

# The Impact of Operational Transparency on Brand Image and The Mediating Role of Perceived Reliability: Restaurants' Customers perspectives in Sulaimani City

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of operational transparency on brand image and the mediating role of perceived reliability in restaurants in Sulaimani City, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A descriptive analytical approach was used. The questionnaire was designed to collect data from restaurant customers within the Sulaimani city, as an infinite population. Structural equation modeling was used to test hypotheses. The results present a strong positive correlation and a direct impact of operational transparency on brand image, and perceived reliability has a statistically significant mediating role in this relationship. The main conclusions show that operational transparency is not only related to brand image, but also affects it directly and indirectly by mediating perceived reliability, hence, focusing on operational transparency is essential to improving the level of brand image among restaurant customers. The paper recommends the importance of perceived reliability for restaurant customers due to its direct impact on the brand on the one hand, and activating an indirect path to the impact of operational transparency on the brand image on the other hand, which ensures continuity and enables them to use resources effectively, which enhances survival in the competition by improving the brand image.

**KEYWORDS:** Operational transparency, Brand image, Perceived reliability, Restaurants, Sulaimani city.

## 1. <sup>1</sup> INTRODUCTION

In today's highly competitive environment, building a strong brand image is a significant factor that contributes in attracting and retaining customers (Khurshid & Mahmood, 2024). Operational transparency is a vital element that directly affects the brand image in various industries, especially in the restaurants, in which customers expect a high level of credibility and clarity in the services provided (Mahmood, 2016). Under the strong competition in this sector, brands that adopt transparent practices are considered more credible in the eyes of their customers. The impact of operational transparency in this context extends to several aspects, including improving the brand image and increasing the perceived reliability of customers, which greatly affects their decisions to

interact with and choose restaurants (Buell, 2019). Social media also plays a prominent role in shaping the brand image (Hama Kareem et al., 2016), as transparency in communication through these platforms affects the general awareness and trust that consumers place in restaurants. Moreover, Mahmood et al. (2017) point out that the facility layout plays a vital role in shaping the quality of service provided, which in turn affects the perceived reliability. Sadiq & Abdulla (2024), have indicated the importance of supportive leadership in enhancing the work environment which enhances trust and transparency in operations. Mantak et al. (2019) also emphasized the role of empowerment in improving customer perceived reliability and enhancing brand image. Therefore, this research aims to discover the impact of operational transparency on brand image in the restaurant industry, exploring the mediating role of

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perceived reliability by customers who constitute the study sample through a questionnaire directed to them.

## 2. FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Gap and problem

Some studies such as (Buell et al., 2021), have addressed the impact of operational transparency on customer trust and satisfaction. However, there is a scarcity of studies that emphasize the mediating role of perceived reliability in this context. In many studies, transparency and brand image have been explored separately, without considering how perceived reliability can act as a link between them. For example, studies indicate that transparency contributes to improving brand image (Holloway, 2024) and that perceived reliability plays an indirect role in enhancing customer trust in brands (Dam, 2020), but there is an absence of research that examines how these two variables interact in a true mediating relationship. This study asks how operational transparency affects the brand image of restaurants when perceived reliability mediates them from the perspective of customers of restaurants in Sulaimani city, investigating the direct impact of operational transparency on brand image and assessing the mediating effect of perceived reliability. How does operational transparency affect brand image of restaurants? Does perceived reliability mediate the causal link between operational transparency and brand image from the viewpoint of the restaurant's customers of Sulaimani city?

### 2.2 Research importance

The study has a practical contribution, helping stakeholders and restaurant managers to improve their operational and marketing strategies by enhancing trust and transparency with customers. This enhances brand image, increases loyalty and sales, and contributes to informed decision-making that leads to improved customer satisfaction."

### 2.3 Hypotheses

All hypotheses will be tested at a statistical significance level of 0.05 in the Sulaimani city restaurants. Therefore, no need to mention this in each hypothesis:

H1: Operational transparency is directly and significantly correlated with brand image.

H2: Operational transparency is directly and significantly correlated with perceived.

H3: Perceived reliability is directly and significantly correlated with brand image.

H4: Operational transparency positively and significantly impacts brand image.

H5: Operational transparency positively and significantly impacts perceived reliability.

H6: Perceived reliability positively and significantly impacts brand image.

H7: Perceived reliability positively and significantly mediates the effect of operational transparency on brand image.

### 2.4 Research model

The model has been designed to graphitize hypotheses regarding the relationship amongst the three variables. Fig. 1. illustrates the study model

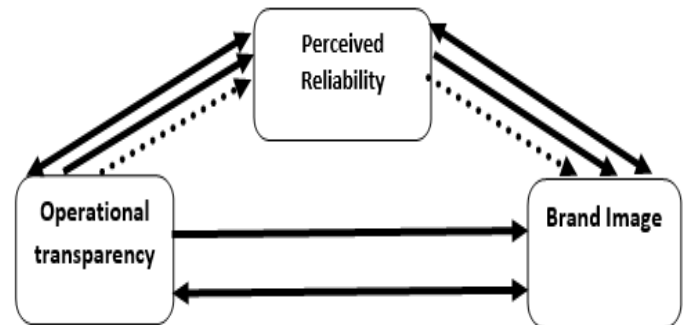


Fig. 1. Proposed study model

Amongst the variables. Solid unidirectional arrow specifies a direct effect. A dashed unidirectional arrow specifies an indirect effect. A bidirectional arrow shows a correlation.

### 2.5 Population and sample

The population consists of all potential customers of restaurants in Sulaimani city, which is considered as an infinite population due to unlimited number of customers of restaurants that are likely to visit restaurants everyday. According to the statistical equation ( $n=1/e^2$ ), the sample size for this infinite population with a 5% margin of error, is 400. but the researcher distributed 1200 questionnaires to obtain better homogeneity. 1073 questionnaires were received, 24 of which were rejected, making the sample size valid for analysis 1049 questionnaires. Different restaurants were selected, some of which offer contemporary Western foods and some of which offer traditional foods in a luxurious way. The questionnaire was distributed among the customers randomly. Restaurant customers were chosen as the study population because they directly experience the impact of brand image, service reliability, and operational transparency.

### 2.6 Data collection methods

A questionnaire was designed based on the sources listed in Table 1 and used to collect primary data from the study sample. The five-point Likert scale was used to quantify the answers of the researched sample, which are represented by (strongly disagree - disagree - neutral - agree - strongly agree) and converted into quantitative

numbers so that the values (1,2,3,4, and 5) represent the answers respectively.

Table 1  
Sources used in designing the questionnaire

V.	Dimensions	Sources
Operational Transparency	Ingredient Transparency	Agrawal & Mittal, 2019; Lindhout & Reniers., 2022; Rady et al., 2023; Budler et al., 2024
	Hygiene Transparency	
	Pricing Transparency	
	Preparation Transparency	
	Compliance Transparency	
Brand Image	Brand Identity	Yulisetiari et al., 2025; Ianenکو et al., 2020, Xue et al., 2020
	Brand Competence	
	Brand Attitude	
	Brand Association	
Perceived Reliability	Brand Personality	
	Service Consistency	Du et al, 2014; Kim et al, 2015; Spyridou, 2017; Saneva & Chortoseva, 2018
	Food Consistency	
	Cleanliness	

### 3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

#### 3.1 OPERATIONAL TRANSPARENCY(OPT)

##### 3.1.1 The concept of Operational Transparency

Ball (2009) states that transparency has progressed from a local principle limited to governmental organizations to a global standard adopted by international and non-governmental organizations to promote good governance and combat corruption. Operational transparency, according to Buell & Kalkanci, (2019) refers to the process of making an organization's internal activities and processes visible to its customer audience and employees alike through providing a clear view of the efforts made in providing the product or service. Buell et al (2017) state that operational transparency enhances customers' sense of the value they receive, and contributes to improved employee performance through their awareness of the extent to which their work affects customers' operational experience in the service sector, due to the increasing intangible nature of service, since customers rely heavily on trust and knowledge to understand and evaluate the service.

Studies have shown that operational transparency in restaurants not only improves customer experience, but also helps improve employee performance, as their awareness of monitoring customers drives them to provide better service (Agrawal & Mittal, 2019). Furthermore, Budler et al., (2024) state that transparency is a commitment to sustainable and socially responsible practices, such as using local ingredients or reducing food waste. Embracing transparency as a core value and

actively encouraging its implementation by making information readily available will be crucial to building sustainable trust relationships with the generation that will lead politics in the 21st century (Tapscott, 2009). Therefore, operational transparency can be defined as the clarity and consistency in the disclosure of evidence related to the internal operations of the organization, including performance, procedures, and decision-making policies (Buell & Choi, 2019).

##### 3.1.2 The Importance of Operational Transparency

Operational transparency enhances brand estimation and buying intention over its impact on emotional appreciation and perceived value, but the efficacy of this impact depends on the nature of the customer-service connection, especially in the context of exchange relationships (Hwang et al., 2024). Studies have shown that it has a significant impact on institutional performance and building a reliable reputation, therefore, has the benefits of enhancing trust and credibility (Buell et al. (2017), Increase operational efficiency and fosters innovation (Buell et al., 2017), Improving operational performance (Shafieizadeh & Tao, 2020), Enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty (Kabir, 2023), Improving corporate reputation (Kim & Kim, 2016), Promoting Sustainability, ethical and compliance behaviors. (Liu et al., 2023).

##### 3.1.3 Dimensions of Operational Transparency

Operational transparency in restaurants relies on several dimensions, aiming to improve the customer experience, increase trust, and create long-term value.

- **Ingredient Transparency (INGT):** Studies show that restaurants that disclose meal ingredients attract customers who care about ethical and health values (Budler et al., 2024).
- **Hygiene Transparency (HYGT):** Lindhout & Reniers (2022) found that customer gratification is affected directly by displaying public health certificates or performing cleaning processed in a visible manner.
- **Pricing transparency (PRIT):** transparency of meal prices and the clarification of the elements that contribute to their composition reduces the likelihood of disappointment and enhances customers' sense of fairness (Rady et al., 2023).
- **Preparation Transparency (PRET):** Open kitchens provide a practical example of this dimension, where customers can watch their meals being prepared, which increases trust and satisfaction (Buell et al., 2017).
- **Compliance Transparency (COMT):** Buell et al. (2017) suggest that restaurants that adopt sustainable practices such as reducing food waste and using recyclable materials achieve greater customer loyalty.

### 3.2 BRAND IMAGE (BID)

#### 3.2.1 The concept of brand image

The front line of any product is its brand, a first look that permits customers to recognize those products. Basically, from the brand communication perspective the promise that producers give to convey a series of performance, benefits and service to the buyer is presented by their brand (Morrell, 2003). While Wijaya (2013) sees brand as a spot that creates a definite sense of feeling and meaning in the hearts and minds of customers. According to Kotler et al., (2024) a brand is further than just a logo, or trademark or a symbol, a name attached to a product, thus, with developing a strong and distinctive image, a brand's image must convey the distinctive benefits of the product and its position.

Zhang (2015) declares that the main factor in determining brand value is the brand image, which greatly affects their behavior and purchasing decisions. However, despite the effect of brand features, the consumer's self-perception is the main factor in determining this value, as this image is affected by changes in consumers' lifestyle and the way they process information, but it remains a major factor in purchasing decisions (Zhang, 2015). All of Prayag et al. (2017) and Raharjo (2017) also agree that the positive behavior of the consumer about a product is affected by the degree of analogy between his self-perception and the image of this particular product, according to the self-congruence theory

#### 3.2.2 The importance of brand image

Solunoğlu (2020) illustrates the importance of brand image in the fact that brand image is formed by positive and negative feelings that arise as a result of consumer experiences, and affects their choices through brand identity (taste, smell, sound, logo), and plays a vital role in distinguishing products and services when it is difficult to distinguish based on physical quality alone, and affects customer satisfaction, which determines their decisions regarding repurchase or recommendation of the product.

A respectable brand image within the consumer's minds will rise the number of new consumers and make them further gratified (Yulisetiari et al., 2019). Memorability, recognizability, and good reputation are the three indicators that determine brand image according to Yulisetiari et al., (2025). Zhang (2015) makes it clear that influencing consumers' perception and creating a positive brand image in their minds, thus motivating their purchasing behavior, is the primary goal of marketing strategies, which results in increased sales, maximized market share, and developed brand value, as it represents the general perception of the consumer and the feelings it evokes towards it. Badmi & Subarna (2021) argue that based on consumers' general feelings and

perceptions about the brand and the implications for consumer behavior

As described by Yulisetiari et al., (2025) distinction can be reached by increasing their market share through having a good brand image since brand image is a distinctive of a certain brand that can distinguish goods or services from their competitors. Moreover, Wijaya (2013) sees the importance of brand image in its benefits of market entry, which means product leadership, as a strong brand makes the first product in the market distinctive and attracts customers before competitors, facilitates the process of expanding products or launching new products within the same brand, and enhances customers' perception of the quality of the product and makes them feel an added value while using it. Brand image acts as a mediator that determines whether or not a consumer chooses a brand, thus influencing purchase decisions (Olunoğlu, 2020).

#### Dimensions of Brand image

Wijaya (2013) claim an agreement among scholars on five of these or, which greatly affects brand equity, consumers incline to pay attention to the brand image of the product earlier to purchase making, therefore, consumer choices to purchase a product are affected by brand image.

dimensions (Brand Identity, Brand Competence, Brand Personality, Brand Associations, Brand Attitude).

- **Brand Identity (BID):** The physical and tangible aspects, like logos, scents, colors, sounds, packaging, locations, corporate features, slogans and other elements connected with a brand, that make it exclusive and help consumers in recognizing the brand and distinguish it from others (Ilanenko et al., 2020).

- **Brand Competence (BCO):** Xue et al., (2020) make it clear that competency emphasizes the functional, emotional, symbolic, or social values, that a brand offers in meeting consumer needs that contribute in improving the brand's image and standing with consumers.

- **Brand Attitude (BAT):** the behaviors and habits that a brand exhibits once communicating with its audience to deliver its values and benefits. consumers' perceptions can negatively be affected by Immoral brand practices or poor service (Yulisetiari et al., 2025).

- **Brand Associations (BAS):** A brand can be associated with specific causes, characters, or symbols to represent elements that are steadily accompanying with a specific brand and upsurge from single product features or from consistent and sustainable activities such as sponsorship or social responsibility (Yulisetiari et al., 2025).

- **Brand Personality (BPE):** Represents the distinct qualities that may include superiority, assertiveness, creativity, friendliness, dynamism, or independence that give the brand a human-like personality to ease the

distinction between brands within the same category (Yulisetiari et al., 2025).

#### 4. PERCEIVED RELIABILITY (PCR)

##### 4.1 Concept of Perceived Reliability

Reliability refers to the capability of a service to deliver accurate, consistent, and predictable performance, ensuring that expectations are met and user needs are consistently satisfied (Voon et al., 2009). Perceived reliability, as Kim et al. (2015) claim, is the perception of users' confidence in the correct and accurate performance of a service during interaction with it, as promised by the service providers. Service reliability is about the practical characteristics of service delivery, ensuring that the specified service has been delivered correctly (Galetzka et al., 2006). True reliability indicates the natural variations or uncertainty that exist in the content of information, and is usually defined as the degree of convergence between a standard, in contrast, perceived reliability indicates user insights of revealed data. Perceived reliability, according to Du et al. (2014) refers to how the user perceives or interprets the information that is presented to him or revealed to him.

##### 4.2 Importance of Perceived Reliability

Customers place great importance on service reliability, despite the type of service purchased. In this context, reliability is defined by Saneva & Chortoseva (2018) as the ability of a company to deliver a service correctly the first time. According to Hensley & Utley (2011) most studies focus on the relationship of reliability to customer perceptions only in spite of its importance, ignoring the mathematical analysis of reliability in service systems. However, reliability aims at ensuring consistency in the accurate and timely delivery of service (Saneva & Chortoseva, 2018). Hensley & Utley (2011) state that using technical tools to assess and improve service reliability can provide additional insights to service managers on how to deliver reliable services.

##### 4.3 Dimensions of Perceived Reliability

Based on Saneva & Chortoseva (2018), the restaurant is evaluated across several aspects related to quality and service, such as environmental reliability, which reflects the attractiveness and maintenance of the physical environment of the restaurant, Service Consistency and Punctuality which deals with the restaurant's ability to consistently provide service on time. Voon et al. (2009) claim that the four dimensions of perceived reliability in the context of restaurant services can be summarized as on-time service, Error correction, Service consistency, Accuracy of order fulfillment. Markovic et al., (2011) confirm accuracy in bills, and Consistent and fast service.

Spyridou (2017) makes it clear that service consistency, food consistency, timeliness, and cleanliness are pivotal dimensions to ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty, in restaurants, as they contribute to enhancing their confidence in the service provider. For this study, four dimensions have been used by Spyridou (2017) was adopted to measure the perceived reliability of service provided to customers, as follows:

**Service Consistency (SCO):** delivering the same quality service every time, which enhances customer confidence in the service provided (Spyridou, 2017).

**Food Consistency (FCO):** Ensuring that promises and commitments to customers are fulfilled, which builds trust and reliance on the service (Spyridou, 2017).

**Timeliness (TIM):** Adhering to the specified time to provide the service, which confirms the reliability of the service and the absence of delays (Spyridou, 2017).

**Cleanliness (CLE):** Ensuring a safe and healthy environment for preparing and serving food, protecting the health of customers and enhancing the reputation of the restaurant (Spyridou, 2017).

#### 5. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

##### 5.1 Normality and reliability

George & Mallery (2021) make it clear that the values of Skewness and kurtosis between (2+; 2-) are acceptable to confirm normal distribution of the data, and the Cronbach's alpha value should be at least 0.70 to ensure the stability of the tool and internal consistency of the scale. Table 2. shows the results of the normal distribution test for the data of the three variables according to skewness and kurtosis, and Cronbach's alpha

Table 2  
Normal Distribution Test

	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's Alpha
Operational Transparency	1.026	1.932	0.878
Brand Image	1.186	1.427	0.789
Perceived Reliability	1.013	1.838	0.834

Based on the results of Table 2, all values of skewness and kurtosis range between ( $\pm 2$ ), and therefore all items of the variables and their dimensions are normally distributed. Cronbach's alpha coefficient results exceeded the minimum level of 0.70, as in Table 2.

##### 5.2 Operational Transparency described

Table 3 demonstrate the final results related to each dimension of the Operational Transparency, which include the weighted arithmetic mean, which indicated a strength level ranging from very weak to very strong (1-

1.8 is Very weak, 1.81–2.6 is weak, 2.61–3.4 is Average, 3.41–4.2 is Strong, 4.21–5.0 is Very strong. (Dancey & Reidy, 2007), and standard deviations, coefficient of variation, consistency, agreement, and order of importance, through which the extent of harmony and homogeneity is determined. It can be identified through the answers of the respondents.

Table 3

Dimensions	Mean	S.D	C.V%	consistency	Agreement	Importance
INGT	4.06	0.48	11.82	88.18	81.20	1
HYGT	3.99	0.55	13.78	86.22	79.80	2
PRIT	3.79	0.51	13.46	86.54	75.80	3
PRET	3.66	0.65	17.76	82.24	73.20	4
COMT	3.45	0.74	21.45	78.55	69.00	5
OPT	3.79	0.59	15.57	84.43	75.80	3rd

The results of table 3 indicate that Ingredient Transparency ranks first in importance, as the survey participants agree with a percentage of 81.20 that the restaurant provides them with clear information about the ingredients used in food and beverages, and that the restaurant is committed to disclosing the declared food ingredients on the menu or description. Compliance Transparency takes the lowest place in terms of importance, as respondents agree by only 69.00 that the restaurant adheres to environmental and social standards clearly and noticeably and that the restaurant provides information about its commitment to sustainable environmental and social practices. It is noted here that the total arithmetic mean of the operational transparency variable is equal to (3.79) with a standard deviation of (0.59), which led to obtaining a coefficient of variation (15.57%) and a consistency rate (84.43%), and the total relative importance measured by the agreement rate for the operational transparency variable was (75.80%), which is evidence of customers' awareness of operational transparency in the restaurants they visit frequently.

### 5.3 Brand Image described

Table 4 shows the final results related to each scale items and the brand image dimensions, which can be identified through the answers of a sample of respondents.

Table 4  
Descriptive analysis of brand image

Dimensions	Mean	S.D	C.V%	consistency	Agreement	Importance
BID	4.03	0.50	12.41	87.59	80.60	2
BCO	3.25	0.61	18.77	81.23	65.00	5
BAT	4.20	0.42	10.00	90.00	84.00	1
BAS	3.70	0.57	15.41	84.59	74.00	4
BPE	3.90	0.55	14.00	86.00	78.00	3
BRI	3.82	0.53	13.89	86.11	76.32	2nd

The results of Table 4 indicate that Brand Attitude is ranked as the most important dimension, as the sample agree % 84 that the clarity of the offers or menu details in the advertisements is the reason for their trust in the restaurant and that they feel satisfied when choosing a restaurant for a meal. As for the least important dimension, Brand Competence, respondents agree with a percentage of only 65.00 that the restaurant meets their food needs once they know its name and that the quality of food and service provided by the restaurant matches their expectations. Brand Image arithmetic means variable equals (3.82) with a standard deviation of (0.53), which led to obtaining a coefficient of difference (13.89%) and a consistency ratio (86.11%), and the overall relative importance measure reached (76.32%), which is evidence of customers' focus on the Brand Image of the restaurants they visit and its role in their choice of the restaurant.

### 5.4 perceived reliability described

Table 5 shows the final results related to each scale items and dimension of the perceived reliability, which can be identified through the answers of a sample of respondents.

Table 5  
Descriptive analysis of perceived reliability

Dimensions	Mean	S.D	C.V%	consistency	Agreement	Importance
SCO	4.05	0.57	13.97	86.03	80.99	2
FCO	3.94	0.68	17.26	82.74	78.81	3
TIM	3.36	0.73	21.73	78.27	67.20	4
CLE	4.32	0.52	12.04	87.96	86.40	1
PCR	3.92	0.63	16.08	83.92	78.35	1st

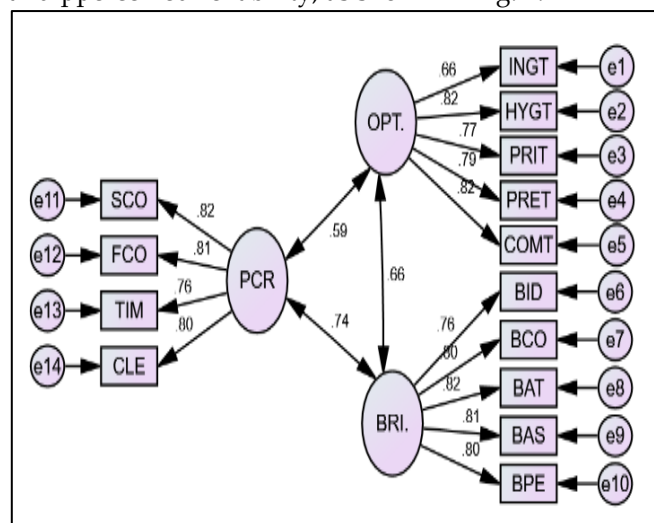
The results of Table 5 indicate that Cleanliness ranks first in importance, as the survey participants agree with a percentage of 86.40 that maintaining the cleanliness of the tables and the place continuously and that the utensils

used (plates, cups, and spoons) are always clean and tidy. The least important dimension is timing, with only 67.20% of respondents considering if food is served on time inside the restaurant and if delivery service arrives always on time. The results of Table 5 shows that the overall arithmetic means of the variable Perceived Reliability equals (3.92) with a standard deviation of (0.63), which led to obtaining a coefficient of difference (16.08%) and a consistency rate (83.92%), and the overall relative importance measured by the percentage of agreement Perceived Reliability reached (78.35%), which is evidence of customers' focus on the Perceived Reliability of the restaurants they visit and its role in their choice of the restaurant.

6. TESTING HYPOTHESES

6.1 Testing the correlation hypotheses

According to Dancey & Reidy (2007) the correlation value expresses a strength level, as 1 means Perfect, 0.7-0.9.9 means Strong, 0.3-0.699 means Average, 0.1-0.299 means Weak, 0 means No correlation. The statistical program AMOS 26 was used to test the three hypotheses, where the researcher applied structural equation modeling that represents the association between the main variables of operational transparency, brand image, and pperceived reliability, as shown in Fig. 2.



$X^2/d.f = 1.383, P=0.061, RMSEA=0.017, NFI=0.989, TLI=0.997, CFI=0.997, IFI=0.997$

Fig. 2. Structural model of the correlation between the research variables

Figure (2) shows that all the goodness of fit indicators is within the acceptable limits and fits the specified model. Hair et al. (2019) identify the ideal values for goodness-of-fit indices in SEM as ( $X^2/df < 3, P > 0.05, RMSEA < 0.08, RFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.95, CFI > 0.95, IFI > 0.95$ ). Based on the results, table 6 shows the correlation coefficient between each two variables.

Table 6

The relationship between each two variables.

	OPT. <--> BRI.	OPT. <--> PCR.	PCR. <--> BRI.
Estimate Covariance		0.088	0.089
S.E.		0.007	0.007
C.R.		13.007	12.358
P		***	***
Estimate Correlation		0.74	0.59

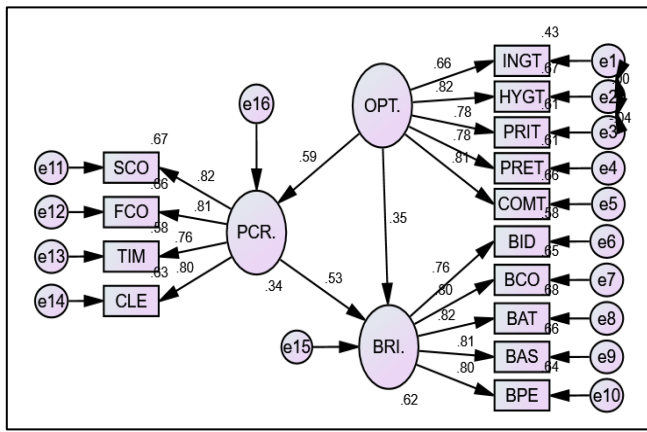
The results shown in Table 6 present a correlation between Operational Transparency, Brand image, at a significant level (0.05). The value of the correlation coefficient between them reached (0.74), which is a strong correlation, to indicate the strength of the direct relationship between them. Accordingly, H1, which states “Operational transparency is directly and significantly correlated with brand image” is accepted

The results presented a correlation equal to (0.59), which is a moderate, positive and significant correlation at a significance level (0.05). Accordingly, H2, which states “Operational transparency is directly and significantly correlated with perceived” is accepted.

The results also displayed that the correlation of perceived reliability with Brand image equals (0.66), which is a medium-strength, positive and significant correlation at a significance level of (0.05). Accordingly, H3, which states “Perceived reliability is directly and significantly correlated with brand image” was accepted.

6.2 Testing the impact hypotheses

A structural model was developed to test the three hypotheses related to the impact of operational transparency on Brand image and perceived reliability on the one hand, and the impact of perceived reliability on Brand image, as Fig. 3 shows a structural model to test these direct effects. The model is also used to test the mediating role of perceived reliability in the impact of ooperational ttransparency on brand image, which is represented by the seventh hypothesis as follows:



$\chi^2/d.f = 1.308, P = 0.054, RMSEA = 0.018, NFI = 0.989, TLI = 0.997, CFI = 0.997, IFI = 0.997$

Fig. 3. The structural model for direct and indirect effects between variables

It is clear from Fig. 3 that all conformity quality indicators fall within the acceptable limits, while the results of direct and indirect effects appear in Table 7.

Table 7

Regression analysis between study variables

	OPT->PCR	OPT->BRI	PCR->BRI
Estimate	0.796	0.417	0.464
indirect	0	0.37	0
S.E.	0.054	0.043	0.033
C.R.	14.624	9.668	14.184
P-VALUE	***	***	***
S. Direct Effects	0.59	0.35	0.53
S. Indirect Effects	0	0.31	0
S. Total Effects	0.59	0.66	0.53

According to the results of Table 7, Operational Transparency affects perceived reliability by an estimated (0.796) and a direct standard (0.590), meaning that every increase of one standard deviation in the variable Operational Transparency leads to an increase in perceived reliability by (59%), and when matching the achieved level of significance (\*\*\*) with the percentage assumed by the researchers, which is (0.05), we find that the achieved level of significance is less, and based on these results, the fourth main hypothesis is accepted, which states: "Operational transparency has a positive and significant effect on the brand image in the restaurants studied at a significant level (0.05)." According to the results of Table 7, the variable Operational Transparency affects the brand image by an estimated (0.417) and a direct standard (0.350), meaning

that every increase of one standard deviation in the variable Operational Transparency leads to an increase in the brand image by (35%), and when matching the achieved level of significance (\*\*\*) with the percentage assumed by the researchers, which is (0.05), we find that the achieved level of significance is less, and based on these results, the fifth main hypothesis is accepted, which states: "Operational transparency has a positive and significant effect on perceived reliability in the restaurants studied at a significant level (0.05)." According to the results of Table 7, the variable perceived reliability affects the brand image by an estimated (0.464) and a direct standard estimate (0.530), meaning that every increase of one standard deviation in the variable perceived reliability leads to an increase in the brand image by (53%), and when matching the achieved level of significance (\*\*\*) with the percentage assumed by the researchers, which is (0.05), we find that the achieved level of significance is less, and based on these results, the sixth main hypothesis is accepted: "Perceived reliability has a positive and significant effect on the brand image in the restaurants studied at a significant level (0.05)."

6.3 Testing the mediation hypothesis:

According to the results of Table 8, the variable OPERATIONAL TRANSPARENCY has an indirect effect on Brand image by an estimated (0.370) and a standard estimate (0.310), meaning that every increase of one standard deviation in the variable OPERATIONAL TRANSPARENCY leads to an increase in Brand image by (31%), in addition to its direct effects. When matching the achieved level of significance (\*\*\*) with the percentage assumed by the researchers, which is (0.05), we find that the achieved level of significance is lower. Based on these results, the seventh main hypothesis is accepted, which states that "perceived reliability has a positive and significant mediating role between the effect of operational transparency on the brand image in the restaurants studied at a significant level (0.05)." To verify the significance of mediation, a bootstrapping test was conducted and the results were as shown in table 8.

Table 8

Bootstrapping test for mediation verification

Path	Upper Bound (95%)	Lower Bound (5%)	S. Indirect Effect	P-value
OPT→PCR→BRI	0.441	0.185	0.312	0.001

The standardized indirect effect (mediator) of OPT on BRI was 0.312, meaning that as OPT increases by one standard deviation, BRI increases by 0.312 standard deviations, in addition to any potential direct effect. The two-sided 90% confidence interval ranged from (0.185 - 0.441) and did not contain zero, indicating statistical significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level. A test at the 0.001 level ( $p = .001$ ) confirmed that the indirect effect was

significant, indicating that the mediator plays a real role in the relationship between OPT and BRI.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

- a. The results indicate that perceived reliability had the highest percentage of agreement, reflecting the importance of customers' perception of reliability of the restaurant brand as a key factor in shaping their impressions and purchasing decisions for restaurant services. The results indicate that "Cleanliness" represents the most important dimension, reflecting its importance in building trust and enhancing the perceived reliability of the brand. In contrast, "timeliness" had lower ratings, therefore, enhancing the dimensions that have high ratings, is considered a vital step to significantly improve customer satisfaction.
- b. The results showed that brand image is the second variable in terms of interest and familiarity among customers, indicating the possibility of increasing customer trust and loyalty in the long term by building a strong and consistent brand image. customers have a mixed positive impression of the brand, where "brand attitude" received the highest degree of agreement, however, there is a gap in their opinion towards "brand competence" which received the lowest degree.
- c. Operational transparency came in third place, indicating that clarity of business processes and providing accurate information to customers helps improve their experience and leads to increased trust in the brand. Ingredient Transparency received the highest degree of importance and agreement, reflecting customers' appreciation for the clarity of the components of products or services. However, there is a disparity in the ratings between the different dimensions, with "Compliance Transparency" receiving the lowest score.
- d. Operational Transparency is closely related to brand image, reflecting the importance of improving operational processes in achieving a strong and positive brand image.
- e. The relationship between operational transparency and perceived reliability is evidence of a modest connotation between operational transparency and perceived reliability, meaning that improving transparency may be associated with an increase in customer perception of the restaurants' service reliability.
- f. The moderate relationship between perceived reliability and brand image indicates that enhancing the brand's reliability is positively related to improving its image, as customers who see the brand as reliable have a better image of it.

g. Operational transparency positively affects perceived reliability, indicating that transparent processes contribute to increasing customer trust. This means that operational transparency is an important factor in enhancing perceived reliability, as evidenced by the emergence of a significant direct effect on this dimension.

- h. The significant direct effect of transparency on brand image shows the importance of clarity of operations in enhancing brand reputation.
- i. Increasing the level of perceived reliability significantly improves the overall image of the brand in the eyes of customers, as evidenced by the presence of a strong regression between perceived reliability and brand image.
- j. Perceived reliability plays a mediating role in the relationship between operational transparency and brand image, as the indirect effect indicates that perceived reliability acts as a mediator between operational transparency and brand image. Moreover, this effect is statistically significant, and the time interval reflects the stability of this effect, which confirms the role of perceived reliability as an important mediating factor between the influencing relationship of operational transparency and brand image.

## 8. RECOMMENDATION

- a. Restaurants must ensure the cleanness of their indoor and outdoor atmospheres, whereas following the quality standards in food preparation, which can be reached by implementing strict cleaning and sanitization protocols, to ensure that all facilities are ready to provide a safe and reliable customer experience.
- b. Restaurants are advised to fashion an integrated customer experience that enhances their emotional connection to the brand image through sharing success stories of the restaurant or sharing content that reflects its vision and values, developing a distinct visual identity and consistent communication style across all networks, such as social media and advertising menus
- c. Restaurants should clearly show details of ingredients and food sources on menus, while providing healthy options and information about food allergies, which helps customers make informed decisions and enhances their trust in the restaurant.
- d. Restaurants should invest in modern order management systems, Given the strong correlation between operational transparency and brand image, to reduce waiting times, and ensure accurate order fulfilment, by train employees to provide quick and professional service, which enhances the positive customer experience.
- e. Restaurants should adopt clear communication policies, such as providing direct channels for customer

inquiries, advertising food sources and health procedures, and providing transparent customer reviews on their digital platforms.

- f. Restaurants must apply uniform quality standards across all branches, owing to the correlation between perceived reliability and brand image, with monitoring systems in place to ensure the same level of service and food, which enhances customers' perception of the restaurant as a reliable destination.
- g. Restaurants should adopt modern technologies such as interactive applications that display the status of orders in real time, and provide immediate feedback to customer inquiries, which enhances the sense of trust and credibility.
- h. To leave a positive impact on brand image, restaurants can highlight their ethical practices, such as using fresh and local ingredients, supporting local farmers, and launching community initiatives, which enhances their reputation and attracts a wider segment of customers interested in transparency and sustainability.
- i. Since increased perceived reliability improves the overall brand image, restaurants should focus on providing accurate orders, responding promptly to any issues customers face, and ensuring that there are clear mechanisms for handling complaints, which contributes to building strong and sustainable relationships with customers.
- j. Restaurants should highlight the transparency of their practices through credibility-based marketing campaigns, such as posting videos showing the stages of food preparation, or sharing real customer reviews, which creates positive engagement with the public in light of the role of perceived reliability as a mediator between operational transparency and brand image,

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