

Feasting on loyalty: Unpacking the dynamics of customer satisfaction and return patronage intentions in the restaurant industry

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35683/jcm24-007.287>

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Restaurants are increasingly facing the problem of remaining competitive and sustainable, thus calling for the need to understand the drivers of customer return patronage within the industry. The study, therefore, attempted to identify service quality and hygiene factors that can stimulate restaurant customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions through the use of a blended approach. The study results reveal that the successful application of these factors can lead to post-behavioural intentions, such as restaurant attachment, willingness to pay a premium price, return patronage intention, and positive word of mouth promotion.

Design/methodology/approach: Non-probability sampling was adopted to target patrons of restaurants in Bloemfontein, South Africa. These included the Longhorn Grill, New York restaurant, Avanti, Euro Caffe, Braza, Spur, Ocean Basket, Bella Casa, Wimpy and McDonald's. Data were obtained by means of a survey from 300 respondents who frequented the abovementioned establishments and who provided feedback. Proposed hypotheses were tested through structural equation modelling.

Findings: The study sought to predict factors influencing restaurant consumers' satisfaction and behavioural intentions through a blended approach by identifying factors that can help stimulate customer satisfaction, such as service quality and hygiene factors. It was found that reliability and assurance positively and significantly impacted customer satisfaction. However, tangibility, responsiveness and empathy effects did not demonstrate statistical effects.

Recommendations/value: Restaurant owners and managers need to enhance, improve, and provide service quality by ensuring that they excel in all service quality elements (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance).

Managerial implications: Findings imply that restaurant owners and managers need to devise strategies and approaches that will ensure restaurants which are always clean and kept to a standard pleasing to customers to retain customers and keep them satisfied.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction; restaurant attachment; return patronage intention; service quality; willingness to pay price premiums

JEL Classification: M31, D12

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite South Africa's challenging economic conditions, the fast-food and restaurant sector continues to experience steady growth (Marx-Pienaar *et al.*, 2020). A 2017 report by the Franchise Association of South Africa (FASA) indicated that the industry comprised 845 franchisors and over 40,000 franchisees, resulting in an intensely competitive market. By the end of 2018, the sector's total turnover was estimated at R721 billion, reflecting a 3.3% increase from the previous year and contributing 15.7% to South Africa's GDP (Business Tech, 2019). Given the high profitability and intense competition, it is essential for restaurants to differentiate themselves to maintain long-term viability. One of the most effective ways to achieve this is by enhancing service quality, which plays a pivotal role in fostering customer satisfaction and reducing competitive pressures (Kumar & Sharma, 2019; Mhlanga *et al.*, 2015).

The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction has been widely examined in previous studies (Maisya *et al.*, 2019; Padlee *et al.*, 2019; Mensah & Mensah, 2018). Ha and Jang (2012) emphasised that food quality and service excellence significantly influence customer satisfaction and future dining behaviour. Additionally, Almohaimmeed (2017) found that all five dimensions of service quality-tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance-had a notable positive impact on customer satisfaction. In an Indonesian study, Maisya *et al.* (2019) established that superior restaurant service quality leads to higher customer satisfaction and, consequently, greater customer loyalty. Similarly, Padlee *et al.* (2019) investigated the hospitality industry's service quality, customer satisfaction, and

behavioural intentions and concluded that food quality was the most influential factor affecting customer satisfaction.

This study examines how customer satisfaction and post-purchase behavioral intentions-including restaurant attachment, willingness to pay a price premium, positive word of mouth, and repeat patronage intention-are influenced by hygiene-related factors (personal hygiene, cleanliness of equipment and surfaces, and restroom cleanliness) as well as service quality dimensions (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance). Additionally, it explores customers' perceptions of hygiene in tangible elements they encounter during their dining experience, such as restroom cleanliness, table hygiene, cutlery, and staff hygiene practices. The role of hygiene in shaping consumer behaviour and its impact on post-dining intentions has been widely analysed in restaurant studies (Hassan *et al.*, 2020; Iddrisu *et al.*, 2019; & Bachman, 2019).

The subsequent sections of this paper will present the problem statement, literature review, conceptual framework, and hypothesis development. Additionally, the research methodology, study findings, managerial implications, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research will be discussed in detail.

1.1 Problem statement

The increasingly competitive nature of the restaurant industry has placed significant pressure on businesses to maintain profitability and sustainability (Marx-Pienaar *et al.*, 2020). Many restaurants are struggling to retain customers and generate consistent revenue, leading to declining sales and, in some cases, business closures (Business Tech, 2019). For example, ChesaNyama, a popular local grill restaurant, was unable to withstand competitive pressures and was forced to shut down 90% of its outlets nationwide, highlighting the challenges of sustaining operations in such a highly saturated market (Business Tech, 2019). The downsizing or closure of restaurants has far-reaching consequences, not only for business owners but also for employees who lose their livelihoods, contributing to South Africa's high unemployment rate of 34.9% (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Research suggests that unemployment and poverty are closely linked in South Africa, further exacerbating economic challenges (Cloete, 2015). Additionally, the country's GDP has been negatively affected, with Statistics South Africa (2020) reporting a 0.6% decline in GDP growth by the third quarter of 2019, underscoring the broader economic impact of restaurant closures.

Given these challenges, it is imperative for restaurants to adopt strategies that ensure long-term success and customer retention. A critical factor in achieving this is customer satisfaction,

which plays a key role in maintaining restaurant sustainability and fostering repeat business. This study examines the influence of hygiene and service quality on customer satisfaction and post-purchase behaviours, including restaurant attachment, willingness to pay a premium, return patronage intentions, and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Service quality is a fundamental pillar of success in the restaurant industry, and delivering exceptional service can be an effective strategy for building customer loyalty and long-term profitability (Padlee *et al.*, 2019; Almohaimmeed, 2017; Tripathi & Dave, 2016). By understanding how hygiene and service quality contribute to customer satisfaction, restaurant managers can implement targeted improvements to enhance competitiveness, sustainability, and customer retention in an increasingly challenging market environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A search was conducted of academic databases and search engines, and relevant literature was examined to understand the rationale behind selecting restaurants as the research context, to justify the theoretical grounding, and to explore the key variables of the study.

2.1 Research contextualisation

2.1.1 *Rationale and importance of choosing restaurants*

The current study focuses on restaurants in South Africa which primarily engage in providing food services to customers who order, receive their food, and pay for it while seated (Statistics South Africa, 2021). Before the pandemic, South Africa's restaurant business was expected to generate R721 billion in revenue in 2018 (Business Tech, 2019). Murray (2017) found that because of hectic lifestyles and an increasing preference for low-cost cuisine with little to no wait time, the majority of customers frequented restaurants at least once a week. One of Africa's developing economies, South Africa, has also played a significant role in the dramatic increase in the consumption of Western fast food, which will support worldwide expansion (Marx-Pienaar *et al.*, 2020). According to previous studies, South African consumers' patronage increased significantly from 66% in 2009 to over 80% in 2015, reaching 42 million people by 2017–2018 (Marx-Pienaar *et al.*, 2020; Murray, 2017). The fast-food and restaurant industries in South Africa are now expanding significantly, leading to fierce competition that has compelled establishments to come up with innovative ways to satisfy their patrons. Additionally, the post-pandemic era has caused hygiene to become increasingly critical, particularly in the restaurant sector (Kumar *et al.*, 2024; Jeong *et al.*, 2022; Madeira, Palrão & Mendes, 2020). Research indicates that post-pandemic consumers place a higher emphasis on cleanliness, sanitation, and overall hygiene standards when selecting a restaurant (Siddiqi,

et al., 2022; National Restaurant Association, 2021). This study employed a balanced approach to investigate hygiene and service quality as predictors or stimulants of customer satisfaction and post-behavioural intentions. Due to the paucity of research on the combined use of hygiene and service quality as variables that could affect customer satisfaction, the authors anticipated the generation of insightful results by using this blended approach.

2.2 Theoretical foundation

This study is grounded in three theories: the hygiene and sanitation theory, the interpersonal attachment theory and the service quality model (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Perry, 1951; Bowlby, 1969). An overview of these three theories is addressed in the next sections.

2.2.1 Hygiene and sanitation theory

Food-borne illness outbreaks can be caused by inadequate infrastructure, inadequate hygiene expertise, and improper food service establishment procedures (Kibret & Abera, 2012). Thus, the hygiene and sanitation theory emanate from the works of Perry (1951), who developed multiple food handling practices in response to outbreaks of food-borne infections around 1946. He suggested that food industry operators teach hygiene standards and the importance of food handling to all people involved. This was done to ensure that all food establishments have the necessary facilities to meet the criteria and that staff are adequately taught and informed in cleaning techniques. Perry (1951) also suggested the provision of appropriate and sufficient space for food storage, as well as structurally sound buildings with readily cleaned surfaces.

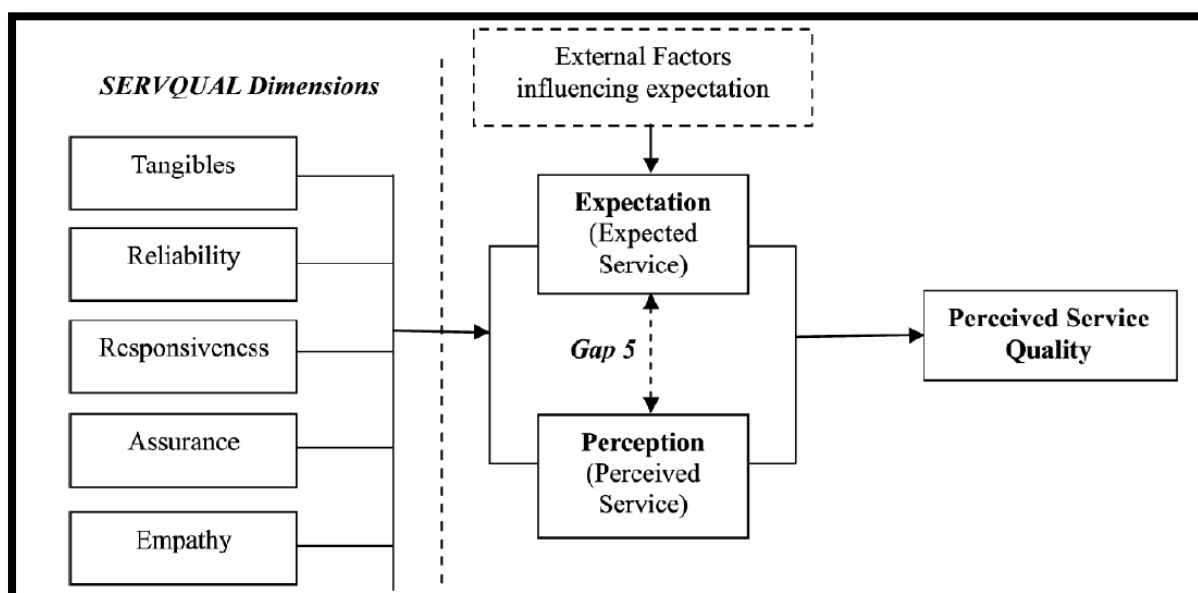
2.2.2 Interpersonal attachment theory

This study is supported by the framework of interpersonal attachment theory in order to provide it with a suitable theoretical foundation and to make its context clear (Bowlby, 1969). John Bowlby, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, developed the theory. According to Bowlby (1969), attachment is a strong and lasting emotional connection that binds a person to another person throughout time and distance. According to Bowlby (1980), attachment is a basic human need that results in an emotional, target-specific interaction between a person and a target. This need in marketing might inspire customers to develop a strong loyalty to a restaurant (Schmalz & Orth, 2012). It follows that if attachment theory is considered, it can help restaurant management fully comprehend what motivates patrons to be happy and loyal to their establishments.

2.2.3 Service quality model

Service quality, according to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), is determined by comparing the expectations of customers with their impressions of the performance of the service. Service quality in the restaurant sector has been defined as the degree of service that staff members and employees deliver, which is based on how customers and staff interact (Petzer & Mackay, 2014). In the end, these human interaction experiences enable patrons to assess the calibre of service provided and establish their general opinion of the restaurant's quality (Petzer & Mackay, 2014).

Figure 1: Servqual model



Source: Parasuraman *et al.* (1988)

The SERVQUAL instrument, which was created by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985), is a research-based list of general expectations that customers have of their service providers. It implies that knowing how customers perceive whether a service meets or surpasses their expectations is crucial to guaranteeing service quality. SERVQUAL was created to quantify the discrepancy between customers' pre-existing expectations of service performance and their post-existing opinions of the service they received. The five dimensions of service quality measured include reliability, security, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman, Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990).

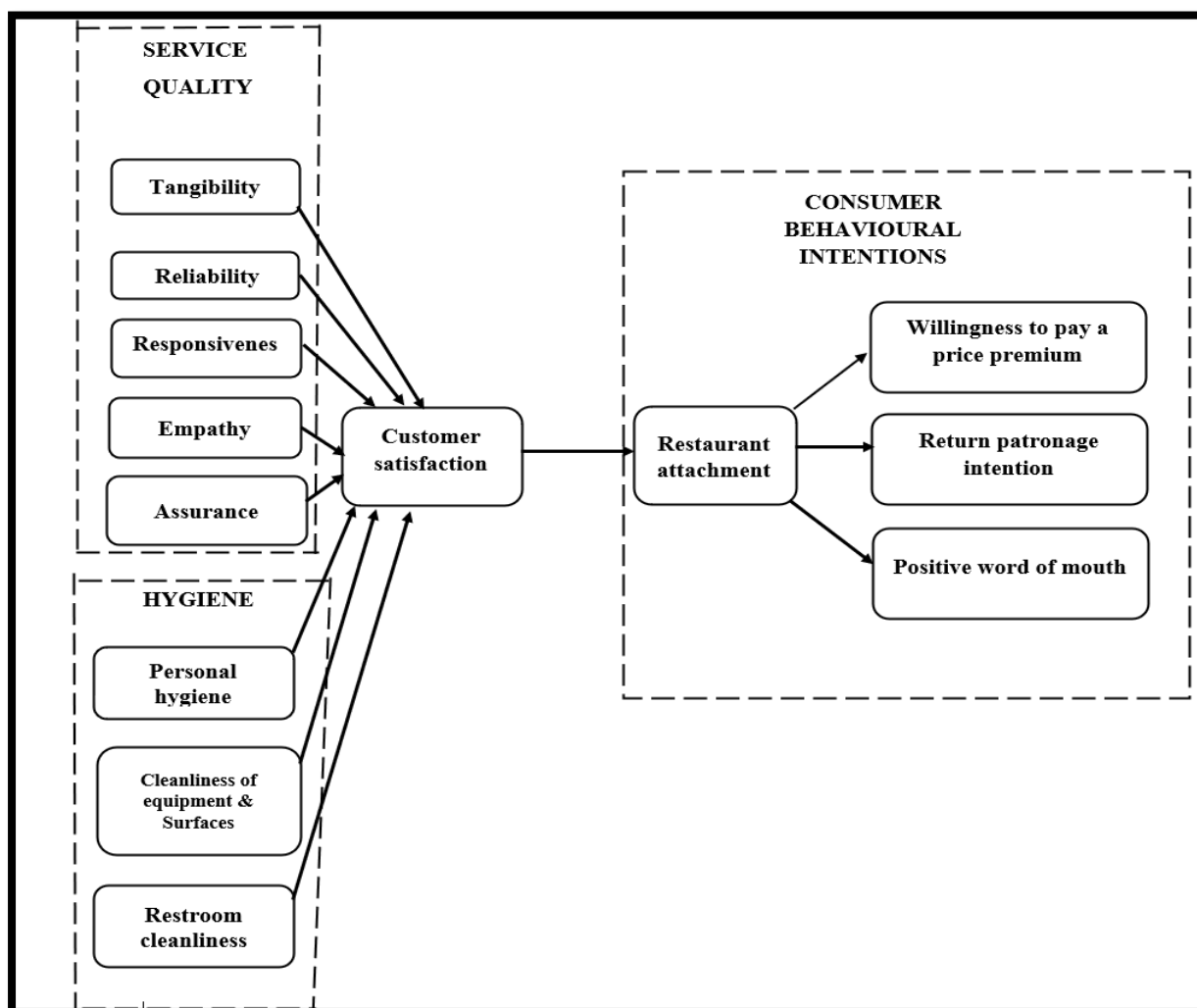
The aforementioned research's explanations make it clear that restaurants can ensure a competitive position in the market and increase customer satisfaction by offering high-quality service. Nonetheless, it is evident that there aren't many studies that have tried to establish a

connection between customer pleasure, hygiene, and service quality. In order to close this information gap, the current study makes a connection between post-behavioural intents, customer satisfaction, hygiene, and service quality. The current study extends the SERVQUAL model to include hygiene factors to obtain more meaningful results.

2.3 Conceptual model and hypotheses formulation

The service quality model, the sanitation and hygiene theory, and the interpersonal attachment theory serve as the foundation for the conceptual framework shown in Figure 2. Figure 2 depicts the conceptual framework that reflects the various pathways and relationships between the constructs being studied, based on these three theories. The hypotheses for the current study are formulated in the following parts.

Figure 2: Conceptual model



2.3.1 Tangibility and customer satisfaction

Panda and Das (2014) define tangibility as the physical aspects of a service that organisations use to enhance external customer satisfaction. Additionally, customers can observe and assess tangible elements of a service without making a purchase (Panda & Das, 2014). Prior studies suggest that customers place significant emphasis on tangibility when evaluating service quality (Eresia-Eke *et al.*, 2020; Ju *et al.*, 2019; Wang & Nicolau, 2017; Priporas *et al.*, 2017; Esmaeilpour *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Nyabundi *et al.* (2021) found a strong correlation between customer satisfaction and tangibility, emphasising that visual, tactile, and sensory cues heavily influence consumers' experiences. Furthermore, Panda and Das (2014) assert that tangible aspects of service delivery significantly impact customer perceptions of quality. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Tangibility has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

2.3.2 Reliability and customer satisfaction

Hoang and Suleri (2021) describe reliability as the consistency and accuracy of service delivery, including elements such as accurate billing, correct food orders, and efficient reservations. Similarly, Omar *et al.* (2016) highlight that a restaurant's commitment to fulfilling customer expectations, such as ensuring precise meal preparation and timely service, is central to its reputation for reliability. A restaurant is considered reliable when it consistently delivers on its service promises, pricing structures, delivery timelines, and customer issue resolution. Several studies emphasize the importance of reliability in influencing customer satisfaction (Aftab *et al.*, 2016; Mmutle & Shonhe, 2017). Customers are more likely to switch service providers if their expectations are not met, making reliability a critical factor in service retention (Eresia-Eke *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, research by Johnson and Karlay (2018) confirms that customers prefer dependable and trustworthy service providers. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H2: Reliability has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

2.3.3 Responsiveness and customer satisfaction

According to Hoang and Suleri (2021), responsiveness is demonstrated through reduced customer wait times and swift responses to inquiries or service requests. Shorter waiting times generally result in higher customer satisfaction levels. The willingness of service providers to accommodate customer needs and provide efficient, timely service is a reflection of their commitment to customer care (Aftab *et al.*, 2016). When restaurant employees exhibit

proactiveness in assisting customers, overall satisfaction improves (Aftab *et al.*, 2016). Studies by Johnson and Karlay (2018) confirm that responsiveness is positively associated with customer satisfaction. Similarly, Nguyen *et al.* (2018) found that in quick-service restaurants, responsiveness was the strongest predictor of customer satisfaction. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Responsiveness has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

2.3.4 Assurance and customer satisfaction

Murad and Ali (2015) highlight that assurance is a key dimension of service quality, significantly influencing customer satisfaction. Assurance refers to the competency, courtesy, and professionalism of service providers, fostering trust and confidence among customers (Aftab *et al.*, 2016). Restaurants that employ knowledgeable, well-trained staff and facilitate secure transactions enhance customer comfort and trust (Alhkami & Alarussi, 2016). Studies by Nguyen *et al.* (2018) and Ali *et al.* (2021) reinforce that assurance plays a critical role in determining customer satisfaction levels. The importance of assurance in the restaurant industry has also been validated in research conducted before and during COVID-19 in Vietnamese restaurants (Hoang & Suleri, 2021). Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Assurance has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

2.3.5 Empathy and customer satisfaction

According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2000), empathy in the restaurant industry is demonstrated when staff recognise customers by name, understand their preferences, and cater to their dietary requirements. Similarly, Toosi and Kohonali (2011) emphasise that service providers must view situations from the customer's perspective to deliver empathetic and personalised service. Murad and Ali (2015) found that empathy is a significant component of service quality and is positively correlated with customer satisfaction. Tripathi and Dave (2016) further identified that empathy, responsiveness, and reliability play key roles in shaping customer satisfaction. Additionally, Gabrow (2021) suggests that customised service offerings, adjusted operating hours, and staff training programs contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction. Consequently, the following hypothesis is presented:

H5: Empathy has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

2.3.6 Personal hygiene and customer satisfaction

Research by Eksoydan (2007) highlights that personal hygiene plays a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction and influences restaurant selection. Factors contributing to customer satisfaction include proper grooming of employees, the use of sterile gloves and hair caps, and expertise in food safety (Voon *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, Liua and Lee (2018) emphasise that employees handling ready-to-eat food should maintain high hygiene standards by wearing clean uniforms, protective gear, gloves, and maintaining well-groomed fingernails to ensure food safety. According to Sembiring *et al.* (2021), personal hygiene extends beyond external cleanliness and encompasses an individual's efforts to maintain physical and mental well-being. A hygienic lifestyle enhances resistance to germs and viruses, thereby reducing the risk of contamination (Sembiring *et al.*, 2021). AlSCO Uniforms (2020) recommends that restaurants implement strict handwashing policies for employees to minimize the spread of contaminants. Other recommended practices include the use of gloves in food handling and covering hair with protective nets to ensure high sanitation standards. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed: *H6: Personal hygiene has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction.*

2.3.7 Cleanliness of equipment and surfaces and customer satisfaction

Cleanliness is widely regarded as one of the most influential factors in how customers assess restaurant quality and determine their level of satisfaction (Yoo, 2012). A lack of cleanliness can be off-putting to customers, with dirty floors, unclean dishes, and unsanitary tableware leading to negative dining experiences (AlSCO Uniforms, 2020). Moreover, improperly sanitised kitchen equipment and dining surfaces can tarnish the restaurant's reputation, further discouraging patronage (AlSCO Uniforms, 2020). Maintaining high hygiene standards in all areas of a restaurant, including food storage conditions, surface sanitation, and equipment maintenance, is critical to ensuring customer satisfaction and safety (Srivastava *et al.*, 2016; Yoo, 2012; Eksoydan, 2007). Studies by Henson, Majowicz, *et al.* (2006) further indicate that the cleanliness of dining areas, kitchens, restrooms, and tableware significantly influences customer perceptions. Additionally, Abubakari *et al.* (2019) highlight that customers consider dining room cleanliness as a major determinant in restaurant retention and satisfaction. Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H7: Cleanliness of equipment and surfaces has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction.

2.3.8 Restroom cleanliness and customer satisfaction

Kim and Bachman (2019) evaluated restroom cleanliness using multiple indicators, including the absence of insects, toilet cleanliness, availability of soap and paper towels, floor sanitation, odour levels, ceiling conditions, and access to hot water. Their findings indicate that restroom cleanliness significantly shapes customer perceptions of a restaurant's overall hygiene standards. Scarcelli (2007) previously reported that over 80% of customers associate an unclean restroom with poor overall restaurant hygiene, making it a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and trust. Furthermore, Barber and Scarcelli (2009) found that patrons who felt comfortable using restaurant restrooms were 25% more likely to dine at the establishment. Their study also established that perceptions of safety and sanitation strongly influence dining experiences. Similarly, Park *et al.* (2016) concluded that sanitation-related factors, including restroom cleanliness, play a significant role in shaping customer satisfaction in full-service restaurants. Additional studies by Kim and Bachman (2019), Yoo (2012), and Barber & Scarcelli (2009) reinforce the idea that lavatory cleanliness is a key determinant of restaurant quality perceptions. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H8: Restroom cleanliness has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction

2.3.9 Customer satisfaction and restaurant attachment

Yaqub *et al.* (2019) define customer satisfaction as the ability of a product or service to meet or exceed consumer expectations. Meanwhile, Park *et al.* (2010) describe attachment as an emotional connection that influences an individual's thoughts, behaviours, and emotions toward an entity. Studies suggest that customers can develop emotional bonds with restaurants like their attachments to people (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2017). According to Scannell and Gifford (2017), restaurant attachment enhances customer enjoyment, quality of life, and overall well-being. Additionally, research by Line, Hanks, and Kim (2018) indicates that higher satisfaction levels result in stronger customer attachment. However, Tripathi and Dave (2016) argue that dissatisfied customers are more likely to share negative feedback, making it crucial for restaurants to consistently meet customer expectations. Customer satisfaction is commonly assessed through post-purchase feedback mechanisms, which gauge whether a service or product has met consumer needs (Razak & Triatmanto, 2016). Given these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H9: Customer satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on restaurant attachment

2.3.10 Restaurant attachment and willingness to pay a price premium

Lim *et al.* (2014) define willingness to pay a price premium as the additional amount a consumer is willing to pay beyond the standard price due to perceived product or service value. Research by Dutta *et al.* (2014) suggests that price premium willingness reflects customer loyalty and demand, as consumers associate higher prices with superior quality (Asamoah, 2014; Diniso & Chuchu, 2017). Jeong and Jang (2011) discovered that customers in fine dining establishments were willing to pay up to 10% more for premium-quality meals. Similarly, Kiatkawsin and Han (2019) found that greater customer engagement and awareness of restaurant quality increased their willingness to pay a price premium. According to Ladhari *et al.* (2008), satisfied and emotionally attached customers tend to pay more, demonstrating brand loyalty. Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H10: Restaurant attachment has a positive and significant impact on willingness to pay a price premium.

2.3.11 Restaurant attachment and return patronage intention

Bae *et al.* (2018) define return patronage intention as the likelihood that a customer will revisit a restaurant for future dining experiences. They emphasise that once a return behaviour pattern is disrupted, it is difficult to restore customer loyalty, making ongoing satisfaction crucial. Tripathi and Dave (2016) argue that a positive dining experience increases the likelihood of return visits and recommendations to others. Furthermore, Park *et al.* (2010) suggest that customers who develop strong attachments to a restaurant tend to view it as part of their identity, leading them to invest more in repeat visits. Studies confirm that satisfied customers are more inclined to return, spend more money, and promote the establishment positively (Bae *et al.*, 2018; Badrinarayanan & Becerra, 2019). Based on these insights, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H11: Restaurant attachment has a positive and significant impact on return patronage intention.

2.3.12 Restaurant attachment and positive word of mouth

Research on place attachment and word-of-mouth behaviour suggests that strong emotional bonds with a business or location encourage customers to share positive recommendations (Line *et al.*, 2018). Consumers who feel emotionally invested in a brand are more likely to recommend it to others (Filieria *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, Tripathi and Dave (2016) and Bae *et al.* (2018) found that satisfied customers are more likely to remain loyal and share positive

experiences, rather than switching to competitors. Mashao *et al.* (2020) further suggest that attachment surpasses mere loyalty, as those with deep emotional ties actively influence others. Based on these findings, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H12: Restaurant attachment has a positive and significant impact on positive word of mouth.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was rooted in an objective ontology within the positivist paradigm, necessitating a quantitative research design to explore causal relationships among variables. The quantitative approach was chosen as it facilitates the precise measurement of consumer behaviour, awareness, perspectives, and preferences (Blumberg *et al.*, 2014). As quantitative research is designed to test existing theories, while qualitative research focuses on theory development (Hackett, 2018), the quantitative approach was considered the most suitable for this study, as it involved hypothesis testing based on prior literature.

The study population comprised restaurant customers in Bloemfontein, specifically those who dined at the following establishments: Longhorn Grill, New York Restaurant, Avanti, Euro Caffe, Braza, Spur, Ocean Basket, Bella Casa, Wimpy, and McDonald's. Due to the absence of a structured customer database in South Africa's restaurant industry, a sampling frame was unavailable. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Petzer and Mackay (2014) and Mashao *et al.* (2020), confirm this lack of an existing customer list within the South African restaurant sector. Given this limitation, the historical evidence approach was applied to determine the sample size, following the methodology suggested by Zikmund *et al.* (2010). A sample size of 300 respondents was deemed sufficient, aligning with prior research on consumer behaviour in restaurant settings (Anyasor & Njelita, 2020; Murwira *et al.*, 2015).

Given the lack of a defined sampling frame, this study employed a non-probability convenience sampling method. As stated by Saunders and Townsend (2018), convenience sampling involves selecting participants based on their easy accessibility to the researcher. The research focused on restaurant patrons from Longhorn Grill, New York Restaurant, Avanti, Braza, Euro Caffe, Ocean Basket, Spur, Bella Casa, Nando's, and McDonald's.

Data was collected through self-administered online surveys, facilitated by Schadré Consulting, a recognised research firm in South Africa known for its strong track record in supporting high-quality research practices. The surveys were distributed to a convenience-based sample of restaurant customers in Bloemfontein via online channels.

3.1 Measuring instrument

The measurement instrument used in this study was structured into eight sections, with seven sections dedicated to assessing specific research constructs. Section A focused on gathering demographic information about the respondents. Sections B through N comprised questions evaluating key research variables, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, personal hygiene, cleanliness of equipment and surfaces, restroom cleanliness, customer satisfaction, restaurant attachment, willingness to pay a price premium, positive word of mouth, and return patronage intention. To assess participant responses, a five-point Likert scale was employed, with responses ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral (Neither Agree nor Disagree), 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. The selection of outcome constructs-willingness to pay a price premium, return patronage intention, and positive word of mouth (WoM)-was driven by their direct relevance to key performance indicators in the restaurant industry, making them more appropriate than alternative measures.

3.2 Statistical techniques assumptions

Assumptions related to multicollinearity were tested using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) to ensure predictor variables were not highly correlated. For structural model assessment and hypothesis testing, through applied Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to evaluate relationships between constructs. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, ensuring that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeded inter-construct correlations. Reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), ensuring internal consistency of the measurement model. These steps validated the robustness of my analysis and the soundness of my assumptions.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study's findings with Table 1 providing reliability and validity measures.

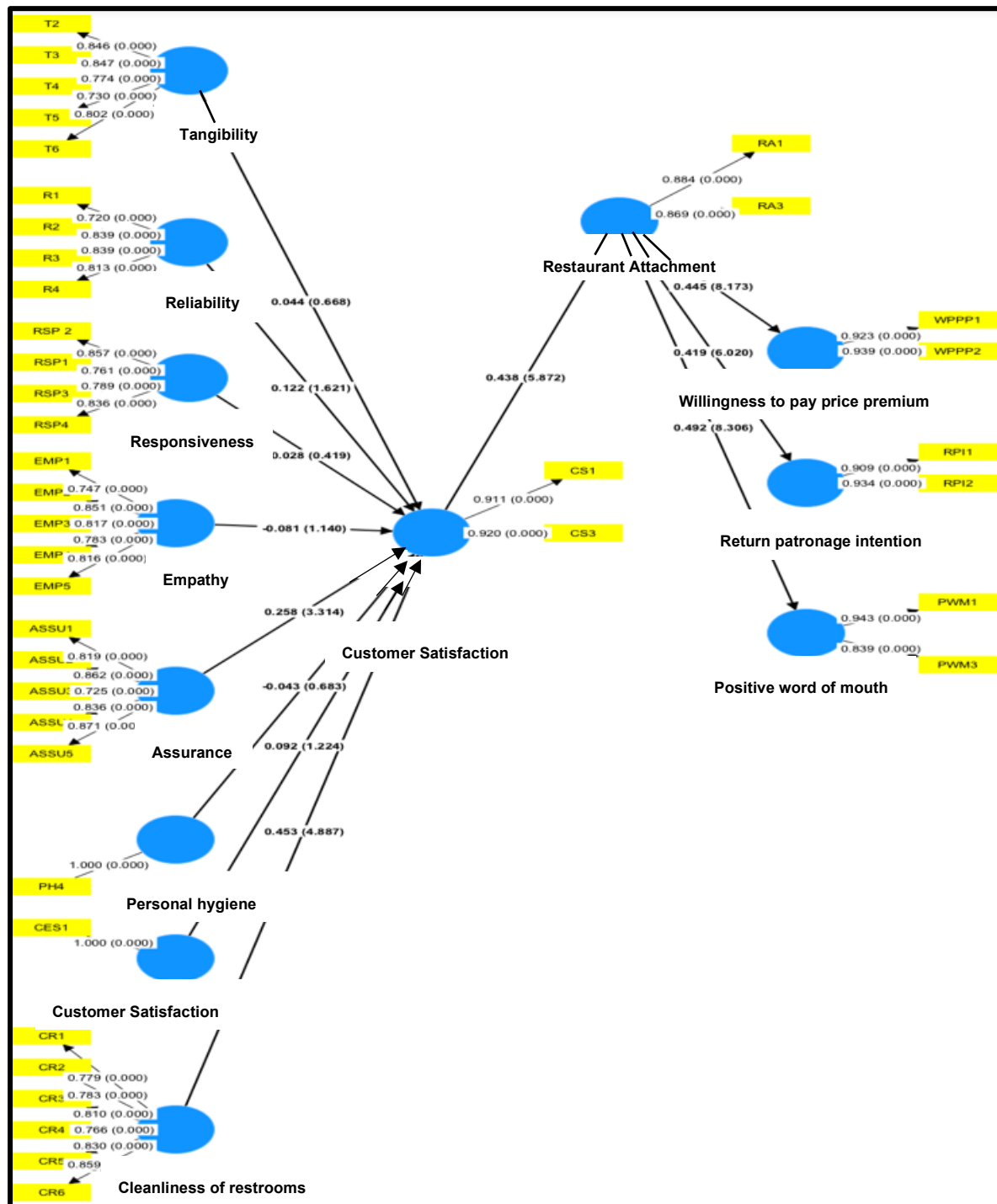
Table 1: Reliability and validity measures

Tangibility	(α =0.886, CR=0.866, AVE=0.756)
Reliability	(α =0.817, CR=0.828, AVE=0.647)
Responsiveness	(α =0.827, CR=0.842, AVE=0.658)

Empathy	(α =0.862, CR=0.864, AVE=0.645)
Assurance	(α =0.881, CR=0.892, AVE=0.679)
Personal hygiene	(α =0.900 , CR =0.914 , AVE=0.770)
Cleanliness of equipment and surfaces	(α =0.910 , CR=0.910, AVE=0.847)
Cleanliness of restrooms	(α =0.891, CR=0.897, AVE=0.648)
Customer satisfaction	(α =0.927, CR=0.929, AVE=0.775)
Restaurant attachment	(α =0.923, CR=0.924, AVE=0.727)
Willingness to pay a price premium	(α =0.908, CR=0.912, AVE=0.744)
Furthermore, return patronage intention	(α =0.896, CR=0.909, AVE=0.828)

It is observed that the Cronbach's alpha (α) was above 0.7, the Composite Reliability (CR) above 0.6 and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) above 0.5 as required. The path model showing the hypotheses and outcomes is presented in the following section in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Path model



The first hypothesis posits that tangibility has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction. However, the findings of this study do not support this hypothesis. While tangibility exhibited a positive impact ($\beta = 0.044$), the effect was not statistically significant ($t = 0.668$). This indicates that while the physical environment of the restaurant, including décor, cleanliness, and ambience, may contribute slightly to customer satisfaction, it does not play a pivotal role in shaping overall satisfaction. These findings contrast with the results of Nyabundi *et al.* (2021), who identified a notable correlation between tangibility and customer satisfaction. This discrepancy suggests that other variables, such as service quality, food standards, or pricing fairness, may exert a stronger influence on customer contentment. Consequently, restaurant managers should not prioritise tangible aspects alone but should instead adopt a holistic approach that integrates multiple service quality dimensions to optimise customer satisfaction.

The second hypothesis asserts that reliability has a significant and positive effect on customer satisfaction. Findings indicate that reliability positively influences satisfaction ($\beta = 0.122$) and is statistically significant ($t = 1.621$). This suggests that a restaurant's ability to deliver consistent, dependable, and accurate service contributes positively to customer satisfaction. However, while the relationship is statistically positive, its strength does not meet conventional significance thresholds. This implies that although customers appreciate reliability, it may not be the defining factor in their overall satisfaction. These findings align with Johnson and Karlay (2018), who also reported a positive association between reliability and customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, the lack of statistical significance in this study suggests that attributes like food quality, staff responsiveness, or assurance may exert greater influence on satisfaction levels in this context. As such, restaurant managers should not rely solely on reliability but instead adopt a broader strategy to enhance service quality.

The third hypothesis proposes that responsiveness significantly enhances customer satisfaction. Study results show that responsiveness exerts a minor positive impact ($\beta = 0.028$), but this effect is not statistically significant ($t = 0.419$). This suggests that prompt and efficient service delivery alone does not guarantee an increase in customer satisfaction. Although customers may value attentive and swift responses from staff, responsiveness does not play a decisive role in their overall dining experience. These findings indicate that other dimensions of service quality-such as food excellence, ambience, or reliability have a stronger influence on satisfaction. This implies that while responsiveness is important, it should be part of a broader service enhancement strategy rather than the primary focus for customer satisfaction improvement.

The fourth hypothesis suggests that assurance has a significant and positive impact on customer satisfaction. Study findings confirm this hypothesis, as assurance demonstrates a notable positive effect ($\beta = 0.258$) and is statistically significant ($t = 3.314$). This indicates that the trust and confidence customers place in restaurant services, staff professionalism, and secure transactions strongly influence their overall satisfaction. Customers feel more satisfied when they interact with knowledgeable and courteous staff in a secure dining environment. These results support previous research by Aftab *et al.* (2016) and Nguyen *et al.* (2018), which emphasised assurance as a key driver of customer satisfaction. Consequently, restaurant managers should focus on staff training, customer trust-building, and professional service delivery to strengthen assurance-related service attributes and enhance customer satisfaction.

The fifth hypothesis proposes that empathy has a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction. However, study results contradict this assumption. Empathy exhibits a negative effect ($\beta = -0.081$) and does not reach statistical significance ($t = 1.140$). This suggests that personalised attention and care from staff may not necessarily enhance customer satisfaction in this particular context. In fact, the negative coefficient suggests that increased empathy may slightly reduce satisfaction, although this effect is not statistically significant. This contradicts findings from Alhkami and Alarussi (2016), who reported a positive correlation between empathy and customer satisfaction. This discrepancy implies that factors such as cultural variations, customer expectations, or the restaurant's unique setting may shape how empathy is perceived. As a result, restaurant managers should adopt a balanced approach rather than assuming that enhancing empathy alone will improve customer satisfaction.

The sixth hypothesis examines whether personal hygiene has a significant and positive impact on customer satisfaction. Findings suggest otherwise, as personal hygiene has a negative influence ($\beta = -0.043$) and is not statistically significant ($t = 0.683$). This implies that the cleanliness and grooming of restaurant staff do not significantly affect customer satisfaction. While hygiene is undoubtedly crucial for health and regulatory compliance, customers in this study may view personal hygiene as an expected standard rather than a satisfaction-enhancing factor. Other elements, such as food quality, service efficiency, or ambience, may exert a stronger influence on satisfaction. This suggests that while hygiene remains essential, restaurant managers should focus on broader service quality improvements.

The seventh hypothesis posits that the cleanliness of equipment and surfaces significantly enhances customer satisfaction. However, study results do not support this assumption. While

cleanliness of equipment and surfaces has a minor positive impact ($\beta = 0.092$), it is not statistically significant ($t = 1.224$). This indicates that although customers appreciate a clean dining environment, it does not directly contribute to a significant increase in satisfaction levels. Cleanliness appears to be an expected standard rather than a differentiating factor in the dining experience. Instead, factors such as food quality, customer service, and ambience may be more influential in shaping satisfaction.

The eighth hypothesis examines whether restroom cleanliness significantly influences customer satisfaction, and findings confirm this assumption. Restroom cleanliness has a notable positive effect ($\beta = 0.453$) and is statistically significant ($t = 4.887$). This suggests that maintaining clean restrooms is crucial in shaping customer satisfaction and fostering emotional attachment to the restaurant. These results align with Kim and Bachman (2019), who highlighted the importance of hygiene in overlooked areas like restrooms. Clean restrooms contribute to higher satisfaction and customer retention, reinforcing the need for restaurant managers to prioritise hygiene across all facilities. The ninth hypothesis asserts that customer satisfaction significantly impacts restaurant attachment. This hypothesis is supported, as customer satisfaction exerts a positive influence ($\beta = 0.438$) and is statistically significant ($t = 5.872$). These findings align with Bahri-Ammari *et al.* (2016), who emphasised that customer satisfaction fosters emotional bonds with a restaurant. The tenth hypothesis suggests that restaurant attachment positively affects customers' willingness to pay a price premium. This is confirmed by study results, which indicate a strong positive effect ($\beta = 0.445$, $t = 8.173$). Customers with a strong emotional connection to a restaurant perceive its offerings as more valuable, making them willing to pay higher prices. This supports the brand loyalty concept, where consumers prioritise emotional attachment over price considerations.

The eleventh hypothesis proposes that restaurant attachment significantly influences return patronage intention. This study validates the hypothesis, as attachment has a strong positive effect ($\beta = 0.419$, $t = 6.020$). Findings align with Maziriri *et al.* (2019), confirming that emotionally attached customers are more likely to return. The twelfth hypothesis states that restaurant attachment enhances positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This hypothesis is supported, with results showing a significant positive influence ($\beta = 0.492$, $t = 8.306$). Findings align with Bae *et al.* (2018), reinforcing the notion that attached customers actively promote their favourite restaurants through positive referrals.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for restaurant managers and policymakers within the food service industry. One key takeaway is that while tangibility positively influences customer satisfaction, it is not a sufficiently strong factor to drive significant levels of satisfaction on its own. This suggests that, although customers appreciate elements such as the restaurant's ambience, furniture, and physical appearance, these factors alone do not lead to higher satisfaction levels. Therefore, restaurant managers should ensure that tangible elements are well-maintained but should not overly prioritise them at the expense of other factors that have a more direct impact on customer satisfaction. Future research could explore which specific tangible aspects (e.g., décor, lighting, seating comfort) contribute most to the overall dining experience and whether this varies across different types of restaurants.

Reliability emerged as a significant predictor of customer satisfaction, emphasising the need for restaurants to maintain consistency in service delivery. Customers place considerable importance on receiving accurate orders, correct billing, and dependable reservation systems. Restaurant managers should focus on employee training programmes that reinforce these aspects, ensuring reliable service across all customer interactions. Policymakers in the hospitality industry may consider setting standardised service quality metrics to help restaurants benchmark their reliability performance. Future research could explore the relative importance of different reliability factors and whether customer expectations of reliability vary depending on dining frequency or restaurant category.

The findings on responsiveness suggest that, while customers value quick and helpful service, it is seen more as a basic expectation rather than a factor that enhances satisfaction. This implies that failing to provide responsive service could lead to dissatisfaction, but exceeding expectations in this area does not necessarily lead to greater satisfaction. Managers should ensure that employees are adequately trained in customer interaction, but may need to focus on other aspects, such as food quality and personalised service, to improve overall satisfaction. Future research could investigate whether responsiveness has a greater impact on satisfaction in different service contexts, such as fine dining versus fast food establishments.

Similarly, empathy was found to have no significant effect on customer satisfaction. This may suggest that customers consider care and attention from employees as a standard part of service, rather than an added benefit. Despite the lack of a significant relationship, restaurants should still prioritise personalised service to avoid dissatisfaction. Managers could implement

customer relationship management (CRM) tools to track customer preferences and enhance their personalised experience. Future research could explore whether empathy plays a more significant role in service recovery situations, where customers experience issues during their dining experience.

Interestingly, personal hygiene and cleanliness of equipment and surfaces did not significantly impact customer satisfaction. This suggests that customers regard hygiene and cleanliness as essential requirements rather than factors that contribute to their satisfaction. However, failure to maintain hygiene could result in dissatisfaction or negative reviews. Restaurant managers should continue to uphold high hygiene standards, but may not need to emphasise this aspect in their marketing efforts. Future research could investigate whether these findings differ across different cultural contexts, where perceptions of hygiene may vary.

In a nutshell, these findings highlight that while certain dimensions of service quality are essential, they do not all contribute equally to customer satisfaction. Restaurant managers should prioritise reliability and assurance while ensuring that responsiveness, empathy, hygiene, and cleanliness are maintained as baseline expectations. Policymakers could develop industry guidelines that help restaurants focus on the most impactful areas. Future research should explore variations in these relationships across different demographics, restaurant formats, and cultural settings to develop more tailored strategies for enhancing customer satisfaction.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study's contribution is structured into two categories: the theoretical contribution and the practical or managerial contribution.

6.1 Theoretical contribution

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on customer satisfaction within the restaurant industry by providing empirical evidence on the relative impact of various service quality dimensions. Through examining factors such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, hygiene, and cleanliness, the study expands theoretical perspectives on service quality models and their applicability in different consumer settings. The findings challenge prior assumptions by demonstrating that certain factors, such as hygiene and empathy, may not significantly contribute to customer satisfaction, suggesting a need to revisit established service quality frameworks. Additionally, this research reinforces the importance of reliability and assurance in driving customer satisfaction, further validating theoretical models like SERVQUAL in the restaurant sector. Future studies may build upon these insights

by exploring variations across cultural contexts, customer demographics, and dining environments.

6.2 Practical contribution

Viewing from a practical standpoint, the findings of this study provide valuable guidance for restaurant managers and policymakers aiming to enhance customer satisfaction. The results emphasise that while physical aspects of a restaurant contribute positively to the customer experience, they are not the sole determinants of satisfaction. This underscores the need for restaurant managers to focus on service reliability, staff competence, and customer trust-building efforts rather than solely investing in aesthetics and ambience. Moreover, the study suggests that hygiene and cleanliness, while essential, are perceived as basic service requirements rather than satisfaction enhancers. Therefore, managers should prioritise holistic service quality improvements, including staff training, personalised service strategies, and consistency in service delivery. Additionally, policymakers in the hospitality sector may use these findings to develop industry benchmarks for service excellence, ensuring that businesses align with consumer expectations and best practices.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights that can be leveraged for marketing strategies and service improvement within the restaurant industry. Based on the literature review and empirical findings, several key recommendations emerge:

From a management standpoint, restaurant owners and operators must continuously enhance service quality by excelling in all core dimensions of service delivery-tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance. The results indicate that reliability and assurance exert a significant and positive influence on customer satisfaction, reinforcing their importance in service quality management. While tangibility and responsiveness also showed positive effects, they did not reach statistical significance. However, a comprehensive approach that integrates all five dimensions can substantially enhance overall service quality, leading to greater customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Additionally, the study confirms that restroom cleanliness has a statistically significant impact on customer satisfaction. This highlights the need for restaurant managers to implement robust hygiene strategies that ensure restrooms are well-maintained, consistently cleaned, and meet high sanitation standards. Given that customers place high value on restroom cleanliness, maintaining impeccable hygiene in these areas is crucial for customer retention and satisfaction.

Furthermore, restaurant managers should focus on strategies that directly improve customer satisfaction, as the findings demonstrate its strong and positive influence on restaurant attachment. This underscores the necessity of meeting or exceeding customer expectations to cultivate long-term emotional connections with the restaurant. The results suggest that higher customer satisfaction leads to greater attachment, reinforcing the importance of delivering high-quality service and maintaining hygienic conditions. Since restaurant attachment plays a critical role in customer loyalty and repeat patronage, ensuring a consistently excellent dining experience will be instrumental in strengthening customer relationships and enhancing business success.

7.1 Limitations of the study and future research directions

While this study yielded valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations, which, in turn, open opportunities for future research. One of the most evident limitations is that the study focused exclusively on restaurant customers in Bloemfontein, within the Free State province of South Africa. This geographical restriction limits the generalisability of the findings to the broader South African restaurant industry. Expanding future research to other regions in South Africa would provide a more comprehensive understanding of customer satisfaction trends and post-behavioural intentions across diverse restaurant markets. Additionally, this study serves as a foundation for future research in the fields of business management and marketing, particularly concerning customer satisfaction and behavioural outcomes. However, the study was limited to the restaurant sector, leaving room for future exploration in other industries, such as hospitality, retail, or healthcare, where service quality and customer experience play an equally critical role.

Another notable limitation is the use of a non-probability convenience sampling method, which, while practical, reduces the ability to generalise findings beyond the sampled group of restaurant customers. As such, future research could adopt probability-based sampling techniques to enhance representativeness. Moreover, data collection relied on a single method, which may have introduced bias or limited the scope of customer insights. Incorporating mixed-method approaches, such as qualitative interviews or longitudinal studies, could provide deeper perspectives on customer satisfaction determinants over time.

The study's findings also present intriguing research opportunities, particularly regarding the unexpected rejection of tangibility as a significant predictor of customer satisfaction. Given that tangibility has traditionally been considered a key driver of service quality, further research is needed to understand why it failed to hold significance in this context. Similarly, while personal hygiene and cleanliness of equipment and surfaces were not found to be significant

predictors, restroom cleanliness showed a strong positive influence. Future studies could investigate which specific hygiene factors matter most to customers and whether their preferences vary across different restaurant types, such as fast-food establishments versus fine dining venues.

From a policy perspective, several recommendations emerge from the findings. Firstly, standardised service quality guidelines should be developed to establish clear benchmarks for reliability, responsiveness, and assurance in the restaurant industry. Since reliability and assurance were identified as key contributors to customer satisfaction, policymakers could introduce industry-wide certifications or regulations that ensure restaurants adhere to minimum service quality standards. Moreover, the concept of attachment, which significantly influences customer loyalty and behavioural intentions, could be explored beyond the restaurant industry. Policymakers could encourage its application in other sectors, such as tourism and healthcare, where emotional connections with service providers play a pivotal role in retention and advocacy. Through recognising the broader impact of attachment, businesses across various industries could enhance customer engagement strategies to drive long-term loyalty and positive word-of-mouth referrals.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of the article.

Data availability: Data that support the findings of this research are available upon request from the main author, Ms. Mathapelo Mafojane.

Ethical clearance and informed consent statement: Ethical approval was obtained from the University of the Free State's General and Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: UFS-HSD2022/0346/22). Consent was obtained from human participants before data could be collected, which included maintenance of confidentiality and data collection, storage and disposal.

Funding: The authors did not receive any financial support for research, authorship and publication of the article.

Prior publication: This article represents a substantial reworking (more than 50%) of Mathapelo Mafojane, Masters dissertation, which is submitted, entitled 'Factors Influencing the Satisfaction and Behavioural intentions of Restaurant Consumers', at the Department of Business Management, Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, University of the Free State, with Professor Eugene Tafadzwa Maziriri (supervisor) and Dr Tarisai Fritz Rukuni (co-supervisor). <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/items/83b70198-9214-4ef3-9efb-9b8187eee3e1>

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