

***Halal* Restaurant Services Across Borders: A Comparative Conceptual Framework for Customer Satisfaction in Malaysia and Brunei**

Aishah Hussain¹, Mohammad Aizat Jamaludin^{2*}

¹ Tun Razak Graduate School (TRGS), Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNIRAZAK), Jalan Tun Razak, 50400 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

² International Institute for *Halal* Research and Training (INHART), Level 3, KICT Building, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Jalan Gombak, 53100 Selangor, Malaysia.

* Corresponding author: Mohammad Aizat Jamaludin, International Institute for *Halal* Research and Training (INHART), Level 3, KICT Building, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Jalan Gombak, 53100 Selangor, Malaysia; mohdaizat@iium.edu.my

Abstract: This conceptual paper aims to develop a comparative framework that identifies the key service dimensions influencing customer satisfaction in *halal* food restaurant services across Malaysia and Brunei. While both countries share Islamic values and strong *halal* governance structures, they differ in market maturity, consumer expectations and technological adoption, creating a relevant context for comparison. The study addresses a gap in literature by offering a structured model that captures the intersection of religious assurance, experiential service quality and post-pandemic digital transformation in *halal* dining. The study adopts a conceptual research design based on a systematic review of secondary data from academic journals, conference papers and industry reports published between 2020 and 2025. A total of 33 relevant publications were selected through thematic filtering, focusing on the *halal* food service industry in Malaysia, Brunei and other Muslim-majority Southeast Asian contexts. No primary data collection was involved. The resulting framework identifies five key service dimensions: Halal Assurance, Food Quality, Service Quality, Ambience and Technology Integration as critical contributors to Customer Satisfaction. While these constructions are commonly observed, their relative importance may vary by national context due to differences in regulatory enforcement and cultural norms. This paper contributes a novel conceptual model for *halal* restaurant services, providing practical guidance for food and beverages (F&B) operators, policymakers and offering a theoretical base for future empirical research. The framework serves as a strategic tool for improving

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halal service delivery in diverse Muslim markets and supports the growing integration of technology with *halal* and *Shariah*-compliant consumer experiences.

1. Introduction

Halal food consumption represents not only a religious obligation but also a lifestyle choice deeply embedded in the everyday practices of Muslims worldwide. For over 1.9 billion Muslims, *halal* principles govern food sourcing, preparation and consumption, thus influencing global food markets and service industries (Rahman *et al.*, 2021). In Southeast Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Brunei, the *halal* food and beverage (F&B) sector is a cornerstone of economic development and cultural identity. Both countries, being Muslim-majority and members of the ASEAN economic bloc, place strong emphasis on *halal* compliance, food safety and Islamic values in their national agendas (Nasir & Kamal, 2022; Hasan & Hussain, 2022).

Malaysia is widely recognized as a global leader in *halal* certification through its centralized and internationally respected body, JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) which has helped to elevate the country's profile in the global *halal* economy. Similarly, Brunei has its own stringent *halal* standards administered by Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (MUIB), reinforcing religious compliance and consumer confidence (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021). Despite these shared religious frameworks, differences exist in market scale, service innovation, consumer expectations and institutional infrastructure, creating fertile ground for comparative analysis (Salleh & Karim, 2020; Khalid & Sulaiman, 2021).

The *halal* restaurant sector, especially in the post-COVID era, is undergoing significant transformation. Consumers now prioritize hygiene, safety protocols, digital ordering systems and seamless service experiences alongside traditional *halal* assurances (Yusof & Nor 2023; Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2022). As such, evaluating *halal* restaurant services today require a hybrid lens, one that combines religious compliance, service quality metrics and digital adaptability (Ali & Rahman, 2023).

This paper seeks to develop a conceptual framework that compares *halal* restaurant services in Malaysia and Brunei. The framework is based on a comprehensive review of post-2020 literature and aims to identify and organize key service dimensions such as *halal* assurance, food quality, service quality, ambience, price fairness and customer satisfaction. By integrating traditional service quality models like SERVQUAL with *halal*-specific constructs and contextual differences between the two nations, this study contributes to both academic

discourse and practical industry application. It offers a foundation for future empirical validation and serves as a strategic guide for F&B practitioners aiming to enhance *halal* service delivery in competitive and culturally sensitive markets.

2. Overview of *Halal* Food Services in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Brunei

The *halal* food services industry has become a cornerstone of economic, cultural and religious identity across Southeast Asia. With over 240 million Muslims in the region, demand for *halal* food has surged, not only as a religious requirement but also as a symbol of quality, cleanliness and ethical sourcing (Rahman *et al.*, 2021). The industry is supported by robust institutional frameworks and evolving consumer preferences, especially in Muslim-majority countries such as Malaysia and Brunei, which have emerged as pioneers in *halal* food governance and service innovation.

2.1. Southeast Asia's Halal Food Landscape

In Southeast Asia, the growth of the *halal* food service sector is driven by a combination of religious adherence, rising disposable income, tourism and increased awareness of health and hygiene. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and Thailand are investing in *halal* certification infrastructure to meet both domestic and international demand (Hasan & Hussain, 2022). The *halal* food market in the region is estimated to be worth billions, with Malaysia and Brunei strategically positioning themselves as *halal* hubs, offering not only certified products but also end-to-end *halal* logistics, tourism and F&B services (Nasir & Kamal, 2022).

Recent developments in the global Islamic economy demonstrate the continued expansion of *halal*-related markets and the growing importance of quality, trust and innovation in serving Muslim consumers (DinarStandard, 2023). In the post-COVID-19 environment, consumers have also become increasingly attentive to *halal* assurance alongside health, hygiene and service convenience. These changing expectations create both challenges and opportunities for *halal* restaurant operators to strengthen service delivery and digital transformation (Yusof & Nor, 2023).

2.2. Malaysia: A Global Halal Pioneer

Malaysia is internationally recognized as one of the leading nations in *halal* governance and innovation. The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) oversees *halal* certification under a centralized system that has gained global acceptance. The government's strategic plans, including the Halal Industry Master Plan 2030, aim to enhance Malaysia's

competitiveness as a global *halal* hub by focusing on high standards, digital adoption and market liberalization (Salleh & Karim, 2020; Hasan & Hussain, 2022).

In the restaurant industry, *halal* certification is not only a marker of religious compliance but also a commercial advantage, especially in urban centers like Kuala Lumpur, Selangor and Penang where consumers actively seek out *halal*-friendly and *Shariah*-compliant dining experiences (Ali & Rahman, 2023). Studies have shown that Malaysian diners expect a combination of *halal* integrity, food quality, modern ambience, and digital convenience such as QR ordering and mobile payment (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2022).

2.3. Brunei: Halal as a Religious Mandate

Brunei presents a unique case where *halal* compliance is deeply embedded in state governance and daily life. The Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (MUIB) centrally manages the *halal* certification process under the Halal Certificate and Halal Label Order 2005, which makes it mandatory for all food premises to obtain *halal* certification. Unlike Malaysia, where *halal* certification can be a strategic business choice, in Brunei it is a religious and legal obligation (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021).

Brunei's *halal* food service landscape is characterized by modest, family-oriented dining environments, high trust in state religious authorities and conservative service expectations. Restaurants are expected to maintain Islamic values in all aspects, from menu design to staff behavior and servicescape (Mohd Noor & Johari, 2024). While the market size is smaller than Malaysia's, consumer loyalty is strongly tied to religious comfort and spiritual assurance rather than innovation or variety (Nasir & Kamal, 2022).

2.4. Comparative Insights

While both Malaysia and Brunei demonstrate high levels of *halal* consciousness, their *halal* food service ecosystems differ in scale, orientation and consumer dynamics. Malaysia emphasizes *halal* as both a religious and economic branding tool, fostering innovation, tourism and global trade. Brunei, on the other hand, maintains a more uniform, religion-centric model that upholds *Shariah* law as the foundation of public services.

These differences justify the need for a comparative conceptual framework that captures the interplay between service quality elements and national context. Such a framework can help policymakers and F&B practitioners better understand how to align *halal* service strategies with consumer expectations in both countries.

3. Key Determinants of Customer Satisfaction in *Halal* Restaurant Services

Customer satisfaction in the halal foodservice context is influenced by a set of interrelated factors that reflect both Islamic values and modern service expectations. Previous research on halal restaurants has demonstrated that customers evaluate their dining experiences through multiple service-related factors, with the importance of these factors potentially differing across customer profiles and dining contexts (Lañas & Dela Peña, 2023). Drawing from the existing literature, this paper therefore conceptualizes five key dimensions, namely Halal Assurance, Food Quality, Service Quality, Ambience and Technology Integration, as the main determinants of satisfaction among Muslim consumers in Malaysia and Brunei.

3.1. *Halal Assurance*

Halal assurance is one of the most fundamental expectations in *halal* restaurant services, especially in Muslim-majority countries like Malaysia and Brunei. It refers to the degree of confidence that food and beverage offerings strictly adhere to Islamic dietary laws, encompassing the processes of sourcing, preparation, handling, packaging, storage and distribution in accordance with Shariah principles (Rahman *et al.*, 2021). It also includes the institutional credibility of *halal* certification authorities and the visibility of *halal* logos, which act as symbols of trust and authenticity in consumers' minds (Hasan & Hussain, 2022).

In Malaysia, *halal* certification is primarily governed by JAKIM (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia), whose standards are internationally recognized. *Halal* certification in Malaysia functions as both a religious indicator and a strategic marketing asset, particularly in competitive urban markets where consumers demand transparency, accountability and ethical food handling (Khalid & Sulaiman, 2021). Restaurants that display valid JAKIM logos are more likely to be perceived as reliable and legitimate, leading to greater perceived quality, satisfaction and revisit intention among Muslim consumers (Salleh & Karim, 2020). In contrast, Brunei enforces *halal* assurance as a legal mandate under the Halal Certificate and Halal Label Order 2005, with oversight by Majlis Ugama Islam Brunei (MUIB). Unlike Malaysia, where *halal* certification is somewhat voluntary for smaller businesses, Brunei mandates that virtually all food establishments must be certified to operate legally (Nasir & Kamal, 2022). This creates a more uniform *halal* ecosystem, where religious compliance is not only expected but systematically enforced across the entire foodservice industry. As a result, Bruneian consumers tend to take *halal* assurance for granted, with their evaluations of satisfaction depending more on service delivery, ambience and other experiential elements (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021).

Beyond regulatory compliance, *halal* assurance also fulfils deep emotional and spiritual needs, particularly among religiously observant consumers. It provides spiritual peace of mind, reduces cognitive dissonance in consumption, and builds brand loyalty, especially when restaurants are transparent about their sourcing and kitchen practices (Mohd Noor & Johari, 2024). In studies conducted in both countries, *halal* assurance has been found to significantly influence customer satisfaction, particularly when paired with visible religious elements such as Islamic greetings, Qur'anic decor or prayer facilities (Ali & Rahman, 2023). Moreover, in the post-COVID context, *halal* assurance has taken on an additional layer of significance, as consumers now associate *halal*-certified restaurants with better hygiene, safety protocols and professional food handling practices (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2022). *Halal* has thus become a proxy not only for religious acceptability but also for health-conscious and ethical dining.

3.2. Food Quality

Food quality is universally recognized as a core determinant of customer satisfaction in the food service industry. In the context of *halal* restaurants, food quality extends beyond taste and freshness to encompass religious cleanliness, ethical sourcing and the spiritual concept of *tayyiban*, meaning wholesome and pure (Ali & Rahman, 2023). Consumers expect not only flavorful and hygienic meals but also confidence that every ingredient and process meet *halal* criteria (Wahab & Abdul Razak, 2021).

In Malaysia, consumer preferences in *halal* dining have evolved, especially among younger generations in urban areas. Diners increasingly value culinary creativity, fusion menus, food aesthetics and modern presentation, provided they remain within *halal* guidelines. According to Ismail *et al.* (2022), Malaysian consumers are willing to pay a premium for *halal* food that is also perceived to be high in nutritional value, freshly prepared and responsibly sourced.

By comparison, Bruneian consumers demonstrate more traditional expectations. They value authenticity, simplicity and consistency in taste, often preferring local Bruneian and Malay cuisines that are familiar and culturally significant (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021). Here, food quality is also judged by portion size, temperature and cultural appropriateness, making the emotional connection to food even more personal.

Several studies have confirmed the direct and positive relationship between food quality and customer satisfaction, brand trust and revisit intention in *halal* restaurants (Rahman *et al.*, 2021; Mohd Noor & Johari, 2024). Especially in a post-pandemic context, food quality has

become a signal not just of value but also of safety and religious integrity, reinforcing its role as a critical antecedent in *halal* dining satisfaction.

3.3. Service Quality

Service quality in *halal* restaurants are multidimensional and influenced by both general hospitality standards and religious considerations. The SERVQUAL model comprising tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy remains a widely accepted framework, though researchers have proposed *halal*-specific extensions to reflect unique Muslim consumer expectations (Che Omar & Mat Daud, 2020).

In Malaysia, customer service has become more professionalized and digitally enhanced. Service staff are increasingly trained not just in hospitality etiquette but also in basic *halal* knowledge, such as food handling, cross-contamination prevention and religious greetings. This hybridization of technical competence and Islamic conduct is shown to boost satisfaction levels, particularly among urban and middle-income customers (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2022).

In Brunei, service interactions are generally more personalized, family-oriented and modest that in line with the country's adherence to *Shariah* law. Diners appreciate when restaurant staff are soft-spoken, respectful and culturally aware, especially in dealing with elders or women (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021). These preferences reflect a broader understanding of Islamic values in customer engagement, making service quality a culturally shaped experience.

Studies have demonstrated a significant and positive correlation between high service quality and customer satisfaction, loyalty and word-of-mouth behavior (Khalid & Sulaiman, 2021; Zainal & Latiff, 2020). Importantly, service quality also acts as a moderator between customer expectations and perceived value, especially in contexts where *halal* assurance is assumed but customer experience is variable.

3.4. Ambience

The ambience of a *halal* restaurant contributes significantly to customer satisfaction by shaping the overall sensory and emotional experience. This includes the physical layout, lighting, temperature, cleanliness, staff appearance, decor and even background music. In *halal* settings, ambience is also evaluated based on its alignment with Islamic values, such as modest seating, absence of inappropriate visuals or sounds and the presence of facilities like prayer areas or Qur'anic inscriptions (Ali & Rahman, 2023).

In Malaysia, especially in urban areas, there has been a surge in *halal*-certified restaurants that combine modern design, artistic aesthetics and spiritual elements. These include minimalist Islamic architecture, Arabic calligraphy and gender-sensitive seating arrangements, which appeal to both religious and lifestyle-conscious consumers (Yusof & Nor, 2023).

In Brunei, ambience is typically more traditional and subdued. Restaurants often emphasize privacy, simplicity and family-friendly designs, and are expected to maintain a respectful atmosphere free from loud music or disruptive behavior (Mohd Noor & Johari, 2024). This reflects a national preference for spiritual tranquility and community cohesion over novelty or trendiness.

Ambience not only enhances satisfaction but also influences emotional attachment to the brand and dining frequency. Consumers who feel spiritually and emotionally comfortable in a *halal* dining space are more likely to recommend it and become loyal patrons (Salleh & Karim, 2020).

3.5. Technology Integration

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, technology integration has become a vital component of customer satisfaction in the F&B sector. The increased use of contactless service technologies has transformed restaurant customer experiences by providing greater convenience, efficiency and reduced physical interaction (Aziz & Adnan, 2021). Halal restaurants have increasingly adopted contactless technologies, including QR menus, mobile payments, online ordering platforms, AI-based menu personalization and halal verification apps (Yusof & Nor, 2023; Halim & Majid, 2023).

In Malaysia, many *halal* restaurants, especially in urban and tourist-heavy areas have embraced digital tools to enhance speed, efficiency and safety. These innovations are especially appealing to tech-savvy younger consumers, who equate technological convenience with modern professionalism and reliability (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2022).

In Brunei, while the pace of technological adoption is more gradual, digital transformation is underway through initiatives supported by government-linked agencies. Restaurants are beginning to implement basic contactless features to improve service flow and reduce health risks, especially among younger segments and international visitors (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021).

Studies show that technology integration positively influences customer satisfaction by improving service speed, reducing human error and enhancing perceived service quality.

Furthermore, when these technologies are embedded within a *halal* framework such as apps verifying *halal* status or *Shariah*-compliant payment gateways, their impact on satisfaction is even more pronounced (Halim & Majid, 2023).

3.6. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction in *halal* restaurants is a multifaceted construction, driven by the combined effect of tangible and intangible service dimensions. It reflects a consumer's overall evaluation of the dining experience and has been linked to behavioral outcomes such as brand loyalty, repeat patronage and advocacy (Rahman *et al.*, 2021; Ismail *et al.*, 2022).

In *halal* contexts, satisfaction is not only a matter of sensory enjoyment but also spiritual alignment and emotional reassurance. Consumers who are confident in the restaurant's *halal* integrity, feel respected during service interactions and find comfort in the ambience are more likely to express high satisfaction and return in the future (Salleh & Karim, 2020).

Importantly, satisfaction levels can differ significantly between Malaysia and Brunei due to variations in cultural norms, regulatory strictness and customer expectations. Malaysian diners may prioritize innovation, efficiency and variety, while Bruneians may focus more on religious harmony, interpersonal warmth and consistent service delivery (Tan & Mokhtar, 2021; Nasir & Kamal, 2022).

4. Proposed Conceptual Framework: *Halal* Food Restaurant Services in Malaysia and Brunei

The proposed conceptual framework integrates key attributes that have been identified in recent *halal* foodservice literature as critical contributors to customer satisfaction. In the context of Malaysia and Brunei, two Muslim-majority countries with distinct *halal* governance structures and consumer expectations. The framework aims to explore how specific service elements influence dining satisfaction among *halal* restaurant customers. The model is designed to guide comparative research and managerial strategy by illustrating the interaction between religious, experiential and technological factors in shaping customer perceptions.

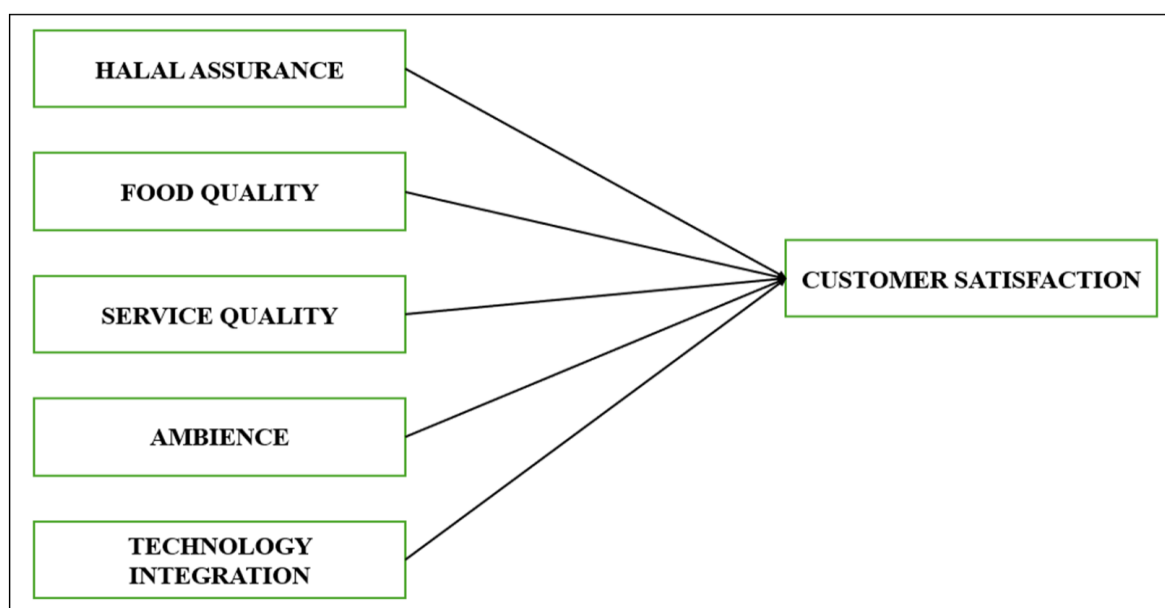


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework: *Halal* Food Restaurant Services in Malaysia and Brunei.

Figure 1 above illustrates five key elements of *halal* food restaurant services in Malaysia and Brunei that lead to customer satisfaction. Among five key elements are *halal* assurance, food quality, service quality, ambience and technology integration that are considered to have a direct and significant impact on Customer Satisfaction in *halal* restaurant settings. These elements have been consistently highlighted in recent academic and industry research from 2020 to 2025 as essential factors influencing the dining experience of Muslim consumers. Each of these components represents a distinct aspect of service delivery, ranging from religious compliance and food preparation standards to the overall environment and the use of digital tools in customer interaction.

In both Malaysia and Brunei, *halal* assurance remains a foundational expectation, as it reflects adherence to Islamic dietary laws and builds consumer trust. However, the way it is implemented and perceived may vary in Malaysia, *halal* certification is often used as a competitive business strategy, while in Brunei, it is legally mandated and uniformly expected. Similarly, food quality and service quality are universally valued, but Malaysian customers may place higher importance on menu innovation and speed of service, whereas Bruneian consumers may prioritize tradition, portion size and interpersonal warmth.

Ambience and technology integration also contribute to customer satisfaction in different ways. Malaysian *halal* restaurants, particularly in urban areas, increasingly embrace modern, aesthetically pleasing spaces and digital ordering systems, aligning with the preferences of tech-savvy, younger consumers. In contrast, Bruneian establishments tend to emphasize

modest, family-friendly environments that support religious and cultural norms, with gradual adoption of digital enhancements.

5. Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual research design that is grounded in a comprehensive literature review and synthesis of secondary data. Rather than relying on primary data collection such as surveys or interviews, the research focuses on analyzing and interpreting existing scholarly work to develop a conceptual framework. This approach is suitable for addressing emerging research areas, such as comparative *halal* foodservice in Malaysia and Brunei, where empirical studies remain limited. The goal is to identify and organize key service dimensions that contribute to customer satisfaction in *halal* restaurant settings, and to propose a framework that can later be empirically tested. Conceptual research is particularly useful for integrating fragmented knowledge and offering direction for future academic inquiry and managerial application.

A systematic literature review was conducted to identify relevant academic and industry sources that support the development of the conceptual framework. Major databases including Scopus, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight and Google Scholar were searched to ensure comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals and recent publications. The search focused on publications from 2020 to 2025, aligning with the period following the COVID-19 pandemic to capture evolving consumer expectations, digital service trends and institutional changes in the *halal* foodservice landscape.

To ensure the relevance and quality of the literature, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during the review process for the development of the proposed conceptual framework. The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings and industry reports published between 2020 and 2025, covering key constructs relevant to the study namely *halal* assurance, food quality, service quality, ambience, technology integration and their influence on customer satisfaction. Studies related to *halal* foodservice, Islamic hospitality and Muslim consumer behavior were prioritized, particularly those incorporating service quality frameworks such as SERVQUAL. Emphasis was placed on literature from Malaysia, Brunei or comparable Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia to maintain contextual relevance.

Meanwhile, exclusion criteria were applied to eliminate sources that did not meet the academic and thematic requirements of the study. These included non-academic sources such as blogs, editorials and opinion pieces, articles unavailable in full text and studies that were

unrelated to foodservice delivery, *halal* compliance or customer satisfaction. After a rigorous screening and filtering process, a total of 33 relevant publications were selected for in-depth review and thematic analysis, which collectively form the foundation of the proposed conceptual framework for *halal* restaurant services in Malaysia and Brunei.

6. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This conceptual paper presents a comparative framework that highlights the key service dimensions influencing customer satisfaction in *halal* food restaurant services across Malaysia and Brunei. The proposed model integrates both traditional service quality constructs such as food quality, service delivery and ambience as well as *halal*-specific elements including *halal* assurance and *Shariah*-compliant practices. Additionally, the framework considers the growing role of technology integration in shaping post-pandemic consumer expectations and service innovation.

By contextualizing these constructs within the unique regulatory, cultural and consumer landscapes of Malaysia and Brunei, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of *halal* service delivery in Southeast Asia. As both countries continue to position themselves as global leaders in the *halal* economy, understanding how service attributes affect customer satisfaction is not only academically relevant but also critical for informing managerial strategy, branding and policy development in the competitive *halal* F&B sector.

This conceptual study is subject to several limitations. First, the framework is developed entirely from secondary sources and has not yet been empirically validated using primary data from restaurant customers. Second, the available literature is more extensive for Malaysia than for Brunei, which may create some imbalance in the depth of the cross-country comparison. Third, the proposed framework is context-specific to Muslim-majority Southeast Asian settings and may require further adaptation before being applied to other cultural or regulatory contexts. Finally, although the five service dimensions are conceptually distinct, some degree of overlap may exist among constructs such as service quality, ambience and *halal* assurance. Future empirical studies should therefore examine their discriminant validity and refine the measurement of each construct where necessary.

To enhance the robustness and applicability of the proposed framework, future studies are encouraged to empirically validate the model through both quantitative and qualitative research designs. One important direction is the use of survey-based comparative studies to test the framework across different demographic segments in Malaysia and Brunei, thereby capturing real-world customer perceptions and behavioral responses.

Longitudinal research would also be valuable in observing how customer expectations and satisfaction levels evolve over time, particularly in the post-COVID era, where safety, hygiene and digital service enhancements have become more prominent. Additionally, multi-group analysis using PLS-SEM or SEM AMOS or similar techniques can be applied to test country context as a moderating variable, thereby determining whether the strength of the relationships between service attributes and satisfaction differs significantly between Malaysia and Brunei.

Another recommended avenue is the inclusion of non-Muslim *halal* consumers, a growing market segment that values *halal* offerings for ethical, health or cultural reasons. This would provide a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of *halal* foodservice satisfaction. Lastly, as digital transformation accelerates, future research should investigate how the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) such as AI-powered ordering, chatbots or *halal* verification tools affect consumer perceptions of *halal* integrity and service quality.

Such empirical validation and expansion would not only strengthen the theoretical grounding of the framework but also enhance its practical utility for restaurant operators, certification bodies, and policymakers aiming to elevate *halal* dining experiences in diverse markets.

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