

Perceived Key Attributes In Determining Highly Satisfied Restaurant Customers During Pandemic

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Abstract

The goal of the study is to identify the perceived key quality attributes that significantly distinguish highly satisfied diners from non-highly satisfied diners. A sample of 113 restaurant diners were included in this empirical study, in which consumers' perception on four factors: food, physical environment, service and corona precautions were measured using a validated scale. Independent t test and weighted average test were used to determine which quality attributes are critical in distinguishing highly satisfied diners from other diners. The findings facilitate restaurant management in better allocating their resources and making improvements to critical quality factors that influence customer satisfaction.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction, perceived quality, pandemic, diners, key quality attributes.

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has caused havoc on the restaurant business. The last several months have been extremely challenging for the country as a whole and restaurants all around the country have seen significant losses in the fight against the crisis. Most population face financial stress influencing their usual spending pattern (Niby Antony, 2021). The restaurants in the southern part of India have been facing an uncertain future as several of their employees have headed back to their native places. The restaurants are therefore now struggling to open up even though the government has issued guidelines announcing relaxations for their dine-in process. This situation will be improved by giving the restaurants a fighting chance. The industry quickly realized that it must adapt to survive with these adjustments for some time so that its long-term potential is more obvious.

Customer satisfaction emphasizes delivering satisfaction to customers and obtaining profits in return (Yi & Natarajan, 2018). Overall service quality influences customer satisfaction, leading to customer happiness (Gong & Yi 2018). This necessitates understanding and measuring the quality attributes of restaurant diners to ensure satisfaction of customers. This study examines the perceived key attributes in critically determining the highly satisfied diners of restaurants.

Theoretical framework

The most important goal of any service industry is to satisfy customers as it gains long term benefits like customer loyalty, and sustainable profitability. Customer satisfaction is the customers' evaluation of experience rendered to them. It depends on the service quality, the perceived value of the service and the trust on the service personnel (Uzir et al., 2021). Marketers should recognize the customer requirements to satisfy their expectation. The higher service quality leads to higher customer satisfaction (Schirmer et al., 2018).

Quality perception is the cognitive response to a service experienced by consumers (Petrick, 2004). It is their judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 3). Perceived quality is attracted by certain features of a product that have the ability to satisfy the personal values of the consumers and will mediate between the product characteristics and consumer preferences (Steenkamp, 1989). Many studies have used DINESERV, SERVQUAL, food, service and atmospherics quality to measure quality perception of consumers in food industry (e.g., Parasuraman et al. (1988), Liu and Jang, (2009), Tuncer et al., (2021).

While services cannot be stored, physical goods can be stored and sold at a later time. Services cease to exist if they are not sold as soon as they become accessible (Hoffman & Bateson, 2001). The service, product, and physical environment all play important roles in determining restaurant service quality (Kim et al., 2009). Customers are more influenced by the appearance of products and sensory qualities while making purchase decisions (Choi et al., 2021). The food quality, along with the taste and presentation, influences behavioural intentions and the satisfaction of the customers. Namkung & Jang (2008) believe that spatial perception conveys a sense of comfort and intimacy much faster than any emotional response or judgement drawn from a specific service environment. Having understood about the significance of various key quality attributes, it is essential to examine the vital attributes in determining the satisfaction of the restaurant diners. Therefore, this merits research attention to optimally use the resources and prioritize decision-making that focuses on perceived key quality attributes.

Methodology

Participants

In a pandemic like situation, slow and steady recovery has led to the relaxation in the lockdowns facilitating in reopening of restaurants. The restaurants were selected for the study on the basis of restaurants offering full table services and providing more than 80% of their earlier menu items. In total 23 restaurants agreed for the data collection process. The restaurants were chosen from the southern part of Tamilnadu, India. The self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the customers who were in the payment counters after getting prior permission from the restaurant's staffs. Of the 150 distributed questionnaires, 113 questionnaires (75.3%) were used for the study after the rejection of partial and unfilled data.

Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire contains two main constructs to measure the perception of key attributes and customer satisfaction. Perceived attributes contain four factors; food (seven items), physical environment (four items), service (3 items), and corona precautions (5 items). The validated scale

from previous study is identified and modified to fit the study setting. Examples of items in food factor are “rate the presentation of the food”, “nutritious factor in the food”, “freshness of the food”. Physical environment factor items are “rate the ambience of the restaurant, “spaciously arranged dining tables with good social distancing”, “waiting area is more spacious”. Items in the service factor are “employees have helping attitude”, “meal is served at promised time”. Corona precaution factor has item like “visibility of the food preparation area”, “availability of online booking options”, restaurant is highly disinfected and clean”, foods are hygiene and hands are sanitized”. Overall satisfaction with the restaurant experience was measured by asking “Overall, I am satisfied with my dining experience at this restaurant,” based on Oliver’s (1997) study. The perception factors and overall satisfaction were measured using a five-point scale: “How much do you agree or disagree with these statements?”

Data collection

This study used convenience sampling method allowing sufficient time for data collection. The participants were given adequate time and freedom to answer the questions, allowing for accurate information to be collected and respondents’ anonymity was completely ensured. The survey consisted of two main sections – demographic questions and items examining the four factors and one item to represent overall satisfaction of restaurant customers.

Procedure

The descriptive statistics is conducted to understand respondents’ demographics characteristics, such as gender, age, and occupation. This study split the samples into highly satisfied and non-highly satisfied diners to understand the driving factors of high satisfaction among restaurant customers. The four in the five-point scale was used as the cut-off point in this study. Hence, the highly satisfied diners (n = 84) were those who rated the level of satisfaction higher than or equal to 4 (group 1), and the remaining (n =29) were grouped as non-highly satisfied diners (group 2).

Results

Reliability Test

Table 1 shows that the composite reliability ranged from 0.84 to 0.89 which are well above the suggested standard of 0.70, indicating internal consistency (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 1 - Reliability Test

S.No	Variable	No of items	Cronbach's alpha (α)
1	Food	5	0.896
2	Service	3	0.849
3	Physical environment	4	0.872
4	Safety precautions	5	0.848

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 indicates Group 1 consists of 84 highly satisfied diners and Group 2 consists of 29 non-highly satisfied diners. The most diners were female of 64 diners (76.2%) for group 1 and 20 diners (68.9%) for group 2. The higher number diners belong to (69%) age group 18–30 years for group 1 and 72.4% for group 2. The least number of diners (2.4%) for group1 and 3.4% diners belong to group 2. Most diners were students (56%) and professionals (32.1%) for group 1 and 48.3% and 24.1% for group 2. The demographic details of the diners chosen for the study are predominantly females belonging to the age group of 18 to 30 years and they are mostly the students and professionals.

Table 2 - Descriptive statistics Independent t- test

Characteristics		Group 1	Group 2
		N = 84	N = 29
		Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	20 (23.8%)	9 (31.1%)
	Female	64 (76.2%)	20 (68.9%)
Age	Younger than 18	19 (22.6%)	3 (10.3%)
	18 to 30 Years	58 (69.0%)	21 (72.4%)
	31 to 40 Years	3 (3.6%)	2 (6.9%)
	41 to 50 Years	2 (2.4%)	2 (6.9%)
	Older than 50 Years	2 (2.4%)	1 (3.4%)
Occupation	Students	47 (56.0%)	14 (48.3%)
	Homemaker	8 (9.5%)	5 (17.2%)
	Professional	27 (32.1%)	7 (24.1%)
	Self- employed	2 (2.4%)	2 (6.9%)
	Retired Professional	0 (0%)	1 (3.4%)

Table 3 shows results of Independent samples t tests conducted to determine the mean differences in the two groups for each observed item of four constructs. This indicates that the levels for all items related to quality perception aspects for highly satisfied diners were significantly higher than the other group ($p < 0.01$). The magnitude of t-statistics indicates that freshness and taste were the two most important contributors to satisfaction among the food quality attributes. In terms of physical environment, special layout and interior design was shown to be the most influential attribute in producing a highly satisfying dining experience. In service, promised service and service quality plays the significant role. Regarding corona precautions, social distancing and see-through kitchen stand out as the crucial properties that restaurant employees should maintain in order to increase customer satisfaction.

Table 3: Independent t – test between two groups

Factors	Items	Group 1 (n=84) (M±SD)	Group 2 (n=29) (M±SD)	t-value
Food	Presentation	4.04±0.55	3.76±0.51	2.550*
	Healthy options	4.12±0.58	3.79±0.55	3.122*
	Taste	4.06±0.54	3.69±0.93	3.491*

	Freshness	4.17±0.51	3.72±0.70	3.501**
	Temperature	3.70±0.74	3.17±1.00	2.669*
Physical environment	Ambience	4.04±0.56	3.38±0.77	2.025**
	Spatial layout	2.95±1.67	2.24±1.45	3.945*
	Dining Privacy	3.94±0.71	3.38±1.08	2.601*
	Interior design	3.98±1.00	3.24±1.35	2.611*
	Promised service	4.07±0.57	3.86±0.51	4.187*
Service	Service quality	4.12±0.54	3.52±0.87	2.181***
	Helping attitude	3.83±0.69	3.07±0.96	2.104***
	See through kitchen	3.81±0.71	2.90±1.20	3.849***
Corona Precautions	Online booking service	4.31±1.37	3.55±1.76	1.827*
	Usage of disinfectant	4.02±0.69	3.55±0.91	2.679***
	Hygienic food	4.00±0.62	3.41±0.82	2.471***
	Social distancing	2.36±1.67	3.14±1.68	4.159*

Note: M- Mean, SD - Standard Deviation, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, *p<0.001

Weighted Average Test

Table 3 shows the result of the weighted average test which is conducted to determine the key factors responsible for high customer satisfaction.

S.No	Factors	Attributes	Ratings					Weighted Average $Y = \sum(W \cdot X) / \sum W$	Rank
			Excellent (W5=5) X5	Good (W4=4) X4	Average (W3=3) X3	Fair (W2=2) X2	Poor (W1=1) X1		
1	Food	Presentation	22	55	25	8	3	28.27	15
		Healthy options	15	79	19	0	0	29.87	5
		Taste	19	73	9	5	7	28.73	11
		Freshness	16	78	19	0	0	29.93	4
		Temperature	22	55	28	5	3	28.47	13
2	Physical environment	Ambience	15	63	27	7	1	28.2	16
		Spatial layout	22	76	14	1	0	30.53	3
		Dining Privacy	15	72	23	2	1	29.13	9
		Interior design	30	53	10	14	6	28.4	14
3	Service	Promised service	81	0	14	0	18	31	2
		Service quality	17	81	10	1	4	29.67	6
		Helping attitude	32	51	10	14	6	28.53	12
4	Corona Precautions	See through kitchen	18	75	13	5	2	29.4	7
		Online booking service	30	11	10	27	25	20.2	17
		Usage of disinfectant	18	74	13	5	3	29.2	8

	Hygienic food	17	67	24	5	0	29	10
	Social distancing	20	79	12	12	2	31.87	1

It is evident from the table that maintaining social distancing (Rank 1) is the key factor which people look for in the restaurant at present pandemic situation. The other attributes like promised service (Rank 2) gets the second highest weight, spatial layout (Rank 3) gets the third highest followed by the freshness (Rank 4) and healthy options (Rank 5) provided in the choice of food.

Discussion

The weighted average table clearly elucidates that the satisfaction level of diners is predicted by the factors that are majorly influenced by the current pandemic situations. Customers make a conscious choice in ranking the key attributes in determining their satisfaction level keeping in view the prevailing situation. This signifies that the service providers must make careful decision in order to satisfying their customers.

Diners expect proper COVID -19 protocol to be followed when they visit the restaurants. Restaurants should provide promised services such as proper table booking, low waiting time, and assured menu options. The restaurant's spatial arrangement promotes comfort and delightful experiences, which must be offered in order to sustain pandemic measures. In these difficult times, providing fresh food and healthy meal options is inevitable because it attracts diners to huge extents.

The diners have ranked service quality in sixth position, see through kitchen in seventh position, usage of disinfectant in eight position, dining privacy as ninth and hygienic food in tenth position. The rankings suggest that more attention should be paid to these key attributes that affect diner's high satisfaction.

Taste, helpful attitude, temperature, interior design, presentation, atmosphere, and online booking services are among the other factors ranked. In addition to the tangible components of a restaurant, the intangible aspects should be prioritized in order to attract more customers and retain them.

The weighted average result shows for food factor, freshness and healthy menu options are the critical determinants of high satisfaction about their dining experience. In this pandemic situation, it is essential for restaurant owners to ensure that the foods are constantly fresh and have numerous healthy choices available as the diners are more health conscious.

In the physical environment, spatial layout and dining privacy are the vital attributes that lead to high customer satisfaction, indicating that customers demand spacious seating arrangements, more privacy, and so on.

Under service factor, promised service and service quality are the most important aspects that influence customer satisfaction. Customers expect service employees to be dependable in providing services that are accurate, precise, and compassionate. They prefer restaurants employees to be trustworthy, knowledgeable and courteous in providing exceptional services to them. Restaurant owners must pay close attention to teach servers to show the suitable traits in restaurants where clients spend time talking with service providers.

Diners have carefully ranked the social distancing measures, open kitchen area, and disinfectant use in the corona precaution factor, highlighting the corona protocol to be rigorously

followed. Amidst the spread of COVID-19, restaurants must adapt their standard operating procedures in order to provide the highest level of safety and protection to their consumers.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the key quality attributes that determine a high satisfaction level among customers during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study reveal that there are differences in perceptions between highly satisfied and non-highly satisfied customers when it comes to the critical attributes of the four quality factors during restaurant consumption experiences. The results of independent samples t tests show highly satisfied diners' perceived evaluations of all quality attributes were significantly higher than those of non-highly satisfied diners.

To achieve the high level of customer satisfaction, the diners should feel comfortable and enjoy the time spent in the restaurants. While eating the diners should be feel the highest service quality provided by their employees.

To attain a high level of customer satisfaction, all corona precautions must be strictly adhered by the restaurants managers. The food must be served fresh and it has to be healthy enough to satisfy the customers. Diners should be kept comfortable in the restaurants and enjoy their time there. Diners should be able to sense the greatest level of service provided by the employees while eating. The findings of this study will facilitate restaurant managers strike a balance between the four factors of perceived quality attributes, focusing limited resources on increasing more crucial quality that increase customer satisfaction.

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