Antecedents involved in developing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty

Gurmeet Singh
School of Business and Management, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

Neale Slack
School of Management, Fiji National University, Nasinu, Fiji

Shavneet Sharma
School of Business and Management, The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, and

Karishma Mudaliar, Suman Narayan, Rajini Kaur and Keshmi Upashna Sharma
School of Management, Fiji National University, Nasinu, Fiji

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to simultaneously examine the interrelated influence of antecedents involved in developing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty. A conceptual model which incorporates service quality attributes, price fairness, customer satisfaction, brand image and trust and the resultant effect on customer loyalty is proposed to better understand how fast-food restaurant customer loyalty can be optimized.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative research methodology adopting structural equation modelling was used to understand the interrelatedness and influence of antecedents involved in optimizing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty.

Findings – The findings indicate that service quality attributes (food quality and employee service quality) and price fairness significantly influence customer satisfaction and brand image, while physical environment quality has no significant influence. Additionally, customer satisfaction was found to influence brand trust and customer loyalty, while the brand image does not influence customer satisfaction but does influence brand trust and customer loyalty.

Practical implications – Understanding the interrelatedness and influence of antecedents involved in developing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty would enable academics and practitioners to formulate honed marketing and operational strategies to optimize customer loyalty and fast-food restaurant profitability.

Originality/value – This research addresses the paucity of research and marketing gaps regarding the interrelatedness and influence of antecedents involved in optimizing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty in Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

Keywords Service quality attributes, Price fairness, Customer satisfaction, Brand image, Brand trust, Loyalty

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Ongoing rapid growth in the fast-food sector across geographic, national and cultural boundaries (Gabriel, 2001) continues to be driven by global changes in consumer lifestyles, increased household income and preference for more convenient "fast" food options (Rahkovsky *et al.*, 2018). This increased demand for fast-food has driven fierce competition in the fast-food sector, with fast-food restaurant success dependent more and more on customer retention (Ha and Jang, 2012).

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Against this backdrop, it is incumbent upon fast-food restauranteurs to continuously develop and hone their marketing strategies and product and service offerings to respond to these fast-changing market dynamics in order to satisfy and retain customers, sustain a competitive edge over competitors and drive long-term profitability (Petzer and Mackay, 2014). Notwithstanding, for marketing strategies and responses to be effective in optimizing customer loyalty, fast-food restauranteurs require a sound understanding of the factors that motivate consumers to purchase fast-food meals (Shahzadi *et al.*, 2018), and the interrelated and compound influence of those factors in developing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty.

Despite the relative importance of fast-foods in the global food-service sector, and customer loyalty being considered a priority for fast-food restauranteurs, the main focus of previous research has been in the USA (Namin, 2017), the UK (Nguyen *et al.*, 2018) and Europe (Carranza *et al.*, 2018). Scant attention has been paid to understanding the factors influencing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Fiji (Slack *et al.*, 2020). Differences in economic, political, legal and cultural factors between countries profoundly impact customer behavior (Sharma *et al.*, 2020b). Also, considering the context-specific nature of customer loyalty and its antecedents, and the challenges associated with generalizing empirical results from developed to developing nations, further context-specific research is warranted. Further, limited previous studies comprise simultaneous investigation of the influence of a broad range of interrelated antecedents, including service quality (attributes comprising food quality, physical environment quality and employee service quality), price fairness, brand image, customer satisfaction and brand trust on customer loyalty, in the fast-food sector.

Hence, this study is important because it aims to bridge these gaps by contributing to new knowledge specifically relating to customer loyalty and its antecedents in the SIDS context. This study also intends to develop and test a questionnaire that has reliable and valid scales and a structural model that is an appropriate predictor of customer loyalty in the context of fast-food restaurants. Practically, this study proposes to provide empirical findings that will enable academics and practitioners to formulate honed marketing and operational strategies to optimize fast-food restaurant customer loyalty.

Literature review
Influence of food quality on customer satisfaction and brand image
Recent studies (Carranza *et al.*, 2018; Clemente-Ricolfe, 2016) suggest that restaurant service quality constitutes three attributes: food quality, the physical environment and employee service quality. Ha and Jang (2013) argue that these attributes are used by customers to evaluate perceived restaurant quality. However, it is noted that food quality is the predominant factor that influences customer's restaurant selection, service perception and overall dining experience and satisfaction toward a restaurant (Shahzadi *et al.*, 2018; Yi *et al.*, 2018; Roy *et al.*, 2020). According to Trimigno *et al.* (2015), customers assess food quality based on a composite of factors including presentation, taste, nutritional value, processing and storage, along with other contributing factors. Tse and Wilton (1988, p. 204) suggest that "the customer's response to the evaluation of the perceived discrepancy between prior expectations (or some norm of performance) and the actual performance of the product as perceived after its consumption" can result in customer satisfaction. Researchers (Ha and Jang, 2010; Ryu *et al.*, 2012) have explored the relationship between food quality and customer satisfaction and highlight the importance of food quality on customer satisfaction, and that food quality has a positive and direct influence on customer satisfaction in restaurants. Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

H1a. Food quality has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Consumer research suggests that brand image is the sum of customers' experiences, ideas, perceptions and impressions of fast-food restaurants (Ryu *et al.*, 2008). Building brand image is an important restaurant characteristic because a positive brand image simplifies customer decision-making regarding the dining experience (Yi *et al.*, 2018) and critically influences the sense of value, satisfaction and behavior of customers (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009). Studies suggest that although the interior and exterior décor, cleanness and location attributes are considered essential, food quality was evaluated to be most significant in building a positive restaurant image (Ryu *et al.*, 2012). Studies also highlight that a restaurant's food quality positively influences brand image (Jin *et al.*, 2012a; Ryu *et al.*, 2012; Yi *et al.*, 2018). Based on the literature, it can be hypothesized that:

H1b. Food quality has a significant positive influence on brand image.

Influence of physical environment quality on customer satisfaction and brand image
Researchers Heung and Gu (2012) refer to a restaurant's physical environment as "the conscious design of a space to encourage specific emotional effects in the customer, to ultimately enhance his/her willingness to purchase a product or service." Previous studies show that "customers use the physical environment in judging the quality of products or services" (Ha and Jang, 2012, p. 204) and the physical environment attracts customers (Ha and Jang, 2012). Han and Ryu (2009) and Ryu and Han (2010a) also stress the importance of building an appropriate restaurant physical environment to increase customer satisfaction. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2a. Physical environment quality has a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Restaurant physical environmental factors provide information to enable customers to ascertain a restaurant's image (Baker *et al.*, 1994); therefore, those factors are deemed significant determinants of restaurant image (Ryu *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, establishing an alluring physical environment (e.g. music, lighting, interior decoration, layout and the like) is argued to be paramount in creating a positive restaurant image (Jin *et al.*, 2012a; Ryu *et al.*, 2008). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2b. Physical environment quality has a significant positive influence on brand image.

Influence of employee service quality on customer satisfaction and brand image
Ha and Jang (2010) propose that restaurant employee service quality is the degree of interpersonal service that employees provide when interacting with customers. Wu and Mohi (2015) also propose that employee service quality is an essential part of a fast-food restaurant's service quality. Hence, because restaurants are assessed based on customers' perceptions of employee service quality received, it is incumbent upon restaurants to ensure employees build and deliver service quality (Liu *et al.*, 2017; Ryu *et al.*, 2012). Studies show that restaurant employees' attitudes (Hwang and Ok, 2013) and interpersonal interaction with customers significantly influence the service quality delivered and customer satisfaction (Kim *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, it is postulated that:

H3a. Employee service quality has a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Studies also show that employee competency (Ryu *et al.*, 2012), communication skills and personal appearance (Masa'deh *et al.*, 2019) significantly impact a restaurants' brand image and reputation. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H3b. Employee service quality has a significant positive influence on brand image.

Influence of price fairness on customer satisfaction and brand image
Price fairness judgments are a customers' subjective comparison between a reference price and a price being judged, and are typically biased by their self-interest (Xia *et al.*, 2004). Results from the study by Slack *et al.* (2020) revealed that social value and functional value (price/value for money) positively affected customer satisfaction when purchasing fast-food. Previous researchers also identified that perception of price fairness influenced customer satisfaction and produced different emotions and behavioral reactions by customers (Gummesson, 2002). Recent studies also confirmed significant positive relationships existed between price fairness and customer satisfaction (Jin *et al.*, 2012a; Uddin, 2019). Therefore, it can be hypothesized:

H4a. Price fairness has a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Providing restaurant offerings perceived to be reasonably priced, can help a restaurant enhance its brand image and obtain a competitive advantage over rivals (Jin *et al.*, 2012a). Prior research infers that price fairness is a critical factor in building image (Marinkovic *et al.*, 2015), is an antecedent that significantly drives brand image (Jin *et al.*, 2012a) and has a significant positive effect on the image (Campbell, 1999). Hence, this study proposes:

H4b. Price fairness has a significant positive influence on brand image.

Influence of brand image on customer satisfaction, brand trust and customer loyalty
A restaurant's brand image enables customers to develop an attitude about a restaurant before an actual dining experience (Pavesic, 1989), to differentiate a restaurant from its competitors (Ryu *et al.*, 2008) and affects customers' dining decisions (Kim *et al.*, 2010). In marketing literature, brand trust is widely accepted as the perception that a service organization has the capability and is sufficiently motivated to carry out what is promised (Jin *et al.*, 2013). Customer loyalty is described as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future, thereby causing repetitive same-brand or same brand-set purchasing, despite situational influences and marketing efforts having the potential to cause switching behavior" (Oliver, 1997, p. 34).

Brand image affects customers' subjective perceptions, purchase intentions and satisfaction (Jin *et al.*, 2012). More specifically, Lee *et al.* (2009) found that a positive brand image is critical in promoting positive emotions of customers about a restaurant and can lead to customer satisfaction and loyalty. Other researchers (Ryu *et al.*, 2008; Jin *et al.*, 2012a) also found that a restaurant's image significantly affects and predicts customer satisfaction. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5a. Brand image has a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Building a brand image is a vital restaurant characteristic, as it is foundational to developing consumer's impressions of the restaurant (Yi *et al.*, 2018). Hence, it is critical that what is portrayed in the brand image is not only promoted to consumers but is delivered in order for consumers to associate with the products and services and develop trust (Erkmen and Hancer, 2019; Han *et al.*, 2015; Jin *et al.*, 2015). Thus, it is postulated that:

H5b. Brand image has a significant positive influence on brand trust.

"Building a positive brand image is a critical marketing strategy in today's marketplace for retaining existing customers and attracting new ones" (Yi *et al.*, 2018, p. 201). Researchers Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) investigated and found that corporate image directly

influences customer loyalty. Further, Hussein (2018) found a positive relationship exists between brand image and customer loyalty. Tepeci (1999) even asserts that brand preference is proportional to restaurant customer loyalty. Therefore, this study hypothesized that:

H5c. Brand image has a significant positive influence on customer loyalty.

Influence of customer satisfaction on brand trust
The association between customer satisfaction and brand trust is well documented in the restaurant marketing literature (Erkman and Hancer, 2019; Jin *et al.*, 2012b). Numerous studies determine brand trust precedes satisfaction (Han and Ryu, 2009; Hyun, 2010; Jin *et al.*, 2012a), the positive effect of brand trust on customer satisfaction (Jin *et al.*, 2015) and "satisfying customers is quite difficult before gaining their trust" (Erciş *et al.*, 2012, p. 1,398). However, other studies suggest contradictory findings that satisfaction is an antecedent to brand trust (Erkman and Hancer, 2019). For this study, we consider satisfaction to be an antecedent of trust and argue that when customers are satisfied with a fast-food restaurant's services and offerings, customer trust in a restaurant is developed. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H6. Customer satisfaction has a significant positive influence on brand trust.

Influence of brand trust on customer loyalty
It is important for restauranteurs to understand customers' specific restaurant selection criteria, and the factors that affect those criteria, in order to influence customers' decisions to return to a restaurant (Haghighi *et al.*, 2012). A review of extant restaurant literature shows that trust is one such factor that promotes loyalty by customers to a restaurant (Erciş *et al.*, 2012; Calvo and Levy-Mangin, 2016). Another study by Quoquab *et al.* (2019) also found trust to be positively related to customer loyalty in the Malaysian fast-food industry. Additionally, several studies have documented the positive effect of brand trust on loyalty in the restaurant industry (Erciş *et al.*, 2012; Hyun, 2010; Uddin, 2019). As such, this study postulates the following hypothesis:

H7. Brand trust has a significant positive influence on customer loyalty.

Theoretical framework
The theory of reasoned action (TRA), developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1977), is "one of the most influential and popular conceptual frameworks for the study of human behavior, and strong support has been shown for the efficacy of the theory as a predictor of behavioral intentions" (Ryu and Han, 2010b, p. 492). According to this theory, individuals are rational decision-makers who use available information to systematically make decisions to create or receive a certain outcome in their best interests (Rodrigo *et al.*, 2019). Studies have used TRA to predict fast-food restaurant patronage decisions (Baggozi *et al.*, 2000) and to explain the decision-making process of consumers (Ryu and Han, 2010b), brand-switching behavior (Ghasrodashti, 2018) and country influence (Brodowsky *et al.*, 2018).

This study employs TRA to help understand the factors driving customer loyalty in fast-food restaurants and adopts the dimensions of service quality (food quality, physical environmental quality and employee service quality), price fairness, image, customer satisfaction and trust. The following figure presents the conceptual model of this research, along with the hypothesized relationships (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Conceptual framework
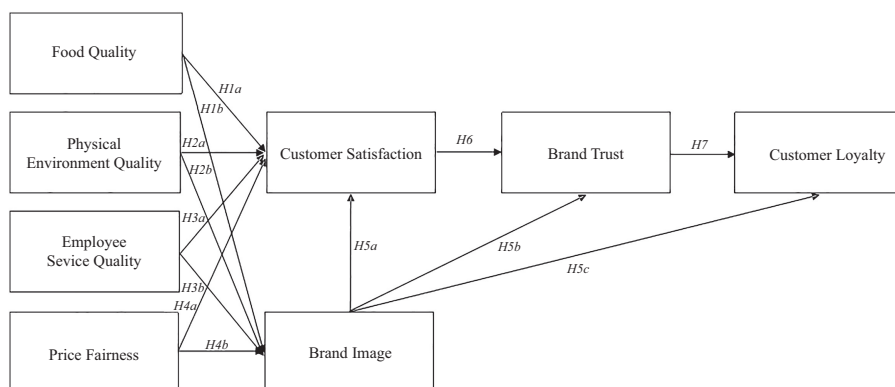
Research methodology

Questionnaire design

The survey questionnaire adopted in this study comprises seven parts and 40 items. Part 1 consists of 11 demographic items. Part 2 consists of 14 fast-food restaurant service quality items adapted from the survey questionnaire developed by Ryu *et al.* (2012). Part 2 comprises three dimensions, namely, food quality (6 items) (Jang and Namkung, 2009), employee service quality (4 items) (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Jang and Namkung, 2009) and physical environment quality (4 items) (Jang and Namkung, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2008). The remainder of the questionnaire comprises Part 3 price fairness (4 items) (Xia *et al.*, 2004), Part 4 customer satisfaction (3 items) (Oliver, 1997; Ryu *et al.*, 2008), Part 5 image (3 items) (Andreassen and Lindestad, 1998), Part 6 trust (3 items) (Moorman *et al.*, 1992) and Part 7 customer loyalty (2 items) (Aydin and Ozer, 2005 as cited in Santouridis and Trivellas, 2010).

All constructs were measured with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A 5-point Likert scale was considered most appropriate for this research considering respondents were the general public (Weijters *et al.*, 2010), to reduce confusion of respondents, increase response rate (Devlin *et al.*, 1993) and enable comparison with similar research that has adopted a 5-point scale (Saleh and Ryan, 1991).

Covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) was used to understand the interrelatedness and influence of antecedents in optimizing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty. SEM is a statistical technique used to analyze structural relationships in data. SEM allows researchers to link scientific philosophy to theory and empirical data (Bagozzi and Yi, 2012).

Sampling method, participants and response rate

Data were collected from fast-food restaurant customers in Fiji's four major urban areas (Suva, Nadi, Lautoka and Labasa) during the period July–August 2016. This selection was justified as these areas constitute a significant percentage of the country's population (Slack and Singh, 2020). A public intercept survey method was adopted to collect data for this study. Fast-food restaurant customers were intercepted when they exited fast-food restaurants. The population for this study consisted of fast-food restaurant customers. Bender and Bender (1995) define fast-food as "a general term used for a limited menu of foods that lend themselves to production-line techniques; suppliers tend to specialize in products such as hamburgers, pizzas, chicken, or sandwiches." This definition of fast-food was also employed by Ghoochani *et al.* (2018). This study sampled customers from a cross-section of different types (local, regional and global brands) of fast-food restaurants, with customers intercepted

as they exited global fast-food restaurants (such as McDonald's and Burger King), regional fast-food restaurants (such as MH and New world) and local fast-food restaurants (such as Wishbone and Lunchbox). In total, 627 fast-food restaurant customers were intercepted, with 331 responding to the questionnaire. This equates to a response rate of 53%. This response rate is higher than the recommended response rate of 50% typically reported for intercept surveys in the literature (Denstadli, 2000).

Results
Descriptive statistics
Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic profile. Demographic profiling shows the gender distribution is fairly even, with 47% being males and 53% females. For the age distribution, most respondents (39.3%) belonged to the age group 26–30 years, 26.3% were between 31 and 40 years, 23.9 were 18–25 years, 6.9% were 41–50 years and 3.6% were below 18. The highest proportion of respondents (79.5%) held tertiary qualifications, followed by secondary school education (20.5%). Most respondents' (43.5%) annual income ranged between Fiji $10,001 to Fiji $20,000; followed by an income at or above Fiji $20,000; 24.2% between Fiji $5000 to Fiji $10,000; and 1.2% less than Fiji $5000.

Measurement model
The analysis performed supported the reliability and validity of the scales. The reliability of all factor scales was examined by internal consistency analysis. Cronbach's alpha for all constructs used in this study indicated high internal consistency (Table 2). According to the recommendation of Fornel and Larcker (1981), construct reliability (CR) and average variance estimates (AVE) should be above 0.50 and 0.70, respectively. Upon conducting the tests in AMOS (version 26), these criteria were met, which confirmed discriminant validity. As evidence of the reliability and validity of the measurement being confirmed, this allowed for the structural model to be examined to assess the relationships that had been hypothesized in the proposed model for this study (Hair *et al.*, 2013). The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are provided in Table 3.

	N	%
Gender		
Male	155	46.8
Female	176	53.2
Age		
Below 18	12	3.6
18–25 years	79	23.9
26–30 years	130	39.3
31–40 years	87	26.3
41–50 years	23	6.9
50 years and above	–	–
Qualification		
Primary	–	–
Secondary	68	20.5
Tertiary	263	79.5
Income		
Under $5,000	4	1.2
$5,000–$10,000	80	24.2
$10,001–$20,000	144	43.5
$20,001 +	103	31.1

Table 1.
Demographic profile of respondents

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	FQ	SQ	PEQ	PF	CS	IMG	TRT	CL
FQ	0.931	0.772	0.689	0.927	*0.868*							
SQ	0.911	0.783	0.678	0.921	0.528***	*0.919*						
PEQ	0.946	0.777	0.612	0.931	0.744***	0.632***	*0.881*					
PF	0.938	0.835	0.612	0.939	0.591***	0385	0.291***	*0.914*				
CS	0.888	0.719	0.655	0.942	0.365***	0.484***	0.258***	0.437*	*0.817*			
IMG	0.932	0.820	0.601	0.916	0.350***	0.484***	0.471***	0.220***	0.456***	*0.906*		
TRT	0.936	0.784	0.612	0.931	0.468***	0.263***	0.691***	0.341***	0.379***	0.635***	*0.886*	
CL	0.872	0.701	0.690	0.926	0.361***	0.531***	0.364***	0.219***	0.225**	0.375***	0.561***	*0.834*

Note(s): The italicized diagonal elements are the square root of the variance shared between the constructs and their measures. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations between constructs. ***$p < 0.001$. FQ = Food quality; SQ = Employee service quality; PEQ = Physical environment quality; PF = Price fairness; CS = Customer satisfaction; IMG = Brand image; TRT = Brand trust; CL = Customer loyalty; CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted; MSV = Maximum shared variance; MaxR(H) = Maximum reliability

Table 2.
Discriminant validity

Factor and item description		Model and item indices				
	SL	CR	SMC	AVE	MSV
Food quality					
FQ1 The food at fast-food restaurants was delicious	0.945	0.931	0.893	0.772	0.689
FQ2 Fast-food restaurants offer a variety of menu items	0.735		0.540		
FQ3 Fast-food restaurants offer fresh food	0.991		0.982		
FQ4 The smell of fresh food was enticing	0.985		0.97		
FQ5 The food presentation was visually attractive	0.962		0.925		
Employee Service quality					
SQ1 Employees provided prompt and quick service	0.999	0.911	0.998	0.783	0.678
SQ2 Employees are always willing to help me	0.974		0.95		
SQ3 Employees made me feel comfortable in dealing with them	0.964		0.93		
Physical environment quality					
PEQ1 Fast-food restaurants have attractive interior design and décor	0.932	0.946	0.870	0.777	0.612
PEQ2 The dining areas are thoroughly clean	0.902		0.814		
PEQ3 Employees are neat and well dressed	0.981		0.963		
Price fairness					
PF1 The food prices charged by fast-food restaurants is reasonable	0.947	0.938	0.897	0.835	0.612
PF2 The prices in fast-food restaurants seems appropriate for what I get	0.919		0.845		
PF3 Overall, fast-food restaurants provide superior prices compared to other food-service providers	0.929		0.863		
Customer satisfaction					
CS1 I am satisfied with my overall experience at fast-food restaurants	0.960	0.888	0.922	0.719	0.655
CS2 Overall, fast-food restaurants put me in a good mood	0.846		0.716		
CS3 I really enjoy myself at fast-food restaurants	0.964		0.929		
Brand image					
IMG1 Fast-food restaurants have a fashionable and trendy image	0.939	0.932	0.882	0.820	0.601
IMG2 Fast-food restaurants have a good reputation	0.943		0.889		
IMG3 Fast-food restaurants are familiar to me	0.957		0.917		
Brand trust					
TRT1 I have confidence in fast-food restaurants	0.991	0.936	0.983	0.784	0.612
TRT2 Fast-food restaurants meet my expectations	0.897		0.804		
TRT3 Fast-food restaurants would compensate me in some way for a problem with their food	0.989		0.978		
Customer loyalty					
CL1 I intend to continue purchasing from fast-food restaurants	0.956	0.872	0.913	0.701	0.690
CL2 I recommend to my family and friends to purchase from fast-food restaurants	0.923		0.851		

Note(s): SL = Standardized loading CR = Composite reliability; SMC = Squared multiple correlations; AVE = Average variance extracted; MSV = Maximum shared variance

Table 3.
Confirmatory factor
analysis results for
refined
measurement items

Thus, the following fit indexes were yielded from the structural equation modeling analysis of the structural model: x^2 (231) = 655.809 ($p < 0.001$), x^2/df = 2.839, CFI = 0.941; TLI = 0.885; RMSEA = 0.076. These measures are used to evaluate the structural model (Hair *et al.*, 2013; Henseler *et al.*, 2012). The indexes indicate an appropriate model fit as they exceeded the minimum thresholds recommended (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, the proposed research model is an appropriate predictor of customer loyalty in the context of fast-food restaurants.

Structural relationships

Following the measurement model being evaluated successfully, the maximum likelihood method of estimation was used to test the hypotheses. The model was adequate as the chi-square value was statistically significant (χ^2 = 609.73; df = 253; p < 0.01; χ^2/df = 2.41; RMSEA = 0.061; CFI = 0.929; NFI = 0.888; TLI = 0.896). Of the 13 estimate path coefficients, 10 were statistically significant at the 0.05, 0.01 or 0.001 level. The significant relationships (as shown in Figure 2) were found on the paths for FQ to CS (β = 0.412, t = 1.989, p < 0.05), SQ to CS (β = 0.171, t = 2.571, p < 0.05), PF to CS (β = 0.511, t = 5.179, p < 0.01), FQ to IMG (β = 0.559, t = 22.134, p < 0.01), SQ to IMG (β = 0.169, t = 8.284, p < 0.01), PF to IMG (β = 0.791, t = 25.267, p < 0.01), IMG to TRT (β = 0.632, t = 11.921, p < 0.01), IMG to CL (β = 0.812, t = 14.628, p < 0.01), CS to TRT (β = 0.278, t = 5.873, p < 0.01) and TRT to CL (β = 0.121, t = 4.538, p < 0.05). Therefore, H1a, H3a, H4a, H1b, H3b, H4b, H5b, H5c, H6 and H7 are supported by the empirical results of this study.

Discussion and conclusions

The R^2 values extracted in the endogenous factors were found as follows: 97% for image, 86% for customer satisfaction, 74% for trust and 98% for customer loyalty. According to Chin *et al.* (2008), three categories can be used to classify the R^2 values of endogenous latent variables: weak (19%), moderate (33%) and substantial (67%). With reference to this classification, the R^2 of 98% signifies that the explanatory power of the model is very substantial.

In line with previous research, this study shows food quality (Ha and Jang, 2010), employee service quality (Ryu *et al.*, 2012) and price fairness (Ryu and Han, 2010a) have a significant positive influence on customer satisfaction in a fast-food restaurant setting. These findings suggest that fast-food restaurant food quality, employee service quality and price fairness meet the functional needs of the customers resulting in customer satisfaction. On the other hand, the physical environment of fast-food restaurants does not significantly influence customer satisfaction and is inconsistent with previous studies (Heung and Gu, 2012; Han and Ryu, 2009; Ryu and Han, 2010a). This contradictory finding could be explained by the context-specific nature of the physical environment of the fast-food restaurants studied, in that many restaurants do not provide an environment for customers to sit and eat – rather, to simply purchase the food and take away for consumption elsewhere.

In terms of the antecedents to brand image, and in line with previous research, food quality (Ryu *et al.*, 2012), employee service quality (Ryu *et al.*, 2012; Masa'deh *et al.*, 2019) and price fairness (Marinkovic *et al.*, 2015; Yi *et al.*, 2018) results suggest a significant positive influence
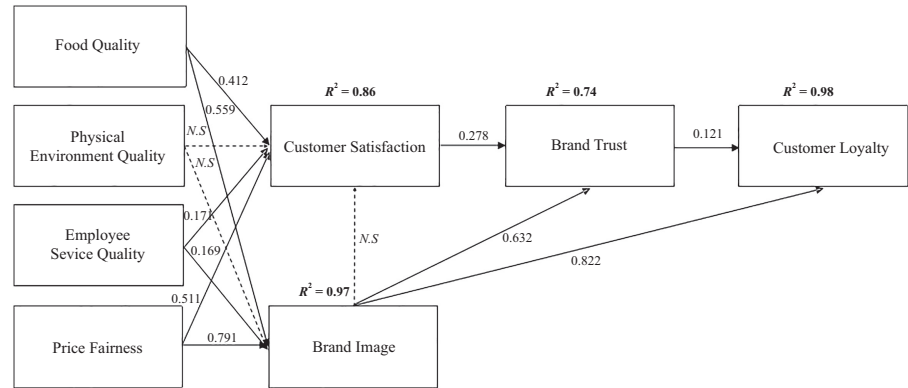

Figure 2.
Relationships and paths

on brand image in a fast-food restaurant setting. These results can be further explained by the fact that customers perceive food quality, provision of correct and prompt service and charging compatible and acceptable prices are important in building a positive fast-food restaurant brand image. In contrast with previous research findings (Ryu *et al.*, 2008, 2012; Jin *et al.*, 2012a), this study's results find that the physical environment does not significantly affect the fast-food brand image. It is suggested that this finding is as a result of customers' acceptance of the absence of an environment provided for customers to sit and eat in fast-food restaurants, with fast-food typically taken away for consumption elsewhere. In addition, due to the low socio-economic status of the customers, it is suggested customers pay less attention to the physical environment and more so to the food quality, employee service quality and price fairness when judging a fast-food restaurant's brand image.

While previous research (Ryu *et al.*, 2012; Hussein, 2018; Erkmen and Hancer, 2019; Espinosa *et al.*, 2018) shows that fast-food restaurant brand image does significantly affect customer satisfaction, this study provides a contradictory result. Such a finding could be confirmation that the branding activities of fast-food restaurants are unclear, inconsistent and ineffective in building a brand image sufficient to enable customers to develop associations in their minds as to what the brand stands for and implied promises. Further, difficulty could be experienced by customers in reconciling their pre-experience expectations based on a "confused" brand image with their post-experience perceptions, therein affecting customer satisfaction.

Consistent with other research findings, this study's results suggest that fast-food restaurant brand image has a significant positive influence on brand trust (Eser, 2012; Han *et al.*, 2015; Erkmen and Hancer, 2019) and that in order to earn customers' trust, fast-food restaurants need to build and maintain a positive brand image in the market. Also, brand image has a significant positive influence on customer loyalty (Espinosa *et al.*, 2018; Hussein, 2018; Jin *et al.*, 2012a), and this suggests the better the brand image of the fast-food restaurant as perceived by customers, the higher the likelihood of building customer loyalty and achieving repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth. Therefore, fast-food restaurants need to invest considerably in building and maintaining an excellent brand image to build customer loyalty.

Customer satisfaction was found to have a positive influence on trust and was aligned with previous studies (Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2000). This result suggests that to win customers' trust, fast-food restaurants need to ensure that customers are satisfied with the overall fast-food restaurant experience. Lastly, results from this study show that trust has a positive influence on customer loyalty, and this is consistent with results of previous studies (Liu *et al.*, 2011). This result suggests that for customers to be loyal to a fast-food restaurant, the fast-food restaurant must achieve customer trust by meeting expectations, being reliable and trustworthy.

Theoretical implications
Firstly, this study contributes theoretically to the literature on service quality dimensions, customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty in the context of fast-food restaurants. Compared to prior studies in this context that primarily focused on developed countries, this study addresses this literature gap by collecting empirical evidence from SIDS like Fiji. Theory building literature highlights the importance of testing models, theories and research instruments in different country contexts to enhance its generalizability (Sharma *et al.*, 2020a). This study offers a significant contribution to literature, as Fiji differs from other developed countries in terms of economic, political, legal and cultural factors that result in differences in customer behavior (Sharma *et al.*, 2020b). The differences in findings that were identified also provide the opportunity for the development of new knowledge (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007).

Secondly, this study is also one of few to simultaneously examine and identify the context-specific, interrelated influence of the tested antecedents involved in developing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty. The resulting research model has a very substantial explanatory power (R^2 value) and is suggested to be an appropriate predictor for use by other researchers of customer loyalty in the context of fast-food restaurants.

Thirdly, this study's findings also confirm the compound influence of the tested antecedents either directly or indirectly on customer loyalty, with most findings in line with previous research. Notwithstanding, findings relating to the influence of fast-food restaurant's physical environment quality on customer satisfaction and of brand image on customer satisfaction were not aligned with previous research and reinforce these antecedents' context-specific peculiarities. Further, considering such context-specific peculiarities, these findings reinforce the need to generalize results with caution.

Managerial implications

From a managerial viewpoint, this study's findings offer useful insights into the interrelated influence of the antecedents involved in developing fast-food restaurant customer loyalty in the context of SIDS. The findings suggest that fast-food restauranteurs and marketers need to develop appropriate branding to address the absence of impact of fast-food restaurants' physical environment and branding image on customer satisfaction, which could also increase the branding image impact on branding trust and customer loyalty. Firstly, practitioners need to understand the nature, drivers and consequences of their branded products and services (Morhart *et al.*, 2014), and that a fast-food restaurant dining experience should comprise a bundle of different attributes that complement each other in order to create a unique brand image, brand trust and satisfied and loyal customers (Erkmen and Hancer, 2019). Secondly, a fast-food restaurant brand strategy should be developed and aligned with identified target customers and business goals. A critical aspect of the strategy should be redesign and creation of alluring fast-food restaurant physical environments which would offer an opportunity and attract customers to dine in, create a positive brand image (Jin *et al.*, 2012a; Ryu *et al.*, 2008) and enhance customer satisfaction (Han and Ryu, 2009; Ryu and Han, 2010a) and customer loyalty. Thirdly, any newly created or updated brand messaging strategy should be communicated and reinforced through appropriate logos, slogans and websites. Finally, branding activities and feedback should be monitored to ensure applied strategies and expenditures are evidenced through enhanced brand image and trust and increased customer satisfaction, loyalty and profitability (Jain *et al.*, 2018).

Limitations and future research

Like other studies, this study has certain limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. However, these limitations offer opportunities for future research. Firstly, as this study uses a non-probability sampling technique, the generalization of the results should be undertaken with caution. Future research could replicate this study using random sampling techniques to allow statistical inferences to be made about the whole group. Secondly, this study did not distinguish between the different types of fast-food restaurants, for example, local, regional and global. Therefore, future studies could replicate this study with different types of fast-food restaurants. Also, it would be interesting to replicate this study with food-trucks. Thirdly, as the nonresponse bias for this study was 47%, the representativeness of the sample could have been affected. Future research could mitigate this bias by using an alternative sampling technique and reducing the questionnaire length. Fourthly, this study neither explored nor considered the impact of culture. Cultural factors can profoundly impact customer perception and loyalty (Sürücü *et al.*, 2019). Future studies could model the impact of espoused cultural values of uncertainty avoidance and individualism/collective as moderating variables

in the research model (Sharma *et al.*, 2020a). Finally, future research could also consider a cross-national comparison to identify the differences in customer behavior across countries.

ORCID iDs
Gurmeet Singh http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2931-0670
Neale Slack http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2733-7597
Shavneet Sharma http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5523-5091
Karishma Mudaliar http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2716-721X
Suman Narayan http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9882-7679
Rajini Kaur http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5792-3581
Keshmi Upashna Sharma http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0247-275X

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Corresponding author
Gurmeet Singh can be contacted at: singh_g@usp.ac.fj