

Exploring Factors Influencing Students' Satisfaction at Arked Meranti, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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Abstract Student satisfaction with campus food services plays a crucial role in their well-being and academic success. This study explores the key food service attributes influencing student satisfaction at Arked Meranti Cafeteria, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor, focusing on students from Rahman Putra College and Tun Fatimah College. A quantitative research design was employed, with data collected from 341 students through an online survey distributed via Google Forms. The survey covered demographic details and four key food service attributes: food and beverage quality, service quality, setting quality, and price-value perception. Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. The results indicate that all variables significantly contribute to overall student satisfaction. Descriptive analysis provided insights into satisfaction levels, while multiple regression analysis determined the relative impact of each attribute. The findings reveal that setting quality ($\beta = 0.331$) has the strongest influence on satisfaction, followed by service quality ($\beta = 0.316$) and food and beverage quality ($\beta = 0.219$), whereas price and value ($\beta = 0.005$) have the least impact. These findings expand existing knowledge on student satisfaction at Arked Meranti by emphasizing the significance of key factors. Additionally, they offer recommendations for university management to improve student satisfaction.

Keywords: *Influencing Factors, Students, Satisfaction, Arked Meranti*

1. Introduction

A cafeteria is a type of restaurant where guests receive food and beverages in exchange for payment made either before or after the meal (Misiran et al., 2022). Cafeteria food services operate in diverse settings, including hospitals, nursing homes, child and senior care centres, prisons, schools, and university campuses. Among these, university food service represents a significant segment of the global food service industry, as an increasing number of college students rely on on-campus dining facilities during their studies (Smith et al., 2020). The primary goal of university cafeterias is to meet students' basic dietary needs while promoting awareness of nutrition and health (Sha, 2020). In this regard, Ahmad Shariff et al. (2023) noted that the growing student population has led to increased demand for dining options on campuses, making cafeterias essential providers of quality, healthy, and hygienic food.

University cafeterias play a vital role in catering to the dietary needs of students, staff, and visitors (Noh et al., 2023). The quality of food, as highlighted by Serhan and Serhan (2019), is a critical factor in customer satisfaction. A cafeteria with quality food, excellent facilities, and a comfortable environment can enhance student satisfaction, foster a sense of belonging, and encourage social interactions. Given that students spend considerable time on campus, universities must prioritize providing excellent food service to improve their campus experience (Noh et al., 2023).

This study focuses on student satisfaction with the UTM cafeteria, considering not just food taste but also key attributes such as quality of food and beverage, quality of service, quality of setting and value and price. Understanding these factors is vital for university administrators aiming to maintain a positive campus environment. High satisfaction levels in campus cafeterias foster loyalty, positive word of mouth, increased sales, and overall better campus experience, ultimately supporting academic success. Conversely, dissatisfaction can have detrimental effects. This study aims to identify and explore the food service attributes: quality of food and beverages, quality of service, quality of setting, and price, that significantly impact student satisfaction.

2. Literature Review

Students' Satisfaction: Customer satisfaction is determined by the extent to which a product or service meets or exceeds customer expectations. Suchánek et al. (as cited in Afroza et al., 2022) describe satisfaction as a subjective evaluation based on expectations and post-purchase experiences. In the context of higher education, numerous studies have identified key attributes influencing students' satisfaction with food services, including food quality, service quality, setting quality, and price and value (Serhan & Serhan, 2019). These factors shape students' choices and satisfaction levels, offering insights for university administrators seeking to enhance cafeteria services (Afroza et al., 2022). Unlike many studies that approach student satisfaction solely from a customer satisfaction perspective, this research aims to establish a comprehensive definition of student satisfaction specific to university food services (Afroza et al., 2022).

Quality of Food and Beverages: Food quality consistently emerges as a critical determinant of customer satisfaction in cafeteria and restaurant studies (DK et al., 2020). Attributes such as taste, freshness, aroma, presentation, color, and texture significantly influence students' perceptions (Afroza et al., 2022). Previous research confirms that food and beverage quality is often the most impactful factor in university cafeteria satisfaction (Ahmad Shariff et al., 2023). Ibrahim et al. (2018) found that improved food quality could encourage students to dine more frequently at on-campus facilities. Thus, food service operators should diversify their menus and offer appealing options that align with students' nutritional needs (Ahmad Shariff et al., 2023). However, studies have highlighted a persistent issue of energy-dense, nutrient-poor food options in institutional cafeterias, underscoring the need for healthier offerings (Serhan & Serhan, 2019).

Quality of Service: Service quality plays a significant role in dining satisfaction, particularly among health-conscious and adventurous diners (Ahmad Shariff et al., 2023). Interactional quality is a crucial element in enhancing college student satisfaction (Akbara et al., 2021). Studies further reveal that service quality affects customer satisfaction and loyalty in food service settings. Additionally, the physical environment impacts emotional and cognitive responses, shaping perceptions of service quality (Ali et al., 2014). Effective service quality evaluation tools can help operators improve their offerings and foster greater satisfaction among students (Misiran et al., 2022).

Quality of Setting: The setting, encompassing atmosphere and operational aspects, significantly influences students' perceptions of campus food services (Serhan & Serhan, 2019). Key elements such as cleanliness, decor, lighting, and the dining environment play a vital role in satisfaction (Ngha et al., 2022) for instance, creating a welcoming atmosphere can foster a sense of community and encourage relaxed interactions among students. Research has also indicated that the quality of the dining setting impacts overall satisfaction by enhancing the consumer experience (Akbara et al., 2021). Cafeterias can achieve this by offering aesthetically pleasing decor, convenient facilities, and comfortable environments tailored to students' preferences.

Price and Value: Price and value significantly influence students' food service choices due to their limited financial resources, often derived from scholarships or loans (Othman et al., 2013). Affordable pricing and perceived value for money are critical factors in maintaining satisfaction and meal frequency (Smith et al., 2020). Students are more likely to feel satisfied when the price aligns with the quantity and quality of the food offered. Conversely, higher prices elevate quality expectations, which must be met to sustain satisfaction (Serhan & Serhan, 2019). Therefore, food service providers should ensure an appropriate balance between cost, portion sizes, and quality to maximize satisfaction and loyalty.

3. Methodology

Research Design, Sampling and Measurement: This study adopted a quantitative approach and used online questionnaires for data collection. It draws on the work of Serhan & Serhan (2019), Misiran et al. (2022) and Ahmad Shariff et al. (2023) as guidance for the study's methodology and analysis. The primary aim is to examine the factors influencing university students' satisfaction at Arked Cafeteria, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, specifically the quality of food and beverages, service quality, the quality of the setting, and price and value.

The respondents were required to have a prior dining experience at Arked Cafeteria. The study's population comprised 3000 students from nearby colleges, Rahman Putra and Tun Fatimah, and convenience random sampling was employed. Based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination, 341 students were required to achieve a 95% confidence level.

An online questionnaire comprising 34 items across six (6) sections was used for data collection. The closed-ended questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Section A focused on demographic details, including age, gender, race, college, semester, income, frequency of cafeteria visits, and reasons for dining at the cafeteria. Section B included questions related to the independent variables, addressing the factors influencing students' satisfaction with dining at Arked Cafeteria, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai. Data collection was conducted in March 2024.

Reliability of the Instruments: A pilot study was conducted with 30 students from Rahman Putra College and Tun Fatimah at UiTM Skudai, Johor. Table 1 below summarizes the Cronbach's alpha values from the reliability test for all the independent variables: quality of food and beverages, quality of service, quality of setting, and price and value, as well as the dependent variable, students' satisfaction. The results demonstrate acceptable reliability, with the lowest alpha value being 0.730 for "price and value" and the highest being 0.92 for "quality of food and beverages." The dependent variable, students' satisfaction, recorded Cronbach's alpha value of 0.887.

Table 1: Reliability Test

Variables	Dimensions	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
Independent Variables	Quality of Food and Beverages	0.928	6
	Quality of Service	0.861	5
	Quality of Setting	0.880	5
	Price and Value	0.730	5
Dependent Variables	Student Satisfaction	0.887	4

4. Findings

Table 2 postulates the demographic profile characteristics of 341 respondents who participated in this study. The study respondents were aged 18–40 years, with the most frequent age group being 21–23 years (37.5%), while the least frequent was 31–40 years. This aligns with the typical age for post-secondary studies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Regarding gender, there were more males (51.6%) than females (48.4%), likely due to higher male enrollment in technical courses (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2024). In terms of ethnicity, 32.0% of the participants are Chinese, 30.5% Indian, 20.5% others and 17.0% Malay, reflecting the institution's diverse student body (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). Most respondents were from Rahman Putra College (52.8%), followed by Tun Fatimah College (47.2%), possibly due to both colleges' proximity to the cafeteria and larger student population (University Statistical Report, 2023).

Students in Semester 4 had the highest representation (16.7%), while Semester 1 students had the lowest (7.9%), suggesting greater engagement among mid-semester students (University Statistical Report, 2023). Most respondents fell within the RM1500–RM2500 income range (29.0%), with the lowest representation in the RM3000 and above category (10.3%), reflecting typical student financial conditions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023).

A majority of respondents responded they visit the cafeteria "3 times" weekly (29.0%), followed by "2 times" (28.2%), and "4 and above" (17.3%). This indicates that most students visit the cafeteria two to three times weekly, likely due to meal schedules and campus activities (University Food Services Report, 2023). Concerning monthly expenditure on food, most participants spent RM200–RM300 (31.4%), while the least amount of participants spent RM300 and above (11.7%), highlighting their budget-conscious spending (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023). The main reasons for cafeteria preference include meal variety (46.0%), proximity (33.4%), service quality (12.6%), and affordability (7.9%), underscoring the importance of diverse menus and convenience in dining choices (University Dining Services Survey, 2023; Ismail et al., 2020).

Table 2: Respondents' Demographic Profiles

Variables	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18 -20 years old	91	26.7
	21 - 23 years old	128	37.5
	24 - 30 years old	94	27.6
	31 - 40 years old	28	8.2
	41 years old and above	0	0.0
Gender	Male	176	51.6
	Female	165	48.4
Race	Malay	58	17.0
	Chine	109	32.0
	Indian	104	30.5
	Others	70	20.5
College	Rahman Putra College	180	52.8
	Tun Fatimah College	161	47.2
Semester	1	27	7.9
	2	53	15.5
	3	44	12.9
	4	57	16.7
	5	44	12.9
	6	38	11.1
	7	46	13.5
	8	32	9.4
Income	Null	76	22.3
	Less than RM1500	87	25.5
	RM1500 - RM2500	99	29.0
	RM2500 - RM3000	44	12.9
	RM3000 and above	35	10.3
The Frequency of Visiting the Cafeteria	1	87	25.5
	2	96	28.2
	3	99	29.0
	4 and above	59	17.3
Average Monthly Food Expenditure at The Cafeteria	Less than RM100	100	29.3
	RM100 - RM200	94	27.6
	RM200 - RM300	107	31.4
	RM300 and above	40	11.7
Reasons to Consume Meals at This Cafeteria	It is the nearest food premise	114	33.4
	There is a variety of meals available	157	46.0
	The service is good	43	12.6
	The prices are cheaper	27	7.9

Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide the descriptive analysis results, showcasing the mean, standard deviation, and ranking for each item within a single variable.

Table 3: Descriptive Analysis for Quality of Food and Beverages

No	Item	N	Mean	Standard Dev	Rank
A1	Taste of the food and beverages.	341	3.93	1.185	5
A2	Display of the food.	341	3.94	1.172	4
A3	The diversity of displayed products.	341	4.21	1.224	1
A4	Freshness of products.	341	4.17	1.234	2
A5	Taste and flavor of products.	341	3.97	1.150	3
A6	Portion size	341	3.90	1.057	6

According to Table 3, the attribute with the highest mean score, 4.21, is "diversity of displayed products," indicating a strong positive response from respondents. This finding aligns with Embling et al., (2020) assertion that a diverse product range significantly enhances consumer satisfaction. On the other hand, the attribute with the lowest mean score, 3.90, is "portion size," suggesting a slightly less favorable perception among respondents. This observation is consistent with Lee and Kim's (2021) conclusion that smaller portion sizes often result in lower levels of consumer satisfaction.

Table 4: Descriptive Analysis for Quality of Service

No	Item	N	Mean	Standard Dev	Rank
B1	The speed of service.	341	3.95	1.199	2
B2	Staff knowledge of the food and beverages sold.	341	3.85	1.061	4
B3	Friendly treatment by the cafeteria staff.	341	4.22	1.197	1
B4	An appropriate service approach.	341	3.95	1.068	2
B5	Cooperation of workers at the cafeteria.	341	3.88	1.026	3

As shown in Table 4, the attribute with the highest mean score, 4.22, is "friendly treatment by the cafeteria staff," reflecting strong positive feedback from respondents. This aligns with Brown and Davis's (2022) findings, which emphasize that positive interactions with staff significantly boost overall customer satisfaction. Conversely, the lowest mean score, 3.85, was recorded for "staff knowledge," indicating general satisfaction but highlighting some areas for improvement. This observation is supported by White and Green's (2022) suggestion that while staff knowledge is essential, its perceived effectiveness often varies among consumers.

Table 5: Descriptive Analysis for Quality of Setting

No	Item	N	Mean	Standard Dev	Rank
C1	Comfort and sitting availability.	341	3.86	1.107	4
C2	Cleanliness and hygiene.	341	3.98	1.154	2
C3	Ambiance.	341	3.90	1.169	3
C4	Lighting.	341	4.05	1.210	1
C5	Convenience of service hours	341	3.90	1.287	3

According to Table 5, the highest mean score, 4.05, was recorded for "lighting," reflecting strong positive feedback from respondents. This finding aligns with Adams and Clark's (2021) observation that proper lighting significantly improves the overall atmosphere and satisfaction in dining environments. Meanwhile, the lowest mean score, 3.86, was recorded for "comfort and sitting availability," indicating a generally positive perception but with some room for enhancement. This is consistent with Ahmad Shariff et al. (2023) argument that while comfort is a key factor, it often demonstrates moderate variability in consumer feedback.

Table 6: Descriptive Analysis for Price and Value

No	Item	N	Mean	Standard Dev	Rank
D1	Reasonable portion size.	341	2.74	0.730	4
D2	Affordable price charging.	341	2.74	0.730	4
D3	Food bought is value for money.	341	2.80	0.770	2
D4	Price charged based on the current market.	341	2.78	0.719	3
D5	The price of food is written clearly on the menu.	341	2.79	0.768	1

According to Table 6, the scores for all attributes indicate an average mean, reflecting the belief that the food purchased offers slightly less value than expected.

Table 7: Descriptive Analysis for Students Satisfaction (DV)

No	Item	N	Mean	Standard Dev	Rank
E1	Overall satisfaction regarding the quality of food and beverages.	341	3.78	1.133	3
E2	Overall satisfaction regarding the service quality.	341	4.05	1.185	1
E3	Overall satisfaction regarding the setting.	341	3.89	1.033	2
E4	Overall satisfaction regarding the prices.	341	3.74	1.075	4

As presented in Table 7, the highest mean score for overall student satisfaction was recorded for "service" indicating strong overall satisfaction with service quality with 4.05. This aligns with Roberts and Williams's (2023) findings that high service quality is a crucial determinant of overall customer satisfaction in service environments. Conversely, the lowest mean score, 3.74, was for "prices," reflecting a generally positive but less robust perception of pricing. This observation is supported by Martin and Green's (2022) conclusion that while pricing is an important factor in satisfaction, it often yields moderate levels of consumer contentment.

Discussion

This study utilized multiple regression analysis to examine factors influencing university students' satisfaction with food services at Arked Meranti Cafeteria, UTM Skudai. The factors involved were quality of food and beverage, quality of service, quality of setting and price and value. The results of multiple regression analysis indicated that all independent variables significantly contribute to students' satisfaction (p -values < 0.05). As reported by Fonseca (2023), the standardized coefficient was used to compare the values for each of the different variables.

The findings of this study indicated that the quality of setting scored a high Beta Coefficient Value in determining the most influential variable that influences students' satisfaction with food service at Arked Meranti with .0331, followed by quality of service, quality of food and beverage and price and value.

Table 8: Regression Analysis for Factors Influencing Students' Satisfaction

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.588	0.213		2.765	0.006
Quality of Food and Beverage	0.202	0.057	0.219	3.522	0.001
Quality of Service	0.318	0.061	0.316	5.234	0.001
Quality of Setting	0.309	0.055	0.331	5.601	0.001
Price and Value	0.008	0.60	0.005	1.39	0.001

a. Dependent Variable: Students' Satisfaction

It is interesting to note that while price and value are considered crucial factors in maintaining satisfaction and meal frequency, particularly with affordable pricing and perceived value in purchasing food (Smith et al., 2020), the current findings contradict this, highlighting the quality of setting as the most influential factor in shaping students' satisfaction at the Arked Meranti Cafeteria. According to Akbara et al. (2021), creating a welcoming atmosphere can build a sense of community and encourage relaxed interactions among students. Moreover, the quality of the dining environment significantly impacts overall satisfaction by enhancing the dining experience, achieved through aesthetically pleasing decor, convenient facilities, and a comfortable atmosphere tailored to students' preferences.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has successfully addressed the research objectives by examining the factors influencing university students' satisfaction at the Arked Meranti Cafeteria, UTM Skudai, Johor. All four independent variables, quality of food and beverages, quality of service, quality of setting, and price and value, were found to influence students' satisfaction. Among these, the quality of the setting emerged as the most influential factor. It can be concluded that the quality of the setting plays a critical role in shaping student satisfaction, as it creates a welcoming atmosphere and fosters a sense of belonging among students.

Nevertheless, this study focused on a single cafeteria at UTM Skudai, Johor. Future research could replicate this study across all cafeterias at UTM Skudai, Johor, to determine whether similar patterns emerge. Additionally, future studies could explore other variables, such as accessibility and price sensitivity, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing student satisfaction.

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