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## Muslim Consumers' Perceptions of Service Quality for Halal Food Service Industry

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### Abstract

This study examines the influence of Muslim consumers' perceptions towards service quality in halal restaurants. The purpose of this study is to explore the factors why Muslim consumers patronize Halal restaurants as well as the assessment of service quality in Halal restaurants as this is important to identify the key attributes towards the service quality in Halal foodservice industry. Hence, this study stretch advantage for the foodservice operator when they are complying Halal certification to fulfil the demand for Halal certified restaurant. This paper investigates the key attributes of service quality from the perspectives of Muslim consumers and it had been explored via in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews were being steered among selected Muslim consumers which had experienced dine-in in the Halal restaurant. Findings for the study divulge the important insight that attributes measured significant for the foodservice industry in the assessment of service quality by Muslim consumers. Future, this study also has prospective to supplement for the concept and theory of Halal service quality since there are very few literature or studies had been discovered.

**Keywords:** Halal restaurant, Muslim consumers, Halal service quality, Foodservice Operator, Halal Certification

### Introduction

The important relationships of service quality, customer satisfaction, and purchasing behavior have thus been an important area of research (Pettijohn et al., 1997; Sivas and Baker-Prewitt, 2000). It is a common belief that improving service quality is imperative in a competitive environment of the service industry. In the restaurant businesses, service providers have begun to place greater emphasis on the quality of services by means of providing a pleasant dining experience to consumers. Moreover, the emergence of Halal services, which include Halal restaurants, intensifies the competition as the Halal restaurant businesses are dealing with a segment of consumers who have different needs and preferences from that of conventional consumers. In turn, consumers are likely to commit and patron a foodservice establishment or repurchase a food product (Qin and Prybutok, 2009; Hyun, 2010; Barber et al., 2011). Service is in the frontier for economies in the post

manufacturing era. Ibrahim and Othman (2014) stated the foodservice sector is one component of the economy which complements the intention of Malaysia to become a Halal hub. Since quality is a tenet of foodservices, evaluation to ensure a competitive advantage to remain in the forefront of the Malaysian economy is indispensable. Malaysia is poised to be one of the leading nations in the Halal industry. From the view Halal restaurant business, there is an upward trend in obtaining Halal certification from both Muslim and non-Muslim restaurant owners. The growth of Halal restaurants is driven by the escalating demand from Muslim consumers. Simultaneously, from the consumers' perspective there seems to be an increasing awareness of Halal food service from Muslims consumers.

In fact, Abdullah et al., (2012) had in their works found and suggested specifically the halal component to be embedded in the framework for a successful Malaysian foodservice industry. Thus, in today's organization, effort need to be paid to ensure continuous improvement and breakthrough in quality to meet the customers' expectation and requirement. This is especially true in the foodservice organizations where service delivery is typically important to win and sustain customers (Ibrahim & Othman, 2014). These scenario calls for restaurant managers to fully understand the behavior of Muslim consumers. This study can be utilized to evaluate the service quality of Halal restaurants. Saaidin et al., (2016) stated Halal certification is very prevalent in the hospitality industry as it promotes the importance of restaurant managers having knowledge of Muslim's dietary restrictions, sensitivities and religious practices.

## **Literature Review**

This section discusses about the service quality and Halal restaurant

### **Service Quality**

Parasuraman et al. (1988) describe service quality as an attitude developed by customers because of an encounter with a service firm. Past researches presented in a restaurant context such as DINESERV (Stevens et al, 1995) and DINESCAPE (Ryu & Jang, 2008) alleged that patrons depend on tangible and intangible cues to evaluate the quality of the services. Tangible cues refer to the food quality (taste and presentation) and physical equipment while the latter involves among others, staff services (responsiveness, courtesy) and ambience of the restaurants (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Furthermore, these studies conclude that food quality and service rendered by employees as vital attributes that influence guest's assessment of overall service quality of restaurants (Marinkovic, 2014). According to Gayatri, Hume and Mort (2011) in their study had investigated the role of Islamic culture in service quality by interviewing 35 respondents sourced from airline, retail, hotel and restaurant industries where they found two main factors namely Islamic and service quality general factors. In other words, the closeness between Islamic culture and service quality are consistent.

More specifically, the fundamental factors that contribute to customer satisfaction in restaurants include the food (hygiene, balance, and healthiness), physical provision (layout, furnishing, and cleanliness), the atmosphere (feeling and comfort), and the service received (speed, friendliness, and care) during the meal experience (Johns & Pine, 2002).

### **Halal Restaurant (Foodservice)**

As customers become more sophisticated, the owner of the restaurants needs to be more focused on the quality of their products, which requires emphasis on the service, food and drinks of halal products. Saaidin et al., (2016) wrote that the preparation and handling of Halal food is based on quality, sanitary and safety considerations and these are the fundamental requirement for food products and trade in Malaysia. This means that the products and services used for front of the house and back of the house must be strictly in accordance with the Syariah requirements. This is significantly prompting consumers' buying intention.

Halal restaurant (food service) is premised on the concept of Halalan Toyyiban (permissible and good for consumption) that is, serving food and beverages in accordance with the principles of the Islamic laws, also known as Sharia. Halalan Toyyiban concerns the process of food production from the farm (animal slaughtering) to food service, that involves the preparation and presentation (for example pork-and alcohol-free ingredients, food hygiene,) as determined by the Sharia (Ab Hamid et al., 2016). Research in the past incline to be narrow in scope as they deal either on attitude or purchase intentions and mostly focused on Halal products (for example, Mukhtar & Butt (2012); Hamdan et al., (2013)). As the scope of the Halal industry encompasses to services including Halal restaurants, a study to gain a better understanding of service quality assessment from Muslim consumers is justified.

### **Methodology**

For this study, a qualitative method was employed in this research as it seeks to obtain in-depth answers to the "why" question rather than "what" (Yin, 2003). The inclusion criteria to obtain information included sampling from a subset of Muslims, average social class standing, age ranging from 20 to 60. This research employed the verbal protocol method to conduct in-depth interviews of consumers. Payne,(1994); Berne, (2004) stated verbal protocol method is a diagnostic tool in the study of consumer judgment and decision-making process. (Kuusela and Paul, 2000; Ericsson and Simon, 1984) as well as consumer problem solving process (Ericsson and Simon, 1984). Since the study pursues to address the Muslim consumers' perceptions of service quality for Halal restaurants, the respondents were from the Muslims consumers in the two cities in Malaysia namely Kuching and Kota Bharu. – Kuching is a highly multi-culture and religion city in Malaysia and Kota Bharu is a city known as a conservative-Muslim state of Malaysia (Taib & Gill, 2012). Total respondents were 13 persons. The researcher asked similar questions to all interviewees and probing whenever needed, which helped in gathering ironic data, most beneficial for exploratory studies. (Jan et al., 2011). The interview-duration for the focus group was approximately one hour and was tape-recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

### **Findings**

#### **Respondents Profile**

The demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1. Seven Muslim respondents have patronized Halal restaurants for more than three years (88%).

**Table 1: Details Profiles of Muslim Respondents**

Respondent	Age	Gender	Area	Years of patronizing Halal restaurant
Respondent 1	20 - 30	Female	Kuching	Less Than a Year
Respondent 2	20 - 30	Male	Kuching	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 3	20 - 30	Male	Kuching	Less Than a Year
Respondent 4	20 – 30	Female	Kuching	Less Than a Year
Respondent 5	20 – 30	Female	Kuching	Less Than a Year
Respondent 6	20 – 30	Female	Kuching	Less Than a Year
Respondent 7	Above 50	Male	Kuching	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 8	Above 50	Male	Kuching	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 9	Above 50	Female	Kota Bharu	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 10	Above 50	Female	Kota Bharu	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 11	Above 50	Female	Kota Bharu	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 12	Above 50	Female	Kota Bharu	More Than 3 Years
Respondent 13	20 - 30	Female	Kota Bharu	Less Than A Year

### Data Collection and Analysis

A thorough content analysis using manual procedures was applied as suggested by Krippendorff (2004). It began with identifying the recorded information that was important for developing themes and interrelationships following theoretical and conceptual suggestions. In this stage, transcripts were prepared from the recorded focus group sessions. Finally, the data were analyzed via thematic analysis by referring to a study conducted by Ong et al., (2014).

The results found that the key attributes of service quality from Muslim respondents choose to dine-in in the halal restaurant based on four main headings; assurance, quality of food, cleanliness, staff service quality.

**Table 2. Attributes of Service Quality from Muslim respondents**

Respondent	Assurance	Quality of food	Cleanliness	Staff service quality
Respondent 1	x	x		
Respondent 2	x		X	
Respondent 3		x	X	
Respondent 4	x			
Respondent 5	x			x
Respondent 6		x		
Respondent 7	x			
Respondent 8	x		X	
Respondent 9	x	x		
Respondent 10	x		X	
Respondent 11	X			X
Respondent 12	X			x
Respondent 13	X		X	

### Assurance

Majority of the respondents were mentioned that the level of assurance provided by the Halal restaurants is one of the main factors which influence their assessment of service quality. Therefore, the service providers that provide the proper facilities or give the more attention towards the details are more in demand for Muslim consumers. The following statements describe their expressions:

*[...] when I see a restaurant, which carries a Halal logo I feel safe to dine in it (R1).*

*[...] I am confident that the restaurant follows the processes according to the Sharia' (R14)*

*[...] I will not dine at a restaurant which I am not sure if it is a Halal restaurant...assurance is important to me (R16)*

As reported by Abdul et al. (2009) Muslim consumers in Malaysia are more concerned with the halal logo and food ingredients than other major religious groups. According to JAKIM (a local government authority producing Halal certificates) the demand for Halal certification is on the rise in Malaysia including from the non-Muslim service providers. Therefore, the first proposition follows:

*RP1: Assurance is a significant factor influencing consumer's assessment of service quality in Halal restaurants.*

### Quality of food

The major of the participants mentioned they preferred to dine-in halal restaurant due to the quality of food served. Several criteria which influenced their selection to dine-in halal restaurant was mentioned by the respondents. Many of them considered the quality as of food safe to be eaten, ingredient used and good taste. The following statements describe their expressions:

*[...] I prefer to choose halal restaurant because of the taste of the food (R2)*

*[...] I decide to dine-in in halal restaurant because of the ingredients used are halal (R8)*

*[...] "... safe to eat. No syubhah" (R7).*

*RP2: Quality of food has significant factors influencing Muslim consumers in service quality in Halal restaurants.*

### Cleanliness

Cleanliness or hygiene is one of the factors perceived as important by Muslim and non-Muslim patrons. Some of the respondents asserted the followings:

*Cleanliness is an important part of our faith [...] (R8)*

*Halal restaurants must portray a good image of Islam...then the facilities should be clean [...] (R15)*

Based on these expressions, it is proposed that:

*RP3: Cleanliness is a significant factor influencing consumer's assessment of service quality in Halal restaurants.*

### **Staff Service Quality**

The quality of service delivered by restaurants' staff is also another factor influencing the assessment of service quality by Muslim consumers. Some respondents indicated that:

*[...] staff who are willing to assist with our special requests makes us feel appreciated (R5)*

*[...] the serving staff are polite (R11)*

According to Ramanathan (2016) when customer's involvement in the entire dining process is high the ability of service personnel in delivering the service efficiently is crucial. In addition, during a visit to the restaurant, customer experiences the product, service and ambience in the establishment (Samyak, 2012). In the restaurant, the service delivery process would begin by checking in at the reception of the restaurant and end with presenting the bill to the customer and saying good-bye (checking-out). Hence it is proposed that:

*RP4: Service from employee is a significant factor influencing consumer's assessment of service quality in Halal restaurants.*

### **Conclusions**

This study provides a platform for future research in the Halal service quality in foodservice industry. Above all, Muslim consumers demand for *Assurance* that the food they consume are halal. Muslim consumers would feel confident in dining when the Halal logo or certification of Halal is visible. Generally, Muslim consumers place great consideration on Cleanliness and food quality in their assessment of service quality. Food hygiene and safe to be consumed are imperatives of service quality especially for Halal restaurants as Islam, the religion advocates cleanliness in anything Muslims do either physically or spiritually. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once said "Cleanliness is half of faith..." insisting that attributes such as personal hygiene, clean physical environment as well as eat clean and healthy food and beverages are desirable practices of Muslims (Shuriye, 2015). Another common feature cited as important in the judgment of service quality is the service delivery by restaurant personnel. Indeed, consumers dining experience will be enhanced by the courteousness and efficient service rendered by the staff leading to intention to revisit (Bujisic & Hutchinson, 2015). This research is concerned with consumers' assessment of service quality from Muslim consumers' perspectives. Further studies involving a larger sample size could be carried out to determine our research propositions in Halal service quality.

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