

## Beyond Fast Food: The Social Appeal of McDonald's Among Malaysian Youth

Daisy Mui Hung Kee<sup>1</sup>, Dee Ning Tan<sup>1\*</sup>, Boon Kiat Tan<sup>1</sup>, Hui Qi Tan<sup>1</sup>, Jia Xuan Tan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universiti Sains Malaysia  
Jalan Sg Dua, 11800 Minden, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
Corresponding Email: [deeningtan@student.usm.my](mailto:deeningtan@student.usm.my)<sup>2</sup>  
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3545-9713><sup>2</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

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This study investigates the social appeal of McDonald's among young people by examining how social interactions, brand image, ambience, perceived enjoyment, and peer influence shape spending behavior and customer satisfaction. Based on survey data from 200 customers, our findings reveal that social interactions, perceived enjoyment, and peer influence significantly enhance spending behavior, whereas ambience and brand image show no meaningful effect. In predicting customer satisfaction, social interactions, perceived enjoyment, and spending behavior emerge as significant contributors, while ambience, brand image, and peer influence do not. Our findings demonstrate that McDonald's functions as more than just a fast-food outlet. It serves as a social space where interpersonal connections and enjoyable experiences drive both spending and satisfaction. Our study offers practical implications for marketers and managers seeking to improve youth engagement by strengthening social experiences and enhancing enjoyment within fast-food environments.

**Keywords:** Brand Image; Customer Satisfaction; Peer Influence; Mcdonald's; Social Appeal; Spending Behavior

## INTRODUCTION

Fast-food restaurants today serve functions that extend far beyond offering affordable and convenient meals, particularly within youth culture (Khoo et al., 2021). Increasing evidence shows that these establishments operate as meaningful “third places” for young people, informal social spaces that support interaction, identity exploration, and the transition into adulthood (Louie & Chen, 2025). For many youths, such venues provide comfortable environments to socialize, relax, and spend time with peers and family. In Malaysia’s competitive fast-food landscape, McDonald’s has distinguished itself not only as a prominent global quick-service brand but also as a vibrant social hub for young consumers (Tunde et al., 2023; Zahra et al., 2024). Its widespread accessibility, consistent branding, and welcoming ambience make McDonald’s an appealing space for informal meetings, leisure activities, and social gatherings. Prior studies have highlighted McDonald’s strong brand presence and its ability to attract young customers through strategic marketing, customer experience enhancement, and operational resilience (Kee et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2023). Services such as “Parties@McD,” which provide special spaces for celebrations, further demonstrate the brand’s integration into youth-centered events and social activities.

McDonald’s cultural influence is further enhanced by digital exposure, especially on social media platforms where food-related content, influencer promotions, and visually engaging advertisements shape youths’ perceptions and consumption patterns. Research indicates that social media has a substantial impact on how Malaysian consumers view McDonald’s, influencing purchase intentions and shaping brand perceptions (Ee et al., 2024; Lok et al., 2024). The visibility generated through user-created content, viral campaigns, and limited-edition menu promotions reinforces McDonald’s desirability and cultural relevance among youth (Salleh et al., 2021). However, this digital engagement may also encourage trend-driven consumption influenced more by social visibility than personal preference (Cheah et al., 2024). Beyond digital influence, peer dynamics play a central role in sustaining McDonald’s popularity among Malaysian youth. Young people often emulate the dining habits of their social groups, using fast-food outings as a means of connection and belonging (Tomé et al., 2012). This aligns with the cultural practice of *lepak*, where youths spend time socializing in accessible, air-conditioned public spaces with minimal pressure for quick turnover. McDonald’s combines convenience with strong branding, sustainability initiatives, and relationship-building strategies that promote long-term customer loyalty and engagement (Ban et al., 2024; Kee et al., 2024). Its environmental and sustainability achievements have also contributed to a more favorable public image, further strengthening its appeal among socially aware youth (Kee et al., 2024).

Recent sustainability-oriented research emphasizes that organizational green initiatives and perceived organizational support can enhance positive stakeholder behaviors and strengthen overall brand image, particularly in service and hospitality contexts (Rubel et al., 2025). In addition, leadership-driven organizational climates have been shown to shape individual attitudes, creativity, and engagement by fostering supportive and psychologically safe environments (Chen et al., 2025; Qian et al., 2025). Such initiatives contribute to a more favorable public image and resonate strongly with socially and environmentally conscious youth segments. Such initiatives contribute to a more favorable public image and resonate strongly with socially and environmentally conscious youth segments. broader sustainability transitions observed in other industries, such as the adoption of battery electric vehicles driven by demographic and environmental awareness factors, highlight a growing alignment between younger consumers and sustainable innovation (Xia et al., 2025). These patterns suggest that youth preferences are increasingly shaped by a combination of social experience, digital

engagement, and sustainability values, which are also becoming relevant within the fast-food sector.

Given McDonald's strong cultural presence, ongoing digital engagement, sustainability positioning, and the significant role of social and peer-based experiences, it is essential to understand how these factors shape youth consumption behavior. Young customers today are influenced not only by the food itself but also by social interactions, brand perceptions, ambience, peer influence, perceived enjoyment, and broader corporate values embedded within fast-food environments (Singh et al., 2023). These experiential and value-based elements may affect spending decisions and customer satisfaction, reflecting the broader sociocultural role that McDonald's plays in the daily lives of Malaysian youth. Therefore, this study examines how social interactions, ambience, brand image, perceived enjoyment, and peer influence affect youths' spending behavior and customer satisfaction at McDonald's, offering insights into the social and sustainability-related appeal of fast-food spaces beyond food consumption.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Interactions**

Social interaction is an important factor that shapes how people behave in shared environments such as cafés, restaurants, and other social spaces. In contemporary hospitality research, this influence is especially notable among youths, who often use fast-food chains like McDonald's as social gathering places. For example, a study in Malaysia found that social interactions and ambience jointly affect customer behavioral intentions in youth-focused cafés, suggesting that social motives strongly guide dining decisions (Omar et al., 2023). Additionally, research on Generation Z highlights how their social identity and peer interactions deeply inform their restaurant preferences and consumption patterns (Seyfi et al., 2024). In a fast-food setting like McDonald's, youths often interact with friends or peers, and these social situations may affect how they choose their meals, how much they spend, and how long they stay. When people are in groups, they may adjust their actions to fit in, or match group expectations. Research also shows that social motives strongly impact behavior in fast-food restaurants. Dining with friends tends to increase enjoyment and can even lead to higher spending (Kim & Stepchenkova, 2018). For many Malaysian youths, McDonald's serves not only as a place to eat but also a popular place to meet, study, or spend leisure time with peers due to its casual seating and accessibility. Based on previous studies, social interactions are expected to positively influence spending behavior and customer satisfaction.

H1: Social interactions positively affect spending behavior.

H6: Social interactions positively affect customer satisfaction.

### **Ambience**

Ambience, or the overall atmosphere of a service environment, is a crucial determinant of customers' perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions in physical service settings. It encompasses elements such as interior design, décor, color schemes, lighting, temperature, air quality, and overall cleanliness, factors that collectively shape the sensory experience of the environment (Eka et al., 2024). Within the servicescape framework, both physical and social cues of the environment play an important role in influencing customer evaluations and behaviors, contributing to the ability of service businesses to attract and retain patrons (Ali et al., 2021). In fast-food restaurants such as McDonald's, ambience contributes significantly to creating a comfortable and inviting atmosphere that appeals to young consumers. Since many youths use McDonald's outlets as social or study spaces, ambient conditions such as comfortable seating, visually appealing interiors, and a clean environment become important in enhancing their overall experience. A pleasant and well-designed environment has been shown to

encourage customers to stay longer and spend more, as it shapes perceptions of service quality and value (Norazha et al., 2022). Moreover, ambience plays a role in forming positive emotional responses, which can increase revisit intentions and strengthen customer loyalty (Quoquab et al., 2019). From a behavioral perspective, environmental cues strongly influence customers' decision-making processes, particularly in hospitality and tourism contexts. For example, sensory and environmental elements have been found to shape behavioral intentions among diners and tourists, with positive environmental perceptions leading to higher satisfaction and stronger intentions to revisit or recommend the establishment (Hashemi et al., 2023). These findings support the notion that ambience is more than a decorative feature, it is a strategic component that impacts both spending behavior and customer satisfaction. Based on prior research and the role of servicescape in shaping consumer behavior, ambience is expected to positively influence youths' spending behavior and customer satisfaction within the McDonald's dining environment.

H2: Ambiance positively affects spending behavior.

H7: Ambiance positively affects customer satisfaction.

### **Brand Image**

Brand image refers to the set of associations, perceptions, and meanings that consumers attach to a brand through their experiences, impressions, and interactions. A strong brand image develops when customers consistently identify a brand with positive attributes such as reliability, quality, convenience, and emotional appeal. In highly competitive service industries like fast food, brand image plays an essential role in shaping customer preferences because consumers often rely on well-established brands they trust, especially when products are standardized and widely accessible. Brand trust is a fundamental component of brand image. When customers believe a brand is dependable and adheres to its values, they are more likely to choose it over competitors (Kee et al., 2023). A favorable brand image also enhances customer confidence that the food, service delivery, and environment will meet their expectations (Hanaysha, 2022). This alignment between expectations and experience leads to increased satisfaction, as demonstrated by Quoquab et al. (2019), who found that customers feel more satisfied when they perceive the brand as reputable and consistent. Similarly, Rodrigues et al. (2021) emphasize that customers report higher satisfaction when their perceptions of the brand match their actual service experience. Brand image also influences customer behavior across various service settings. For example, research on global coffee chains such as Starbucks demonstrates that brand perception and image significantly affect customer satisfaction and loyalty (Pandey et al., 2021). Likewise, studies reveal that strong corporate brand reputations, shaped by factors such as service quality, sustainability initiatives, and corporate social responsibility, enhance customer evaluations and behavioral intentions (Teoh et al., 2025). Additionally, evidence from consumer goods sectors such as Nestlé indicates that a solid brand image contributes to stronger customer satisfaction and loyalty, further reinforcing repeated purchase behavior (Kee et al., 2021c). In fast-food contexts, a positive brand image not only enhances satisfaction but also encourages higher spending, repeated visits, and favorable word-of-mouth recommendations. When customers hold positive feelings toward the brand, they are more willing to invest time and money in the dining experience. Therefore, based on prior literature and empirical evidence, brand image is expected to positively influence youths' spending behavior and customer satisfaction.

H3: Brand image positively affects spending behavior.

H8: Brand image positively affects customer satisfaction.

### **Perceived Enjoyment**

Perceived enjoyment is the extent to which the activity of using a specific system is perceived to be enjoyable in its own right, aside from any performance consequences resulting from system use. In fast-food contexts, enjoyment can come from various aspects such as taste, menu variety, promotional items, and the overall dining environment. McDonald's incorporates strategies such as offering diverse menu choices, providing promotional items, and operating in convenient locations, all of which enhance customers' dining experience and contribute to greater enjoyment (Tan et al., 2024). Youth customers are particularly drawn to these hedonic aspects, often seeking dining experiences that combine socializing with food consumption. Perceived enjoyment also contributes to customer satisfaction. Perceived enjoyment affects customer loyalty positively and significantly (Kurniawan & Tankoma, 2023). Enjoyment enhances emotional connections to the restaurant, which can strengthen loyalty and encourage repeat visits. Therefore, perceived enjoyment is expected to positively influence spending behavior and customer satisfaction.

H4: Perceived enjoyment positively affects spending behavior.

H9: Perceived enjoyment positively affects customer satisfaction.

### **Peer Influence**

Peer influence refers to the impact that friends, classmates, or social groups have on an individual's choices, attitudes, and behaviors. Among youths, peers play a critical role in shaping decisions related to dining and spending, as social approval, belonging, and group identity strongly affect behavior. Young consumers often feel pressured to conform to the spending patterns and food choices of their peers, leading them to purchase items they might not have otherwise considered. In both online and offline contexts, such as social media platforms and dining environments, peer dynamics and social identity significantly influence food consumption decisions (Anwar et al., 2024; Jang et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2024). In fast-food settings such as McDonald's, peer influence can determine not only which outlets youths select but also what menu items they order and the amount they spend. Research indicates that consumers often spend more and engage more actively in purchasing when accompanied by peers, highlighting the social facilitation effect on consumption behavior (Gui et al., 2021). Based on these insights, peer influence is expected to positively impact both spending behavior and customer satisfaction among youths in fast-food environments.

H5: Peer influence positively affects spending behavior.

H10: Peer influence positively affects customer satisfaction.

### **Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction**

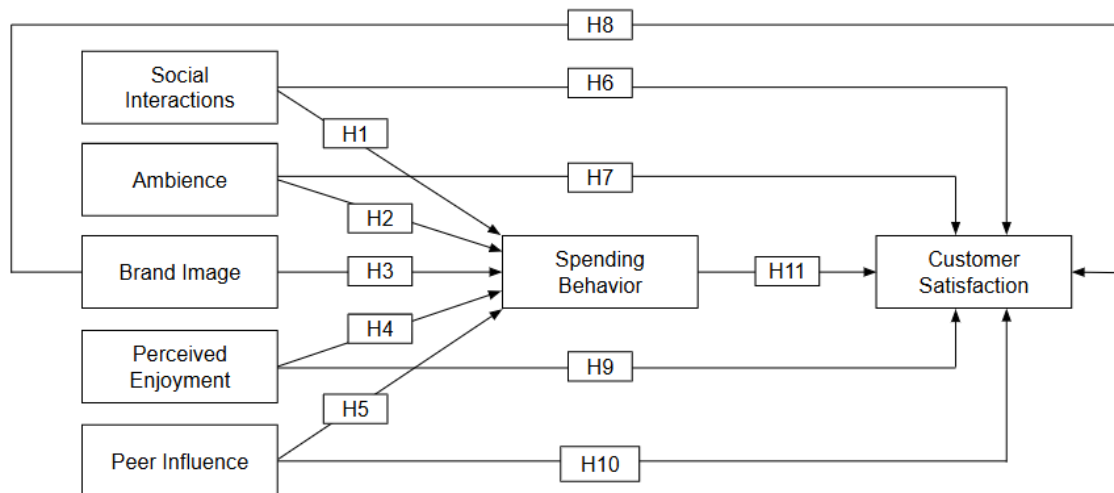
Spending behavior refers to the patterns and decisions through which customers allocate their available financial resources, whether cash, debit, or credit, to fulfill needs or desires (Sundra Kumar et al., 2022). Customer spending behavior is dynamic rather than fixed, and in fast-food settings, it reflects choices regarding what items are purchased, the quantity, and any premium upgrades or add-ons. When customers willingly spend more, such as upgrading meals, adding sides, or trying premium offerings, it often indicates a positive perception of the restaurant and satisfaction with the service experience. Spending behavior is closely intertwined with perceptions of quality, enjoyment, and social fulfillment (Rodrigues et al., 2021). Empirical studies have consistently shown that spending behavior and customer satisfaction can reinforce one another: satisfied customers are more likely to spend more, while higher spending often leads to more favorable evaluations of the experience. In digital and physical service environments, such as Foodpanda, Shopee, and McDonald's, spending decisions reflect not only transactional behavior but also broader assessments of value, convenience, and brand

experience (Kee et al., 2022, 2023; Yo et al., 2021). In fast-food contexts, including McDonald's, spending behavior is particularly relevant because customers frequently make quick decisions influenced by convenience, taste, and perceived value. When purchased items align with expectations, customers experience higher satisfaction, reinforcing loyalty and positive brand perceptions. Beyond transactional implications, spending behavior serves as an indicator of emotional and cognitive responses to the dining experience, encompassing service quality, food quality, and overall environment. Financial literacy and informed decision-making also play a role, particularly among university-aged consumers, influencing both spending patterns and satisfaction outcomes (Kee et al., 2025). Overall, the evidence suggests that spending behavior not only reflects consumer choices but also influences the level of satisfaction experienced in fast-food environments. Consequently, it is expected that higher spending behavior will positively influence customer satisfaction.

H11: Spending behavior positively affects customer satisfaction.

### Conceptual Framework

The study framework model is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Research Framework

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Sample and Procedures

This study employed a survey methodology to examine the social appeal of McDonald's among Malaysian youths. Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. To maximize participant diversity, the survey link was disseminated randomly across multiple social and professional networks. A total of 200 valid responses were obtained and included in the analysis. All data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 28), enabling descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses.

### Measures

All constructs, social interactions, ambience, brand image, perceived enjoyment, peer influence, spending behavior, and customer satisfaction, were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). All items are presented in Appendix 1. Except for customer satisfaction, which was adapted from established scales (Kee et al., 2023; Yo et al., 2021), all measures were self-developed for this study. The self-developed items underwent a pre-test with 5 respondents to

ensure clarity and relevance, followed by a pilot test with 20 respondents to assess reliability and initial validity. Cronbach's alpha values for the pilot test ranged from 0.78 to 0.89, indicating good internal consistency.

**Social interactions** capture the extent to which customers visit McDonald's for social purposes, such as meeting friends, using the restaurant as a gathering place, and perceiving that time spent with friends enhances their social life. Sample items include: "I visit McDonald's to meet and hang out with friends" and "Spending time with friends at McDonald's enhances my social life." Cronbach's alpha for the pilot test was 0.82.

**Ambience** reflects customers' perceptions of the restaurant's physical environment, including seating, décor, music, lighting, and comfort. Sample items include: "The ambience encourages me to stay longer at McDonald's" and "Music, lighting, and décor make McDonald's a pleasant place to meet friends." Cronbach's alpha was 0.80.

**Brand image** measures overall associations and impressions of McDonald's, including perceptions of trendiness, identity, and reputation. Sample items include: "McDonald's is considered 'cool' by youth in my social circle" and "Visiting McDonald's makes me feel socially recognized." Cronbach's alpha was 0.84.

**Perceived enjoyment** assesses the intrinsic pleasure derived from visiting McDonald's beyond food consumption. Sample items include: "I enjoy spending time at McDonald's beyond eating" and "Visiting McDonald's with friends makes me feel happy." Cronbach's alpha was 0.81.

**Peer influence** captures the extent to which friends or social groups shape individuals' choices, including the decision to visit McDonald's and make purchases. Sample items include: "Friends' opinions influence my choice of hangout location" and "I feel encouraged to visit McDonald's when my friends recommend it." Cronbach's alpha was 0.78.

**Spending behavior** reflects consumers' financial decisions in the fast-food context, including the impact of social influence or promotions. Sample items include: "I tend to spend more when visiting McDonald's with friends" and "Group visits influence my spending behavior." Cronbach's alpha was 0.79.

**Customer satisfaction** reflects consumers' overall contentment with both the social and culinary aspects of the McDonald's experience. Items were adapted from established consumer satisfaction scales (Kee et al., 2023; Yo et al., 2021) and modified for the fast-food setting. Sample items include: "I enjoy both the food and social environment at McDonald's" and "Overall, I am happy with my visits to McDonald's for social purposes." Cronbach's alpha for the pilot test was 0.87.

## RESULTS

**Table 1.** Summary of Respondents' Demographic Information (N=200)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Age</b>		
18 - 21 years old	137	68.5
22 - 25 years old	46	23.0
26 - 30 years old	17	8.5
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	103	51.5
Female	97	48.5
<b>Frequency of visiting McDonald's</b>		
Rarely (less than once a month)	67	33.5
Sometimes (1-2 times a month)	92	46.0
Often (1-2 times a week)	27	13.5

Very Often (3-4 times a week)	14	7.0
<b>Preferred reason for visiting McDonald's</b>		
Food	101	50.5
Socializing	63	31.5
Promotions	36	18.0
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	57	28.5
Chinese	109	54.5
Indian	34	17.0
<b>Nationality</b>		
Malaysian	200	100.0
<b>Education Level</b>		
Matriculation	3	1.5
Diploma	15	7.5
Bachelor's degree	165	82.5
Postgraduate	17	8.5

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 200 respondents. The sample consisted predominantly of young Malaysian adults aged 18–21 years (68.5%), with nearly equal representation of males (51.5%) and females (48.5%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (82.5%) and reported visiting McDonald's for food (50.5%) or socializing (31.5%). The sample composition aligns with the study's focus on youth consumers and their engagement with McDonald's as a social environment. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics, measures of reliability, and zero-order correlations among the study variables. All tests demonstrate high levels of reliability, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.80 to 0.851.

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

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Social Interactions	<b>.818</b>						
Ambience	.683***	<b>.834</b>					
Brand Image	.693***	.764***	<b>.813</b>				
Perceived Enjoyment	.651***	.822***	.771***	<b>.829</b>			
Peer Influence	.705***	.748***	.834***	.762***	<b>.842</b>		
Spending Behavior	.743***	.689***	.726***	.726***	.771***	<b>.800</b>	
Customer Satisfaction	.709***	.640***	.589***	.657***	.645***	.717***	<b>.851</b>
Number of items	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Mean	4.49	4.41	4.42	4.50	4.49	4.47	4.49
Standard Deviation	0.61	0.63	0.64	0.58	0.64	0.62	0.62

Note: N = 200; \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001. The bold diagonal entries represent Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha.

The regression analysis results are presented in Table 3, examining the effects of Social Interactions, Ambience, Brand Image, Perceived Enjoyment, and Peer Influence on Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction. For Spending Behavior, Social Interactions ( $\beta = .337$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Perceived Enjoyment ( $\beta = .229$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and Peer Influence ( $\beta = .321$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant positive predictors, indicating that youths who engage more socially, enjoy their dining experience, or are influenced by peers tend

to spend more at McDonald's. Ambience ( $\beta = -.015$ ) and Brand Image ( $\beta = .059$ ) were not significant, suggesting these factors do not substantially affect spending behavior. The model accounted for 69.7% of the variance in Spending Behavior ( $R^2 = .697$ ,  $F = 89.261$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among the predictors, Social Interactions showed the strongest effect, followed closely by Peer Influence, supporting H1, H4, and H5, while H2 and H3 were not supported.

For Customer Satisfaction, Social Interactions ( $\beta = .341$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Perceived Enjoyment ( $\beta = .190$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and Spending Behavior ( $\beta = .316$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant predictors, indicating that greater social engagement, higher enjoyment, and higher spending contribute to increased satisfaction among youths. Ambience ( $\beta = .102$ ), Brand Image ( $\beta = -.168$ ), and Peer Influence ( $\beta = .080$ ) did not significantly predict Customer Satisfaction. The model explained 61.1% of the variance in Customer Satisfaction ( $R^2 = .611$ ,  $F = 50.548$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Social Interactions had the largest positive impact, highlighting the importance of social experiences in shaping satisfaction. H6, H9, and H11 were supported, whereas H7, H8, and H10 were not supported.

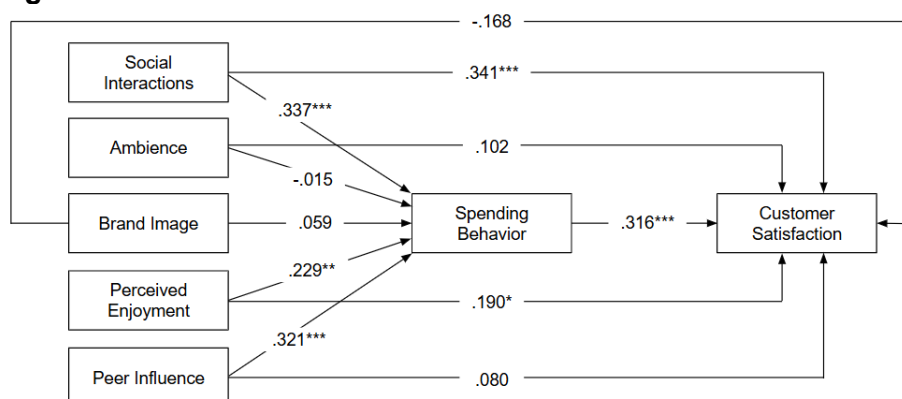
Overall, 6 out of the 11 hypothesized relationships were supported, and 5 were not supported. Social Interactions emerged as the most significant predictor of both Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction. Perceived Enjoyment and Peer Influence also significantly influenced Spending Behavior, while Spending Behavior itself significantly affected Customer Satisfaction, confirming its mediating role. Ambience and Brand Image were not significant predictors in either model, suggesting that these factors may be less relevant to Malaysian youths' dining behavior and satisfaction at McDonald's. Figure 2 presents our structural model.

**Table 3.** Regression Analysis

Variables	Spending Behavior	Customer Satisfaction
1. Social Interactions	.337***	.341***
2. Ambience	-.015	.102
3. Brand Image	.059	-.168
4. Perceived Enjoyment	.229**	.190*
5. Peer Influence	.321***	.080
6. Spending Behavior		.316***
$R^2$	.697	.611
F value	89.261	50.548
Durbin-Watson Statistic	1.998	1.921

Note:  $N = 200$ ; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 2.** Structural Model



## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Influence of Social Interactions on Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction**

This study shows that social interactions have a positive and significant influence on both spending behavior (H1) and customer satisfaction (H6). These results indicate that the presence of friends or peers plays an important role in shaping how youths behave and evaluate their dining experience at McDonald's. The findings align with contemporary hospitality research, which shows that social dynamics and group-based interactions strongly guide dining choices among young consumers (Omar et al., 2023). These findings also correspond with recent work on Generation Z, where social identity and peer interactions significantly influence consumption decisions in hospitality settings (Seyfi et al., 2024). When dining in groups, youths often adjust their behavior as part of social participation and group alignment. In a fast-food setting, this behavioral adjustment can manifest through longer dining durations, meal upgrades, or additional purchases, thereby increasing spending. Such behavioral adjustments help explain the significant positive effect of social interactions on spending behavior observed in this study. The positive and significant influence of social interactions on customer satisfaction further reflects the role of social experiences in shaping emotional and evaluative responses within service environments. Social interactions create a sense of enjoyment, support, and belonging, which enhances the overall emotional experience beyond the functional aspects of food and service quality. This is consistent with Kim and Stepchenkova (2018), who found that group dining enhances meal enjoyment and strengthens consumers' positive perceptions of their visit. Within the Malaysian context, McDonald's functions as a social hub for youths, providing an accessible and comfortable environment that supports socializing, studying together, or gathering casually. This helps explain why social interactions strongly contribute to both higher spending and increased satisfaction among young customers. However, this study measured social interactions as a single construct. Future research may benefit from distinguishing different types of social engagement such as studying with peers, casual hangouts, or celebrations to determine whether their effects on spending and satisfaction vary across contexts.

### **The Influence of Ambience on Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction**

The findings show that ambience does not significantly affect spending behavior (H2) or customer satisfaction (H7). Although ambience contributes to a more pleasant dining environment, the findings suggest that it does not play a decisive role in shaping youths' spending behaviors or overall satisfaction within this context. This outcome contrasts with hospitality literature that highlights ambience as a key component of the servicescape capable of influencing customer perceptions and behavioral intentions (Ali et al., 2021). Elements such as interior design, temperature, scent, and overall neatness contribute to the atmosphere of a service environment and can enhance customers' sense of comfort (Eka et al., 2024). Similarly, Norazha et al. (2022) emphasize that appealing design, comfortable seating, and cleanliness help shape customers' quality perceptions and may encourage longer stays or higher spending. However, despite these theoretical expectations, the present findings suggest that ambience functions more as supporting elements rather than primary factors influencing behavioral or evaluative outcomes. The non-significant influence of ambience may indicate that McDonald's already maintains a standardized and familiar environment, reducing the extent to which variations in ambience affect customers' judgments or spending decisions. Youth customers may instead prioritize social dynamics, emotional enjoyment, or brand-related factors over physical environmental elements when evaluating their experience or deciding how much to spend. Overall, the results imply that while ambience enhances psychological comfort and contributes to the overall dining atmosphere, it may not be strong enough on its own to significantly influence spending

behavior or satisfaction levels. This highlights the relatively greater importance of social and experiential variables such as social interactions, peer influence, and perceived enjoyment in shaping youths' dining outcomes in fast-food environments.

#### **The Influence of Brand Image on Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction**

The findings show that brand image does not significantly affect spending behavior (H3) or customer satisfaction (H8). This differs from earlier studies (Hanaysha, 2022; Quoquab et al., 2019; Rodrigues et al., 2021), which found positive relationships between brand image and satisfaction. A well-established brand is expected to provide assurance regarding product quality and service consistency, which may subsequently influence customer evaluations and purchasing behaviors. However, the non-significant results in this study suggest that brand image may already be strongly established and uniformly perceived among Malaysian youths, especially for a global brand like McDonald's. As the brand is widely recognized, familiar, and trusted, there may be limited variability in brand-related perceptions within this context. When brand trust and recognition are already taken for granted, as Kee et al. (2023) note is common for established brands, their influence on satisfaction and spending can diminish because these attributes become baseline expectations rather than differentiating factors. From a managerial perspective, traditional brand-building alone may not boost spending or satisfaction. Instead, it would be more useful to focus on improving in-store experiences, creating social seating areas, running engaging promotions, and offering menu options that appeal to youth preferences. These findings should be interpreted cautiously due to the sample being mostly 18-21 years old. To better understand the role of brand image, future research could explore factors such as perceived value or emotional connection.

#### **The Influence of Perceived Enjoyment on Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction**

This study confirms that perceived enjoyment significantly affects both spending behavior (H4) and customer satisfaction (H9). Consistent with prior research, customers who experience enjoyment from menu variety, taste, promotions, and the dining atmosphere tend to spend more during their visits and report higher satisfaction levels (Tan et al., 2024; Kurniawan & Tankoma, 2023). This suggests that hedonic value drives immediate consumer behavior, especially among youths, who often seek dining experiences that combine social interactions with pleasurable food consumption. However, while perceived enjoyment influences customer satisfaction, its effect was found to be weaker compared to social interactions. This suggests that although young customers value enjoyable experiences, their satisfaction is primarily influenced by social factors, such as spending time with friends or dining in groups. The emotional connection fostered by enjoyable experiences does contribute to loyalty and repeat visits, but social engagement appears to be the stronger determinant of overall satisfaction. McDonald's can leverage perceived enjoyment to boost customers' spending through limited-time menus, taste-focused promotions, and engaging in-store experiences. At the same time, enhancing satisfaction may require improving socially friendly spaces, seating comfort, and the overall group dining experience. Future research could explore whether perceived enjoyment interacts with social context or perceived value to influence satisfaction more strongly.

#### **The Influence of Peer Influence on Spending Behavior and Customer Satisfaction**

This study shows that peer influence has a positive and significant relationship with both spending behavior (H5), while its effect on customer satisfaction (H10) is positive but not statistically significant. These results indicate that youths often adjust their food choices and spending patterns at McDonald's to align with their friends' preferences and social expectations. In terms of spending behavior, peer presence can encourage meal upgrades or additional purchases, consistent with prior research showing that youths

feel social pressure to match group norms (Gui et al., 2021). Furthermore, peer recommendations and shared dining habits also guide youths' purchasing decisions, reinforcing the influence of social identity on consumption (Jang et al., 2024; Seyfi et al., 2024). Although peer influence has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, the relationship was not statistically significant in this study. This suggests that while dining with friends may enhance the social and emotional aspects of the experience, satisfaction is influenced by a broader combination of factors. Nevertheless, McDonald's continues to function as a social space for Malaysian youths, peer influence clearly plays a crucial role in shaping both spending behavior and satisfaction.

### **The Influence of Spending Behavior on Customer Satisfaction**

This finding shows that spending behavior has a positive and significant effect on customer satisfaction (H11). These results indicate that the amount customers choose to spend at McDonald's is closely tied to how favorably they evaluate their dining experience. In a fast-food setting, spending behavior often reveals customers' level of interest, perceived value, and expectations of the restaurant. When customers willingly spend more, such as adding sides or upgrading meals, which satisfy their needs or wants indicates a positive perception of the restaurant and its offerings (Sundra Kumar et al., 2022). Higher spending is frequently associated with perceptions of value, enjoyment and quality, which suggest that customers who invest more in their meals tend to feel more fulfilled and satisfied. This is further supported by Rodrigues et al. (2021) who note that increased spending enhances the emotional and experiential aspects of dining. Additionally, these findings align with the expectation-disconfirmation theory proposed by Rumagit et al. (2022), which states that satisfaction increases when customer purchases meet or exceed expectations. In the context of McDonald's, spending behavior serves as an important indicator of how customers evaluate their overall experience. Quick service, convenience, and meal customization options allow customers to select items that match their preferences, and when these purchases deliver the expected value and satisfaction increases. Thus, the positive relationship observed in this study highlights that spending behavior contributes meaningfully to higher customer satisfaction.

### **Practical Implications**

This study provides several practical insights for fast food chains like McDonald's to improve customer satisfaction and influence spending behavior among Malaysian youths. Since social interactions are highly valued by the youths in Malaysia, fast food restaurants should design their physical environment to better support group activities and social gatherings. For example, McDonald's may offer more flexible seating arrangements, including long tables or movable furniture that can accommodate larger groups. Although ambience was not found to significantly influence spending or satisfaction, maintaining a comfortable ambience through appropriate music, lighting and style of decor remains important as a baseline expectation that supports social interactions and perceived enjoyment. McDonald's has also been known to decorate outlets according to seasonal or cultural festivals in Malaysia. This strategy can continue to be strengthened, as it enhances the ambience and helps customers, particularly youths, feel more engaged and connected to the brand. At the same time, brand image was not found to have a significant impact in this study, but brand image remains to meet baseline expectations and avoid negative perceptions. To reinforce brand image, McDonald's should ensure high-quality customer service and implement effective operational procedures to reduce customers' waiting time, besides improving service consistency. Perceived enjoyment was found to significantly influence both spending behavior and customer satisfaction in this study. Hence, fast food restaurants must ensure strict adherence to Standard Operating Procedures among kitchen staff so that food quality, taste, and presentation remain consistent. Additionally, front counter and

lobby staff should demonstrate helpfulness, patience, and politeness when interacting with customers to further enhance the perceived enjoyment of the dining experience. This study also reveals that peer influence positively and significantly affects youths' spending behavior. McDonald's can leverage this by introducing promotional campaigns that encourage social sharing, such as "share to get one free" deals that motivate youths to share and spread advertisements via social media platforms, subsequently attracting their peers. Lastly, our findings show that spending behavior itself has a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction. One strategy that can be implemented by McDonald's is to offer more limited-edition or collectible products, such as trendy blind boxes, to encourage higher spending and increase customer excitement.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study investigated how social interactions, ambience, brand image, perceived enjoyment, peer influence, and spending behavior influence customer satisfaction towards McDonald's among Malaysian youths. The findings demonstrate that social interactions and perceived enjoyment are the most influential determinants, significantly affecting both spending behavior and customer satisfaction. These results highlight the central role of social engagement and hedonic value in shaping youths' fast-food dining experiences. In contrast, ambience and brand image did not exhibit significant direct effects on spending behavior or customer satisfaction. This suggests that for a well-established global fast-food brand, such attributes may be perceived as baseline expectations rather than differentiating factors. Peer influence was found to significantly influence spending behavior, while its relationship with customer satisfaction was positive but not statistically significant, indicating that peer presence encourages higher expenditure without necessarily translating into stronger satisfaction. Furthermore, spending behavior itself was shown to have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction, reinforcing the link between transactional decisions and evaluative outcomes. Overall, the results suggest that youth satisfaction in fast-food settings is driven primarily by social and experiential factors rather than physical environment or brand-related cues. These findings provide practical implications for marketers and managers interested in capitalizing on social appeal, maximizing customer experience, and developing long-term relationships with young consumers, which will enable them to go beyond offering food and develop socially significant dining experiences.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study is subject to several limitations despite providing meaningful insights into the factors influencing spending behavior and customer satisfaction among Malaysian youths. First, the sample size and sampling method limit the generalizability of the findings. This study relied mainly on respondents within specific regions, which may not accurately represent all youth consumers across Malaysia. Future research could employ a larger and more diverse sample to obtain more comprehensive results. Second, this study focused only on selected variables, including social interactions, ambience, brand image, perceived enjoyment, peer influence, and spending behavior. However, other factors such as convenience, price sensitivity, promotional strategies, and service quality may also play important roles in shaping customer satisfaction, which were not included in this study. Future research could incorporate these variables to provide a more comprehensive understanding of youth dining behavior in fast-food contexts. Third, this study used self-administered questionnaires, which may cause response bias. Respondents might have provided socially desirable answers, potentially affecting the accuracy of the data. Implementing mixed methods that combine both qualitative and quantitative approaches, such as interviews or observations, and surveys, could help generate deeper insights into Malaysian youths' behaviors and perceptions.

#### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)**

#### **1<sup>st</sup> Author**

Dr. Daisy Mui Hung Kee is an Associate Professor at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of South Australia and an MBA from USM. A prolific scholar, she has authored over 85 Web of Science-indexed and 127 Scopus-indexed publications. In addition to her academic contributions, Dr. Kee serves as the Country Director for the Association of International Business and Professional Management (AIBPM) and the STAR Scholars Network. Email: [daisy@usm.my](mailto:daisy@usm.my). ORCID ID: [0000-0002-7748-8230](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7748-8230).

#### **2<sup>nd</sup> Author**

Tan Dee Ning is currently an undergraduate student at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Email: [deeningtan@student.usm.my](mailto:deeningtan@student.usm.my). ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3545-9713>.

#### **3<sup>rd</sup> Author**

Tan Boon Kiat is currently an undergraduate student at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Email: [tanboonkiat@student.usm.my](mailto:tanboonkiat@student.usm.my).

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Author**

Tan Hui Qi is currently an undergraduate student at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Email: [huiqi626@student.usm.my](mailto:huiqi626@student.usm.my).

#### **5<sup>th</sup> Author**

Tan Jia Xuan is currently an undergraduate student at the School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Email: [jiaxuan04@student.usm.my](mailto:jiaxuan04@student.usm.my).