

## The Role of Communication on The Quality of E-Services and Food Quality: The Case of Online Food Delivery

<https://doi.org/10.3991/ijim.v17i13.39787>

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**Abstract**—The trend of online food delivery is booming in developing and emerging countries and COVID-19 has made it further under the spot. Now, it is the time for marketers and owners of restaurants to develop effective marketing strategies. Therefore, this research aimed to investigate the effect of communication on e-service quality and food quality on customers' loyalty. These relations were further explored by the mediating role of communication. Methodology—The data were collected from customers ordering food online. The collected data were further analyzed by using AMOS. The results highlighted that both e-service quality and food quality can enhance the loyalty of customers. Moreover, the presence of communication also, explained that e-service quality and food quality can significantly and positively affect customer loyalty. This research has highlighted the broader domains but still there are some limitations that can be addressed by future studies. The study is based on one country and future studies can compare the results of developed and developing countries. In addition, the model of study can be enhanced by introducing subjective knowledge or information credibility as potential moderators because they can also generate loyalty.

**Keywords**—e-service quality, food quality, customer loyalty

### 1 Introduction

The widespread use of the internet has changed the dynamics of the business world and provided endless opportunities for both businesses and customers. Apparently, it turns out that this facility has not yet been fully utilized. Nonetheless, the inclusion of the internet in business has revolutionized the entire business environment by eliminating national and geographical boundaries and opening new doors and opportunities for both sellers and buyers. In this regard, Lim et al., (2004) highlighted that the extensive use of the internet around the world guarantees increased local and international client coverage which ultimately results in high organizational gains. Meanwhile, the inclusion of the internet in business and advances in internet technologies have encouraged e-commerce activities that facilitate transactions between both businesses and customers. The e-commerce activity allows businesses to sell their products on various e-commerce platforms such as online stores to promote convenient shopping for customers. Also, it permits customers to compare products, prices, and features, and moreover,

allows them to choose the best seller for their purchases in order to arrange a safe and prompt product delivery (Yeo, Goh, & Rezaei, 2017). According to Jones (2013), e-commerce is no more a traditional idea and has already proven its existence. Therefore, we can say that E-commerce platforms have made shopping easier for customers as they can now buy products in the comfort of their homes and at the leisure of their time without personally visiting any market or store (Jiang et al., 2013; Rezaei et al., 2016c). In view of Towers and Xu (2016), the inclusion of the internet in the business industry has positively encouraged the development of online retailing and E-commerce. Similarly, Nguyen et al., (2019) stated that the advancements in internet and mobile phone technologies have positive effects on both businesses and customers. Accordingly, Nielsen (2018) pointed out that there are 4 billion people around the world who use the internet, of which 92.6% are those who use mobile phones to access the internet. A group of scholars has suggested that nowadays consumers are more inclined towards digital activities and spent more time surfing on the internet (Nielsen, 2018; Ramus & Nielsen, 2005). Therefore, online shopping is vividly evolving businesses by attracting a large audience, and by providing customers with accessible and more convenient techniques to find and evaluate products than traditional shopping methods (Hartono et al., 2014; Alagoz & Hekimoglu, 2012). Lim et al., (2004) suggested that the proportion of online shopping in Western countries is much higher than in Eastern countries. However, the agri-food industry faces many challenges due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic as the governments impose travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders. Moreover, public health officials around the world have suggested social distancing to prevent the further spread of the disease and the instructions have created a demand and supply gap among retail food establishments and farmers (WHO 2020; The World Bank 2020). Further, it has been observed that due to the pandemic, restaurants along with other businesses are facing many challenges as governments around the world have banned eating and drinking inside restaurants. Due to this, the demand for food in restaurants has come down drastically (Mohammed 2020). On the other hand, this decline has led the online food shopping industry to flourish and encourage restaurants to offer food online. Although, the trend of online food shopping has been steadily increasing the coronavirus pandemic has drastically increased the trend of online shopping. A group of scholars has suggested that the trend of online food shopping in near future will certainly surpass retail food sales (Redman 2020b; IGD 2017; Nielsen 2015). According to Suhartanto et al., (2019), the adoption of online technologies by restaurants has enabled customers to order food online through restaurant websites, phone calls, or other online food delivery services. In the context of online shopping, the trend of ordering food online is growing by 12% annually (Chang et al., 2014). It is argued that the widespread use of E-commerce platforms for online shopping and its advantages also gives rise to the trend of online food shopping which is now growing exponentially (Ramus & Nielsen, 2005; Statista, 2017). In this regard, Nielsen, (2015) indicated generation X, Millennials, and generation Z as the most extreme buyers of online food. Likewise, Yeo et al., (2017) stated that online sales have made restaurants competitive in the saturated food market. Therefore, Saarijärvi et al., (2014) stated that many key factors motivate customers to shop online, such as convenience, ease of use, and previous online experiences (Rezaei et al., 2016d). It is found that consumers do not recall

food prices and make their food choices accordingly to the particular moment without taking anything into account from previous purchases (Monroe and Lee, 1999). In view of Hansen (2008), online food shopping allows consumers to explore a wide variety of products in no time, evaluate products, evaluate prices, and most importantly, buy products at the leisure of their homes. However, in this modern business world, an online firm must have loyal customers to remain competitive in the market (Pee, Jiang, & Klein, 2018). Consequently, firms need to improve service quality in order to achieve greater customer satisfaction. Therefore, scholars in this area of the field have suggested that loyal customers who remain for the long run are the ultimate source of profit for companies (Chen & Myagmarsuren, 2011).

Many studies highlighted the concept of customer loyalty in different industries (Abou-Shouk & Khalifa, 2017) but still, its generalized implications are required from the perspective of any single industry. Similarly, the researchers also directed to examine the formation of loyalty in industrial sectors (Gursoy, Chen, Chi, 2014). Therefore, this study established to investigate customer loyalty in the online food delivery industry because the online food delivery service business is currently emerging with every passing day and will be more prosperous in the future (Kedah, Ismail, Haque, & Ahmed, 2015). Tsai, Yang, & Cheng (2014) highlighted that there is a significant relationship between e-service quality and e-loyalty. According to Santos (2003), e-service quality can be described as a customer perception or evaluation of an electronic service experience online.

E-Service quality and satisfaction are the variables that play a key role in building the e-loyalty of online customers (Romadhoni, Hadiwidjojo, Noermijati, & Aisjah, 2015). Ilham (2018) aimed to investigate e-loyalty by analyzing the effect of e-service quality on customer e-loyalty through e-satisfaction in online food service delivery. Praseto et al., (2021) determined the factors influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty in OFDS measures in Indonesia during the new normal of the COVID-19 pandemic by using an extended theory of planned behavior (TPB) approach. Their study analyzes factors affecting customer satisfaction and loyalty towards OFDS apps during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Tech (2020) adopted a questionnaire from Mobile Service Quality (M-S-QUAL) and investigated the relationships between customers' perceived service quality of online food delivery (OFD) and its influence on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, moderated by personal innovativeness. Suhartano et al., (2019) discussed the influence of food quality and e-service quality on customer loyalty toward online food delivery (OFD) service and its indirect influence through the mediation of customer satisfaction and perceived value. They also recommend using the other elements which are critical to loyalty. In connection with this, the research in hand aims to introduce a unique model for studying customer loyalty in online food delivery services by using food quality and e-service quality. Moreover, communication is presented as a mediating variable in the aforementioned relations.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Customer loyalty and food delivery**

Loyal customers are the most valuable assets for firms which help in improving the profit. To get customer loyalty, high commitment in terms of costs and effort is required so that product quality can meet the customer's expectations (Budianto, 2019). Generally, loyalty can be divided into attitudinal and behavioral loyalty. The term attitudinal loyalty is used for the positive approach which results in repeated behavior, therefore, it is considered to be true loyalty. On the other hand, behavioral loyalty refers to the customer's commitment to the company, however, emotional components could incite customers to change suppliers if the firm changes its marketing strategy (Pitta et al. 2006). Therefore, loyalty concerns both factors (repurchasing behavior and commitment) together, hence, loyalty emerges due to the consumer's psychological involvement (results in a positive attitude) and effective repurchasing intention (Al-dweeri et al., 2017). Generally, loyalty results in satisfaction, however, satisfaction does not necessarily mean loyalty.

According to Pfeifer (2005), acquiring new customers result in five times more costly as compared to retaining existing customers. However, another study conducted by Gupta and Zeithaml (2006) suggested that customer loyalty intentions often can not anticipate the actual behavior. Such latent loyalty can be a serious concern for firms as creating an even more positive attitude may be costly, and unlikely to guarantee the loyalty of clients. Therefore, it is also necessary to understand the circumstance which leads to latent loyalty (Wolter et al., 2017).

Many studies suggested that the profit of a firm can be increased by loyal customers because of their faithful commitment toward the firm. Moreover, these clients allow the firm to decrease costs in recruiting new customers (Reichheld, Markey, & Hopton, 2000). Additionally, as compared to new ones, loyal clients tend to purchase more, refer new customers, and decrease operating costs of the firm (Kim et al., 2009; Suhartanto, Chen, Mohi, & Sosianika, 2018). Although, the expenditure of getting online loyal customers is higher than that of traditional loyal customers, however, online loyalty can increase the profit (Kim et al., 2009). According to Fandos and Flavián (2006), first time customers can be converted into loyal customers via exceeding customers' expectations by providing them with unique products and services. Therefore, the need for food purchased using OFD services depends on the combination of food preparation, online processing as well as quick delivery services (Kedah et al., 2015; Yeo et al., 2017), while, food well-designed services, and exceeding customer's expectations remain essential requirements. Similar to the former findings of the aforementioned researches, other studies claimed that three different approaches are used to analyze customer loyalty regarding service or products. The first approach is known as the behavioral approach, which emphasized that a loyal client is one who constantly purchases the product/service within a specific period (Suhartanto et al., 2018). Within OFD system, the behavioral approach says that loyal customers are those who order systematic

cally, either through the restaurant website or through the restaurant intermediate website. According to the second approach, loyalty is conceived as an emotional expression of the consumer's plan to recommend and buy again (Gursoy et al., 2014).

## **2.2 E-service quality and customer loyalty**

Zeithaml et al (2002) defined e-service quality as a customer's comprehensive evaluation regarding electronic services being offered. The term E-services is referred to services that are offered through the internet, interactive for customers, and managed by customers (Al-dweeri et al., 2017). The e-services are based on mutual interaction between customers and service providers, making them an alternative to traditional services. In such services, high-quality internet is important to enhance both efficiency and benefits. Initially, web presence and low prices were thought to be the main factors ensuring success in e-services, however, recently many other issues related to e-services quality have been identified (Parasuraman et al., 2005; Al-dweeri et al., 2017). Previous studies suggested that the quality of e-services depends upon two factors, the first is security or confidentiality of information, and the second is website performance (Shafiee, and Bazargan, 2018; Durmuş et al., 2013). Some researchers (Parasuraman et al., 2005; Bauer et al 2006) have divided e-service quality into technical dimension (how the process is delivered), and functional dimension (what is delivered due to services provided). These researches also suggested that e-service quality should take into account all the factors and interactions occurring during and after the delivery of e-services.

While purchasing online, customers expect high-quality services from websites (Caruana & Ewing, 2010). Therefore, providing a quality website becomes important for a firm to market its products and services. This is true, especially in online businesses like OFD services, where, online devices are the only source of interaction between firms and consumers. Researchers (Jeon and Jeong, 2017) suggested that maintaining the quality of the website is crucial to retain clients, causing them to revisit the website, and finally secure loyal customers. Hence, the success of an online business essentially depends on website quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Malhotra, 2005; Pee et al., 2018). On the basis of the discussion provided above, the following hypothesis was formulated.

**H<sub>1</sub>:** E-service quality can significantly and positively influence customer loyalty.

## **2.3 Food quality and customer loyalty**

Food quality has been defined in literature differently, however, it can be defined on the basis of various attributes including commodity requirements (product definition as determined by-laws), security (Safety of food for consumption), nutritional and sensory features (nutritional value and taste), service requirements (easy use of the product for customers), and sustainability (Savelli et al., 2019). Previous studies highlighted that food quality is a major determinant of customer loyalty. Sulek and Hensley (2004), reported that customer satisfaction with restaurants is mainly affected by the food quality. Moreover, the food quality is an important element of the consumer experience with

the restaurant and it is defined as the overall performance of food to meet customers' expectations (Ha & Jang, 2010; Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Previously, most studies emphasized the importance of food quality concerning what attribute constitutes food, however, previous studies have no consensus in terms of the constituent aspects. A study used food attributes (nutrition, taste, and variety) to evaluate the effect of customers' experience with food and their intention to revisit the restaurant (Ha and Jang, 2010). In addition, Liu, Lee, and Hung (2017) used the size, variety, menu, and presentation as a symbol of the restaurant's food quality. According to Sulek and Hensley (2004), common characteristics by which customers determine the quality of food are appeal, dietary factors, and safety. Alternatively, researchers also suggested food presentation, variety of menu, taste, freshness, healthiness, and temperature of food to assess food quality (Namkung & Jang, 2007). The quality of food and services are regarded as basic factors which influence consumers' experience with restaurants (Ha & Jang, 2010; Liu et al., 2017; Namkung & Jang, 2007).

Namkung & Jang (2007) also reported a significant role of food quality in influencing customer satisfaction, repurchasing intention, and the possibility of recommending it to others. Moreover, food quality seems to be a fundamental element even in online food delivery systems. In this aspect, researchers reported that food quality influences online loyalty by affecting both customer satisfaction and perceived value (Suhartanto et al., 2019). Upon getting high-quality food, customers tend to repurchase constantly and can recommend it to other customers. Therefore, it is essential to not only meet customers' expectations but also exceed competitors' food quality (in terms of taste, variety, healthiness, and food presentation). Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Food quality can significantly and positively influence customer loyalty.

## **2.4 Communication/Customer communication**

Communication is an important factor in every business as it causes a positive relationship between the company and the customer. Also, communication may affect the customer's trust, satisfaction, and even loyalty. Acting as a mean of relational governance, communication enhances affective commitment towards business relationship (Hänninen, and Karjaluoto, 2017). Relationship with customers depends on two-way communications and customer services. Quality services and satisfying communication can earn loyal customers who are the possible future customer and can refer service to other people. In this regard, firms need to create, develop, and evaluate employee-customer interactions as an important part of service (Eger, L. and Mičák et al., 2017). Moreover, companies must constantly check customers' needs and purchasing process, involving customer-oriented communication. In the modern era, customers can connect with the company through the internet, and can get an endless amount of information. Therefore, customers can evaluate, recognize, and choose which company can deliver quality services. If clients get satisfactory support from the company, they tend to repurchased more (Kotler & Keller, 2016). With the addition of social media, companies started to use websites and social platforms to interact with customers. Both companies and customers have been facilitated by social media to communicate with each other

(Wang et al., 2012). On basis of above given discussion, we can formulate following hypothesis:

**H3:** Communication can significantly and positively influence customer loyalty.

**H4:** Communication can mediate the relationship between e-service quality and customer loyalty.

**H5:** Communication can mediate the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty.

This research has focused on multiple factors which can influence customer loyalty and all those are discussed in detail to design the framework given in Figure 1.

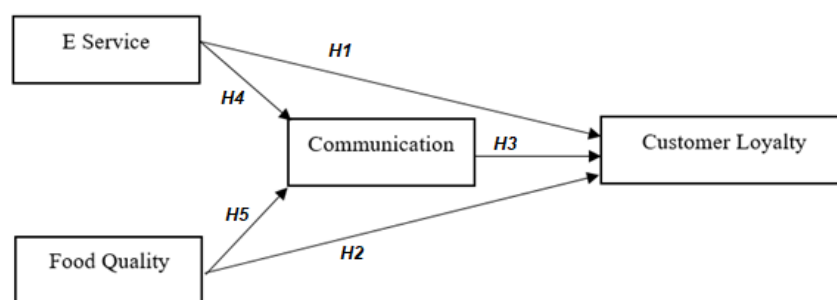


Fig. 1. Model for Paper

### 3 Methods

The data were collected through a Google survey form, from the customers of online food delivery restaurants in Bahrain. The study aims to test the mediating role of communication in the relationship between e-service quality and food quality with customer loyalty. 530 online food delivery service customers were targeted and a survey form was emailed to them. Out of 500, only 323 successful responses were gathered by end of February 2021, hence the response rate was 61%. Of the total respondents, 81% were male, while 19% were female customers. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS-24 for structural equation modeling (SEM) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

#### 3.1 Measures

The construct of e-service quality was measured with a 12-item scale adopted by Suhartanto et al., (2019). The construct of customer loyalty was measured using a 2-item scale adopted from the study of Diallo et al. (2015) and Gómez et al., (2018). The construct of communication was measured with a 2-item scale while the construct of food quality was measured with a 4-items scale developed and utilized by Suhartanto et al., (2019). All the responses were taken on 5-pints Likert Scale, where 1= Strongly Disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neutral 4= Agree 5= Strongly Agree. Factor loadings values of all items are presented in Table 2 which shows all loading values are well above 0.60 as recommended by Hair et al., (2010).

### 3.2 Discriminant and convergent validity

Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were used to test discriminant and convergent validities of study variables as recommended by Fornell and Larcker, (1981) and Henseler, Ringle & Sarstedt, (2015). According to Bagozzi and Yi, (1988) the values of AVE greater than 0.50 and CR greater than 0.60, establish the convergent validity. The current study results as shown in Table 1, the AVE values ranged from 0.58 to 0.86, and the values of CR ranged from 0.85 to 0.94 proving the construct’s convergent validity. For discriminant validity, this study follows the benchmark values recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981) that Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) should be less than AVE and the square root of AVE should be greater than correlations among variables. Table 1 indicates  $MSV < AVE$  and square root of  $AVE > correlations$ ; hence, this confirms discriminant validity. Moreover, Table 2 indicates excellent factor loadings ranging from 0.62 to 0.95, which satisfied the cut-off value recommended by Hair et al., (2010).

**Table 1.** Descriptive, Reliability, Validity, and Correlation Analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4
1. Communication	3.01	1.20	0.92	0.86	0.21	0.926			
2. E-Service Quality	3.67	0.85	0.94	0.58	0.43	0.314***	0.764		
3. Food Quality	3.42	0.76	0.85	0.58	0.43	0.292***	0.656***	0.764	
4. Customer Loyalty	3.59	1.20	0.92	0.85	0.23	0.458***	0.478***	0.457***	0.922

N = 323; Significance of Correlations: † p < 0.100; \* p < 0.050; \*\* p < 0.010; \*\*\* p < 0.001; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; Diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root of the AVE.

**Table 2.** Factor structure of measurement scales

Variables	Items	Loadings	SMC
Communication	I like the online communication	0.950	0.903
	Online communication is easy for me	0.901	0.811
Customer Loyalty	I am loyal to online food delivering restaurants & brands	0.930	0.866
	I consider online food delivery among my first priority	0.914	0.836
Eservice Quality	In the web or (app), I can find easily what I need	0.733	0.537
	The web or (app) makes it easy to get anything	0.782	0.612
	The web or (app) is uncomplicated to operate	0.797	0.635
	Whenever I need the web or (app) always available	0.713	0.508
	The web or (app) launches straight away	0.784	0.614
	The delivering order is as promised (web or app)	0.804	0.647
	The items ordered is sent out promptly (web or app)	0.796	0.634
	The web or (app) offering is honest	0.766	0.587
	The web or (app) accurately inform the delivery promise	0.779	0.607
	The web or (app) keeps my shopping behavior information	0.773	0.597
	My personal information is not shared by the web or (app)	0.755	0.571
Food Quality	My payment ID is safe with the web or (app)	0.674	0.455
	I like the presentation of food upon delivery	0.816	0.665
	I like the variety of food	0.845	0.714
	I like taste of food	0.757	0.573
	I prefer the healthy food	0.620	0.384

SMC = Square Multiple Correlation



### 3.3 Measurement model

Before going for hypotheses testing, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) were performed using AMOS-SEM to establish model fitness. CFA results, as presented in Table 3, show that our 4-factor hypothesized model is well fitted ( $\chi^2 = 472.74$ ,  $df = 164$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.88$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.07$ ,  $IFI = 0.93$ ,  $TLI = 0.92$ ,  $CFI = 0.93$ ).

**Table 3.** Measurement Model

Measurement Model	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	IFI	TLI	CFI
4-Factor Measurement Model	472.74	164	2.88	0.07	0.93	0.92	0.93

### 3.4 Test of hypothesis (direct effect)

Prior testing results of discriminant and convergent validities, significant correlations, and good overall model fitness have provided the basis for further testing of the study hypothesis. Table 4 presents the results of the hypothesis regarding the testing of direct effects. H1 predicts a positive significant effect of e-service quality on customer loyalty, and the results support the hypothesis ( $\beta = 0.620$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Moreover, study results support H2 that predicts a significant and positive effect of food quality on customer loyalty ( $\beta = .601$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the direct effect of communication on customer loyalty is also significant ( $\beta = .461$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which confirms the acceptability of H3.

**Table 4.** Test of Hypothesis (Direct Effect)

Relationships	Path coefficients	P-Value
E-Service Quality → Customer Loyalty	0.620	***
Food Quality → Customer Loyalty	0.601	***
Communication → Customer Loyalty	0.461	***

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

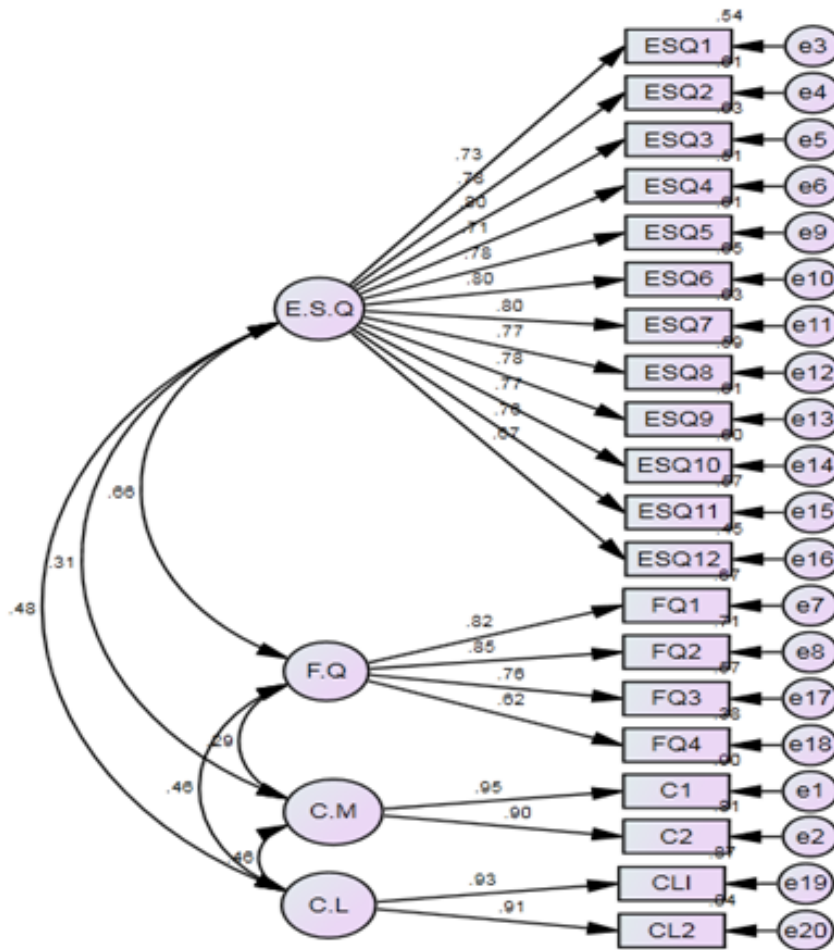
### 3.5 Test of mediation effect

The mediation effect of communication between the relationships of e-service and customer loyalty, and food quality and customer loyalty is tested and results are shown in Table 5. The results reveal that communication significantly mediates the relationship between e-service and customer loyalty ( $\beta = .135$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI = 0.07 ~ 0.22). Moreover, the mediation effect of communication between food quality and customer loyalty is also significant ( $\beta = .134$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 95% CI = 0.06 ~ 0.21). Therefore, the hypothesized mediation relationships are well supported by the results, and H4 and H5 are accepted.

**Table 5.** Test of Hypothesis (Mediation)

Relationships	Indirect Effect	LL(CI)	UL(CI)
E-Service Quality → Communication → Customer Loyalty	0.134***	0.066	0.219
Food Quality → Communication → Customer Loyalty	0.131***	0.063	0.213

Note: \*p <.05, \*\*p <.01\*\*\*p <.001.



**Fig. 2.** Measurement Model

## 4 Discussion

Globally the use of smartphones is growing rapidly and these media gadgets are becoming more popular among the young generation for their usage in daily activities. As per statistics from 2017, it was seen that more than 97.7 % of youngsters aged 15 years and more, prefer to use smartphones in every possible daily activity. This usage has

altered the purchase behavior and thinking patterns of customers. Customers now have more technology-oriented thinking which has promoted the trend of online food delivery services. This service has emerged as a new potential wave in the food industry (Tech, 2020). Besides technological advancement and change in consumer behavior, COVID-19 has also boosted the trend of online food shopping or delivery (Chang and Meyerhoefer, 2021). Ngai and Gunasekaran (2007) explained online food delivery service as ordering food or doing a monetary transaction for food payment using a smartphone or any digital media device. Similarly, in the context of restaurants, the delivery service by using online technology allows customers to order the food from different delivery service providing companies or directly from the website of the restaurants. This technology and facility of online delivery service is not only beneficial for customers but also it is important for the industry of restaurants for increasing their productivity, improving their accuracy, building strong relationships with customers (Kimes, 2011), and expanding the market (Yeo et al., 2017).

Many studies highlighted online food delivery service/technology and linked it with customer intentions because consumer attitude and intention play important roles in the online purchasing of food among customers of emerging countries (Nguyen et al., 2019) and developing countries. If this provided food delivery service is found to be good then it can influence customer loyalty (Tech, 2020). Moreover, it is essential for service-providing companies to attain the loyalty of customers as a competitive advantage and enables them to build long-term relationships with their potential customers and offer them superior services for retaining their loyalty (Liu et al., 2017). The majority of researches on food focused on the flourishing demand for food because of online delivery services, but they ignored the most important aspect of e-service delivery and food quality which are the most important influencers of customer loyalty (Suhartanto et al., 2019). Therefore, this research is unique in its context as it highlights e-service quality and food quality, as to know their influence on customer loyalty. In this research study, the researchers classify customer loyalty into three categories which include primary behavior, secondary behavior, and intention to repurchase (Jones and Sasser, 1995) and this study focuses on customer loyalty as an intention to repurchase. Thus, this study mainly puts the spot on attention towards customer loyalty by highlighting two main relationships. Firstly between e-service quality and customer loyalty and secondly, between food quality and customer loyalty. In addition, the study investigates the mediating role of communication between aforesaid relations. The results demonstrate the relevance of studying e-service quality and food quality from the perspective of customers ordering food via online platforms in the kingdom of Bahrain. Moreover, in multiple ways, the results can extend the available literature on e-service quality, food quality, communication, and customer loyalty.

In pursuing the purpose of the study, the research formulated five hypotheses. The first hypothesis of this study, H1 predicted that e-service quality has a positive impact on customer loyalty. Service quality is a traditional marketing concept but e-service quality is a newly emerging term used for services provided online (Sontos, 2003). The positive relationship between e-service quality and customer loyalty highlights that if the provided service is up to mark, then the customer will remain loyal to the restaurant

which is delivering online food. The higher levels of service quality generate more satisfied customer which become loyal to the service provider (Kumar, Kee and Manshor, 2009) because there is a positive effect of service quality on customer loyalty (Martensen and Kristensen, 2000). As far as there is a concern of e-service quality, the results of this research as in line with previous studies (Chang, 2009; Khatibi and Azam, 2017, Tsai, Yang and Cheng, 2014) which concluded a positive relationship between e-service quality and customer loyalty. In the case of studies core relevant to the food delivery service, this research also corroborates those studies as Tech (2020); Liu et al., (2016) supported that service quality of online food delivery can enhance customer loyalty. Thus, the results of H1 justified the results of previous studies and satisfied the need of current research by approving the claim that among several types of service quality, e-service quality is the one that can significantly and positively affect customer loyalty. The second hypothesis of this study was developed to highlight the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty. Even though it can be the fact that the quality of food satisfies the customer (Iham, 2018; Tech, 2020; Suhartanto et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2016) which in turn become loyal still there was a need to explore the quality of food delivered online. Therefore, this study also corroborates with some previous studies based on the restaurant perspective, which highlighted food quality as an important determinant of customer loyalty (Mattila, 2001; Ryu and Han, 2009). The superior quality of food can make the customer purchase and repurchase the food because it is a need of the body and quality creates loyalty which would be the need of the mind. Thus, the findings of this hypothesis highlighted that food quality is an essential element not only for traditional restaurants but also for restaurants providing online food delivery. Similarly, food quality can be a competitive advantage for restaurants.

The emerging trend of online food delivery in developing and emerging countries has also raised an important remark about the future of these online shopping platforms when the restrictions due to COVID-19 will be lifted or the pandemic will abate (Hobbs, 2020). Thus, this research has also focused on the unique relations which will remain a fact, like the third hypothesis of this research claimed that there is a significant and positive relationship between communication and customer loyalty. Communication is information that provides knowledge that can be objective or subjective (Zubair et al., 2019). The results of this research are backed by many previous studies such as Haninen and Karjaluo (2017) which explained communication as an important factor for every business as it builds the relationship between company and customer. Moreover, communication can affect loyalty. Communication via social media can facilitate both customers and companies to develop long-term relations (Wang et al., 2012). The H4 and H5 highlighted the mediating role of communication between the relationship of “e-service quality and customer loyalty” and “food quality and customer loyalty”. Communication is among the 10 attributes of service quality evaluation proposed by (Parasuraman, et al., 1988) as responsive quality is more based on communication with customers (Liu et al., 2016). Because of their impact on customer recommendations, emerging ways of communication have determined a new type of competition and marketing practices in the food sector (Marchini et al., 2015). Dimayati (2018) concluded that customer loyalty and satisfaction can be enhanced by marketing. Therefore, proper

communication with superior e-service quality and food quality can generate customer loyalty.

## **5 Implications**

Service quality, food quality, communication, and customer loyalty, all are broader areas of marketing and this research has focused on these domains by providing detailed literature and gathering several empirical pieces of evidence. Therefore, this research has provided many implications. In terms of theoretical implications, this study has explained the relationship between e-service quality and food quality on customer loyalty. Moreover, these relationships were further analyzed by considering communication as a mediator between them. Many studies previously have discussed every concept alone or aligned a few concepts but this research is unique of its kind that it has managed to study a blend of concepts together from the perspective of the food industry. In addition, this study has expanded the literature on e-service quality, food quality, communication, and customer loyalty. Marketers, marketing managers, and even the owner of food businesses are keen to evaluate the factors that can make their customers loyal. Similarly, the research has shifted the attention towards developing effective and efficient marketing strategies based on food quality and e-service quality to generate customer loyalty. Thus, this research is different from previous studies as they either ignored the use of communication or did not focus on online food delivery, particularly in developing economies such as the kingdom of Bahrain. The model developed for this study was very unique. Furthermore, the methodological contributions of this research stem from the data management and collection from online food ordering customers. The questionnaire was adopted from previous studies to retain reliability and collected data were analyzed by using AMOS. Therefore, the methodology of questionnaire development was very common but the adopted questions were resigned based on the requirement of context and the need of the study. Some of the items of variables were carefully changed to maintain sequence and consistency. On the basis of the need for study and the trend of literature, the relationship between e-service quality and food quality with communication was not measured. The combined scale developed by this research can be used or partially changed for further investigation. The concepts highlighted in this study can be used by other studies and future studies can quote the findings of this research as a reference while working on customer loyalty in the food industry.

Customer loyalty can be achieved in many ways, but in the food industry or specifically online food delivery, it is very difficult to develop effective loyalty-generating strategies. Therefore, by focusing on several key influencers, this research has provided many practical implications. It tends to the attention of advertisers, marketers, marketing managers, and owners of online food-delivering restaurants towards e-service quality, food quality, and communication. Instead of considering these things as terms, if restaurant managers will consider them as strategies then they can make their customers loyal. Thus, it can be concluded that the findings of this research can enable managers to make strategies for loyalty generation. In comparison to traditional service quality,

in the food industry, e-service quality is difficult to maintain but once the quality is achieved, it can make the customer loyal. Moreover, this research has provided significant directions to managers working in the food industry so that they can improve their business during COVID-19 and even after this pandemic. The scope of this research is not limited to the current situation of COVID-19 but the derived model and significance of results can help managers to retain the excellence of online food delivery even when the pandemic will be over.

## **6 Limitations**

This study is unique in its context and highlighted the latest and most comprehensive areas. Therefore, it has provided sufficient implications but still, it has many limitations. Future studies can address these limitations to further generalize the findings or enhance the research. Some of the limitations along with their future recommendations are highlighted in the headings given below.

### **6.1 Inclusion of other variables**

In this research, different variables have been used to discuss the broad concept of customer loyalty. These variables include electronic service quality, food quality, and communication but still, there are many other factors that can affect customer loyalty. Thus, this study is limited to one mediating variable (i.e. communication) but future studies can more specifically use the single dimension of communication (e.g. word of mouth) as mediating variable. In addition, the aspect of information management or knowledge can make the model more comprehensive, thus, the subjective knowledge or information can be taken as potential moderating variables.

### **6.2 Further studies on customer loyalty**

The word loyalty has been discussed by many researchers in marketing and even the human resource management domain but customer loyalty is typically the domain of marketing and there is still a hot debate among marketers and researchers around the definition and constructs of the loyalty concept. This concept has been discussed in many studies from a different perspective but technology-related or more especially food-related studies have not utilized this concept much. The researchers are always keen to observe customer behavior and customer loyalty is also considered as the least researched topic in food-relevant studies. Similarly, this research has directed attention toward customer loyalty with reference to food delivery service and food quality. Therefore, further studies should focus on customer loyalty from different other scenarios of perspective. Moreover, the food-relevant studies can quote this study by expanding their research on customer loyalty.

### 6.3 Industrial alteration

This study is limited to the food industry and specifically focused on the online food delivery industry which emerged more in this era of Covid-19 after the ban on dining in restaurants. The comprehensive model used by this study is not generic and cannot be applied completely to other industries. Therefore, the partial change in the model can be changed to suit other industrial contexts that make this study be shifted to a broader area of e-commerce.

### 6.4 Similar studies in cross-cultural context

Culture is a very excellent influencer as it can change the attitudes or perceptions towards anything or a phenomenon (Nayal et al., 2021) so, a little change in cultural context can alter the findings. The current research is limited to Bahrain and replication of the same research in different areas of similar context or other developing countries can generalize the results for better implementation of the model and making efficient marketing strategies confidently.

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Article submitted 2023-03-22. Resubmitted 2023-05-13. Final acceptance 2023-05-17. Final version published as submitted by the authors.