

The Effect of the Working Environment among Restaurant Employees towards Job Satisfaction during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Muhammad Syazwan Rosli*

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management
and Technology, Johor, Malaysia
Corresponding Author Email: msyazwan@tarc.edu.my

Tuan Ahmad Tuan Ismail

Faculty of Hotel & Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: tuana436@uitm.edu.my

Nor Azela Md Isa

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management
and Technology, Johor, Malaysia
Email: norazela@tarc.edu.my

Naranthiran Vijayakumaran

Department of Accountancy and Business, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management
and Technology, Johor, Malaysia
Email: naranthiran@tarc.edu.my

Mohamad Aidil Hasim

Department of Accountancy and Business, Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management
and Technology, Johor, Malaysia
Email: mohamadaidil@tarc.edu.my

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship of the working environment on job satisfaction among casual restaurant employees during the COVID-19 outbreak. The study is based on empirical data obtained from 104 completed surveys. To test the relationship between working environment and job satisfaction, Pearson Correlation Coefficient Analysis was employed. Based on the analysis, the result indicated that there is a significant, weak positive relationship between working environment and job satisfaction, $r(102) = .221, p < 0.05$. This

suggests that improvements in the working environment are associated with increases in job satisfaction among employees. However, the relationship is weak, meaning that while the working environment does influence job satisfaction, other factors may also play a larger role in determining employees' overall job satisfaction. The study highlights the importance of creating a supportive and conducive working environment, particularly during times of crisis, to sustain employee morale and performance. Practical implications include the need for restaurant managers to prioritize employee well-being by enhancing workplace conditions, which may, in turn, contribute to service quality and organizational resilience. Limitations of the study include its focus on a specific sector and geographical context, suggesting that future research should explore other industries, larger samples, and additional variables such as leadership, compensation, and work-life balance.

Keywords: Employee, Casual Restaurant, COVID-19, Working Environment, Job Satisfaction

Introduction

In 2019, the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was discovered in Wuhan, China. There have been several outbreaks worldwide since then, and the World Health Organization (2020) has declared it a global pandemic. Since December 2019, more than 240,000 people have died and 3.4 million have been infected (Abu Bakar, 2020). The virus spreads rapidly from person to person, so lockdown measures were essential to prevent the spread of the virus (BBC News, 2020). A similar initiative has been announced by Malaysian government officials to curb diseases through Movement Control Orders (MCO).

Malaysia implemented the MCO on March 18, 2020, in response to the pandemic COVID-19 (Jamil et al., 2021). Most economic activities have been forced to close or operate with very strict procedures since the first MCO, including service providers, manufacturers, retailers, hotels, and tourism sectors. Consequently, many restaurant operators have had to alter the way they do business to limit the spread of infectious diseases during the current pandemic season (Engidaw, 2022). Towards the middle of 2020, restaurants began adapting to the new service landscape, which was characterized by the concept of standard operating procedures, the ability to carry out takeaway or delivery, and the possibility of dining in based on new standard operating procedures (Madeira et al., 2020). While online ordering services and dine-in restrictions have had a significant impact on the decline in the number of restaurants, restaurant owners have also been compelled to reduce their workforce as a result (Norris et al., 2021).

Job cuts lead to a change in the work environment. As a result, they perform tasks formerly done by laid-off workers. The government has also always required food and beverage operators to conduct regular cleaning as part of its directives to prevent the spread of the virus (Rahman, 2020). Consequently, employees often feel burdened while working. Employees have also experienced emotional distress because of the changes in the economic and work environments (Feltmann et al., 2023). Because of this, Malaysians work overtime to meet their living expenses. As a result of stress, those facing COVID-19 tend to feel burnout, stressed, or sad. When stress persists for an extended period or negatively affects one's ability to function normally, it can negatively affect a person's motivation at work, job satisfaction, and daily functioning (Baquero, 2023)

It is important to create a synergy of motivation among employees in a restaurant to encourage motivation (Watson et al., 2018). It is also important to note that the majority of previous job satisfaction studies have only covered the scope outside of Malaysia, different states, and other fields, and were carried out before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Khuong & Linh, 2020; Demirovic et al., 2021; Awang & Yusuf, 2020; Balwa et al., 2021). In this regard, it is worthwhile to continue conducting research in this area to gain a deeper understanding of it.

Hence, because of the limited resources allocated to this study, this study must fill the empirical gap in data regarding job satisfaction in Malaysia's southern state, particularly in Johor Bahru, since there is a significant shortage of data regarding job satisfaction in that city. As part of this hypothetical study, the variables affecting employee motivation at work, such as the working environment, are explored to determine whether they will indirectly affect job satisfaction among restaurant employees during the period of the pandemic.

Literature Review

An Overview of the Covid-19 Pandemic in a Casual Restaurant Setting

On March 18, 2020, the Malaysia Movement Control Order (MCO) restrictions went into effect, making daily life for Malaysians drastically different overnight (Prime Minister's Office, 2020). To mitigate the virus, restrictions will be tightened on goods purchased until an MCO is lifted.

According to Hooi, 2021, the virus has also affected the economic health of the hospitality industry. Due to this lockdown, restaurants across the country had to adhere to strict regulations when it came to customer dining. Although such places are prohibited from operating for dine-in, restaurants can fulfill takeout orders and deliver meals (Astro Awani, 2021). This global pandemic has particularly adverse effects on restaurants. It is no longer uncommon to see empty dining rooms as many people prefer to eat at home rather than out. Delivery services are offered during the crisis by the restaurant service and kitchen to help with financial support (Lun & Quoquab, 2023). Despite this restriction, restaurants may only offer takeout and not serve guests on-site.

As a result, restaurants must take strong measures to prevent surrenders. To accommodate the restrictions, restaurant management adopted several strategy changes during this period. Further, even if the pandemic ends soon, it will take some time for people to stop being concerned about dining out. Consequently, digital options have become essential tools for restaurants to maintain visibility to clients to mitigate economic loss (Mohamad, 2020). Consequently, food delivery platforms like Grab Food and Food Panda are growing in popularity (Berita Harian Online, 2020). In addition to casual restaurants, as they use plates rather than plastic containers to serve food, this outbreak will affect them (Sha'ari et al., 2023). Without a restaurant, sales would be impossible; a restaurant relies on cash flow to stay afloat.

The Impact Towards Restaurant Employment

Food supply chains have been disrupted due to the ban on crowded establishments and social distancing practices (Alam & Khatun, 2021; Mohamed, 2021; Chin, 2020); wholesalers' and suppliers' services have also been limited. When the economy is in a downturn, households

prioritize spending on essentials (Kong, 2020). However, since implementing MCO, restaurant workers are not allowed to work remotely, unlike office workers who can work remotely via computers. In contrast to office work, restaurant work is significantly different. In restaurants, employees are responsible for maintaining operational efficiency and effectiveness (Connley, 2020). A restaurant can't function if its employees aren't present. As a result, despite the government's support for restaurateurs, business owners must be self-assured in order to maintain relevance (Rodzi, 2021).

As a result, some restaurant owners have taken advantage of the current situation by being inventive, or, on the other hand, anticipate cutting their labor force (NBC Washington, 2020). Therefore, for employees to obtain job security, they must be capable of handling multiple tasks at once and enhancing their skills in other areas (Kamarudin, 2020). Similarly, Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) contend that engagement is essential for maintaining employee motivation and satisfaction during a period of crisis.

As a result, restaurants have revised their menu items to improve business operations (Blum, 2021). Chefs need to consider their target market when creating appealing and appropriate menu items. Restaurant owners, for instance, offer marinated lamb meats and premixed drinks on their menus (Adilla, 2020). Due to the changing menus and delivery methods in restaurants, existing employee roles are reorganized. It is also imperative for them to keep up with recent trends and consumer needs, such as delivering their products on time or following standards of practice (Li et al., 2020), to maintain their long-term viability. To accommodate fluctuating delivery schedules and demand uncertainty, the kitchen area will shift from service to production. As part of their clerical duties, server staff will complete online or telephone orders and deliver meals.

Despite this, according to Bufquin et al. (2021) restaurant employees who remained on their jobs during the pandemic had a greater tendency to experience emotional stress, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse compared to restaurant employees who were furloughed. Those who remained employed reported higher levels of emotional stress because they were concerned about the uncertainty of the economy and worried they would not be able to find a job, which eventually led to a decrease in their mental health (Khan et al., 2021; Morán et al., 2023)

Satisfaction

The Cambridge Dictionary (2021) explains fulfillment as being able to achieve what you want or have accomplished what you wanted. Similarly, Stone and Morse (1954) also maintain that satisfaction is primarily determined by what one wants and receives from the world, that one's level of satisfaction is primarily determined by their wants, needs, and desires. In other words, expectations of the outcome affect satisfaction (Jiang et al., 2011).

Simplistically, satisfaction is a complex concept that has many dimensions (Karaferis et al., 2022). Human reality, as well as a variety of disciplines beyond it, such as law, economics, and sociology, are examples of the dimension's application. In addition, satisfaction in a variety of life domains influences satisfaction positively. According to Sirgy (2012), subjective happiness requires a person to be satisfied in all areas of life, including shelter, food, and self-esteem.

In addition, Bilton et al., (2002) stated that people's satisfaction may depend on their social class, such as ethnicity and economic class, among other factors. Various psychological factors, the environment, belief systems, as well as cultural constructs may contribute to satisfaction. As well as context, factors like job, view of products or services, or everyday lifestyle can influence the factor.

Job Satisfaction

Locke (1969) defined employee job satisfaction as the extent to which the employee feels satisfied about the work that he or she performs at work. According to Davidescu et al. (2020), job satisfaction refers to what individuals think about their work, as well as the circumstances surrounding their opinions about their work. The impact of job satisfaction on an organization's efficiency and financial performance is significant (Borralha et al., 2016). Moreover, metropolitan population has general good knowledge about job satisfaction as well as a positive attitude.

People's positive attitudes indicate positive morale at work (Aziri, 2011). Jules et al. (2017) support this claim that casual restaurant employees in Malaysia are satisfied with their jobs due to strong commitments between the organization and the employees. In addition, ensuring that employees have complete employee satisfaction will lead to higher levels of job satisfaction, as well as a more customer-focused attitude (Arokiasamy, 2019; Brower, 2024). This includes fair treatment, satisfactory working conditions, benefits, and good communication with coworkers. Furthermore, Romero et al. (2018); Zientara et al. (2023) contend that hotel and restaurant employees in Europe express dissatisfaction due to long working hours, leading to low productivity.

Despite their dissatisfaction with their jobs, employees are likely to continue working because they perceive their jobs as opportunities for personal growth (Lee et al., 2017). Furthermore, Balwa et al. (2021) found a moderate effect of job benefits on employee satisfaction in Kuala Lumpur restaurants. In contrast, Heimerl et al. (2020) concluded that the work environment and infrastructure of an organization have less influence on employee job satisfaction.

Working Environment

The American Psychology Association (2021) defines work motivation as an eagerness to put in the effort to succeed. Moreover, the association has made a point of emphasizing the importance of a range of factors that could affect motivation, including salary, compensation, recognition, and the sense of belonging to the workplace. Schultz et al. (2020) also describe how the behavior of workers in the workplace is determined by a collection of individuals as well as organizational attributes, and in this respect, motivation is a combination of both. Similarly, according to Collins Dictionary (2021), the working environment can be defined as anything or anyone that is present around employees and influences the way they do their jobs and the ability to perform them at optimal levels.

According to Molina-Hernández et al. (2021), working conditions have a significant impact on employee job satisfaction. Similarly, an employee's job satisfaction is enhanced due to factors such as their safety, a productive workplace, an employment situation with a stable job, a positive working relationship with their co-workers, recognition for their efforts, and the ability to make good decisions (Memon et al., 2023). Additionally, Atmaja and Puspitawati

(2018) found that a company with a suitable working environment has increased the satisfaction of its employees. In addition, noise, office furniture, ventilation, and light factors, as well as several other factors, can affect job performance (Sarode & Shirsath, 2014). Hence, employee job satisfaction facilitates performance outcomes when the workplace is contented (Dewi et al., 2020).

The degree to which employees are satisfied with their jobs is related to many factors such as their wages, level of power, and communication with their manager (Kukiqi, 2017; Muthu et al., 2015). Additionally, when employees feel they are important to the company, they will be more dedicated and feel ownership of it (Pitchforth et al., 2020). As a result, Mulyanto et al. (2018) contend that corporations will succeed if employees interact with the organization. Consequently, employees work long hours and are not recognized for their work, leading to them leaving their jobs (Zhenjing et al., 2022).

On the other hand, a study conducted in Penang in a restaurant found that employees were forced to leave their jobs due to excessive overtime and inadequate recognition, even when they worked in an environment that was conducive to their work (Zainol et al., 2020). Additionally, findings from a study at a casual restaurant in Kuala Lumpur indicate that employees feel tired when working overtime because their workload is increased (Amran et al., 2019). In spite of this, there still remains a cloud of doubt over the motivation of restaurant employees during the pandemic. It appears that before the COVID-19, employee job satisfaction in the restaurant industry was largely influenced by the motivation factor of financial rewards (salary and bonuses) as well as the working environment (social relationships). In order to answer this question completely, perhaps an in-depth examination of the study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic will be necessary.

Methodology

Research Approach

Following the study's objective, the quantitative approach is most applicable to investigate the relationship between workplace conditions and employee satisfaction. In this study, small field experiments will be conducted with minimal researcher interference because the study will take place in an uncontrived environment. A self-distribution method and internet-based survey technique were employed for this study's field survey. In order to provide a significant yet meaningful result on the subject investigated, a quantitative questionnaire survey is the most appropriate method of data collection. Real-life data will be incorporated into the research, so the decision is based on that fact. In their study, Veal and Ticehurst (2005) found that a researcher would have more success using this method than qualitative methods in collecting data from a broad range of respondents. Besides assessing personal views, behaviors, experiences, demographic information, and variables in a situation, Sekaran and Bougie (2016) observed that the quantitative approach can also assess personal traits, beliefs, and behaviors. A quantitative approach, according to Antwi and Hamza (2015), generally follows a confirmation hypothesis testing approach for determining whether a hypothesis is supported. Moreover, this study includes descriptive research as well. Consequently, it provides an entirely new assessment in research intended to demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships by describing and understanding population patterns and variances (Loeb et al., 2017). In this case, descriptive analysis is appropriate since there are interrelationships and correlations between the variables and attributes.

Population, Sample Size and Sampling Technique

During the COVID-19 pandemic period, this study investigates how the working environment affects restaurant employees' motivation to work. Consequently, the study was conducted in Johor Bahru at a casual food restaurant. Among the many businesses in Johor Bahru offering everyday food, casual restaurants should offer a midrange price range, offer a variety of cuisines, and be family friendly. Besides offering services at several locations, the casual restaurant should mainly be located in Johor Bahru. Hence, this study will focus on the casual restaurant areas mentioned above.

Creswell (2014) defines a population as a collection of individuals with similar characteristics. Samples are taken from employees who have been married for three years and have worked in the industry for a minimum of three years. It is theoretically more robust to select the specific criteria of the sample to achieve more substantial results in terms of working experience and commitment. As Daniel (2012) recommends, the study will interview a minimum of 100 participants. Rather than selecting respondents at random, the researcher will use a convenience sampling technique that involves selecting respondents who are easily available to him or her (Kumar et al., 2013). As a result, the researcher will be able to save time and money.

A non-probability sampling method is used in this study. In this methodology, sample members are selected based on subjective judgments made by the researcher (Alvi, 2016). This study also utilized convenience sampling. Accidental sampling is also part of convenience sampling. When randomly selecting participants from a target population that meet study requirements by living close by, having time to devote, and being willing to take part in the study, such as those living geographically close by (Dörnyei, 2007) & (Etikan, 2016), this kind of random sampling is carried out (Dörnyei, 2007).

Findings

Descriptive Statistic for Job Satisfaction Dimensions

Using descriptive analyses, the dimensions of the working environment and job satisfaction were measured based on a Likert-scale with 1 being strongly disagree, 2 being disagree, 3 being neutral, 4 being agree, and 5 being strongly agree).

Working Environment

An analysis is conducted on the variable of the working environment. Based on the results of Table 4.11 below, it is apparent that most respondents agreed with most items in the section analysis. The scores range from 3.53 to 3.78. During COVID-19, restaurant workers reported that their physical working environment provided satisfaction with their work environment (M=3.78, SD=0.723), they received adequate supervision during the pandemic (M=3.59, SD=0.719), and they also reported having adequate personal safety equipment (M=3.56, SD=0.993) during the pandemic. Data also shows that the two lowest scores are the one used to determine whether an employee is comfortable with another employee in the same department during pandemics (M=3.55, SD=0.762), followed by the one used to determine their confidence in the health services for the department due to pandemics (M=3.53, SD=0.824).

Table 4.11

Descriptive Statistic Working Environment of Job Satisfaction Construct

| No. | Item | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|----------------------------|--|------|----------------|
| Working Environment | | | |
| 1 | I am satisfied with my physical working environment during COVID-19 pandemic. (Saya berpuas hati dengan persekitaran kerja fizikal saya semasa pandemik COVID-19.) | 3.78 | .723 |
| 2 | I receive adequate support from my supervisors during COVID-19 pandemic. (Saya mendapat sokongan yang mencukupi daripada penyelia semasa pandemik COVID-19.) | 3.59 | .719 |
| 3 | I feel comfortable with another employee in the same department during COVID-19 pandemic. (Saya berasa selesa dengan pekerja lain dari jabatan yang sama semasa pandemik COVID-19.) | 3.55 | .762 |
| 4 | I feel confident in the safety of my health in the department due to COVID-19 pandemic. (Saya berasa yakin dengan keselamatan kesihatan saya di dalam jabatan semasa pandemik COVID-19.) | 3.53 | .824 |
| 5 | I have adequate personal safety equipment COVID-19 pandemic. (Saya mempunyai peralatan keselamatan diri yang mencukupi semasa pandemik COVID-19.) | 3.56 | .993 |

Note: 5 Likert-scale

N=104

Inferential Analysis

In this study, inferential analysis was conducted to generalize the findings from the sample to the larger population. To ensure accuracy and reliability, SPSS software (Version 26) was employed to perform the necessary statistical procedures.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), Pearson Correlation Analysis is used to determine the direction, strength, and nature of the bivariate relationship between variables in a study. In this research, the Rule of Thumb was applied to interpret the range of correlation coefficients and their corresponding strength of association, as presented in Table 4.15

Table 4.15

Pearson Coefficient Range Table

| Pearson Coefficient Range | Strength Association |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ± 0.91 to ± 1.00 | Very Strong |
| ± 0.71 to ± 0.90 | High |
| ± 0.41 to ± 0.70 | Moderate |
| ± 0.21 to ± 0.40 | Small but Definite Relationship |
| 0.00 to ± 0.20 | Slight or Almost Negligible |

Source: Jr., J. Hair. F., Celsi, W. M., Money, A. H., Samouel, P., & Page, M. J. (2011). *Essentials of Business Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Working Environment and Job Satisfaction

The following is the proposed hypothesis in this study as follows:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between working environment and job satisfaction among restaurant employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4.17

Correlations between Working Environment and Job Satisfaction

| | | Job Satisfaction | Working Environment |
|---------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Job satisfaction | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .221* |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .024 |
| | N | 104 | 104 |
| Working Environment | Pearson Correlation | .221* | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .024 | |
| | N | 104 | 104 |

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Based on the results in Table 4.17, there is a significant, weak positive relationship between working environment and job satisfaction, $r(102) = .221$, $p < 0.05$. This result implies that as the working environment improves, employees' job satisfaction also increases, although the effect size remains small. In other words, while the working environment does contribute to job satisfaction, it may not be the sole or dominant factor influencing employees' overall satisfaction at work.

Although the strength of the correlation is weak, the positive direction suggests that a more favourable working environment tends to contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that there is a positive relationship between working environment and job satisfaction is accepted. While the strength of the relationship is weak, its statistical significance confirms that the working environment plays a meaningful, though limited, role in influencing job satisfaction among the respondents.

Discussion

The Relationship Between Working Environment and Job Satisfaction Among Restaurant Employees During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The findings of this study reveal a significant, yet weak positive relationship between the working environment and job satisfaction among employees, $r(102) = .221$, $p < 0.05$. This indicates that improvements in the working environment are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, although the effect size suggests that the working environment is not the sole or dominant factor influencing overall satisfaction. In other words, while the workplace setting does play a role in shaping employees' attitudes toward their jobs, other factors such as compensation, leadership style, career advancement opportunities, and interpersonal relationships may exert stronger influences.

Nevertheless, this result underscores the importance of the working environment as a contributing factor to employee satisfaction. A supportive and conducive workplace can foster a sense of belonging, reduce stress, and improve overall morale, even if its effect is relatively modest compared to other determinants (Dumitriu et al., 2025). The study

highlights the importance of creating a supportive and conducive working environment, particularly during times of crisis, to sustain employee morale and performance. This finding aligns with existing literature suggesting that a positive workplace atmosphere enhances employees' psychological well-being and encourages them to perform their tasks more effectively (Pandey et al., 2025).

From a practical standpoint, these results offer valuable implications for restaurant managers and employers in the service sector. Practical implications include the need for restaurant managers to prioritize employee well-being by enhancing workplace conditions, which may, in turn, contribute to service quality and organizational resilience. For instance, ensuring fair scheduling, providing safe and hygienic workspaces, offering adequate resources, and fostering open communication can improve employee experiences. By doing so, organizations not only enhance job satisfaction but also create a stable and resilient workforce capable of sustaining service quality, particularly during challenging periods such as economic downturns or public health crises.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study establishes a significant, albeit weak, positive relationship between the working environment and job satisfaction. Although the strength of this association is modest, the result underscores the role of workplace conditions as a contributing factor to employees' well-being and performance. This implies that while the working environment alone may not fully determine employees' overall job satisfaction, it remains a critical component that organizations cannot overlook, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as the restaurant industry.

From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the importance of cultivating a supportive and conducive working environment to sustain employee morale and performance. Enhancing workplace conditions not only contributes to job satisfaction but also strengthens organizational resilience and service quality, especially during times of crisis when employees face heightened stress and uncertainty.

Despite its contributions, the study also opens several avenues for future research. First, future studies could explore the interaction effects between the working environment and other factors, such as leadership style, compensation, work-life balance, and organizational culture, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of job satisfaction. Second, longitudinal studies may provide deeper insights into how improvements in the working environment influence employee satisfaction and performance over time, rather than at a single point of measurement. Third, expanding the research to diverse sectors beyond the restaurant industry could help validate the generalizability of these findings and uncover sector-specific dynamics. Finally, incorporating qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, could enrich the understanding of employees' subjective experiences regarding their workplace conditions.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on employee satisfaction by emphasizing the significance of the working environment as a supportive mechanism for employee well-being. Future research that builds on these findings will be vital in informing

evidence-based strategies to foster sustainable, resilient, and motivated workforces across different organizational contexts.

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