Assessing the Factors Influencing on the Business Performance of Restaurants of the District of Muadzam Shah

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Abstract

Purpose: While there are number of existing studies have been undertaken on the business-related performance in organizations that producing products and services, however in the context of restaurants remain scarce. The purpose of this paper is to examine the predictor variables of factors that could influencing the restaurants' business performance.

Design/methodology/approach: A survey of 25 restaurants was conducted in a developing township in the Southeast of Pahang state and the data was analysed using SPSS technique.

Findings: The explanatory variables of physical environment, food-related compliance and certification, food handling, food resources and materials, food pricing and employee attributes were found do not have significant impact on business performance of the restaurants.

Research limitations/implications: The study was undertaken in a very small sample of restaurants in the developing township in Pahang. Nevertheless, the current study shall be extended to a larger population of restaurants which covers in major cities of Malaysia.

Practical implications: The study highlights the important aspects that the restauranteurs should emphasize and practice in order to keep attract customers for their business sustainability.

Originality/value: The study contributes a fruitful insight on the strategy and integrity that ought to be upheld by the restaurant owners in order to sustain their business performance in the long-term.

Keywords: Halal, Certification, Restaurants, Performance, Consumers.

Introduction

The restaurant industry constitutes as one of the leading industries that contributes a remarkable economic growth and development to the country. Based on key statistic in the fourth quarter of 2018, Malaysia's economy recorded a better performance with a growth of 4.7 per cent and annual comparison of Service Producer Price Index (SPPI) has recorded an increase of 3.3 per cent contributed by Restaurants and Mobile Food Service Activities by 4.0 percent (Department of Statistic, 2020). This increasing rate can be attributed by the escalation number of restaurants have been established in Malaysia that provide a numerous range of food varieties. Enriched with the various customs and cultures, Malaysian can be characterized as the multi-cultural country that has three major ethnics (Malay, Chinese and Indian) with their uniqueness and distinctiveness in food dishes in accordance with their different religions and

values. The variety of food dishes has made Malaysia as food paradise among local citizens and international tourists, in which many more restaurants have taken various initiatives to attract their customers to dine in to enjoy the galore of food choices.

Religion plays an important role in the food selection and consumption especially in certain culturally-sensitive societies (James, 2004; Dindyal and Dindyal, 2004). In Malaysia, since Malays (or Bumiputeras) who are Muslims and constitutes as the largest ethnic composition, thus their food selection and consumption are restricted by religious dietary requirements. In other words, Muslims are only allowed to consume halal foods and any elements of unlawful (haram) food shall be avoided. The rationale behind the halal concept under Islamic dietary laws is to protect the nature of human well-beings (Saadan and Zainal Abidin, 2014). Besides, given the market structure of restaurants is highly competitive and no barriers in entering or leaving the market, thus the restaurant owners embrace a substantial amount of challenges to sustain the restaurant business. Taking the demand of halal foods into account forms as one of the significant long-term strategies to ensure that the restaurant business is prolonged sustained in the market.

Unlike previous studies that empirically undertaken in major urban cities, however this study has been carried out in Muadzam Shah, a small township that is located in Southeast of Pahang state and it has been privately managed by the former Southeast Pahang Development Authority (DARA), or Lembaga Kemajuan Pahang Tenggara (LKPT). Succeeding the vision of Malaysia's second prime minister (Tun Abdul Razak), the small township has undergone several notable developments for being a part of East Coast Economic Region (ECER)'s key development plan in several districts of Pahang state, where a number of good key infrastructure and spread of educational institutions and government public services have been established for the well-beings of the local community.

Most of the local dwellers are Malays, comprising of local people and government and private workers who domicile in the township. Besides, the place also becomes a strategic pit-stop for passers-by especially from Kuantan to Segamat/Bahau, and food eateries are amongst the most hunted place for travelers to refuel energy after having a long-distance journey. Therefore, food eateries that are attractive with hygienic, cozy and halal attributes would attract more customers to their restaurants. However, based on a report by Rompin District Council (2019), it is estimated that 7 out of 33 restaurants (24%) had shut down their operations due to several diminishing factors including economic aspect, customer preferences, pricing and dropped number of educational institution's students. Apart from that, it is reported that the restaurant owners have less exposure on the importance of business strategy and integrity in providing food service (Rompin District Council, 2019).

Although there are abundant of the extant studies have been undertaken to assess the customer satisfaction on the service quality -related studies, however the distinctive facet of the current study is the emphasis on the restaurant owner's perspective given on their preparedness to serve food with halal, hygiene and safety attributes as ways to attract their customers. In fact, the locus of attention of service quality-related studies intensifies on the appearance of the state of restaurants and food served and customer's preference on that restaurant's dimensions hat could contribute to the image enhancement of the restaurants. This is because those said qualities are very crucial in the industry that is highly competitive (Syed Marzuki, Hall and Ballantine, 2012) and has positive outcomes on economic, social and environmental aspects (Shafieizadeh and Tao, 2020). Although there are few similarities in the dimensions of serve quality-related studies, however this study focuses on the social responsibility perspective that could be delivered for the well-being of customers from the good restaurant's services and food-related compliance. For these reasons, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

- How is the level of the restaurants' business performance in one of the Rompin's district town?
- What are the factors that could influence the restaurants' business performance?

These research questions subsequently drive the researchers to examine the level of restaurant's business performance and also to investigate whether the factors of business strategy and business integrity could influence the restaurants' business performance. The findings of the study are expected to provide insightful contributions to the existing researches in the breadth of social responsibility and food service-related performance, since social responsibility is not only confined within the large companies but it shall expand to the food-related service business which serves food and drinks for people's consumption. This implies that this paper emphasizes on the quality aspects of the food preparation and restaurants including the lawful (*halal*ness) of the foods' material contents, restaurant's workers, food handling and cleanliness of the food preparation as well as ambience of the restaurant itself. The restauranteurs should pay greater attention to these elements which ultimately could contribute to not only customers' satisfaction but for their essential well-beings. In the following sections, the relevant literature is reviewed that contributes to the hypotheses development, discussion of research methodology, discussion of findings, conclusion and ways forward for the future research.

Literature Review
Restaurant's Performance and Restaurant Operator's Responsibility
There are number of previous performance-related studies have documented significant effects of several number of factors that contribute to the business survival of companies, especially involving the large companies. Nonetheless, there are growing number of prior studies that investigating the performance of small-medium-typed firms (commonly known as 'SMEs') in realizing the important roles and contributions of these types of companies towards the nation and society. As far as the SMEs are concerned, the extant literature which investigating the performance of SMEs that specifically focusing on food industry are still limited. Realising the significant contribution made by this gastronomy-related industry to the country, the food industry has gained its momentum in the recent decades following to the upsurging awareness and demands of consumers on Halal products. According to Mohd Nawi and Mohd Nasir (2014), consumers nowadays are ingenious and take precautionary actions in making food selection to ensure that food purchase has some features of halalan toyyiban (permissible and wholesomeness), safe, hygienic and environmentally-conscious. These food characteristics are critically important for companies that wish to gain consumer's confidence on their outputs/products.

Being firms that produce or serve consumption food products that may be provide health effect to the consumers, hence firms play significant roles in delivering their responsibility to ensure that the food products are suitable to the humans' well-beings. This context of food industry is perceived as in line with the stakeholder theory which the pursuit of profitability is no longer relevant in the world of highly competitive. This implies that firms should consider other consumer or other stakeholders' issues rather than give emphasis mainly on their profitability motive (Freeman, 1984). Based on the Caroll (1991)'s explanation on his corporate social responsibility (CSR) pyramid, firms hold four major dimensions of responsibilities including economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic aspects. With these kinds of responsibilities, it is expected that firms should be committed in delivering values in their products/service that not only could beneficial to its stakeholders but also helps to minimize any possible harmful effects to their health and well-beings (Mohr, Webb and Harris, 2001). This is due to the fact that consumers are easily exposed to the risk of food-borne illness since the preparation of food by the food manufacturers/operators is unknown to the knowledge of consumers. In fact, Ismail, Kassim, Mohd Amit and Mohd Rasdi (2014) affirmed that majority of the firms are likely to

elucidate their economic and ethical responsibilities and being more competent in carrying out their social obligation to its constituencies. Thus, the mutual connection between firms and consumers provide a clear-cut on the deliberation why the investigation of firm performance in the context of food industry is pertinent in the current literature as consumers have their right to ascertain that the food they consumed is consistent with food-related guidelines and standards.

As far as the food-related guidelines are concerned, examining the performance of restaurants is imperative in the context of food service industry as the elements of food safety, cleanliness and quality are expected from the restauranteurs (Syed Marzuki, et.al., 2012). One of the ways to prove that restauranteurs are in compliance to the food-related guidelines and standards is through the secure of food certification (i.e. Halal certification) issued by local authority. However, there are several challenges and obstacles encountered by the service operators in the certification compliance which ultimately could lead to the non-compliance of food-related certification including financial and non-financial factors (Ab Rahman, et.al., 2012). The true motives of the food service operators in the certification compliance are essential in determining the positive outcomes of the certification and the success of the firms, as it attempts to adjust consumers' expectations and perceptions towards the firms (Gotzamani and Tsiotras, 2002). The association between these contextual factors and the performance of restaurants have been empirically documented in the previous studies, which demonstrated that these factors contribute significantly to the performance of the food operators (Syed Marzuki, et.al., 2012; Ab Rahman, Saleh, Ab Rahman and Hashim, 2012; Ahmad, Abdul Rahman, Othman and Ungku Zainal Abidin 2017).

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

There are several number of prior studies that investigated the factors that influencing the business performance of restaurants (Syed Marzuki, et.al, 2012; Kanyan, Ngana and Voon, 2016; Kim, Kim, Lee and Tang, 2020; Tajeddini, 2011; Ab Rahman et.al., 2012), as majority of the studies are highly emphasized on the internal firm's strategy factors of brand improvement, marketing-related strategy innovative and cost efficiency, and quality function development. For instances, Kim, et.al. (2020) found that high brand reliability, advertising expenditure and type of restaurant's service have significant negative impacts towards firm's value. It indicates that perception of brand reliability, restaurant with high advertising expenditure and full-service restaurant respectively has significantly less negative impacts on abnormal returns, than those with low brand reliability, low advertising expenditure and limited-service restaurants. Meanwhile, Tajeddini (2011) advocated that innovativeness, operating effectiveness and cost efficiency have positive effects on business performance (measured by service quality, customer satisfaction and overall customer service level).

It is understood that operating service function is not an easy task and calls for quality service improvement as failure to do so may cause the restauranteurs encountered problems and challenges to face on. Kanyan, Ngana and Voon (2016) provided suggestions for the selected restaurants on the improvement of service quality function development, total quality management, process focus to strengthen the interaction between customers and the restaurant, restaurant layout, HRM, practice of good supply management and regular maintenance of restaurant's equipment. Although past studies have been rendered on the importance of quality improvement, however there is little research studies that have highlighted on the locus of quality that should be focused especially on the food ingredients, food handling and preparation which form an underlying basis to secure for food-related certification. Given the Malaysian population is dominated by Malay ethnic, thus most of food producers/providers realise that religious sensitivity is a crucial issue that shall be taken into account in this food consumption matter. For Muslims, eating halal and *toyyib* (wholesomeness) food is an act of worship of God,

and the food service operators is deemed plays an important role to ensure that halal standards in the food preparation and handling procedures are always in place. This can be evidenced by Syed Marzuki, et.al. (2012) which found that restaurant managers perceived that halal certification promotes the importance of having knowledge of Muslims' dietary restrictions, sensitivity and religious practices, as securing halal certification signifies that the food producers/providers have some attributes that make it unique and conforming to the Islamic dietary rules. This is consistent with the stakeholder theory with the assertion that business has social obligations to the society (beyond its profitability motive) as the firms' stakeholders are vulnerable with the consequences of the business' course of actions (Freeman, 1984; Carroll, 1999).

It is important to note that securing halal certification is a voluntary practice by food producers/providers as it requires the firms to incur a substantial amount of costs to secure and maintain the halal status. Halal certification is perceived as a powerful weapon for firms/restaurants to attract and sustain their customers as it is a source of building the consumers' trust and confidence (Mohamed, Rezai, Shamsudin and Chiew, 2008). To build the consumers' confidence, Halal- and other food-related certification which provides proper guidelines on operational procedures to ensure that the food quality and safety are in place determines the way foods are sourced, handled, prepared and served to consumers, and the employment of workers that are equipped with food-related knowledge and training could lead to the significant improvement business performance (Ab Talib, Ai Chin and Fischer, 2017; Ahmad, Abdul Rahman, Othman and Ungku Zainal Abidin, 2017). Besides, consumers also are aware on the food pricing as it represents the food attributes and worth of consumers to pay. According to Mohd Dali, Nooh, Nawai and Mohammad (2009), food pricing is positively associated with the quality of food. The food pricing, however, may vary in accordance to the location in which the restaurants are in operation. Since the current study is carried out in the small township in Muadzam Shah which distances far away from the capital city of the Pahang state, hence charging food at an expensive cost and excessive profit may let local and passing-by consumers to stay away from visiting or dining in the restaurants which eventually may affect the business performance of the restaurants. Hence, from the above previous findings may lead to the development of the following hypotheses:

H1(a): There are significant association between physical environment and business performance of restaurants.

H1(b): There are significant association between food-related compliance and certification and business performance of restaurants.

H1(c): There are significant association between food handling and process and business performance of restaurants.

H1(d): There are significant association between food resource and materials and business performance of restaurants.

H1(e): There are significant association between food pricing and business performance of restaurants.

H1(f): There are significant association between employee attributes and business performance of restaurants.

Research Methodology
Data Sampling and Data Collection Procedure
This study is a quantitative in nature, which is carried out based on cross-sectional study that was involved with a small sample of restaurants in the vicinity of Muadzam Shah using a purposive sampling. The sample of restaurants which involving 25 restaurants was literally the list of restaurants that have been registered under the District Council of Muadzam Shah as of 1 July 2019. The category of sample of restaurants includes locally-owned (family-run) restaurants and fast-food restaurants. Overall, only 19 restaurants were available for the distribution of questionnaire since the remaining 6 restaurants were unable to meet the criteria of this study due to several reasons for instance 4 of the restaurants were non-Muslims restaurants that do not comply with food-related guidelines and rules, 1 restaurant faced financial problem while another restaurant was unable to identify its location.

Measurement of variables
In order to meet the objective of the study, the questionnaire was divided into two sections; demographic profile of the respondent and the measurement of independent and dependent variables (i.e. factors influencing the business performance of restaurants and performance measures of the restaurants). There are five (5) independent variables that are used in this study as measurement of factors that could influence the business performance of restaurants including physical environment (PE), food resources and materials (FRM), food handling/process (FHP), food pricing (FP) and employee attributes (EA). Meanwhile, the dependent variables (business performance are measured based on sale and profit improvement and range of estimated monthly revenue. The questionnaire employs Four-point Likert scale as it eliminates the neutral level which offers opportunity the respondents to answer neither range of agree nor disagree statement (Dumas and Redish, 1999).

Findings
Before descriptive statistics are analysed, preliminary analyses (reliability analysis and normality test) have been performed beforehand in which the former analysis is employed for the purpose of testing the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient-the scale's internal consistency, while the latter is used to assess the normality of data distribution (Pallant, 2010). Both analyses are found meet the minimum requirement for subsequent data analysis with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is above 0.7 while the normality of data distribution is more than 0.05 (normal distribution using Shapiro-Wilk's test of normality).

Descriptive Statistics
Table 1 depicts the descriptive statistics of demographic profile of the respondents, in which the respondents were among the owner of the restaurants or personnel of the restaurants who are directly involve or/and well-versed with all the operating process of the restaurants (i.e. supervisor). The above findings revealed that all of the respondents were Malay and majority of the respondents were male (52.6%). Although majority of the restauranteurs were among SPM holders, however some of them had previous job experience in food service and food and beverage (F&B) industry which led them either become the owner of the restaurants or involves in supervision matter. Majority of the restaurants (63.1%) have been established in more than 5 years. Most of the restaurants are small in size (36.8%) which is measured based on number of employees with less than 5 employees. Majority of the restaurants did not hire foreign workers, and surprisingly about 63.2% of the respondents did not hold or apply for halal certification. However, majority of the restaurants which about 36.8% only obtained grade B for "Sijil Penarafan Kebersihan Premis Makanan". On average, the restauranteurs managed to obtain monthly revenue at more than RM10,000.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Criteria	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	10	52.6%
	Female	9	47.4%
Race	Malay	19	100%
	Chinese	0	0%
	Indian	0	0%
	Others	0	0%
Education Level	SPM Level	12	63.1%
	Diploma	3	15.8%
	Bachelor's Degree	4	21.1%
Experience in Food Service	Less than 5 years	3	15.8%
	5-10 years	9	47.4%
	11-20 years	4	21.1%
	20 years and above	3	15.8%
Previous Job Experience	Food & Beverage	9	47.4%
	Professional	1	5.3%
	Practitioner	2	10.5%
	Self-employed	7	36.9%
Business Duration	Less than 1 year	4	21.1%
	1-5 years	4	15.8%
	More than 5 years	11	63.1%
Number of Employee	< 5 employees	7	36.8%
	6-10 employees	4	21.1%
	11-15 employees	6	31.6%
	> 15 employees	2	10.5%
Availability of Foreign Workers	Yes	7	36.8%
	No	12	63.2%
Estimated revenue per month	< RM10,000	3	15.8%
	RM10,001 – 20,000	5	26.3%
	RM20,001 – 30,000	5	26.3%
	> RM30,001	6	31.6%
Halal certification	Yes	7	36.8%
	No	12	63.2%
Grade for "Sijil Penarafan Kebersihan Premis Makanan"	A	5	26.3%
	B	7	36.8%
	C	1	5.3%
	Unspecified	6	31.6%

Table 2: Mean Response for Each Variable

Variable	Main Theme	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
INDEPENDENT	Physical environment (PE)	Item 1: Pleasant interior design	-	-	9	10	3.47
		Item 2: Clean premise	-	-	8	11	3.58
		Item 3: Cosy premise layout	-	-	8	11	3.58
		Item 4: Lightings and interior colour	-	1	9	9	3.42
	Food resources and materials (FRM)	Item 1: halal food resources	-	-	5	14	3.74
		Item 2: reputable suppliers	-	-	5	14	3.74
		Item 3: high quality ingredients	-	-	7	12	3.63
		Item 4: clean kitchen	-	-	6	13	3.68
	Food handling/process (FHP)	Item 1: Hygiene kitchen area	-	-	3	16	3.84
		Item 2: hygiene utensils	-	-	3	16	3.84
		Item 3: maintain cleanliness	-	-	4	15	3.79
		Item 4: clean food storage	-	-	3	16	3.84
	Food pricing (FP)	Item 1: offer best price	-	-	8	11	3.58
		Item 2: charge at reasonable price	-	-	8	11	3.58
		Item 3: price at minimum cost coverage	-	-	6	13	3.68
	Employee Attributes (EA)	Item 1: adequate training	-	-	11	8	3.42
		Item 2: understand handling procedure	-	2	8	9	3.37
		Item 3: competent in food handling	-	2	12	5	3.16
		Item 4: receive vaccination	-	-	3	16	3.84
DEPENDENT	Business performance (BP)	Item 1: Significant sales improvement	1	3	11	4	2.95
		Item 2: Significant profit improvement	1	4	11	3	2.84

Table 2 above depicts the mean response of items that underpinning for each measured variable. For the variable of physical environment, majority of the respondents were strongly agreed that their ambience of restaurants was pleasant and attractive for their customers. Besides, majority of the respondents also were strongly agreed to claim that customers should render their confidence towards not only on their foods as the food ingredients were clean and supplied by the reputable suppliers, but also on the food handling/process since they were able to maintain the cleanliness of food preparation space, utensils used and food storage. They were also agreed that they offered the best price for their customers and did not charge at excessive price at the expense of their customers. On average, most of the respondents were agreed that their employees were equipped with sufficient training and received vaccination. However, only few of them claimed that some of their employees were not competent and need improvement in food handling. Overall, majority of the respondents were agreed that their food business showed significant improvement in both sales and profit.

Inferential Statistics
Correlation analysis

Table 3: Correlation analysis

Variables	PE	FRM	FHP	FP	EA	BP
PE	1.00	0.73 (-0.07)	0.46 (-0.15)	0.80 (0.051)	0.95 (0.13)	0.86 (-0.37)
FRM	0.73 (-0.07)	1.00	0.64 (0.1)	0.36 (0.19)	0.33 (0.20)	0.51 (0.13)
FHP	0.46 (-0.15)	0.64 (0.1)	1.00	0.65 (0.09)	0.31 (0.20)	0.69 (-0.81)
FP	0.80 (0.051)	0.36 (0.19)	0.65 (0.09)	1.00	0.28 (0.22)	0.15 (0.54)
EA	0.95 (0.13)	0.33 (0.20)	0.31 (0.20)	0.28 (0.22)	1.00	0.22 (0.36)
BP	0.86 (-0.37)	0.51 (0.13)	0.69 (-0.81)	0.15 (0.54)	0.22 (0.36)	1.00

Table 3 above reveals that none of the independent variables have significant association with the dependent variable (business performance). In other words, the above correlation analysis implies that there be might other factors that could influence the business performance of the restaurants.

Discussion and Conclusion
This study attempts to investigate several factors that could influence the business performance of restaurants involving a small sample of restaurants in the small township in one of the districts of the Pahang state. Being located in the southern-east of the Pahang state along Jalan Kuantan-Segamat, this growing township become the appropriate pitstop for the passers-by along this state road especially for those who are looking for some errands and is populated by local community who are majority of them are dwelled by the governments' -and private institutions' employees. These provide reasons for restauranteurs to equip their business with proper food handling, pleasant ambience, trusted food ingredients, healthy and competent employees and moderate food pricing in order to attract their regular and new customers for sustaining their business performance. However, this unique township was unable to provide empirical evidence that these measured variables be the contextual factors that could influence

the restaurants' business performance. This seems to provide suggestions that there might be the other factors that could affect the business performance of the restaurants. This provides a limitation of study as it involves a small sample of restaurants and it is recommended that this study should be extended to other major cities and with some additional factors or variables in order to evaluate restaurant's business performance involving a larger sample of restaurants.

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