

Beyond The Plate: A Mixed-Methods Study on Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, Loyalty, and Owner Challenges in Restaurants

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ABSTRACT

Service quality stands as the cornerstone of restaurant excellence, shaping customers' perceptions and experiences while driving loyalty and reputation in a competitive food service industry. This mixed-methods study examined restaurant operations in Misamis Occidental, Philippines, from customer perceptions of service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty, to owners' lived experience of sustaining that quality. A descriptive-correlational design surveyed 396 customers across ten establishments, assessing service quality (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy), satisfaction (ambiance, hospitality service, added value, technology, trust and commitment), and loyalty (repeat patronage, word of mouth, brand equity, emotional attachment, switching costs), using

researcher-made questionnaires and Pearson correlation. A phenomenological design then interviewed the owners of those establishments, analyzed through Moustakas' method. Results showed service quality rated very good, satisfaction very high except for technology, and loyalty very high, with service quality significantly correlated with both outcomes. Interviews yielded three themes describing owners' difficulties: managing operations, sustaining marketing, and countering rivals. An exploratory correlation linking owner-reported difficulty severity to satisfaction and loyalty scores found no significant relationship, though the small sample limits what this test can rule out. Taken together, the findings suggest that strong customer-facing outcomes may be sustained despite, rather than because of, an absence of strain on the owner's side: owners describe active personal involvement, informal staffing, and reactive promotion, a pattern that may not hold as rivalry intensifies, although this could not be confirmed. Recommendations include investing in technology-enabled delivery, formalizing staff training, and adopting more deliberate promotional strategies to protect satisfaction and loyalty.

Keywords: *DINESERV, expectancy-disconfirmation theory, restaurant management, technology adoption, food service*

INTRODUCTION

Professional services exhibit distinct characteristics that must be considered at the intersection of service quality, pricing, service image, and client satisfaction (Brucal et al., 2022). In the food industry, restaurants play an important role as places where people eat and have culinary experiences, offering a portal into many people's culinary heritage by showcasing a variety of cuisines, cultures, and traditions. Restaurants support small-scale farmers and promote healthier, more ecologically friendly food systems by sourcing locally and sustainably, fostering innovation and cultural exchange (Dusica & Kortoseva, 2018).

There are three essential characteristics of service quality: it is more difficult to measure than the quality of goods; customers' expectations and perceptions of the actual service influence perceived quality; and the difference between expectations and perceptions of the service experience is a key indicator of service quality (Novixoxo et al., 2018). The benefits of strong service quality include greater customer satisfaction, favorable effects on consumer behavioral intentions such as loyalty and retention, positive word of mouth, and increased profitability for the service provider (Padlee et al., 2019).

Service quality has become essential for differentiating products and services from competitors, thereby increasing market share, customer satisfaction, responsiveness to orders, customer loyalty, return on investment, and lowering production costs (Afthanorhan et al., 2019). To succeed and become more competitive, restaurants, like other service businesses, must offer excellent service, and most restaurant owners agree that exceptional customer service is what most clearly sets them apart from competitors. Loyalty and customer satisfaction are crucial to driving a business toward success, and providing high-quality service drives business growth through customer loyalty and expansion.

Restaurants may be a significant differentiating factor in a destination's competitiveness because they connect food to tourism. The restaurant industry is one of the largest employers in the United States, employing a large share of the national workforce and providing jobs across a wide range of roles, including chefs, servers, bartenders, managers, and kitchen staff, that offer financial stability to communities. Service quality that consistently meets or exceeds customer expectations, by providing personalized experiences, prioritizing effective customer service, ensuring consistency, resolving complaints, and establishing emotional connections, plays a vital role in achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Customer satisfaction extends beyond a customer's immediate service experience, focusing on creating customer value while being responsive to customers' needs (Hoe & Mansori, 2018). Customer satisfaction is measured by how pleased consumers are with a company's products, services, and overall performance. The dining facility industry is highly competitive, conducting various experiments to achieve customer satisfaction and meet customers' expectations while providing consistent, reliable service. Similarly, customer loyalty is achieved when the value proposition is emphasized in every business transaction; ensuring that customers' demands and preferences are regularly addressed is key to satisfaction and the foundation for enduring relationships built on loyalty and trust (Haralayya, 2022).

Customer loyalty increases as businesses meet customer demands and provide value. There is evidence that socially responsible business practices influence customer expectations and increase satisfaction, and that satisfaction can serve as a determinant of service quality and loyalty (Afthanorhan et al., 2019). The part of service quality in customer satisfaction and loyalty has been the subject of several studies; however, few have focused specifically on the level of service provided by restaurants in Misamis Occidental and its impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty there. To ascertain the impact of excellent service on customer satisfaction and loyalty, as well as its vital role in business sustainability, this study was undertaken to inform strategies to increase customer satisfaction.

Customer loyalty is similarly related to customer satisfaction; as satisfaction increases, consumers' intentions to repurchase a product or service demonstrate the positive impact of satisfaction on loyalty (Díaz, 2017). Customer retention is a customer's loyalty to a business and its products over time, evidenced by repeat purchases and a tendency to promote positive word of mouth within one's social circles (Barusman & Rulian, 2020). There are two dimensions of service quality, namely technical quality, reflecting what customers receive from their interactions with the service provider, and functional quality, reflecting how customers receive that service, that is, the expressive nature of service delivery, including courtesy, attentiveness, and promptness (Kasiri et al., 2017).

Reliability is considered the most important dimension of service quality. Companies that provide services accurately and as promised demonstrate trustworthiness, which involves accepting the trust others place in them. Service providers frequently aim to learn what matters most to their external or internal customers. The DINESERV model, developed specifically to adapt the SERVQUAL framework to the

restaurant industry, provides a tool for measuring the gap between customer service alignment, giving restaurant operators a quantified measure of what consumers expect, since unfulfilled expectations drive guests away (Stevens et al., 1995). DINESERV comprises five key dimensions, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. It has been used in numerous studies to examine how restaurants can raise customer satisfaction and service quality, which in turn affects diners' intentions to return and their likelihood of recommending a restaurant to others.

Assurance includes staff knowledge, ability, courtesy, and trustworthiness, that is, being free from danger, risk, or doubt (Parasuraman et al., 1988). In a highly competitive environment, staff members must demonstrate competence and expertise in their respective roles; by prioritizing assurance, service providers can enhance customer confidence, mitigate perceived risk, and foster positive perceptions of service quality, ultimately leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty.

The Service Quality Gap Theory of Johns and Tyas (1996) defines quality as the difference between what customers expect and what actually happens during a service encounter, that is, a mismatch between what customers expect from a service experience and what they receive, thereby illuminating the variance between consumer assumptions and literal service delivery in the hospitality industry.

Oliver's (1980) Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory is also closely associated with this study. The theory holds that customers form expectations about the products or services they will receive, based on past experience, word of mouth, and advertising, and then compare those expectations against their actual experience. When the service exceeds expectations, customers experience positive disconfirmation and report higher satisfaction; when it falls short, they experience negative disconfirmation and report lower satisfaction. In the restaurant context, customers form expectations about food quality, service quality, ambiance, and the overall dining experience based on past visits, advertising, and others' recommendations. A restaurant that exceeds these expectations, through high-quality food and service, a welcoming ambiance, and an enjoyable experience, is more likely to produce positive disconfirmation, higher satisfaction, and, over time, stronger loyalty. By understanding and managing customer expectations in this way, restaurants can use the theory to set realistic service standards and shape customer perceptions of quality.

While the relationship between restaurant service quality and customer outcomes has received considerable scholarly attention, this body of work is largely told from the customer's perspective. Comparatively little is known about how the people responsible for delivering that service quality, namely restaurant owners, experience the work of sustaining it day to day, particularly in a Philippine provincial setting such as Misamis Occidental, where the topic remains underexplored. A study that considers only customer perceptions risks producing recommendations that are easy to state but difficult for owners to execute, because it does not account for the operational, staffing, and competitive realities owners face. Conversely, a study of owners' difficulties alone would not establish whether those difficulties are, in fact, consequential for the customer-facing outcomes that matter most to the business. This study therefore combines both perspectives: a quantitative strand assessing customers' perceptions of restaurant service quality and its relationship to their satisfaction and loyalty, and a qualitative strand exploring the difficulties restaurant owners face in sustaining that same service quality. Bringing the two together is intended to produce a more complete and more actionable picture of restaurant service quality than either strand could offer alone.

Conceptual Framework

In the restaurant sector, customer loyalty and satisfaction are largely determined by the quality of service. When customers have a great dining experience, which is more likely when they receive excellent service, their satisfaction and loyalty are enhanced (Fida et al., 2020). Restaurants can establish a distinctive marketing proposition and differentiate themselves from rivals by offering excellent service (Chua et al., 2020), which raises long-term profitability because customers are more inclined to choose a restaurant that offers great service over one that does not.

Customer satisfaction can either strengthen or weaken the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty: when consumers are satisfied with a company's service quality, their loyalty increases; when dissatisfied, the relationship between service quality and loyalty deteriorates (Solimun & Fernandes, 2018). DINESERV (Stevens et al., 1995) is a reliable, relatively simple tool for assessing how consumers view a restaurant's quality, and it provides restaurant owners with a metricized baseline of customer anticipation, since unfulfilled expectations drive guests away.

Quality, from a marketing standpoint, refers to consumer satisfaction rather than simply being a feature associated with costly goods. It is important to distinguish goods from services: the former is tangible, that is, an object, while the latter is intangible, an actual performance (Abdullah & Rahman, 2015). Services are invisible and therefore difficult for a supplier to demonstrate and for consumers to measure (Ali et al., 2021). Because service delivery in the hospitality industry always involves human beings, attention must focus on managing people, specifically on the collaboration between clients and personnel, referred to as service encounters. The fortune of a hospitality business depends on the combined impact of the service encounters its customers experience (Abdullah, 2018).

Food experiences are an essential component of tourism, adding to visitor spending and overall trip satisfaction, and quality dimensions are acknowledged as a cornerstone for achieving competitive advantage in food services. Customers in the food service industry have numerous restaurant options, which may lead them to switch restaurants if their expectations are not met (Bichler et al., 2020). As a result, restaurants strive to improve customer experience by focusing on aspects of total quality management, particularly service quality. Many service providers regard quality as the most important competitive factor, since it affects both current and future clients as more customers come to value quality over quantity (Spyridou, 2017). Customers assess service quality by comparing what they desire or expect to what they perceive they are actually given, a comparison known as perceived quality, where any negative variation is referred to as a quality gap.

Restaurant owners face a range of challenges as they strive to maintain that same quality. Consistently delivering high-quality food and service becomes harder as a business grows and demand increases, and meeting and exceeding customer expectations is complicated by the fact that customers have diverse preferences and requirements (Filimonau et al., 2022). Restaurants often face high customer volume during peak periods, such as weekends or holidays, and frequently experience high staff turnover, both of which can affect service quality. Maintaining food safety standards and consistently serving high-quality food is essential, but doing so can be challenging because of factors such as ingredient availability, supplier reliability, and kitchen operations. Sustaining service quality in the restaurant industry therefore requires constant monitoring, adaptation, and commitment to meeting and exceeding customer expectations.

The key to sustaining competitive advantage depends on providing high-quality services that result in guest satisfaction (Damit et al., 2019). Service quality is indicated by the gap between expectations and perceptions of service. Service quality has been defined as the capability of a hospitality business to meet guests' expectations (Anwar & Climis, 2017), concentrating on satisfying guests' quality needs and reflecting guests' judgment of the establishment's overall superiority and excellence.

Restaurant owners face a variety of difficulties in managing their businesses. The restaurant industry is highly competitive, with numerous establishments vying for customers' attention, making it challenging for owners to attract and retain customers (Anwar & Ghafoor, 2017). Rising costs, including rent, utilities, ingredients, and labor, continue to strain profit margins and make it difficult for owners to maintain profitability (Bichler et al., 2020).

Based on participant-generated answers in the qualitative strand, this study's conceptual framework integrates three primary themes describing owners' difficulties: Challenges in Restaurant Management, with subthemes of customer relations and satisfaction, customer service challenges, staffing and employee management, and operations and management challenges; Business Strategies and Marketing; and Navigating Competition in Business. The theme of challenges in restaurant management captures the

difficulties and barriers restaurant owners frequently encounter in their everyday duties, namely staffing, customer service, cost control, compliance with safety and health regulations, and overall business management (Filimonau et al., 2022). Customer relations and satisfaction concerns concern ensuring that each customer has a satisfying dining experience from arrival to departure, including handling difficult customers, addressing complaints, and exceeding expectations (Abror et al., 2019). Customer service challenges concern the overall standard of service employees provide, including sustaining service quality, training staff in customer care, and managing peak hours to limit wait times (Lee, 2019). Staffing and employee management address the difficulty of finding, developing, and retaining skilled employees, ensuring their motivation and job satisfaction, and managing their schedules to sustain adequate staffing at peak times (Aburumman et al., 2020). Operations and management challenges encompass problems that affect daily operations, such as food waste, supply-chain disruptions, and rising ingredient costs, making it progressively harder to run a profitable restaurant (Sevitoglu & Ivanov, 2020).

Business strategies and marketing concern the measurement of overall business success through metrics such as revenue, profit, and market share, alongside marketing-specific indicators such as customer acquisition, retention, and lifetime value; this involves creating plans to attract customers, increase revenue, and advance the restaurant's performance (Purnomo et al., 2021). Navigating competition in business requires understanding the competitive environment and identifying how a restaurant can distinguish itself from competitors, evaluating competitors' strengths and weaknesses, and implementing distinctive menu items or superior customer service as differentiation strategies (Son & Niehm, 2021).

Rather than treating the quantitative and qualitative constructs as two separate accounts, this study's conceptual framework links them into a single model in which the difficulties restaurant owners absorb, namely challenges in restaurant management, business strategies and marketing, and navigating competition, are what produce the level of service quality customers experience. That service quality then drives customer satisfaction, which reinforces customer loyalty. Because this chain of outcomes rests on the owner's continuous personal effort rather than standardized systems, sustaining it places renewed strain back on the owner, completing a cycle rather than a one-way chain. This integrated model, illustrated in Figure 1, frames the Discussion section's interpretation of how the two strands' results relate to one another.

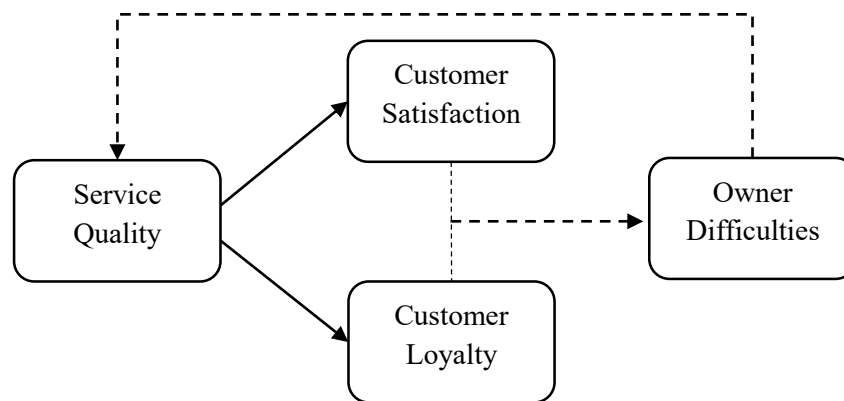


Figure 1.
Schematic Diagram Connecting Service Quality, Satisfaction, Loyalty, and Owner Challenges

Note. Solid = tested in this study; dashed = hypothesized, not confirmed

Problem Statement

This study examined restaurant service quality from the perspectives of both customers and owners in Misamis Occidental. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of restaurant service quality in terms of tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, as perceived by customers?
2. What is the level of customer satisfaction with restaurants in terms of ambiance, hospitality service, added value, technology, and trust and commitment?
3. What is the level of customer loyalty to restaurants in terms of repeat patronage, word of mouth, brand equity, emotional attachment, and switching costs?
4. Is there a significant relationship between the level of restaurant service quality and the level of customer satisfaction?
5. Is there a significant relationship between the level of restaurant service quality and the level of customer loyalty?
6. What difficulties do restaurant owners face in sustaining service quality, and in what contexts do these difficulties arise?

Null Hypotheses

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between the level of restaurant service quality and the level of customer satisfaction.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between the level of restaurant service quality and the level of customer loyalty.

Note. The link between owner-reported difficulties (RQ6) and these quantitative outcomes, discussed in the integrated model in Figure 1, was also tested, but only exploratorily: because the ten interviewed owners corresponded to the same ten restaurants surveyed, owner difficulty severity was correlated with restaurant-level satisfaction and loyalty (Table 6). No null hypothesis is formulated for this exploratory test, since it relies on a small sample of ten restaurants and a single rater's severity judgments rather than a validated instrument; the resulting non-significant correlations are reported descriptively in the Results and discussed as a direction for future, more rigorously designed confirmatory research rather than as a tested finding on the order of Ho1 and Ho2.

METHODS

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods design combining a quantitative descriptive-correlational strand with a qualitative phenomenological strand to examine restaurant service quality from complementary vantage points. The descriptive-correlational design determines whether a relationship exists between two or more variables, aiding researchers in understanding how factors may relate to one another without making causal claims; it was considered appropriate for examining how restaurant service quality affects customer satisfaction and loyalty. The phenomenological design, in turn, is well suited to studying intense, often emotionally significant human experiences (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021) and was used to understand restaurant owners' difficulties in sustaining service quality as they experienced them. The two strands were conducted sequentially, with the quantitative strand conducted first and the qualitative strand second, and their findings are integrated in the Discussion to provide a fuller account of restaurant service quality than either strand could offer alone.

Research Locale

This study was conducted among selected restaurants in Misamis Occidental, a province in the Philippines famous for its wide variety of seafood. The province's three largest cities and surrounding municipalities have experienced a steady increase in restaurant businesses, with establishments concentrated in city centers and along major highways. These areas attract visitors from nearby localities

for business and personal reasons, making the province a relevant setting for examining both customer experience and operational challenges on the ownership side in the restaurant industry.

Participants

The respondents in the quantitative study were customers who had dined at selected restaurants in Misamis Occidental, identified through convenience sampling. Restaurants were eligible for inclusion if they were (1) legally registered with the Department of Trade and Industry, (2) in operation for more than two years, (3) staffed by more than ten employees, and (4) located in the city center or along a highway within the province. Customer-respondents were eligible if they (1) had dined at the selected restaurant at least three times, (2) were 18 years of age or older but under 60, and (3) were willing to answer the survey. A total of 396 respondents from 10 selected restaurants were surveyed, with approximately 40 per restaurant. These same ten restaurants were also the source of the qualitative strand's owner-participants, described below.

On the qualitative strand, the participants were the owners of the same ten restaurants surveyed in the quantitative strand, who had each handled the overall operations of their establishment (excluding owners aged 60 or older) and had direct, first-hand experience maintaining service quality. Because the qualitative and quantitative strands shared the same 10 restaurants, each owner-participant's interview data could be linked to that restaurant's customer survey results, supporting the restaurant-level exploratory analysis reported in the Results. The ten owners had operated their restaurants for 3 to 10 years; 6 were female, and 4 were male.

Instruments

Under service quality, the researcher-made instrument comprised five constructs — tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy — with five to ten items each. It was validated by experts in the field and pilot-tested to establish reliability; Cronbach's alpha values were 0.8427 (tangibles), 0.8141 (reliability), 0.7692 (responsiveness), 0.7692 (assurance), and 0.7899 (empathy), indicating excellent internal consistency. Responses were scored on a four-point scale (4 = Strongly Agree to 1 = Strongly Disagree) and interpreted using the following continuum: 3.25–4.0 = Very Good, 2.5–3.24 = Good, 1.75–2.49 = Fair, 1.0–1.74 = Poor.

The researcher-made instrument for customer satisfaction comprised five constructs — ambiance, hospitality service, added value, technology, and trust and commitment — with five to ten items each. It was similarly validated and pilot-tested; Cronbach's alpha values were 0.9040 (ambiance), 0.9297 (hospitality service), 0.8899 (added value), 0.8841 (technology), and 0.8847 (trust and commitment), indicating excellent internal consistency. Responses were interpreted using the continuum: 3.25–4.0 = Very High, 2.5–3.24 = High, 1.75–2.49 = Low, 1.0–1.74 = Very Low.

Customer loyalty comprised five constructs — repeat patronage, word of mouth, brand equity, emotional attachment, and switching cost — with five to ten items each. It was validated and pilot-tested; Cronbach's alpha values were 0.9080 (repeat patronage), 0.9286 (word of mouth), 0.9531 (brand equity), 0.9510 (emotional attachment), and 0.9085 (switching cost), indicating excellent internal consistency. The same Very High–Very Low continuum used for the Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire was applied here.

Moreover, a semi-structured Interview Guide composed of six open-ended questions was used to elicit responses from the owner-participants, allowing the researcher to pursue discussion and follow-up questions throughout each interview. The guide included an opening question, main questions, and a closing question. Interviews were scheduled at participants' preferred times and dates and lasted 45 minutes to 1 hour; each was audio-recorded and later transcribed. Responses were coded, categorized, and organized into themes using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach in support of the broader Moustakas analytic procedure.

Data Analysis

Mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of restaurant service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to test the significance of relationships among service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

Interview data were analyzed using Moustakas' method, a phenomenological approach to analyzing and interpreting textual data that focuses on understanding the meaning of lived experience. Transcripts were read repeatedly to identify significant units of meaning, that is, words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs conveying a particular experience, which were then coded and clustered according to shared characteristics. Clustered codes were organized into categories and themes, and the relationships among categories were examined to arrive at a coherent structural description of the phenomenon under study. This descriptive account was synthesized into a narrative that captured the nature of participants' experiences, and the analysis was validated through participant and peer input to support the reliability and accuracy of the resulting themes.

Because each of the ten owner-participants could be linked to the same restaurant surveyed in the quantitative strand, an exploratory analysis tested whether owners' difficulty levels were associated with their restaurant's customer-reported outcomes. Each owner's transcript was rated by the researcher on a 1 (low) to 4 (high) severity scale for each of the three qualitative themes, namely challenges in restaurant management, business strategies and marketing, and navigating competition, based on the number of distinct difficulties described, their framing as ongoing versus resolved, and their described severity. The three theme ratings were averaged into a single owner-level difficulty score, which was then correlated with that restaurant's mean customer-satisfaction and customer-loyalty scores using Spearman's rho. This analysis is exploratory in nature, as it relies on a single rater's severity judgments applied to interview excerpts rather than a validated instrument, and a sample of ten restaurants provides limited statistical power; results are therefore reported descriptively rather than treated as a confirmatory test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Restaurant Service Quality as Perceived by Customers

Table 1 presents customer perceptions of restaurant service quality across five constructs. Overall, restaurant service quality was rated very good (WM = 3.43, SD = 0.0593), with reliability the highest-rated construct (WM = 3.51) and tangibility the lowest, though still very good (WM = 3.35).

Table 1. *Level of Restaurant Service Quality as Perceived by Customers (n = 396)*

Construct	Weighted Mean	SD	Interpretation
Tangibility	3.35	0.5762	Very Good
Reliability	3.51	0.4715	Very Good
Responsiveness	3.41	0.5576	Very Good
Assurance	3.43	0.5441	Very Good
Empathy	3.46	0.5347	Very Good
Overall Weighted Mean	3.43	0.0540	Very Good

Legend: 3.25–4.00 Very Good (VG); 2.5–3.24 Good (G); 1.75–2.49 Fair (F); 1.00–1.74 Poor (P)

Reliability, defined as the perception that restaurants consistently deliver on their promises, was the highest-rated construct, consistent with well-established systems for order accuracy, timely preparation, and consistent food and beverage quality. Empathy (WM = 3.46) reflected customers' sense that staff were attentive and understood their needs, while assurance (WM = 3.43) reflected confidence in staff competence and courtesy. Responsiveness (WM = 3.41) indicated that staff were perceived as quick to attend to customer needs. Tangibility, which covers the restaurant's physical appearance, cleanliness, and menu

presentation, received the lowest rating, though still very good, suggesting that customers weighed the quality of food, hospitality, and service speed somewhat more heavily than physical design (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020).

Level of Customer Satisfaction

Table 2 presents customer satisfaction across five constructs. Overall, customer satisfaction was very high (WM = 3.31, SD = 0.190), with trust and commitment rated highest (WM = 3.46) and technology the only construct rated merely high rather than very high (WM = 2.93).

Table 2. *Level of Customer Satisfaction (n = 396)*

Construct	Weighted Mean	SD	Interpretation
Ambiance	3.39	0.5512	Very High
Hospitality Service	3.40	0.5514	Very High
Added Value	3.36	0.5414	Very High
Technology	2.93	0.8818	High
Trust and Commitment	3.45	0.5207	Very High
Overall Weighted Mean	3.31	0.190	Very High

Legend: 3.25–4.00 Very High (VH); 2.5–3.24 High (H); 1.75–2.49 Low (L); 1.00–1.74 Very Low (VL)

Trust and commitment emerged as the strongest contributor to customer satisfaction (WM = 3.46), reflecting customers' confidence in food safety, hygiene, and consistency. Hospitality service (WM = 3.40) and ambiance (WM = 3.39) followed closely, suggesting that staff compassion and responsiveness, along with the dining environment, also left a strong impression on customers' overall experience (Karlsson et al., 2019). Added value (WM = 3.36), which covers supplementary benefits such as promotions, was likewise rated very high (Farooq et al., 2020; Vanhatalo et al., 2022). Technology was the only construct rated merely high (WM = 2.93) and had the largest standard deviation of any construct (SD = 0.8818), indicating considerable variability in customers' experiences with digital reservation systems, self-service kiosks, Wi-Fi, and online promotion across the 10 restaurants surveyed (Seo, 2020). This combination of a comparatively low mean and high variability marks technology as the construct with the clearest room for improvement.

Level of Customer Loyalty

Table 3 presents customers' loyalty across five constructs. Overall, customer loyalty was very high (WM = 3.48, SD = 0.0239), with repeat patronage rated highest (WM = 3.52) and emotional attachment the lowest, though still very high (WM = 3.46).

Table 3. *Level of Customer Loyalty (n = 396)*

Construct	Weighted Mean	SD	Interpretation
Repeat Patronage	3.52	0.5218	Very High
Word of Mouth	3.50	0.5564	Very High
Brand Equity	3.47	0.5498	Very High
Emotional Attachment	3.46	0.5680	Very High
Switching Costs	3.49	0.5112	Very High
Overall Weighted Mean	3.48	0.0239	Very High

Legend: 3.25–4.00 Very High (VH); 2.5–3.24 High (H); 1.75–2.49 Low (L); 1.00–1.74 Very Low (VL)

Repeat patronage was the strongest indicator of loyalty, suggesting that customers consistently returned because of food and service quality and an overall positive experience (Hanaysha, 2021; Tang et al., 2023). Word of mouth (WM = 3.50) and switching costs (WM = 3.49) were nearly as high, indicating that satisfied customers were both willing to recommend restaurants to others and reluctant to risk an

unfamiliar establishment's lower food or service quality (Koo et al., 2020). Brand equity (WM = 3.47) and emotional attachment (WM = 3.46), the latter being the lowest-rated construct, were both still very high, though the comparatively lower emotional-attachment score suggests room to deepen the personal, community-oriented connection between restaurants and patrons beyond satisfaction with individual transactions (Nyamekye et al., 2023).

Relationship Between Restaurant Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Table 4 presents the correlations between the five service-quality constructs and the five customer-satisfaction constructs. Every pairing was positive and statistically significant at $p < .01$, ranging from a moderate $r = .387$ (reliability–technology) to a strong $r = .775$ (responsiveness–hospitality service). Because all correlations in the matrix were significant, H_01 was rejected: there is a significant relationship between restaurant service quality and customer satisfaction.

Table 4. *Correlation Between Restaurant Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction*

Service Quality	Ambiance	Hospitality Svc.	Added Value	Technology	Trust & Commit.
Tangibility	$r = .732^{**}$	$r = .654^{**}$	$r = .717^{**}$	$r = .548^{**}$	$r = .583^{**}$
Reliability	$r = .669^{**}$	$r = .619^{**}$	$r = .684^{**}$	$r = .387^{**}$	$r = .618^{**}$
Responsiveness	$r = .734^{**}$	$r = .743^{**}$	$r = .676^{**}$	$r = .560^{**}$	$r = .601^{**}$
Assurance	$r = .759^{**}$	$r = .775^{**}$	$r = .757^{**}$	$r = .556^{**}$	$r = .725^{**}$
Empathy	$r = .696^{**}$	$r = .747^{**}$	$r = .759^{**}$	$r = .550^{**}$	$r = .681^{**}$

***Significant at $p = .00$ ($p < .01$); all correlations reject H_01 .*

Assurance showed the strongest associations with satisfaction overall, particularly with hospitality service ($r = .775$) and ambiance ($r = .759$), suggesting that customers' confidence in staff competence and trustworthiness is closely bound up with how welcoming and well-cared-for they feel (Sharma et al., 2021; Shin et al., 2018). Technology consistently showed the weakest, though still significant, correlations with every service-quality construct, most notably with reliability ($r = .387$), a pattern that reinforces the Table 2 finding that technology functions somewhat independently of the core service-quality experience and represents a distinct lever restaurants have not yet fully employed (Moon & Armstrong, 2020).

Relationship Between Restaurant Service Quality and Customer Loyalty

Table 5 presents the correlations between the five service-quality constructs and the five customer-loyalty constructs. As with satisfaction, every pairing was positive and statistically significant at $p < .01$, ranging from a moderate $r = .387$ (reliability–emotional attachment) to a strong $r = .701$ (assurance–brand equity). Because all correlations in the matrix were significant, H_02 was rejected: there is a significant relationship between restaurant service quality and customer loyalty.

Table 5. *Correlation Between Restaurant Service Quality and Customer Loyalty*

Service Quality	Repeat Patr.	Word of Mouth	of Brand Equity	Emot. Attach.	Switching Cost
Tangibility	$r = .541^{**}$	$r = .543^{**}$	$r = .593^{**}$	$r = .593^{**}$	$r = .565^{**}$
Reliability	$r = .552^{**}$	$r = .552^{**}$	$r = .571^{**}$	$r = .534^{**}$	$r = .601^{**}$
Responsiveness	$r = .589^{**}$	$r = .586^{**}$	$r = .606^{**}$	$r = .595^{**}$	$r = .532^{**}$
Assurance	$r = .639^{**}$	$r = .696^{**}$	$r = .701^{**}$	$r = .666^{**}$	$r = .640^{**}$
Empathy	$r = .604^{**}$	$r = .613^{**}$	$r = .642^{**}$	$r = .648^{**}$	$r = .599^{**}$

***Significant at $p = .00$ ($p < .01$); all correlations reject H_02 .*

Assurance again showed the strongest associations with loyalty overall, particularly with brand equity ($r = .701$) and word of mouth ($r = .696$), suggesting that customers who feel secure and well cared

for are also the ones most likely to think well of the restaurant's brand and recommend it to others (Hwang et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). Responsiveness showed the weakest correlation in the matrix, with switching costs specifically ($r = .532$), though all five service-quality constructs correlated with loyalty in a comparatively narrow band ($r = .532$ to $r = .701$) relative to the wider spread observed for satisfaction in Table 4, suggesting that loyalty responds somewhat more uniformly to each dimension of service quality than satisfaction does (Alam et al., 2021; Slatten et al., 2021).

Difficulties Faced by Restaurant Owners in Sustaining Service Quality

The ten restaurant owners interviewed had operated their establishments for 3 to 10 years and had direct, first-hand experience maintaining service quality; six were female and four were male. Analysis of their interview responses using Moustakas' method yielded three themes: Challenges in Restaurant Management, Business Strategies and Marketing, and Navigating Competition in Business.

Theme 1: Challenges in Restaurant Management

This theme captured the day-to-day difficulties owners faced in running their establishments, organized into four subthemes.

Customer relations and satisfaction. Owners described handling demanding or insulting customers as one of the most immediate tests of composure. One owner recalled, "We encountered an insulting and demanding customer who was unhappy with the food and services we offered" (P1). Owners responded by addressing complaints with tact and empathy rather than defensiveness, as another explained: "Sometimes we can't predict the different attitudes of our customers; some will be friendly, and some will not. We've had some customers complaining about the taste of their food. So we've offered to recook, replace, or give them another meal for free" (P3). This pattern of resolving complaints through tangible remediation, such as recooking, replacing, or comping a meal, reflects a broader principle in service recovery: addressing dissatisfaction promptly and with a genuine desire to resolve it can convert a negative experience into a positive one and preserve the customer's loyalty (Hayati et al., 2020).

Customer service challenges. Delivery delays during high-volume periods were a recurring source of strain. As one owner put it, "We are unable to serve every client. We believe that the customer is always right; therefore, even if some customers have complained about our delivery times and have even yelled at us, we still must maintain more patience" (P3). Another owner connected delay directly to dissatisfaction: "We often serve and deliver orders late, which causes dissatisfied customers. It's the waiting time that will cause customers to complain, not the food's quality" (P6). A third added, "Orders are sometimes delayed, especially when we have an excessive number of orders" (P9). Proactively identifying potential issues through customer feedback, surveys, and trend monitoring before they escalate can help businesses address underlying problems before customers become aware of them, balancing customers' needs against a healthy, efficient work environment for staff (Morgan et al., 2018).

Staffing and employee management. Owners consistently described manpower as one of their most persistent difficulties. "Manpower is crucial, and even with good sales, dissatisfied staff can lead to turnover" (P7). Attitude and skill gaps among staff compounded the problem: "Some employees lack positive attitudes and are genuinely inadequate for dealing with the various types of customers" (P8), while another owner described having to personally compensate for staff who would not follow direction: "Some staff members are stubborn and never listen to the owners, but the owners provide exceptional service and make customers feel at home" (P9). Managing employees effectively requires owners to practice considerable tolerance, since each staff member brings a different set of strengths, limitations, and dispositions to the role (Renz et al., 2018); establishing a positive holistic employee experience, strong pay, and clear career ladders can help reduce turnover and build the loyalty needed for consistent service delivery (Slatten et al., 2021).

Operations and management challenges. Active, hands-on ownership emerged as central to maintaining standards. One owner stated, “A business owner must be actively involved in operating the restaurant to oversee day-to-day operations and be aware of what needs to be done” (P4). A second linked this involvement directly to ingredient and food-quality consistency: “Part of operating a business is maintaining the standard of our meals; we never use substandard meats, the ingredients must be constant, and providing excellent customer service ensures that our customers stay with us” (P7). Time management was a related strain, as one owner described: “The greatest difficulty we've faced is managing our time effectively” (P6). Staying actively involved allows an owner to adapt swiftly to market changes, innovate where necessary, and manage finances effectively, safeguarding the restaurant's stability and competitive edge (Yost et al., 2021).

Theme 2: Business Strategies and Marketing

Owners described needing to actively cultivate demand beyond their existing customer base, particularly outside of catering work. One owner explained, “Sell new products; since we have a lot of competitors, we need to think about more tactics such as promos and events. Aside from dine-orders, we fulfill online orders and provide high-quality food and services” (P1). Another described a period of deliberate customer-acquisition effort: “During that period, aside from our catering services, we needed more customers, so we made every effort to ensure their satisfaction so they would return to our establishment” (P2). A third framed challenges as something owners must actively manage rather than avoid: “Though it's normal to encounter challenges, it's up to us how to handle them and ensure that customers are satisfied with both our food and the services we provide” (P3). Menu innovation also featured prominently: “We offer new items and modify our menu to improve and innovate our products” (P5). Modifying the menu signals a restaurant's responsiveness to customer preferences and market trends and reflects a commitment to delivering a better dining experience over time (Purnomo, 2021).

Theme 3: Navigating Competition in Business

Owners recognized that customers could readily defect to competitors and described a need for continuous, visible promotional effort to retain them. One owner summarized this directly: “Customers may choose to visit another restaurant, so we must advertise new promotions, marketing strategies, and items each month that will bring them back” (P10). Sustained promotional activity, including new offers, marketing strategies, and menu items refreshed monthly, increases the likelihood of engaging existing customers while attracting new ones (Kee et al., 2021). Owners also pointed to the value of strategic partnerships in extending their reach amid heavy competition, consistent with the idea that collaborative alliances with complementary businesses can expand a restaurant's reach and add value for customers (Ponce et al., 2020).

Across all three themes, the picture that emerges from owners' accounts is one of service quality sustained largely through personal vigilance and reactive problem-solving, such as an owner stepping in to placate an angry customer, personally overseeing the kitchen, or pushing out a new promotion when traffic slows, rather than through standardized systems that would let service quality hold steady independent of the owner's constant, direct attention.

Exploratory Test of the Owner Difficulty–Customer Outcome Link

Because each owner-participant could be linked to the same restaurant surveyed in the quantitative strand, an exploratory analysis tested whether owners' difficulty severity was associated with that restaurant's customer-reported satisfaction and loyalty. Table 6 presents each restaurant's owner-difficulty severity score, along with its mean customer satisfaction and loyalty scores.

Table 6. *Owner Difficulty Severity and Restaurant-Level Customer Outcomes (10 Restaurants)*

Restaurant	Owner Severity	Difficulty	Mean Satisfaction	Mean Loyalty
1	2.33		2.75	3.00
2	1.33		3.01	3.23
3	2.33		3.53	3.55
4	2.00		3.44	3.53
5	2.00		3.41	3.57
6	2.00		3.54	3.72
7	2.67		3.56	3.64
8	2.67		3.35	3.52
9	2.67		3.48	3.71
10	3.33		3.26	3.43

Note. Severity scores reflect researcher ratings of interview transcripts on a 1 (low) to 4 (high) scale, averaged across three themes; satisfaction and loyalty are restaurant-level means of that restaurant's customer respondents.

Spearman's rho showed no significant relationship between owner difficulty severity and customer satisfaction ($\rho = .087$, $p = .811$) or customer loyalty ($\rho = .025$, $p = .945$) across the ten restaurants. Neither correlation approached conventional significance thresholds, and both effect sizes were close to zero. This null result should be interpreted cautiously: with only ten restaurants, the analysis has limited power to detect even a moderate true relationship, and the severity ratings rely on a single rater's judgment applied to brief interview excerpts rather than a validated instrument. Within those limits, the data available here do not show owners' self-reported difficulty levels predicting their customer satisfaction or loyalty scores in either direction.

Variability in the Service Quality, Satisfaction and Loyalty

The quantitative findings confirm, in this provincial Philippine setting, the relationship between service quality and customer outcomes that has been documented in hospitality research elsewhere (Lee et al., 2020; Bhuian, 2021): restaurants rated very good on service quality also produced very high customer satisfaction and very high customer loyalty, and every one of the fifty correlations tested across Tables 4 and 5 was statistically significant. This pattern supports both Oliver's (1980) expectancy-disconfirmation framework, in which customers whose expectations are consistently met or exceeded report higher satisfaction, and the Service Quality Gap Theory of Johns and Tyas (1996), since the comparatively high, consistent ratings across constructs suggest a small gap between what these customers expected and what they experienced.

However, the relationship was not uniform across constructs. Assurance was the strongest correlate of both satisfaction and loyalty, while technology was consistently the weakest and the only satisfaction construct not rated “very high.” This combination of strong assurance effects and weak technology effects suggests that, in this setting, customers' trust in staff competence and courtesy currently drives satisfaction and loyalty more than restaurants' digital infrastructure does. That is a meaningful finding for resource-constrained restaurant owners: it implies that staff training and interpersonal service quality, rather than technology investment, may be the more immediately cost-effective lever for raising satisfaction and loyalty. At the same time, the comparatively low and highly variable technology rating ($SD = 0.8818$, by far the largest of any construct in Tables 1–3) indicates that some restaurants have invested in reservation systems, kiosks, Wi-Fi, or digital promotion and others have not, leaving real room for differentiation through technology adoption (Ma et al., 2022) as a second-order improvement once core service quality is secured.

The weaker relationship between reliability and emotional attachment specifically ($r = .387$, the lowest value in Table 5) is also worth noting. Reliability built strong repeat patronage, word of mouth, brand equity, and switching costs, but a comparatively weak emotional bond, suggesting that dependable service

alone produces functional loyalty (customers keep returning) without necessarily producing the kind of felt attachment that would make a brand resistant to a single bad experience or an aggressive competitor's promotion. This nuance becomes visible only once the constructs in Tables 4 and 5 are read against one another rather than reported individually.

Discrepancy Between Customer Outcomes and Owner Experience

Read alone, the quantitative strand could be taken to suggest that restaurant service quality in Misamis Occidental is in a comfortable, self-sustaining position, with service quality rated very good and predicting satisfaction and loyalty exactly as theory would suggest. The qualitative strand complicates that picture considerably. The same restaurants whose customers rate them very good on tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy are, from their owners' accounts, sustaining those ratings through what amounts to constant personal intervention: an owner stepping in personally to de-escalate an angry customer, absorbing staff who "never listen" while still trying to "make customers feel at home" (P9), and managing delivery delays through patience rather than through a fundamentally different operational process.

This gap between customer-perceived outcomes and owner-experienced process is consistent with the idea that sustaining competitive advantage in food service depends on continuously meeting guest expectations, even as the underlying operational difficulties of doing so increase (Damit et al., 2019). It also helps explain why reliability (Table 1's highest-rated construct) coexists with owners' own description of staffing and operations as their most persistent strain (Theme 1): the customer-facing outcome and the backstage difficulty of producing it are not the same thing, and a study that measured only the former would have missed the latter entirely.

Read together, the two strands suggest a restaurant sector in Misamis Occidental that is currently delivering strong customer outcomes, but largely through the owner's direct, hands-on effort rather than through standardized systems for staff training and retention, for handling complaints, or for sustained marketing, that would let service quality hold steady independent of any one person's constant attention. This is the cycle depicted in Figure 1: owner-absorbed difficulties produce service quality, service quality drives satisfaction and loyalty, and that sustained business outcome loops back into renewed strain on the owner rather than resolving into a stable, self-sustaining state. The exploratory test reported in Table 6, however, found no significant association between owners' difficulty severity and their restaurant's satisfaction or loyalty scores, so this cycle is best read as a pattern visible in owners' qualitative accounts rather than as a statistically confirmed mechanism. One plausible reading consistent with both results is that owners absorb difficulty unevenly enough, and customers' standards are met closely enough across all ten restaurants, that strain on the owner's side does not yet show up as a detectable difference in customer-side outcomes, although with only ten restaurants, this study cannot rule out that a real relationship exists but was too small to detect. That uncertainty is itself a meaningful business risk: it suggests that current satisfaction and loyalty levels may be more fragile to owner turnover, illness, business expansion, or simple fatigue than the very good and very high ratings in Tables 1 through 3 would suggest on their own.

Practical Implications

For restaurant owners, the combined findings point toward three priorities. First, because assurance and empathy correlate most strongly with both satisfaction and loyalty, continued investment in staff training, particularly around handling complaints calmly and consistently, the very skill owners described exercising personally in the interviews, is likely to yield disproportionate returns relative to investment in physical upgrades alone. Second, because technology was both the weakest-performing satisfaction construct and the construct with the most variability across restaurants, even modest, low-cost technology adoption (online ordering, simple reservation tools, an active social media presence) represents an underused opportunity for differentiation, consistent with restaurant owners themselves describing online order fulfillment as something they were already doing informally (P1) rather than systematically. Third,

because owners' qualitative accounts point to staffing and retention, rather than customer-facing service quality itself, as their central strain, addressing staff turnover directly through clearer expectations, feedback, and incentives (Renz et al., 2018; Slatten et al., 2021) may do more to protect long-run service quality than any customer-facing initiative.

CONCLUSION

This study examined restaurant service quality in Misamis Occidental from two complementary vantage points. From the customer's side of the counter, service quality was rated very good, customer satisfaction very high (technology excepted), and customer loyalty very high, with every tested relationship among the three constructs statistically significant, confirming that restaurant service quality is a meaningful driver of how satisfied and loyal their customers become. From the owner's side, the same restaurants are sustained through considerable, largely personal and reactive effort: managing difficult customers, persistent staffing difficulties, delivery delays, and the constant work of marketing against competitors. An exploratory test linking owners' difficulty severity to their own restaurants' customer outcomes did not find a significant relationship, so this study cannot confirm that the difficulty owners report is detectably associated with their customer satisfaction or loyalty scores. With only 10 restaurants, it also cannot rule out a relationship. Neither quantitative picture is complete without the qualitative one, even though the two are not yet statistically linked: restaurants in this setting are succeeding with customers, and owners describe enduring considerable difficulty to make that happen, but this study's data speak to each separately rather than to a single confirmed mechanism linking them. Sustaining and improving these very good and very high ratings over time will likely depend on whether owners can convert personal vigilance into durable systems for staff training, retention, technology adoption, and deliberate, rather than reactive, marketing, a recommendation grounded in owners' own accounts, even though its link to customer-side outcomes remains a direction for future confirmatory research rather than an established finding.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following are recommended:

1. Restaurant owners may formalize staff training around complaint handling, courtesy, and attentiveness, the assurance- and empathy-related behaviors most strongly associated with customer satisfaction and loyalty in this study, rather than relying on individual staff disposition or the owner's personal intervention.
2. Restaurant owners may invest in accessible, low-cost technology (online ordering, digital reservations, active social media presence) to close the gap between technology and the other, more strongly rated satisfaction constructs, given both its comparatively low mean and its high variability across restaurants.
3. Restaurant owners may address staff turnover directly by setting clearer expectations, providing regular feedback, offering competitive compensation, and offering growth opportunities, since staffing and employee management emerged as one of owners' most persistent difficulties and a likely threat to the consistency of service delivery over time.
4. Restaurant owners may shift from reactive, ad hoc marketing toward planned, recurring promotional and menu-innovation strategies, building on practices they already described as informal to maintain visibility and differentiation amid competition.
5. Industry associations or local government units may consider offering shared training resources or technology subsidies to independent restaurants, since many of the difficulties owners described,

particularly staffing and technology adoption, are unlikely to be resolved by any single small establishment acting alone.

6. Future researchers may build on the exploratory test reported here with a larger sample of restaurants, a validated multi-item instrument for rating owner difficulty rather than a single rater's judgment of interview excerpts, and statistical power adequate to detect a moderate relationship, since the present sample of ten restaurants could not confirm or rule out a link between owner-side difficulty and customer-side outcomes.

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