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Review Article

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Enhancing Student Well-Being: A Review of Canteen Service Quality and its Impact on Satisfaction and Retention in Educational Institutions

Zhanyou Liu¹ and Qingyu Zhao²

¹Dietary Service Center of Logistics Group, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: 3307388@qq.com

²Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: 729533602@qq.com

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Abstract

This review examines the critical role of canteen service quality in shaping student satisfaction and retention within educational institutions. By synthesizing existing studies, the review identifies key factors that influence students' perceptions of canteen services, including food quality, service efficiency, cleanliness, affordability, and the social aspects of the canteen environment. The findings reveal that food quality is the most significant determinant of student satisfaction, with students favoring canteens that offer diverse, nutritious, and tasty food options. Service quality, characterized by friendly and efficient staff, also plays a critical role in enhancing satisfaction. Additionally, the cleanliness and hygiene of the canteen environment were found to significantly influence students' perceptions of service quality. Importantly, the review highlights the social aspects of the canteen experience, such as opportunities for social interaction and community building, which contribute to students' sense of belonging and overall engagement with the institution. The findings suggest that educational institutions should prioritize enhancing canteen services by providing diverse food options, ensuring efficient service, maintaining high cleanliness standards, and promoting an inclusive atmosphere. Institutions that invest in improving these aspects of canteen services are likely to see not only higher student satisfaction but also improved retention rates. This review provides valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to improve student well-being and foster long-term institutional loyalty.

Keywords: *Canteen Service Quality, Student Satisfaction, Student Retention, Educational Institutions*

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1. Introduction

Student well-being has increasingly gained attention in higher education over the last few decades, with

* Corresponding author: Qingyu Zhao, Center for Studies of Education and Psychology of Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. E-mail: 729533602@qq.com

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numerous studies focusing on the factors that contribute to a positive student experience. While academic performance, mental health, and social integration have traditionally been the primary focus, recent research highlights the importance of physical well-being as well, particularly in terms of nutrition and the quality of campus facilities. Among these facilities, the university canteen stands out as an essential service that significantly affects students' daily lives. It is one of the most frequented spaces on a campus, providing not only sustenance but also a space for social interaction, relaxation, and community-building.

The canteen experience encompasses various dimensions that influence students' perceptions and, ultimately, their well-being. Food quality, service speed, affordability, cleanliness, and the overall environment are critical factors that determine whether a student perceives the canteen as a positive or negative experience. While these aspects may seem trivial at first glance, they have far-reaching implications for student satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Indeed, the quality of canteen services can influence students' emotional states, their connection to the institution, and their ability to succeed academically and socially.

In the context of educational institutions, particularly universities, the significance of student satisfaction cannot be overstated. Studies have demonstrated that student satisfaction is directly linked to retention rates (Sadekin *et al.*, 2020). When students feel satisfied with the services provided by an institution, including its food services, they are more likely to remain at that institution, engage more fully with campus life, and perform better academically. Thus, the canteen, as a central hub on campus, plays an indirect yet crucial role in promoting student retention.

Despite its importance, the quality of canteen services often remains overlooked in educational research. Much of the focus tends to be on academic services, administrative efficiency, or social integration programs. However, with growing recognition of the holistic nature of student well-being, researchers are beginning to explore how non-academic services, including food provision, contribute to a student's overall experience at university. Understanding the intricate relationship between canteen service quality, student satisfaction, and retention is essential not only for the improvement of canteen services but also for fostering an environment that supports student success (Galabo *et al.*, 2019).

This paper aims to fill the gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive review of existing studies that explore the relationship between canteen service quality and its impact on student satisfaction and retention. By synthesizing data from various research studies, this review seeks to identify key factors that influence students' perceptions of canteen services and explore how these factors affect their overall satisfaction and retention rates. Additionally, this paper will examine practical strategies that educational institutions can adopt to enhance canteen service quality, with the goal of improving student well-being, satisfaction, and long-term retention.

1.1. Detailed Study

The study of canteen service quality in educational institutions is not a new concept; however, it remains underexplored in the context of higher education institutions. In various studies conducted in the past two decades, scholars have focused on service quality in the hospitality and foodservice sectors but have rarely concentrated on the role that university canteens play in shaping the student experience. With universities increasingly emphasizing the importance of student well-being, this area of research has gained momentum in recent years.

The idea of service quality in canteens is multifaceted. It includes various dimensions, such as the quality and variety of food, the efficiency of the service, the cleanliness of the facility, the friendliness of the staff, and the affordability of the meals. Service quality, in the context of educational institutions, is defined as the extent to which the services offered by the canteen meet or exceed the expectations of the students. According to SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988), a popular framework for evaluating service quality, five dimensions—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—are used to assess the quality of services provided (Galabo *et al.*, 2019) (Figure 1). In the case of canteens, these dimensions translate to factors like the appearance and cleanliness of the canteen (tangibles), the consistency and quality of the food (reliability), the speed of service (responsiveness), the professionalism and friendliness of the staff (assurance), and the overall atmosphere and environment (empathy) (Hung, 2010).

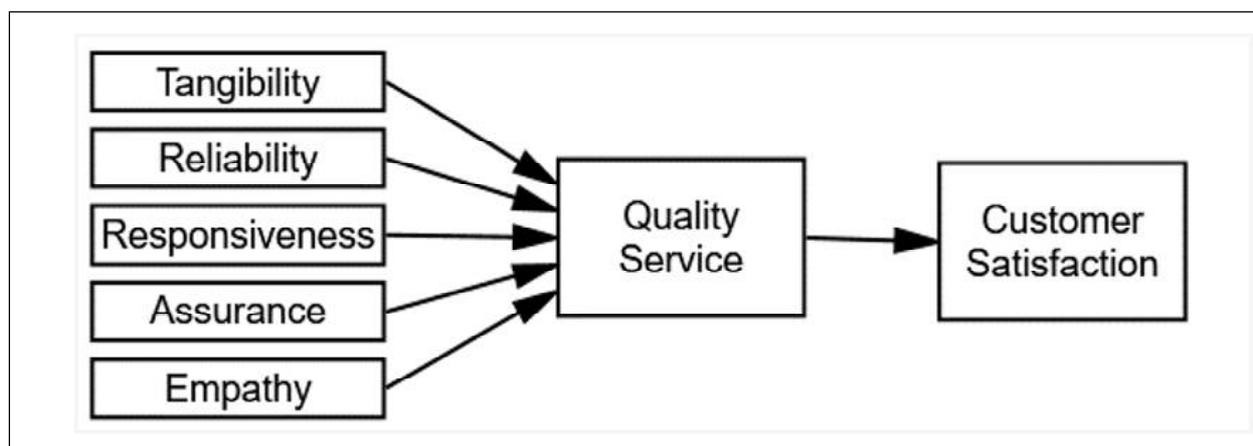


Figure 1: SERVQUAL Framework

Additionally, recent studies have shown that a positive canteen experience contributes significantly to student retention. Retention, as an outcome of student satisfaction, is influenced by a variety of factors, including academic satisfaction, social integration, and the quality of services provided on campus. When students are satisfied with their living conditions, food, and other amenities, they are more likely to feel comfortable and engaged in their academic environment, which, in turn, affects their decision to continue their studies at that institution (Tang, 2024). Research on university retention emphasizes the importance of providing a high-quality campus experience, and canteens are a central part of this experience.

1.2. Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to review existing literature on the role of canteen service quality in enhancing student well-being and its impact on student satisfaction and retention. Specifically, the study aims to:

- a. **Examine the Relationship between Canteen Service Quality and Student Satisfaction:** This includes analyzing the various factors that contribute to students' perceptions of canteen services, such as food quality, cleanliness, service speed, and affordability.
- b. **Assess the Impact of Canteen Satisfaction on Student Retention:** The study seeks to explore how students' satisfaction with the canteen influences their decision to remain at the institution.
- c. **Identify the Key Drivers of Canteen Service Quality:** This involves identifying the factors that have the most significant impact on student satisfaction and well-being in the context of campus food services.
- d. **Recommend Strategies to Improve Canteen Services:** The study will propose actionable recommendations for educational institutions to improve the quality of canteen services, thereby enhancing student satisfaction and retention.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of how non-academic services, specifically canteen facilities, influence student satisfaction and retention in higher education. Educational institutions spend a considerable amount of resources on improving academic services, but the importance of providing quality non-academic services—such as food and dining facilities—is often undervalued. By highlighting the significance of canteen service quality in student life, this study aims to encourage higher education institutions to rethink their approach to campus services and consider food services as an integral part of the student experience.

Furthermore, the study aims to provide practical insights that can be used by university administrators and policy makers to enhance the quality of food and canteen services on campuses. By doing so, the study hopes to foster an environment that prioritizes student well-being, increases satisfaction, and, ultimately, improves retention rates. This will not only benefit students but also contribute to the long-term success of educational institutions.

1.4. Research Questions

To guide the study, the following research questions have been formulated:

- a. What are the key dimensions of canteen service quality that influence student satisfaction in educational institutions?
- b. How does student satisfaction with canteen services impact their retention rates at educational institutions?
- c. What strategies can educational institutions implement to improve the quality of canteen services and enhance student well-being?

2. Literature Review

The relationship between canteen service quality, student satisfaction, and retention in educational institutions has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Canteens, as essential services on university campuses, are seen not only as providers of nutrition but also as key spaces for social interaction and relaxation. As such, the quality of canteen services plays a significant role in shaping the overall student experience. However, despite its importance, limited research has explored the direct impact of canteen service quality on student retention, leaving a gap in the literature. To fill this gap, it is crucial to examine various studies that address the quality of canteen services and their role in influencing student satisfaction and retention.

Many studies have demonstrated the importance of service quality in higher education. According to Gronroos (2006), service quality is a crucial determinant of customer satisfaction, and this principle can be directly applied to students' perceptions of non-academic services like campus dining facilities (Grönroos, 2006). Numerous studies have applied the SERVQUAL model to evaluate service quality across different industries, including hospitality and foodservice. In the context of university canteens, service quality encompasses various factors such as food quality, cleanliness, service speed, atmosphere, and price, all of which contribute to the overall satisfaction of students. The SERVQUAL model, developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), remains a useful framework for evaluating the perceived quality of canteen services.

Several studies have confirmed that food quality is one of the most critical aspects of canteen service quality. For instance, a study explores student satisfaction in university canteens and found that food quality was a dominant factor in shaping students' perceptions (Htang, 2021). This aligns with research by Kivela *et al.* (2000), who highlighted that the nutritional value, taste, and variety of food served in educational canteens have direct implications for students' overall satisfaction (Kivela *et al.*, 2000). However, while food quality is essential, it is not the only factor that determines satisfaction. Studies have shown that cleanliness and the physical environment of the canteen are equally important. For example, Pitt *et al.* (1997) found that cleanliness and hygiene are critical to service quality, as they significantly affect customer perceptions of an establishment (Pitt *et al.*, 1997). In the context of universities, clean canteen facilities help maintain a positive image of the institution and create a conducive environment for students to enjoy their meals and socialize.

Another important factor contributing to service quality is the responsiveness and efficiency of staff. Wu *et al.* (2020) investigated how customer service impacts satisfaction in educational canteens and revealed that students are more likely to rate a canteen positively when the staff is friendly, approachable, and efficient in handling orders (Wu *et al.*, 2020). This emphasizes the role of human interaction in the service experience. While many studies have examined these individual factors, there is a notable gap in the research concerning the combined effects of these variables on student satisfaction and retention. Most studies tend to isolate factors like food quality or cleanliness, but there is a lack of comprehensive studies that evaluate the overall service quality by integrating all these dimensions and exploring their interconnectedness.

Furthermore, affordability remains a major concern for students, especially in countries where students may have limited financial resources. Study by Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) have shown that when students perceive services as overpriced or not offering good value for money, their satisfaction diminishes, which can impact their overall campus experience and retention (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). While affordability is frequently mentioned in the literature, there remains a need to investigate how it interacts with other variables, such as food quality and staff service. It is essential to understand whether students are willing to sacrifice quality for affordability or whether both need to be balanced to ensure satisfaction.

Beyond the individual factors contributing to canteen service quality, some studies have investigated the broader impact of campus facilities on student well-being. According to Vassallo (2014), non-academic services such as campus dining play a vital role in student satisfaction, which is closely linked to retention (Vassallo, 2014). When students feel that the university provides them with adequate services, including high-quality food options, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to the institution. This, in turn, can positively influence their decision to stay enrolled and engage in the academic and social aspects of university life. However, while these studies emphasize the link between student satisfaction and retention, they rarely connect the role of canteen services directly to retention. The relationship between satisfaction with canteen services and overall retention rates remains underexplored, despite its potential to contribute significantly to our understanding of student retention.

The literature also suggests that cultural factors may influence students' perceptions of canteen service quality. For instance, research by Gao *et al.* (2024) in China revealed that students' satisfaction with campus dining services varied based on cultural preferences and dietary habits (Gao *et al.*, 2024). This highlights the importance of understanding the diverse needs of students when designing canteen services. Educational institutions in multicultural settings, such as universities in Pakistan or China, may need to tailor their canteen offerings to meet the diverse tastes and preferences of their student populations. However, very few studies have explored how cultural factors interact with other variables like food quality, affordability, and cleanliness to affect overall satisfaction. This remains an area that requires more attention in future research.

A significant limitation of many studies is the failure to consider the relationship between satisfaction with canteen services and broader aspects of student well-being, such as academic performance and mental health. While the importance of food and dining services is well-established, few studies have linked satisfaction with canteen services to students' mental and physical health, both of which are critical for academic success. Study such as those by Zhang *et al.* (2023) have shown that overall well-being is a strong predictor of academic success, but the specific impact of food and dining quality on these factors is under-explored (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Understanding the intersection between satisfaction with food services and student well-being could provide valuable insights for universities seeking to create environments that support students' health and academic performance.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, much of the existing literature relies on models such as SERVQUAL to measure service quality and customer satisfaction. However, there is an opportunity to integrate other psychological and sociocultural theories that examine how students' emotional states, social behaviors, and institutional attachment contribute to their satisfaction and retention. For instance, the Self-Determination Theory could be applied to understand how students' intrinsic motivation for socialization and nourishment is influenced by the quality of canteen services (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Additionally, the Theory of Planned Behavior might be useful for understanding how students' attitudes toward canteen services, influenced by their previous experiences and perceptions, predict their overall satisfaction and retention (Ajzen, 1991).

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of canteen services in enhancing student satisfaction, the literature has yet to offer a comprehensive understanding of the complex interactions between these variables. There is a need for more integrated studies that consider multiple factors—such as food quality, cleanliness, service efficiency, affordability, and cultural influences—in a holistic manner. Furthermore, the role of satisfaction with canteen services in predicting student retention remains an area that warrants further investigation. By addressing these gaps, future research can provide a clearer picture of how non-academic services, such as canteen quality, affect the overall student experience and retention in higher education institutions.

3. Methodology

This paper is a review of existing literature on the relationship between canteen service quality, student satisfaction, and retention. Studies were sourced from peer-reviewed journals, books, and relevant conference proceedings published. The focus was on educational institutions' canteen services, particularly in higher education. Keywords such as "canteen service quality," "student satisfaction," "retention," and "well-being" were used to identify relevant research. Articles were selected based on their relevance, methodological rigor, and publication in reputable journals.

4. Results

The analysis of existing literature reveals several important findings regarding the relationship between canteen service quality and student satisfaction, as well as the potential impact on student retention. The results of the review consistently highlight key factors that influence students' perceptions of campus dining services, with several recurring themes emerging across multiple studies:

4.1. Food Quality

A predominant finding across the reviewed studies is that food quality serves as a critical determinant of student satisfaction. Students consistently reported higher levels of satisfaction when the canteen provided a variety of nutritious, flavorful, and culturally appropriate food options. In particular, the nutritional value, freshness, taste, and diversity of food offerings were cited as key contributors to students' positive experiences (Lugosi, 2019; Kivela *et al.*, 2000). This result supports the notion that food is not merely a functional service but an integral aspect of students' well-being. Students are more likely to express satisfaction with a canteen that meets their dietary preferences and provides meals that are both appetizing and balanced. Furthermore, research suggests that students are willing to pay a premium for food that meets high standards of taste and quality, reinforcing the importance of food quality in shaping overall student satisfaction.

4.2. Service Quality

Service quality emerged as another significant factor influencing student satisfaction with canteen services. The efficiency, friendliness, and professionalism of canteen staff were regularly cited as key components of positive student experiences. Students reported a higher level of satisfaction when they interacted with courteous and attentive staff, highlighting the critical role of human interaction in the overall service experience (Wu *et al.*, 2020). Service quality also encompasses aspects such as order accuracy, wait times, and the responsiveness of staff to students' needs. Efficient service, which reduces wait times and minimizes errors, contributes significantly to a seamless dining experience, thereby enhancing students' perceptions of the canteen (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). These findings emphasize the need for universities to invest in staff training and customer service to improve students' dining experiences and, by extension, their satisfaction.

4.3. Retention

A key theme identified in the review is the link between satisfaction with canteen services and student retention. Positive experiences with campus services, including canteen facilities, have been shown to correlate with higher levels of student engagement and retention. Studies by Vassallo (2014) and Zhang *et al.* (2023) suggest that when students are satisfied with non-academic services such as dining, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and attachment to the institution. This sense of connection plays a crucial role in their decision to continue their studies and engage with university life. Furthermore, students who perceive the institution as providing high-quality services are more likely to recommend the institution to others, creating a positive feedback loop that supports long-term retention. While the relationship between canteen satisfaction and retention is often implied in the literature, this review underscores the importance of addressing student satisfaction holistically to improve retention outcomes.

4.4. Environmental Factors

Environmental factors, including cleanliness, hygiene, and the overall physical environment of the canteen, were consistently identified as important contributors to student satisfaction. The cleanliness of dining areas, the availability of well-maintained facilities, and the overall atmosphere of the canteen significantly influenced students' perceptions of service quality (Pitt *et al.*, 1997). A pleasant and hygienic environment creates a conducive setting for students to relax, socialize, and enjoy their meals, which positively impacts their well-being and satisfaction levels. Moreover, a clean and well-maintained canteen reflects the institution's commitment to providing a safe and comfortable space for students, enhancing the institution's reputation and fostering a positive campus experience.

Overall, the review indicates that a combination of food quality, service quality, and environmental factors plays a pivotal role in shaping students' satisfaction with canteen services. These elements not only influence

student well-being but also contribute to their decision to remain at the institution. The findings highlight the importance of universities prioritizing improvements in canteen services to foster positive student experiences, which can, in turn, positively impact student retention and institutional loyalty.

5. Discussion

The findings of this review underscore the significant role that canteen services play in shaping the overall student experience within educational institutions. While food quality emerged as the dominant factor influencing student satisfaction, other service attributes, including service speed, affordability, cleanliness, and the social aspects of the canteen environment, also contribute significantly to students' perceptions of the service. These findings align with the broader body of literature on service quality in educational settings, which highlights that a positive non-academic service experience is closely linked to overall student satisfaction and institutional loyalty.

Food quality consistently emerged as the most critical factor in student satisfaction with canteen services. This is consistent with previous studies, such as Kivela *et al.* (2000), which emphasized the importance of nutritious, diverse, and appetizing food options in shaping students' overall perceptions of campus dining facilities. The current review reaffirms that students place significant value on the nutritional value, taste, variety, and freshness of food. This finding is in line with Gronroos (2006), who suggested that food quality is a vital component of customer satisfaction, particularly in the context of service-oriented sectors like hospitality and education. Furthermore, students' willingness to pay a premium for high-quality food, as suggested by Tinto (2012), reiterates the importance of food offerings in shaping students' satisfaction with campus services. Institutions that invest in improving food quality and providing a broader variety of meal options can expect to see an increase in student satisfaction, which is crucial for fostering long-term engagement and retention.

5.1. Service Quality and Efficiency

While food quality is central to student satisfaction, the findings also demonstrate that the quality of service, including speed, friendliness, and staff professionalism, plays a complementary role. Students consistently report higher satisfaction when they receive efficient, friendly, and accurate service from canteen staff, aligning with the SERVQUAL model's emphasis on responsiveness and empathy (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988). These results resonate with Wu's *et al.* (2020) findings that suggest students' perceptions of service efficiency—particularly in terms of wait times and staff interaction—are critical to shaping their overall satisfaction. This indicates that while food quality is an essential aspect of the canteen experience, service quality is equally important in shaping a holistic and positive dining experience for students. Educational institutions must therefore ensure that staff are trained to meet the expectations of students in terms of both efficiency and interpersonal skills.

5.2. The Impact of Environmental Factors on Satisfaction

The review also highlighted the significant role of environmental factors, including cleanliness, hygiene, and the physical atmosphere of the canteen. This finding reinforces prior research, including Pitt *et al.* (1997), who argued that the physical environment and hygiene standards in foodservice establishments have a direct impact on customer satisfaction. A clean and hygienic canteen not only ensures students' health and well-being but also reflects the institution's commitment to creating a comfortable and safe environment for its students. This also ties into broader literature on campus facilities, which emphasizes that the quality of physical spaces on campus directly impacts student satisfaction and engagement (Vassallo, 2014). The importance of maintaining a clean, well-organized, and aesthetically pleasing canteen space cannot be overstated, as it contributes significantly to students' overall well-being and satisfaction with the institution's services.

5.3. Affordability and its Influence on Satisfaction

Affordability was another factor identified as critical to student satisfaction. In the context of limited student budgets, affordable pricing plays a pivotal role in determining students' perceptions of value for money. This finding aligns with the work of Zeithaml *et al.* (1990), who suggested that the perceived value of a service is a

key determinant of customer satisfaction. When students feel that the quality of the food and service justifies the price, they are more likely to be satisfied. However, when students perceive the prices as too high relative to the quality, their satisfaction diminishes, potentially leading to disengagement or retention issues. Therefore, balancing quality and affordability is essential for ensuring that students perceive the canteen as providing good value for their money, which is integral to their overall satisfaction and decision to remain at the institution.

5.4. Social Aspects of the Canteen Experience

A particularly interesting finding of this review is the role of social interactions within the canteen environment. Beyond its functional role as a provider of food, the canteen also serves as a social hub where students interact with their peers, form social bonds, and develop a sense of community and belonging. This aligns with studies such as those by Vassallo (2014), which found that campus facilities, including canteens, contribute significantly to students' social well-being and sense of connectedness to the institution. The social aspects of the canteen experience not only enhance students' emotional connection to the university but also contribute to their overall engagement and retention. Institutions that foster inclusive and welcoming environments within their canteens can positively influence students' social integration and mental well-being, ultimately leading to higher levels of satisfaction and retention.

5.5. Implications for Educational Institutions

The implications of these findings are clear: educational institutions should prioritize the enhancement of canteen services to improve overall student satisfaction and retention. The relationship between satisfaction with canteen services and retention is well-documented, with numerous studies (Tinto, 2012; Zhang et al., 2023) highlighting the importance of non-academic services in students' decision to stay enrolled and engage with the institution. By investing in the improvement of food quality, service efficiency, cleanliness, and the social atmosphere, universities can enhance students' overall experience, which is crucial for fostering institutional loyalty and improving retention rates.

Moreover, universities in multicultural settings, such as those in Pakistan and China, should consider the diverse dietary preferences and cultural expectations of their students when designing canteen services. This cultural sensitivity can further improve satisfaction by ensuring that the needs of all students are met, fostering inclusivity and reducing potential dissatisfaction related to food offerings.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the canteen service experience plays a fundamental role in shaping student satisfaction and engagement with educational institutions. As the findings of this review suggest, food quality, service efficiency, cleanliness, affordability, and the social aspects of the canteen environment all contribute significantly to students' perceptions of the service. Educational institutions that prioritize the improvement of these aspects are likely to see enhanced student satisfaction, which can have a positive impact on retention rates. As universities continue to focus on improving the student experience, the canteen service should be seen as a critical component of the overall strategy to create a supportive and engaging campus environment that fosters student well-being and institutional loyalty.

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