



BEYOND THE TASTE: EXPLORING THE FACTORS INFLUENCING CONSUMER LOYALTY TO *CARINDERIAS* IN GENERAL SANTOS CITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the factors influencing consumer loyalty to carinderias in General Santos City, with a focus on non-taste elements such as service quality, hygiene, portion size, affordability, atmosphere, and accessibility. It aims to determine the extent to which these non-taste factors influence customer retention and whether their importance diminishes when dishes are perceived as highly palatable. Additionally, the study examines how consumers perceive the interaction between food palatability and non-taste attributes in shaping loyalty. A mixed-method research design was employed, utilizing an explanatory sequential approach. The quantitative phase involved descriptive research to assess the influence of non-taste factors on loyalty, while the qualitative phase used a phenomenological approach to gain deeper insights into consumers' lived experiences. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. Findings reveal that while food palatability is the primary determinant of consumer loyalty, non-taste factors—particularly affordability and hygiene—also play significant roles. Among these, affordability emerged as the most influential, followed by cleanliness and service quality. These insights can help carinderia owners and food entrepreneurs improve their customer retention strategies. Future research may further explore emotional connections and assess the impact of customer engagement.

Keywords: *Consumer Loyalty, Carinderias, Non-Taste Factors, Food Palatability, Service Quality*

INTRODUCTION

For generations, taste has been considered the primary determinant of individuals' food preferences, as noted by Imtiyaz et al. (2021). However, Azman and Majid (2023) observed that consumer loyalty to dining establishments is no longer determined solely by flavor. Non-taste factors such as service quality, hygiene, portion size, affordability, atmosphere, and accessibility have increasingly influenced dining preferences and loyalty. This paradigm shift prompted the researchers to investigate factors beyond food palatability, recognizing that the overall dining experience frequently sustains customers' continued patronage of their preferred local eateries, commonly known in the Philippines as carinderias. Consequently, this study focused on the collective influence of both taste and non-taste elements on consumer loyalty.

Daikh (2015) defined consumer loyalty as a persistent intention to maintain a relationship with a business, driven by emotional bonds that encourage long-term commitment and advocacy. In the Philippine context, carinderias are an essential part of the local culinary landscape, offering affordable, home-cooked



KAALAM: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

meals in informal settings. As described by Dr. Uy (2020), these establishments are typically located along roadsides or within marketplaces and are valued for their convenience and accessibility. While in the United States, similar small-scale eateries utilize the turo-turo or "pointing" system, as noted by Andrei (2010).

The primary objective of this study was to examine non-taste factors influencing consumer loyalty to carinderias in General Santos City. As emphasized by Ananda et al. (2024), limited research has been conducted on consumer loyalty within Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), with existing literature primarily focusing on large-scale businesses. This gap is particularly relevant in the Philippine context, where MSMEs serve as key drivers of economic activity and heavily depend on customer retention for sustainability. In General Santos City, carinderias represent more than just affordable dining options; they embody cultural values and community identity. However, they also face ongoing challenges such as rising operational costs, inflation—recorded at 4.6% as of September 2024 (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2024)—and heightened hygiene expectations. The findings of this study aim to inform carinderia owners, policymakers, and scholars in crafting strategies to enhance consumer retention and support the sustainability of these culturally significant local enterprises.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aimed to explore the factors influencing consumer loyalty in carinderias, small local dining establishments, within the research locale. Specifically, the researchers aimed to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do non-taste factors influence consumer loyalty in carinderias in terms of;
 - 1.1 Service Quality;
 - 1.2 Hygiene;
 - 1.3 Portion Size;
 - 1.4 Affordability;
 - 1.5 Atmosphere; and
 - 1.6 Accessibility?
2. To what extent do non-taste factors lose significance in influencing consumer loyalty when dishes are perceived as palatable particularly;
 - 2.1 Service Quality;
 - 2.2 Hygiene;
 - 2.3 Portion Size;
 - 2.4 Affordability;
 - 2.5 Atmosphere; and
 - 2.6 Accessibility?
3. How do consumers perceive the relationship between the palatability of food and non-taste factors as influences in consumer loyalty in carinderias?
4. Based on the findings, what possible interventions can be proposed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumer Loyalty

Consumer loyalty is defined as a consistent desire to maintain a relationship with a business, driven by emotional connection and satisfaction (Daikh, 2015). Loyalty plays a critical role in enhancing



KAALAM: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

profitability, marketing effectiveness, and long-term sustainability. Omoregie et al. (2019) emphasized that loyal customers are more likely to engage in repeat purchases and promote the business through word-of-mouth. Similarly, Kyurova and Koyundzhiyska-Davidkova (2021) highlighted the strategic value of fostering loyalty through continuous satisfaction and emotional engagement. These insights are relevant to *carinderias*, where cultivating loyalty contributes to resilience in a competitive food service environment.

Carinderias

Carinderias are small-scale, locally operated eateries in the Philippines known for offering affordable, home-cooked meals. According to Buncalan et al. (2018), the term has historical roots, influenced by Indian migration and culinary exchange. These establishments typically operate under a *turo-turo* or “point-and-choose” system, where diners select dishes from a display (Andrei, 2010). Rijal et al. (2023) emphasized that while *carinderias* are vital to the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise (MSME) sector, they must innovate to remain competitive. The cultural relevance and accessibility of *carinderias* make them important case studies for consumer loyalty in grassroots food service models.

Service Quality

Service quality is widely recognized as a determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Ramya (2019) described it as an intangible asset that enables businesses to retain consumers by addressing their expectations. Madanchian et al. (2022) added that effective communication and empowered employees enhance the customer experience, leading to repeat patronage. Mason et al. (2016) emphasized that in small food establishments like *carinderias*, factors such as speed, hygiene, and staff responsiveness are essential to service quality and customer retention.

Hygiene

Hygiene is a fundamental requirement in food establishments, directly linked to public health and consumer trust. Shamshad et al. (2021) defined hygiene as a set of cleanliness practices essential for disease prevention and safety assurance. Gohain and Nath (2024) found that consumers are more likely to return to dining establishments with visible sanitation efforts. Sato and Villarica (2022) highlighted that compliance with the Philippine Food Safety Act of 2013 reinforces consumer confidence, especially in informal dining settings like *carinderias*.

Portion Size

Portion size plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of value and satisfaction. Benton (2013) described it as the amount of food served per meal, which influences fairness and consumer expectations. Haslam et al. (2020) found that larger portions are often equated with better value, encouraging return visits. Rohwiyati and Praptiestrini (2020) emphasized that consistency in portion size is a competitive advantage in consumer retention strategies.

Affordability

Affordability significantly influences dining choices, particularly in low to middle-income communities. Beal and Foli (2020) defined it as the consumer's ability to access services without financial strain. Salamin and Bagshi (2016) asserted that fair pricing improves satisfaction by reinforcing the perception of value. Kotler et al. (2016) emphasized that emotional and psychological perceptions of cost must also align with expectations to sustain loyalty.



Atmosphere

Atmosphere, or the overall sensory and spatial environment of an establishment, affects how consumers experience their meals. Emir (2016) described it as a combination of physical and social cues that influence behavior. Omar et al. (2015) identified lighting, decor, and layout as critical contributors to ambiance and satisfaction. Cloete and Semente (2024) further noted that well-crafted atmospheres foster emotional engagement and repeated visits.

Accessibility

Accessibility refers to the ease with which consumers can reach and utilize services. Broderick (2019) emphasized that it enhances inclusivity and convenience, particularly for underserved populations. Blow et al. (2017) noted that proximity to institutions and working areas influences dining preferences. Paulin (2022) added that delivery options and flexible hours also contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Palatability of Food

Palatability is the sensory appeal of food, involving taste, texture, aroma, and appearance. Anguah et al. (2017) emphasized its role in driving food preferences and emotional satisfaction. Rohmawati et al.

(2024) found that offering a variety of palatable dishes strengthens consumer loyalty by meeting diverse preferences. Somani (2022) concluded that food quality and palatability are central to repeated patronage, making them indispensable to *carinderia* success.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design, specifically an explanatory sequential design, beginning with a quantitative phase using a descriptive research design, followed by a qualitative phenomenological phase to explore the relationship between non-taste factors, food palatability, and consumer loyalty to carinderias in General Santos City. The study was conducted in General Santos City due to its significant concentration of carinderias, where 40 regular consumers were purposively selected for the quantitative survey and 4 diverse participants — a student, a worker, a parent, and a retiree — were drawn from them for in-depth interviews. The researchers used a modified survey questionnaire as the primary research instrument, administering structured surveys to capture consumer evaluations of service quality, hygiene, portion size, affordability, atmosphere, and accessibility, and conducting structured interviews to explore their lived experiences and perspectives. The collected quantitative data were analyzed using Arithmetic Mean, Frequency Distribution, and Percentage to determine the influence of non-taste factors. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data to identify recurring patterns and insights related to consumer loyalty.

RESEARCH MATERIAL

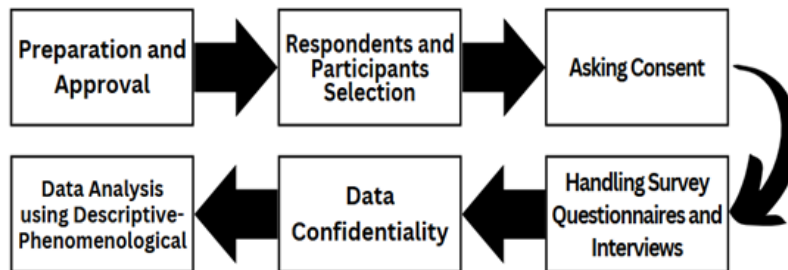
The researchers used a modified survey questionnaire as the primary research instrument, with items developed to reflect the six identified non-taste factors: service quality, hygiene, portion size, affordability, atmosphere, and accessibility. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections, including respondent profiling, which gathered information such as age, sex, occupation, and frequency of dining at carinderias; 30 positively stated items measuring the influence of non-taste factors on consumer loyalty; and 30 items exploring how these factors lost significance when dishes were palatable, all rated using a 4-point Likert scale from strongly agree (4) to strongly disagree (1). A structured interview guide, developed



KAALAM: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

by the researchers for the qualitative phase, was used to collect detailed insights into how participants perceived the relationship between food palatability and non-taste factors, focusing on the lived experiences of regular carinderia consumers. Data collection was done through a combination of face-to-face and online surveys using Google Forms, and face-to-face interviews with four (4) selected participants to ensure convenience, clarity, and depth. To ensure validity and reliability, the instruments were reviewed by experts in Marketing, Mathematics or Statistics, English, Social Science, and ABM, who assessed the tools' relevance, accuracy, clarity, and alignment with business and cultural considerations.

DATA COLLECTION



Before conducting the study, the researchers secured approval from the academic adviser and institutional review board, and the research instruments—survey questionnaires and interview guides—were reviewed by experts, including a Marketing teacher, a Mathematics or Statistics teacher, an English teacher or Grammarian, a Social Science teacher, and an ABM teacher. For the quantitative phase, 40 respondents were selected through purposive sampling based on their regular patronage of carinderias, while for the qualitative phase, 4 diverse participants—student, worker, parent, and retiree—were chosen from the initial respondents based on demographic variation and frequency of visits. Prior to data collection, a comprehensive informed consent form was distributed physically or electronically, detailing the study's purpose, confidentiality terms, and the voluntary nature of participation. Data was gathered using modified survey questionnaires via face-to-face surveys and Google Forms for the quantitative phase, and face-to-face structured interviews for the qualitative phase, with interviews being audio-recorded with participant consent for transcription and analysis. All collected data was treated with strict confidentiality, stored securely, anonymized, and accessible only to the researchers and academic adviser, while descriptive statistics were used for analyzing survey data and the descriptive-phenomenological approach was applied to identify themes in the qualitative data.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The researchers prioritized the participants' safety, well-being, and rights throughout the study, ensuring that no harm came to them during the research process. By ethical standards, the following principles were strictly followed:

Autonomy. The researchers ensure that all participants have complete autonomy over their involvement in the study. Before participating, each individual is provided with an informed consent form that outlines the purpose of the study, the procedures followed, any potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Participants are encouraged to ask questions and given ample time to consider their participation, ensuring they make an informed, voluntary decision.



KAALAM: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Confidentiality. The confidentiality of all participants is maintained throughout the study. Personal information is securely stored, and identifiable data are excluded from any public presentation of results. Only authorized researchers have access to this information; all records are strictly confidential. Data are anonymized to protect the identity of the participants, ensuring their privacy is respected at all stages of the research.

Informed Consent. Informed consent is a fundamental principle in ethical research, ensuring that participants are fully aware of the study's nature, purpose, and potential outcomes. The researchers ensure that participants receive comprehensive information about the research, including the research questions, the identity of the researchers, potential risks and benefits, and the expected results.

Consent is obtained through a clear, written agreement, and participants are assured that their data remain confidential. Access to identifiable information is strictly limited to those directly involved in the study.

Voluntary Participation. Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. No participant is coerced or pressured into taking part. The researchers clarify that participants can discontinue their involvement at any point during the study without any obligation to provide reasons or face negative consequences. This principle ensures that participants feel free to withdraw from the study at their discretion, without fear of reprisal.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Extent of Influence of Non-Taste Factors on Consumer Loyalty in *Carinderias*

Table 1

Influence of Non-Taste Factors on Consumer Loyalty in Carinderias

Indicators	Total Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Service Quality	3.60	Non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.
Hygiene	3.63	Non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.
Portion Size	3.66	Non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.
Affordability	3.71	Non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.
Atmosphere	3.70	Non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.
Accessibility	3.67	Non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.
Grand Mean	3.66	All non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty.

For Research Question 1, the results in Table 1 reveal that all non-taste factors strongly influence consumer loyalty in *carinderias*, as shown by their mean scores ranging from 3.60 to 3.71 on a 4-point



KAALAM: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Likert scale. Affordability received the highest mean score (3.71), followed closely by atmosphere (3.70) and accessibility (3.67), suggesting that consumers value budget-friendly meals, a comfortable dining environment, and convenient locations. Portion size (3.66) and hygiene (3.63) also received high ratings, indicating that generous servings and cleanliness are essential in choosing where to eat. Although service quality had the lowest mean (3.60), it still shows a strong influence, highlighting that customer service enhances the dining experience. With a grand mean of 3.66, the findings imply that while taste is important, non-taste factors collectively play a critical role in shaping consumer loyalty, and carinderia owners should improve these elements to maintain and attract customers.

II. Extent of Influence of Non-Taste Factors on Consumer Loyalty when Dishes are Perceived as Palatable

Table 2

Influence of Non-Taste Factors on Consumer Loyalty when Dishes are Perceived as Palatable

Indicators	Total Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Service Quality	3.29	Non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.
Hygiene	3.15	Non-taste factors slightly influence consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.
Portion Size	3.25	Non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.
Affordability	3.39	Non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.
Atmosphere	3.25	Non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.
Accessibility	3.34	Non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.
Grand Mean	3.28	All non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are palatable.

For Research Question 2, the results in Table 2 show that non-taste factors have minimal or no influence on consumer loyalty when dishes are perceived as palatable, with mean scores ranging from 3.15 to 3.39 and a grand mean of 3.28 on a 4-point Likert scale. Affordability (3.39) and accessibility (3.34) received the highest ratings, suggesting that while pricing and convenience are still considered, their influence is reduced when food quality is satisfactory. Service quality (3.29), portion size (3.25), and atmosphere (3.25) received similar ratings, indicating that these aspects hold less importance when dishes meet taste expectations. Hygiene, with the lowest score (3.15), shows that cleanliness retains slightly more influence than other non-taste factors even when food is palatable. These findings imply that food palatability is the main driver of consumer loyalty in this context, and *carinderia* owners should maintain food quality while ensuring non-taste factors meet basic consumer expectations.



III. Perceived Relationship Between Food Palatability and Non-Taste Factors in Consumer Loyalty to *Carinderia*

Table 3

Perceived Relationship Between Food Palatability and Non-Taste Factors in Consumer Loyalty to Carinderia

Major Themes	Core Ideas	Descriptors
The Interplay Between Food Palatability and Non-Taste Factors	Taste as a Primary Driver Non-Taste Factors as a Reinforcement	General Variant

For Research Question 3, the interplay between food palatability and non-taste factors reveals that both elements influence consumer loyalty to *carinderias*, though in varying degrees. Consumers perceived food palatability—particularly taste and quality—as the most dominant factor, while non-taste elements such as hygiene, service quality, portion size, affordability, atmosphere, and accessibility serve to enhance the overall dining experience. This dynamic suggests that while both factors are important, taste holds a more central role in shaping consumers' decisions. As participants described, their continued patronage largely depends on the food being delicious, though this does not diminish the role of other factors in contributing to a favorable experience.

Non-taste factors, however, were identified as reinforcements that can strengthen or weaken loyalty depending on their presence or absence. Participants P1, P2, and P4 mentioned that cleanliness, customer service, and a pleasant atmosphere made them more likely to return. These insights support the idea that non-taste factors, while secondary, are critical in reinforcing consumer loyalty to *carinderias*.

CONCLUSION

In light of the study's findings, food palatability remains the foremost driver of consumer loyalty to *carinderias* in General Santos City, with consumers placing greater weight on taste when deciding to return. However, non-taste factors—such as service quality, hygiene, affordability, portion size, atmosphere, and accessibility—play a reinforcing role that either strengthens or weakens loyalty. While highly palatable food can compensate for minor flaws in non-taste elements, serious lapses, especially in hygiene and service, can deter repeat visits. Among these, affordability stands out as the most influential non-taste factor, reflecting the practical concerns of budget-conscious consumers.

Despite these conclusions, the study opens space for future research on emotional and social influences that may sustain consumer loyalty beyond taste and service. Broadening the research scope to include diverse cultural contexts and longitudinal studies will provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of consumer loyalty dynamics in *carinderias*.



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