

Examining Customer Loyalty in AYCE Dining: A Qualitative Investigation of Experience-Driven Factors

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Abstract

The all-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurant model has gained considerable popularity by offering unlimited food at a fixed price, appealing to customers who seek variety, value, and social engagement. However, customer loyalty in AYCE settings remains underexplored, as existing loyalty frameworks predominantly emphasize service quality and customer satisfaction, while neglecting the experiential dimensions that influence long-term retention. This study addresses this gap by identifying key psychological, social, and hedonic factors that shape customer loyalty in AYCE restaurants and by proposing a novel conceptual model grounded in experiential theory. Employing a qualitative exploratory approach with grounded theory methodology, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation in AYCE restaurants located across West Java, Indonesia. A total of 25 participants—20 customers and five industry practitioners—offered insights into customer behavior and operational dynamics. The findings highlight three primary drivers of loyalty in the AYCE context: psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance. Customers emphasized the importance of dining autonomy and unpressured eating environments, while social interactions enhanced emotional connection and brand attachment. Perceived abundance reinforced hedonic satisfaction and value-for-money perceptions; however, misalignment between variety and quality led to dissatisfaction, emphasizing the importance of balancing both. The study proposes a conceptual model where customer satisfaction serves as a mediating factor between experience-based motivators and loyalty outcomes. These insights expand the theoretical scope of experience-based loyalty and offer actionable recommendations for AYCE restaurant operators aiming to enhance customer retention through experience-centric strategies..

Keywords: Customer Loyalty, All You Can Eat (AYCE), Psychological Comfort, Social Bonding, Perceived Food Abundance, Hedonic Dining, Consumer Experience Theory

INTRODUCTION

The all-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurant model has significantly transformed the dining landscape by offering unlimited food at a fixed price, attracting consumers drawn to variety, perceived value, and social interaction (Campaner & Ramos, 2023; Yan & Felicen, 2021). A central appeal of this format lies in the perceived abundance of food, which enhances customer satisfaction and encourages repeat visits (Repatacodo, 2024). Unlike traditional à la carte dining, AYCE experiences emphasize hedonic consumption, where unrestricted eating enhances enjoyment and perceived value (Ma & Hsiao, 2019). According to prospect theory, customers assess value based on the ratio between perceived gain and monetary cost, making AYCE particularly appealing when expectations of abundance are fulfilled (Rahman et al., 2020). Nonetheless, maintaining a balance between quantity and quality remains critical. When the variety of offerings fails to meet standards of freshness, taste, or presentation, dissatisfaction may arise and negatively impact loyalty (Lin, 2018; Repatacodo, 2024).

Beyond food-related considerations, social dynamics and restaurant ambiance are instrumental in shaping customer experiences and loyalty. AYCE restaurants are often chosen for group dining, celebrations, and communal occasions, reinforcing the role of emotional and social bonds in customer retention (Campaner & Ramos, 2023). A well-designed, welcoming environment

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strengthens these connections by enhancing the overall dining experience and establishing positive emotional associations (Yan & Felicen, 2021).

As competition among AYCE establishments intensifies, strategies to foster customer retention must extend beyond conventional emphases on pricing, food quality, and service efficiency. Emerging research suggests that psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance are critical experience-driven factors influencing customer loyalty (Akhoondnejad et al., 2021). For instance, psychological comfort arises from the ability to dine at one's own pace, free from portion restrictions or time-related pressures (Anggraeni et al., 2023). Similarly, social bonding occurs through shared meals and collective dining rituals, which foster emotional attachment and align with social identity theory, wherein group interactions strengthen customer-brand relationships (Akhoondnejad et al., 2021; Anggraeni et al., 2023).

Perceived food abundance, meanwhile, reinforces both hedonic satisfaction and value-for-money perceptions, further anchoring customer loyalty. However, such abundance must be matched by quality, as a discrepancy between variety and food quality can diminish the positive impact on satisfaction (Akhoondnejad et al., 2021). Given these unique dynamics, traditional loyalty models—rooted in service quality and transactional satisfaction—may not fully explain customer retention in the AYCE context. Although AYCE restaurants continue to grow in popularity, academic inquiry into loyalty within this dining format remains limited. Existing studies tend to emphasize service-related variables and overlook the experiential and emotional aspects that define AYCE dining (Agrawal & Mittal, 2019; Repatacodo, 2024). Unlike conventional formats, AYCE emphasizes autonomy, indulgence, and group interaction, suggesting the need for a tailored conceptual framework (Edeh et al., 2021; Hussein, 2018; Nejati & Moghaddam, 2013).

Classical loyalty theories such as the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) and the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) have been widely used to explain post-consumption behavior. However, these models lack the experiential lens needed to interpret AYCE customer behavior. In contrast, more contemporary theories like Consumer Experience Theory (Schmitt, 2000) provide a more relevant foundation, emphasizing emotional, sensory, and hedonistic factors (Ma et al., 2014; Njelita & Anyasor, 2020). AYCE dining inherently involves autonomy in portion control, flexible dining pace, and the psychological satisfaction of abundance, all of which deeply influence loyalty (Kusdiantoro, 2023; Mulyawan et al., 2022). Although recent studies acknowledge the importance of these experiential factors, there remains a gap in integrating them into a unified conceptual model tailored to the AYCE context. To address this, the present study develops a qualitative, experience-based loyalty model grounded in Consumer Experience Theory, focusing on psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance as key loyalty drivers.

Employing a grounded theory approach, this research captures in-depth customer experiences through semi-structured interviews and participant observations in AYCE restaurants across West Java, Indonesia. Unlike previous research that primarily relies on quantitative survey data, this study adopts a bottom-up methodology to derive loyalty constructs organically from the field. In doing so, it contributes to theoretical development and provides actionable insights for AYCE restaurant operators seeking to optimize loyalty through experiential engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer Loyalty in the Restaurant Industry

Customer loyalty is widely recognized as a critical factor driving repeat patronage, brand advocacy, and long-term business sustainability (Akhoondnejad et al., 2021; Uddin, 2019). In conventional restaurant settings, loyalty has been predominantly explained through frameworks that prioritize service quality, food quality, pricing, and overall customer satisfaction. Among the most established models is SERVQUAL, which evaluates service performance across five key dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility (Ji et al., 2023). Another frequently employed theoretical lens is the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT), which posits that loyalty is reinforced when customers perceive that their dining experiences meet or exceed initial expectations. This alignment results in heightened satisfaction, increased intention to revisit, and favorable word-of-mouth referrals (Uthaisar et al., 2023). While these models offer robust explanations in traditional restaurant environments, they often fail to fully capture the distinct consumption patterns and loyalty drivers in all-you-can-eat (AYCE) contexts.

Unlike à la carte dining—where consumers often base satisfaction on specific dish quality or brand affinity—AYCE experiences are characterized by a complex interplay of utilitarian motivations (seeking value and quantity) and hedonic pleasures (enjoyment, indulgence, freedom) (Jeong et al., 2019; Josiam & Henry, 2014; Yacoub et al., 2021). In such settings, perceived value-for-money, variety, and unrestricted access to food often outweigh other considerations. Research shows that the ability of AYCE establishments to deliver a lively

dining atmosphere and diverse menu offerings plays a pivotal role in cultivating customer satisfaction and loyalty (Alonso et al., 2013; Ivkov et al., 2014; Kincaid et al., 2010; Shishan et al., 2021). Beyond product and service attributes, social and digital dimensions of customer experience have emerged as vital in shaping loyalty within AYCE contexts. Increasingly, customers rely on electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and social media engagement to share and validate dining experiences, extending brand interactions beyond the restaurant space (Premordia & Gál, 2023). Positive digital exposure enhances the restaurant's perceived credibility and draws in new customers while reinforcing loyalty among existing patrons (Keane & Morschett, 2016).

Furthermore, the communal nature of AYCE dining—often chosen for family gatherings, celebrations, or social meetups—adds another layer to loyalty formation. Group dining experiences foster emotional attachment and a sense of belonging, which deepen the customer-restaurant relationship over time (Goldsmith et al., 2024). Unlike traditional models that emphasize individualistic or transactional satisfaction, loyalty in AYCE dining is often shaped by collective experiences, highlighting the need to incorporate experiential, psychological, and social factors into the broader understanding of customer retention in this unique restaurant format.

The Unique Characteristics of AYCE Restaurants

All-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurants fundamentally reshape consumer perceptions of value and satisfaction, distinguishing themselves from traditional dining establishments through their emphasis on variety, quantity, and pricing flexibility (Christian, 2022). Unlike conventional restaurants, where customer loyalty is often grounded in specific menu items, chef quality, or brand prestige, AYCE dining appeals to a broader set of motivations. These include the freedom to explore unlimited food options, the absence of portion restrictions, and the ability to customize the dining experience based on individual preferences. Such characteristics make AYCE venues especially attractive to customers seeking both value maximization and experiential gratification (Ardiningrum & Prawoto, 2023). This experience-centric appeal shifts the focus of customer retention strategies away from traditional concerns with food quality alone toward a more holistic model that incorporates social interaction, psychological comfort, and perceived abundance. The opportunity to indulge in a wide variety of dishes without constraints generates a unique psychological response, reinforcing feelings of satisfaction, autonomy, and indulgence—all of which contribute to increased revisit intentions and emotional loyalty.

A particularly distinguishing feature of AYCE dining is the absence of portion control, which plays a critical role in shaping customer expectations. Unlike à la carte formats, where portion size is predefined and consumption is externally limited, AYCE empowers diners with freedom of choice and control over consumption pace. Consequently, customer satisfaction in this setting is often derived not only from the taste or presentation of the food but also from the perceived abundance and unrestrained access to menu offerings (Ardiningrum & Prawoto, 2023). This departure from conventional consumption patterns challenges the assumptions embedded in traditional service quality frameworks such as SERVQUAL, which primarily emphasize transactional elements like service efficiency, food quality, and reliability (Grummon et al., 2021). While these factors remain relevant, they are insufficient to fully explain loyalty dynamics in AYCE settings, where emotional, psychological, and social drivers play an equally significant—if not more dominant—role. In response, AYCE restaurant operators must recalibrate their approach to customer satisfaction and loyalty building. Rather than solely focusing on the mechanical delivery of service and food, operators should design dining experiences that emphasize variety, freedom, comfort, and social connectivity. This strategic shift involves curating menu diversity, ensuring a relaxed dining atmosphere, and embracing group-oriented marketing approaches—elements that collectively foster long-term customer engagement and competitive differentiation in the increasingly saturated AYCE market..

Psychological Comfort and Customer Loyalty in AYCE

Psychological comfort has emerged as a pivotal determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty, particularly within experiential dining environments such as all-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurants. In contrast to conventional dining formats, AYCE settings empower customers to eat at their own pace, free from portion constraints or social pressure, thereby fostering a relaxed, autonomy-driven atmosphere (Pelletier & Collier, 2018). This unpressured environment enhances the overall dining experience by aligning with customers' intrinsic desire for freedom, flexibility, and personal control—features largely absent in traditional à la carte models. Empirical studies indicate that positive emotional experiences during dining significantly influence revisit intentions, highlighting the critical role of psychological comfort in fostering long-term customer

loyalty (Ji et al., 2022). This finding resonates with Self-Determination Theory (Njenga, 2010), which posits that individuals are more likely to engage in and remain committed to activities that offer autonomy, competence, and intrinsic satisfaction. Within the AYCE context, the freedom to choose from a variety of food options and determine one's portion sizes addresses these fundamental psychological needs, resulting in heightened emotional satisfaction and repeat patronage.

Beyond the autonomy of food selection, the physical dining environment and quality of service further shape the psychological comfort experienced by customers. Elements such as spatial layout, ambient conditions (e.g., lighting, noise levels, cleanliness), and staff attentiveness collectively contribute to how diners perceive the space, not merely as a venue for consumption but as a comfortable, socially inviting setting (Rajaguru et al., 2024). A welcoming, well-organized restaurant layout can mitigate stress, promote ease of movement, and facilitate social interaction, all of which reinforce emotional attachment to the venue. Notably, customers are more likely to associate such emotionally positive experiences with brand trust and loyalty, particularly in settings that meet or exceed expectations for comfort and hospitality. As a result, psychological comfort functions not only as a driver of immediate satisfaction but also as a catalyst for habitual dining behavior and brand advocacy over time. For AYCE operators, recognizing and optimizing these psychological dynamics is crucial. Designing service strategies that enhance customer autonomy, while maintaining a balance between operational efficiency and guest comfort, can lead to more emotionally resonant experiences. Ultimately, cultivating psychological comfort in AYCE environments is not merely an operational consideration, but a strategic imperative for sustaining long-term customer loyalty in an increasingly experience-driven dining marketplace.

Social Bonding and Emotional Attachment in AYCE Loyalty

All-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurants function not only as food service venues but also as communal social spaces, distinctly different from traditional dining formats that often emphasize individual meals or private experiences. A growing body of research affirms that dining is inherently a social activity, where customer satisfaction is derived not only from food quality but also from interpersonal engagement, particularly in the presence of family, friends, or colleagues (Javed et al., 2021). In AYCE settings, these shared experiences are amplified by the open, inclusive, and unrestrictive nature of the dining format, which facilitates collective enjoyment and group cohesion. Such social dynamics significantly enrich the dining experience by fostering emotional connections that extend beyond the immediate act of consumption. These interactions play a critical role in shaping repeat patronage and customer loyalty. The Social Identity Theory (Nawaz et al., 2023) offers a relevant framework here, suggesting that individuals develop a sense of belonging and attachment through group-based interactions and shared rituals, such as communal dining, which, in turn, strengthen their emotional ties to the establishment.

Empirical studies further reinforce the view that a sense of community cultivated in AYCE environments contributes to heightened emotional engagement, ultimately encouraging customers to return. In many cases, positive group dining experiences generate affective loyalty that exceeds the influence of service speed or pricing accuracy (Javed et al., 2021). This suggests that, in the AYCE context, loyalty is not merely the outcome of satisfaction with a transaction but is rooted in emotional resonance and social reinforcement. In addition to social identity formation, emotional attachment to a restaurant has emerged as a powerful and often underestimated driver of loyalty (Riverola et al., 2022). Studies have shown that social interactions within AYCE environments foster relational benefits, such as trust, affiliation, and comfort, which frequently surpass the impact of functional service metrics (Grigoropoulou, 2021; Oktadiana et al., 2020). These emotional bonds develop organically through consistent and meaningful shared experiences, creating a loyal customer base that is less price-sensitive and more engaged.

Despite its evident importance, social bonding is often absent in traditional loyalty models, which tend to focus on individual satisfaction, service performance, or cognitive evaluations of value (Nawaz et al., 2023). For AYCE operators, recognizing the social dimensions of dining behavior opens new opportunities to strengthen customer loyalty through strategic design of group-friendly environments, celebratory promotions, and community-oriented branding. Incorporating social bonding into AYCE loyalty frameworks provides a more nuanced understanding of customer motivation, highlighting that dining decisions are shaped not only by personal taste or value-seeking but also by the emotional satisfaction derived from communal and shared experiences. These insights affirm that emotional and social engagement are not ancillary—but central—to sustaining loyalty in the experiential AYCE context.

Perceived Food Abundance and the Hedonic Dining Experience

The concept of perceived food abundance plays a central role in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty in all-you-can-eat (AYCE) dining environments. Unlike traditional à la carte establishments, where portion sizes are predetermined and consumption is limited, AYCE restaurants offer unrestricted access to a diverse array of food options. This not only satisfies utilitarian expectations of value-for-money but also reinforces the hedonic dimension of dining, in which pleasure, indulgence, and freedom outweigh nutritional or portion-based constraints (Sangpikul, 2023). Customers entering AYCE venues typically anticipate variety and plenitude, which enhances their perceived value and contributes to a more gratifying, self-directed dining experience. However, this perception of abundance must be carefully managed. Research suggests that when variety is high but food quality is low, customers experience a dissonance between expectation and reality, resulting in dissatisfaction and weakened loyalty (Alotaibi & Alshiha, 2021; Azman & Majid, 2023). Therefore, AYCE operators must strike a deliberate balance between menu diversity and consistent quality, ensuring that the abundance offered aligns with customers' experiential standards.

Beyond the physical availability of food, psychological factors are equally vital in reinforcing AYCE loyalty. According to Self-Determination Theory, individuals derive greater satisfaction when they experience autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Kurniawan & Chang, 2024). In the AYCE context, this translates to the ability to explore and choose freely among food options, without imposed limits. This sense of empowerment and control over the dining experience fosters deeper emotional gratification, elevating the perceived value of the meal. Moreover, studies indicate that the psychological gratification of freedom and abundance can strengthen emotional bonds with a restaurant. The pleasure of unlimited access, paired with the enjoyment of personalized choices, generates positive affective associations that encourage repeat visits and long-term patronage (Đjekić et al., 2016). In this way, AYCE dining supports both hedonic consumption and experiential satisfaction, positioning abundance not just as a functional attribute but as a symbol of generosity, hospitality, and indulgence. To remain competitive, AYCE operators must therefore go beyond traditional loyalty metrics—such as price fairness and service speed—and adopt a multi-dimensional retention strategy. This includes curating visually appealing, high-quality selections, managing menu rotations to maintain interest, and reinforcing customers' sense of control and indulgence. By integrating perceived abundance, autonomy, and emotional engagement into loyalty-building efforts, AYCE restaurants can cultivate a stronger, more resilient customer base anchored in experiential value rather than transactional exchange alone.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to develop a contextually grounded model of customer loyalty in all-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurants. Considering the experiential and psychological nature of AYCE dining, grounded theory methodology was adopted to facilitate the construction of a theory derived inductively from empirical data, rather than relying on pre-existing theoretical models. This approach is particularly appropriate for investigating loyalty drivers that extend beyond traditional service metrics, such as psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance. Data collection involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with two participant groups: AYCE customers (n = 20–25), selected through purposive sampling to ensure variation in demographic characteristics, dining frequency, and dining motivations; and industry practitioners (n = 5–10), including restaurant managers, chefs, and operational staff with direct experience in customer interaction and retention strategies. To enrich the interview data, participant observation was also conducted in selected AYCE restaurants, enabling real-time documentation of customer behaviors, group dynamics, and experiential patterns during the dining process.

A theoretical sampling strategy guided the participant selection and data collection process, which continued iteratively until theoretical saturation was achieved—that is, until additional data no longer yielded new conceptual insights. The data were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory procedures, beginning with open coding to identify initial concepts related to AYCE customer loyalty. This was followed by axial coding to explore relationships between categories, such as links between dining autonomy and repeat patronage, and concluded with selective coding to integrate and refine the core categories into a conceptual model of loyalty in AYCE settings. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted, allowing participants to review and verify the interpretations of their responses. Triangulation was also employed by cross-referencing interview data with observational findings and existing literature to ensure analytic rigor. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. All participants were fully informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review board (IRB), and informed consent was secured prior to data collection. Through this systematic and ethically sound methodology, the

study aimed to generate a theoretically robust and empirically grounded model of customer loyalty that reflects the unique experiential dimensions of AYCE dining environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Customer Profile

This study was conducted in West Java, Indonesia, focusing on AYCE (All-You-Can-Eat) restaurants located in major urban areas where the popularity of this dining format has significantly increased. A total of 25 participants were involved in the data collection process, comprising 20 customers and five industry practitioners. The customer participants were purposefully selected to represent a diverse range of demographic profiles, dining behaviors, and motivations for choosing AYCE restaurants. Meanwhile, the industry practitioners—including restaurant managers and operational staff—provided insider perspectives on customer loyalty, retention strategies, and operational challenges specific to the AYCE context in West Java. The customer sample reflected notable demographic diversity across age, gender, income, and occupation. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 55 years old, with 30% aged 18–25, 40% aged 26–35, and the remaining 30% aged 36–55. Gender distribution was evenly split between male and female respondents. In terms of income level, 40% identified as low-income earners (< IDR 5 million/month), 45% as middle-income (IDR 5–12 million/month), and 15% as high-income earners (> IDR 12 million/month). Occupationally, the participants included university students (25%), private and public sector employees (50%), entrepreneurs (15%), and other professions (10%).

Beyond demographic characteristics, the sample also displayed diverse dining behaviors and motivational patterns. In terms of dining frequency, 40% of respondents were classified as frequent diners (visiting AYCE restaurants at least once per month), while 60% were occasional diners (visiting less than once a month or primarily for special occasions). Three dominant motivations emerged for choosing AYCE dining: 1) Perceived value-for-money (50%) – participants aimed to maximize food consumption at a fixed price, 2) Variety-seeking behavior (30%) – diners were drawn to the extensive range of menu offerings, and 3) Social dining experience (20%) – AYCE restaurants were preferred as venues for family gatherings, social events, and celebrations. Respondents also differed in their preferred dining companions, with 45% typically dining with family, 40% with friends, 10% with colleagues, and only 5% choosing to dine alone. The duration of each visit varied: 15% of respondents spent less than 60 minutes, 50% stayed for 60–90 minutes, and 35% remained for more than 90 minutes per visit. These patterns underscore the experiential and social dimensions of AYCE dining, highlighting that the appeal extends well beyond food consumption into areas such as leisure, bonding, and emotional satisfaction.

Table 1. Customer Dining Preferences

Category	Details
Dining Frequency	Frequent (≥1x/month) – 40%, Occasional (<1x/month) – 60%
Dining Motivation	Value-for-money (50%), Variety-seeking (30%), Social dining (20%)
Preferred Dining Group	Family (45%), Friends (40%), Colleagues (10%), Solo (5%)
Time Spent per Visit	<60 minutes (15%), 60–90 minutes (50%), >90 minutes (35%)
Preferred Features	Food variety (60%), Comfortable ambiance (25%), Group promotions (15%)

Source: Research data, 2024

Industry Practitioner Profile

To complement customer perspectives, the study also incorporated insights from five industry practitioners: three restaurant managers and two operational staff from AYCE restaurants in Bandung, Bogor, and Bekasi. Their experience levels varied, with 40% having 3–5 years of experience and 60% having more than six years in the AYCE sector. Their responses provided a comprehensive view of the operational challenges and customer loyalty drivers within the AYCE industry. Practitioners emphasized several key factors affecting customer retention and operational sustainability, including 1) Balancing unlimited food offerings with profitability, ensuring that food waste and portion control strategies are managed efficiently; 2) Adapting to shifting consumer preferences, particularly regarding healthier food options and premium dining experiences; 3) Integrating digital engagement strategies, such as social media marketing, influencer partnerships, and online reservation systems, to attract and retain customers. Their insights highlight the complex interplay between customer expectations and business operations in the AYCE sector, reinforcing the importance of strategic menu planning, targeted promotions, and service innovation in maintaining competitive advantage.

Psychological Comfort as a Loyalty Driver

A significant factor influencing customer retention in AYCE restaurants is the sense of psychological comfort that arises from an unpressured and autonomous dining experience. Interviewees frequently emphasized that AYCE settings allow them to eat at their own pace, free from time constraints or portion limitations, fostering a relaxed and satisfying atmosphere. One respondent, a 29-year-old office worker, stated:

"I love AYCE restaurants because I do not feel rushed. Unlike à la carte dining, I can take my time, enjoy the food, and not worry about portions or extra charges."

This aligns with self-determination theory, which suggests that individuals prefer environments with autonomy and control over their actions. Observational data confirmed this, as customers were seen spending prolonged periods at their tables, socializing, and enjoying the flexibility of the AYCE setting.

Most AYCE restaurants in West Java apply a 90-minute dining time limit, which was widely regarded by respondents as sufficiently long to enjoy their meals without feeling rushed. A 23-year-old university student noted:

"A 90-minute session is just right. It gives me enough time to try everything I want without feeling like I need to rush, especially when dining with friends."

Restaurant practitioners also affirmed that the 90-minute policy balances customer satisfaction with operational efficiency, ensuring table turnover while maintaining a positive dining experience. A restaurant manager explained:

"We set a 90-minute limit because it allows customers to enjoy their meals while ensuring that other guests do not have to wait too long for a table. Most customers finish within this time, and only a few feel it is too short."

Beyond time flexibility, other elements contribute to psychological comfort, including seating arrangements, ambiance, and service quality. Many respondents highlighted that a spacious and well-organized dining area enhances the AYCE experience, making them feel more comfortable and less restricted. This aligns with the fact that restaurant ambiance is crucial in shaping customer perceptions and dining satisfaction. Table 2 summarizes the key elements of psychological comfort identified in interviews and observations:

Table 2. Psychological Comfort Factors in AYCE Dining	
Comfort Elements	Customer Perception (%)
Absence of portion control	75% find it stress-relieving
Flexible dining pace	65% enjoy eating at their own rhythm
Comfortable seating & ambiance	50% mention it enhances the experience
Friendly service	40% link it to return intention

Source: Research data, 2025

Observations at three AYCE restaurants in Bandung and Bekasi confirmed that customers who felt comfortable and unhurried tended to stay longer and were more likely to return. Staff members also noted that repeat customers often commented on the importance of a relaxed dining environment in their decision to revisit. Additionally, service attentiveness was found to influence perceptions of comfort. Customers valued staff who were present but not intrusive, ensuring that tables were cleared promptly without making diners feel pressured to leave. The findings suggest that psychological comfort is critical in fostering emotional attachment and repeat patronage. Customers who associate an AYCE restaurant with a stress-free, welcoming environment are likelier to develop a positive emotional connection to the brand, increasing their likelihood of return visits. These insights contribute to experience-based loyalty models, demonstrating that customer retention in AYCE settings is not solely about food quality but also about creating a psychologically comfortable dining atmosphere.

Social Bonding and Emotional Attachment

The role of social interaction in fostering customer loyalty emerged as a key theme in this study. Many respondents emphasized that AYCE restaurants are preferred venues for family gatherings, group celebrations, and casual meetups with friends, reinforcing that dining is a fundamentally social activity. This finding aligns with social identity theory, which posits that individuals develop emotional attachments through shared experiences in group settings. One respondent, a 34-year-old entrepreneur, explained:

"When I eat at an AYCE restaurant, it is rarely just about the food. It is about the experience—laughing, sharing meals, and spending quality time with friends or family. That is what makes me want to come back."

Industry practitioners also highlighted that restaurants with communal seating arrangements, group promotions, or event-based dining themes tend to see higher repeat patronage. A restaurant manager noted:

"We often get large groups celebrating birthdays or company gatherings. That is why we offer group discounts and private room options—it encourages people to choose our restaurant over others."

This indicates that AYCE customer loyalty is driven by individual satisfaction and the restaurant's ability to facilitate meaningful social interactions. Customers return to restaurants with an engaging group experience, reinforcing emotional attachment and habitual patronage. Table 3 below summarizes the key social bonding factors that influence customer loyalty in AYCE restaurants:

Table 3. Social Bonding and AYCE Loyalty

Social Factor	Impact on Loyalty (%)
Group dining experience	70% prefer AYCE for social gatherings
Celebratory atmosphere	55% choose AYCE for birthdays/events
Restaurant layout (group-friendly)	45% link seating arrangements to revisit the intention

Source: Research data, 2025

Observations in several AYCE restaurants in Bandung and Bogor confirmed that most customers dined in groups rather than alone. Large tables, buffet-style serving stations, and designated event areas facilitated interactive dining experiences, further strengthening social connections. Additionally, interviews revealed that group-oriented promotions (e.g., "pay for four, eat for five" deals) were highly attractive to customers, encouraging them to choose AYCE over other restaurant formats. A university student explained:

"My friends and I always look for AYCE places that offer group discounts. It makes eating together more fun and affordable."

The findings suggest that social interaction is a powerful motivator for repeat patronage in AYCE restaurants. Customers who associate an AYCE venue with shared experiences, celebrations, and bonding moments are likelier to develop emotional loyalty beyond food satisfaction. For AYCE operators, investing in group-friendly facilities, event-based marketing, and promotional packages can significantly enhance customer retention and brand attachment.

Perceived Food Abundance and Hedonic Satisfaction

The perception of food abundance emerged as a critical factor in shaping customer loyalty in AYCE restaurants. Many participants emphasized that the unlimited food selection fosters a sense of indulgence and maximizes value for money, making AYCE dining a compelling alternative to conventional à la carte restaurants. This aligns with the hedonic consumption perspective, suggesting that customers derive pleasure from food quality and unrestricted access to diverse meal options. A 26-year-old office worker from Bandung stated:

"I feel like I am getting the best deal when I can eat as much as I want. It is not just about the food, but the experience of choosing freely from a wide selection."

Observational data supported this, as many diners were seen making multiple trips to the buffet station, carefully selecting from various dishes, and experimenting with different food combinations. This behavior reinforces the idea that abundance enhances the dining experience by providing freedom and indulgence.

However, participants also noted that perceived abundance must match food quality. Customers expressed frustration when a restaurant offered a large selection but compromised on taste, freshness, or ingredient quality. This finding supports prospect theory, which explains that consumers assess value relative to expectations, and any mismatch between perceived value and experience leads to dissatisfaction. A 32-year-old entrepreneur from Bogor shared:

"Some AYCE restaurants have many options, but if the quality is not good, I would rather go to a place with fewer dishes but better taste."

Industry practitioners highlighted the delicate balance between cost efficiency and delivering a perception of abundance, which remains a strategic challenge for AYCE operators. One restaurant manager in Bekasi explained:

"We have to make sure that customers feel like they have many choices, but at the same time, we cannot compromise on quality. We rotate menus and manage inventory carefully to keep costs under control."

Table 4 below summarizes customer reactions based on the relationship between food variety and quality:

Table 4. Perceived Food Abundance and Customer Perception

Expectation vs. Reality	Customer Reaction (%)
High variety and high quality	85% express high satisfaction
High variety and low quality	40% feel dissatisfied
Low variety and high quality	30% return, but prefer more choices

Source: Research data, 2025

The findings indicate that a restaurant's ability to maintain variety and quality is key to customer loyalty. Customers who perceive receiving high value for money through a well-balanced selection of quality dishes are more likely to become repeat patrons. However, customers may seek alternative dining options if the restaurant fails to meet expectations. This suggests that menu management, ingredient sourcing, and portion control strategies must be optimized to ensure that food variety does not come at the expense of quality. For AYCE operators, these insights highlight the need to refine menu offerings continuously, optimize food preparation standards, and ensure that perceived abundance aligns with actual dining satisfaction. Strategic initiatives such as seasonal menu rotations, premium-tier menu options, and chef-curated specialty dishes can help enhance both variety and quality, fostering long-term customer loyalty.

Discussion

This study explored the key experiential factors influencing customer loyalty in AYCE restaurants in West Java. Unlike traditional restaurant loyalty models emphasizing food quality, pricing, and service efficiency, this study found that psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance play crucial roles in shaping repeat patronage. These findings highlight the experience-driven nature of AYCE dining, where customer retention is not solely based on transactional satisfaction but also on emotional engagement, dining autonomy, and social interactions. Psychological Comfort emerged as a primary determinant of customer loyalty, with respondents expressing a strong preference for unpressured dining experiences. The 90-minute dining time limit, widely adopted by AYCE restaurants, was perceived as adequate for enjoying a meal without feeling rushed. Additionally, freedom from portion restrictions, comfortable seating, and attentive but non-intrusive service enhanced customers' sense of ease, reinforcing their desire to return. This supports self-determination theory, which posits that individuals seek environments where they feel autonomy and control over their choices.

Social Bonding played a significant role in shaping emotional attachment to AYCE restaurants. Many participants viewed AYCE settings as ideal venues for group dining, celebrations, and shared experiences, reinforcing the social identity theory perspective that group associations and communal interactions often drive loyalty. Restaurants that implemented group promotions, event-based dining themes, and communal seating arrangements were more likely to attract repeat customers, emphasizing the need for strategic social engagement initiatives in AYCE settings. Perceived Food Abundance was consistently cited as a major factor in customer retention, with respondents associating AYCE dining with indulgence and value maximization. However, prospect theory explains that when variety is high but food quality is low, customers feel dissatisfied and are less likely to return. Industry practitioners highlighted the operational challenge of balancing menu variety with quality, suggesting that strategic menu curation, seasonal dish rotations, and controlled inventory management are essential to sustaining perceived value without compromising quality.

Based on these findings, this study proposes a conceptual model that integrates psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance as primary determinants of customer loyalty in AYCE restaurants. The model positions customer satisfaction as a mediating factor, linking experiential dimensions to repeat patronage and word-of-mouth recommendations, as in Table 5 and Figure 1.

Table 5. Future Recommendations For Quantitative Study

Latent Variable	Dimensions	Path to Other Variables
Psychological Comfort (PC)	Absence of portion control	PC → Customer Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty
	Flexible dining pace	
	Comfortable ambience	
	Service attentiveness	
Social Bonding (SB)	Group dining experience	SB → Customer Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty
	Celebration and event appeal	
	Restaurant layout for social interaction	
Perceived Food Abundance (PFA)	A variety of food selection	PFA → Customer Satisfaction → Customer Loyalty
	Perceived quality	
	Food presentation and accessibility	
Customer Satisfaction (CS) (Mediator)	Overall experience	CS → Customer Loyalty
	Expectation vs. reality	
	Perceived value-for-money	
Customer Loyalty (CL) (Dependent Variable)	Repeat patronage	Outcome variable
	Positive word-of-mouth (WOM)	
	Emotional attachment to the restaurant	

Source: Research data, 2025

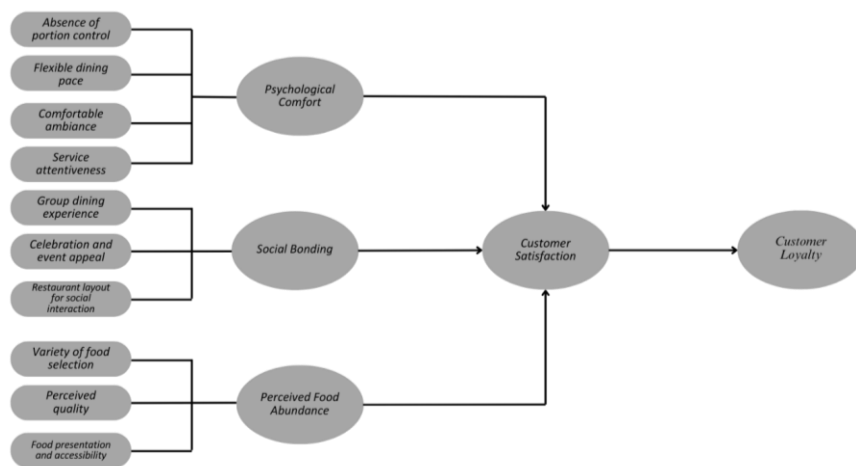


Figure 1. Future Research Model

Source: Research data, 2025

This model contributes to experience-based loyalty research by shifting the focus from traditional service quality metrics to emotional and psychological factors influencing repeat patronage. Future research can validate this framework using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to quantify the strength of these relationships and refine the theoretical model.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

This study contributes to AYCE restaurant loyalty research by shifting the focus from traditional service quality metrics to experiential loyalty drivers. The findings extend existing loyalty models by integrating psychological, social, and hedonic consumption factors, demonstrating that customer retention in AYCE settings is shaped by emotions, comfort, and perceived abundance rather than food quality alone. Furthermore, this study aligns with and expands upon consumer experience theory, emphasizing that memorable dining experiences, rather than mere transactional satisfaction, drive long-term brand attachment. By highlighting the importance of emotional and psychological engagement, this research underscores the multi-dimensional nature of restaurant loyalty in AYCE settings.

For AYCE restaurant operators, these findings provide actionable insights into customer retention strategies. First, **Enhancing Psychological Comfort**: Restaurants should prioritize spacious seating arrangements, stress-free dining environments, and flexible service approaches to reinforce customer autonomy. Implementing reservation-based time slots while ensuring a relaxed ambiance can enhance customer satisfaction. Secondly, **Strengthening Social Engagement**: Restaurants should leverage group-oriented promotions, private dining areas, and celebration packages to attract social diners. Creating interactive dining experiences like chef-curated buffets or seasonal event nights can strengthen customer attachment and word-of-mouth referrals. Third, **Optimizing Menu Variety and Quality Balance**: While high food variety is expected, AYCE operators must ensure consistency in food quality to prevent dissatisfaction and negative reviews. Implementing limited-time specialty dishes, ingredient quality control, and real-time customer feedback loops can help sustain perceived value and menu appeal.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the key factors influencing customer loyalty in all-you-can-eat (AYCE) restaurants in West Java, emphasizing experience-driven determinants rather than traditional quality-based models. The findings revealed that psychological comfort, social bonding, and perceived food abundance are central to customer satisfaction and repeat patronage. Unlike conventional restaurant settings, where loyalty is primarily driven by food quality and service efficiency, AYCE dining experiences foster loyalty through unpressured dining autonomy, social engagement, and the perception of indulgence and value. First, psychological comfort emerged as a primary driver of repeat visits, as customers valued the freedom to control their meal portions, pace, and overall dining experience. The widely adopted 90-minute dining session was perceived as sufficient, reinforcing self-determination theory, which suggests that autonomy in consumption enhances overall

satisfaction. A comfortable restaurant ambiance, spacious seating arrangements, and non-intrusive service further contributed to positive customer experiences. Second, social bonding significantly influenced customer loyalty, as AYCE restaurants were perceived as ideal venues for group dining, celebrations, and shared experiences. This supports social identity theory, which posits that individuals develop emotional attachments to brands through group-based interactions. Restaurants facilitating communal seating, group promotions, and celebratory atmospheres reported higher repeat patronage and word-of-mouth recommendations. Third, perceived food abundance was crucial in reinforcing the sense of indulgence and value for money, motivating customers to return. However, expectation-reality gaps in food variety and quality were found to be potential sources of dissatisfaction, supporting prospect theory, which suggests that perceived losses (in quality) outweigh perceived gains (in quantity). Industry practitioners highlighted the operational challenge of balancing food variety with quality, indicating that menu curation, inventory control, and food presentation strategies are essential in sustaining customer satisfaction. Despite these contributions, this study has limitations. The findings are specific to West Java and may not fully capture regional or cross-cultural variations in AYCE dining behavior. Future research should expand the geographical scope and employ quantitative validation through SEM analysis to measure the relative influence of each factor on customer loyalty. Additionally, investigating the role of digital engagement (e.g., online reviews, influencer marketing, and social media presence) could further refine the loyalty formation process in AYCE restaurants.

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