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RESEARCH PAPER

Relationship between Hotels' Service Quality Factors and Customers' Dining Behavioral Outcomes: A Mediating Role of Brand Trust

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of Hygiene and Safety measures, consumer brand experience, and food and service quality on consumers' willingness to pay more, dine-out intentions, and intention to spread eWOM in Pakistani restaurants. The introduction of lockdowns and movement restrictions during the pandemic had a negative effect on the restaurant and hospitality sectors, requiring a change in the way of service delivery. The sector showed its resilience despite the difficulties it encountered, although it needed quite some effort to regain the trust of consumers in eating establishments. This study also investigated how brand trust functions as a mediator. This study focused on Pakistani individuals aged 18 years and above who dined at restaurants post-pandemic. Four hundred eighty-nine (489) individuals participated in the online self-administered survey utilized for data collection. The results revealed the importance of brand experience, as well as food and service quality in restaurants, and they were positively associated with customers' willingness to pay more, dine-out intentions, and intentions to spread electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). The function of brand trust as a mediator has proven to be beneficial. Restaurants can understand the factors that contribute to an improved dining experience. This research will substantially enhance the current knowledge in hospitality and marketing by analyzing the importance of hygiene and safety protocols, brand experience, and the quality of food and service on consumers' brand trust, willingness to pay a premium, intentions to dine out, and propensity to share electronic word-of-mouth in the post-pandemic context.

KEYWORDS	Brand Trust, Hygiene and Safety Measures, Brand Experience, Food and Service Quality, Willingness to Pay More, Dineout Intentions, eWOM

Introduction

The expectations were for a gradual industry revival following vaccination and the easing of restrictions (Dong et al., 2023). Dine-in service, in contrast to meal delivery and drive-through, expands career opportunities, especially for waiter-staff (Wei et al., 2021a; Wei et al., 2021b). Thus, the government's strategy to reintroduce restaurant dine-in is crucial for economic revitalization(Lantry et al., 2020). Restaurants in Pakistan must implement Hygiene and Safety measures recommended by the National Command and Control (NCOC) to reopen safely. These measures include wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing, temporarily closing indoor dining areas, providing hand sanitizers, and cleaning and disinfecting objects and surfaces. Initially, the NCOC permitted fully vaccinated individuals to dine in restaurants; however, due to weaker compliance and implementation, the government was unable to control the public (Dawn.com, 2021). However, most restaurants have entirely adhered to these principles and implemented additional requirements for staff and guests (Lucas, 2020; Wei et al., 2021a).

COVID-19 severely impacted the restaurant industry, as authorities implemented lockdowns and restricted mobility to contain its spread (Kim et al., 2020). Global, national, and local travel limitations threatened hospitality(Dalwai, 2023; Kim et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2020; Yaseen, et. al., 2020). Contrary to this, the hospitality industry has a history of resilience and bouncing back from earlier crises; here again, it has demonstrated resilience and rebound ability (Lombardi et al., 2021). They leveraged IT capabilities to transform their businesses by 180 degrees. To some extent, they contributed to the revival of the IT industry in developing countries, such as Pakistan. After the pandemic, the public was well aware of the benefits of home delivery and eating food at home (Hong et al., 2021); therefore, the real challenge was to bring them back physically for dineouts and give them the confidence that they are out of danger of spreading disease. At this stage, the hotel industry required a comprehensive business model to meet the public's expectations regarding dining. At one side, hotel administration has to take care of service quality factors; on the other, they need to act according to the public's dining behaviours.

Consumer experiences, like brand trust, strongly affect their decision-making, behavior, and WOM communication, making them a valuable asset for competitive advantage(Cao et al., 2019; Khan & Fatma, 2023). However, food and service quality determine restaurant customer satisfaction (Ababneh et al., 2022). Ambiance, food quality, and pricing were examined to determine the restaurant customer experience (Wu et al., 2021), but the integration of collective service quality factors and consumers' dining behavior has not been documented. This study focuses on post-pandemic dining out. This study examines how customers' cognitive experiences, influenced by sanitation, safety, brand experience, and food and service quality, affect their dining out decisions.

The aims of the study are: 1) to examine the role of hygiene and safety measures in building brand trust, willingness to pay a premium, intentions to dine out, and e-WOM. 2) To examine the influence of customers' brand experience on brand trust, price elasticity, intention to dine out, and eWOM intention. 3) To analyze the influence of food and service quality on brand trust, price elasticity, dining-out intentions, and eWOM intentions. 4) To ascertain the mediating role of brand trust in the link between antecedent and outcome variables. This study is expected to benefit the hospitality sector by providing restaurants with authentic insights into client needs, enabling them to establish the necessary standards to strive for. The study encompassed three outcome variables that can elevate the image of the restaurant and augment earnings. The proposed study would assist restaurant management in comprehending consumer behavior following the pandemic. It aims to elucidate post-pandemic societal dynamics that will influence consumer behavior. Implementing stringent hygiene and safety standards, ensuring restaurant safety, and involving food-safety organizations in quality audits enables restaurants to identify factors that enhance the dining experience, thereby reinforcing their dedication to customer well-being.

Literature Review

Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) emerged from foundational studies in consumer behavior and marketing(Oliver, 1977, 1980). According to ECT, consumer satisfaction is contingent upon the degree of alignment between original expectations and subsequent confirmation or disconfirmation of those expectations (Atapattu et al., 2016). Expectancy Confirmation Theory posits that the purchasing experience significantly influences future consumer behavioral states, including expectations, disconfirmation judgments, attitudes, satisfaction levels, and intentions for repeat usage (Oliver, 1980). In marketing, ECT has been a prevalent approach for examining many phenomena, such as consumer expectations, consumer satisfaction, repurchase intentions, and post-purchase behavior (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Ashfaq et al., 2019; Dabholkar et al., 2000).

The current study uses Expectancy Confirmation Theory (ECT) to examine how restaurant features including hygiene and safety, brand experience, and food and service quality affect consumer behavior. Customers expect a restaurant's cleanliness, health, atmosphere, food, and service before going. Online reviews, antecedent experiences, and WOM recommendations shape these expectations.

After the pandemic, restaurant patrons expect high hygiene and safety standards. They expect strict hygiene, sanitization, and health regulations. They anticipate a memorable and good brand experience that includes nutrients, ambiance, service, and dining setting. High expectations are set for meal quality, flavor, and staff service. The ECT states that customers' perceived performance affects whether their sanitation, brand experience, and food/service quality expectations are met. This impacts brand trust. Therefore, constant positive expectation confirmation builds brand confidence. Trust in a restaurant brand makes customers happy, which improves their behavior. This means being willing to spend more for a restaurant's food. Trust also encourages future restaurant visits. Finally, clients with high brand trust are more likely to recommend the restaurant on social media and dine out.

Hygiene and Safety Measures at Restaurants

Food safety and hygiene involve the management of microbiological, chemical, and physical hazards to prevent foodborne illnesses and ensure that food is free from contamination and safe for consumption (Thio & Wijaya, 2010; Yeung & Morris, 2001). Consumers consider hygiene and safety measures to be the most important factors when dining out at restaurants after the COVID-19 pandemic. One in ten people dies after eating unsafe and contaminated food (World Health Organization, 2015). Thus, cleanliness and safety are crucial for preventing the introduction of contaminants and maintaining a safe food environment (Onyeaka et al., 2024). A majority of individuals, specifically 75 percent, express reluctance to revisit a restaurant that has experienced a food poisoning or cleanliness issue unless there has been a change in ownership (HQ, 2022).

The principal objective of food safety, hygiene, and cleanliness is to provide food items that are suitable for consumption, safe to consume, and devoid of contaminants. This ensures that consumers have trust and peace of mind when consuming the food(Thio & Wijaya, 2010). Hence, hygiene and safety measures have become crucial in the restaurant industry, even during the pandemic (Vandenhaute et al., 2022). Implementing these measures can effectively safeguard the well-being of both customers and employees while also helping to mitigate the transmission of the virus.

The post-pandemic period has been characterized by a significant level of consumer heterogeneity in their attitudes towards health and safety rules as some groups of them support strict rules and others are characterized by non-compliance (Bavel et al., 2020). Restaurants should be able to realise how such perceptions affect the dining intentions because health consciousness has a substantial influence on consumer behaviour. By prioritizing hygiene and safety, a significant decrease in the consumer confidence level can be achieved and foster patronage.

The emergence of health-conscious restaurants and the growing popularity of organic and clean-eating venues suggest that buyers are ready to pay a higher price to improve health risks and increase well-being (Hsu et al., 2023). Hanks et al. (2024) assert that customers who feel that restaurants have high sanitation and safety levels record greater satisfaction and can make positive online word-of-mouth (eWOM) feedback. On the same note, Alsubhi et al. (2023) established that restaurants that focus on hygiene and safety gain the ability to raise prices and attract loyal customers.

Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: The perceived importance of customers regarding the hygiene and safety measures of restaurants is positively associated with the willingness to pay more.

H1b: The perceived importance of customers regarding the hygiene and safety measures of restaurants is positively associated with dine-out intentions.

H1c: The perceived importance of customers regarding hygiene and safety measures in restaurants is positively associated with eWOM.

Customer's brand experience at restaurants

Direct and indirect interfaces among customers and brands elicit a set of responses called brand experiences (Kang et al., 2017; Safeer et al., 2021; Shukla et al., 2023). Brand experience includes "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli in design, identity, packaging, communications, and environments"(Brakus et al., 2009; Rosado-Pinto & Loureiro, 2023). The impact of brand experience, whether positive or negative, has enduring implications for customer behavior (Huang & Chen, 2022). Sensory, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral characteristics can be used to study restaurant brand experience. After the pandemic, consumers may choose restaurants based on safety and hygiene (Vandenhaute et al., 2022). Prior research have examined café consumer experiences (Ma et al., 2023; Shukla et al., 2022; Wong, 2023) but after the pandemic, it is important to understand how intellectual experiences affect behavior.

Customers' intellectual experiences with restaurant safety and hygiene can affect their decisions. Consumers may dine out if they think the restaurant is taking appropriate action regarding health and safety (Bonfanti et al., 2023; Hwang et al., 2023; Lo et al., 2023). Customers who perceive a deficiency in safety at restaurants may refrain from dining there. Their propensity to invest more in dining experiences appears contingent upon the extent to which the restaurant has implemented safety measures.   The implementation of contactless payment options (Gursoy and Chi, 2020) or advanced air filtration systems (Chang et al., 2021) may lead customers to see these preventive measures as more valuable. Satisfied patrons are more inclined to disseminate their experiences on online review sites and social media accounts.   Favourable electronic word of mouth (eWoM) assists restaurants in attracting additional patrons and enhancing their reputation. Leading to the following hypothesis

 H2a: Customers' experiences with restaurants are positively associated with their willingness to pay more.

H2b: Customers' experiences with restaurants are positively associated with dining out intentions.

H2c: Customers' experience with restaurants is positively associated with positive positive eWOM.

Food service and quality at restaurants

It has been shown based on empirical research that the ability to attract and retain clientele of a restaurant depends on the quality of culinary and service offerings (Ahmed et al., 2023; Deszczyński, 2021; Satti et al., 2021). Here, the most important difference is the quality of the food and service offered(Liu et al., 2017). Food quality as a subjective construct summarizes the characteristics that consumers apply to assess its worth and desirability. These characteristics include size of the portion, visual appearance, taste profile, nutritional value, diversity, and general visual display (Ha and Jang, 2010; Qin et al., 2011). Ultimately, individual preference governs perceptions of food quality.

It has been demonstrated in the literature that the quality of the food has a strong impact on consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, which in turn affects the future behavioral intentions towards food service establishments (Nam et al., 2017; Namin, 2017; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Zhong and Moon, 2020). The recent study conducted by Yuliantoro et al. (2020) identified the importance of food and service quality in forming the overall quality of restaurants during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Service quality is the degree to which service delivery by a restaurant surpasses the expectations of consumers, which results in a superiority perception (Biswas and Verma, 2022). According to Slack et al. (2021), customers determine service quality by contrasting their expectations with the actual experience they had with a service provider. According to ECT, satisfying customers is more effective when their expectations are met or exceeded (Atapattu et al., 2016). If the meal is delicious and the service is outstanding, customers will be satisfied and even willing to spend more.

Customers are increasingly seeking excellent dining experiences, and restaurants that invest in superior food and services can command higher prices and build loyal customers. Restaurants can achieve long-term loyalty and success in the competitive restaurant sector by prioritizing quality, cost management, consistency, and understanding client preferences. This approach enhances the perceived value of the restaurant and increases customers' willingness to spend. Positive attitudes towards a restaurant's food and service quality can increase the likelihood of customers sharing their experiences online (Ababneh et al., 2022; Jeong et al., 2022).

Based on the above arguments, we hypothesize the following:

H3a: The food and service quality of restaurants is positively associated with customers' willingness to pay more.

H3b: The food & service quality of the restaurant is positively associated with customers' dine-out intentions.

H3c: The food and service quality of the restaurant is positively associated with customers' intentions to spread positive eWOM.

Role of brand trust

Brand trust can be explained by expecting the trustee to maintain commitments and fulfill obligations (Pivato et al., 2008; Rehman et al., 2022; Sirimongkol, 2022). This trust becomes pivotal during times of uncertainty, as highlighted by (Y. R. Kim & Liu, 2022; McKnight & Chervany, 2001), where trust has been recognized as crucial in navigating unclear situations.

Customers are making decisions to reduce risks because the pandemic has made them worried about their health and safety (Wei et al., 2021b; Lacey et al., 2009). Brand trust has a positive relationship with the perceived relevance of restaurant hygiene and safety procedures. In these uncertain times, customers appreciate eateries that put their health first.

Restaurants must create a secure dining environment that prioritizes customer well-being through effective safety measures to establish trust. Customers will feel safer and more comfortable with the necessary precautions, which will reduce their perceived risks. Hence, safety measures are important for customers in the post-pandemic period. Consumer behavior might be influenced by brand trust. Understanding trust as a mediator is crucial for restaurant managers. This will demonstrate how hygiene and safety regimens

can foster consumer trust and enhance the desire to pay, dine out, and share positive eWOM. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

H4a: The perceived importance of restaurant hygiene and safety measures is positively associated with brand trust.

H4b: Brand trust is positively associated with willingness to pay.

H4c: Brand trust mediates the relationship between customers' perceived importance of restaurant hygiene and safety measures, and willingness to pay more.

H4d: Brand trust mediates the relationship between customers' perceived importance of restaurant hygiene and safety measures and dine-out intentions.

H4e: Brand trust mediates the relationship between customers' perceived importance of restaurant hygiene and safety measures and the spread of positive electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

Previous research suggests that brand trust stems from brand experience (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Khan & Fatma, 2017). A memorable and distinctive brand experience can serve as a foundation for building brand trust, which in turn helps create positive consumer-brand relationships. Consumers are now less price sensitive toward the brand and are willing to pay more for services, thus giving preference to experiences (Dwivedi et al., 2018). In post-COVID times, diners may worry about health and safety. Thus, restaurants that prioritize safety measures can create a positive brand experience, building customer trust. Wei et al. (2021b) assert that the customers have an increased tendency to visit such places and positive experiences which they can share through social media. The trust towards the brand is a key factor in the restaurant industry. With the provision of good experiences on a regular basis, restaurants can build trust, hence creating customer loyalty, increasing spending, and appealing to positive online comments.

Experimental analysis of the relationships between brand experience, brand trust and the behavioral intentions provides valuable information that can be used in making strategic intervention in an attempt to foster the establishment of trust and enhance customer relations.

Thus, the hypotheses are the following:

H5a: Customers' prior experiences with restaurants are positively associated with brand trust.

H5b: Brand trust is positively associated with dine-out intentions.

H5c: Brand trust positively mediates the relationship between customers' prior experience with restaurants and their willingness to pay more.

H5d: Brand trust positively mediates the relationship between customers' prior experiences with restaurants and their intentions to dine out.

H5e: Brand trust positively mediates the relationship between customers' prior experiences with restaurants and the positive spread of eWOM in restaurants.

Food and service of high quality promote building trust among the visitors of the restaurant (Haghighi et al., 2012; Jun et al., 2017). The service and culinary quality of the restaurant plays a central role in building brand trust (Sirimongkol, 2022). The trust is necessary because consumers would want to be assured that the restaurants are of high

standards in the delivery of food and services. In cases where customers demonstrate trust in the reliability, competence and ethical behavior of a restaurant, their tendency to patronize and pay premium prices respectively rises. In addition, customers tend to share positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) about the quality of the foods and services offered in restaurants they consider to be trustworthy (Jun et al., 2017). Based on the premises above, the hypothesis presented below is formulated:

H6a: Restaurant food and service qualities are positively associated with brand trust.

H6b: Brand trust is positively associated with eWOM.

H6c: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between restaurant food and service quality and customers' willingness to pay more.

H6d: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between restaurant food and service quality and customer intention to dine out.

H6e: Brand Trust mediates the relationship between restaurant food and service quality, and customers' intention to spread positive eWOM.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT). According to ECT, consumers are more likely to buy or experience a product or service again if it meets their expectations. Expectation, perceived performance, and belief confirmation or disconfirmation determine post-purchase satisfaction in this theoretical approach. . Consumer expectations for safety and hygiene, food and service quality, and previous experience indicate perceived performance, according to our research. Brand trust defines confirmation, and Willingness To Pay More, intents to dine out, and eWOM assess client happiness.
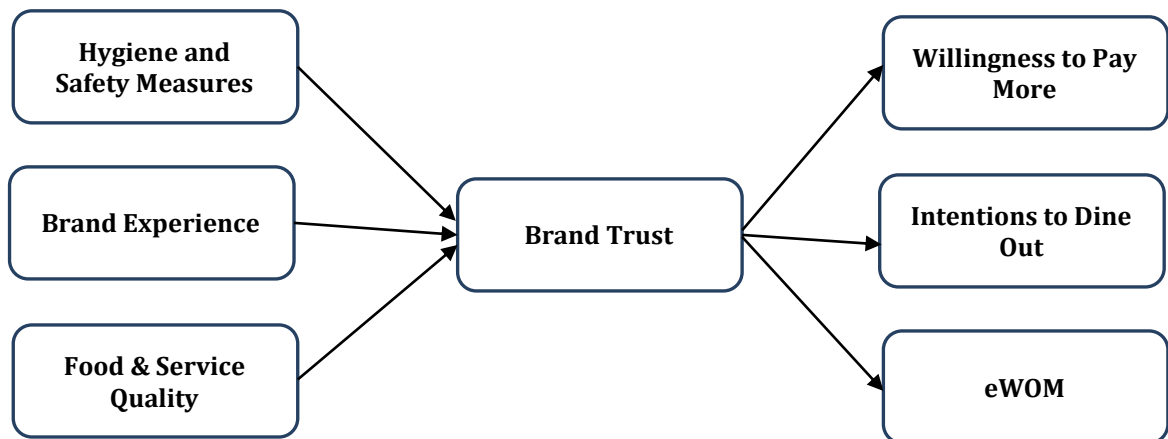

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Material and Methods

The target audience comprised Pakistani customers aged 18 and older who visited restaurants in the post-pandemic period. An electronic survey was administered. Online surveys offer notable benefits such as low administrative expenses, convenient access to extensive samples, effective sampling management, straightforward follow-up (Evans & Mathur, 2019), and reduced social desirability bias (Wei et al., 2021a). The appropriate sample size for the study was determined based on Hair et al. (2010), who emphasized the 10:1 criterion, indicating that the total number of items utilized in the study should be multiplied by 10 to ascertain the minimum sample size. This study utilized a total of 43

items. After multiplying by 10, we obtained a minimum sample size of 430 participants. The authors approached respondents from universities in Punjab, Pakistan, at their convenience, and the sample size ultimately consisted of 489 individuals. The benefit of approaching higher education institutions was that it provided an accurate representation of our sample. These people, either students or teachers, faced proper lockdowns and post-pandemic issues in all aspects of life, especially regarding dining behaviours.

SmartPLS version 4.0 is used for data analysis. Advanced analysis is available via SmartPLS. It enables researchers to study mediation and moderation effects more effectively, thereby better understanding the processes and conditional linkages within their models. SmartPLS helps evaluate modeling data with many predictor variables and larger sample sizes. This analysis was conducted in two steps: the analysis of the measurement model and the structural model.

Results and Discussion

The first step involved analyzing the measurement model, where we assessed the reliability, validity, and fit values of the conceptual model.

Table 1
Sample Profile

Demographic Characteristics		N=489	%
Gender			
	Male	252	51.5
	Female	237	48.5
Age			
	21-25	366	74.8
	26-30	84	17.2
	31-35	22	4.5
	36-40	12	2.5
	41 or above	5	1.0
Dine out Frequency			
	Several times a week	25	5.1
	Once a week	120	24.5
	A few times a month	210	42.9
	Rarely	72	14.7
	Very rarely	62	12.7

Table 1 presents the participants' demographic profiles. The study included a total of 489 participants. A total of 252 males and 237 females participated in the study, with approximately equal participation from both sexes, and people of different ages volunteered for this study. The highest proportion of participants was youth aged 21-25 years (74.8%), whereas the participation of those aged 41 years or above was the least in the study (1% only). It can also be inferred from these outputs that young people in Pakistan are more likely to dine out. May their income level or some other reason restrict their dining-out frequency; 42.9% responded to dining out a few times a month, whereas 12.7% of participants reported rarely dining out.

Table 2
Cronbach's Alpha, Average Variance Extracted, and Composite Reliability

Constructs	α	CR	AVE
Brand Trust	0.902	0.904	0.632
Food & Service Quality	0.836	0.843	0.549
Intentions to Dine Out	0.802	0.804	0.717
Hygiene and Safety Measures	0.854	0.859	0.536
Consumer's Brand Experience	0.788	0.802	0.701
Willingness to Pay	0.749	0.823	0.649
eWOM	0.849	0.855	0.625

The measurements of Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) are presented in Table 2. The results showed that all Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (CR) values exceeded the threshold (0.70), which proves that all variables are reliable and have internal consistency. The AVE of all measures should be greater than 0.50, which helps to establish the convergent validity of the measures. According to Table 2, all AVE values exceed the threshold, indicating that the measures used in the study possess convergent validity.

Table 3
VIF and Outer Loading Values

Variables	Outer Loadings	VIF
Brand Trust		
BT1	0.777	2.044
BT2	0.839	2.732
BT3	0.834	2.572
BT4	0.822	2.350
BT5	0.802	2.201
BT6	0.732	1.920
BT7	0.752	1.969
Food & Service Quality		
FQ1	0.817	2.042
FQ2	0.710	1.547
FQ3	0.731	1.713
FQ4	0.683	1.626
SQ1	0.749	1.696
SQ3	0.750	1.592
Dineout Intentions		
IDO1	0.812	1.633
IDO2	0.884	2.152
IDO3	0.843	1.719
Consumer's Brand Experience		
CBE1	0.850	1.709
CBE2	0.801	1.613
CBE3	0.859	1.646
Willingness to Pay		
WTP1	0.859	1.324
WTP2	0.766	1.733
WTP3	0.789	1.659
e WOM		
e WOM1	0.794	1.849
e WOM2	0.849	2.380
e WOM3	0.816	2.095
e WOM4	0.768	1.809
e WOM5	0.720	1.491
Hygiene and Safety Measures		
HSM1	0.721	1.565
HSM2	0.630	1.403
HSM3	0.657	1.430
HSM4	0.773	1.994
HSM5	0.795	2.194
HSM6	0.805	2.037
HSM7	0.726	1.660

Items with low factor loading were excluded from the analysis. Regarding hygiene and safety measures, no items were deleted. For Food and Service Quality, SQ2 was

removed, and for Brand Trust, BT8, BT9, and BT10 were removed. The variance inflation factor (VIF) was used to evaluate collinearity statistics. A VIF value of five or higher indicates potential collinearity problems. All values were below five, as shown in Table 3. Therefore, there are no collinearity issues. All VIF and outer loading values were within acceptable ranges.

Table 4
Fornell-Larker criterion

Variables	BT	CBE	FSQ	IDO	HSM	WTP	eWOM
Brand Trust (BT)	0.795						
Consumer's Brand Experience (CBE)	0.590	0.837					
Food & Service Quality (FSQ)	0.705	0.565	0.741				
Intentions to Dine Out(IDO)	0.660	0.503	0.623	0.847			
Hygiene and Safety Measures (HSM)	0.521	0.443	0.514	0.398	0.732		
Willingness to Pay (WTP)	0.449	0.459	0.383	0.467	0.245	0.806	
eWOM	0.470	0.498	0.434	0.440	0.366	0.555	0.791

First, the discriminant validity of the measures was computed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion. The values on the diagonal are the square roots of the AVE values, and these diagonal values should be greater than the correlation values among all constructs to ensure discriminant validity (Zhe et al., 2023). The output in Table 4 shows that all values are less than the corresponding correlational values, indicating that the measures have discriminant validity in this study.

Table 5
HTMT (Heterotrait-Monotrait) criterion

Variables	BT	CBE	FSQ	IDO	HSM	WTP	eWOM
Brand Trust (BT)							
Consumer's Brand Experience (CBE)	0.692						
Food & Service Quality (FSQ)	0.799	0.681					
Intentions to Dine Out (IDO)	0.774	0.623	0.757				
Hygiene and Safety Measures (HSM)	0.587	0.540	0.605	0.468			
Willingness to Pay (WTP)	0.496	0.536	0.438	0.551	0.277		
eWOM	0.530	0.599	0.500	0.525	0.425	0.686	

Second, the discriminant validity of the measures was assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT), as shown in Table 5. The acceptable values should be lower than the cutoff value (0.85) (Henseler et al., 2015) for discriminant validity. The output in Table 5 indicates that all values are below the cutoff value, demonstrating that the measures possess discriminant validity in this study.
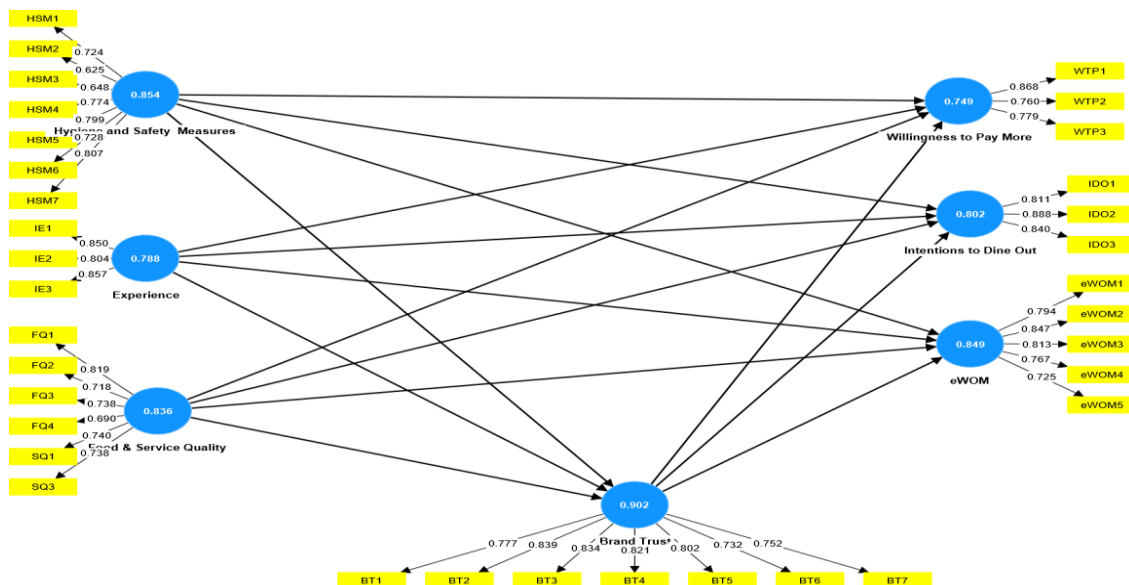

Figure 2: Measurement Model

Figure 2 illustrates the measurement model analysis conducted in SmartPLS 4. The values retrieved from measurement model analysis confirm that the reliability, validity, and fit values of the conceptual model meet the specified criteria to proceed further towards structural model analysis.

The second step involved structural model analysis, where we tested hypotheses regarding significance, path coefficients, and direct and mediating relations.

Table 6
Direct Relationships

Hypotheses	Relationships	β Values	Sample Mean (M)	T Statistics	P Values
H1a	HSM→ WTP	-0.052	-0.045	1.000	0.318
H1b	HSM →IDO	-0.002	0.002	0.058	0.954
H1c	HSM →eWOM	0.094	0.096	1.822	0.068
H2a	CBE→ WTP	0.296	0.296	6.208	0.000
H2b	CBE→IDO	0.109	0.105	2.281	0.023
H2c	CBE →eWOM	0.300	0.302	6.575	0.000
H3a	FSQ→ WTP	0.065	0.069	1.037	0.300
H3b	FSQ →IDO	0.289	0.295	3.356	0.001
H3c	FSQ →eWOM	0.085	0.092	1.099	0.272
H4a	HSM→ BT	0.164	0.165	3.906	0.000
H4b	BT → WTP	0.259	0.252	3.770	0.000
H5a	CBE → BT	0.248	0.247	5.404	0.000
H5b	BT →IDO	0.393	0.387	4.697	0.000
H6a	FSQ → BT	0.478	0.479	7.784	0.000
H6b	BT →eWOM	0.185	0.177	2.236	0.025

Table 6 lists all hypotheses that suggest a direct and positive relationship between the variables used in the study. H1a, H1b, and H1c hypothesized a significant and positive relationship between hygiene and safety measures on Willingness to Pay (β = -0.052; p=n.s), intentions to dine out (β = -0.002; p=n.s), and eWOM (β = 0.094; p=n.s), respectively, and the results showed insignificant values for all three hypotheses; therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c could not be proven in the study. Similarly, H2a, H2b, and H2c hypothesized a significant and positive relationship between consumers' brand experience and willingness to pay (β = 0.296; p<0.05), intention to dine out (β = 0.109; p<0.05), and eWOM (β = 0.300; p<0.05), respectively, and the results showed positive and significant values for all three hypotheses; therefore, H2a, H2b, and H2c were accepted in the study. Same in the row, H3a, H3b, and H3c hypothesized the significant and positive relationship of Food & Service Quality on Willingness to Pay more (β = 0.065; p=n.s), Intentions to dine out (β = 0.289; p<0.05), and eWOM (β = 0.085; p=n.s) respectively, the results showed positive and significant relationship among Food & Service Quality and Intentions to dine out, whereas for the rest of two variables direct and significant relationship could not be proved. Therefore, H3a and H3c are not accepted, and H3b is accepted in the study

The relationship between hygiene and safety measures and Brand Trust (β = 0.164; p<0.05); consumers' Brand Experience and Brand Trust (β = 0.248; p<0.05); and Food & Service Quality and Brand Trust (β = 0.478; p<0.05). The results showed positive and significant values for all three hypotheses; therefore, H4a, H5a, and H6a were accepted. The direct relationship of Brand Trust was also regressed on three outcome variables: Willingness to Pay(β = 0.259; p<0.05), intention to dine out(β = 0.393; p<0.05), and eWOM(β = 0.185; p<0.05) in hypotheses H4b, H5b, and H6b, respectively. The results showed positive and significant values for all three hypotheses; therefore, H4b, H5b, and H6b were accepted.

Table 7
Mediation Analysis

Hypotheses	Relationships	β Values	Sample Mean (M)	T Statistics	P Values
H4c	HSM→ BT→ WTP	0.043	0.041	2.821	0.005
H4d	HSM→ BT→ IDO	0.065	0.064	2.942	0.003

H4e	HSM→ BT→eWOM	0.030	0.029	2.031	0.042
H5c	CBE → BT→WTP	0.064	0.063	2.760	0.006
H5d	CBE → BT→IDO	0.098	0.096	3.199	0.001
H5e	CBE → BT→eWOM	0.046	0.045	1.874	0.061
H6c	FSQ → BT→ WTP	0.124	0.119	3.884	0.000
H6d	FSQ → BT→ IDO	0.188	0.183	4.729	0.000
H6e	FSQ → BT→eWOM	0.088	0.083	2.321	0.020

Table 7 lists all the hypotheses that proposed a mediating relationship between the variables used in the study. Brand Trust is the only mediator in the study; therefore, we analyzed whether mediation exists between the relationships of the independent variables (hygiene and safety measures, consumers' Brand Experience, and food and service quality) and the dependent variables (Willingness to Pay, Intentions to dine out, and eWOM). The results revealed that the indirect effect between hygiene and safety measures and Willingness to Pay (β = 0.043; p<0.05), intention to dine out (β = 0.065; p<0.05), and eWOM (β = 0.030; p<0.05) exists through the mediation of Brand Trust, which proves that H4c, H4d, and H4e, respectively, are accepted in this study.

Next, the mediation was examined between consumers' brand experience and willingness to pay, intentions to dine out, and eWOM. Results revealed that the indirect effect between Consumer's Brand Experience and Willingness to Pay (β = 0.064; p<0.05) and Intentions to dine out (β = 0.098; p<0.05) exists, but mediation between Consumer's Brand Experience and eWOM (β = 0.046; p=n.s) does not exist through the mediation of Brand Trust, which proves that H5c and H5d are accepted, and H5e is rejected in the study.

Finally, mediation was examined between food and service quality, willingness to pay, intention to dine out, and eWOM. The results revealed that the indirect effect between Food & Service Quality and Willingness to Pay (β = 0.124; p<0.05), intention to dine out (β = 0.188; p<0.05), and eWOM (β = 0.088; p<0.05) exists through the mediation of Brand Trust, which proves that H6c, H6d, and H6e are accepted in the study.
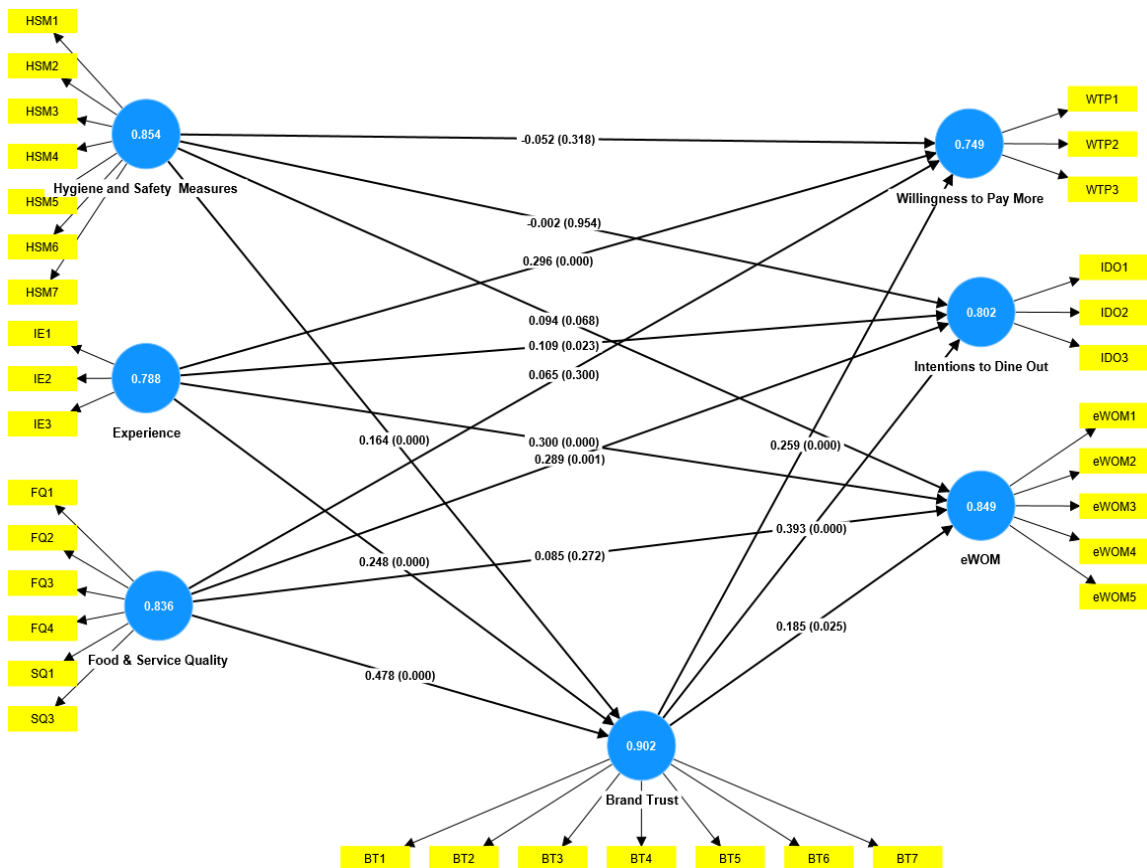

Figure 3: Structural Model

Figure 3 illustrates the structural model analysis conducted in SmartPLS 4. Hypothesis testing, significance, path coefficients, and direct and mediating relations were examined using the values from structural model analysis.

Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Evaluation of Predictive Relevance (Q^2)

The coefficient of determination (R^2) represents the proportion of variation in the dependent variable and was used to evaluate the structural model (Henseler et al., 2009). The R^2 value must be between 0 and 1, indicating a suitable and reliable outcome. Higher values indicate greater predictive accuracy; all values of R^2 are within the acceptable range (Brand Trust=0.570; intentions to dine out=0.455; Willingness to Pay=0.202; eWOM=0.242).

The predictive relevance (Q^2) was determined using the blindfolding procedure in SmartPLS 4.0 (Ringle et al., 2015). Q^2 values of all the variables must be greater than zero, indicating the path model's predictive relevance. Results revealed that the model had good predictive relevance (Brand Trust=0.557; Intentions to dine out=0.411; Willingness to Pay=0.226; eWOM=0.279).

Conclusion

During the pandemic, safety and cleanliness, brand experience, food and service quality, brand trust, willingness to pay a premium, desire to dine out, and internet recommendations were studied. Customer behavior, especially spending more and dining out, is unaffected by hygiene and safety regulations. Restaurant visits were positively correlated with pandemic safety measures by Wei et al. (2021b). Hygiene promotion may not improve behavior. Second, 74.8% of survey respondents are 21-25 years old, predominantly children, therefore cost, convenience, and menu options may considerably impact consumer preferences in this market group.

Like previous studies, customer brand experience improves consumer behavior intentions (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020; Risitano, 2017). Positive experiences increase brand loyalty and value, justifying higher prices. Dining quality and service greatly impact customers. Previous research indicates that food quality greatly affects consumer behavior (Batouei et al., 2023; Martínez García, 2020).

This study found that food and service quality increases restaurant visits but not premium payments or eWOM. Food and service quality may depend on trust or contentment. Due to brand trust, all indirect effects were positive and considerable. Brand trust mediates food and service quality, willingness to pay more, dining out intention, and eWOM (Tariq et al., 2017). Consumers feel safer dining in places they trust. Customers are more likely to choose trustworthy restaurants even at greater pricing because they follow through on their promises. Restaurant customers value brand trust, according to mediation results. Restaurant managers may boost customer loyalty, revenue, and brand reputation by recognizing brand trust's intermediary function.

This study provides important theoretical insights into the restaurant sector after the outbreak. The low correlation between safety and hygiene and customer behavior suggests a shift in priorities. This implies that cleanliness messaging has become a norm rather than a differentiator. Second, managers must prioritize pricing, convenience, and menu over hygiene when establishing restaurant services for younger generations.

The fact that food and service quality directly affect dining intentions but not willingness to pay more or e-WOM, unless mediated by trust, suggests a more nuanced relationship. High-quality food and service may not be enough to increase desire to pay or positive word-of-mouth without trust. Thus, restaurant management must prioritize quality and trust to win customers.

This study stressed brand trust in restaurants. Restaurants should focus brand trust to restore consumer confidence and boost dine-out. Displaying testimonials, positive customer experiences, and active engagement with customer problems and criticism can boost brand trust for restaurants. Establishing trust can boost restaurant traffic and income. Positive dining experiences inspire people to spend more and spread positive word-of-mouth, according to one study. Effective and transparent communication across channels can encourage customers to dine and spread positive electronic word-of-mouth.

Recommendations

Future research may include more diverse age groups to capture generational differences in dining preferences and behaviors. Demographic variables (age, gender and income)need to be studied as moderators to understand consumer decision making. Different theoretical structures like protection motivation theory can be used to expand the analytical perceptiveness of consumer research. Longitudinal research design is suggested for keeping track of dynamic changes of consumer attitudes and behaviours over time.

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