Conceptual assessment on service quality, food safety and sanitation practices of Casual Dining Restaurants (CDR): A proposal of an enhanced customer-based brand equity framework

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Abstract

This study aimed to conduct a conceptual assessment and adherence of casual dining restaurants located in the National Capital Region, Philippines. Specifically, it is assessed through service quality dimensions such as food quality, the physical environment, and service delivery, based on the SERVQUAL and Dinescape Model. It evaluated the food safety and sanitation aspects in terms of personal hygiene, food serving, food handling, restroom, dining room experience, and exterior grounded on the principles of HACCP and the Philippine Food Safety Act of 2013. Lastly, it related the results to its contributions to a CDR's brand equity component such as brand quality, brand awareness, brand image, and brand loyalty, based on the perceptions of its major stakeholder, the customers. A descriptive-evaluative method was utilized to conduct this study. The 425 respondents who have dined at least twice for the past six (6) months in any of the 32 DOT- accredited casual dining restaurants, were chosen through stratified random sampling. Through personal and online administered questionnaires, the researcher tabulated the result of the data gathered using SPSS v. 21, frequency distribution, and percentage. To describe the demographic and psychographic profile of the respondents, weighted mean and ranking were used to evaluate the results of the indicators. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to establish the relationships of the profile and variables. Results identified that based on the respondent's assessment, customers generally agreed that the 32 DOT-accredited casual dining restaurants were able to satiate their expectations on service quality and food safety and sanitation practices which led to establishing its brand equity. However, there were certain predictors that required consistent attention or polishing to achieve a more positive dining experience for customers. An enhanced customer-based brand equity framework was proposed.

Keywords: casual dining restaurants, customer-based brand equity, food safety and sanitation, service quality

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1. Introduction

In part driven by the pandemic, the food service industry faces difficult challenges in terms of a brand process that is amplified by the existing international and national safety standards. A serious decline in revenue was experienced from 2020 up to the last quarter of 2021, significant employees were let go and some firms even underwent bankruptcy and permanent closure. In order to survive, some brands converted to downsizing. Casual dining restaurants (CDRs), on the other hand, must learn to strategize and have appropriate contingency plans to ensure that they can sustain their brand which dozens of employees and investors rely on. While doing this, CDRs must strive to modify their operation in order to adapt and still meet the expectation of the customers.

The National Capital Region (NCR) also known as the Metropolitan Manila, is the economic, political, and educational center of the Philippines (www.dti.gov.ph). There lie numerous businesses, particularly in the food sector. It consists of a fine mix of fine dining, casual dining, quick-service restaurants, and hybrid services in between the aforementioned restaurant categories. Casual dining service is the midpoint between fine dining and fast-food service. Casual dining restaurants (CDRs) are full-service restaurants that are open for all meal periods. They offer big food servings and have the capacity to accept big groups and deliver a satisfying experience at the same time (Kertasunjaya et.al., 2020; Sarmiento & Apritado, 2020). They offer the full spectrum of products including desserts, alcoholic drinks and coffee.

Food businesses in the NCR slowly adapted and adhered to changes as demanded by the government. Filipinos on the other hand, were exhilarated to visit the outdoors and spend time with their families and friends, to simply experience being social again. Restaurants slowly recovered due to the wave of people wanting to experience communal dining again. A lot has changed in terms of operation and amenities within a food establishment as well as in terms of dining patterns and food choices of customers. A shift in CDR facilities layout was realized in such a way that al fresco or open dining areas, as well as open kitchens, were a trend. Customers appreciate transparency in terms of their food preparation and handling. Likewise, there was a significant increase in healthy food or complete meal requests from patrons. All of these new implementations and expectations are both additional operational load and expense to food businesses in the country. But are consumers really safe while dining in restaurant establishments? Could they rely on these casual dining establishments, particularly in the cities of the National Capital Region, Philippines to execute quality service and safety with utmost prudence at the same time?

Karniouchina et. al. (2022), mentioned that a lot of food businesses will not survive due to the current demands of the food industry. Therefore, keeping up with consumer demands during crisis situations should be given thought. Restaurants being able to adapt will indeed help establish their brand equity, hence, emerge their competitive advantage. Acheson (2021) stated that the most pressing food safety concern in 2021 is businesses "cutting corners" due to an increase in cost. For food businesses, it is a matter of compliance versus survival. Owners and managers continuously find solutions to these setbacks, unfortunately, most of the time, at the expense of the consumers. Due to heavy traffic in a CDR's day-to-day operation, it could be hard for the management to keep up and monitor all these things and guarantee the safety of its patrons (Borbon & Tolentino, 2020). Since CDRs have the most liberty in changing their processes, managing different kinds of risks alongside the quality of service provided is essential to contribute to CDR's brand equity.

There were numerous types of research prior, that only focused on two of each variable indicated in this study. Given that, this would be the first time that principles of service quality are assessed against food safety

and sanitation practices of casual dining establishments, that could possibly contribute to a new connotation of brand equity through the views of its customers and lead to CDR's revenue generation amidst incurring additional necessary costs in safety. This research will attempt to bridge the following gaps to aid current and future CDRs. Specifically, the knowledge gap, wherein it aims to provide CDRs input on the expectations of customers in terms of service quality, food safety and sanitation. Standard gap, wherein, it may help in aligning customer expectation versus the current CDR products and service delivery. Communication gap, which will help CDRs to mitigate false expectations and misleading promises as a casual dining brand. And lastly, the satisfaction gap, which will help CDRs identify what constructs would give rise to highly satisfied customers.

The purpose of this research was to assess whether casual dining restaurants in the National Capital Region, Philippines, consistently executed food and health safety practices for their consumers, based on the existing guidelines of the RA 10611 or the Philippines' Food Safety Act of 2013 and Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP). Likewise, it also established its linkage to service quality offered by casual dining restaurants, primarily in terms of food quality, the physical environment, and service delivery grounded on the modified principles of the Service Quality Model (Parasuraman et.al.,1988), and Dinescape (Ryu & Jang, 2008). And eventually, manifested its significance in creating customer-centric brand equity (Yang et.al., 2023), based on the existing theories of Keller (1993) and Aaker (1991).

As an industry practitioner and academic, this research can aid in evaluating applicable theories and frameworks that suit the changing demands of the casual dining industry in the new normal. This research not only will explore the significance of service quality and food safety in order to establish brand equity in CDRs but rather help restaurant owners, managers, and food business consultants construct a reliable process of consistency and dependency that will greatly help casual dining businesses position themselves in the food sector based on the new normal standards while considering the perception of their major stakeholders, the customers. Moreover, it will also help marketing and advertising professionals, for it will provide a more holistic understanding of brand equity. This will also help casual dining businesses cultivate and enhance existing government and management policies and tailor-fit them to the current safety needs of CDR consumers through a brand equity framework, based on the new normal consumer expectation.

Objectives of the study - This study aimed to conduct a conceptual assessment of casual dining restaurants located in the National Capital Region: Specifically, it presented the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of sex, age, and marital status and presented the psychographic profiles of the respondents in terms of frequency of visits and companions during their visits to casual dining restaurants. It also assessed service quality in terms of food quality, physical environment, and service delivery and evaluated food safety and sanitation practices in terms of personal hygiene, food serving, food handling, restroom, dining room experience, and exterior. Moreover, it assessed brand equity in terms of brand quality, brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty. Furthermore, it tested the significant difference in responses when grouped according to profile and tested the significant relationship of service quality, food safety, and sanitation, to the brand equity of casual dining restaurants. Lastly, it proposed an enhanced customer-based brand equity framework suited casual dining restaurants.

2. Methods

This quantitative research utilized a descriptive-evaluative method. The data gathered was achieved through a customer-based questionnaire in order to provide accurate facts on the subjects, service quality, food safety, sanitation and brand equity of casual dining restaurants in the new normal within the 16 cities of the National Capital Region. A quantitative analysis, which relies on measurements and quantification (Sidel et.al., 2018) of responses, was conducted using statistical tools or techniques to carry out a large-scale assessment or baseline survey. The researcher made use of stratified random sampling, following the recommended sample size from the statistician. The sample size was determined based on the average monthly covers for the month of September 2022 in 32 DOT-accredited (Department of Tourism, 2022) casual dining restaurants. This study

adapted the instruments from three published research: the service quality was adapted from the survey instrument developed by Slack et.al. (2020) and Tuncer et.al. (2020). The food safety and sanitation is from the study of Sarmiento & Apritado (2022). Lastly, the brand equity is from the survey instrument of Ylagan (2021).

The research instrument underwent validation from the experts, pilot testing was executed and submitted for reliability test. The results showed that the computed Cronbach's alpha value for service quality (0.964), food safety and sanitation (0.980), and brand equity (0.970) signifies that the instrument has strong or excellent consistency in the rule of thumb. Thus, this set of questionnaires is considered valid and reliable for use (Taber, 2018). The researcher tabulated and evaluated the result of the data gathered using SPSS v. 21. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (National Privacy Commission, 2012) or Republic Act 10173, the researcher sought approval from the establishment prior to disseminating questionnaires onsite and the respondents were provided with informed consent.

3. Results and discussion

Table 1

Service Quality of Casual Dining Restaurants

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Food Quality	4.18	Agree	1
Physical Environment	4.14	Agree	3
Service Delivery	4.15	Agree	2
Composite Mean	4.16	Agree	

Table 1 represents the summary of service quality in casual dining restaurants. The composite mean score of 4.16 indicates that the respondents agreed on the indicators. Food quality ranked first, with a mean score of 4.18, followed by service delivery (4.15) and physical environment ranked third with a mean score of 4.14.

The results show that the respondents were satisfied with the dimensions of food quality served to them. This involves the appearance, aroma, temperature, taste, portion and nutritional value of a dish. It could mean that the driving force of customers to revisit and patronize a brand, food quality must be on point and prioritized. Otherwise, it might affect brand loyalty and derail brand equity. In the study of Shokhsanam & Ahn (2021), the researchers mentioned that in outcome quality, the most important dimension is food quality. They argued that management must continuously improve the quality of food, understand the expectations of guests, and consistently monitor the guests' feedback in terms of taste. Food quality is considered to be the driving force in revisit intentions (Bae, et al., 2018; Sarmiento & Apritado, 2020).

Subsequently, although the respondents agreed that casual dining restaurants provided an adequate physical environment or ambiance, it implies that the respondents saw something to improve or were underdelivered during their visit. Providing a clean and conducive facility for dining is critical for customers nowadays because it serves as a safety net while away from home and enjoying food. Brand experience happens when customers interact with the physical environment of a store (Kim et.al., 2018). The cleanliness of the dining area, table setting, and washroom areas must be overseen in order to provide comfort and stimulate a hedonic experience while dining (Clemes et.al., 2018). Unal et.al. (2014) as mentioned in the study of Cetinsoz (2019), stated that the physical environment affects customers' emotions, and positive emotion is directly related to satisfaction, and satisfaction affects loyalty.

In addition, although the respondents agree, food serving (4.20), exterior (4.11), and restroom (3.97) ranked least in the assessment. According to the respondents, the casual dining restaurant met their expectations in restrooms, particularly in terms of tangible structures such as walls, floors, and amenities such as soaps, towels, and availability of water. However, it may be the least assessed because of management consistency issues, specifically in terms of waste management. It is evident that customers nowadays also pay close attention to non-food facilities and structure that is related to their dining experience. Provided that restrooms are a communal facility, patrons still expect to be protected from any safety and sanitation hazards, particularly illness.

And not being able to deliver the expectations of customers, may affect their dining experience and patronization.

Table 2

Food Safety and Sanitation Practices of casual Dining Restaurant

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Personal Hygiene	4.21	Agree	3
Food serving	4.20	Agree	4
Food Handling	4.28	Agree	1
Restroom	3.97	Agree	6
Dining Room Experience	4.25	Agree	2
Exterior	4.11	Agree	6
Composite Mean	4.16	Agree	

Table 2 indicates the summary table of food safety and sanitation practices in casual dining restaurants. The composite mean score of 4.17 shows that the respondents assessed the indicators as agree. Food handling got the highest mean score of 4.21 and ranked first. It was followed by dining room experience (4.25) and personal hygiene (4.21) ranked third.

Based on the results, the respondents assessed food handling to be the highest key indicator in terms of assessing food safety and sanitation practices in casual dining restaurants. How the employees prepared, plated, packed, and delivered food to the table is important to patrons nowadays. Even small details, like table and serving implements such as tongs, serving gears, and trays are carefully observed and would affect the dining experience of customers if their expectations on food handling measures were not achieved. Nowadays, since customers have an awareness and were exposed to extreme situations where contact surfaces are crucial in getting sick, they have developed a newfound dining behavior where they have elevated expectations that do not involve just the food anymore. And when executed religiously by CDRs, it results in brand trust and loyalty. This is supported in the study of Cheng (2018) where it was stated that after COVID19, in order to build customer trust and loyalty, restaurants must be transparent with customers in the three most critical food handling aspects. This includes being transparent in the preparation, cooking process and protocols and procedures while dining.

An exact outcome has been concluded in the study by Kim & Bachman (2019) that stated, restroom cleanliness and management of the key factors that directly affect customer satisfaction and perception of restaurant quality. It emphasized that managers should maintain training and monitor procedural policies to be carried out in restrooms regardless of employee availability. And post COVID-19, certain standards are still observed, if not, fortified as mentioned in the study of Harris et.al. (2020), which emphasized that one of the easily noticeable violations to diners nowadays include restroom mismanagement.

Table 3 presents the summary table of brand equity in casual dining restaurants. The composite mean score of 4.26 means the respondents agreed on the indicators. Brand Loyalty ranked first, with a mean score of 4.29, followed by brand awareness (4.27) and brand image (4.27), which ranked second.

Table 3

Brand Equity in Casual Dining Restaurant

Indicators	Weighted Mean	Verbal Interpretation	Rank
Brand Quality	4.22	Agree	4
Brand Awareness	4.27	Agree	2.5
Brand Image	4.27	Agree	2.5
Brand Loyalty	4.29	Agree	1
Composite Mean	4.26	Agree	

Based on the results, the CDRs have earned the loyalty of the respondents because according to them, they would recommend the CD brand that they are patronizing and at the same will engage in spreading good feedback or reviews that will greatly help in establishing brand equity for the brand. It is evident that because of the appropriate execution of the dimensions stated in this study such as food quality, physical environment,

service delivery, personal hygiene, food serving, food handling, restrooms, dining room experience and exterior, the participating CDRs have achieved brand loyalty.

As mentioned in the study of Chinomona, et.al. (2017), brand loyalty is the first step in achieving a positive and reliable brand equity. On the other hand, brand quality garnered the least mean score of 4.22. This shows that although respondents agreed that CDRs provided them with quality service and adhered food safety and sanitation practices, the respondents felt that there were inconsistencies in their execution, which can be room for improvement on the establishment. Zhong & Moon (2020) agrees that customers consider the reliability and consistency of CDRs in terms of service delivery, otherwise it will be the driving force to change brand preference.

Table 4

Relationship Between Service Quality and Brand Equity of Casual Dining Restaurants

Food Quality	Rho	p-value	Interpretation
Brand Quality	0.611**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.361**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.487**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.519**	0.000	Highly Significant
Physical Environment			
Brand Quality	0.687**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.375**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.480**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.473**	0.000	Highly Significant
Service Delivery			
Brand Quality	0.717**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.426**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.574**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.542**	0.000	Highly Significant

The association between service quality and brand equity of casual dining restaurants. The resulted rho-values indicate a strong direct correlation, and the computed p-values were less than the alpha level. This means that a significant relationship exists and indicates that the better the service quality, the better the brand equity. In fact, in previous research, scholars concluded that food quality indeed positively influences brand trust (Moon et. al., 2023; Erkmen & Hancer, 2019;) However, the study of Jeon & Yoo (2021), stated that food quality has a lot of dimensions to consider in order to establish trust and credibility, depending on the situation.

Moreover, for customers to be aware and recall a CDR and differentiate it from its competitors, food quality must be consistent in terms of portion, must have a plethora of flavors, unique presentation, and diverse offerings in order to provide customers' physiological needs (appetite and special diet). Whaley et.al. (2019) concluded that food quality is the most influencing factor that can establish perceived value and drive positive brand awareness. This was also supported by the study of Konuk (2019), and added, strengthening brand awareness through the use of marketing. However, the study of Hernandez-Rojas et. al. (2021) stated that brand awareness has a moderate relationship to food quality and emphasized that store managers should understand the difference between customer preferences.

Previous literature explicated that yes, kitchen transparency does illustrate food safety and cleanliness for the brand (Chang et.al. 2021; Bigne et.al., 2023). Results also showed that if the food quality was consistent based on the characterization stated above, CD brand preference is established, subsequently to increase revisit intention, regardless of changes in price. Recommendations will follow naturally through WOM. Scholars explicated that standards in product quality (food and service) play a significant role to establish positive brand performance through WOM that results to brand loyalty (Koufie & Kesa 2020; Baluyot & Caluza, 2021). However, Zhong & Moon (2020) concluded that reasonable price still directly affects the perceived quality of the restaurants.

Table 5

Relationship Between Food Safety and Sanitation Practices and Brand Equity of Casual Dining Restaurants

Personal Hygiene	Rho	p-value	Interpretation
Brand Quality	0.698**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.431**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.619**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.562**	0.000	Highly Significant
Food serving			
Brand Quality	0.753**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.409**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.615**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.556**	0.000	Highly Significant
Food Handling			
Brand Quality	0.704**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.490**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.663**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.584**	0.000	Highly Significant
Restroom			
Brand Quality	0.683**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.367**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.537**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.517**	0.000	Highly Significant
Dining Room Experience			
Brand Quality	0.761**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.538**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.732**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.636**	0.000	Highly Significant
Exterior			
Brand Quality	0.750**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Awareness	0.526**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Image	0.665**	0.000	Highly Significant
Brand Loyalty	0.617**	0.000	Highly Significant

The association between food and sanitation practices and brand equity of casual dining restaurants. The resulted rho-values indicate a strong direct correlation, and the computed p-values were less than the alpha level. Result shows that there was significant relationship exists and indicates that the better the food and sanitation practices, the better is the brand equity.

As CD brands consistently execute said practices through their food handlers, this will positively affect perceived value due to its credibility and motivate revisit intention. Similar to the studies of Wang and Lang (2019) and Liu & Lee (2018) employees' physical appearance is crucial for establishing social comparison and triggers employee-customer relations and eventually customer-brand relationship. And this is further supported by the study of Akou (2020) wherein results show that customers even identified masks should be a part of a restaurant uniform. There was also a direct relationship between food serving and brand loyalty. The respondents showed high regard on the consistency of food and how it was served if service areas are pest-free or if furniture and utensils are sanitized. This shows that customers really pay close attention to these aspects of serving due to their phobia of getting sick, especially right after the pandemic. Currently, some customers even request for utensils to be soaked in hot water prior to table setup, this alone is an indication of fear. The feeling of security is the reason why they would continuously patronize a CD brand regardless of increase in price. In fact, in the study of Bove and Benoit (2020), the researchers argued that an effective means to retain customers is through progressive and strategic innovations or safety signals of food service providers to make safety highly visible before and during the purchase of customers. Although, Lippert et.al. (2021) mentioned that in some restaurant establishments, employees still conduct policing of customers when it comes to safety protocols.
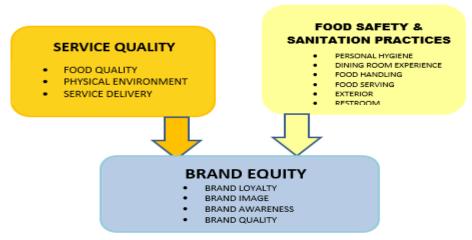
FRAMEWORK

Figure 1. Sarmiento's Enhanced Customer-based Brand Equity Framework SQFSS

Figure 1 shows the key attributes of SQFSS brand equity framework in the context of casual dining restaurants located in the National Capital Region. Color psychology was utilized to associate consumer emotions (Veflen, et al., 2023). Colors assist readers to have affective connection or understanding of the relative concepts at hand. For instance, service quality was given orange, which denotes courage, confidence, warmth, innovation, friendliness and energy. While food safety and sanitation, was painted yellow, which depicts caution, fear, and anxiety but can also reflect optimism. And lastly, blue was given to brand equity which denotes trust, loyalty, dependability, and security (Parris, etr al., 2023).

Based on the results of the study, there is a strong significant relationship that exists between service quality and brand equity. Among the dimensions of service quality, food quality was known to be the highest predictor to establish brand equity. This means that as CDRs consistently execute quality food in terms of taste, presentation, temperature, aroma, variety of flavors and nutritional value, customers will develop a sense of loyalty (Safi & Awan, 2018; Martin et.al., 2021).

Moreover, there is also strong correspondence between food safety and sanitation practices and brand equity, specifically in terms of food handling and brand loyalty (Liu & Lee, 2018; Wang& Lang, 2019). This shows that the food handling practices of employees or food handlers through food transference from preparation, packaging and serving play a significant role in achieving brand loyalty.

However, the results show no direct correlation between service quality and food safety and sanitation as indicators have no significance over the other. This research provides empirical support to the present theories which focused on the three dimensions of service quality (food quality, physical environment, and service delivery) (Parasuraman, 1998; Slack et.al. 2020; Tuncer et.al. 2020), six aspects of food safety and sanitation practices (personal hygiene, food serving, food handling, restroom, dining room experience and exterior) (Sarmiento & Apritado, 2020) and four components of brand equity (brand quality, brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty) (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1991). Previous literature mainly focused on established brand equity and then attempts to modify service quality dimensions in order to achieve its goal. The direction of this research was more on an outward perspective rather than an inward perspective. Predictors (service quality, food safety and sanitation) are assessed initially, in order to determine what the customers perceive as essential, then curate a brand equity strategy for the current and future CD businesses that is tailor-fit to the current undertakings of the industry.

Firstly, this research investigated the customers' evaluation of service quality in CDRs and what predicts its value. It contributes to the literature on how these experiences play a significant role to brand performance and

elevate brand equity. Results indicate that all dimensions of service quality (food quality, physical environment, and service delivery) have direct correlation to the components of brand equity (brand quality, brand awareness, brand image and brand loyalty). Customers gave significant importance to *food quality*. The results were congruent with previous studies where the key aspects of food such as taste, presentation, aroma, temperature, nutritional value, and portions were crucial to establish satisfaction and return intention (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019; Whaley et.al., 2019; Nguyen, 2020; Baluyot & Caluza, 2021; Martin et. al., 2021 Setiawan & Patricia, 2022; Moon et.al., 2023). Following food quality was service delivery where customers assessed the functional and humanic clues of employees (Liu & Lee, 2018; Hanks et.al., 2020) and lastly, physical environment, where the customers assessed technical and mechanic clues of equipment, tools, furniture, lighting, and aesthetics (Slack et.al., 2020; Tuncer et.al., 2020; Zhong & Moon, 2020). Generally, customers agree that these dimensions of service quality are a trifecta in achieving customer satisfaction and return intention. Challenges may arise when one is underdelivered.

Secondly, food safety and sanitation practices of CDRs were also evaluated in terms of personal hygiene, food serving, food handling, restroom, dining room experience and exterior (Sarmiento & Apritado, 2020. Literature on food safety may be available, however, only certain aspects are explored, as against its overall contribution to brand equity. Results show that all aspects of food safety and sanitation have significant relationships with the components of brand equity, however, food handling is the primary basis of customers in gauging brand performance. Their adherence to food handling practices such as not smoking within the CD premises, and the transference of food, likewise, the preparation, packing and serving of food items seem to significantly favor the customers (Yost and Cheng, 2021).

Lastly, service quality, food safety and sanitation practices of CDRs showed significant implications to Brand Equity. Top results show that service quality dimensions such as food quality are established to have direct correlation to brand loyalty (Koufie & Kesa 2020; Baluyot & Caluza, 2021). However, Zhong & Moon (2020) concluded that reasonable price still directly affects the perceived quality of the restaurants. Furthermore, food safety and sanitation aspects such as food handling have a direct correspondence to customer loyalty (Bove and Benoit, 2020). In fact, the study of Morgeson et.al. (2020) even suggests that when CDRs are successful in handling complaints about food handling, it produces more loyal customers. Therefore, the intensified proposed comprehensive SQFSS brand equity framework validates that in the customers' perception, the delivery of quality service, as well as food safety and sanitation practices is crucial in creating a brand equity that is applicable to the current undertakings of the industry.

4. Conclusions

Based on the results, the customers confirmed that CDRs provided standard service quality. Specifically, by means of food quality, where customers find CDR food to be delicious, which means that customers need to find value based on their expectation in terms of taste, portion, temperature and aroma of food in order for CDRs to gain customer brand preference; In service delivery, they agreed that employees served exactly as they ordered. When employees are accurate in serving guest food and attending to their needs, it elevates the brands performance as they are also known to be ambassadors of the CD brand; Lastly, in terms of physical environment, where customers also agreed that CDR lighting provided a comfortable atmosphere. This means that customers find it important to feel the mood and comfort that the CDR establishments want to impart. They find an additional means to enjoy their dining experience when lighting contributes to it.

Moreover, customers also confirmed that CDRs adhered to food safety and sanitation practices. Specifically, by means of food handling, where patrons strongly agreed that smoking was strictly prohibited within the establishment. This means air quality inside the establishment is a factor that customers observe before assessing their dining experience; In the dining room experience, customers all agree to experience a cozy and relaxing dining area; In terms of personal hygiene, customers agreed that the CDR staff wore the prescribed uniform. Being part of brand image, uniformity of the employees is significant in the eyes of the customers, particularly

how it was worn and how neat it is; In food serving, they also agreed that the food they received was well-cooked. This means that when customer expectations are met in terms of food and service, value is perceived. Subsequently, in terms of exterior, customers agreed that the overall appearance of the building exterior is well-maintained. The facade of the establishment should also coincide with what is to expect on the inside. If a CDR brand wants to portray quality, then it should be reflected in all areas of their establishments including parking spaces; Lastly, customers also agreed that the restroom walls were well-maintained and clean. Being the hideaway of customers to conduct self-care during casual engagements, CDRs must exceed the expectation of its patrons, particularly in its cleanliness.

Furthermore, customers also confirmed that CDRs had built positive brand equity. Since customers were loyal to the brand, they would recommend the restaurant to other people. They were aware of the restaurant brand and can easily compare and differentiate their CD brand from others. Likewise, customers also agreed that CDRs were able to establish their image since they perceived that the logos and symbols highlight the brand and its safety, which contributes to its uniqueness and is found to be special compared to other CD brands. Lastly, customers agreed that brand quality to be reliable and trustworthy.

Meanwhile, a highly significant relationship between dimensions of service delivery and components of brand equity was also determined. This means that service quality delivered by CDRs contributes immensely to brand performance which would facilitate and strengthen brand equity. Correspondingly, a highly significant relationship between aspects of food safety and sanitation and brand equity was revealed. This shows that customers as of this date pay remarkable attention to the aspects of food safety and sanitation practices in CDRs. And these practices also contribute to brand performance which intensifies brand equity. The researcher recommended an enhanced SQFSS Brand Equity Framework based on the results of the study which can be used by entrepreneurs, managers, consultants, marketing and advertising professionals and the local government to cultivate new programs, guidelines or protocols for the betterment of the products and services provided to CDR customers.

4.1 Recommendation

The existing casual dining restaurant brands may utilize this research framework in order to modify their current service, food safety and sanitation practices to achieve conative loyalty from their patrons and strengthen their brand equity. For instance, CDRs may exploit the nutritional value of dishes, showcase how food handlers process the food and make them more visible in menus and ad campaigns in order to inform and attract new customers and increase revisit intention and perceived value.

As entrepreneurs curate new CDR concepts, they also may carefully select furniture and equipment that can easily be managed, maintained or cleaned without the intervention of the manufacturer. They may consider designing their facility that will not just serve its operational purpose but also consider safe spaces for their employees and customers. Likewise, an open-kitchen design may be appropriate to promote brand transparency and brand confidence.

Marketing and advertising professionals may utilize this study to attract more marginalized and sensitive markets to widen the brand reach. Campaigns that are focused on a product or service's safety and quality will facilitate successful market penetration and development. Reviews and endorsements of prominent culinary experts, local or foreign, may help in boosting the quality and safety of food served in CDRs, however, this must be conducted ethically and without malice.

CD Managers and consultants may develop new policies and protocols that are realistic for employees to religiously comply. For instance, when an employee is feeling ill, the CDR and employee may share a 50/50 expense when a doctor's consultation is needed. This will protect their co-employees, as well as the customers. Furthermore, food safety and service training should be offered cyclically on a monthly basis and should focus more on employees with the lowest KPIs. This will innately develop adherence to protocols that is not executed

due to fear or sanctions. Finally, surprise service quality and food safety audits may be conducted by an independent service provider in order to be objective, reliable and accurate.

Finally, the national government may utilize this study to design new laws that are imposed on CDR businesses, both existing and new entrants. For instance, a house bill requiring CD brands to be ISO2200 certified after two years of operation. Or mandating CDR employees to accomplish and wear identification cards that include their license to practice food handling that will symbolize their capacity to execute the tasks.

Ultimately, with all that were discussed, certain limitations were also observed in this research. For instance, future researchers may expand the number of participating establishments since this study revolved on DOT-accredited CDRs only. Likewise, they may explore the significance of new innovations to facilitate service quality dimensions, as well as food safety and sanitation aspects of CDRs and how this will increase patronage and brand equity. Alternatively, since the result of this research focused on the perceptions of the Millennials, an exploratory study may be conducted on the perceptions of the next generation of customers such as generation Z or alpha. Lastly, the research scope was located in urban areas, a qualitative study on the perceptions of customers situated in rural areas may be initiated.

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