

Investigating the Strategies Employed by Fast-Food Restaurant to Establish Sustainable Customer Relationships

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ABSTRACT

McDonald's Corporation, established in 1940, is an American multinational fast-food chain. Over the years, McDonald's has successfully expanded their business operation worldwide. The customer plays a vital role in the success of a business. The strategies and abilities to retain a customer will determine the survival of a business. Hence, this study aims to investigate the strategies employed by McDonald's to foster long-term customer relationships by examining various factors, including food quality, service quality, atmosphere, price, brand, and customer relationships. To explore, primary and secondary data collection was conducted through several sources, and a digital questionnaire was produced to collect data and information from 150 respondents. The results found that only atmosphere and brand had a significant positive impact on customer relationships. The study found that atmosphere has the strongest influence, followed by brand. This suggests that while food quality, service quality, and price are important, creating a pleasant atmosphere and fostering a strong brand are even more critical for McDonald's to build lasting customer relationships.

Keywords: Business Sustainability; Brand Image; Customer Relationship; Fast-Food Restaurant; Restaurant Atmosphere

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, change is accelerating, driven by many factors. These include the constant emergence of new technologies, the rapid growth of urban populations, particularly in developing regions, and the resulting expansion of urban areas. These trends significantly impact the daily lives of people around the globe. For instance, the widespread practice of taking coffee breaks and consuming beverages at cafes such as Starbucks has become a habitual aspect of many people's morning routines, as it is more efficient and convenient than preparing drinks at home. A similar trend can be observed concerning food consumption. A significant segment of the population prefers not to waste time on cooking and associated activities. As such, people often optimize their time by outsourcing tasks such as meal preparation to traditional restaurants and cafés. Since the 1960s, this trend has resulted in various new options to eat out and the development of the food & beverage industry, rapid service restaurants.

McDonald's has been at the forefront of the fast-food industry for several decades. The company was established in 1948 by two brothers, Dick, and Mac McDonald, who introduced the Speedee Service System, which revolutionized the industry. In 1961, entrepreneur Ray Kroc acquired the chain, and in 1967 the company expanded into international markets. Today, McDonald's is the world's largest fast-food supplier in the number of restaurants. It boasts over 40,000 restaurants worldwide, owned and franchised, serving an estimated 69 million customers daily. This equates to a staggering 25,185 million customers annually. McDonald's has a presence in more than 100 countries, making it one of the largest transnational corporations in the world (Gereffi & Christian, 2009).

However, McDonald's faces excellent international competition, which makes it necessary to develop both the marketing and service. According to the American Customer Satisfaction Index and its evaluation of leading quick service restaurant chains in the United States, McDonald's ranks below such important market players as KFC, Burger King, Taco Bell, Domino's Pizza, and others (Statista Research Department, 2024). It shows that even giant corporations like McDonald's face unprecedented challenges in attracting customers and maintaining sustainable relationships with them; therefore, development is becoming increasingly complicated. That necessitates the review of the marketing style and performance of McDonald's, the case company of this research, so that it can keep up with competitors and outperform them.

Considering the above-described fact that McDonald's is already a transnational company with a significant number of customers and is well-known all around the globe, the issue of customer retention is crucial. So, the primary purpose of this research is to investigate the strategies employed by McDonald's to establish sustainable customer relationships and to give advice on the development of the company's approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Quality

According to Hidayat in Arif and Syahputri (2021), quality describes a product's ability to meet both stated and unstated customer needs. This definition applies directly to food quality, which encompasses various aspects. Nutritional value (calories, protein, vitamins, etc.) plays a crucial role in ensuring the food provides essential elements for the body. Taste and freshness are equally important, impacting consumer enjoyment. Business aspects like quality standards and criteria ensure consistent product delivery (Castka, 2020).

Food quality is influenced by numerous factors. Food safety is paramount, requiring measures to guarantee the food is free of harmful contaminants and safe for consumption. This involves controlling biological, chemical, and physical hazards throughout the production process (Panghal et al., 2018).

Ethical considerations also play a role in food quality (Fourat et al., 2020). Production that respects workers' rights, avoids animal cruelty and considers diverse religious and cultural dietary restrictions contributes to a positive perception of quality. The aesthetic factor, encompassing appearance, color, texture, packaging, branding, and presentation, also impacts consumers' food perception (Wu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022).

Beyond these core elements, additional factors influence food quality. Convenience, the ease of preparation and consumption, is increasingly valued (Drewnowski & Monsivais, 2020; Raimundo et al., 2020). Authenticity, the perception that food reflects its origin or traditional practices, resonates with some consumers (Chen et al., 2020; Chousou & Mattas, 2021). Sensory elements, such as aroma, mouthfeel, and sound, contribute to the overall dining experience (Liu et al., 2022; Spence, 2022). Finally, the origin of the food, whether local, regional, or international, can influence purchasing decisions (Dangerfield et al., 2021; Bukhari et al., 2022; Dudziak et al., 2023).

Food quality can be considered one of the most essential factors in customer satisfaction and maintaining sustainable relationships. McDonald's is committed to providing clients with high-quality products in compliance with international and national standards. The extent of customers' satisfaction with McDonald's food quality is investigated and provided in the following parts of the paperwork. The hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H1: Food quality is positively related to sustainable customer relationships.

Service Quality

A company is required to perform the best quality of service in order to survive and be able to trust customers. Service quality increases customer satisfaction (Tendur et al., 2021) so that relationships with customers are harmoniously established such as customer loyalty and forming word-of-mouth recommendations that can benefit the company.

Service quality is a cornerstone of customer satisfaction. It goes beyond the simple delivery of a product or service and encompasses the entire customer experience. Customers expect service providers to be friendly, professional, responsive, attentive, and knowledgeable about their offerings. Traditionally, service quality evaluations focused on three key areas: the physical environment, personal interaction with staff, and the core service or product itself (Hussain & Ekiz, 2009).

For a deeper understanding, there are five key dimensions of service quality which were proposed by Parasuraman et al. in Ponnaiyan et al., 2021 and Song et al., 2022: (1) Tangibles: This refers to the physical aspects that customers encounter during their service experience. This includes the cleanliness and condition of facilities, the quality of equipment used, and the overall appearance of the staff. All these elements contribute to a customer's perception of the service; (2) Responsiveness: This dimension focuses on the organization's ability to react promptly and efficiently to customer needs and requests. Short waiting times and staff who are readily available to address inquiries are hallmarks of responsiveness; (3) Assurance: Customers value the confidence that a service provider will deliver reliably and competently. Factors like staff expertise, service reliability, and providing accurate information all contribute to a sense of assurance; (4)

Empathy: Understanding and responding to customer feelings, needs, and expectations are crucial aspects of empathy. This involves an empathetic attitude and effective communication skills on the part of service providers; and (5) Reliability: it reflects a company's ability to consistently deliver its services dependably, ensuring customers receive the same level of service every time they interact. This consistency applies across all touchpoints, regardless of location or the specific staff member encountered. In the context of service quality, reliability translates to meeting customer expectations accurately and on time. A reliable restaurant consistently delivers orders correctly and within the promised wait times. This consistent service delivery fosters trust and confidence. By measuring and focusing on these five dimensions, organizations can create a more positive service experience, leading to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and a competitive advantage.

McDonald's success story exemplifies how continuous improvement in service quality through innovation and technology can significantly benefit customer perception. While not directly mentioned in the framework, this approach aligns with the overall emphasis on responsiveness and meeting customer needs effectively.

Good service quality often results in satisfied customers who become loyal customers and can even become good news carriers who promote the business or organization to others. Therefore, many organizations strive to continuously improve their service quality in order to achieve a competitive advantage and build strong relationships with customers. The hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H2: Service quality is positively related to sustainable customer relationships.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere in the restaurant environment must create a positive atmosphere that plays an important role in maintaining customer satisfaction, as well as maintaining the quality and reputation of the restaurant business. A well-created atmosphere will give a positive impression or impression to customers which can increase customer loyalty to the business (Ali et al., 2021). A comfortable environment and friendly service can provide a sense of comfort to customers so they can enjoy in peace without unnecessary distractions. This can also be supported by promotion through positive reviews on various online review platforms which can help improve the reputation of the restaurant business. This includes the restaurant's physical environment, ambiance, cleanliness, décor, music, lighting, and noise level. Customers expect the atmosphere to be comfortable, pleasant, hygienic, and suitable for their dining purposes and mood. As Kotler (in Ariffin et al., 2017) suggests, the restaurant atmosphere is more than just the physical space. It is a meticulously crafted experience designed to evoke specific emotions in customers, ultimately influencing their purchasing decisions. This goes beyond simply offering a place to sit and eat. It is about creating an ambiance that resonates with the target audience and subtly encourages them to spend more. Ultimately, creating a positive and memorable atmosphere fosters an emotional connection with customers. When customers associate a restaurant with a pleasant and enjoyable atmosphere, they are more likely to return and recommend it to others.

Providing a comfortable atmosphere to customers can invoke positive emotions leading to customer satisfaction. The positive emotion combined with a delicious meal will create a powerful memory for the customer. This strong memory will remind customers of the positive emotion of creating good customer relationships. All of these efforts must run consistently in order to maintain customer trust and be able to attract many new customers. The consistency of the atmosphere in the restaurant environment is also able to maintain the brand reputation of the restaurant (Steven & Tunjungsari, 2023).

The restaurant business should be able to build long-term brand loyalty. In the business world, understanding how ambience can affect customer memory and behavior is invaluable. It is fundamental in marketing strategy and brand management. Ensuring that the cozy atmosphere in restaurants is consistently maintained can help maintain and expand market share, increase customer loyalty, and support business growth. To conclude, "Positive Memory" is an important factor in the long-term effects of a good restaurant ambience. It involves complex neurological and psychological aspects where a comfortable ambience creates a feeling of pleasure, influences memory processes, and affects future customer behavior. Understanding and managing this element is key in maintaining and improving customer relationships and supporting restaurant business growth.

In addition, a positive atmosphere is not only about visual aesthetics but also about creating a satisfying experience for customers. The main point is to aim at creating a better relationship between brands and customers. That will ensure the maintenance of business brand reputation in the long term. The hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H3: Atmosphere is positively related to sustainable customer relationships.

Price

Price or pricing has an important role in maintaining the reputation of the restaurant business. While it may sound in contrast to the positive atmosphere concept previously discussed, the truth is that a good balance between price and value provided to customers also contributes to a restaurant's image and reputation (Chen et al., 2020). There are several reasons why the price is very important in maintaining the reputation of the restaurant business, namely regarding perceived value, reasonable prices, and compatibility with the quality of food and the service and experience that customers get will create a positive perception of value in the eyes of customers. So, customers will tend to be satisfied and give positive reviews to restaurants. Segmenting the market by setting prices according to the restaurant's business targets will have a good impact on the restaurant itself and also the customers. The price set will target the right market or customers with the restaurant's target market. Transparency in pricing can build trust with customers. Make sure that the prices are clear and there are no hidden costs that might surprise customers. This includes the perceived value, fairness, affordability, and price competitiveness.

Customers expect the price to match the quality of the food and service and to be reasonable compared to other similar restaurants. The better the pricing and the higher the product quality, the more customer satisfaction will increase (Kencana, 2018). Vice versa, if the price and quality of products are low, customer satisfaction will also decrease. McDonald's always looks for ways to provide quality food at a price that is affordable to many people. Despite the harsh economy where the price of ingredients rose, and inflation increased in 2022, McDonald's in Malaysia kept the price the same.

The aim to offer good value to their customers shows how McDonald's has retained their customer relationships in good favor and became the largest fast food restaurant chain in the world. In maintaining the reputation of the restaurant business, it is important to recognize the value offered to customers and reflect it through the prices that are set. Consistent quality in the context of McDonald's is a very important principle in managing a large and complex fast food supply chain. It refers to McDonald's ability to keep their food and beverage quality levels at the same level across their restaurants worldwide. This is not just a coincidence, but the result of strict management and control practices in every aspect of its operations. First of all, high-quality raw materials are the foundation

of consistent food quality. Next, consistent cooking procedures are essential. McDonald's has very detailed guidelines for the preparation and cooking of their food. In addition, quality checks are an integral part of maintaining consistent quality. There are stringent inspection stages throughout the supply chain, from the processing plant to the restaurant. Staff training also plays a big role in achieving consistent quality. All McDonald's employees receive rigorous training in proper food preparation, hygiene procedures, and customer service. Consistent quality is not just about the same taste and texture of food in every place, but also about food safety. Strict and consistent procedures in food preparation also help reduce the risk of contamination and illness from unsafe food. So, setting a good and balanced price can help build positive perceptions among customers, maintain their satisfaction, and support a strong brand image. The hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H4: Price is positively related to sustainable customer relationships.

Brand and Its Influence

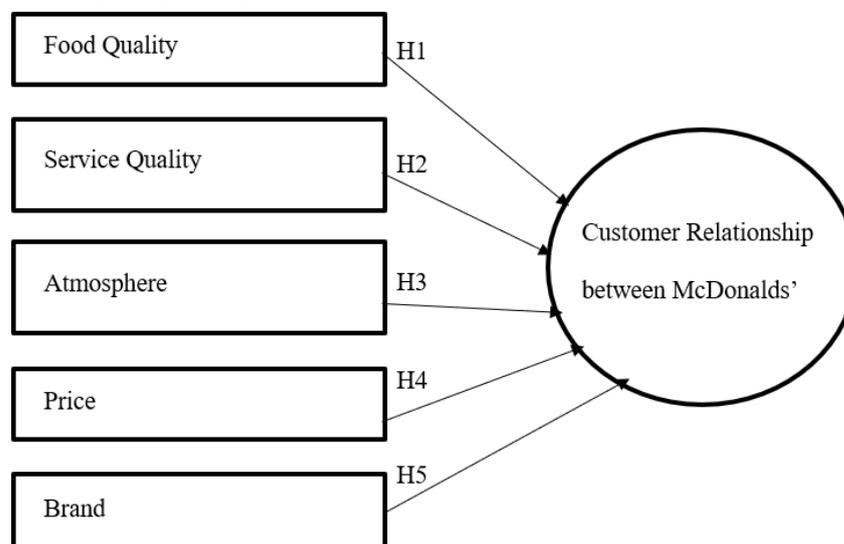
Brand is a combination of the visual identity, values, image, and experience that a business provides to customers. It includes elements such as logo, design, brand message, and product or service quality. The importance of a brand in business cannot be ignored. A strong brand creates a positive impression and is easily recognizable among fierce competition. This allows businesses to differentiate themselves, attract customers, and maintain customer loyalty. In addition, a strong brand also influences customers' perception of the quality and value of the product or service offered. Brand influence is also strongly linked to consumer psychology. They tend to trust brands that are familiar and have a good reputation. This can influence their purchasing decisions and motivate them to pay more for products or services from brands they trust (Havidz & Mahaputra, 2020). In addition, brands can have a social impact. Brands that reflect positive values or support certain social causes can influence customers to choose those brands and feel better about their purchases (Mbeté & Tanamal, 2020). Over the past few decades, the digital age has significantly expanded brand influence. Social media and online networks allow brands to interact directly with their customers. This creates opportunities to build strong customer communities and communicate directly with them, increasing the brand's influence in shaping customer opinions and behavior. In an increasingly competitive and digitally connected era, a deep understanding of brands and the ability to manage them well are invaluable assets for businesses.

Brands have a very important role in the restaurant business because they create a distinctive identity and differentiate them from competitors. A strong brand builds an emotional connection with customers, creating a positive perception of value and quality. It influences purchasing decisions, increases customer loyalty, and supports a good reputation through positive reviews. A well-recognized brand gives customers confidence about the experience they will have at the restaurant. With a consistent brand, customers have clear expectations about the products and services offered. In addition, a strong brand also allows restaurants to develop more effective marketing strategies, create opportunities to expand product and service offerings and attract appropriate market segments. Thus, a brand in the restaurant business not only creates a positive image but also forms a solid foundation for long-term growth, trust, and success. Brands in the restaurant business have an impact that stretches further than just a logo or design. A strong brand reflects a restaurant's core values and culture, provides guidance for business decisions, and directs interactions with customers. In addition, a successful brand also plays a role in building a community around the restaurant. Customers who feel connected to the brand tend to share their experiences, promote the restaurant organically, and even become brand ambassadors. In a competitive environment, a strong brand is a valuable tool to attract attention, build

loyalty, and create a lasting positive impact in the minds and hearts of customers and in the market as a whole. When a brand is presented to a customer, their mental image of the brand is essentially what they think of. In other words, when consumers evaluate a brand name, they automatically consider its attributes. Consumers' trust in a brand grows because of consuming the goods. Brand perception and consumer belief in the Brand are directly correlated with brand image. Customers will buy, even at high prices and in large quantities, if the perception of the brand is positive; otherwise, they will switch to another brand. It is possible to assert that brand loyalty develops because of brand image influences (Tuti & Wicaksono, 2021). Hence, brand and influence are essential when evaluating the factors influencing customer relationships. The hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H5: Brand is positively related to sustainable customer relationships. Figure 1 presents the research framework of this study.

Figure 1. Research Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

This study aims to examine the strategies used by McDonald's to establish sustainable customer relationships by considering food quality, service quality, atmosphere, price, brand, and customer relationships. To establish sustainable customer relationships and gather information about McDonald's, the researchers conducted an online survey using Google Forms. The researchers distributed the Google Form randomly through WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram. The survey targeted McDonald's customers from three different countries: Malaysia, Indonesia, and Belarus. The researchers utilize 18 statement items, such as "I am satisfied with the McDonald's food", "I am satisfied with the McDonald's service", "I am satisfied with the atmosphere in the restaurant", and "I enjoy it when I have my meals in the restaurant", "I find that the price of McDonald's menu is reasonable", "McDonald's menu price is consistent with the quality and taste", "I am familiar with McDonald's and its logo", "I will continue to purchase the McDonald's food in future.", and "I will share and recommend McDonald's to my family and friends" to measure respondents' opinions on McDonald. Each item was structured using a 10-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree with score of 1 to strongly agree with score of 10.

RESULTS

Table 1. Summary of Respondent's Profile (N=152)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	89	58.6
Male	63	41.4
Age		
10 - 17	1	0.7
18 - 24	145	95.4
25 - 34	4	2.6
35 - 44	2	1.3
Education		
Secondary School or same-level	8	5.3
Bachelor's degree or incomplete higher education	142	93.4
Master's degree or incomplete education at this stage	2	1.3

The researchers have collected answers from 152 McDonald's customers. The researchers have recapitulated the respondents' profiles. More than half of the respondents are female (58.6%), with a dominant age range of 18-24 (95.4%) can be known that the generation aged 18-24 years is Generation Z. Most of the respondents are pursuing bachelor's degrees or incomplete higher education (93.4%) followed by respondents from secondary school or same level (5.3%).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Zero-order Correlations of All Study Variables and Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Food Quality	0.765					
2.	Service Quality	0.790**	0.739				
3.	Atmosphere	0.683**	0.678**	0.828			
4.	Price	0.687**	0.715**	0.677**	0.711		
5.	Brand	0.648**	0.679**	0.726**	0.642**	0.682	
	Customer Relationship	0.677**	0.673**	0.727**	0.643**	0.698**	0.780
	Mean	4.330	4.380	4.337	4.253	4.350	4.243
	Standard Deviation	1.938	1.905	2.125	1.939	1.904	2.029
	No. of items	3	3	3	3	3	3

Note: N=152; *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. Diagonal entries in bold indicate Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics, alpha correlations, and zero-order correlations of all the study variables. The results of our research calculations show that the five variables have acceptable internal consistency reliability with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 0.69 this indicates that the variables of food quality, service quality, atmosphere, price, and brand have consistent answers from respondents and are reliable.

Table 3. Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

Variables	Customer Relationship Beta
Food Quality	0.165
Service Quality	0.107
Atmosphere	0.308***
Price	0.094

Brand	0.234**
R ²	0.631
F Value	50.010
Durbin-Watson Statistic	1.754

Note: N= 151; *p <.05; **p <.01; ***p <.001

Contrary to expectations, this study (refer to Table 3) found that only atmosphere and brand image had a statistically significant positive impact on customer relationships with McDonald's. The influence of the atmosphere was stronger (beta = 0.308) compared to the brand (beta = 0.234). Interestingly, factors like food quality, service quality, and price did not significantly affect customer relationships. Overall, the model explains 63.1% of the variation in customer relationships (R-square = 0.631). The analysis yielded partial support for the hypotheses, with only H3 and H5 demonstrating statistically significant positive effects on customer relationships, while H1, H2, and H4 are rejected. These findings suggest that for McDonald's, creating a welcoming atmosphere and cultivating a strong brand are more critical for building lasting customer relationships than just focusing on food quality, service quality, or price.

DISCUSSION

The atmosphere is positively related to customer long-term relationships with McDonald's. It is the most significant variable. The atmosphere of a restaurant greatly impacts the overall dining experience. A pleasant and inviting atmosphere can make customers feel comfortable, relaxed, and more inclined to spend time at the establishment. This positive atmosphere may include factors such as physical environment, ambiance, cleanliness, décor, music, lighting, and noise level. Building a positive atmosphere in a restaurant environment has very significant implications for customer experience and overall business success. Atmosphere encompasses everything from interior design to lighting, music, and service. A positive atmosphere creates a comfortable, attractive, and engaging environment for customers. A good atmosphere invites customers to feel relaxed and enjoy their time at the restaurant. This allows them to enjoy the food and social interactions more and creates positive memories that will be remembered in the long run, enhancing customer loyalty. This finding is in line with the research by Juliana et al., 2022. In addition, a positive atmosphere also contributes to a restaurant's brand image and reputation. Customers tend to speak well of places that provide a pleasant experience. A well-designed atmosphere can also influence the length of time customers spend in a restaurant, potentially increasing sales. Suitable music and attractive decorations can evoke a good mood, making customers want to stay longer. Therefore, building a positive atmosphere is not just about the visual or physical, but also about creating an inviting, comfortable, and cohesive feel that enhances the overall quality of the dining experience.

The brand is positively related to customers' long-term relationships with McDonald's. McDonald's customers evaluated the atmosphere as an important factor in deriving long-term relationships with McDonald's. This result indicates that the popularity of McDonald's will affect the customers' decision on whether to satisfy the service of McDonald's. This is in line with prior research by Priyono (2017). A possible reason is that McDonald's has established a strong and recognizable brand over the years. The brand represents familiarity, consistency, and a specific experience that customers associate with the company. This brand recognition and reputation can create a sense of trust and loyalty among customers, making them more likely to continue their long-term relationships with McDonald's. McDonald's brand is a valuable asset that encompasses the distinctive experience, quality, and trust provided to customers over the years. Consistency in service, taste, and brand image results in strong customer

loyalty and a good reputation. McDonald's must ensure that every outlet and product continues to meet the brand standards it has built, avoiding incidents that could damage its image. In a digital world, transparency and responsiveness to customer feedback are also important to maintain trust. Overall, maintaining a brand with integrity is key to maintaining a leading position and positive reputation in the fast-food restaurant.

Food quality is not a significant factor influencing customers' long-term relationships with McDonald's. One possible reason for this could be that customers have different priorities or expectations when it comes to fast food. They may not consider McDonald's as a primary choice for high-quality cuisine, but rather for convenience and affordability. In this context, while food quality might be important for other types of restaurants, customers of McDonald's may not prioritize it as heavily when evaluating their satisfaction or loyalty to the brand. So, while food quality may not be a major factor in customers' long-term relationship with McDonald's as a whole, it could still play a role in customers' experience and their decision to return or not. In a more in-depth analysis, variables such as service quality, price, and convenience would also need to be considered to get a more complete picture of the factors that influence customers' relationship with the McDonald's brand.

Service quality is not a significant factor influencing customers' long-term relationships with McDonald's. The self-service nature of McDonald's reduces the importance of direct interactions with staff, as customers often place their orders at counters or through self-service kiosks. McDonald's strong brand identity and loyalty may also overshadow the significance of personalized service experiences. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that service still plays a role in the customer experience, even if it is not the dominating factor. Friendly and efficient service can increase customer satisfaction and create a positive experience, although it is unlikely to be the only factor that influences long-term relationships. In a business setting like McDonald's, it is important to identify the factors that are most relevant to understanding and improving customer relationships and brand loyalty.

The willingness of the respondents to pay more for enhanced and dependable fast-food services may explain why the price of services is not a significant factor in their decision to remain loyal to McDonald's. The customers prioritize other aspects of their experience over the cost of the food. The willingness of respondents to pay more for enhanced and dependable fast-food services suggests that they place a higher value on factors such as atmosphere and brand. They are willing to pay a premium for these enhanced services, indicating that price alone does not heavily influence their decision to remain loyal to McDonald's. In other words, customers perceive the added benefits and improved experience provided by McDonald's as more important than the cost they must pay. However, it is important to note that price can still be a relevant factor in the context of competition with other brands in the same industry. In addition, price may remain a consideration for some customers, especially in different economic situations. Thus, while price may not be a major factor in McDonald's long-term customer relationships, it may depend on individual priorities and customer preferences. It is important to continue to understand changes in customer preferences and measure the impact of certain factors on long-term relationships to inform effective business strategies.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the factors influencing customer relationships with McDonald's. Contrary to expectations, the analysis of data (refer to Table 3) revealed a surprising outcome. Only atmosphere and brand image had a statistically significant positive impact on customer loyalty. Interestingly, the influence of atmosphere (beta =

0.308) was even stronger than brand (beta = 0.234). These findings suggest that traditional customer loyalty strategies in the fast-food industry, which often focus solely on food quality, service quality, and price, may need to be reevaluated. For McDonald's, creating a welcoming and enjoyable dining experience appears to be more critical for building lasting customer relationships.

The research offers valuable insights for McDonald's customer retention strategies. While maintaining a strong brand image remains important, prioritizing the creation of a positive atmosphere is paramount. This could involve renovations that enhance comfort and aesthetics, implementing programs that promote a family-friendly environment, or incorporating features that cater to specific customer segments. By focusing on these areas, McDonald's can create a more inviting and engaging dining experience, ultimately leading to stronger customer relationships.

However, the research also highlights the need for further exploration. While this study underlines the importance of atmosphere, a deeper understanding is necessary. Future research could delve deeper into the specific elements that contribute to a positive atmosphere in McDonald's restaurants. Additionally, investigating the potential interactions between atmosphere and other factors, like service quality or price, could provide even more comprehensive insights for optimizing customer retention strategies.

Finally, this study has broader implications for the fast-food industry. The findings challenge the traditional emphasis on core product and service aspects in building customer loyalty. By demonstrating the significant contribution of atmosphere, this research suggests that customer experience extends beyond just the food itself. These insights can be valuable for other fast-food chains and similar businesses, prompting them to re-evaluate their customer loyalty strategies and consider the role of environment in fostering long-term customer relationships.

LIMITATION

This study has a limitation in terms of its sample composition. Most respondents are students from Generation Z, as data collection was conducted through Google Forms and spread via social media platforms, including Telegram, WhatsApp, and Instagram. This limitation raises concerns about the generalizability of the findings to the entire population of McDonald's customers, because those who consume McDonald's products are not only young people aged 18-24 years, but also parents and children. Second, this study also has variable limitations on food satisfaction, service satisfaction, atmosphere, price, and brand. The limitations of these variables make the research results less diverse so that bias can occur in the research.

The researchers suggest that future researchers address this limitation by expanding the sample size to encompass more diverse demographic characteristics. The limitations of a less diverse sample may lead to bias in the research results. This may result in generalizations that are not accurate or relevant for the larger population. Therefore, considering various factors such as age, gender, ethnic background, education level, and social status in sample selection is key to ensuring that research findings are more generally applicable. Expanding the sample size with more diverse demographic characteristics can also help identify significant differences in behavior or views between different groups. This allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of society and provides a stronger basis for policy development, marketing strategies, or other recommendations. In order to maximize the validity and generalizability of research results, researchers should always strive to create samples that reflect the diversity present in the population under study. By doing so, the research will have more practical applications and strengthen its scientific contribution.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to include various independent variables that may impact the long-term relationship between customers and McDonald's. It is an important step towards generating a more in-depth and scientific understanding of the dynamics involved in customer interactions with brands. The addition of independent variables can allow researchers to look deeper into the factors that might influence customer loyalty. As such, the addition of relevant independent variables will enrich the research framework, increase the validity of the findings, and provide deeper insights into how McDonald's and similar businesses can effectively interact with customers over the long term. It also makes a more significant contribution to the academic literature and business practice of managing brands and customers. By considering various independent variables, research becomes more scientific and holistic. This makes it possible to identify more precise correlations and causation between certain factors and long-term customer relationships. The results generated from this kind of research not only provide deeper insights but also have strong practical implications. Scientifically, this research can make a significant contribution to the related literature of business, consumer psychology, and marketing. It allows the scientific community to better understand the factors that influence consumer behavior in the context of fast-food businesses. Thus, this research is not only beneficial for business practitioners but also for the development of theory and knowledge in various related fields of science.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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