

Factors Influencing Tourist Satisfaction in the Restaurant Industry at Can Tho City, Vietnam after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Food & Beverage (F&B) market has accelerated after the COVID-19 crisis, especially in big cities. Stakeholders are racing to improve quality to attract more customers. Can Tho City, a tourism hub in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region, is experiencing a revival of its restaurant industry-an important sector of its economy. This study surveyed 286 Vietnamese domestic tourists and international tourists at medium-sized restaurants in Can Tho city, aiming to (1) identify factors affecting customer satisfaction after the health crisis; (2) evaluate the importance of these factors; and (3) propose implications for improving quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and return intention. The study used document research, interviews, observations, and questionnaires. Data were analyzed using Descriptive Statistics, Partial Least Squares, and Structural Equation Modeling. The findings revealed five factors impacting tourist satisfaction: (1) flavor of food and drinks; (2) reasonable price; (3) cleanliness; (4) service quality; and (5) restaurant atmosphere. Customer satisfaction positively influenced loyalty and return intention. Recommendations were provided for stakeholders in Can Tho's restaurant industry.

Keywords: *customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, restaurant industry, Can Tho City, Vietnam.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in 2019, has significantly impacted the global economy, particularly the tourism and food & beverage (F&B) industries. According to the World Bank (2022), the global tourism industry experienced a decline of 72% in international tourist arrivals and a loss of \$1.3 trillion in 2020. However, as the pandemic has been controlled in many countries and vaccination rates increased, the tourism industry has gradually regained momentum, with a focus on domestic tourism to drive economic recovery (UNWTO 2022).

Vietnam, a developing country in Southeast Asia, has also experienced severe consequences from the pandemic on its economy, particularly in the tourism sector. In 2020, Vietnam reported a decline of 78.7% in international tourist arrivals and a 45.8% decrease in tourism revenue (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2021). In response to this situation, Vietnam's government has been promoting domestic tourism to stimulate the economy, with several provinces and

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cities experiencing remarkable recovery (VNAT 2022). Most recent, as reported by the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism and the General Statistics Office (VNAT) (2023a, 2023b), international visitor arrivals to Vietnam in March 2023 were estimated at 895,425, marking a 4.0% decrease compared to February 2023 but an impressive 5,869.5% increase compared to the same period in 2022. The cumulative number of visitors for the first quarter of 2023 reached 2,699,556, representing an 11,974.2% growth compared to the same timeframe in 2022. This upward trajectory demonstrates the positive impact of post-pandemic recovery initiatives, as well as the enhanced promotion and quality of Vietnam's tourism offerings in the international market.

Can Tho City, located in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam, has been developing tourism as a spearheading economic sector. As the largest city in the region, Can Tho plays a crucial role in the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism industry. Can Tho City has set ambitious goals for its tourism sector by 2025, with a vision extending to 2030. The city aims for tourism services to contribute over 9% to its Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) structure, attract around 9 million tourists, with hotel guests accounting for approximately 4 million (10% being international visitors), and create jobs for about 10,000 direct workers in the industry, with over 75% receiving training (Kieu Mai 2022). Currently, international tourists staying in Can Tho spend an average of 250 USD per person, and the average length of stay is about 2 days. By 2030, the city strives to attract about 12 million visitors and increase the average stay to 2.2 days. The restaurant industry in Can Tho City, which is an important part of the city's economy, has shown an encouraging revival after the COVID-19 crisis. To sustain this growth and further develop the tourism industry, research aimed at enhancing tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and return intention in the restaurant sector is vital.

Customer satisfaction has long been considered a critical factor in the success of the F&B industry (Kotler et al. 2014). High levels of satisfaction lead to greater customer loyalty, return intentions, and positive word-of-mouth, which are essential for businesses to survive and thrive in the competitive post-pandemic environment (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002). Understanding the factors that influence customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry will help stakeholders make informed decisions to improve their services and attract more customers, both Vietnamese and foreign tourists.

The present study aims to address this research gap by exploring the factors affecting customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry in Can Tho City after the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing and evaluating the importance of these factors, and proposing management implications to help stakeholders improve quality, developing satisfaction, loyalty, and the return intention of customers. To thoroughly investigate the factors affecting tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry and provide valuable insights for stakeholders, the following research questions were formulated:

Research question 1 (RQ1): What are the key factors influencing customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry in Can Tho City after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research question 2 (RQ2): What is the relative importance of these factors in determining customer satisfaction?

Research question 3 (RQ3): How does customer satisfaction serve as an intermediary in creating customer loyalty and return intention?

Research question 4 (RQ4): What are the management implications and recommendations for stakeholders in the restaurant industry in Can Tho City to improve quality, enhance customer satisfaction, and foster loyalty and return intention?

In this study, the author sought to address these research questions and provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contributed to customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, as well as practical suggestions for stakeholders. This study is structured as follows: Immediately following this introduction, section 2 provides a literature review on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry; Section 3 details the methodology employed in this research; Section 4 presents the research findings and discussion; and Section 5 concludes the study, offers recommendations for stakeholders in Can Tho city's restaurant business, presents the limitations of this study and proposes future research directions.

Literature Review

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is a crucial element in the restaurant industry, as it reflects the degree to which a customer's needs, expectations, and desires are met or exceeded by a particular dining experience (Kotler et al. 2014). High levels of customer satisfaction contribute to customer loyalty, positive word-of-mouth, and ultimately, business success (Wilson et al. 2016). Several theories and models have been proposed to explain customer satisfaction in the service industry, including the restaurant sector. The expectancy-disconfirmation paradigm (Oliver 1980) posits that satisfaction is determined by the discrepancy between customers' pre-consumption expectations and their actual experiences. If the experience exceeds expectations, customers are satisfied; if it falls short, dissatisfaction ensues. Equity theory (Adams 1965) suggests that customer satisfaction is influenced by the perception of fairness in the exchange process. Customers assess the value of the goods and services received in relation to the effort, time, and money invested. If they perceive an equitable exchange, satisfaction is likely to be high, whereas perceived inequity leads to dissatisfaction. Attribution theory (Weiner 1985) asserts that customer satisfaction is affected by the attribution of responsibility for service outcomes. Customers tend to be more satisfied when they attribute positive outcomes to the service provider's efforts and skills, while negative outcomes attributed to external factors may lead to dissatisfaction. These theories and models provide valuable insights into the factors that drive customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry and help inform strategies for enhancing the

dining experience. By understanding and addressing these factors, restaurant operators can work towards achieving higher levels of customer satisfaction and ultimately, business success.

Factors Affecting Customer Satisfaction

Several factors have been affirmed in the literature as key determinants of customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. These factors include food and drink quality, service quality, ambiance, price, and cleanliness. Food and drink quality is a critical component of customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Namkung and Jang 2007). It encompasses the taste, presentation, variety, and freshness of the food and beverages offered. A study by Ryu et al. (2012) emphasized that food quality significantly influenced customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in upscale restaurants. Service quality refers to the efficiency, friendliness, and professionalism of the restaurant staff (Parasuraman et al. 1988, Nguyen 2021). It has been found to be a strong predictor of customer satisfaction (Liu and Jang 2009). A study by Ha and Jang (2010) revealed that service quality dimensions such as responsiveness, assurance, and empathy were critical factors in determining customer satisfaction in casual dining restaurants. Ambiance, or the physical environment of the restaurant, contributes to the overall dining experience and influences customer satisfaction (Bitner 1992). Factors such as lighting, music, interior design, and seating arrangement play a role in shaping customers' perceptions of the restaurant's atmosphere. A study by Jang and Namkung (2009) demonstrated the significant impact of ambiance on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in upscale restaurants. Price has been identified as a determinant of customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Kivela et al. 1999). Customers evaluate the value they receive for the price they pay, and perceived value has been found to be positively related to satisfaction (Ryu et al. 2010). A study by Qin and Prybutok (2008) confirmed that price fairness positively influenced customer satisfaction in Chinese restaurants. Cleanliness is another critical factor influencing customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Soriano 2002). Cleanliness of the restaurant environment, tableware, and staff uniforms can significantly affect customers' perceptions of the dining experience. A study by Tuncer et al. (2021) indicated that cleanliness was a key driver of customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants. Most recently, a study by Ha (2023) on customer loyalty in the food and beverage industry in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, following the COVID-19 pandemic, discovered that factors such as service quality, reasonable pricing, and restaurant atmosphere positively impact customer satisfaction. In summary, various empirical studies have identified and ranked the importance of factors such as food and drink quality, service quality, ambiance, price, and cleanliness in determining customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry across different contexts.

Customer Loyalty and Retention

Customer loyalty and retention are crucial concepts in the restaurant industry, as they represent customers' ongoing commitment and likelihood of returning to a particular establishment. Customer loyalty refers to the emotional attachment and preference for a specific brand or business, leading to repeated patronage (Oliver 1999). Retention, on the other hand, is the ability of a business to maintain its customer base over time (Reichheld and Teal 1996, Ha 2022, Ha 2023). The significance of customer loyalty and retention in the restaurant industry cannot be overstated, as these factors contribute to the long-term success and profitability of businesses (Dick and Basu 1994). Loyal and returning customers not only provide a stable revenue source but also help reduce marketing costs and foster positive word-of-mouth (Reichheld and Sasser 1990, Nguyen 2021). The relationship between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention has been extensively studied in the literature. Customer satisfaction is often considered an intermediary factor in creating loyalty and return intention (Anderson and Sullivan 1993). When customers are satisfied with their dining experiences, they are more likely to develop loyalty and return to the restaurant (Bowen and Chen 2001). A study by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) validated that customer satisfaction was a significant driver of customer loyalty in the service industry, including the restaurant sector. Research by Ryu et al. (2008) substantiated that customer satisfaction mediated the relationship between the quality of the physical environment, food, and service, and customer loyalty and return intention in the restaurant industry. In summary, customer loyalty and retention are essential for the success and sustainability of businesses in the restaurant industry. Customer satisfaction plays a vital role in fostering loyalty and return intention, making it a critical factor for businesses to focus on and optimize.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Restaurant Industry

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the restaurant industry, causing numerous challenges and changes that have affected customer behavior, preferences, and expectations. The global health crisis has led to a shift in the way customers dine out, with many preferring contactless services, takeaway, or delivery options (Alhemimah 2023). Additionally, concerns over health and safety have led to increased expectations for cleanliness and hygiene practices in restaurants (Brizek et al. 2021). The pandemic has also resulted in a change in customer preferences, with a growing emphasis on value for money, local sourcing, and sustainable practices (Martino et al. 2021, Nguyen 2021, Ha 2022). These changes have the potential to affect the factors influencing customer satisfaction, as customers now place greater importance on different aspects of their dining experience. The literature reveals that during and after the pandemic, the factors influencing customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry may have evolved to reflect new priorities and expectations. For example, cleanliness and hygiene practices have become more critical in driving customer satisfaction (Brizek et al. 2021). Similarly, contactless services and the ability to adapt to new service

delivery models, such as takeout and delivery, have become essential in meeting customer expectations (Alhemimah 2023, Ha 2023). In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the restaurant industry, leading to changes in customer behavior, preferences, and expectations. These changes have likely influenced the factors that drive customer satisfaction, requiring restaurants to adapt and respond to new customer demands and priorities.

Cultural and Regional Factors

Cultural and regional factors play a crucial role in shaping customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry, especially in specific contexts such as Can Tho City and the Vietnamese market. Understanding the cultural and regional influences can help restaurant owners and managers cater to local preferences and expectations, ultimately enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering loyalty (Nguyen 2021, Ha 2022, Ha 2023). Research on Vietnamese dining habits and preferences reveals that traditional Vietnamese cuisine, known for its emphasis on fresh ingredients, balance of flavors, and presentation, is highly valued by local consumers (Mai and Bui 2018). Moreover, cultural values such as collectivism, relationship-building, and hospitality are essential in the Vietnamese context, affecting the way customers perceive service quality and overall dining experiences (Han et al. 2019). In Can Tho City, a major tourism hub in the Mekong Delta region, the restaurant industry is influenced by both local and international customers, with diverse cultural backgrounds and preferences (Nguyen 2021). As such, it is essential for restaurant owners and managers to understand and adapt to these cultural and regional factors to meet the diverse needs of their customers and ensure high satisfaction, loyalty, and retention rates. In summary, cultural and regional factors significantly impact customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry. A thorough understanding of these factors in the specific context of Can Tho City and the Vietnamese market is essential for restaurant owners and managers to tailor their offerings and services, ultimately enhancing customer satisfaction and fostering loyalty.

Management Implications and Strategies

Management implications and strategies are essential for restaurant owners and managers to improve customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. The literature offers several strategies and best practices to enhance these key performance indicators in the restaurant industry, including service training, menu design, and marketing communication (Pike et al. 2018). Service training is crucial for ensuring that employees understand and meet customer expectations, ultimately leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty (Pham et al. 2016). Employee training programs focusing on soft skills, such as communication and problem-solving, as well as technical skills, like food handling and preparation, are essential in providing quality service. Menu design plays a significant role in attracting customers and meeting their preferences (Magnini and Kim 2016). A well-designed menu should consider factors such as variety, dietary preferences,

regional tastes, and cultural influences. Additionally, menu design should incorporate visual appeal and easy-to-understand descriptions to enhance customer satisfaction. Furthermore, marketing communication helps restaurants to create brand awareness and build relationships with customers (Sigala 2018). Effective marketing strategies, such as social media marketing, targeted promotions, and customer feedback management, can contribute to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In the Can Tho City context, these strategies and best practices are relevant and applicable. Considering the city's diverse cultural and regional factors, restaurant owners and managers should adapt their offerings and services to meet the unique needs of both local and international customers (Nguyen et al. 2018, Nguyen 2021). Implementing effective management strategies, such as service training, menu design, and marketing communication, can help restaurants in the city enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention.

In conclusion, the literature review provides a solid foundation for understanding the various factors that can influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cultural and regional factors in Can Tho City's context. The following section, "Methodology," will detail the methods and approaches employed in this study to address the research questions and objectives.

Methodology

Research Hypotheses

Upon examining the existing literature, this study formulated the subsequent research hypotheses to explore the factors affecting tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry post-COVID-19 pandemic:

- Research hypothesis 1 (H1): Flavor of food and drinks has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.
- Research hypothesis 2 (H2): Reasonable price has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.
- Research hypothesis 3 (H3): Cleanliness has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.
- Research hypothesis 4 (H4): Service quality has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.
- Research hypothesis 5 (H5): Restaurant atmosphere has a positive and significant impact on customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.
- Research hypothesis 6 (H6): Customer satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on customer loyalty in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.

- Research hypothesis 7 (H7): Customer satisfaction has a positive and significant impact on customer retention in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.
- Research hypothesis 8 (H8): Customer loyalty has a positive and significant impact on customer retention in Can Tho City's restaurant industry.

The independent and dependent variables were listed as follows:

Dependent Variables: (1) Customer satisfaction (SAT) (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5); (2) Customer loyalty (LOY) (H6); and (3) Customer retention (RET) (H7, H8).

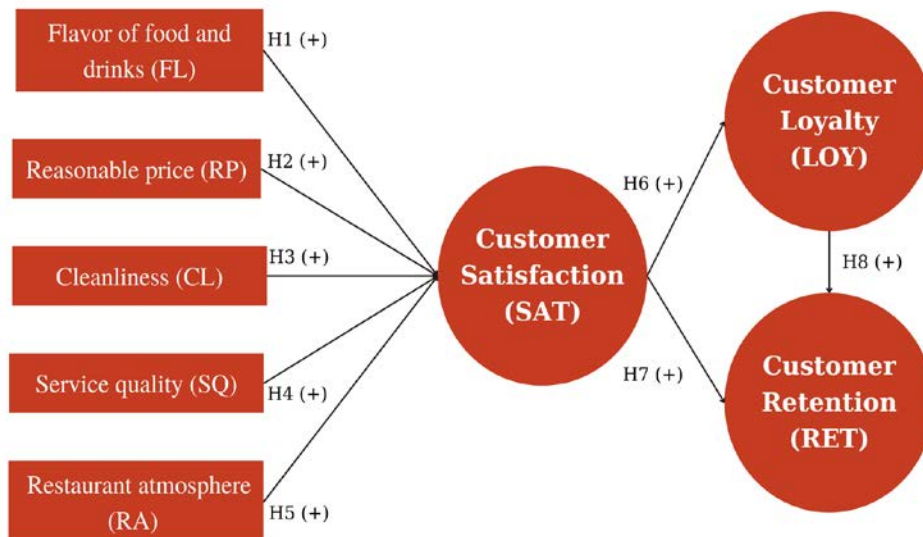
Independent Variables: (1) Flavor of food and drinks (FL) (H1); (2) Reasonable price (RP) (H2); (3) Cleanliness (CL) (H3); (4) Service quality (SQ) (H4); (5) Restaurant atmosphere (RA) (H5); (6) Customer satisfaction (SAT) (H6, H7); (7) Customer loyalty (LOY) (H8)

These dependent and independent variables are crucial in understanding the factors that contribute to tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry after the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing the relationships between these variables, the study aimed to provide valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing the industry's resilience and long-term success.

Research Model

Based on the aforementioned hypotheses, the research model for this investigation was subsequently developed by the author as follows:

Figure 1. Research Model



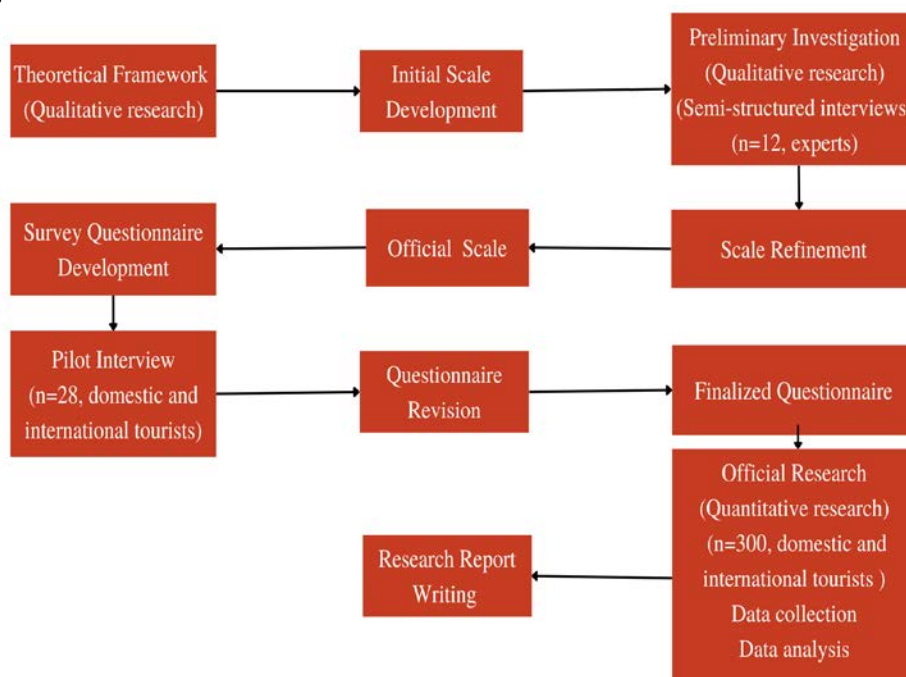
Source: The author (2023).

Mixed-Methods Approach

The research process, as illustrated in Figure 2, encompasses the following specific research stages:

(1) Draft Scale Construction

The author conducted qualitative research to identify factors influencing tourist satisfaction in the restaurant industry at Can Tho City, Vietnam, after the COVID-19 pandemic, within a specific context and time frame. The draft scale used to measure the concepts in the research model was proposed by the author based on theoretical foundations drawn from previous related concepts and studies.

Figure 2. Research Process

Source: The author (2023).

(2) Preliminary Research Phase

This phase aimed to adjust the draft scale (i.e modify and supplement the observed variables used to define and measure the concepts in the research model). The author utilized qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews) based on prepared scripts to gather expert opinions (n=12). Representatives from various entities in Can Tho city's tourism industry, such as the Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, travel agencies, restaurants/hotels, etc., were selected through purposive sampling. Interview results helped adjust the observed variables proposed in the previous draft scale. Refined variables were used to construct the questionnaire for the main research phase. Subsequently, the author tested and assessed the questionnaire's suitability (e.g., language, response level/cooperation

of survey participants, etc.) as the basis for determining sample size, and sampling method in the pilot research and the main study phase. The quantitative research method (pilot survey) was performed with a sample size (n=28) of Vietnamese domestic tourists and international tourists in Can Tho city. Non-random sampling (convenience sampling) was applied in this phase. Following the pilot survey phase, the results helped adjust the questionnaire, resulting in the official questionnaire.

(3) Main Research Phase

This phase involved quantitative research, aiming to validate the scales in the research model through the official interview questionnaire. The survey questionnaire, consisting of 24 questions (both multiple-choice and open-ended), was designed by the author to suit the research context of tourism in Can Tho City. The questionnaire was divided into six main sections, each exploring data on a specific factor: (1) flavor of food and drinks (FL); (2) reasonable price (RP); (3) cleanliness (CL); (4) service quality (SQ); (5) restaurant atmosphere (RA); and (6) personal information of the respondents. A 5-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There were 39 observed variables across the 8 factors (see Table 1). Additionally, control variables for the respondents' personal information (e.g., gender, age group, place of origin, yearly earnings, first visit to Can Tho City or not, optimal travel season, duration of stay, and type of travel group) were also included.

Table 1. *References for Measurement Scales*

Variables	Observed variables/Sources
Flavor of food and drinks (FL)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Taste: The overall taste profile of the food and drinks, which includes aspects such as sweetness, saltiness, sourness, bitterness, and umami (Soriano 2002). 2. Aroma: The smell or fragrance of the food and drinks, which plays a significant role in the overall flavor perception (Spence 2020). 3. Presentation: The visual appeal and arrangement of the food and drinks, which can influence customer perceptions of taste and quality (Namkung and Jang 2007). 4. Freshness: The quality and freshness of the ingredients used in the food and drinks, which can impact the overall flavor (Mai and Bui 2018). 5. Variety: The range of food and drink options available on the menu, offering diverse flavors and catering to different customer preferences (Ryu et al. 2012).
Reasonable price (RP)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Price fairness perception: Customers' assessment of the price in relation to the quality of food and service they receive (Xia et al. 2004). 2. Price comparison: Customers' perception of the restaurant's prices compared to other similar establishments in the area (Kivela et al. 1999). 3. Price-value ratio: Customers' evaluation of the overall value they receive for the price they pay, considering factors such as food quality, service quality, and ambiance (Ryu et al. 2010).

	<p>4. Menu price range: The range of prices on the menu, reflecting the affordability and variety of options available to customers (Magnini and Kim 2016).</p>
Cleanliness (CL)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cleanliness of dining area (Soriano 2002): This indicator includes the cleanliness of floors, tables, chairs, and other dining surfaces. 2. Cleanliness of tableware and utensils (Soriano 2002): This includes the cleanliness of plates, glasses, cutlery, and other utensils provided for customers. 3. Cleanliness of restroom facilities (Tuncer et al. 2021): This involves evaluating the overall cleanliness, maintenance, and hygiene of the restrooms available for customers. 4. Cleanliness of staff uniforms (Tuncer et al. 2021): This indicator assesses the cleanliness and presentation of the staff's clothing and overall appearance. 5. Food handling and preparation hygiene (Tuncer et al. 2021): This involves assessing the cleanliness of the kitchen area and the adherence to proper food handling and preparation practices.
Service quality (SQ)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Responsiveness: The ability of restaurant staff to provide timely and efficient service to customers (Parasuraman et al. 1988). 2. Assurance: The knowledge and courtesy of staff, as well as their ability to instill trust and confidence in customers (Parasuraman et al. 1988). 3. Empathy: The level of individualized attention and care provided by restaurant staff towards customers (Parasuraman et al. 1988). 4. Reliability: The consistency and dependability of the service provided, ensuring that customers receive accurate and correct service (Parasuraman et al. 1988). 5. Tangibles: The physical appearance and presentation of the restaurant, including the cleanliness, equipment, and staff uniforms (Parasuraman et al. 1988).
Restaurant atmosphere (RA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lighting: The level of brightness and the color temperature of the lighting in the restaurant, which can influence customers' mood and dining experience (Kwon et al. 2017). 2. Music: The genre, volume, and tempo of the music played in the restaurant, which can affect customers' emotions and behavior (Biswas et al. 2018). 3. Interior design: The style, color scheme, and overall aesthetic of the restaurant's interior design, which can impact customers' perceptions and satisfaction (Lin 2004). 4. Seating arrangement: The layout and comfort of the seating options in the restaurant, which can influence customers' social interactions and overall enjoyment (Robson 2008). 5. Ambient scent: The presence and intensity of pleasant aromas in the restaurant, which can enhance customers' perceptions of food quality and overall atmosphere (Spence 2020). 6. Noise level: The level of background noise, including conversations and ambient sounds, which can affect customers' comfort and satisfaction (Kwon et al. 2017).

Customer satisfaction (SAT)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Food and Drink Quality: Taste, presentation, variety, and freshness of the food and beverages (Namkung and Jang 2007, Ryu et al. 2012). 2. Service Quality: Efficiency, friendliness, and professionalism of the restaurant staff (Parasuraman et al. 1988, Liu and Jang 2009). 3. Ambiance: Lighting, music, interior design, and seating arrangement contributing to the overall dining experience (Bitner 1992, Jang and Namkung 2009). 4. Price: Perception of fairness in the price paid for the goods and services received (Kivela et al. 1999, Qin and Prybutok 2008). 5. Cleanliness: Cleanliness of the restaurant environment, tableware, and staff uniforms affecting customers' perceptions (Soriano 2002, Tuncer et al. 2021).
Customer loyalty (LOY)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Repeat patronage: The frequency of a customer's return visits to a particular restaurant (Oliver 1999). 2. Positive word-of-mouth: The extent to which customers recommend a restaurant to friends, family, or colleagues (Reichheld and Sasser 1990). 3. Emotional attachment: The degree of emotional connection a customer feels towards a specific restaurant (Bowen and Chen 2001). 4. Brand preference: The extent to which customers prefer a particular restaurant over its competitors (Dick and Basu 1994). 5. Resistance to switching: The likelihood that a customer will not switch to a competitor, even when faced with incentives or better offers (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2002).
Customer retention (RET)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Customer lifetime value: The total net profit a restaurant expects to earn from a customer over the duration of their relationship (Berger and Nasr 1998). 2. Customer churn rate: The percentage of customers who stop visiting a particular restaurant over a given period (Reichheld and Teal 1996). 3. Frequency of repeat visits: The average number of times a customer returns to a restaurant within a specified time frame (Mascarenhas et al. 2006). 4. Length of customer relationship: The duration of time a customer has been frequenting a restaurant, usually measured from the date of their first visit (Bolton 1998).

Source: The author (2023).

The required sample size for obtaining the desired data was at least five times the number of observed variables (Hoang and Chu 2008). For this study, the author used 39 observed variables in the research model, necessitating a minimum sample size of $(n = 39 \times 5 = 195)$. Eventually, the author decided on a sample size $(n=300)$ of Vietnamese domestic tourists and foreign tourists in Can Tho City, using non-random purposive sampling to increase data reliability. The participants selected for the survey had to meet the condition: “planning to undertake a new trip in 2023”. Survey participants’ names were anonymized for privacy protection. To conduct the study, a total of 12 mid-range restaurants near or within the 12 most typical tourist destinations in Can Tho city were chosen. Direct surveys were conducted with small groups of 2-3 people, based on specific cases at each survey

site, lasting an average of 30 to 40 minutes per session. About 20-25 tourists were surveyed at each destination.

(4) Data Analysis

Upon completing the official survey, the initially obtained primary data were checked for validity. The data were then input and stored on Excel before being transferred to SPSS 20.0 for descriptive statistics. Additionally, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) validation, supported by SMARTPLS 3.0 software, was applied to evaluate the scale and determine the importance of factors as well as test the research hypotheses.

The study took place over ten months (from June 2022 to March 2023) during the recovery phase following the pandemic. This duration allowed sufficient time for recruiting interview and survey participants, gathering data through interviews, surveys, field observations, and conducting data analysis. The research was conducted during two primary peak tourism periods: summer and year-end. This strategic timing ensured that the most reliable and persuasive information was obtained for the study. It was also a crucial period for the restaurant sector in Can Tho City, Vietnam. The selected timeframe facilitated the assessment of tourist satisfaction as businesses adjusted to new health and safety protocols while working to regain customer confidence. Examining this period offered valuable insights into the factors that affected satisfaction, enabling stakeholders to make informed decisions to bolster the industry's resilience and long-term prosperity.

Results

Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, and 286 valid responses were collected, yielding a response rate of approximately 95.3%. This actual sample size was confirmed to be more than the minimum required, allowing for the execution of further analytical methods. Descriptive statistics of the sample were presented in Table 2 thanks to the data analysis software SPSS 20.0.

The demographics of the survey respondents in this research sample reveal that the majority are female (51.7%), compared to 46.2% male. Most of the tourists surveyed were young, aged between 18 and 35, accounting for 64.4% of the sample. Middle-aged individuals, from 36 to 49 years old, made up 21.6%, while those aged 50 to over 60 represented only 14%.

Regarding professional backgrounds, 28.7% of the respondents were trained staff/workers, 28.3% were artisans, traders, or business administrators, and 27.3% were executives or high-level intellectual professionals. Agricultural workers constituted 8.7%, and untrained staff/workers made up 4.2% of the sample, highlighting its diverse nature. This heterogeneity can provide insights into varying customer preferences and expectations across different occupations,

contributing to a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing satisfaction in the restaurant industry.

In this sample, Vietnamese domestic tourists comprised 58%, while international tourists accounted for 42%. The majority of surveyed tourists had relatively high incomes, with 56.6% earning between \$25,000 and \$49,000, 22.4% earning below \$25,000, and only 19.9% earning between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

Approximately 72% of the tourists were first-time visitors to Can Tho City. Most respondents opted for short stays in the city, either 1-2 days (51.7%) or 3-4 days (39.2%), with longer stays of 1-2 weeks being quite rare at only 9.1%. Throughout the year, their preferred travel periods were during the summer months of June through August (39.2%) and the end of the year, from December to January (34.3%). In contrast, 21.3% of the respondents chose to travel between February and May, while a mere 5.2% preferred the period from September to November for their visit. The majority of respondents in the sample chose to travel to Can Tho City in groups, with friends being the most common choice (45.8%), followed by couples (24.8%) and families (22.7%). Solo travelers accounted for a smaller proportion, at 6.7%.

Table 2. Demographics of Research Sample (n=286)

Survey Respondents		Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	148	51.7
	Male	132	46.2
	Other/Decline to disclose	6	2.1
Age group	18-25 years old	50	17.5
	26-35 years old	134	46.9
	36-49 years old	62	21.6
	50-60 years old	26	9.1
	> 60 years old	14	4.9
Job title	Agricultural workers	25	8.7
	Artisans, traders, business administrators	81	28.3
	Executives and high-level intellectual professionals	78	27.3
	Trained staff/workers	82	28.7
	Untrained staff/workers	12	4.2
	Not specified	8	2.8

Place of origin	Vietnamese domestic tourists	166	58.0
	International tourists	120	42
Yearly earnings	Below \$25,000	64	22.4
	\$25,000 - \$49,000	162	56.6
	\$50,000 - \$74,000	48	16.8
	\$75,000 - \$100,000	9	3.1
	Different amount	3	1.1
First visit to Can Tho City	Yes	206	72.0
	No	80	28.0
Duration of stay	Brief journey: 1-2 days	148	51.7
	Short excursion: 3-4 days	112	39.2
	Week-long getaway	23	8.0
	Prolonged visit: over two weeks	3	1.1
Optimal Travel Season	February - May	61	21.3
	June - August	112	39.2
	September - November	15	5.2
	December - January	98	34.3
Type of travel group	Partner	71	24.8
	Individual	19	6.7
	Family members	65	22.7
	Group of friends	131	45.8
Total		286	100.0

Source: The author (2023)

Evaluating the Measurement Model

The assessment of the measurement model from the gathered data comprised of (1) Composite Reliability (CR) for assessing the internal consistency and individual reliability of each observed scale/variable; (2) Average Variance

Extracted (AVE) for evaluating convergent validity; and (3) Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading for examining discriminant validity.

Initially, the convergent validity of the model was determined through Factor Loading, CR, and AVE. The results indicated that all Factor Loading coefficients for the observed variables exceeded 0.7, thus meeting the convergent validity requirements (Sovey et al. 2022). Furthermore, the CR values for the scales ranged from 0.957 to 0.968, and the AVE levels for the scales all met the threshold, reflecting satisfactory reliability ranging from 0.651 to 0.895. Consequently, the measurement model was deemed appropriate. Next, the researcher assessed the discriminant validity between constructs, which was characterized by the low correlation between the observed variables measured for one related construct and the observed variables measured for another construct. The results demonstrated that the square root value of AVE (value on the diagonal) for each construct was larger than the corresponding correlation coefficients for that construct compared with other constructs in the research model. As a result, the discriminant validity of the constructs was confirmed. Lastly, the discriminant value achieved in the measurement for the constructs of the research model was also validated, as the cross-load coefficient of the observed variables on the construct itself was greater than that on other constructs.

While the Fornell-Larcker criterion and cross-loading testing are regarded as accepted methods in SmartPLS for assessing discriminant validity between constructs, they have limitations (Ha 2022, Ha 2023). Hence, Dijkstra and Henseler (2015) argued that the HTMT index, developed through simulation studies, provided a better measure of discriminant validity. If the HTMT index value was below 1, the discriminant value between the two related variables was confirmed (Garson 2016 as cited by Kante et al. 2018). Additionally, the HTMT index needed to be less than 0.9 (Dijkstra and Henseler 2015). The study results showed that the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio values for each construct were below 0.9, thereby establishing the discriminant validity criterion for the HTMT.

Assessing the Structural Model

Testing for Multicollinearity in Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM)

Multicollinearity arises between the respective exogenous and endogenous variables (Lowry and Gaskin 2014). Multicollinearity involving latent variables is present when the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) value exceeds 5 or falls below 0.2 (Wong 2013 as cited by Ha 2022). The results revealed that all VIF coefficients remained under the limit of 5 (the highest VIF value being 2.271 (less than 5) and the lowest VIF value being 1.812 (greater than 0.2)). Consequently, multicollinearity was not observed among the latent variables.

Moreover, several researchers (e.g., Tenenhaus 2005, Wetzels et al. 2009 as cited by Huynh 2020, Ha 2022) have shown that the PLS structural model's quality should be assessed using an Effect Size Index, Communality Value, and Goodness of Fit (GoF) index. Hence, this study examined these indicators.

Evaluating Effect Size Index

The Effect Size Index measures the impact of a specific exogenous latent variable on an endogenous variable when the exogenous variable is removed from the model. The Effect Size Index is categorized into three groups: large effect size with f-values above 0.40; medium effect size with f-values between 0.25 and 0.4; and small effect sizes with f-values less than 0.10 (Cohen 1988 as cited by Rosenthal et al. 1994). Cohen's f-index corresponds to an R² value above 0.26 for a significant effect, between 0.13 and 0.26 for moderate influence, and less than 0.02 for minor impact (Wetzels et al. 2009 as cited by Huynh 2020). The contributions of FL, RP, CL, SQ, and RA in predicting customer satisfaction were found to be highly predictive (R² = 0.624), with a value exceeding 0.26. The study's outcomes also demonstrated that customer satisfaction (SAT) accounted for 61.5% of customer loyalty (LOY) and 59.1% of diners' intention to return (RET). For customer loyalty (LOY), the findings indicated that it accounted for 68.2% of diners' intentions to return (RET).

Communality Value

Communality Value is employed to evaluate and validate the overall PLS model (Tenenhaus 2005, Wetzels et al. 2009 as cited by Huynh 2020). To fit the model, these researchers suggested that the communality index, equivalent to AVE in the PLS model, should have a value greater than 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker 1981 as cited by Ha 2022). Consequently, this study's structural model was found to be in good agreement with the experimental data, as the AVE values of the structures were all greater than 0.5.

Goodness of Fit (GoF)

GoF, proposed by Tenenhaus et al. (2005), is the criterion for the overall assessment of the model's fit using a measure that combines effect size with convergence value. SmartPLS does not typically provide values for the GoF metric, so the metric must be manually calculated by taking the square root of the average of the AVE values of the structures multiplied by the average of the R² values of the latent variables. The GoF impact can be classified into (1) large effect (GoF = 0.36), (2) moderate effect (GoF = 0.25), and (3) small effect (GoF = 0.1) (Wetzels et al. 2009 as cited by Ha et al. 2014). The study's model showed that the GoF index was 0.624, greater than 0.36, indicating a significant influence on the model. In summary, all the data analysis results presented have confirmed that the PLS model established in this research was in good agreement with the experimental data.

Evaluating Hypotheses: Unveiling the Findings of Hypothesis Testing

In this research, the author investigated eight hypotheses, pinpointing five factors that influence tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry following the COVID-19 pandemic: (1) flavor of food and drinks (FL); (2) reasonable price (RP); (3) cleanliness (CL); (4) service quality (SQ); and (5) restaurant atmosphere (RA). Furthermore, the study outcomes also verified the

favorable effect of tourist contentment on their devotion and ongoing patronage, as well as the encouraging role of customer allegiance in maintaining their long-term engagement (i.e., the positive impact of SAT on LOY, SAT on RET, and LOY on RET). Consequently, the overall results validated all eight research hypotheses.

More specifically, the research results have shown that the model, which includes five factors: (1) flavor of food and drinks; (2) reasonable price; (3) cleanliness; (4) service quality; and (5) restaurant atmosphere, explains 62.4% of the variation in tourist satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.624$), with a value exceeding 0.26. The study findings also emphasized that customer satisfaction (SAT) accounted for 61.5% of customer loyalty (LOY) and 59.1% of diners' intentions to return (RET). Additionally, customer loyalty (LOY) contributed to 68.2% of the diners' intentions to revisit (RET).

The research results have confirmed the H1 with ($\beta = 0.559$, P-value = $0.001 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a strong positive relationship and statistical significance. Among the eight hypotheses, H1 ranked first in determining the factors influencing tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, Vietnam, following the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the observed variables, "Taste" (Mean Value = 3.48) and "Freshness" (Mean Value=3.93) were found to be the highest-rated factors, whereas "Aroma" (Mean Value = 2.46) and "Presentation" (Mean Value = 1.46) were the lowest-rated factors. In conclusion, the research results have revealed that the overall taste profile and freshness of ingredients played crucial roles in determining customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, Vietnam, after the COVID-19 pandemic, while the aroma and presentation were less influential factors.

The research outcomes have validated the H2 with ($\beta = 0.518$, P-value = $0.003 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a strong positive relationship and statistical significance. Among the eight hypotheses, H2 ranks second in determining the factors influencing tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, Vietnam, following the COVID-19 pandemic. After evaluating the observed variables, the highest-rated factor was found to be the "Price-value ratio" (Mean Value = 2.9) while the lowest-rated factor was the "Menu price range" (Mean Value = 2.13). In conclusion, the research outcomes have demonstrated that reasonable pricing, particularly in terms of the price-value ratio, significantly contributed to customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry after the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the menu price range had a lesser impact.

The findings of the study have affirmed the (H3) with ($\beta = 0.472$, P-value = $0.031 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a strong positive relationship and statistical significance. Among the eight hypotheses, H3 ranks third in determining the factors influencing tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, Vietnam, following the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon evaluating the observed variables, the highest-rated factor was "Cleanliness of dining area" (Mean Value = 3.91) while the lowest-rated factor was "Cleanliness of staff uniforms" (Mean Value = 2.1). In conclusion, the research outcomes have proven that cleanliness, particularly the cleanliness of the dining area, played a vital role in customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry after the COVID-19 pandemic, while the cleanliness of staff uniforms had a lesser impact.

The study findings have substantiated the (H4) with ($\beta = 0.423$, P-value = $0.038 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a positive relationship and statistical significance. Among the eight hypotheses, H4 ranks fourth in determining the factors influencing tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, Vietnam, following the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest-rated observed variable was "Responsiveness" (Mean Value = 4.1) while the lowest-rated observed variable was "Tangibles" (Mean Value = 2.04). In conclusion, the research findings have shown that service quality, particularly staff responsiveness, played a crucial role in customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry after the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas tangibles had a lesser impact.

The investigation of the research has affirmed the results of the (H5) with ($\beta = 0.315$, P-value = $0.042 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a positive relationship and statistical significance. Among the eight hypotheses, H5 ranks fifth in determining the factors influencing tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry, Vietnam, following the COVID-19 pandemic. The highest-rated observed variable was "Interior Design" (Mean Value = 4.02) while the lowest-rated observed variable was "Noise Level" (Mean Value = 2.01). In conclusion, the research findings indicated that restaurant atmosphere, particularly the interior design, played a significant role in customer satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry after the COVID-19 pandemic, while noise level had a lesser impact.

The research findings have specifically confirmed the (H6) with ($\beta = 0.718$, P-value = $0.000 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a strong positive relationship and statistical significance. The importance of the factors was ranked in descending order as follows: (1) flavor of food and drinks (Mean Value = 4.12); (2) reasonable price (Mean Value = 4.01); (3) cleanliness (Mean Value = 3.62); (4) service quality (Mean Value = 3.52); and (5) restaurant atmosphere (Mean Value = 3.14). In conclusion, this study highlighted the significance of prioritizing these factors, with particular emphasis on food and drink flavors and reasonable pricing, in order to enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty in the restaurant industry.

The research investigation has affirmed the results of the (H7) with ($\beta = 0.602$, P-value = $0.001 < 0.05$) that demonstrates a strong positive relationship and statistical significance. After analyzing the variables, it was found that the highest-rated factors were repeat patronage (Mean Value = 4.92) and positive word-of-mouth (Mean Value = 4.13), while the lowest-rated factors included emotional attachment (Mean Value = 3.01), brand preference (Mean Value = 3.00), and resistance to switching (Mean Value = 2.11). In conclusion, the findings of this study confirmed the importance of understanding and addressing these key factors in order to boost customer retention in Can Tho City's restaurant industry following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study conclusions have reinforced the evidence of the (H8) with the β value (0.621) and the P-value = $0.000 < 0.05$) that demonstrated a strong positive relationship and statistical significance. After analyzing the variables, it was found that the highest-rated factors were customer lifetime value (Mean Value = 4.45) and frequency of repeat visits (Mean Value = 4.21), while the lowest-rated factors included customer churn rate (Mean Value = 2.51) and length of customer relationship (Mean Value = 2.15). In conclusion, the findings of this study

emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing these key factors to enhance customer loyalty and retention in Can Tho City's restaurant industry following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the factors influencing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry of Can Tho City following the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings validated all eight hypotheses, emphasizing the significance of five factors on customer satisfaction in descending order as follows: (1) food and drink flavor; (2) reasonable pricing; (3) cleanliness; (4) service quality; and (5) restaurant ambiance. Furthermore, the study also confirmed the positive impact of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty and retention, and the positive influence of customer loyalty on customer retention.

These results corroborate previous research in the hospitality industry, which emphasized the importance of food and drink quality, pricing, cleanliness, service quality, and ambiance on customer satisfaction (e.g., Sulek and Hensley 2004, Ryu et al. 2012, Ha 2023). The study's findings are particularly relevant in the context of the Post-COVID-19 pandemic, where customer expectations and preferences have shifted towards a greater emphasis on safety, hygiene, and value for money (Brizek et al. 2021, Martino et al. 2021, Alhemimah 2023).

The study also provided valuable insights into the relationships between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. The results highlighted the importance of understanding and prioritizing these factors to enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry, particularly in the post-pandemic context. This is consistent with previous research demonstrating the role of customer satisfaction in building customer loyalty and retention (e.g., Chang and Chen 2008, Oliver 1999, Ha 2022, Ha 2023).

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study can assist restaurant operators and policymakers in Can Tho City and beyond in implementing effective strategies to enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. By prioritizing the identified factors, businesses can better cater to the evolving needs and preferences of customers in the post-pandemic era. By comparing the results of this study with the findings in the "Literature Review" section, it is evident that the research has effectively addressed the research questions and objectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in Can Tho City's restaurant industry following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions

This study has successfully addressed the research questions and objectives by exploring the key factors influencing tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and retention in the restaurant industry in Can Tho City after the COVID-19 pandemic. The

findings revealed that food and drink flavor, reasonable pricing, cleanliness, service quality, and restaurant ambiance are the most significant factors affecting customer satisfaction, in that order. By understanding the relative importance of these factors, stakeholders can better prioritize their strategies to cater to customers' evolving needs and preferences in the post-pandemic context.

Moreover, the study confirmed that customer satisfaction serves as an intermediary in creating customer loyalty and return intention, emphasizing the importance of enhancing satisfaction to foster loyalty and retention. The positive relationship between customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention found in this study is consistent with previous research and offers valuable insights for restaurant operators and policymakers in Can Tho City and beyond.

Furthermore, based on the obtained results, the study proposed the following concrete recommendations to help the restaurant industry enhance tourist satisfaction by addressing the key factors identified in the research.

Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Can Tho's Restaurant Industry

(1) Develop a diverse and flavorful menu: Offer a wide variety of dishes catering to different tastes and dietary preferences, ensuring that food and drink items are consistently high in quality and flavor. Moreover, focus on the presentation and decoration of artistic and attractive dishes to better attract and satisfy customers.

(2) Implement competitive and transparent pricing: Set reasonable prices for menu items and clearly communicate them to customers, fostering trust and encouraging repeat visits.

(3) Maintain impeccable cleanliness and hygiene: Adhere to strict cleanliness standards throughout the establishment, including the kitchen, dining area, and restrooms, ensuring the safety and comfort of guests. Additionally, invest in uniforms for employees to project a neat, clean, and professional image, making it easier to impress and connect with diners.

(4) Invest in staff training and development: Provide comprehensive training and ongoing support for employees to enhance their service skills, enabling them to deliver attentive, efficient, and personalized customer service.

(5) Create a comfortable and inviting atmosphere: Design the restaurant's interior and exterior spaces to promote a welcoming and relaxing environment for guests, positively impacting their overall dining experience. Emphasize noise control management by limiting the number of people in a space or installing soundproof walls. Encourage the division of service spaces to suit different tourist segments, avoiding mixing between customer groups (e.g., families with or without children, couples, groups of friends, or elderly diners).

(6) Establish a loyalty program with special offers to further enhance diners' satisfaction, loyalty, and desire to return to the restaurant, ultimately contributing to the establishment's success.

By implementing these recommendations, restaurant owners and managers can cultivate a more enjoyable and satisfying dining experience for their customers, ultimately resulting in increased customer loyalty and retention. These factors are

crucial for achieving long-term success in the highly competitive restaurant industry.

In summary, the findings of this study have provided valuable insights into both theoretical and practical aspects of the restaurant industry. From a theoretical standpoint, the research has contributed to the existing literature on customer satisfaction by identifying and examining the key factors that influence tourist satisfaction in Can Tho City's restaurant industry following the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of practical implications, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the crucial factors driving customer satisfaction and offers valuable insights into their role in fostering loyalty and return intention. These findings have been utilized by the author to provide practical recommendations for stakeholders in Can Tho's restaurant industry. The aim is to facilitate the development of effective strategies that enhance the customer experience and promote long-term success.

Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledged several limitations that may have impacted the generalizability of the findings. One such limitation is the sample size, which may not be representative of the broader population of tourists visiting Can Tho City's restaurants. Additionally, the geographical scope of the study was confined to Can Tho City, and thus the results might not be applicable to other locations with different cultural and economic contexts. Methodological constraints, such as the reliance on self-reported survey data and potential biases in participant responses, may also have influenced the study's conclusions. Future research is encouraged to address these limitations by increasing the sample size, exploring other geographical areas, and incorporating a variety of methodological approaches. This would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of tourist satisfaction in the restaurant industry.

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