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Evaluating Local Street Food Service Quality: Insights from Visitors to Penang

Noor Suhaila Yusof[1], Kamal Izzuwan Ramli[2]

School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management, College of Law, Government and International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia

Email: [1]nsuhaila@uum.edu.my, [2]izzuwan@uum.edu.my

Corresponding Author Email: nsuhaila@uum.edu.my

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Abstract

This study investigates the service quality of local street food vendors among visitors to Penang Island, emphasizing the impact of the physical environment, staff behavior, and food quality on visitor satisfaction. A total of 130 questionnaires were sent using simple random selection, with 105 completed and used for further analysis. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the information reported in this study. Findings reveal that all three factors significantly influence service quality. The physical environment, including cleanliness and organization of food stalls, plays a key role in shaping customer perceptions. Vendors can enhance service quality by maintaining clean and appealing environments. Staffs behaviour emerged as a crucial factor, with courteous and responsive service leading to higher customer satisfaction. Positive staff interactions encourage customer loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion. It was discovered that food quality was the most significant determinant of overall satisfaction, with taste, freshness, and portion size being key considerations. The results of the study may help those who wants to start a street food business, and those who are already in business have a better understanding of their customers. Furthermore, it may serve as a useful guide and reference for vendors and customers.

Keywords: Local Street Food, Service Quality, Food Tourism, Food Vendors, Hawkers Food, Penang

Introduction

Penang is renowned as a gastronomy destination and food paradise. Gastronomy, also known as food tourism, has gotten a lot of attention from tourism stakeholders. According to Rousta et al. (2019), food tourism influences the intention to visit the destination while also favourably affecting the intention to advocate local cuisine. Penang, Malaysia's smallest state, is referred to as the "Pearl of the Orient" and "Food Capital of Malaysia" (Abubakar & Mohamed, 2010). In 2009, George Town, which is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site, was placed 12th in the New York Times' Frugal & Food category. It has been acknowledge that a

destination's culture and customs are tied to its local food and beverages Nokman et al. (2023). Previous studies indicates that Penang is known as being the most popular Asia travel destination that has the reputation as the 'food paradise' (Abdul Shukur, 2023).

According to Farhana (2020), street food alludes to “hawker food,” which is street meals that is sold on the side of the road. A street food vendor may operate from a moveable booth or a cart. Three criteria define the street food industry. It is incredibly practical, affordable and widely available in urban location; and it is delivered in stalls, kiosks, or vans that are commonly seen on business sidewalks or at festivals (Bellia et al. 2016). In Penang, hawker food rivals or even surpasses the best gourmet experiences in other cities. Penang is a popular gourmet destination among Malaysians, known for its simple eateries and booths rather than sophisticated restaurants (Abdul Shukur, 2023). Penang's reputation for delicious food has led to a high concentration of hawker stalls and restaurants, particularly in Georgetown. Malaysian cuisine incorporates local cooking traditions and practices, which represent the country's diverse people.

The quality of services provided by tourist areas should be carefully assisted and properly managed because it can generate touristic revenues that would be beneficial to the local community. For instance, it has the potential to generate numerous levels of employment for people at various levels of a particular community. Furthermore, the development in tourism industry into the community area helps and provides local individuals with opportunities for economic growth and improve their lives by becoming one of the vendors or street food operators. This shows that even though street food is viewed as just a small business operator, for a tourist attraction location like Penang, this business can bring a lot of benefits not only to the operators but also to the Penang tourism industry as a whole. As a result, the primary objective is to investigate the service quality of visitors towards street food vendors in Penang.

Food quality is one of the essential component of the food consumption process. Food quality can be separated into four categories: food safety, nutrition, flavour, and cleanliness (Henson and Trail, 1993). Food quality will not only influence the overall level of service offered to customers. It also plays a crucial role in maintaining customer loyalty to the service.

However, according to Benny-Ollierra and Badrie (2007), there were some hygiene issues among the street food stalls while handling their food and during transaction with money. However, not all food hawkers focus food quality, as Kesumasari (2020) found that most vendors put their stalls alongside highways that are immediately exposed to external smoking trucks, which would have an effect on the quality of food. In this situation, street food vendors have put public customers' health and safety at risk unless they take preventive steps and are attentive when making and managing the street meals offered. Therefore, it is crucial for these food vendors to be aware about the importance of maintaining the quality of the foods and services offered because it will not only influence customers’ satisfaction but also improve the overall image of the tourism destination.

Even though street food sales are a significant contributor to Malaysia's economy, there have been few studies on the primary factors that influence service quality by street-food vendors in Penang. Although some articles have been published previously, the quantity is insufficient

to create a reliable database to conduct a more accurate analysis. The study is relevant because it offers street food vendors, legislators, and aspiring entrepreneur on how to enhance customer satisfaction and service quality. Because of its popularity and profitability, street food is a competitive industry that attracts many vendors. Maintaining current customers with high-quality service while attracting new customers has become a great struggle for many street food vendors (Abu Bakar & Farinda, 2012).

This study was carried out to investigate about the quality of service, specifically regarding the visitor's perception and the quality of street food vendors. It has been previously established that food been served has a significant impact on customers' eating experiences and satisfaction (Anjun et al., 2016; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Furthermore, the impact of providing a good quality of service to the visitors would also affect their satisfaction as a whole. According to Omar et al. (2016), providing services involves direct interactions between servers and customers and, when it is done correctly, this interactions build a trust-based relationships among them. When customers are pleased, they are more inclined to tell their friends, family, and coworkers.

Additionally, this study sought to ascertain how the physical environment effects the service quality of street food vendors. These vendors may operate in a variety of locations around a city, either concentrated in high-traffic areas or dispersed throughout larger regions. The atmosphere of food stalls is significant in the sense that it may have an impact on the quality of human life, such as people's happiness, comfort and their stress levels. According to a study regarding the atmosphere of food stalls in Indonesia by Kesumasari (2020), it was discovered that some consumers felt physically comfortable but socially uncomfortable at the street food stalls. The vendor's location, weather, and use of tarps ensures that consumers will not feel crowded or uncomfortable. Customers were found to feel socially uncomfortable if the vendors do not provide sitting spaces for them. Customers were found to stay less than an hour on street food carts, as opposed to other types of street vendors, because they come to buy a takeaway. Consequently, this study investigates the most fundamental aspects of street vendors: how street vendors' physical environments impact the service quality given by food sellers.

Previous study has highlighted the importance of service quality among restaurant services, comparatively only a few have looked at the service dimension in terms of street food (Seo & Lee, 2021). Excellent service quality should prioritise customer satisfaction, resolving inquiries, and surpassing expectations. According to Rheinländer et al. (2008), visitors always buy street food from the same seller with whom they have created confidence. A vendor who delivers good services to consumers would encourage visitors to return to the same booth since they have sentiments of trust and confidence. As a result, one of the objectives of our research is to identify the elements that influence the quality of service offered by food sellers. This allows vendors to better determine whether visitors' expectations are satisfied. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the factors that affect visitors' perceptions of the quality of service provided by Penang's local street food vendors.

Literature Review

Someone who sells goods, foods, and merchandise outside a typical business, such as on the street or at an open-air market, is known as a street vendor. The street vendor's stall can be

a cart that can be carried from place to place and returned home at the end of the day, or it can be a tiny outdoor space that can be locked and closed at night (Kesumasari, 2020). Street food vendors not only provide affordable foods to their customers but also were found to contribute significantly to the economy (Ma, et al. 2019).

Penang has always been known as one of the top food heaven destinations in Malaysia. A study of young domestic visitors found that one of the main reasons for them to prefer Penang street food rather than other destination in Asia is due to the fact that the food is found to be cheap, tasty and safe (Penang Insider, 2024). Customers will therefore be happier and more content with the food they eat if they believe Penang street foods offer a lot in terms of flavour, health and affordability (Nokman, 2023).

Tourists are learn about the history and customs of various cultures when they eat local street food (Madaleno et al., 2017). Therefore, overall views towards local cuisine will be improved if tourists view something new and are likely to learn about another destination's food (Choe and Kin, 2018). Additionally, Choe and Kim (2018) pointed out that eating Penang street food gives tourists epistemic value since they can look for the suggested street food in different places, satisfying their desire to taste the cuisine an get a closer look at the well-known street food in its place of origin. As a result, they would develop a greater appreciation of Penang street food.

In the tourism industry, tourism services are inherently subjective. Businesses, organizations, and companies that prepare meals outside of homes are included in the food service or catering sector. It include eateries, cafeteria at schools and hospitals, catering services, street food, fast food and many others (Ramli, 2023). Purchasing decisions is described as the process by which a customer determines a need, generates possibilities and selects a particular brand and product. This refers to how customers behave, perceive and feel. Consumers' purchasing patterns are crucial factor to consider when assessing a particular product (Yen and Jung, 2022).

Previous studies pointed out that there were differences in the relationship between the quality of service and consumer's purchasing decision. Kealesitse and Kabama (2012) stated that the quality of service influenced the consumer food purchase decision. They found that 80 percent of respondents agreed that the food's safety and quality criteria significantly influence their purchasing decisions. Yong et al. (2020) highlighted that consumers are more concerned with the consistency of the service and thus, and therefore, it is a challenge for the service providers to please their customers. In addition, the service efficiency is also dictated by the attitudes and actions of employees by (Gong, 2018). The delivery of services by street food vendors can vary from employee to employee or even vary from day to day affected by different factors. As aforementioned, achieving customers' satisfaction is not something that is easy to achieve but yet, it is not an issue to be overlooked.

According to a study by Hossny (2022), customers' evaluations of the overall quality of a service or product's experience have a significant influence on their purchasing decisions. In addition, Zhao et al. (2012) indicated that the increased level of customer satisfaction had resulted from high levels of service quality performed to them. Service quality had an impact on customer loyalty and satisfaction, both of which are essential to a business's success

(Caruana, 2000). Additionally, purchase decisions made by customers are closely related to their whole experience using a service or product (Saleh & Ryan, 1991). Other than that, the expansion of street food businesses depends largely on customers' perception and service quality can have significant impact on it. Customer with positive perception towards the service may result in high levels of customer satisfaction (Canny, 2014). Also, customer satisfaction is mostly determined by the quality of the products and services provided (Caruana et al., 2000).. Based on the aforementioned statements that customers' perception plays crucial role in determining customers' satisfaction and consequently increasing the likelihood of customer loyalty.

Service Quality of Street Food

The main focus of this study is to investigate the factors that affect the service quality of street foods such as physical environment, staff behaviour and food quality. The following section discusses the three factors in relation to the service quality.

Physical Environment

The physical environment may induce sentiments of excitement, pleasure, or rest. Thus, it is vital for a restaurant service to have a good physical environment image in attracting customers to visit and dine in (Ngah et al., 2022). Hansen (2002) indicated physical surroundings influence consumers' perceived quality of food products as well as their emotions. Elegant physical surroundings in food usage atmosphere impacted consumers; perceived quality, pleasure-feeling and their level of arousal (Hansen, 2002). In the case of street foods, the physical surrounding of the location that the food vendors operate may influence the customers' perception.

Other than that, visual and aural signals such as function, space, design, colour, and music are examples of atmospheric components in a service context (Hashim et al, 2012). There are numerous characteristics of atmospherics that may be utilised as physical indicators by customers to judge the quality of services supplied by vendors. For example, Rheinlander et al. (2008) conducted a study about physical environment on consumer preferences of food and food safety in Ghana. Data gathered from the interviews among street food vendors and consumers indicated that customers' preference over food choice were influenced by its physical look and presentation setting, which is known as 'neatness'. They emphasised the importance of sellers grooming themselves to look clean and tidy in person in order to convince customers to purchase from a street food stall.

The physical environment appears to impact the service quality of street food sellers. A study by Farhana et al. (2020) examined the conditions of Bangladeshis' street food environmental awareness towards cleanliness and food handling safety procedures. Their findings indicated that many kids faced illness from eating street food because the stalls were located near exposed drains and lack rubbish receptacles. Irresponsible vendors were found to dump their trash in the adjacent drains or around their stalls. These behaviours not only bring negative image for the vendors but more importantly it would bring serious health threats to their customers, especially to the high risk population such as the elderly and young children (CDC, 2024).

Consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about the cleanliness and hygiene of food suppliers as a result of being more mindful of what they eat (Elseidi, 2018). In addition to the taste of the food, Loh and Hassan (2021) noted that consumers also pay attention to the overall cleanliness of the establishment, including the outside and inside spaces, as well as the personal hygiene of the employees in the food operators. This demonstrates that, in addition to appealing and pleasant surroundings, people also place greater emphasis on food safety and cleanliness when deciding where to eat. Also, studies have shown that these factors influence customers' perception and satisfaction.

In relation to this, Ryu and Han (2011) indicated that the physical environment influences the location's brand image. Physical environment of street food could be successfully used to promote the owner's brand image, as well as to reposition the guest's perceptual mapping among competitors, and to directly improve customer happiness with the service experience. Nguyen and Leblanc (2002) discovered that employees who interact with guests and the physical environment had a strong favourable influence on new clients' perceptions of the vendor's image. Hightower et al. (2013) stated that the service owner's physical environment is vital in motivating consumer buying behaviour and at the same time promoting brand image.

Staff Behaviour

The service staff behaviour has a significant impact on the quality of service provided by street food vendors. The relevance of service employee interpersonal qualities in a service quality setting is highlighted in both marketing and service quality literature Konuk (2019). For instance, literature on client relationship marketing discussed about service interactions focusing primarily to those individualised marketing communication between service provider and service customer (Tuzunkan & Albayrak, 2016). The interaction between employee and customer service are the primary application of workers' interpersonal traits in the service setting. Service interactions are influenced by communication, client orientation, service customisation, staff flexibility, and employee emotions (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). Employee quality, service efficiency, cleanliness, linguistic competence, comprehension of visitors' request, friendliness, and helpfulness all have a positive impact on satisfaction. Staff service and menu diversity are crucial factors in ensuring customer satisfaction (Ali et al., 2021). As a result, the service owner must be cautious about the service quality of their personnel and providing appropriate training for them. There is a high emphasis on staff commitment to the fundamentals of service interactions to improve the company's overall performance and quality (Kankam, 2023).

Furthermore, Rossi et al. (2012) stated that consumers desire some reciprocity from the establishment where they eat, represented in the form of good service. The cleanliness, conduct, friendliness, and solicitude of the sellers exemplify this exceptional service. As a result, the level of service offered by the employee or staff will have an indirect impact on the total service quality of the street food owner. Loriato and Pelissari (2017) conducted a survey in Brazil and discovered that service by employee or staff is a decisive factor for consumers when choosing a street food seller. Customers are increasingly concerned about how they are treated; thus service takes precedence over other aspects such as pricing (Morano et al. (2018).

Cheng (2014) examined a number of metrics pertaining to service behaviour as a measure of service quality. They came to the conclusion that staff service attitudes, respect for client privacy, dealing of customer complaints, managing of problems and unforeseen circumstances, and marketing, advertising and promotional skills are the main factors that determine well-performance service. Furthermore, Gong et al. (2018) added the service quality is determined depending on how accurately employees take orders and deliver foods, how well-trained and experienced they are, and also employee comfort.

Food Quality

Customers placed food quality at the top of their priority list when selecting a destination for centuries (McNeil & Young, 2019). The food is the primary priority of the clients. Consumer would forgo the wait time for meal preparation if the food delivered was of good quality and satisfying (Al-Tit, 2015). Consumers, especially overseas visitors, will be the key arbiters of food quality. It is one of the aspects influencing consumer satisfaction with meals. Furthermore, food is one of the most important components of people's life because it affects one's health, nutritional status, and mental capacity.

Tourists identified the quality of street food through several factors such as flavour, colour, nutritional content, appearance, texture, and safety.. According to Koo et al. (1999), taste is one of the main key components in determining the food quality. Aside from flavour, there are other attributes such as cleanliness, texture, freshness and temperature to determine food quality. Ramanathan (2016) supported that food quality is the element most closely associated to customer satisfaction and would indirectly impact the service quality offered by street food sellers. Customers will return to the vendors' stalls if they are pleased with the quality of the food and the services they get.

Furthermore, Hanaysha (2016) discovered that the meal quality has a considerable effect on the service quality offered. The tastiness and freshness of items would undoubtedly impact the consumer eating experience and satisfaction in the setting of a hawker centre. According to Jeong and Seo (2014), foodservice managers should attempt to optimise food and service quality for residents since enhancing food quality increases their quality of life because consumer wellbeing or happiness is driven by it.

Ryu et al. (2012) emphasised the significance of food quality as a predictor of customer satisfaction in the restaurant business. As a result, five elements of food quality were adopted from Ryu et al. (2012): the food is fresh, the food is delicious, the food is healthy, the menu items are diverse, and the fragrance of the food is appealing. In relation to this, the impact of hawker food quality has a positive and substantial link with customer satisfaction among Penang visitors (Abdul Shukur, 2023). According to Al-Tit (2015) food quality has a significant impact on customer satisfaction. It is one of the most essential variables contributing to increased levels of satisfaction among customer visiting restaurant in Jordan. Food quality was shown to be the most influential component determining consumer satisfaction in the food service sector, followed by reliability and assurance (Moorthy et al., 2019).

Figure 1.1 illustrate the framework of the study about the quality of service among local food street vendors in Penang. Again, the study aim's aim is to investigate the factors that influence the quality of service provided by local street food vendors in Penang.

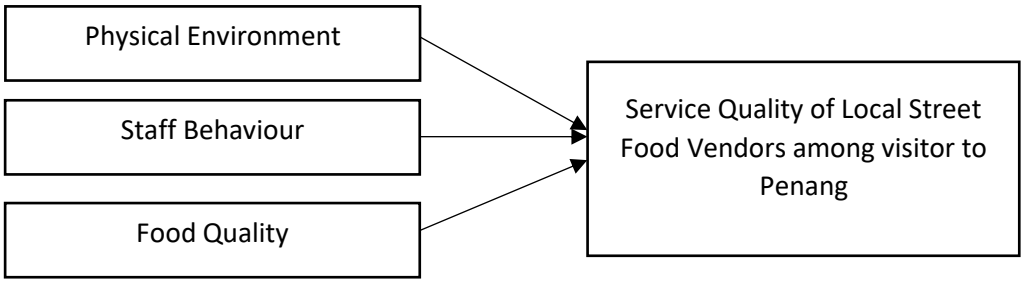


Figure 1: Framework of the study

Methods

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed among visitors to Penang. The questionnaire of the study was divided into four sections. Section A provides the respondents' demographic background, which includes five categories such as gender, age, job status, and race. Section B, C and D outline concerns about food sellers' service quality.

The questionnaire was developed based on prior research into the service quality of food operators such as food service, restaurants, food trucks, food street stalls, and Penang hawkers (Ramli, 2022; Ngah et al., 2022; McNeil et al., 2019; Moorthy et al., 2019). A five-point Likert scale was utilised, with the following options: Strongly Disagree (1); Disagree (2); Neutral (3); Agree (4); Strongly Agree (5). Questionnaires were delivered in popular tourist destinations in Penang, such as Georgetown, Penang Street, and Ferringhi Beach. A total of 130 questionnaires were issued via simple random sampling, with 105 completed and used for further research. SPSS was used to examine the data provided in this study.

Results

The data was compiled and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. A total of 105 questionnaires were eligible for analysis. Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents were female 81 (77.1 percent), while the remaining 24 (22.9 percent) were male. The age groups are categorised as: below 25 years; 26-41 years; 42-57 years; 58-67 years; and 68-76 years. 62 out of 105 of the total respondents which amounts to 59 percent are below 25 years age group category. Next, 26 – 41 years age group recorded 21 (20 percent); 13 (12.4 percent) recorded at the age group of 42 – 57; and only 9 (8.6 percent) was around age 58 – 67 years old. In terms of employment status, 58 (55.2 percent) of respondents were students, while 47 (44.8 percent) worked in either the government or the private sector. The race of respondents comprises Malay, Chinese, Indian, and others, which are recorded as 35 (33.3 percent), 51 (68.1 percent), 6 Indian (5.7 percent), and 3 (2.9 percent), respectively.

Table 1
Demographic Statistics of Respondents (N=105)

Characteristics	*N*	Percentage (%)	Characteristics	*N*	Percentage (%)
Gender			**Race**		
Male	24	22.9	Malay	213	33.3
Female	81	77.1	Chinese	197	68.1
			Indian	52	5.7
			Others	3	2.9
Age					
<25 years old	62	59			
26 – 41 years old	21	20			
42- 57 years old	13	12.4			
58 - 67 years old	9	8.6			
68 -76 years old	0	0			
Employment Status					
Student	58	55.2			
Employed	47	44.8			

Cronbach's Alpha, which has a value between 0 and 1, is a commonly used statistic for examining internal reliability testing. The internal reliability of the question is interval, and the ratio scale is good when the Cronbach's Alpha value is between that range. The items used in Physical environment, Staff behaviour and Food quality appears to be significant and reliable to be used where it is recorded as .820; .801; and .786 respectively.

Physical Environment as a Factor Influencing Service Quality of Food Vendors in Penang
Table 2 displays the items used to investigate the physical environment factors influencing the quality of food vendor service in Penang. Respondents indicated that they 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that 'the environment of street food sellers is very important when deciding food to buy,' with 41.0 percent and 44.8 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, respondents responded that they 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that they feel comfortable dining at food carts, particularly when street food vendors are clean and tidy, with 62.9 percent and 24.8 percent, respectively. Figures 2 and 3 depict the proportion of these data in the pie chart provided.

Table 2
Physical Environment of Local Street Food Vendors and the Service Quality (N=105)

Physical Environment Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The environment of street food sellers is very essential to me when picking food to buy.	3 (2.9%)	1 (1.0%)	11 (10.5%)	43 (41.0%)	47 (44.8%)
The street food vendors are clean and orderly, so I feel comfortable dining at the food carts.	3 (2.9%)	2 (1.9%)	8 (7.6%)	26 (24.8%)	66 (62.9%)
The level of service provided by street food vendors will be influenced by their surroundings.	3 (2.9%)	3 (2.9%)	8 (7.6%)	45 (42.9%)	46 (43.8%)
The clean environment of the street food booths influences my decision to choose one.	4 (3.8%)	2 (1.9%)	8 (7.6%)	34 (32.4%)	57 (54.3%)
I prefer to buy street food in a clean environment around the stall, waste water, open drains and animals, toilet facilities and away from debris.	3 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	8 (7.6%)	21 (20%)	73 (69.5%)

Majority of respondents stated in agreement especially for the level of service provided by street food vendors influenced by their surroundings. It is recorded that 46 (43.8%) 'Strongly agree' and 45 (42.9%) 'Agree' on the item. Meanwhile, respondents chose to rate with 'the clean environment of the street food booths influences their decision to choose one' recorded at 57 (54.3%) and 34 (32.4%) for 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' respectively. The final items refers to visitor preference to buy street food in a clean environment around the stall which is away from debris, waste water, toilet facilities, open drains and animals. With the total of 73 (69.5%) strongly agree with the item statement; 21 (20%) Agree, 8 (7.6%) Neutral, and the remaining 3 (2.9%) Strongly disagree.

Staff Behaviour as a Factor Influencing Service Quality of Food Vendors in Penang

Table 3 displays the items used to investigate the staff behaviour factors influencing the quality of food vendor service in Penang. Respondents responded that they were 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that 'they feel pleased if when the food sellers dressed neatly,' with 56 (53.3 percent) and 29 (27.6 percent), respectively. Meanwhile, majority of visitors responded that they 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that service received from the seller and staff is crucial to them, with the score recorded at 52 (49.5 percent) and 41(39.0 percent) respectively. Similarly, visitors also stated that they were 'Strongly agree' (59 percent) and 'Agree' (28.6 percent) with the attitude of the staff and sellers influenced their whole impression of the food stalls. Regarding the offended feeling respondents have towards the staffs with terrible attitude especially during conversation, 60 (57.1 percent) 'Strongly agree' and 33 (31.4 percent) 'Agree' with that. Majority of respondents recorded at 88 (83.8 percent) 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that staff attitude impacted their overall service quality of street food stalls.

Table 3
Staff behaviour influence the service quality of food vendors (N=105)

Staff Behaviour Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel pleased when I see the seller of food street vendors dressed neatly.	3 (2.9%)	1 (1.0%)	16 (15.2%)	29 (27.6%)	56 (53.3%)
Service received from the seller and staff is crucial to me.	3 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	9 (8.6%)	41 (39.0%)	52 (49.5%)
The attitude of the staff and sellers will influence my impression of the food stalls.	3 (2.9%)	0 (2.9%)	10 (9.6%)	30 (28.6%)	62 (59.0%)
I will be offended if the staff have a terrible attitude while speaking with me.	3 (2.9%)	1 (1.0%)	8 (7.6%)	33 (31.4%)	60 (57.1%)
Staff attitude will have an impact on the overall service quality of street food stalls.	3 (2.9%)	0 (0%)	14 (13.3%)	27 (25.7%)	61 (58.1%)

Food Quality as a Factor Influencing Service Quality of Food Vendors in Penang

Table 4 displays the items used to investigate the food quality factors influencing the quality of food vendor service in Penang. Respondents responded that they 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that the street food is made of fresh quality ingredients,' with 26 (24.8 percent) and 49 (46.7 percent), respectively. Meanwhile, majority of visitors responded that they 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' that the street food is tasty and delicious consistent with its price, with the score recorded at 47 (44.8 percent) and 35 (33.3 percent) respectively. Similarly, visitors also stated that they were 'Strongly agree' 43 (41 percent) and 'Agree' 36 (34.3 percent) with they believe street food is freshly cooked. Respondents believed that there are variety of healthy menu selection addressed for street food with 27.6 percent 'Strongly agree' and 31.4 percent 'Agree'. Majority of respondents believe the smells and fragrance of street food are appealing, recorded at 51 (48.6 percent) 'Strongly agree' and 25 (23.8 percent) 'Agree'.

Table 4
Food Quality influence the Service Quality of Food Vendors (N=105)

Food Quality Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I think the street food is made of fresh quality ingredients.	1 (0.9%)	2 (1.9%)	27 (25.7%)	49 (46.7%)	26 (24.8%)
I think the street food is tasty and delicious consistent with its price.	2 (1.9%)	8 (7.6%)	13 (12.4%)	35 (33.3%)	47 (44.8%)
I believe street food is cooked freshly.	5 (4.8%)	7 (6.7%)	14 (13.3%)	36 (34.3%)	43 (41.0%)
I believed there are variety of healthy menu selections addressed for street food.	4 (3.8%)	15 (14.3%)	24 (22.9%)	33 (31.4%)	29 (27.6%)
I believe the smells and fragrance of street food are appealing.	2 (1.9%)	4 (3.8%)	23 (21.9%)	25 (23.8%)	51 (48.6%)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the service quality of local street food vendors in Penang, with an emphasis on the physical environment, staff behaviour, and food quality. Results showed that these three factors have a substantial impact on visitors' overall satisfaction and their decision to return or suggest the vendors to others.

According to Ryu et al. (2012), the physical environment constitutes factors that influence consumer satisfaction. Although the physical environment influence consumers' eating experiences, environmental variables can impact consumers even before they witness the actual outcome of providers of services or business outputs, such as food. This is consistent with the findings of the current study where majority of respondents agreed the physical environment influence the quality of service. Ngah et al. (2023) supported that the overall quality of physical atmosphere may be regarded as crucial in affecting the degree of customer satisfaction, particularly because customer reactions to the physical surroundings are part of their consuming experience.

The study also found that the cleanliness of the food stalls and surrounding spaces played a significant role in determining consumer happiness. Existing studies highlighted the relevance of cleanliness and ambiance in restaurant service. Parasuraman et al. (1988) found that the physical environment effects customers' perceptions and attitudes towards service quality. The current data support this, demonstrating that cleanliness and the entire surroundings greatly contribute to perceived service quality (Ramli, 2023; Ngah, 2022; Hossny, 2022). A clean, well-organised environment not only serves basic hygiene requirements, but also fosters trust and comfort. For example, a well-lit, appealingly designed stall with easy customer access tends to put guests at ease, which can improve their dining experience. Street food vendors may consider investing in basic cleaning supplies and making their stand visually appealing. Simple improvements, like providing covered seats and employing appealing signage, can make a major difference in customers' opinions.

Results also showed the people felt that contacts with staff were an important part of their experience. Vendors who provided courteous, attentive, and prompt service received higher overall service quality ratings. In contrast, sellers who were inattentive or unresponsive were less well-regarded. Staff behaviour is frequently seen as an important factor in service excellence. The SERVQUAL model (Buttle, 1996) emphasised 'assurance' and 'responsiveness' as important aspects of service quality. This study confirms this by demonstrating that vendors who engaged positively with consumers were more likely to be perceived as providing high-quality service. Staff behaviour has a direct impact on a customer's opinion of service quality since it affects their emotional and social experiences. Positive interactions, like as pleasantries, helpfulness, and fast service, make consumers feel valued, encouraging repeat visits and positive word-of-mouth (Mc Neil, 2019; Al-Tit, 2015). It is critical for street food vendors to understand what consumers are searching for in order to increase their likelihood of returning and desire to promote word of mouth. Training programs that emphasise on customer service skills, such as active listening and pleasant communication, may help improve customer interactions. Therefore, vendors are encouraged to personalise their service by remembering repeat customers' preferences, as this can increase consumer loyalty.

The study also discovered that food quality was among the important element in determining consumer satisfaction. Customers frequently listed taste, freshness, and serving quantity as important considerations. Vendors that regularly served high-quality food earned good feedbacks. But on the other hand, those who sacrificed freshness or serving size faced customer discontent. According to the study's findings, customers thought that street food sellers that sold good cuisine gave high-quality service. Seo and Lee (2021) concurred that food quality is a key determinant of customer repurchase intention for street food. This is also consistent with Ramanathan et al. (2016) where food quality is the most important factor in customer satisfaction, and it will have an indirect impact on the service quality provided by street food vendors.

Previous research continually demonstrates that food quality is inextricably linked to service quality in the food sector. Farhana et al. (2020) suggested that the main service, in this case, the meal, must match or surpass customer expectations in order to be regarded high quality. This is consistent with our findings, which indicated that food quality was directly related to customers' overall assessment of service. Food quality is generally regarded as the most tangible aspect of service, so it is the first point of comparison for customers. When customers receive food that meets their expectations for taste and freshness, it reinforces their positive opinion of the vendor and adds to their overall pleasure (Yong et al., 2020; Morano et al., 2018). Food street vendors should focus on procuring fresh ingredients and maintaining consistent food preparation standards. Implementing quality control techniques, such as taste tests or standardising recipes, may assist maintain excellent food quality.

To summarize, a clean physical environment, attentive staff, and good quality foods all contribute to a more satisfied and returning customer base. Even if the food is of high quality, poor service or an unsanitary environment can detract from the experience and undermine customer loyalty. The SERVQUAL model's categories of tangibles (physical environment), reliability (constant food quality), responsiveness (staff behaviour), and assurance (staff interactions) all correspond to our findings, reinforcing the importance of these factors in determining service quality. Understanding the level of service quality in relation to the several critical areas of the street food business will assist boost the chances of success in such a competitive market.

There are implications for the study’s conclusions. In addition to helping current vendors better understand and satisfy customer expectations, they can offer advice to prospective business owners on how to launch a profitable street food enterprise. The study also provides authorities with useful information to improve the street food sector and guarantee that it continues to be a thriving and sustainable part of Penang’s economy and cultural environment. This study highlights the significance of consistently raising service standards for the benefit of suppliers, clients and the community at large by examining the crucial aspects of service quality.

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