 3) Attentiveness toward customer service (3.77, rank 12)
- 4) Friendliness of service (3.70, rank 13)
- 5) Presentation of food (3.69, rank 14)
- 6) Freshly prepared food (3.65, rank 15)
- 7) Temperature of food (3.65, rank 16)

These findings indicate that besides previous attributes, customers also expect to get attentiveness, friendliness of service, freshly prepared food, the right temperature of food, food correctly delivered with acceptable presentation and sufficient service staff, when dining at any restaurants.

It was also anticipated that there would be a greater importance for the customers related to the price of food when choosing the restaurants. Despite being important, the score for this item was less than other previous items. In fact, it was ranked 17 with the mean score (3.64) which is far lower than food and service attributes. With this, it could be said that customers now place more weight on, or have more concern for food and service attributes compared to the price, and they are willing to pay if the food and service rendered meet their appetites and expectations. This fits with Bolton and Drew (1991), which pointed out that service and food have a significant influence on customers' patronage behavior.

In the olden days, operating environment elements such as concept and setup,

ambience, including interior appearance and entertainment probably were not considered to be very important in the customers' and the operators' views, especially in the medium class restaurants. Similarly, the level of customers' toleration on food hygiene and restaurant personnel hygiene probably was not so critical. However, as the world changed and moved in line with globalization, customers' views and expectations of restaurants could have altered and restaurants are perceived to be more than just places to have food. In addition, word of mouth as a free marketing tool and handling comments positively can increase customers' repeat patronization. All the assumptions seem to provide evidence in this study. The mean scores of such items are as follows;

- 1) Hygiene and cleanliness (3.63, rank 18)
- 2) Concept and setup (3.56, rank 19)
- 3) Conducive dining environment (3.55, rank 20)
- 4) Entertainment (3.55, rank 21)
- 5) Brightly lit atmosphere (3.51, rank 22)
- 6) Word of mouth (3.50, rank 23)
- 7) Accepting customer comment (3.50, rank 24)

Other elements like accessibility, location and ample parking space, a clear menu board, a variety of beverages, a suitable place for meeting friends and discussion, a large crowd, friends' influence, as well as curry food, might also moderate and motivate customers to patronize a particular restaurant. A well presented and displayed menu board, for instance indirectly helps customer to have preconceived ideas of what kind of food to order, what the food comprises, and the prices. The mean scores obtained related those elements are as follows:

- 1) Clear menu board (3.49, rank 25)
- 2) Strategic location (3.49, rank 26)
- 3) Accessibility (3.46, rank 27)
- 4) Ample parking space (3.40, rank 28)
- 5) Varieties of beverage (3.39, rank 29)
- 6) Suitable for meeting friends (3.31, rank 30)
- 7) Discussion place (3.29, rank 31)
- 8) Large crowd influence (3.23, rank 32)
- 9) Friends' influence (3.20, rank 33)

Despite the mean ratings to those items were below 3.5 (scale from 1 with not important to 5 with very important), the actual magnitudes of ratings were inclining toward importance. This revealed that customers now are starting to be concerned with these attributes and are probably influenced by friends and large crowds in patronizing the restaurants.

The overall result clearly indicates that customers patronize restaurants not just to acquire food, but service delivery and other attributes also play a significant role in moderating their decision to dine at particular restaurants.

## Comparison of Indian Muslim and Malay Restaurants

As this analysis compares the customers' assessment of two types of restaurants (Indian Muslim and Malay restaurant) the matched paired sample t-test was found to be the most suited procedure. The analyses were divided into five sections based on groupings of independent variables determined by factor analysis namely food dimension (ten items), service dimension (nine items), operating environment dimension (nine items) human dimension (six items) and intention to re-patronization dimension (five items).

### *Differences Attributable to Food Dimension*

A number of patterns were identified which indicated some distinctions in respondents' perceptions relating to food in the Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants. This can clearly be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3: Showing mean scores for items in the food dimension reported by respondents for Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants with standard deviation, t-test results and levels of significance**

Food Dimension	n	Rest	Mean	Std Dev	t-value	Sig 2-tail
This restaurant provides more varieties of food.	600	MAL	3.84	.897	3.48	<b>.001</b>
		MAM	3.70	.868		
Food in this restaurant suits my taste	600	MAL	3.80	.926	-1.87	.061
		MAM	3.88	.926		
This restaurant serves better quality food	600	MAL	3.53	.828	-.424	.671
		MAM	3.55	.841		
Presentation of food is also important for me to patronize the restaurant	600	MAL	4.05	.788	3.88	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.94	.763		
This restaurant serves freshly prepared food	600	MAL	3.44	.827	-.946	.345
		MAM	3.46	.877		
Foods are served at the right temperature	600	MAL	3.30	1.009	.949	.343
		MAM	3.25	1.017		
Only serves curry food	600	MAL	3.12	1.274	-13.19	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.81	1.166		
The price of the food is reasonable	600	MAL	3.52	.943	-1.54	.122
		MAM	3.55	.947		
Snack foods are served all day long	600	MAL	3.22	1.318	-23.86	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	4.55	.796		
This restaurant offers a variety of beverages	600	MAL	3.07	1.217	.246	.806
		MAM	3.06	1.179		

Note: 1. Statistically significant differences from the paired sample t-test are indicated in bold.  
2. MAM = Indian Muslim Restaurant; MAL = Malay Restaurant

Respondents clearly reported themselves as somewhat agreeing that Malay restaurants provide more varieties of food (3.84,  $p = .001$ ) compared to Indian Muslim restaurants (3.70) and better presentation of food (4.05,  $p = .000$  against 3.94). This might hold true as Indian Muslim restaurants are seen to be selling dishes confined to curry products rather than more diversity of dishes. This is perhaps best explained by a greater level of agreement related to item 'only serve curries' (3.81,  $p = .000$  for Indian Muslim restaurants compared to 3.12 for Malay restaurants).

With regard to the taste and price of food, respondents somewhat agreed that Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants serve an acceptable flavour of food (3.88 for Indian Muslim

restaurants and 3.80 for Malay restaurant), offer reasonable prices (3.55 against 3.52 ), quality of food (3.55 against 3.53) and freshly prepared foods (3.46 against 3.44) with no statistically significant differences appearing on all mentioned items. With those perceptions, they were also in agreement that both restaurants served food at the right temperature (3.25 for Indian Muslim restaurant against 3.30) and offered a variety of beverages (3.06 against 3.07). Together these suggest that respondents have a common view of Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants with regard to some of the food attributes.

Despite the above scenarios, statistically significant differences appear on the item relating to the availability of snack food, and this is perhaps the most interesting result in this section analysis. Respondents strongly agreed that snack food would always be available in Indian Muslim restaurant 4.55,  $p = .000$ ) than in the Malay restaurants (3.22). In actual fact, Indian Muslim restaurant are seen to offer snack foods all day long compared to most of the Malay restaurants.

The overall result of this section clearly indicates that there is no convincing evidence that the perceptions of respondents' differ, as a very small number of statistically significance differences appeared related to food dimensions. However, there is evidence to support the idea that Indian Muslim restaurant received more customers than the Malay restaurants as they offer all day long snack food.

#### *Differences Attributable to the Service Dimension*

Table 4 reports and compares the mean scores reported by respondents for Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants on service dimension items. All the nine items used were found to have statistically significant differences.

Table 4: Showing mean scores for items in the service dimension reported by respondents for Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants with standard deviation, t-test results and level of significance

Service Dimension	n	Rest	Mean	Std Dev	t-value	Sig 2-tail
This restaurant provides fast service	600	MAL	3.44	1.256	-18.76	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	4.40	.865		
This restaurant provides fast <i>a la carte</i> service	600	MAL	3.41	1.278	-17.73	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	4.35	.858		
Even in the peak period, this restaurant still manages to give fast service to customers	600	MAL	2.97	1.339	-18.33	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.96	1.206		
This restaurant provides consistent service to their customers	600	MAL	3.18	1.352	-14.61	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.92	1.118		
This restaurant provides more friendly service	600	MAL	3.19	1.113	-14.12	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.89	1.055		
This restaurant provides efficient counter and table cashier service	600	MAL	3.35	1.212	-13.09	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.91	1.051		
The employees are very attentive toward you	600	MAL	3.33	1.241	-9.57	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.89	1.175		
This restaurant employs sufficient service staff	600	MAL	3.34	.994	-12.53	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.79	1.054		
When place the order, the staff deliver the food correctly	600	MAL	3.50	1.017	-3.92	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.63	.782		

Note: 1. Statistically significant differences from the paired sample t -test are indicated in bold.

2. MAM = Indian Muslim Restaurant; MAL = Malay Restaurant

Respondents strongly agreed that Indian Muslim restaurant provide fast service (4.40,  $p = .000$  than Malay restaurants 3.44), employ sufficient staff (3.79,  $p = .000$  against 3.34), give fast *a la carte* or cook to order food service (4.35,  $p = .000$  against 3.41). They were more optimistic that Indian Muslim restaurant provides fast service even during the busy period (3.96,  $p = .000$  against 2.97), provide consistent service (3.92,  $p = .000$  against 3.18), giving friendliness of service (3.89,  $p = .000$  against 3.19) and providing efficient counter and table cashier service (3.91,  $p = .000$  against 3.35), produced fewer mistakes in delivering foods to the customers (3.63,  $p = .000$  against 3.50) and having more attentive service employees (3.89,  $p = .000$  against 3.33). This perception might hold true as Indian Muslim restaurant were always seen to be packed with customers either during breakfast, lunch and dinner as opposed to most of the Malay restaurants.

#### *Differences Attributable to the Operating Environment Dimension*

Out of nine items show in Table 5, five items appeared to have statistically significant differences.

**Table 5: Showing mean scores for items in the operating environment dimension reported by respondents for Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants with standard deviation, t-test results and level of significance**

Operating Environment Dimension	n	Rest	Mean	Std Dev	t-value	Sig 2-tail
The concept and setup of this restaurant are more attractive	600	MAL	3.36	1.090	-11.19	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.83	1.070		
This restaurant is well ventilated with a conducive dining environment	600	MAL	3.30	.945	-8.60	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.59	.959		
Bright lit atmosphere attracts customers	600	MAL	3.61	.879	-9.11	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.93	.955		
This restaurant provides entertainment like big screen TV and live football matches	600	MAL	3.27	1.148	-12.32	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.77	1.184		
Clear menu boards help customers to make orders	600	MAL	3.46	.765	-11.305	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.81	.914		
The strategic location of this restaurant makes me dine here	600	MAL	3.64	.834	.433	.665
		MAM	3.63	.826		
This restaurant provides ample parking space	600	MAL	3.88	.856	-.569	.569
		MAM	3.90	.850		
Excellent staff cleanliness and hygiene practice	600	MAL	3.45	.919	1.77	0.77
		MAM	3.40	.941		
The restaurant is easy to access	600	MAL	3.55	.733	-1.13	.256
		MAM	3.57	.745		

Note: 1. Statistically significant differences from the matched paired sample t-test are indicated in bold.  
2. MAM = Indian Muslim Restaurant; MAL = Malay Restaurant

Respondents slightly agreed that Indian Muslim restaurant possessed attractive designs in terms of concept and setup (3.83,  $p = .000$  compared to 3.36 for Malay restaurants), provided better ventilated and conducive dining environments (3.59,  $p = .000$  against 3.30), provide a brighter restaurant atmosphere (3.93,  $p = .000$  against 3.61). With these perceptions, it is not surprising that respondents also agreed that Indian Muslim restaurant were superior in presenting the menu boards (3.81,  $p = .000$  against 3.46), used more entertainment devices like LCD television projectors (3.77,  $p = .000$  against 3.27). Together this point reveals that respondents tend to agree that Indian Muslim restaurant have superior operating environments compared to Malay restaurants. It can also be

contended that Malay restaurant operators probably do not realize the importance of this attribute (operating environment) as a medium of attracting repeat customers.

It also worth bringing to attention that despite no statistically significant differences found on items related to availability of parking space (3.90 for Indian Muslim restaurant compared to 3.88 for Malay restaurants), location (3.63 against 3.64), accessibility of the restaurants (3.57 against 3.55), as well as cleanliness and excellent hygiene practices (3.40 against 3.45), the magnitudes of the mean scores merit further explanation. Similar ratings were given to those items with very small numerical differences (ranging from 0.1 to 0.5 values). This indicates that respondents collectively agreed all those elements were important in attracting them. In addition, respondents feel that both restaurants complied with the regulations especially with regard to cleanliness and hygiene practices.

#### *Differences Attributable to the Human Dimension*

Out of six (6) items used (Table 6), only two were found to have statistically significant differences. Item relating to “accepting customer comment without negative impression” was recorded as being more highly rated for Indian Muslim restaurant (3.81,  $p = .000$  against 3.09 for Malay restaurants. This seems to support the popular belief that it is much easier to give comments or complaints in the Indian Muslim restaurant compared to Malay restaurants. The second emerged on items relating to “this restaurant can be used as a place for discussion” (4.04,  $p = .000$  against 3.36). This difference presumably occurred because respondents may have felt more comfortable meeting friends in the Indian Muslim restaurant as most of the established Indian Muslim restaurant operated in corner lots which provide more space for them.

Table 6: Showing mean scores for items in the human dimension reported by respondents for Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants with standard deviation, t-test results and level of significance

Human Dimension	n	Rest	Mean	Std Dev	t-value	Sig 2-tail
Accepting customer comment without negative impression	600	MAL	3.09	1.057	-16.35	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.81	1.000		
This restaurant can be used as a discussion place	600	MAL	3.36	.864	-16.30	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	4.04	1.055		
Large crowds influence my decision to dine in this restaurant	600	MAL	3.49	.837	-3.28	.743
		MAM	3.50	.845		
This restaurant is suitable for meeting friends	600	MAL	3.95	.997	-.069	.945
		MAM	3.95	.995		
My friends influenced me to patronize this restaurant	600	MAL	3.62	1.074	.232	.817
		MAM	3.61	1.134		
Word of mouth make me patronize this restaurant	600	MAL	3.73	.833	-.907	.365
		MAM	3.75	.858		

Note: 1. Statistically significant differences from the matched sample t -test are indicated in bold.

2. MAM = Indian Muslim Restaurant; MAL = Malay Restaurant

Four items appeared to have no significant difference in this analysis. Respondents agreed that friends also influenced them to patronize the restaurant (3.61 for Indian Muslim restaurant, and 3.62 for Malay restaurants. Similar goes to word of mouth (3.75

against 3.73), large crowds influence their decision to dine in this restaurant (3.50 against 3.49), suitable for meeting friends (3.95 for both restaurant). This result show that despite a few differences, respondents consistently agreed all those factors also moderate their intention to dine at particular restaurants.

### *Differences Attributable to the Intention to Re-patronize*

Five items were used in assessing respondent's intention for repeat patronization. Table 7 reports those items where statistically significant differences between the mean scores of Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants were identified.

**Table 7: Showing mean scores for items in the intention to patronize dimension reported by respondents for Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants with standard deviation, t-test results and level of significance**

Intention to Patronize Dimension	n	Rest	Mean	Std Dev	t-value	Sig 2-tail
I will patronize this restaurant because of the food	600	MAL	4.01	1.059	-16.21	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.09	.981		
Good service makes me patronize this restaurant again	600	MAL	3.18	.932	-13.99	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.96	.995		
Good restaurant ambience makes me come to this restaurant again	600	MAL	3.18	1.188	-10.99	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.92	1.145		
I will go to this restaurant if people around me go there	600	MAL	3.40	.866	-4.28	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	3.61	1.135		
I will always patronize this restaurant	600	MAL	3.28	.989	-12.89	<b>.000</b>
		MAM	4.03	1.168		

- Note: 1. Statistically significant differences from the matched sample t -test are indicated in bold.  
 2. MAM = Indian Muslim Restaurant; MAL = Malay Restaurant

Result shows that majority of customer intention to re-patronize the Malay restaurants (4.01,  $p = 0.00$  was very much influenced by varieties food as compared to Indian Muslim restaurant (3.09). Nevertheless, good overall of food and service (3.96,  $p = 0.00$  against to 3.18 to Malay restaurants) and good restaurant ambience (3.92,  $p = 0.00$  against to 3.18) moderated them to revisit Indian Muslim restaurant and moods for re-patronizing was also moderated by social influences (3.61,  $p = 0.00$  against 3.40). The mean ratings indicated that the Indian Muslim restaurants were probably still the first choice for customers to dine in compared to Malay restaurants.

### Discussions and Implications

From this study it is evident that food attributes are important in moderating customers to dine at a restaurant. This result strengthened the previous related studies. However, a very clear picture emerged that service and other determinants were also significant reasons for customers' propensity to patronize restaurants. On the basis of the main research findings, there is evidence that most of the service elements (efficiency and consistency of service) and other related determinants (comfort, clear menu board, pleasant ambience and entertainment) were better met in Indian Muslim restaurant compared to Malay restaurants. Malay restaurants are perhaps least able to attract more customers at all periods, and consequently this probably will lead to an inability to

increase their business prosperity. This scenario highlights several important points, which should be taken up by Malay restaurant operators.

One of the most apparent finding is that despite providing quite a slow service, there is strong evidence that the majority of customers explicitly perceived that Malay restaurants served more varieties food than did the Indian Muslim restaurant. Malay restaurant operators therefore should not overlook these positive perceptions, but rather concentrating on service and other elements that can attract more customers. This can be done through improving their service by delivering more prompt and efficient service consistently to the customers. This could be achieved by properly training the staff and educating them to be more sensitive on these aspects. Though this kind of approach may add a cost, it would help the staff to better understand the importance of the service elements in a restaurant business operation.

Results also clearly indicate that staff behaviour has a significant impact on customer propensity to dine. When customers believed restaurant staff did everything possible to serve them quickly, their reaction towards the restaurant was much positive. Nevertheless, when customers believed service staff were not doing everything possible, their perception became much more negative. Thus, the way that employees are perceived by the customers is critical and the communication skills of staff serving the customers should be improved. In the context of this study, service staff in most of the Malay restaurants in particular should be trained to recognize customers' verbal and non-verbal indicators of dissatisfaction and be able to transform the dissatisfaction into a form that is innocuous or even positive, such as acknowledgement and apology for any complaint pertaining to service. Such simple acts could go far in maintaining customer satisfaction with the service.

It appears to be generally assumed that time taken by service staff to attend to the customers is always negligible in some of the restaurants. This is related to the attentiveness of service staff towards the customers. In the case of the present study, the attentiveness of service staff in Indian Muslim restaurant is slightly better than most of the Malay restaurants. The restaurant operators therefore should not neglect this element but give more serious thought to it. One of the most urgent ways to reduce this issue is for service staff to be informed and made aware of the potentially positive impact of their actions on the restaurant. Restaurant staff must possess the required skills and knowledge to perform better overall service. Because quality restaurant service depends are heavily on the ability of staff to share their knowledge with the customer.

Regardless of the type of restaurant, what customers believe about a restaurant and how they view a restaurant have the strongest impact on what they will expect. If the customers believe that a particular restaurant is able to meet their needs, their expectations concerning that restaurant will be heightened. Owing to this, their probability of repeat patronization will be increased since presumably there is a direct correlation between expectation and customer dining intention. Because of this impact, managing the image of the restaurant with firm delivery of service will create positive feelings in the customers toward the restaurant.

Providing good food and services will also generate positive word of mouth communication among the customers. Customers who are pleased with the quality of services provided by the restaurant will recommend the restaurant to others. Customers will form a mental image of the restaurant based on information and use that information to influence others. Similarly, if otherwise. Therefore, the restaurant operators should be highly conversant with these matters.

As a conclusion, it is hoped that the recommendations and information flow from this study will facilitate the medium ethnic scale restaurant operators to better understand customer needs. Therefore they can position themselves well and be more competitive in the fast growing restaurant businesses. In fact, a better understanding of the restaurant customers' expectations would also provide restaurant operators with valuable information so they can be more sensitive and effective in operation management techniques and improve customer satisfaction and repeat patronization. Finally, managing customers' needs is becoming an important and critical area as the world economy progressively turns to a service orientation.

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