



Service Quality Dimensions as Correlates of Customer Satisfaction and Behavioral Intentions: The Case of Fast Food Restaurants in Subang Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Service quality is the key to a successful restaurant. When customers are satisfied with the services offered, the likelihood of customers returning to the restaurant is high. The quality of food, prices and the service itself seem to be the salient factors for customers to dine in. Thus, identifying which factor in the service quality dimensions is most important for the customer is primarily the focus of this paper. In this study, the researchers made use of descriptive correlational research design utilising 250 local and 250 international students in Malaysia as subjects. Convenience sampling was used in the selection of respondents. The study shows that customers have satisfactory perceptions on the prices and quality of food served by fast food restaurants in Malaysia. Further, results indicate that cleanliness is the most important predictor of customer satisfaction. It was found out also that ambience and food greatly influenced the behavioural intentions of the respondents. Lastly, the study shows also that no significant differences were seen in the customers' perceptions and satisfaction on the service quality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A restaurant is a place where meals are served to the consuming public. They are not only providing food to the customers but the service as well. The quality of the food and service defined by the restaurant determines the success or failure of the business. The food must have quality, and the service should be quick and well-mannered.

The diverse eating habits, a wide range of cuisines and innovative cooking techniques, the growth of the tourism industry and open market policies are some of the factors behind the growth of restaurants. With the change in the lifestyle of the people, more and more consumers are also flocking various restaurants. Today, women have less time to plan and prepare food for their spouses and family because of work. Andaleeb and Conway stressed that to balance work and family, preference for food prepared in restaurants has taken a central role in their life [1]. The growth of the restaurants paved the way for fast food eating outlets.

As the restaurant industry becomes more competitive, economic pressures also increase. Hence, the primary challenge now for the restaurant managers is to strive to improve its services for the higher satisfaction of customers. Restaurant operators need to focus their marketing efforts on the strength of the restaurants to ensure customers' satisfaction. Customers might be delighted with the food but may dislike the environment or the quality of the service. When a customer fails to return, the manager may not know the reason anymore. Hence, the importance of keeping the customer is especially true not only in the restaurant business.

The future of the restaurant industry looks bright. With the increase in demand and the consumers' eating patterns, the market of this industry will significantly rise. In this regard, customer satisfaction should now be the heart of their marketing efforts. The ability to satisfy the customers is very vital for a number of reasons. First, dissatisfied customers tend to complain, seek redress and extreme cases may resort to negative word-of-mouth as a means of getting back [2]. A satisfied customer creates business for the restaurant operators. In a study conducted by Bernhardt et al. with 472

restaurants, they found out that there is a significant positive relationship between customer satisfaction and profits over a long period of time [3].

The complexity of restaurant business coupled with the complexities of customers' expectations makes it difficult for a manager to predict how each customer will react to a particular dining experience. The intricacies are magnified by Davis et al. [4], when they pointed out that "a consumer becomes part of the product which adds to the challenge of how to market the product effectively [5].

The focus of this paper is in the fast food restaurants. The concept of fast food is to provide customers portable and instant meals, without spending much time in waiting for the food to be served and consumed [6]. The increasing demand for fast food restaurants among the students in Subang Jaya can be observed. The students find it the easiest way to relieve their hunger at very cheap price. Due to the emerging trend of fast food restaurant around the world, fast food chains are gaining popularity among the youngster. Fast food availability, taste, low cost, marketing strategies and peer pressure made them very popular [7].

Since there are different findings, the researchers are motivated to explore to explore the perceptions of the Malaysians and foreigners on the service quality of the fast-food restaurants situated in Subang Jaya, Malaysia. The findings of the study will serve as a point of reference for managers in their marketing plans.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The research study was anchored on the SERVQUAL model of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [8]. In 1985, the proponents identified ten factors. These are:

1. Reliability - consistency in doing his functions and responsibility.
2. Responsiveness – receptiveness of employees in delivering service.
3. Competence - possession of the required skills and ability needed in the performance of his job.
4. Access - approachability and eye contact.
5. Courtesy - politeness, courteousness and civility of the staff to the customers.

6. Communication - readiness of the staff to keep customers informed in a language they can understand.
7. Credibility - trustworthiness, sincerity and honesty of the staff in serving the customers.
8. Security – making the customers feel that they are free from risk in the place.
9. Understanding/knowing the customer – the willingness of the staff to know the customer’s needs.
10. Tangibles – include the physical environment, facilities and the appearance of the personnel.

However, in the subsequent works of the same authors in 1988, they tested the variables and reduced it to five factors such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance (combining communication, credibility, security, competence and courtesy) and empathy (combining understanding and knowing the customer with accessibility).

The model supports the present study because it guided the researchers in the selection of variables price, food, ambience, hospitality and cleanliness.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Service Quality

Service quality is very vital in any organization. It is a global evaluation of a particular service setting and is a consequence of satisfaction incidents [9]. A similar idea was given by Fogli (2006, p.4), when the author defined service quality as a “global judgment or attitude relating to a particular service”. Service quality in the international context is complicated by cultural differences [10]. Service satisfaction on the other hand, is a function of a consumer’s experience and reactions to providers during the service encounter [11,12].

The importance of service quality is considerably addressed in the fast-food restaurant. Service-based industries are spending tremendous effort and money to measure and evaluate the services of their business to ensure success. To be competitive, service industry must achieve a quality service that exceeds expectation because this determines the success or failure of an organization. Superior service leads to satisfied and loyal customers which are very crucial to the success of a restaurant [13].

According to Perlik [14] as cited in Abdullah and Rozario [12], poor service quality increases customer dissatisfaction and the likelihood that the customer dines at a competitor and becomes an active champion in persuading others to dine elsewhere. In this regard, managers should be sensitive on how the customers perceive the services they provide and what dimensions might determine their level of satisfaction.

According to Ha et al. [15], service quality was found to have significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Their finding shows that the service quality provided by the personnel is central and vital to the customer satisfaction in the restaurants. Similarly, on Qin et al. [6] findings, service quality is one of the foundations of customer satisfaction in fast food restaurant. Their study reveals that five elements which include tangibles, reliability/responsiveness, recovery, assurance, and empathy show a significant result towards customer satisfaction.

In Malaysia, fast food gained acceptance because of its adoption of the western styles of food consumption [17] such as burgers and fried chicken, especially students and office workers [18]. Yardimci et al. [19] also found that the rate of visit in the fast food restaurants is very high among the university student which is about 98%. According to a recent study conducted by Taylor’s University on the eating habits and food culture of the Malaysian population, the Malaysian Food Barometer observed that at least one out of two meals is eaten out by Malaysians [20].

In a study conducted by Yong et al. [21] in Malaysia, they found out that food quality shows to be the least important factor while service quality is the most important factor among the respondents. On the other hand, in a research done by Hon Tat et al. (2011) assurance occurred to have the greatest influence on customer satisfaction.

Several studies were also conducted by well-known researchers on how to measure service quality. A widely used instrument of service quality in the United States is a 22-indicator SERVQUAL scale. It measures the service quality by the gap between customer’s expectations for the service and their perceptions of the providers actual performance [8,16]. Clearly, service quality is an issue that leads to substantial debates over its conceptualization.

2.2 Satisfaction

Satisfaction can be defined as an attitude or perception towards the provider of services, or the reaction between what consumers expect from a service and what they received [22]. It is the linkage between purchase and consumption. A satisfied consumer may have a repeat purchase and will be loyal to the brand [23,24].

Customer satisfaction is an abstract concept and the actual manifestation varies from one person to another. It is a key factor in the formation of the customer's desires for future purchase [25,26]. It is viewed as influencing repurchase intentions and behavior which in turn leads to revenue and profit [27]. Hence, the issue of how customers select a restaurant posed considerable attention among researchers. Customers apply diverse criteria in evaluating the attributes that affect their choice. To find out what motivate people to dine in, several studies were conducted by different scholars. In a study conducted by Inkumsah [1], out of five variables utilized only food quality, service quality and price had significant influence in determining customer satisfaction. Similarly, Weiss et al. [28] found out that the food quality and atmosphere of the restaurant setting made customer exhibit positive disconfirmation towards theme restaurant and consistently exhibited return intentions and intent to spread positive word of mouth. Jang and Namkung [29] gave three reasons that influence the total dining experience of the customers. These include service quality, product quality and atmospheric quality. Sulek and Hensley [30] on the other hand, revealed that food quality is the most important determinant of customer satisfaction in the food service industry.

The study of Andaleeb and Conway [2] determined the factors that explain customer satisfaction in a full service restaurant. According to them a full service restaurant should focus on three elements such as service quality, price and food quality.

2.3 Behavioral Intentions

It can be defined as the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; cited in www.ukessays.com, 2012). In studies based on the Theory of Planned Behavior, several researchers found out that customer satisfaction

is the most important determinant of behavioral intentions.

Today, most managers recognized that companies that have more satisfied guests experience higher guest loyalty. Likewise, companies with higher guests loyalty perform better financially compared to their competitor [31]. A similar study was conducted by Conlon et al. [32] who proved that loyal guests are very important because it costs three to five times as much to attract new guests than to retain existing ones. Equally, previous guests strongly influence others by word of mouth recommendation.

Past research also indicates that satisfaction is an excellent predictor of repurchase intentions [33]. Moreover, the long-term success of a company depends on is based on guests loyalty and customer repurchase intention. [27]. A study conducted by Qin and Prybutok [16] posits a direct and positive relationship between customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

The theory of planned behavior has been used in several researches and found out that we can really change the behavior or even the buying patterns of the people. Increasing knowledge about a good or service through advertisement is not enough to change the behavior of a customer, rather campaigns or activities that aim at attitudes and perceived norms have better results. This theory supports the present study since the researchers will also used customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions as variables and will find out if there is a correlation between these two variables. Past experiences among fast food restaurants determine the customer's repurchase intentions, hence it is very necessary to determine what satisfies them.

Hypothesis

Given the literature, this paper sought to test the following hypotheses:

- H₁ There is a significant relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction.
- H₂ There is a significant relationship between service quality and behavioral intentions.
- H₃ There is a significant relationship between customers' satisfaction and behavioral intentions.
- H₄ There are significant differences in the perceptions of the respondents in terms of service quality.

H₅ There are significant differences in the perceptions of the respondents in terms of satisfaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research design used was survey. Likewise, the descriptive-correlation research method was also employed. The researchers took a total of 500 respondents consisting of 250 locals and 250 foreign college students in Subang Jaya, Selangor. The respondents are regular customers of KFC, McDonald, Subway and Burger King. Convenience sampling was used in the selection of samples. In the administration of questionnaires, 70% were done on-site while 30% were done outside the premises of the fast food.

The researchers utilized a two-page survey questionnaire to gather the information needed to achieve the desired objectives of the study. To determine the service quality of the fast food restaurant, the researchers adopted some of the questions from the SERVQUAL instrument (Zeithaml et al., 1990) and existing studies with some modifications to fit into the objectives of the study. It was pre-tested among 20 customers over a week interval. Out of 535 questionnaires distributed only 500 were considered valid and usable. The five-point Likert numerical scale [34] with 5 as the highest and 1 as lowest was used. The reliability of the scale was assessed using the Cronbach's Alpha method. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation. The researchers used Pearson Product Moment Correlation to determine the correlation. Pearson's R is a statistical tool commonly used in researches, particularly when one is looking for the magnitude and direction of the association between two variables that are on an interval or ratio scale. On the other hand, T-Test was used to determine the differences in the perceptions of the respondents.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

To answer the research questions, the researchers made use of 500 respondents. Two hundred fifty (250) locals and two hundred fifty (250) foreign students were randomly selected. The results of the survey showed that the majority of the respondents (54%) are females. In terms of nationality, 50% are Malaysians. The 50% foreigners are dominated by Indonesians (48%); Chinese (37.5%); Maldivians (6%) and the remaining (8.5%) are a

mixture of Africans, Brazilian, Iranians and other Asian countries.

In terms of length of stay in Malaysia, the survey shows that the majority of the foreigners (48%) are in the country for 1-2 years; 28% for 3-4 years and 24% for 5 or more years. As regards Malaysians, there is no doubt that they are here for more than 5 years.

Further, survey reveals that 27% dine in once a week; 17.25% 1-2 times a week; 28% twice a month; 21.75% once a month; 6.5% 3-4 times a week and only 1.5% dine in every day. As regards spending per dine in, it shows that 61% of the respondents spend RM 10-15; 25% less than RM10; 13% about RM 16-20 and only 1% spends more than RM20. It was also revealed that most of the respondents (78.5%) dine in with their friends and sometimes together with their friends and relatives (13.5%). Others (8%) prefer to dine in alone or with their relatives only.

When asked what factors motivate them to dine in a particular fast food, 38% are motivated by the type of food served; 13% by the prices of the food while 24.25% are influenced by both food and price. The remaining 24.75% are influenced by other factors like ambience, cleanliness and hospitality of the staff.

Table 1 shows the perception of the respondents on the service quality of fast food restaurant in Malaysia. As reflected in the table both locals (3.92) and foreigners (3.73) agree that prices are affordable and value is received for their money. They also agree that the food is excellent as revealed by the mean scores of 3.62 (locals) and 3.48 (foreigners). As regards ambience, hospitality and cleanliness, both groups rated the indicators as neutral. It only proves that in terms of hospitality, the respondents observed that staffs are quite responsive to the needs of the customers. The staffs are attentive, courteous and support each other to speed up their services. As regards the ambience and cleanliness, both groups noticed that the restaurants have visually attractive interior and exterior, which make their customers free to move around. Likewise, the respondents witnessed that the facilities are thoroughly clean and the staffs are properly dressed.

As reflected in Table 2, the locals (3.76) and foreigners 3.51 are fairly satisfied with the prices of food. Likewise, they are also fairly satisfied with the food served by fast food restaurants in

Malaysia. It can be seen from the table also that the respondents are satisfied with the ambiance, the way they are treated by the staff and the cleanliness of the facilities of the restaurants.

It can be gleaned from Table 3 the impact of service quality to behavioral intentions of the respondents. The mean scores of 3.78 (locals) and 3.57 (foreigners) showed that their overall dining experience was really enjoyable. This is a factor which according to them will drive them back to the restaurants. With their experience, the respondents agree that they will be glad to recommend the restaurant to their friends and relatives.

Table 4 shows the correlation between service quality and customer's satisfaction. It can be observed from the table that at .01 level of significance, service quality, moderately influenced the satisfaction of local customers.

This is indicated by the computed r-values of .49 (price), .69 (food), .58 (ambiance), .61 (hospitality) and .74 (cleanliness) which all exceeded the critical p-value of .115. The results imply that service quality can influence the level of satisfaction of the customers towards fast food restaurants, hence, hypothesis is accepted. The findings are also compatible with that of Inkumsah's [1] study that food quality, service quality and price significantly influenced customer satisfaction.

Further, it can be viewed from the table that foreigner's satisfaction is also influenced by service quality measured in terms of price (.33), food (.59), ambiance (.45), hospitality (.62) and cleanliness (.64). At .01 level of significance, all computed r-values exceeded the critical p-value of .115, hence, hypothesis is accepted. Among the five dimensions cleanliness has the greatest influence for both respondents.

Table 1. Perceptions of the respondents on the service quality of fast food restaurants in Malaysia

Perceptions	Locals		Foreigners	
	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
Price	3.92	Agree	3.73	Agree
Food	3.62	Agree	3.48	Agree
Ambiance	3.33	Neutral	3.26	Neutral
Hospitality	3.11	Neutral	3.04	Neutral
Cleanliness	3.28	Neutral	3.01	Neutral
Overall Mean	3.45	Neutral	3.30	Neutral

Table 2. Customers' satisfaction on the service quality of fast food restaurants in Malaysia

Customers' satisfaction	Locals		Foreigners	
	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
a. Price	3.76	Fairly Satisfied	3.51	Fairly Satisfied
b. Food	3.73	Fairly Satisfied	3.72	Fairly Satisfied
c. Ambiance	3.36	Satisfied	3.24	Satisfied
d. Hospitality	3.11	Satisfied	2.99	Satisfied
e. Cleanliness	3.30	Satisfied	3.03	Satisfied
Overall Mean	3.45	Satisfied	3.30	Satisfied

Table 3. Impact of service quality to behavioral intentions

Impact	Locals		Foreigners	
	Mean	Description	Mean	Description
a. The overall dining experience is enjoyable	3.78	Agree	3.57	Agree
b. Your experience will make you return	3.80	Agree	3.62	Agree
c. You will be glad to recommend the restaurant with your friends.	3.64	Agree	3.53	Agree
Overall Mean	3.74	Agree	3.57	Agree

A correlation between service quality and behavioral intentions can be seen from the table. For the locals, service quality can influence behavioral intentions as manifested in the computed r-values of .56 (price), .65 (food), .67 (ambiance), .52 (hospitality) and .55 (cleanliness). All values exceeded the critical p-value of .115 in .01 level of significance. For the locals, the ambiance greatly influenced their behavioral intentions.

Furthermore, the results show that service quality is also a predictor of behavioral intentions among the foreigners. Unlike the locals, food is the best predictor of behavioral intentions of the foreigners. The findings were parallel to the study of Gilbert et al. [13] where superior service leads to satisfied and loyal customers which are very crucial to the success of a restaurant.

It can be observed from Table 6 the correlation between customer satisfaction and behavioural intention. As manifested in the table, customer satisfaction influenced behavioural intentions. The computed r-values of .60 (locals) and .64 (foreigners) which exceeded the critical p-value of .115 in .01 level of significance proves that satisfaction with food is the most significant predictor of behavioural intention among the respondents. The result of the study is analogous to Qin and Prybutok [16] findings who found a direct and positive relationship between customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Moreover, the long-term success of a business is based on guest loyalty and retention, which results to future revenue [27]. Other dimensions such as price, ambience, hospitality and cleanliness were found to be predictors of behavioural intentions also.

Table 4. Correlation between service quality and customers' satisfaction

Perception of service quality	Customers' satisfaction			
	Locals		Foreigners	
	r	r ²	r	r ²
Price	.49	.24	.33	.11
Food	.69	.48	.59	.35
Ambiance	.58	.34	.45	.20
Hospitality	.61	.37	.62	.38
Cleanliness	.74	.55	.64	.41

Level of significance = .01 Critical p-value = .115

Table 5. Correlation between service quality and behavioral intentions

Perception of service quality	Behavioral intentions			
	Locals		Foreigners	
	r	r ²	r	r ²
Price	.56	.31	.40	.16
Food	.65	.42	.56	.31
Ambiance	.67	.45	.33	.11
Hospitality	.52	.27	.38	.14
Cleanliness	.55	.30	.38	.14

Table 6. Correlation between customers' satisfaction and behavioral intention

Customers' satisfaction	Impact on behavioral intentions			
	Local		Foreigner	
	r	r ²	r	r ²
Price	.50	.25	.36	.13
Food	.60	.36	.64	.41
Ambiance	.53	.28	.44	.19
Hospitality	.36	.13	.40	.16
Cleanliness	.43	.18	.45	.20

Table 7. T-test results for service quality perceptions and customer satisfaction

Dimensions	Computed T- values service quality	Computed T- values customer satisfaction
Price	.0003	.0005
Food	.023	.813
Ambiance	.171	.087
Hospitality	.333	.126
Cleanliness	.0001	.0016

Level of significance = .01 Critical t- value = 2.59

It can be gleaned from Table 7 that no difference exists in the perceptions of the respondents on the service quality of fast food restaurants in Malaysia. All computed t-values did not exceed the critical t-value of 2.59 at .01 level of significance, hence, the hypothesis is rejected. Figures only validate that both groups of respondents have the same perceptions of the dimensions under study. Likewise, the respondents experienced the same satisfaction from the services of the fast food restaurants in Malaysia. The result of the study is linked to Jang and Namkung [29] who opined in their study that service quality, product quality and the atmosphere are the main attributes affecting the total dining experience of the customers. As such, the respondents of the study conferred that they got the same perceptions and experiences in the fast food restaurants. These experiences will inspire them to promote through word of mouth the restaurants to their friends and relatives.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The results of the study showed that the quality of services of fast food restaurants in Malaysia is manifested on the price and food as agreed upon by both groups of respondents. Further, results also indicate that the respondents are fairly satisfied with the prices and food offered by the restaurants. The respondents discoursed that their overall experience is enjoyable and they are glad to recommend the fast food to their friends. Findings also reveal that service quality influenced customers' satisfaction at a moderate level; hence, the hypothesis is accepted. Among the five dimensions, cleanliness has the most significant influence on both respondents. A correlation between service quality and behavioral intention was seen also. Further analysis shows that ambiance is the best predictor for locals while food greatly influenced behavioural intentions for foreigners. It was found out also that satisfaction with food is the most significant predictor of behavioural intention

among the respondents. Lastly, no significant differences exist in the service quality perceptions of the respondents as well as to their level of satisfaction.

Though the five dimensions of service quality influenced customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions, the researchers still suggest that fast food managers should focus on improving the ambiance and the cleanliness of the restaurant as this will also attract more customers and generate more profits for them. Appealing physical facilities attract customers to dine in. It is critical also that they provide reliable and responsive services to the customers. Continuous training for the staff on how they can be more efficient in their services is also recommended. Restaurants should establish good relationship with the customers since this is an important element of behavioural intentions. Tracking down of feedbacks and complaints should be done on a regular basis.

The result of the study is deemed important to the managers of fast food restaurants as they can use it in their organizational planning for the betterment of their services. Likewise, for other fast food managers, they can also use the results as a basis for their plans for them to be able to compete with the restaurants under study.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations should be acknowledged in this study. First, the instrument employed is particularly designed for the fast food industry. Second, the selection of college students as our sample is another limitation. Although our respondents dine at fast food restaurants several times, a full blown on-site survey can provide a more reliable result. Lastly, only five dimensions were employed in this study. For a deeper analysis of the services of fast food restaurants, a comparison of the service quality across different countries can also be a possible research. The comparison across different cultures enables fast food managers to understand the differences of the consumers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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