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Service Quality, Employee Personality, Satisfaction, Trust, and Customer Loyalty in Malaysia's Restaurant Industry

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ABSTRACT

Customer loyalty has become increasingly important for sustaining competitiveness and long-term success in the restaurant industry. This study examines the effects of service quality and employee personality on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, as well as the roles of customer satisfaction and trust in shaping customer loyalty among restaurant customers in Malaysia. A quantitative approach was employed using a structured questionnaire distributed to customers of Haidilao Malaysia. A total of 220 valid responses were collected and analyzed using regression analysis. The results indicate that service quality ($b = 0.30$, $p = 0.001$) and employee personality ($b = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$) have significant positive effects on customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction also positively influences trust ($b = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), while trust significantly affects customer loyalty ($b = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, service quality ($b = 0.25$, $p = 0.014$) and employee personality ($b = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) directly contribute to customer loyalty. The findings suggest that employee personality plays a more prominent role than service quality in driving customer satisfaction and loyalty. Both operational and interpersonal service factors contribute to customer loyalty through customer satisfaction and trust.

Keywords: Customer Loyalty; Customer Satisfaction; Employee Personality; Service Quality; Trust

JEL Classification: M31, M12, L83

INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry has become increasingly competitive as customers are presented with a growing variety of dining alternatives and increasingly sophisticated expectations regarding service experiences. In such an environment, customer loyalty has emerged as a critical determinant of long-term business success because loyal customers are more likely to revisit a restaurant, recommend it to others, and maintain enduring relationships with the brand. These behaviors not only contribute to stable revenue generation but also enhance an organization's competitive position through positive word-of-mouth communication and customer retention (Oliver, 1999; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Consequently, understanding the factors that foster customer loyalty remains a central concern within hospitality and service marketing research.

Among the factors associated with customer loyalty, service quality has consistently received considerable scholarly attention. High-quality service enables organizations to meet customer expectations, create favorable service experiences, and establish stronger customer relationships. In restaurant settings, customers frequently evaluate service quality through the consistency of service delivery, responsiveness to customer needs, and employees' ability to provide reliable and professional services. Previous studies have demonstrated that service quality contributes positively to customer satisfaction and encourages favorable behavioral outcomes, including repeat patronage and recommendation intentions (Abdullah et al., 2022; Amerta & Madhavi, 2023; Bupu et al., 2023; Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992; Ryu & Han, 2010; Tuncer et al., 2021). More recent evidence also suggests that service quality remains a critical source of competitive advantage in hospitality settings because customers increasingly value reliable and personalized service experiences (Mohsein et al., 2025; Teoh et al., 2025). Nevertheless, as restaurant services become increasingly experience-oriented, customers' evaluations may extend beyond operational service performance alone.

The growing emphasis on customer experience has directed attention toward the role of frontline employees in shaping service encounters. Because hospitality services are characterized by intensive interpersonal interactions, customers frequently form impressions of an organization based on their direct experiences with employees. Positive employee personality traits, such as friendliness, professionalism, empathy, and helpfulness, can enhance service encounters and create meaningful experiences that strengthen customers' perceptions of the organization (Ekinci & Dawes, 2009; McCrae & Costa, 2003). In many cases, customers may remember how they were treated more vividly than specific service procedures, suggesting that employee personality can play an important role in influencing customer evaluations and behavioral intentions (Akinruwa & Adeyeye, 2025; Kim et al., 2007). Recent studies further indicate that positive employee characteristics contribute to interaction quality, customer engagement, and favorable service evaluations, highlighting the strategic importance of employee personality in hospitality environments (Boninsegni et al., 2021; Ho & Chow, 2022).

In addition to service quality and employee personality, customer satisfaction and trust have been widely recognized as important mechanisms underlying customer relationship development. Customer satisfaction reflects customers' overall evaluations of their experiences, while trust represents confidence in a service provider's reliability and ability to consistently deliver value (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Oliver, 1999). Within relationship marketing, satisfaction is frequently viewed as a foundation for trust, and trust subsequently serves as an important driver of customer loyalty by reducing perceived risk and strengthening relationship commitment (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Slack & Singh, 2020). Recent studies have reinforced the importance of satisfaction and

trust in fostering long-term customer relationships, particularly within hospitality and experiential service settings where customers rely heavily on previous experiences when making future behavioral decisions (Darvishmotevali et al., 2025; Hussain et al., 2025; Nyamekye et al., 2022).

Despite extensive research on customer loyalty, several gaps remain in the existing literature. First, many studies have focused primarily on service quality while giving comparatively less attention to employee personality as a distinct determinant of customer outcomes. Second, although customer satisfaction and trust have been examined independently in previous research, fewer studies have investigated their sequential roles in linking service experiences to customer loyalty within a unified framework. Third, empirical evidence addressing these relationships in experiential dining environments remains relatively limited, particularly within the Malaysian restaurant industry (Abdullah et al., 2022; Akinruwa & Adeyeye, 2025; Osman et al., 2015). These gaps indicate the need for a more comprehensive examination of the factors that contribute to customer loyalty in contemporary restaurant settings.

Haidilao Malaysia provides an appropriate context for addressing these issues because the company is widely recognized for its customer-oriented service culture, personalized service practices, and strong emphasis on employee-customer interactions. As consumers increasingly seek memorable dining experiences rather than merely food consumption, Haidilao offers a relevant setting for investigating how operational service performance and interpersonal employee characteristics jointly influence customer relationship outcomes. Previous studies have emphasized that experiential elements of restaurant services play an increasingly important role in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty, making the Haidilao context particularly suitable for examining these relationships (Asghar et al., 2024; Guan et al., 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to examine the effects of service quality and employee personality on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, as well as the influence of customer satisfaction on trust and the subsequent effect of trust on customer loyalty among customers of Haidilao Malaysia. By integrating these variables into a single conceptual framework, this study contributes to the hospitality and service marketing literature by providing a more comprehensive understanding of customer loyalty formation in restaurant services. The findings are also expected to offer practical insights for restaurant managers seeking to strengthen customer loyalty through service excellence and employee development initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality

Service quality has long been recognized as a central concept in service marketing because it shapes customers' perceptions, evaluations, and behavioral intentions (Mohsein et al., 2025; Teoh et al., 2025). In service-based industries, customers often judge an organization not only by the outcomes it delivers but also by the manner in which those outcomes are provided. Consequently, service quality plays a critical role in determining how customers evaluate their overall experiences and whether they choose to continue their relationships with a service provider.

Parasuraman et al. (1988) conceptualized service quality as the discrepancy between customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual service performance. Their SERVQUAL framework identifies five dimensions of service quality: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Although all dimensions contribute to customers' evaluations, reliability, responsiveness, and assurance are particularly

relevant in restaurant environments, where customers frequently assess service consistency, promptness, and employees' ability to inspire confidence during service encounters.

Within the restaurant industry, service quality extends beyond the delivery of food and encompasses every interaction that occurs throughout the dining experience. Customers evaluate whether employees respond efficiently to requests, handle problems effectively, and provide services in a professional and dependable manner. Positive service experiences can enhance customers' perceptions of value, strengthen favorable attitudes toward the restaurant, and contribute to long-term relationship development (Dandis et al., 2023; Zeithaml et al., 1996).

A substantial body of research supports the importance of service quality in shaping customer outcomes. Amerta & Madhavi (2023), Bupu et al. (2023), and Cronin Jr and Taylor (1992) found that superior service performance contributes significantly to customer satisfaction, while Ryu & Han (2010) and Tuncer et al. (2021) demonstrated that service quality positively influences both satisfaction and behavioral intentions in restaurant settings. More recent studies continue to confirm the strategic importance of service quality in fostering customer satisfaction and loyalty within the hospitality industry (Abdullah et al., 2022; Amoozegar et al., 2025). These findings suggest that customers who perceive higher levels of service quality are more likely to develop positive evaluations of the service provider and maintain ongoing relationships with the organization.

Employee Personality

While service quality reflects the operational aspects of service delivery, customers' experiences are also shaped by the individuals who deliver the service. In hospitality settings, frontline employees serve as the primary point of contact between the organization and its customers. As a result, employee personality becomes an important factor influencing how customers perceive and interpret service encounters.

Employee personality refers to relatively stable patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that influence how individuals interact with others (McCrae & Costa, 2003). The Five-Factor Model identifies five broad personality dimensions—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and emotional stability—which collectively shape interpersonal behavior (Swargiary, 2024). In service environments, these personality characteristics often manifest through friendliness, helpfulness, professionalism, empathy, and effective communication during customer interactions.

The importance of employee personality is particularly evident in hospitality and restaurant services, where customer experiences are highly interpersonal in nature. Unlike tangible products, services are produced and consumed simultaneously, making employee-customer interactions an integral part of the overall service experience. Customers frequently form impressions of an organization based on how employees treat them, respond to their concerns, and demonstrate genuine attention to their needs. Consequently, positive employee personality traits may contribute not only to favorable service evaluations but also to stronger emotional connections with the service provider (Ekinci & Dawes, 2009).

Empirical evidence supports the importance of employee personality in shaping customer perceptions and behaviors. Ekinci & Dawes (2009) and Ho & Chow (2022) found that customers' perceptions of employee personality significantly influence interaction quality and customer satisfaction. Similarly, Boninsegni et al. (2021) and Kim

et al. (2007) reported that employee characteristics affect customers' evaluations of service encounters and overall experiences. More recently, Akinruwa and Adeyeye (2025) demonstrated that positive employee personality traits contribute to stronger patronage intentions within hospitality settings. Collectively, these findings suggest that employee personality functions as an important intangible resource capable of enhancing customer experiences and encouraging favorable behavioral outcomes.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is widely regarded as one of the most important indicators of successful service delivery and an essential determinant of long-term customer relationships. In service industries, satisfaction reflects customers' overall evaluation of their experiences and represents a key benchmark for assessing organizational performance (Effendi et al., 2025).

Oliver (1999) defined customer satisfaction as a customer's evaluation of a product or service after comparing expected performance with actual performance. This perspective is rooted in expectation-confirmation theory, which proposes that satisfaction emerges when perceived performance meets or exceeds prior expectations. Conversely, dissatisfaction occurs when actual experiences fall short of anticipated standards.

In restaurant settings, customer satisfaction is shaped by multiple dimensions of the dining experience. Customers evaluate not only the quality of food and services but also employee behavior, responsiveness, comfort, and the overall atmosphere of the establishment (Asghar et al., 2024; Ryu & Han, 2010). Because dining experiences involve both functional and emotional components, satisfaction reflects a holistic assessment of customers' interactions with the restaurant.

Beyond its immediate evaluative function, customer satisfaction plays an important role in relationship development. Satisfied customers are more likely to engage in repeat patronage, provide positive recommendations, and maintain favorable attitudes toward a service provider (Slack & Singh, 2020). Moreover, repeated satisfactory experiences help reduce uncertainty and strengthen customers' confidence in an organization's ability to consistently deliver value. Consequently, satisfaction is often regarded as a critical foundation for the development of trust and long-term customer relationships. Previous studies have consistently identified customer satisfaction as a significant predictor of favorable customer outcomes across hospitality and service contexts (Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992; Darvishmotevali et al., 2025; Osman et al., 2015; Ryu & Han, 2010).

Trust

Trust occupies a central position within relationship marketing because it enables customers and organizations to establish and maintain long-term exchanges. In service industries, customers frequently make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, as future service outcomes cannot be fully evaluated prior to consumption. Consequently, trust becomes an important mechanism through which customers reduce perceived risk and develop confidence in a service provider.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined trust as a customer's confidence in the reliability, integrity, and dependability of an exchange partner. When customers believe that an organization consistently acts in their best interests and fulfills its promises, they become more willing to maintain an ongoing relationship with that organization.

Trust is often developed through accumulated service experiences. Positive interactions and satisfactory experiences reinforce customers' perceptions that a service provider is capable of consistently delivering expected outcomes. Over time, these repeated

experiences strengthen confidence and reduce uncertainty regarding future interactions. Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) and Nyamekye et al. (2022) argued that satisfaction serves as an important precursor to trust because customers who repeatedly experience positive outcomes are more likely to perceive a service provider as dependable and trustworthy.

The significance of trust extends beyond customers' perceptions and directly influences their behavioral intentions. Trust encourages relationship commitment, reduces customers' tendency to switch to competitors, and strengthens long-term loyalty. Recent hospitality research further suggests that trust functions as a key mechanism linking positive service experiences with favorable relationship outcomes, including customer retention and loyalty (Hussain et al., 2025; Slack & Singh, 2020).

Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty represents one of the most desirable outcomes in hospitality and service marketing because it reflects customers' willingness to maintain ongoing relationships with a service provider. Loyal customers are more likely to engage in repeat purchases, recommend the organization to others, and remain committed despite the availability of competing alternatives.

Oliver (1999) defined customer loyalty as a deeply held commitment to repurchase or continue supporting a preferred product or service in the future. Loyalty therefore extends beyond repeated transactions and encompasses a psychological commitment that influences future behavioral intentions. Within service industries, loyalty is often viewed as the culmination of successful relationship-building efforts and serves as an important indicator of organizational sustainability.

From a managerial perspective, customer loyalty is particularly valuable because retaining existing customers is generally more cost-effective than acquiring new ones. Loyal customers contribute to stable revenue streams, generate positive word-of-mouth communication, and strengthen an organization's competitive position over time (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Consequently, understanding the factors that drive customer loyalty remains a primary concern within hospitality research.

Previous studies have identified several important antecedents of customer loyalty, including service quality, customer satisfaction, trust, and employee-related factors. Guan et al. (2022) and Qin & Prybutok (2009) found that positive service experiences significantly influence customers' behavioral intentions in restaurant environments. Osman et al. (2015) further reported that customer satisfaction and trust contribute positively to customer loyalty within Malaysian service settings. More recent evidence suggests that high-quality service experiences strengthen emotional attachment and relationship quality, thereby encouraging long-term customer loyalty (Abdullah et al., 2022; Pérez-Morón et al., 2022).

Collectively, the literature indicates that customer loyalty is shaped by both service-related and relationship-oriented factors. Service quality and employee personality influence customers' evaluations of service experiences, customer satisfaction reflects customers' overall assessment of those experiences, and trust serves as an important relational mechanism that strengthens long-term customer relationships. Drawing upon expectation-confirmation theory and relationship marketing theory, this study proposes a framework in which service quality and employee personality function as key antecedents of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, customer satisfaction contributes to trust formation, and trust subsequently enhances customer loyalty within the restaurant context.

Hypotheses Development

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Service quality has long been recognized as one of the primary determinants of customer satisfaction because it directly influences how customers evaluate their service experiences. Within restaurant environments, customers continuously compare the services they receive with their prior expectations. When service delivery is reliable, responsive, and capable of addressing customer needs effectively, customers are more likely to perceive that the restaurant has fulfilled its promises. Such positive evaluations contribute to favorable emotional responses and ultimately enhance customer satisfaction.

From the perspective of expectation-confirmation theory, satisfaction emerges when perceived performance meets or exceeds customer expectations (Oliver, 1999). Therefore, customers who experience higher levels of service quality are more likely to develop positive evaluations of the restaurant. Previous studies consistently support this relationship, demonstrating that service quality significantly contributes to customer satisfaction across hospitality and service settings (Abdullah et al., 2022; Amerta & Madhavi, 2023; Bupu et al., 2023; Cronin Jr & Taylor, 1992; Ryu & Han, 2010; Tuncer et al., 2021). These findings suggest that customers who perceive superior service performance are more likely to experience satisfaction with their overall dining experience.

H1: Service quality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Employee Personality and Customer Satisfaction

In service industries, customers frequently evaluate organizations through their interactions with frontline employees. Because restaurant services involve substantial interpersonal contact, employee personality can significantly influence customers' perceptions of their overall experience. Employees who demonstrate friendliness, professionalism, empathy, and genuine concern for customers are more likely to create positive service encounters that enhance customers' emotional responses toward the organization.

The influence of employee personality extends beyond functional service delivery. Positive interpersonal interactions can foster feelings of comfort, appreciation, and personal attention, which contribute to more favorable evaluations of the service experience. Consequently, customers who interact with employees exhibiting positive personality characteristics are more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction. Previous studies have similarly found that employee-related attributes positively influence customer satisfaction in hospitality contexts (Akinruwa & Adeyeye, 2025; Ekinci & Dawes, 2009; Ho & Chow, 2022; Kim et al., 2007). Furthermore, positive personality characteristics facilitate stronger interaction quality and customer engagement, which subsequently enhance satisfaction outcomes (Boninsegni et al., 2021).

H2: Employee personality has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

Customer Satisfaction and Trust

Customer satisfaction plays an important role in the development of trust because positive experiences provide customers with evidence that a service provider is capable of consistently delivering value. As customers accumulate satisfactory experiences, they become increasingly confident that the organization will continue to meet their expectations in future interactions. This process gradually reduces uncertainty and strengthens customers' confidence in the reliability and credibility of the service provider.

Relationship marketing theory suggests that trust develops through repeated positive exchanges that reinforce customers' perceptions of organizational dependability (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Consequently, satisfied customers are generally more likely to perceive a service provider as trustworthy than dissatisfied customers. Prior research has consistently demonstrated that customer satisfaction contributes significantly to trust formation in service relationships (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Nyamekye et al., 2022). Moreover, customers who repeatedly experience satisfactory service encounters tend to develop stronger confidence in an organization's ability to deliver reliable and consistent service outcomes over time.

H3: Customer satisfaction has a positive effect on trust.

Trust and Customer Loyalty

Trust is widely considered a critical mechanism for establishing and maintaining long-term customer relationships. Customers who trust a service provider are more likely to believe that future interactions will result in positive outcomes, reducing the need to seek alternative providers. In highly competitive service environments, such confidence becomes particularly important because customers are frequently exposed to competing offerings.

When customers perceive a service provider as reliable, honest, and capable of consistently delivering quality services, they become more willing to maintain ongoing relationships and demonstrate loyalty-related behaviors. Trust therefore strengthens relationship commitment and encourages customers to continue supporting a preferred service provider over time. Previous studies have consistently identified trust as a significant predictor of customer loyalty across various service industries (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hussain et al., 2025; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Osman et al., 2015). Trust reduces perceived risk and reinforces customers' willingness to engage in repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth communication.

H4: Trust has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

Service Quality and Customer Loyalty

Beyond influencing customers' immediate evaluations, service quality can also affect their long-term behavioral intentions. Customers who consistently receive high-quality service are more likely to perceive greater value in their relationship with a service provider and develop stronger preferences toward the organization. As a result, positive service experiences may encourage customers to revisit the restaurant, recommend it to others, and maintain their patronage over time.

The direct relationship between service quality and loyalty suggests that customers do not always rely solely on satisfaction when making future behavioral decisions. Instead, their overall assessment of service performance may independently influence their willingness to continue engaging with a service provider. Empirical evidence supports this perspective, with previous studies demonstrating that service quality significantly contributes to customer loyalty within hospitality and restaurant contexts (Abdullah et al., 2022; Guan et al., 2022; Pérez-Morón et al., 2022; Qin & Prybutok, 2009). Consistently favorable service experiences can strengthen customers' attachment to a service provider and encourage long-term loyalty behaviors.

H5: Service quality has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

Employee Personality and Customer Loyalty

Employee personality may also exert a direct influence on customer loyalty because mployee personality may also exert a direct influence on customer loyalty because customers often remember interpersonal interactions long after the service encounter has ended. Positive employee behaviors can create meaningful experiences that strengthen emotional attachment to a service provider and encourage customers to maintain ongoing relationships with the organization.

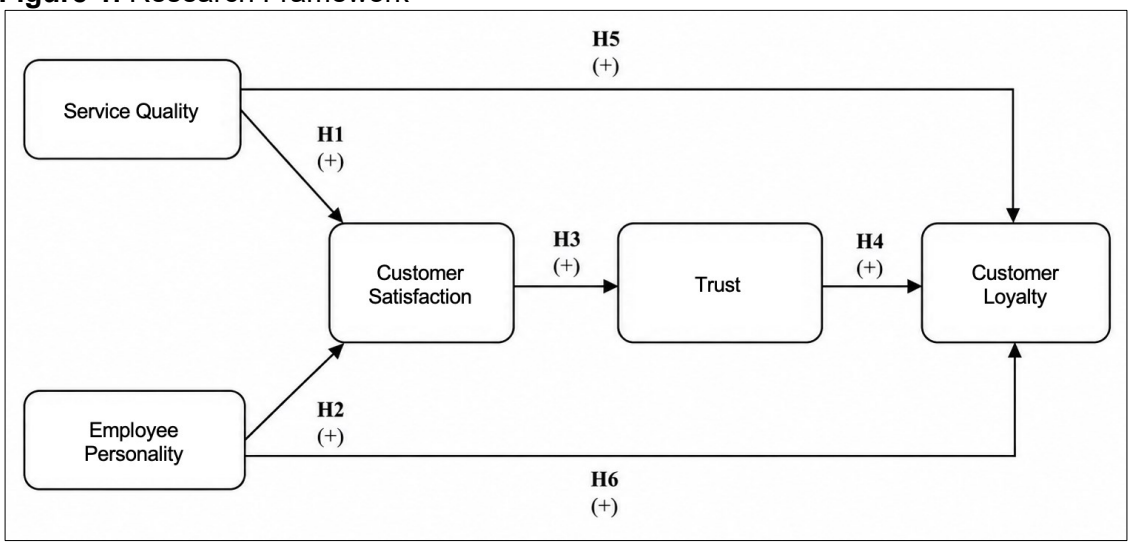
In restaurant settings, customers frequently associate their overall impressions of a restaurant with the employees who serve them. Employees who display warmth, professionalism, attentiveness, and genuine concern can foster positive emotional connections that extend beyond transactional exchanges. These emotional bonds may subsequently increase customers' willingness to revisit the restaurant and recommend it to others. Previous studies have similarly suggested that employee-related factors contribute significantly to customer retention and loyalty intentions within hospitality environments (Akinruwa & Adeyeye, 2025; Boninsegni et al., 2021; Ekinci & Dawes, 2009; Ho & Chow, 2022; Kim et al., 2007). Therefore, positive employee personality is expected to strengthen customers' commitment to maintaining long-term relationships with the restaurant.

H6: Employee personality has a positive effect on customer loyalty.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence discussed in the preceding sections, this study proposes a conceptual framework that illustrates the hypothesized relationships among service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty. The conceptual framework of the study is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research Framework



RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to investigate the relationships among service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty within the restaurant industry. A cross-sectional survey design was employed to collect data from customers of Haidilao Malaysia at a single point in time. The quantitative approach was deemed appropriate because it facilitates the empirical examination of the proposed relationships among the study variables and enables the statistical testing of the hypotheses developed from the literature.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised customers who had previously dined at Haidilao restaurants in Malaysia. As a comprehensive sampling frame of Haidilao customers was not available, a non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed. This approach enabled the collection of data from individuals who possessed relevant experience with the restaurant and were therefore capable of providing informed evaluations of the constructs examined in this study.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to eligible respondents. A total of 220 valid responses were obtained and included in the final analysis. The sample size was considered adequate for conducting the statistical procedures required to examine the proposed relationships among service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty.

Measurement of Variables

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section gathered respondents' demographic information, including gender, age, and educational background. The second section measured the study constructs using items adapted from established literature and modified to suit the context of restaurant services.

Service quality was assessed based on customers' perceptions of the restaurant's reliability, responsiveness, and assurance in delivering services (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Employee personality was measured through customers' evaluations of frontline employees' interpersonal characteristics, including friendliness, helpfulness, professionalism, and positive interaction behaviors (Ekinci & Dawes, 2009; McCrae & Costa, 2003). Customer satisfaction was measured using items reflecting customers' overall evaluations of their dining experiences and the extent to which their expectations were fulfilled (Oliver, 1999). Trust was assessed through customers' confidence in the restaurant's reliability, honesty, and ability to consistently deliver quality services (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Customer loyalty was measured using items related to customers' intentions to revisit the restaurant, recommend it to others, and maintain a long-term relationship with the brand (Oliver, 1999).

All measurement items were evaluated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with the respective statements.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were first employed to summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and examine the distribution of the study variables. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha was subsequently conducted to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement scales. Pearson correlation analysis was then performed to assess the relationships among service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty.

To test the proposed hypotheses, a series of regression analyses were conducted. Specifically, regression analysis was used to examine the effects of service quality and employee personality on customer satisfaction, the effect of customer satisfaction on trust, the effect of trust on customer loyalty, and the direct effects of service quality and employee personality on customer loyalty. The significance of the relationships was evaluated using standardized beta coefficients (β) and p-values. Following conventional statistical practice, a significance level of 0.05 was adopted as the criterion for hypothesis

testing, whereby relationships with p-values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Respondent Demographic Profile

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 220)

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	86	39.09
	Female	115	52.27
	Prefer Not to Say	8	3.64
	No Response	11	5.00
Age	18-24	102	46.36
	25-34	56	25.45
	35-44	36	16.36
	45-54	14	6.36
	55 or above	1	0.45
	No Response	11	5.00
Highest Education Level	Secondary School or Below	60	27.27
	Diploma/Foundation	60	27.27
	Bachelor's Degree	73	33.18
	Master's Degree or Above	16	7.27
	No Response	11	5.00

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 220 respondents included in this study. Female respondents constituted the largest proportion of the sample (52.27%), followed by male respondents (39.09%), while a small number of participants either preferred not to disclose their gender (3.64%) or did not provide a response (5.00%). In terms of age, the majority of respondents were between 18 and 24 years old (46.36%), followed by those aged 25–34 years (25.45%). This distribution indicates that the sample was predominantly composed of young adult consumers, representing a key customer segment within the restaurant industry.

Regarding educational attainment, respondents with a bachelor's degree formed the largest group (33.18%), while those with secondary school education or below and diploma/foundation qualifications each accounted for 27.27% of the sample. Respondents holding a master's degree or higher represented 7.27% of the total sample. Overall, the demographic profile suggests that the respondents were relatively diverse in terms of educational background, providing a broad representation of Haidilao Malaysia's customer base.

Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach's Alpha, and Correlations

Variables		1	2	3	4	5	M	SD
1	Service Quality	0.81					4.01	0.63
2	Employee Personality	0.62***	0.82				4.00	0.62
3	Customer Satisfaction	0.71***	0.68***	0.86			3.91	0.69
4	Trust	0.65***	0.70***	0.74***	0.85		3.96	0.75
5	Customer Loyalty	0.60***	0.66***	0.72***	0.78***	0.86	3.94	0.73

Note: N = 220. Diagonal entries indicate Cronbach's alpha. **p < 0.001.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and correlation matrix for all study variables. The mean scores ranged from 3.91 to 4.01, indicating that

respondents generally reported favorable perceptions of service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty. Among the measured constructs, service quality recorded the highest mean score (M = 4.01, SD = 0.63), followed closely by employee personality (M = 4.00, SD = 0.62). Customer satisfaction exhibited the lowest mean score (M = 3.91, SD = 0.69), although it remained above the scale midpoint, suggesting generally positive evaluations.

The reliability analysis demonstrates satisfactory internal consistency across all constructs. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.81 to 0.86, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 and indicating that the measurement scales were reliable for subsequent analyses.

The correlation analysis further reveals positive and significant relationships among all study variables. Customer loyalty showed the strongest correlation with trust ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.001$), followed by customer satisfaction ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), employee personality ($r = 0.66$, $p < 0.001$), and service quality ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, customer satisfaction demonstrated a strong positive association with trust ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide preliminary evidence that the proposed variables are closely related and support further hypothesis testing through regression analysis.

Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Table 3. Regression Results for Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis		β	p
H1	Service Quality → Customer Satisfaction	0.30	0.001
H2	Employee Personality → Customer Satisfaction	0.56	< 0.001
H3	Customer Satisfaction → Trust	0.68	< 0.001
H4	Trust → Customer Loyalty	0.59	< 0.001
H5	Service Quality → Customer Loyalty	0.25	0.014
H6	Employee Personality → Customer Loyalty	0.54	< 0.001

A series of regression analyses was conducted to test the proposed relationships among service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty. The results are presented in Table 3.

The analysis shows that both service quality and employee personality significantly contribute to customer satisfaction. Service quality was found to have a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.30$, $p = 0.001$), providing support for H1. Likewise, employee personality demonstrated a positive and significant influence on customer satisfaction ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Notably, the effect of employee personality was stronger than that of service quality, suggesting that customers place considerable value on employees' personal attributes and interpersonal behaviors when evaluating their dining experiences.

The findings also reveal a strong positive relationship between customer satisfaction and trust. Customer satisfaction significantly influenced trust ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Among all the relationships examined, this path exhibited the largest coefficient, indicating that favorable customer experiences play a crucial role in fostering trust in the restaurant.

Furthermore, trust was found to positively and significantly affect customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H4. This result suggests that customers who perceive the restaurant as dependable and trustworthy are more likely to remain loyal and continue their relationship with the brand over time.

In addition to the indirect pathways, both service quality and employee personality were found to have significant direct effects on customer loyalty. Service quality positively influenced customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.014$), supporting H5. Similarly, employee personality showed a strong positive effect on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$), providing support for H6. The larger coefficient associated with employee personality indicates that employee-related interpersonal factors exert a greater influence on customer loyalty than operational service quality alone.

Overall, the results provide support for all six proposed hypotheses. These findings underscore the importance of delivering high-quality service while simultaneously fostering positive employee-customer interactions. Together, these factors contribute to enhancing customer satisfaction, strengthening trust, and ultimately cultivating customer loyalty within the restaurant industry.

DISCUSSION

The Influence of Service Quality on Customer Satisfaction

The findings reveal that service quality has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction, thereby supporting H1. This result underscores the importance of service performance in shaping customers' evaluations of their dining experiences. In restaurant settings, customers continuously assess various aspects of service delivery, including reliability, responsiveness, and assurance. When these service elements are delivered consistently and effectively, customers are more likely to perceive that their expectations have been fulfilled.

A plausible explanation for this relationship is that quality service reduces the discrepancy between anticipated and actual experiences. Customers who receive prompt assistance, accurate service, and professional treatment tend to develop more favorable evaluations of the restaurant as a whole. As a result, satisfaction emerges not only from the food itself but also from the quality of interactions and support received throughout the dining process.

This finding aligns with expectation-confirmation theory (Oliver, 1999), which suggests that satisfaction develops when perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations. It also corroborates previous studies conducted by Abdullah et al. (2022), Amerta & Madhavi (2023), Bupu et al. (2023), Cronin Jr & Taylor (1992), Ryu & Han (2010), and Tuncer et al. (2021), all of which identified service quality as a significant predictor of customer satisfaction across hospitality and service settings. More recent evidence provided by Mohsein et al. (2025) and Teoh et al. (2025) further suggests that customers increasingly evaluate service providers based on the consistency, responsiveness, and reliability of service delivery. Within the context of Haidilao Malaysia, the company's emphasis on attentive and customer-oriented service may contribute to customers' favorable assessments and enhanced satisfaction.

The Influence of Employee Personality on Customer Satisfaction

The positive and significant relationship between employee personality and customer satisfaction provides support for H2. Notably, employee personality exhibits a stronger effect on customer satisfaction than service quality, suggesting that interpersonal interactions constitute a particularly influential aspect of the dining experience.

Unlike many service attributes that operate in the background, employee personality is directly experienced by customers during service encounters. Frontline employees who demonstrate friendliness, empathy, patience, and professionalism can create an atmosphere that makes customers feel welcomed, valued, and respected. Such

experiences often leave a lasting impression and shape customers' emotional responses toward the service provider.

The prominence of this relationship may reflect the experiential nature of restaurant services, where customers evaluate not only functional outcomes but also the quality of social interactions. This finding is consistent with the work of Akinruwa & Adeyeye (2025), Ekinci & Dawes (2009), and Kim et al. (2007), who emphasized the importance of employee characteristics in influencing customer perceptions and satisfaction. The result also supports the findings of Ho and Chow (2022), who reported that employee-related attributes significantly contribute to customers' service evaluations, and Boninsegni et al. (2021), who highlighted the importance of interpersonal interactions in shaping positive customer experiences. The findings suggest that customers may be more forgiving of minor operational shortcomings when service employees display positive personality traits that enhance the overall dining experience.

The Influence of Customer Satisfaction on Trust

The results indicate that customer satisfaction positively influences trust, supporting H3. Among all tested relationships, this effect demonstrates the largest coefficient, highlighting the central role of satisfaction in fostering customers' confidence in the restaurant.

Trust rarely develops instantaneously. Rather, it emerges through repeated positive experiences that reinforce customers' beliefs that a service provider is reliable and capable of consistently delivering value. When customers leave a restaurant feeling satisfied, they are more likely to believe that future visits will produce similarly positive outcomes. This accumulated confidence gradually strengthens trust and reduces uncertainty regarding future transactions.

The finding is consistent with relationship marketing theory, which positions trust as a key outcome of successful customer experiences (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It also supports the arguments of Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001) and Nyamekye et al. (2022), who found that satisfaction serves as an important foundation for trust formation because positive experiences reinforce customers' perceptions of organizational reliability and dependability. In the present study, satisfaction appears to function as a bridge between service experiences and customers' confidence in the restaurant, emphasizing its strategic importance in relationship development.

The Influence of Trust on Customer Loyalty

The significant positive effect of trust on customer loyalty confirms H4. This finding suggests that customers who believe a restaurant is dependable and capable of delivering consistent service are more likely to remain committed to that restaurant over time.

In highly competitive restaurant markets, customers frequently encounter alternative dining options. Under such circumstances, trust becomes a valuable relational asset because it minimizes perceived risk and strengthens customers' willingness to continue patronizing a particular establishment. When customers trust a service provider, they are less inclined to search for alternatives and more willing to maintain an ongoing relationship despite competitors' offerings.

This finding supports the commitment-trust perspective proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994) and is consistent with the empirical findings of Chaudhuri & Holbrook (2001), Osman et al. (2015), and Hussain et al. (2025). These studies similarly suggest that trust plays a pivotal role in strengthening relationship commitment and encouraging long-term

customer retention. The result indicates that loyalty is influenced not only by transactional satisfaction but also by customers' confidence that the restaurant will continue delivering positive experiences in the future. Consequently, trust serves as a critical mechanism for transforming favorable experiences into enduring customer relationships.

The Influence of Service Quality on Customer Loyalty

The findings demonstrate that service quality has a significant positive effect on customer loyalty, thereby supporting H5. Although the magnitude of this effect is smaller than that of employee personality, the result confirms that service excellence remains an important driver of customers' long-term behavioral intentions.

Customers are more likely to revisit a restaurant when previous experiences consistently meet expected standards. Reliable service delivery, efficient problem resolution, and professional customer care contribute to positive evaluations that encourage repeat patronage. Beyond encouraging repeat visits, high service quality may also motivate customers to recommend the restaurant to friends and family, thereby strengthening loyalty-related behaviors.

This finding is consistent with the studies of Abdullah et al. (2022), Guan et al. (2022), Pérez-Morón et al. (2022), and Qin & Prybutok (2009), which reported that superior service quality contributes directly to customer loyalty. The findings also support recent observations by Mohsein et al. (2025) and Teoh et al. (2025), who noted that customers are increasingly inclined to maintain relationships with service providers that consistently deliver reliable and responsive service experiences. The result suggests that maintaining service consistency remains essential even for organizations that already possess a strong brand reputation, as customers continue to evaluate service performance during each encounter.

The Influence of Employee Personality on Customer Loyalty

The positive and significant effect of employee personality on customer loyalty supports H6. The relatively strong coefficient observed in this study indicates that employee personality is among the most influential factors affecting customers' intentions to revisit and maintain relationships with the restaurant.

This finding highlights the emotional dimension of customer loyalty. While operational efficiency and service quality are important, customers often remember how they were treated more vividly than specific service procedures. Positive interactions with frontline employees can generate feelings of appreciation, comfort, and personal connection, which strengthen customers' attachment to the service provider. Over time, these emotional bonds may encourage customers to remain loyal even when alternative options are available.

The result is consistent with the findings of Akinruwa & Adeyeye (2025), Ekinci & Dawes (2009), and Kim et al. (2007), which emphasize the influence of employee-related characteristics on customer behavioral intentions. The finding is further supported by Ho & Chow (2022) and Boninsegni et al. (2021), who highlighted the role of employee interactions in creating positive customer experiences and strengthening relationship quality. In the context of Haidilao Malaysia, the finding suggests that customer loyalty is shaped not only by operational excellence but also by the ability of employees to create meaningful and memorable service experiences. Therefore, investments in employee development, interpersonal communication skills, and customer engagement initiatives may represent effective strategies for strengthening long-term customer retention.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationships among service quality, employee personality, customer satisfaction, trust, and customer loyalty in the context of Haidilao Malaysia. The findings demonstrate that both service quality and employee personality significantly contribute to customer satisfaction, while customer satisfaction serves as an important antecedent of trust. Trust, in turn, positively influences customer loyalty. In addition, service quality and employee personality were found to directly enhance customer loyalty.

Among the examined relationships, customer satisfaction exhibited the strongest influence on trust, highlighting the importance of creating positive customer experiences as a foundation for building confidence in the service provider. The findings also reveal that employee personality exerts stronger effects on both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty than service quality. This suggests that interpersonal interactions represent a particularly important component of the dining experience and may play a critical role in shaping customers' long-term relationships with restaurant brands.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the hospitality and service marketing literature by providing empirical evidence that customer loyalty is influenced by both operational service factors and employee-related interpersonal characteristics. The findings further demonstrate the interconnected roles of customer satisfaction and trust in strengthening customer relationships within the restaurant industry.

From a managerial perspective, restaurant operators should not focus solely on improving service processes and operational efficiency. Equal attention should be given to employee recruitment, training, and development programs that foster positive interpersonal skills, professionalism, empathy, and customer engagement. By combining service excellence with meaningful customer interactions, restaurants can strengthen customer satisfaction, cultivate trust, and ultimately enhance customer loyalty.

LIMITATION

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study focused exclusively on customers of Haidilao Malaysia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other restaurant brands, service industries, or cultural contexts. Future studies may extend the investigation to different restaurant categories or hospitality sectors to examine whether similar relationships are observed across diverse service environments.

Second, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, capturing respondents' perceptions at a single point in time. Customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty are dynamic constructs that may evolve through repeated service encounters. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to better understand how these relationships develop over time.

Third, the study examined service quality and employee personality as the primary antecedents of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. However, customer behavior in restaurant settings may also be influenced by other factors, such as food quality, perceived value, restaurant atmosphere, brand image, customer experience, and emotional attachment. Incorporating these variables into future models may provide a more comprehensive understanding of customer loyalty formation.

Finally, this study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to common method bias and respondent subjectivity. Future research may benefit from combining

survey data with qualitative approaches, observational methods, or actual behavioral data to obtain a richer understanding of customer perceptions and loyalty behaviors.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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