

Proceeding Paper

# The Revisit Intention of Customers at Old Town White Coffee Outlets in Shah Alam, Malaysia during the Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Era <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** This study examined the relationship between the emotional triggers and revisit intention of customers at Old Town White Coffee outlets in Shah Alam, Malaysia during the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. Nevertheless, the motivations and attributes of customers returning to the same restaurant during the post-COVID-19 pandemic era remain unclear. By using three triggers of emotions: (i) food, (ii) environment, and (iii) staff, which were derived from the existing literature review for this study, a total of 309 customers participated, and all data were analysed using SPSS version 27. The multiple regression analysis reveals that food has the greatest effect towards the emotional trigger of customers to revisit restaurants.

**Keywords:** customer; theme restaurant; revisit intention; emotion



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## 1. Introduction

Today, the foodservice business is recognised as a global industry with a broadening of customers worldwide [1–3]. This development can be seen from the array of foodservice establishments blooming in all sub-sectors including catering, hotels, food retail, food manufacturing, and restaurants. The restaurant sub-sector is experiencing an incredible expansion [1,4]. In the global marketplace, the demand for food and beverages keeps increasing, and competition is always stiff. Several factors such as the behavioural intention of customers, humanistic approach, task performance by service staff [4,5], physical environment [6–8], and positive customer emotions [9] have all influenced this positive development.

At the end of 2019, a novel coronavirus (popularly known as COVID-19) was detected and became one of the worst health disasters to hit the entire global population. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, almost every country declared some form of movement control order (MCO) to restrict human contact and minimise the chances of becoming infected. At the same time, the World Health Organisation (WHO) officially recognised COVID-19 as a pandemic. Due to continuous increase in the number of people becoming infected and the rise in the number of deaths, everyone had to stay at home, and there were strict restrictions on the performance of social, business, and trading activities. This has caused significant economic damage all over the world.

In the case of Malaysia, due to MCO enforcement, all restaurant businesses were required to halt dine-in services during the first wave of the pandemic, which began in mid-March 2020, and only takeout, drive-thru, or delivery services were allowed [10]. According to studies conducted by the National Restaurant Association in 2020, the restaurant business lost more than USD 120 billion in sales by May 2020, and eight million people were laid off or furloughed [11]. It was reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had directly increased the cost of restaurant operations to USD 240 billion by the end of 2020 [11]. Additional requirements had to be implemented by restaurant operators as a result of the social

distancing initiatives imposed by the Government. In order to thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic, many restaurant businesses designed various strategies to be implemented as their survival modus operandi. Such strategies, at the same time, allowed the restaurant operators to acquire a deep understanding of the needs, wants, and perceptions of their customers, which was crucial in order to keep on attracting and retaining them [12,13].

Similar to other countries, Malaysia offers a wide range of food outlets including stalls, cafeterias, restaurants, fast food outlets, fine dining restaurants, canteens, and many more [14,15]. Such a variety of food outlets can cater to various categories of customers, from higher to lower income groups. The casual dining full-service restaurant, such as a theme restaurant, is one of the best choices for customers to go to if they wish to dine out because of its various concepts and the types of food available [16].

A theme restaurant is a dining establishment furnished with a variety of unique features that are unrelated to the act of eating [17]. As a result, a customer dining experience at a theme restaurant is an experience of consumption produced through the effects of the servicescape of the restaurant and the appraisal of real experiences. For example, a recent study on servicescape (referring to external features such as decoration, music, costumes, and service, as well as interactions between customers and personnel to share information about historical events and the culture of a theme) [17] found that favourable evaluations of these unique experiences by customers often lead to the building of attitudes, which can improve the behavioural intention of customers to return to the same theme restaurant [17].

Meanwhile, another study on understanding the degree to which an individual may recognise authenticity (i.e., psychological cue) found that a role in the construction of a favourable dining experience in a theme restaurant is crucial [18]. The involvement of customers in a restaurant is driven by their perception of authenticity, which creates pleasant emotions or attachments [17]. In addition to this, scholars believe that the concept of emotion helps to differentiate restaurant operators from their competitors and thus position their products in the marketplace [18,19]. It is a useful component to use to appeal to customers and create memorable customer experiences, particularly when they dine at special concept restaurants, such as theme restaurants [17,20].

However, the role of these emotion-evoking elements in triggering the theme restaurant revisit intention of customers remains questionable, especially with the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforcement of MCOs. More specifically, to what extent do emotions related to the theme restaurant experience during the post-COVID-19 pandemic era trigger revisit intention? A comprehensive literature review has pointed out three main features, namely, food, service, and environment, as the main factors which influence the selection by customers of a theme restaurant to dine in. Therefore, this study examined the three emotional triggers that would lead customers to revisit their favourite theme restaurant during the post-COVID-19 pandemic era in Malaysia.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Theme Restaurant

Theme restaurants are a sub-set of the casual restaurant category, which makes up the largest share of the full-service restaurant market [21,22]. A theme restaurant is a restaurant that follows a formula in which all of its aspects, including the culinary menu, the ambience, and the décor, revolve around a single theme, which is usually related to the leisure industry [21]. The following are examples of appealing themes: (i) Hollywood and movies; (ii) sports and sporting events; (iii) reminiscence of simpler times; (iv) radio, music, and television; (v) travel and transportation; (vi) the environment; and (vii) the world around us. The themes are intended to create a memorable experience, which is bolstered by marketing methods that aim to entice diners to visit a different era, moment, or place. Aside from food and beverage consumption, the staff at a theme restaurant encourage diners to purchase souvenirs under the guise of acquiring a memento to commemorate their experiences [21,23]. The sale of such souvenirs generates a significant amount of

revenue, which ranges from 20% to 55% of their sales mix, depending on the brand of the theme restaurant.

## 2.2. Revisit Intention

Revisit intention is defined as the judgment of an individual about using a designated service from the same company again, taking into account his or her current situation and likely circumstances [17,24]. Revisit intention is similar to visit intention except for the component of the experience. Revisit intention refers to the possibility of the customer returning to the restaurant in the future. It is further noted that revisit intention signifies the willingness of an individual to make another purchase from the same firm, based on their previous experiences. However, revisit intention is concerned with subjective viewpoints of individuals regarding their own personal behaviour in the future and may differ from actual revisit behaviour [25,26]. Studies on repeat visitation are vital for food and beverage businesses in order to gain a better understanding of food habits from an economic perspective. Food habits can be defined as a set of behaviours related to food preferences and social experiences. The level of liking for particular types of food is essential in the choice of food and the ability to directly create satisfaction through the eating experience and to build revisit intention for the restaurant [12,27]. It was also denoted that due to globalization, changes in eating habits, economic growth, and cultural influences, the hospitality industry has become highly competitive. In gaining customer loyalty and satisfaction, an understanding of customer perceptions is vital among restaurateurs. Several studies in the field have postulated that it is possible to induce actions such as repurchasing and revisiting by stimulating the memories of consumers [1,28–30]. For this reason, many companies have employed emotional elements in their advertising. A study has found that stimulating personal emotions in advertising is an effective way to attract customers [31]. Therefore, this study has attempted to employ nostalgia triggers in predicting revisit intention.

## 2.3. Emotional Triggers

### 2.3.1. Food

The key factor influencing restaurant choices is food [14,21,32,33] and its quality [1,16]. Food relates to sensory stimuli that connects with psychological perspectives perceived from such human senses [21,34]. Food consumption is the one area which is most likely to take people back into their past. It calls on several different senses, which is a valuable vector for emotion. The link between emotion and food consumption is almost obvious [35,36]. In communication strategies, one or several themes characterizing food nostalgia can be used to promote products. The use of childhood, happy family times, and intergenerational transmission are particularly suitable as communication strategies to be adopted by food brands [35,36]. In addition, food helps to create emotion by evoking memories of a particular experience or situation in the past [23,37]. For example, the chicken noodle soup that is served by the grandmother when one is sick. It is distinctive and thus memorable. This memory sets the stage for a product to be nostalgically linked to deep feelings about the grandmother. It is assumed that a person who experiences eating chicken noodle soup at a restaurant will recall such memories. Furthermore, the experience factor helps the restaurateurs in securing customer loyalty. This has been proven, especially as those experiences influence ongoing food-related behaviours and reveal the nature of current behaviours [38–41]. Additionally, the relative consequence of this attribute is that it becomes the main criteria of the customers in deciding to repeat their visit to the restaurant [32,42].

### 2.3.2. Environment

The environment of a restaurant is a critical factor in determining the dining experience of its customers [17,32]. There are two categories of environment in a business context: external and internal [12,15]. The external environment includes related factors present outside of the boundaries of the restaurant. In contrast, the internal environment includes physical and social factors present within the boundaries of the restaurant. On

the other hand, an organization needs to study external forces that lead to changes, which the organization can prepare for, in order to secure and improve its performance in the future [43]. An earlier study undertaken by Banker in 1986 pointed out another factor, ambience, as an internal factor. Ambience refers to the atmospheric elements in a restaurant. Table setting, seat space, restaurant layout, and architecture are all physical atmospheric elements, while social factors consist of customers and the service personnel of the internal environment. When customers step into the restaurant, they start to enjoy the service provided in a comfortable environment [17,44]. Based on studies on the determinants of customer behavioural intentions in terms of environmental elements, the results showed that spatial layout, interior design, and ambience are the key environmental elements that can influence customer emotion [9,35]. Nowadays, many people go to dine in restaurants not only to enjoy the food served but also to satisfy their need for social stimulation and entertainment [39,45–47]. Thus, restaurants need to present an attractive environment to influence the positive emotional responses of customers [23,35,41,48].

### 2.3.3. Staff

The employees or staff working in a restaurant play an important role in determining the service level of the restaurant and often impact the dining experiences of customers [9,49]. The engagement of employees towards their jobs is directly linked to customer service satisfaction levels. Employee characteristics such as the display of a caring attitude, responsiveness, solicited and unsolicited actions, and reliability are possible elements that can influence the casual dining experiences of customers [39–41,50]. A study found that service staff must pay attention to all the needs of the guest, which is of utmost significance in building a customer base that will regularly return to the restaurant [21,42].

## 2.4. Design and Population

The state of Selangor was selected as a demographic population background due to the availability of varying customer socio-demography. It is one of the most developed business and industrial hubs in Malaysia with many multinational industrial estates, educational institutions, rapidly growing commerce hubs, good transport services, and basic amenities. This study has been designed by selecting the population of Shah Alam. Shah Alam has a total population of 481,654, which makes up approximately 8.02% of the total population of Selangor [46]. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Old Town White Coffee outlets in Shah Alam. Prior to this, the researchers also approached other theme restaurants in Shah Alam; however, no feedback was received. Due to time and financial constraints, Old Town White Coffee was selected as an ideal theme restaurant model (i.e., national chain restaurant with standardised setup, service, and menu) for the purposes of the main inquiry of this study.

## 2.5. Survey Instrument

This quantitative study employed a questionnaire made up of three sections. The first section of the questionnaire required information regarding the demographic profile of respondents including gender, monthly income, race, and education level. Meanwhile, the second section contained questions regarding the emotions of respondents on revisit intention. The intention of respondents to visit theme restaurants was questioned in the third section of the questionnaire. This construct was measured using a multiple-item scale of 1–7 with the value of (where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*) to determine customer perception of these cues. To measure customer emotions, the study adopted constructs from [34]. A total of 300 respondents were selected, and this sample size was considered sufficient for this study [47]. The author proposed the criterion to follow when determining sample size, which is that the number of participants in a questionnaire should be larger than 30 and less than 500. The respondents were customers who dined in Old Town White Coffee outlets in Shah Alam who had different educational backgrounds and who earned different levels of income per month. This selection depended on the capability

of respondents to answer and comprehend the needs of the survey. Eventually, a total of 350 questionnaires were distributed to guarantee that at least 300 usable questionnaires could be collected. Out of these 350 questionnaires, a total of 309 questionnaires were later completed and returned (88% response rate). No questionnaires were eliminated as all of them were found fit to be analysed. The following table reports the mean scores and standard deviation of emotion items obtained from the descriptive statistics.

2.6. Procedures

Figure 1 summarizes the data collection standard operating procedure (SOP) employed for this study.

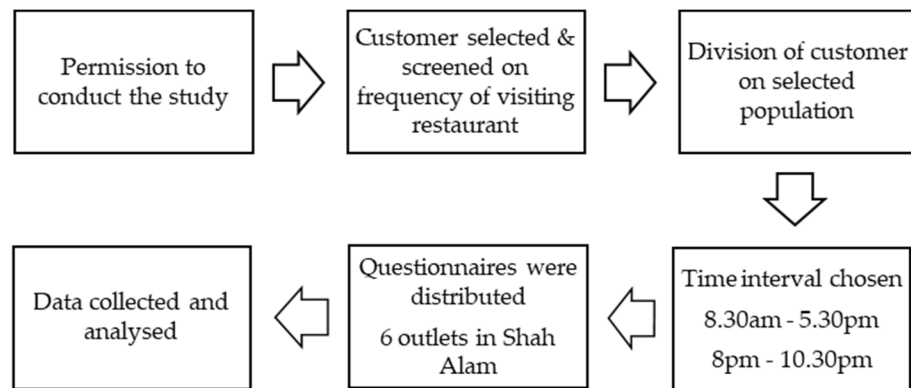


Figure 1. Summary of standard operating procedure (SOP) for data collection.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Profiles of Respondents

The frequency analysis reveals that more than half (52.8%) of the respondents were female, while 47.2% were male. In terms of race, 61.8% of the sample were Malays, while less of the respondents (27.2%) were Chinese, followed by Indian (9.4%), and the balance was made up of respondents from other races (1.6%). Regarding their educational level, almost half of the respondents (44.7%) had a bachelor’s degree. This was followed by 28.5% who had a diploma, 15.5% who had a master’s degree, and only 1.9% who had a PhD. In addition, respondents were asked about their monthly income: 66.7% of the respondents reported having a monthly income of MYR 2001 and above, 16.5% of the respondents reported earning between MYR 1500 to MYR 2000, and 13.3% of the respondents reported earning between MYR 1001 and MYR 1500. Only 3.6% of the respondents stated that they earned a monthly income of below MYR 1000. More than 75% (77.0%) of respondents claimed they frequently dined at the restaurant, while 23.0% said they did not frequently dine there. Lastly, they were required to state the frequency of their dining at the Old Town White Coffee outlet in a month. Approximately half of them (55.0%) responded that they dined at the outlet twice a month, 28.5% stated their frequency of visit as being once a month, while 16.5% claimed that they dined there every weekend.

3.2. Analysis of the Emotional Triggers of Customers

Table 1 reports the overall mean scores and standard deviation of food, environment, and service (staff) items that were obtained from descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Overall mean score of food, environment, and service (staff).

Construct	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD
Food	3.00	6.66	5.43	0.798
Environment	2.43	6.57	5.34	0.770
Service (staff)	2.57	5.85	4.46	0.625

Based on three dimensions of emotional triggers, food ( $M = 5.43, SD = 0.798$ ) emerged as the most important component of how customers perceived emotion towards Old Town White Coffee in relation to other dimensions. This was followed by environment ( $M = 5.34, SD = 0.770$ ) and then service (staff) ( $M = 4.46, SD = 0.625$ ). This analysis proves that all three predictors spark emotions among customers, but in order to see whether these predictors relate to revisit intention, multiple regression analysis was then employed.

### Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regression was employed to assess the significant relationship among variables in the study framework. A significant level of 0.05 was applied. In addition, it was used to determine the best predictor on revisit intention. Table 2 shows a summary of multiple regression analysis.

**Table 2.** Summary of multiple regression analysis.

	B	SE B	B
Constant	3.77	0.418	
Food	0.269	0.048	0.23 *
Environment	0.623	0.050	0.72 *
Service (staff)	0.364	0.062	0.37 *

Note:  $R^2 = 0.07, * p < 0.001$ .

Among the three predictors entered into the model, namely food, environment and service (staff), all three made statistically significant contributions to revisit intention with significant values of 0.002, 0.000, and 0.030 each, when  $p < 0.05$ . In terms of importance, environment made the largest unique contribution to the model with  $\beta = 0.72$ . The model was significant [ $F(3,305) = 7.96, p < 0.001$ ]. It made a significant contribution to revisit intention, and it explained 7% of the variation in revisit intention ratings. The remaining 93% is explained by other predictors. Even though the percentage was small, the ANOVA table showed that the model was highly significant and can be used to explain or predict cross-shopping behaviour among consumers.

The results indicate that food (i.e., the menu choices on offer and specific meals that bring nostalgia to a person) is the most significant element affecting the perception of emotional triggers of customers in Old Town White Coffee regarding revisit intention during the post-COVID-19 pandemic era. The best quality food choices with authentic taste bring nostalgia and meet the expectations of customers. It was found that the taste of food can bring back memories for customers but not to the extent of influencing them to return. This finding is aligned with previous studies which identified that food not only helps to create an emotional response by evoking a memory of an experience or situation in the past, but it also assists customers in choosing a restaurant based on their special food interest (SFI) [37]. This is because not all restaurants serve food in the same way as theme restaurants where customers are excited to experience again the dining moment and the feeling of enjoying the food. These one-of-a-kind experiences, if positively rated by customers, contribute to the formation of attitudes, which can increase the behavioural intention of customers to return to the restaurant.

On the other hand, the service (staff) obtained only a medium score in terms of the perception of emotions of customers in the restaurant. It shows that the staff at the Old Town White Coffee outlets in Shah Alam did not contribute towards making the restaurant memorable to customers; however, the results show that staff do influence the customers to revisit. Apart from that, it was found that environment was a key determinant in predicting the revisit intention of customers. Previous studies have found that spatial layout, interior design, and ambience are the key elements of environment that can influence customer emotion, whereby when customers step into the restaurant, they can start to enjoy the comfortable environment [9,14,44,47].

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendation

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that there are significant associations between food, environment (i.e., restaurant setup), staff (i.e., service providers) and the revisit intention of customers during the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, specifically in the case of Old Town White Coffee outlets in Shah Alam. Food and environment play very important roles in evoking the experiences and memories of customers. Therefore, efforts to maintain and sustain the existing restaurant setup and business operations should be continuously made. This allows for the restaurant to build its brand and image in the minds and eyes of every customer who visits and dines at the restaurant. Furthermore, providing appropriate food choices on the menu card which blend well with the theme restaurant itself would be able to trigger the emotions of customers. In the end, this is a competitive advantage for Old Town White Coffee outlets in Shah Alam, and it could be a great business model for other theme restaurants too. Future studies can further expand the theory of emotional triggers by breaking the theory into sub-dimensions such as social aspects, sensory inputs, and events.

Similarly, the dimensions can be divided into people, friends, food, and environment [4,31,49]. In fact, comparison between different theme restaurants would also be beneficial. Given that other selection factors (such as food price, choice, and style of service) are important in restaurants, their relative value should be checked and compared. In addition, customer behaviour models often link psychological elements (e.g., personality, imagery-related characteristics) to behavioural intention, while linking aspects of attribute (e.g., product attributes, service quality) to attitude formation [34,35] should be extended. As a result, further exploration of the relationship between psychological characteristics, such as authenticity and attitude, would be required.

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