

## Article

# Employee Service Quality at Uzbekistani Halal Restaurants Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Zoirova Shokhsanam <sup>1</sup> and Young-joo Ahn <sup>1,2,\*</sup>
<sup>1</sup> Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Sejong University, Seoul 05006, Korea; kurbonsanginov99@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Tourism Industry Data Analytics Lab (TIDAL), Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Sejong University, Seoul 05006, Korea

\* Correspondence: yjahn@sejong.ac.kr

**Abstract:** In this study, we examined the employee service dimensions which are associated with satisfaction and customers' intention to revisit among Uzbekistani customers who visit halal restaurants in Korea. We also investigated the situational factor of the pandemic outbreak and the moderating role of the restaurant locations. A total of 264 respondents participated. The results revealed that behavior quality and appearance were important employee service quality dimensions for halal restaurants. However, interaction quality and expertise quality were not associated with satisfaction. The results may indicate that consumers did not prefer human interactions at the restaurants because of the risk of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The results affirmed that customers who positively evaluated their restaurant experience showed a higher intention to visit again. Finally, the findings showed a moderating effect of the location (the capital city vs. others). The customers visiting restaurants in the capital city were likely to be satisfied with employees wearing masks and wearing clean uniforms. These findings could enrich the literature on the multidimensional aspects of service encounters at Uzbekistani halal restaurants considering the tangible and intangible service qualities of employees during COVID-19.

**Keywords:** employee service quality; satisfaction; loyalty; ethnic restaurant; Uzbekistan; COVID-19



**Citation:** Shokhsanam, Z.; Ahn, Y.-j. Employee Service Quality at Uzbekistani Halal Restaurants Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 5712. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13105712>

Academic Editor: Kisang Ryu

Received: 9 April 2021

Accepted: 18 May 2021

Published: 19 May 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Many studies have discussed the role of service encounter quality using the existing service quality models [1–5]. Customers have a pleasant experience at restaurants when trained employees provide a warm welcome and personalized service through communication and attentive care [6]. The functional and personal roles of service employees are considered key for the delivery of excellent service quality [6–8]. Service encounter failures lead to customer complaints, dissatisfaction, negative brand image and low performance [9], whereas excellent service quality is crucial for positive customer evaluations and their patronage of restaurants [8,10]. Thus, service encounter quality is a crucial concept in the restaurant industry [6].

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), a highly transmittable virus, emerged in December 2019. This health crisis brought unprecedented effects on the Korean hospitality and tourism industry [11]. Customers tended to avoid crowded places and visited restaurants only in small groups, in compliance with social distancing guidelines and COVID-19 prevention and control [11,12]. They preferred to order food delivery via mobile applications, and prioritized hygiene and the cleanliness of the products [13–16]. Therefore, restaurant managers adapted and developed new service protocols and procedures and ensure compliance with the policies and regulations, such as hand washing, social distancing, controlling the number of people at a table, and wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) [11]. Studies on the risk perceptions of food, packaging and food safety at restaurants

provide guidance for restaurant operators who are required to respond immediately to the pandemic situation [16–19].

Although previous literature has demonstrated the antecedents and outcomes of service quality in different research settings [5,20,21], the employee service quality at halal restaurants in a non-Muslim country amid the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak remains underexplored. A growing number of Muslim tourists have recently drawn attention to hospitality and tourism [22–25]. The Korean Tourism Organization (KTO) reported that Muslim tourists are the second-largest travel segment of the global travel market. They were approximately 6.1% of the inbound travelers in Korea in 2019 [26].

When Muslim tourists travel to non-Muslim countries (e.g., Korea), food is one of their issues of inconvenience because they experience the psychological discomfort of having non-halal products due to religious reasons [22]. Moreover, consumers prefer to visit their favorite restaurant brands because they are emotionally attached to them [27]. Accordingly, the government and industry practitioners in Korea have attempted to increase awareness regarding halal food and Muslim tourist behavior in order to achieve one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs), i.e., inclusive tourism [28].

Non-Muslim countries, such as Korea, can initiate actions to improve the supply chain system for halal products, manage the quality of halal certificates, provide halal food and restaurant information for Muslim tourists, promote the operation of ethnic restaurants, and meet the wants and needs for food tourists at travel destinations [29–31]. Research on halal restaurants can further explain Muslim customers' behavior and culture amid the current health crisis and can suggest service protocols and regulations in accordance with their needs and demands [32]. There has been little research conducted in the context of halal restaurants amid COVID-19. Moreover, the new virus is easily transmitted through human interactions. In this regard, it is necessary to highlight customer perceptions of employee service delivery at restaurants.

Therefore, we examine the ways in which the service quality of frontline employees influences the satisfaction and loyalty among Uzbekistani customers who visit halal restaurants. We consider the situational factor of the COVID-19 outbreak and investigate the moderation effect of restaurant locations (i.e., the capital city versus other cities). The theoretical framework of the proposed model is the stimulus-organism-response framework [33]. We focus on multidimensional aspects of service encounters at Uzbekistani halal restaurants, considering the tangible and intangible service quality of employees based on the existing model [34].

## 2. Literature Review

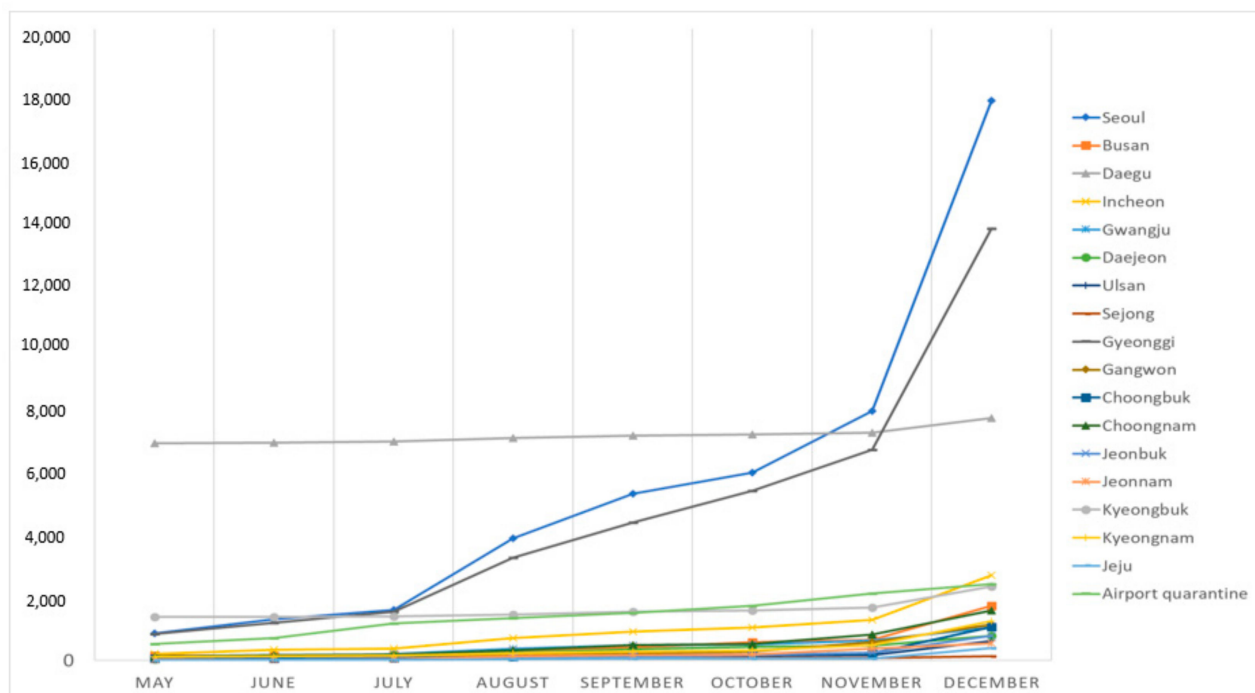
### 2.1. The COVID-19 Outbreak and Changes of Policies in Hospitality and Tourism

The World Health Organization (WHO) [35] reported 119 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and 2.7 million COVID-19-related deaths all over the world. The number of patients with COVID-19 and death rates have been increasing because of the COVID-19 variants that have been found in several countries. Even though vaccines for COVID-19 were introduced in November 2020, the spread of COVID-19 has not yet ended. In South Korea, the Central Disaster Management Headquarters (CDMH) [11] recorded 96380 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 1678 related deaths as of 17 March 2021. The CDMH insisted that the data on COVID-19 should be reported to the public for transparency. Information regarding the new COVID-19 virus has been broadcast on a daily basis since March 2020. Furthermore, developing campaigns and new protocols for sharing knowledge about the symptoms, treatment, and prevention of COVID-19 has been considered to be one of the most important prevention strategies. These strategies have been observed to reduce COVID-19 cases across different countries [12].

Coordinated actions among countries are critical to continue business activities and protect people. The OECD [12] estimated a decline of approximately 60% in international tourism in 2020. The recovery of the global hospitality and tourism industry has been relatively slower than that of domestic tourism. UNWTO [36] shared that experts in the

hospitality and tourism industry expect that the decline of approximately 80% in tourism will rebound slowly by 2024.

As shown in Figure 1, according to the CDMH [11], the number of confirmed patients with COVID-19 in Seoul, the capital city, continuously increased from November 2020. In 2020, the total number of confirmed patients in Seoul reached 5960 in October and continued to increase to 7900 in November and 17,731 in December. Gyeonggi Province, which is close to Seoul, also showed an increasing number of confirmed patients and ranked second in terms of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. By contrast, other cities have not shown a rapid increase in the number of patients with COVID-19 (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The COVID-19 cases of cities in Korea from May 2020 to December 2020. Note: Seoul is the capital of Korea.

The South Korean government has provided information about the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in order to prevent rapid virus transmission. Public authorities have also implemented strict regulations regarding non-essential travel, social distancing, and PPE utilization (e.g., masks, sanitizer, and gloves). The central and local governments have translated information from Korean into several other languages and have distributed new regulations and recent information regularly [37]. They aim to help the hospitality and tourism industry recover [11] by implementing controls and regulations on travel restrictions, limiting business operation hours, enforcing social distancing between customers, and providing support for job retention [12].

The restaurant industry has complied with the new regulations and protocols. Employees should ensure cleanliness and hygiene at restaurants. Customers also need to comply with several procedures. First, customers who visit restaurants should scan their QR codes and follow instructions if they have been closely exposed to patients with COVID-19. Second, they are encouraged to wear masks, except when eating and drinking. Third, they must make a reservation, maintain social distancing, and have meals with a maximum of four people per table [38]. Ethnic restaurants also comply with the same regulations. Customers still prefer to visit halal restaurants due to religious reasons. However, limited research has been carried out on the restaurant experience among foreigners in South Korea. This study examines the Uzbekistani consumers who visited Uzbek halal restaurants after the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, this study examines restaurant locations as a moderator in the proposed model.

## 2.2. Employee Service Quality

Employee service delivery is an essential element of service [3]. Frontline employees create important interaction moments between a company and its customers [1]. The previous literature has highlighted the interaction between customers and frontline employees and has suggested various models of service quality and service encounters [1,6,8]. A service encounter refers to an employee's interpersonal interaction with customers in the service process [34].

The research on service quality at restaurants has highlighted important components of service quality, such as food quality, ambience, authenticity, and the service delivery of frontline employees [39–41]. However, the previous research reached no consensus concerning service quality, and the studies on service quality at restaurants suggest various stimuli at restaurants rather than service encounters. Few scholars have suggested the multidimensionality of service encounters [6,34,42]. The dimensions of service encounter quality vary between research settings and the proposed models. For example, Alhelalat, Habiballah and Twaissi [6] focused on the service quality dimensions of employee behavior at restaurants and suggested personal and functional service dimensions.

One of the seminar works of Brady and Cronin [34] suggested three dimensions in regard to employee service quality. Service interaction refers to a friendly attitude, communication, and interactions with customers [34]. Behavior quality refers to politeness, attention, and willingness to fulfill customer needs and wants [34]. Expertise refers to being knowledgeable and able to answer customer inquiries without hesitation [34]. Finally, one of the tangible aspects of service encounters is included. Appearance refers to a clean and neat appearance and wearing a clean uniform [3,6]. In this study, we used these multidimensional factors of employee service quality, which included employee interactions, behavior, expertise, appearance, and the tangible elements at restaurants.

As the previous research has highlighted the important aspects of service encounters [1,34], we explore the employee service quality at halal restaurants. Specifically, we focused on the interpersonal interactions and tangible aspects of a major service encounter of restaurant employees.

## 2.3. Service Encounter and Satisfaction

Satisfaction refers to customers' emotions after evaluating the service quality compared to their prior expectations [43,44]. The investigation of customer satisfaction can help us to understand how customers evaluate service quality and, thus, improve service delivery and poor service performance [3]. Previous research has demonstrated that employee service delivery is a core element of service quality, and that it can affect satisfaction toward restaurants [6,20,21,45–47]. For example, Hussain, Jing and Parveen [20] investigated whether service quality attributes enhanced satisfaction and loyalty at Chinese restaurants. Their study demonstrated that excellent service quality can increase the level of customer satisfaction. Alhelalat, Habiballah and Twaissi [6] examined the influence of function dimensions of ethnic restaurant employees on satisfaction using data collected from 212 tourists visiting Jordan. They affirmed the positive influence of employee service quality and showed that employee–customer interactions enhanced the positive evaluation of service performance at restaurants. We propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Employee service quality (interactions, behavior, expertise, and appearance) positively influences satisfaction.*

## 2.4. Satisfaction and Loyalty

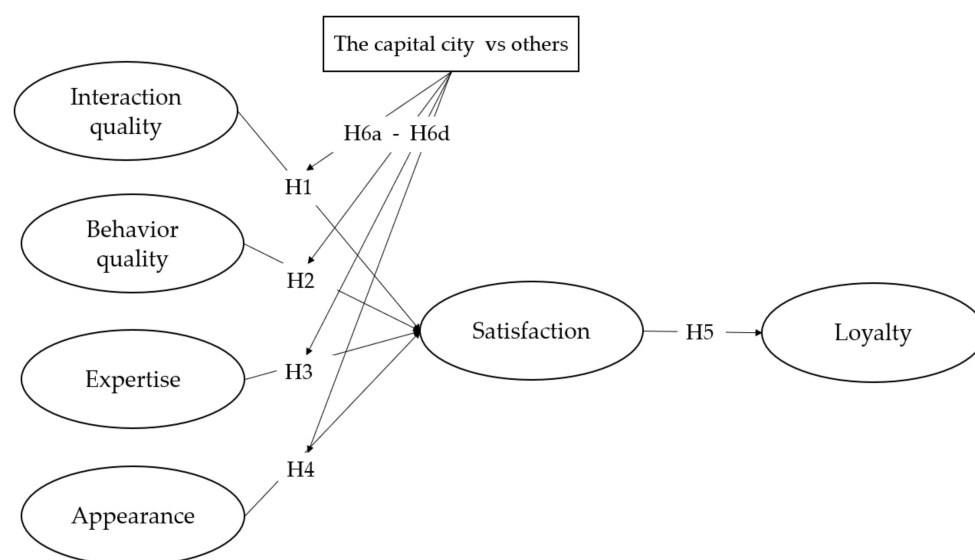
Customer loyalty refers to repeat customers who show a high commitment to purchasing particular brands or products/services [44]. Customer satisfaction can be a critical variable for influencing customer loyalty at restaurants. Previous literature has provided empirical evidence that highly satisfied customers tend to show higher intentions to visit in the future [6,20,48]. Prentice, Lopes and Wang [49] examined artificial intelligence and

employee service performance and found a positive influence of multidimensional facets on satisfaction. They also demonstrated that highly satisfied customers showed higher loyalty. The above studies explored the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty using different research contexts. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Satisfaction positively influences loyalty.*

### 2.5. Moderating Effect of Location

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has influenced customers' food consumption and behaviors at restaurants [13,14]. COVID-19 cases in the capital city and metropolitan cities are likely to be higher than those in other regions [50]. Consequently, customers in the cities prefer to reduce their risk when they visit restaurants [16]. In the current health crisis, food delivery companies and new service protocols can help to improve restaurant performance [13,14]. Thus, the moderating role of a restaurant's location (i.e., the capital city versus other cities) requires further investigation [14,50,51]. For example, given that the confirmed COVID-19 cases and mortality are higher in the capital city (Seoul) than in other major cities in Korea (see Figure 1), customers in Seoul may show more cautious behavior at restaurants than those in other regions. Our proposed conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** The Proposed Model.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *The halal restaurant location (capital city vs. other cities) has varying moderating effects.*

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Measures

The survey items include three parts. First, the characteristics of halal restaurants (e.g., the location, frequency of visitation, number of companions, use of promotion coupon and restaurant type) were asked for. Second, the survey contained questions about the employee service quality, the level of satisfaction regarding employee service performance, and loyalty. The employee service quality construct included ten items and measured four constructs: interaction, behavior, expertise quality [34] and appearance [3,6]. The measurement items for satisfaction [44] and loyalty were adopted from Oliver [44]. The measurement items were developed by confirming the criterion validity based on previous research [3,6,25,34,43]. The items anchored a 5-point Likert scale. When people answered the questionnaire items, they were asked to express their agreement level with



each statement. The final part of the questionnaire includes questions about the respondents' demographic information.

### 3.2. Data Collection

The eligibility criteria for the selection of a segment of the population were developed because of time constraints and the lack of research funds. This study focused on people from Uzbekistan who had visited Uzbekistani ethnic restaurants in South Korea within the last 6 months. The criteria used for the prescreening of the participants of this study were as follows: (1) those aged 18 years and above, (2) those who visited Uzbekistani ethnic restaurants in South Korea, and (3) those who visited Uzbekistani ethnic restaurants in South Korea within the last 6 months.

This study used convenience sampling, and the researchers contacted potential participants from online communities of people from Uzbekistan in South Korea, and using a field study at Uzbek Halal restaurants. The developed questionnaire was created on SurveyMonkey. The online survey provided a brief introduction on the first page of the questionnaire, and all of the question items were created on the online survey platform. All of the questionnaire items were written in English. Before collecting the data, the research team conducted a pilot test for the evaluation of the flow of questions and to check for mistakes or misspellings in the survey items.

The pilot test was conducted with people who had worked for at least three years, and with graduate students in hospitality and tourism. Through this process, the research team attempted to confirm the content and face validity. After reflecting on the comments, the online survey was complete, and a survey link which created an online survey platform was distributed to the pool of respondents in the online communities. The research team conducted several field studies in order to send the survey link to restaurants.

The developed survey was distributed to potential respondents via the SurveyMonkey website. Small gifts were given to randomly selected participants who completed the survey. The data were collected from August 2020 to November 2020. A total of 315 respondents participated in the survey; however, the research team excluded some returned surveys which were incomplete or had invalid numbers. Therefore, the data from 264 respondents were finally used in the analysis of the proposed model.

### 3.3. Demographic Characteristics

Descriptive analysis was used to provide the demographic information. The rate of male respondents (54.2%) was slightly higher than that of female respondents ( $n = 121$ , 45.8%). The largest age group was people aged in their twenties. The mean age was 25 years old. The majority were single ( $n = 185$ , 70.1%), and approximately 25% were married. Regarding the level of education, about 53.8% of the people had a bachelor's degree. The others reported that they had a postgraduate degree ( $n = 72$ , 27.3%) or were high school graduates ( $n = 40$ , 15.2%). For monthly household income, the income level varied from below KRW 1,500,000 to over KRW 10,000,000. Most of the respondents indicated that they were students and belonged to the youngest age groups; thus, approximately 49.3% reported that their monthly household income was less than KRW 3,000,000. As many respondents were in their early twenties, approximately 44.7% reported that they were students. Approximately 21.6% reported that they were full-time employees ( $n = 57$ ), and approximately 15.9% reported that they had a part-time job ( $n = 42$ ) Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile.

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	143	54.2
	Female	121	45.8
Age (Mean: 25)	18–24	145	54.9
	25–29	75	28.4
	30–34	21	8.0
	35–39	10	3.8
	40–44	7	2.7
	45–49	2	0.8
	Over 50	4	1.5
The level of education (degree)	High school	40	15.2
	Associate degree	10	3.8
	Bachelor's degree	142	53.8
	Post-graduate degree	72	27.3
Marital status	Single	185	70.1
	Married	66	25.0
	Other	13	4.9
Monthly household income	Under 1,500,000 KRW (Korean Won)	72	27.3
	1,500,000–less than 3,000,000	58	22.0
	3,000,000–less than 4,999,999	41	15.5
	5,000,000–less than 6,999,999	30	11.4
	7,000,000–less than 10,000,000	20	7.6
	Over 10,000,000	43	16.3
Occupation	Full-time	57	21.6
	Part-time	42	15.9
	Self-employed	18	6.7
	Unemployed	13	4.9
	Student	118	44.7

Note: One U.S. dollar = 1.129 KRW (Korean Won).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A two-stage approach [52] was used to find the underlying constructs of the proposed model. First, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed latent constructs and removed the measurement items with cross-loadings. Second, CFA was computed in order to identify the latent constructs and affirm the model fit indices [52]. The proposed conceptual model was tested using Stata 16. The results indicated that the factor loadings of the CFA were anchored from 0.70 to 0.87 Table 2. The CFA results met the recommended model fit:  $\chi^2 (120) = 248.928$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.074$ , GFI = 0.921, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.945, RMSEA = 0.064, and SRMR = 0.038. The results of the CFA presented in Table 3 indicate the satisfactory fit indices [53,54]. The composite reliability was anchored from 0.774 to 0.897 [54]. All of the AVEs exceeded 0.5 [55], and all of the squared correlation values were below the AVE values. Therefore, the convergent validity and discriminant validity were confirmed. Finally, the SEM analysis was computed to examine the hypothetical paths, as shown in Table 3.

### 4.2. The Results of the Proposed Model

The SEM results indicate the good model fit. All of the indicators met the recommended criteria ( $\chi^2 (124) = 252.63$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.037$ , GFI = 0.920, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.947, RMSEA = 0.063, and SRMR = 0.040) [56]. As shown in Table 4, employees' polite and attentive behaviors ( $\beta = 0.414$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and appearance ( $\beta = 0.454$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) appeared to increase the positive evaluation of employee service performance among customers.

**Table 2.** The Items and Standardized Loadings of the Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Item	Item Source	Standardized Loading
Interaction Quality	IQ 1	0.87
	IQ 2	[34] 0.85
	IQ3	0.80
Behavior quality	BQ1	0.80
	BQ2	[34] 0.75
	BQ3	0.79
Expertise quality	EQ1	0.79
	EQ2	[34] 0.80
Appearance	APP1	0.79
	APP2	[3,6] 0.79
Satisfaction	SAT1	0.84
	SAT2	[25,44] 0.72
	SAT3	0.78
	SAT4	0.82
Loyalty	LOY1	0.70
	LOY2	[25,44] 0.84
	LOY3	0.85
	LOY4	0.75

**Table 3.** The CFA Results and the Model fit.

Factor	items	Mean (SD)	AVE	Interaction Quality	Behavior Quality	Expertise	Appearance	Satisfaction	Loyalty
Interaction quality (IQ)	3	3.746 (0.873)	0.706	0.886 <sup>a</sup>	0.551 <sup>b</sup>	0.399	0.488	0.501	0.324
Behavior quality (BQ)	3	3.729 (0.804)	0.609	0.303 <sup>c</sup>	0.823	0.470	0.418	0.485	0.284
Expertise quality (EQ)	2	3.771 (0.831)	0.632	0.159	0.220	0.804	0.375	0.409	0.219
Appearance (APP)	2	3.867 (0.890)	0.624	0.238	0.175	0.141	0.774	0.456	0.283
Satisfaction (SAT)	4	3.890 (0.745)	0.626	0.251	0.235	0.167	0.208	0.897	0.349
Loyalty (LOY)	4	4.077 (0.781)	0.620	0.105	0.048	0.048	0.080	0.122	0.879

Note:  $\chi^2$  (120) = 248.928,  $p < 0.001$   $\chi^2/df = 2.074$ ; GFI = 921; CFI = 0.957; TLI = 0.945; RMSEA = 0.064; SRMR = 0.038.<sup>a</sup> Composite reliability (the diagonal); <sup>b</sup> correlation coefficient (r); <sup>c</sup> correlation coefficient squared ( $r^2$ ).

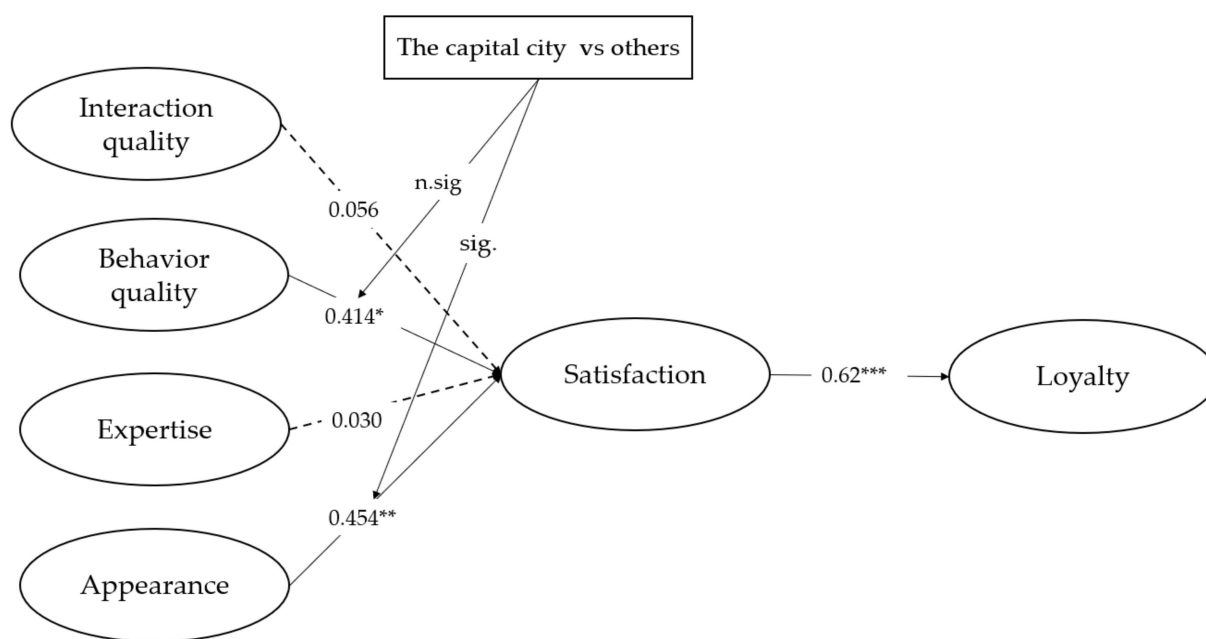
**Table 4.** The SEM Results.

	Factor			Coefficient	z
H1	Interaction quality	→	SAT	0.056	0.40
H2	Behavior quality	→	SAT	0.414 *	1.96
H3	Expertise	→	SAT	0.030	0.18
H4	Appearance	→	SAT	0.454 **	3.63
H5	SAT	→	LOY	0.620 ***	9.13

Note: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  and \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

However, employees' interactions ( $\beta = 0.056$ ,  $p = 0.688$ ) and information about the restaurants ( $\beta = 0.030$ ,  $p = 0.857$ ) were not statistically significant. Finally, highly satisfied customers ( $\beta = 0.620$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) showed their high intention to visit again and expressed higher loyalty. Therefore, as presented in Figure 3, H2, H4, and H5 were statistically significant and support the hypothesis; however, H1 and H3 were rejected.





**Figure 3.** The SEM results. Note: n. sig = not significant, sig = significant. \*  $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$  and \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

#### 4.3. Moderation Results

The level of the perceived service performance of two groups based on the location of the restaurants (capital city versus other cities) was compared by using multigroup analysis. The restaurant locations were classified into two subgroups and dummy coded (capital city, Seoul = 1 versus others = 0). The number of customers who visited halal restaurants in the capital city (Seoul) was 167 (63.3%), and the number of customers in other cities was 97 (36.7%). The results indicated a moderating effect of the capital city (i.e., Seoul). One hypothesis, H6d, was supported. A statistically significant difference between the customers in the capital city and customers in other cities was found with regard to employee appearance ( $\chi^2 = 5.071$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) (see Table 5). However, other hypotheses such as H6a, H6b, and H6c were not supported. Other dimensions such as interaction, behavior, and expertise did not show statistically significant results. With regard to the location of the restaurants, customers in the capital city (Seoul) were more influenced by the appearance of restaurant employees than customers in other cities.

**Table 5.** The Multigroup Analysis.

Moderator	Relationship	Location (The Capital City Vs Other Cities) Difference				
		Other Cities		Seoul		$\chi^2$
	Path	Coeff.	z	Coeff.	z	
H6a	Interaction quality -> SAT	0.454	2.23 *	−0.063	−0.35	3.614
H6b	Behavior quality -> SAT	−0.248	−0.43	0.316	1.71	0.855
H6c	Expertise quality -> SAT	0.807	1.68	0.115	0.88	1.935
H6d	Appearance -> SAT	−0.003	0.22	0.614	0.168 ***	5.071 *

\*  $p \leq 0.05$  and \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical Implications

Considering the increasing demand for halal restaurants and foods, this study targeted Uzbekistani customers visiting Uzbekistani restaurants in South Korea. The subset of the population who visit Uzbekistani halal restaurants can provide useful information regarding the targeted consumers and their evaluation of service quality in terms of

employee service delivery. Moreover, this study focused on Uzbekistani restaurants due to the growing Uzbekistani population in South Korea. The Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS) [57] reported that the number of Uzbekistani residents in Korea has been increasing and that the Uzbekistani population in Korea ranks as the fifth largest foreign resident population, followed by the Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, and Japanese populations. Religion and food preferences are major cultural differences. After the COVID-19 outbreak, restaurants followed changed protocols and regulations. In this regard, this study could contribute empirical evidence and enrich previous literature, given the limited number of studies on the Uzbekistani population in the context of restaurants.

We thus suggest several theoretical implications. First, although the performance of service encounters can enhance customer satisfaction, customers appeared to avoid social interaction and communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. As is consistent with the previously reported results in the literature [34], the results consisted of four dimensions. However, all of the dimensions did not positively influence customer satisfaction. Among the four dimensions, appearance was the most influential, followed by behavior quality. Wearing clean uniforms and masks appeared to increase the positive evaluation of the service quality among customers. Moreover, restaurants followed the new policies and regulations, such as social distancing and maintaining high levels of cleanliness and hygiene. In addition, employees may need to show increased attentiveness to customers who may need help or request new orders. The results revealed that appearance and behavioral intention were important service quality dimensions of halal restaurants among consumers from Uzbekistan during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, interaction quality and expertise quality did not exert a statistically significant effect. The results indicated that consumers did not prefer human interactions at restaurants due to the risk posed by COVID-19. Consumers from Uzbekistan may not require particular information about familiar halal food and beverages. Previous studies identified friendly employees, pleasant conversations, and interactions between employees and consumers at restaurants as influential factors for increasing customer satisfaction [6,8]. Interactions between customers and employees are an important element that builds relationships with customers and increases customers' attachment to restaurants. Moreover, knowledgeable employees can increase customer knowledge about ethnic Uzbekistani foods. Even though statistically nonsignificant results for the two employee service dimensions were found, this study used a cross-sectional design to obtain the results. The results may reflect the current and temporary situation during the COVID-19. Therefore, further research should be conducted.

Second, our findings affirm that highly satisfied customers tended to show high intention to visit in the future. This result is similar to the findings of Alhelalat, Habiballah and Twaissi [6]. The positive evaluation of excellent employee service is an essential antecedent for customer loyalty. The results can provide recent empirical evidence in different contexts of the restaurant industry. Moreover, the findings suggest a different context for ethnic restaurants.

Finally, the moderating effect of restaurant location was statistically significant. Our findings revealed the difference in the perceived service quality in terms of employee appearance based on restaurant location. Given the high rate of COVID-19 cases in the capital city, the results indicate empirical evidence for a situational factor. Although service encounters are critical factors for restaurants, customers may be satisfied with employees who ensure polite and accurate service and are attentive to their needs and wants. The clean and neat appearance of employees and the wearing of masks appeared to increase customer satisfaction.

## 5.2. Practical Implications

The results provide important implications for practitioners and restaurateurs. First, employee appearance and behavior quality were the most important dimensions for increasing satisfaction. Employees wearing clean uniforms and masks were associated

with customer satisfaction. The employees' attentive and responsive behavior when providing services still exerted a positive effect on the satisfaction of restaurant customers. As a previous study emphasized [58], practitioners and restaurant owners must provide training to facilitate customer orientation and ensure that employees frequently check on the condition of their uniform and use PPE whenever they provide services to restaurant customers. Employees should express their concern for COVID-19 prevention and customer safety by cleaning the restaurants frequently and following social distancing regulations. Restaurant managers and owners may need to display their concern about cleanliness and hygiene at their restaurant. For example, cleaning procedures and COVID-19 prevention guidelines need to be presented at a restaurant.

Second, interactions and expertise quality in employee service delivery did not increase the level of satisfaction. Consumers may not prefer close interaction and communication with employees at restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although these employee service quality factors can be generally important, the current situation and the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the consumer evaluation of the service encounter quality. Practitioners should make consumers feel relaxed while dining at restaurants, create a comfortable environment, and reduce the level of anxiety and perceived risk of COVID-19 transmission through intensive human interaction services at restaurants. In this regard, new technologies and devices, such as contactless service through various devices, kiosks, or serving robots, may need to be introduced if restaurants are willing to invest and introduce contactless services.

Even though people prefer to minimize unwanted face-to-face interactions with employees at restaurants, they seem to have employees' attentive service whenever they have any requests. Managers and owners may need to find various ways, such as using electronic tables or pressing an electronic bell, through which people can express their personal needs to employees. Moreover, an online communication channel or live chat with customers could be helpful to facilitate contactless communication. Restaurant managers may provide self-help information for customers. As suggested in previous research [59], restaurant managers need to receive customers' feedback and reviews actively via online platforms in order to manage restaurant service quality and minimize service failures.

Finally, the findings affirmed the moderating role of the location (i.e., the capital city versus other cities). Restaurateurs and employees should continue monitoring COVID-19 cases and mortality rates. Restaurateurs and employees in the capital city should improve hygiene and cleanliness at restaurants. Employees should frequently check their uniforms and aprons and use PPE at restaurants. Moreover, no difference was observed between the behavior qualities of consumers visiting restaurants in the capital city and in other regions. The employees' rapid response to their needs and requests can increase positive evaluations among customers at Uzbek halal restaurants.

### *5.3. Limitations and Future Research Suggestions*

Although the results provide empirical evidence for a specific research setting, this work has several limitations. First, the proposed model should be tested in other settings and populations during the pandemic. We selected a subsegment of consumers at Uzbek halal restaurants. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Second, the data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, and cross-sectional data were used. Replicated studies may be useful for understanding the situational factor and perceived service quality of restaurants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study only used the location of the restaurants, and the results may not fully capture the psychological states of consumers and the effects of the pandemic. Further research may need to use different methods such as an experimental research designs and longitudinal data to provide results with increased robustness. Third, this study examined the service quality perceived by customers at Uzbekistani halal restaurants in South Korea. Future research could include other Muslim populations at halal restaurants for cross-cultural studies.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, Z.S., Y.-j.A.; data collection: Z.S.; analysis, Y.-j.A.; writing, Z.S. and Y.-j.A.; supervision, Y.-j.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research did not receive any extra research funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

1. Bitner, M.J.; Booms, B.H.; Tetreault, M.S. The service encounter: Diagnosing favorable and unfavorable incidents. *J. Mark.* **1990**, *54*, 71. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
2. Grönroos, C. The perceived service quality concept—A mistake? *Manag. Serv. Qual. Int. J.* **2001**, *11*, 150–152. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
3. Parasuraman, A.; Zeithaml, V.A.; Berry, L.L. SERVQUAL: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *J. Retail.* **1988**, *64*, 12–40.
4. Medberg, G.; Grönroos, C. Value-in-use and service quality: Do customers see a difference? *J. Serv. Theory Pr.* **2020**, *30*, 507–529. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
5. Teeroovengadam, V. Service quality dimensions as predictors of customer satisfaction and loyalty in the banking industry: Moderating effects of gender. *Eur. Bus. Rev.* **2020**. ahead-of-print. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
6. Alhelalat, J.A.; Habiballah, M.A.; Twaissi, N.M. The impact of personal and functional aspects of restaurant employee service behaviour on customer satisfaction. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2017**, *66*, 46–53. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
7. Fang, S.; Zhang, C.; Li, Y. Physical attractiveness of service employees and customer engagement in tourism industry. *Ann. Tour. Res.* **2020**, *80*, 102756. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
8. Genc, V.; Akoglan Kozak, M. Emotional and social competence in the aestheticization of labor in the restaurant Industry. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2020**, *32*, 1201–1225. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
9. Parsa, H.G.; van der Rest, J.-P.I.; Smith, S.R.; Parsa, R.A.; Bujisic, M. Why restaurants fail? Part IV: The relationship between restaurant failures and demographic factors. *Cornell Hosp. Q.* **2015**, *56*, 80–90. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
10. Lin, H.; Zhang, M.; Gursoy, D. Impact of nonverbal customer-to-customer interactions on customer satisfaction and loyalty intentions. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2020**, *32*, 1967–1985. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
11. CDMH. Briefing of the COVID-19. Available online: <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/> (accessed on 4 April 2021).
12. OECD. Tourism Policy Responses to the Coronavirus (COVID-19). Available online: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/tourism-policy-responses-to-the-coronavirus-covid-19-6466aa20/> (accessed on 4 April 2021).
13. Kim, K.; Bonn, M.A.; Cho, M. Clean safety message framing as survival strategies for small independent restaurants during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2021**, *46*, 423–431. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
14. Kim, J.; Kim, J.; Wang, Y. Uncertainty risks and strategic reaction of restaurant firms amid COVID-19: Evidence from China. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2021**, *92*, 102752. [\[CrossRef\]](#) [\[PubMed\]](#)
15. Yang, K.; Kim, J.; Min, J.; Hernandez-Calderon, A. Effects of Retailers' Service Quality and Legitimacy on Behavioral Intention: The Role of Emotions during COVID-19. *Serv. Ind. J.* **2021**, *41*, 84–106. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
16. Brewer, P.; Sebby, A.G. The effect of online restaurant menus on consumers' purchase intentions during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2021**, *94*, 102777. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
17. Byrd, K.; Her, E.; Fan, A.; Almanza, B.; Liu, Y.; Leitch, S. Restaurants and COVID-19: What are consumers' risk perceptions about restaurant food and its packaging during the pandemic? *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2021**, *94*, 102821. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
18. O'Hara, S.; Toussaint, E.C. Food access in crisis: Food security and COVID-19. *Ecol. Econ.* **2021**, *180*, 106859. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
19. Brizek, M.G.; Frash, R.E.; McLeod, B.M.; Patience, M.O. Independent restaurant operator perspectives in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2021**, *93*, 102766. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
20. Hussain, K.; Jing, F.; Parveen, K. How do foreigners perceive? Exploring foreign diners' satisfaction with service quality of Chinese restaurants. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2018**, *23*, 613–625. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
21. Gong, T.; Park, J.K.; Hyun, H. Customer response toward employees' emotional labor in service industry settings. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2020**, *52*, 101899. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
22. Akhtar, N.; Jin, S.; Alvi, T.H.; Siddiqi, U.I. Conflicting halal attributes at halal restaurants and consumers' responses: The moderating role of religiosity. *J. Hosp. Tour. Manag.* **2020**, *45*, 499–510. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
23. Jia, X.; Chaozhi, Z. Turning Impediment into Attraction: A supplier perspective on halal food in non-islamic destinations. *J. Destin. Mark. Manag.* **2021**, *19*, 100517. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
24. Han, H.; Al-Ansi, A.; Olya, H.G.T.; Kim, W. Exploring halal-friendly destination attributes in South Korea: Perceptions and behaviors of Muslim travelers toward a non-muslim destination. *Tour. Manag.* **2019**, *71*, 151–164. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

25. Raimkulov, M.; Juraturgunov, H.; Ahn, Y. Destination attractiveness and memorable travel experiences in silk road tourism in Uzbekistan. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 2252. [CrossRef]
26. KTO. Muslim-Friendly Restaurants. *Background and Objectives*. Available online: <https://www.mfrk.or.kr/ko/guide/guide> (accessed on 4 April 2021).
27. Ali, F.; Dogan, S.; Amin, M.; Hussain, K.; Ryu, K. Brand anthropomorphism, love and defense: Does attitude towards social distancing matter? *Serv. Ind. J.* **2021**, *41*, 58–83. [CrossRef]
28. UNWTO. UNWTO—Inclusive Tourism Report 2018. Available online: <https://www.sdgfund.org/publication/unwto-%E2%80%9393-inclusive-tourism-report-2018> (accessed on 4 April 2021).
29. Al-Nahdi, T.S.; Islam, M.A. Factors influencing Malaysian Muslims to patronage halal restaurants—Ambience as a mediator. *Bus. Rev.* **2011**, *6*, 119–131.
30. KTO. Muslim-friendly Travel: VisitKorea Muslim-Friendly Travel. Available online: [http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/ATR/muslim\\_intro.jsp](http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/ATR/muslim_intro.jsp) (accessed on 4 April 2021).
31. Ahn, Y.; Lee, S.-K.; Lee, S.-M. Do some travel purposes lead to more tourist expenditure patterns than others? Evidence from an Almost Ideal Demand System (AIDS) Analysis. *Asia Pac. J. Tour. Res.* **2020**, *25*, 902–913. [CrossRef]
32. Khunti, K.; Routen, A.; Patel, K.; Ali, S.N.; Gill, P.; Banerjee, A.; Lad, A.; Patel, V.; Hanif, W. Focused action is required to protect ethnic minority populations from COVID-19 post-lockdown. *Br. J. Gen. Pract. J. R. Coll. Gen. Pract.* **2021**, *71*, 37–40. [CrossRef]
33. Mehrabian, A.; Russell, J.A. The basic emotional impact of environments. *Percept. Mot. Skills* **1974**, *38*, 283–301. [CrossRef]
34. Brady, M.K.; Cronin, J. Some new thoughts on conceptualizing perceived service quality: A hierarchical approach. *J. Mark.* **2001**, *65*, 34–49. [CrossRef]
35. WHO. Coronavirus. *Coronavirus Disease 19(COVID-19)*. Available online: <http://ncov.mohw.go.kr/en/> (accessed on 4 April 2021).
36. UNWTO. COVID-19 and Tourism | 2020: A Year in Review. Available online: <https://www.unwto.org/covid-19-and-tourism-2020> (accessed on 4 April 2021).
37. Seoul Metropolitan Government. Seoul’s Fight against Covid19—Google Search. Available online: <https://www.google.com/search?q=seoul+fight+against+covid19> (accessed on 13 May 2021).
38. Statistics Korea. COVID-19. Available online: [https://kosis.kr/covid\\_eng/response\\_system.do](https://kosis.kr/covid_eng/response_system.do) (accessed on 4 April 2021).
39. Ryu, K.; Jang, S.S. The effect of environmental perceptions on behavioral intentions through emotions: The case of upscale restaurants. *J. Hosp. Tour. Res.* **2007**, *31*, 56–72. [CrossRef]
40. Ha, J.; Jang, S. (Shawn). Effects of service quality and food quality: The moderating role of atmospherics in an ethnic restaurant segment. *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2010**, *29*, 520–529. [CrossRef]
41. Liu, Y.; Jang, S. (Shawn). Perceptions of Chinese restaurants in the U.S.: What affects customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions? *Int. J. Hosp. Manag.* **2009**, *28*, 338–348. [CrossRef]
42. Zeithaml, V.A.; Berry, L.L.; Parasuraman, A. The behavioral consequences of service quality. *J. Mark.* **1996**, *60*, 31–46. [CrossRef]
43. Oliver, R.L. A cognitive model of the antecedents and consequences of satisfaction decisions. *J. Mark. Res.* **1980**, *17*, 460–469. [CrossRef]
44. Oliver, R.L. *Satisfaction: A Behavioral Perspective on the Consumer*; Routledge: London, UK, 1997. [CrossRef]
45. Koc, E. Do women make better in tourism and hospitality? A conceptual review from a customer satisfaction and service quality perspective. *J. Qual. Assur. Hosp. Tour.* **2020**, *21*, 402–429. [CrossRef]
46. Prentice, C.; Nguyen, M. Engaging and retaining customers with ai and employee service. *J. Retail. Consum. Serv.* **2020**, *56*, 102186. [CrossRef]
47. Nunkoo, R.; Teeroovengadum, V.; Thomas, P.; Leonard, L. Integrating service quality as a second-order factor in a customer satisfaction and loyalty model. *Int. J. Contemp. Hosp. Manag.* **2017**, *29*, 2978–3005. [CrossRef]
48. Assaker, G.; O’Connor, P.; El-Haddad, R. Examining an integrated model of green image, perceived quality, satisfaction, trust, and loyalty in upscale hotels. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* **2020**, *29*, 934–955. [CrossRef]
49. Prentice, C.; Dominique Lopes, S.; Wang, X. The impact of artificial intelligence and employee service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty. *J. Hosp. Mark. Manag.* **2020**, *29*, 739–756. [CrossRef]
50. Hu, M.; Roberts, J.D.; Azevedo, G.P.; Milner, D. The role of built and social environmental factors in Covid-19 transmission: A look at America’s Capital City. *Sustain. Cities Soc.* **2021**, *65*, 102580. [CrossRef]
51. Erkuş-Öztürk, H.; Terhorst, P. Innovative restaurants in a mass-tourism city: Evidence from Antalya. *Tour. Manag.* **2016**, *54*, 477–489. [CrossRef]
52. Anderson, J.C.; Gerbing, D.W. Structural equation modeling in practice: A review and recommended two-step approach. *Psychol. Bull.* **1988**, *103*, 411–423. [CrossRef]
53. Fornell, C.; Larcker, D.F. Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *J. Mark. Res.* **1981**, *18*, 39–50. [CrossRef]
54. Hair, J.F.; Black, W.C.; Babin, B.J.; Anderson, R.E. *Multivariate Data Analysis: Pearson New International Edition PDF EBook*; Pearson Education: London, UK, 2013.
55. Bagozzi, R.P.; Yi, Y. On the evaluation of structural equation models. *J. Acad. Mark. Sci.* **1988**, *16*, 74–94. [CrossRef]
56. Acock, A.C. *Discovering Structural Equation Modeling Using Stata*; Stata Press: College Station, TX, USA, 2013.



- 
57. KOSIS. Statistics of Foreign Residents in South Korea. Available online: [https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=111&tblId=DT\\_1B040A6](https://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=111&tblId=DT_1B040A6) (accessed on 13 May 2021).
  58. Pham Thi Phuong, L.; Ahn, Y. Service climate and empowerment for customer service quality among Vietnamese employees at restaurants. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 1172. [[CrossRef](#)]
  59. Liu, W.; Ji, R.; Nian, C. (Peter); Ryu, K. Identifying the types and impact of service provider's responses to online negative reviews in the sharing economy: Evidence from B&B's in China. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 2285. [[CrossRef](#)]