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CUSTOMER SATISFACTION TOWARDS COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF THE FRANCHISE RESTAURANT FRONTLINERS



Suhaini Muda (a)*, Sabrina Mohd Rashid (b)
*Corresponding author

(a) School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia, suhaini@uum.edu.my

(b) School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010, Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia, suhaini@uum.edu.my

Abstract

The frontline services provide by the staff represent the image of the organisation. The perceptions of customers towards the organisation will be influenced by their experiences at the frontline. A poor service delivery experience by a customer will influence the image of the organisation as the customer may share his/her bad encounters to other people. Hence, it is important that the organisation ensured the quality of frontline services will give satisfaction to the customers in order to secure a positive image of the organisation. Researching customer satisfaction towards communication skills among the frontline staff of the selected franchise restaurants in a small-town setting requires the researchers to look beyond the tangible aspect alone. The service quality (SERVQUAL) model provides the theoretical background to analyse and discuss the interview data conducted with twenty-four customers of five franchise restaurants. The findings revealed a mix perception of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among the participants who received the services from the frontliners. Some participants suggest the need for the employers to provide training to the staff to improve their communication skills and develop favourable attitudes.

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1. Introduction

In Malaysia, the homegrown franchising system acquires 70% of the total number of franchise systems in the country while foreign franchises account for 30%. That numbers include the food and beverage sectors. With the support of the four strategic thrusts identified in the National Franchise Development Blueprint (NFDB), 2012-2016, the Domestic Trade, Cooperative and Consumerism Ministry has projected that the franchise industry will continue to make up 9.4% of the country's gross domestic products (GDP) by 2020 compared to 2.2% in 2010. Moreover, the Malaysian Franchise Association has anticipated that the growth in the franchise industry will give significant impact to the gross domestic product (GDP) in increasing contribution from RM32 billion in 2018 to RM35 billion in 2020 (Bernama, 2019). One of the NFDB's strategic thrusts is to develop the competence of franchised human capital. Among its emphasis is to promote collaboration between public sector, academia, and franchise industries. In line with the country's aspiration, the study on the customer satisfaction towards communication skills among frontline staff of the franchise restaurants is conducted. Prior to the study, the main concepts and issues related to the study are reviewed.

2. Problem Statement

The issues that led to the studies underlying in the reviewed of the literature that shows that there is a lack of research on customer satisfaction towards communication skills of the frontline staff of the franchise restaurants in non-urban areas. Frontline employees or staff were defined as those who have daily or regular contact with customers in their work role (Slåtten & Mehmetoglu, 2011). In this study, the frontline staff include cashiers and waiters/ waitresses of the fast food franchised restaurants. The frontline services provide by the staff represent the image of the organisation. Communication is one of the highly demanded soft skills which attach to interpersonal qualities and personal attributes one possesses which is required by employers in hiring the staff (Robles, 2012). Robles (2012) has done a research on the importance of soft skills attributes in the workplace from business executive perspectives, and the findings indicate that all 57 respondents view that integrity and communication were extremely important. Hence, researching the practice of communication skills among the frontline staff from the perspectives of the customers will assist in improving dining experience of the customers and human capital of this country

3. Research Questions

Based on the review of the literature, the research question is generated as: How do the customers view their communication experience in dealing with the service encounter?

4. Purpose of the Study

In line with the research question, the objective of the studies is to assess the customers' communication experience on the service encounter.

5. Research Methods

This study utilised qualitative approach of semi structured interview technique. The interview protocol was mainly developed based on the five dimensions of SERVQUAL by Parasuraman et al. (1988). The objective of the interviews was to get varied perspectives from the customers of the franchise restaurants based on their experiences in getting services and interacting with the frontliners that are especially satisfying or especially dissatisfying. Twenty-four customers of five franchise fast-food restaurants in a small town of Kedah, Malaysia have been selected as participants based on Yin (2011) purposive sampling technique to be interviewed. The researchers approached the customers at each restaurant and after they agreed to participate, the researchers briefed them about the research and ethical aspects that they need to know. All twenty-four participants had given consent to the researchers to record the interviews. Most of the interviews were one-on-one, although joint interviews were conducted when the group of customers agreed to be interviewed in group. The recorded interviews were transcribed before they were coded and analysed thematically based on the communication skills and service quality dimensions. The researchers maintain the unanimous identity of the participants and confidentiality of the restaurants by allocating specific label rather than using their real names. For example, P1R1 is referring to “participant 1” and “restaurant 1), and so on.

6. Findings

The findings on how the customers view their communication experience in dealing with the service encounter at the selected franchise restaurants are categorised into four main dimensions: reliability, assurance, empathy, and responsiveness which have been adapted from the service quality dimensions as shown in Table 01.

Table 1. Dimension of Customer Perceptions on Communication Experience on the Service Encounter

Dimension	Subdimension	Keyword
Reliability	Accuracy of performance	Making order & payment Basic need request Preparation time
	Accuracy of billing	Promised price
	Competence	Communication Knowledge
Assurance	Courtesy	Greeting & Interaction Professionalism Friendly & Trusted by customer
	Understanding customer	Making order Menu recommendation Tailored menu Specific need Caring
Empathy	Personalised Attention	Specific customer
	Helpfulness	Menu explanation Willingness to help
	Promptness	Readiness to service Taking order Handling urgency

It means that the tangible aspect of the Parasuraman et al. (1988) SERVQUAL dimension is less applicable in how customers view their communication experiences they encountered at the frontline.

6.1. Reliability

Reliability is concerned with the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately (Abd Rashid et al., 2015; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Souca, 2011). Based on the findings, the reliability dimension consists of accuracy of performance and accuracy of billing subdimensions. The accuracy of performance is further divided into making order and payment, basic need request, and preparation time. While the accuracy of billing is where the service provider is expected to be accurate in charging and calculating the service or product sold according to the promised values.

The study reveals that eleven participants mentioned about their encounter with the frontliners at all five selected franchise restaurants in making order and payment. Out of eleven participants, nine participants are satisfied with the accuracy of performance encountered at all five restaurants. Participant P22R5 compared her dissatisfaction encountered at other branch to emphasise her satisfaction with the performance of the frontliners of R5. Two other participants expressed their dissatisfaction over the accuracy of performance received from the restaurant frontliners, two others dissatisfied over the slow payment process at the counter and mistaken order.

In term of the basic need request, all two participants who had experienced requesting for extra basic needs at the restaurants were fully satisfied with the performance of the frontliners. The rest of the participants were rarely requesting for the extra basic needs and could not recall the experience clearly. This may mean that the restaurants have provided enough basic needs. Referring preparation time and how it is communicated to the customer, only one participant expressed his satisfaction. Participant P18R4 expressed her dissatisfaction in receiving inaccurate billing. Overall, majority participants were satisfied with the ability of the frontliners to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

6.2. Assurance

Another important dimension is assurance. Parasuraman et al. (1994) assert assurance to imply the attitudes of the employees and their behaviours, and their ability to provide friendly, confidential, courteous, and competent services. This key dimension includes the subdimension of competence (communication and knowledge), and courtesy (greeting and interaction, professionalism, and friendly and trusted by customer).

Communication competence briefly refers to the knowledge and the ability to use and adapt effective communication and patterns to various contexts (Cooley & Roach, 1984; Hargie, 2011). Half of the participants interviewed admit that they were satisfied with the competency of the frontliners in using effective communication at the counter. Satisfied participants mention that they never experienced miscommunication (P1R1, P3R1, P21R5), never had difficulties communicating (P20R4, P21R5, P23R5), clear and understandable (P2R1, P3R1, P4R1), share the same meaning (P23R5), feel comfortable (P2R1), the frontliners are competence, friendly, neutral (P17R4), job done (P21R5) and use professional language (P19R4). Three others simply expressed their satisfaction as okay and very good.

However, P4R1 having difficulties in communicating with the foreign workers due to their poor level of English language command. Two other dissatisfied participants view the frontliners at the restaurant as less competence in communicating other languages other than Malay. One participant also suggested the frontliners to make effort to learn other languages like Thai and Chinese as there are a number of them live around the area. It is interesting to find out while most studies concern with English language proficiency (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Qian, 2009; Rafik-Galea et al., 2012; Shahrudin et al., 2015), this study discovers the proficiency of the third language is deemed as similarly important from the Malaysian citizen himself.

Other competency that may assure satisfaction is knowledge competence. Knowledge competence in this study deals with the range of frontliners' own information and understanding within their job scope, and how they make that into used. Based on the findings, four participants specifically mentioned that they are satisfied with the competency of the frontline staff to convey their knowledge and information that are necessary for them as the customers. Participant P15R4 further regards the frontliners in R4 as more professional than the staff in other branch. The dissatisfied participants viewed the frontliners as just having adequate knowledge but not beyond that (P24R5), and lack of knowledge competency and just depend on one knowledgeable person (P17R4). These findings clearly show that communicating clearly during service encounter could influence customers satisfaction in positive way.

Another assurance that may inspire trust and confidence within the customers is the ability of the frontliners to show courtesy towards others, in this studies that include greeting and interaction, professionalism, and friendly and trusted by customer. In practising courtesy in greeting and interacting with customers, only two participants are satisfied with that. Participant P3R1 is specifically praised the women frontliners in their ability to greet and communicate well with the customers. Those who expressed dissatisfaction are actually outnumbered the first group above. Participant P3R1 expressed her dissatisfaction towards the lack of courtesy among men frontliners in greeting and interacting with customers. Other participants dissatisfied with the frontliners as they smile less (P19R4), which make them less friendlier (P21R5), and less people oriented (P24R5). Courtesy influences how the customers view professionalism. Seven participants openly expressed their satisfaction towards the professional courtesy practised by the frontliners. All of them relate to well manners (P21R5) portray by the frontliners. That include good communication, welcome greeting, friendly, professional treatment, and respecting customers. The dissatisfaction occurs in the opposite form of professional courtesy mentioned. That includes the lack of professionalism, unwelcoming facial expression and greeting, lack of communication skills, lack of motivation, and low courtesy.

A part of courtesy is the friendly and customer trust. All two participants who regard friendly and trusted by customer as related to courtesy are satisfied with friendly (P6R2, P9R2), good service and respect showed by the frontliners. Towards the extend that relationship is viewed as developing into friendship. Overall, the findings reveal that language plays an important role to increase communication competence and practising courtesy is crucial to assure customer satisfaction.

6.3. Empathy

The whole idea of empathy is the ability to feel what others are feeling and how we respond to it cognitively and affectively (Decety & Lamm, 2006), and in a service setting, it is the main driver to attain a high-quality customer experience (Parasuraman et al., 1994). Despite offering diverse views of empathy, the findings reveal that all participants agreed in looking at the empathy factor as important in providing satisfying services to the customers. The dimension of empathy from the studies mainly concerns with the understanding of customers. This subdimension of understanding customer is linked to the keywords of making order, menu recommendation, tailored menu, and specific needs of the customer.

Two participants are satisfied when they feel that the frontliners have shown their understanding to ease their process of making order at the counter. One participant from China praised the frontliners who communicate with her using pictures in making order. The same goes to the other participant who would feel honoured when the frontliners remember her favourite menu.

Almost all participants are happy to receive recommendation from the frontliners when deciding for the menu to be ordered. In this part, participant P11R3 satisfied with the frontliners menu recommendation that cater to the specific needs like allergies. However, other two participants view others' recommendation as not necessary. Tailoring menu according to the need of the customer is also perceived as a part of understanding customer. Four participants are satisfied with the frontliners that had tailored the menu according to their religious preference, child preference, customer's own preference and needs.

In term of customer specific needs, nine participants from four franchised restaurants under studied are satisfied with the way the frontliners responded to their specific need requests. Some of the needs including requesting coffee without sugars, less spicy food, customised 3D art on the coffee, child chair and a lot more. None of the participants from all five restaurants mentioned that their specific needs are not being attended to. The act of caring towards the customers (P11R3), and personalised attention to specific customer like a child (P2R5) are also regarded as understanding customer. As suggested by Pavlovich and Krahnke (2012), empathy can serve as a mechanism to foster connectedness which may lead to positive relationship.

Besides emphasising diverse aspects of empathy, the findings further supported the findings of previous studies that always show satisfaction when customers feel that the staff are more empathetic to them (Abd Razak et al., 2016; Lahap et al., 2018; Saporna & Claveria, 2019), and hence able to positively value the service they encountered (Wieseke et al., 2012).

6.4. Responsiveness

Responsiveness, an important dimension in this study is referred to the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service as suggested by Souca (2011). The helpfulness subdimension includes menu explanation and willingness to help. While the promptness subdimension consists of readiness to service, taking order, and handling urgency.

This menu explanation is closely related to menu recommendation mentioned earlier. For this part, the customers will ask for more details from the frontliners they encountered. Seven participants indicate

their satisfaction in receiving help in choosing the promotional menu of the day and getting explanation in deciding the delicious menu. However participant P3R1 is more satisfied with the recommendation and explanation from the female staff rather than the male ones. Only participant P24R5 views the lack of helpfulness from the frontliners in giving recommendation.

Prompt service involves the readiness of the frontliners to serve the customer. Four participants had expressed satisfaction over the prompt service they received. One of them P10R2 regarded the frontliners as very observant based on their ability to provide immediate service. Three participants did not agree that the frontliners able to provide prompt service as they had experienced delay in getting service. This may due to the lack of local language command among these two foreign students (P19R4, P20R4). While participant P8R2 had experienced mistaken order and this delayed the promptness of the service. At the time of emergency situation, the frontliners need to be able to know how to handle urgency. Participant P11R3 praised the frontliners who reacted promptly and comforting the customers professionally when the blackout incident happened at the restaurant. Overall, the participants perceived the frontliners of the selected franchise restaurants in the study as willing to help customers and provide prompt service. As services are produced, delivered, and consumed by interaction of service provider and receiver, services received should be looked from the interactive perspective (Svenson, 2004) as in how the participants in this study view responsiveness of the frontliners.

7. Conclusion

Researching customer satisfaction on the service received at the franchise restaurants from the customers own perspectives will assist the researchers to gain insight that is more holistic which go beyond looking at the tangible aspect alone. The communication styles of the frontliners when interacting with the customers may give impact on their feeling which determine how the customers perceive their satisfaction. As revealed by previous research, the way the customers evaluate their satisfaction on the service received were based on their expectation in mind (Abd Rashid et al., 2016) and in this study, the expectation is based on their comparison on the services that they received mainly from different branches of similar franchisees. Overall, the findings show that all dimensions of service quality discovered in this study are interrelated to each other, and contribute to the way customers assess their satisfaction of service encountered based on the communication with the frontliners.

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