



CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN MALAYSIAN MALAY RESTAURANTS DINING EXPERIENCE

SARIMAH ISMAIL

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ABSTRACT

Sarimah Ismail

Customer Satisfaction in Malaysian Malay Restaurants Dining Experience

The subject of this Ph.D. thesis is *Customer Satisfaction in Malaysian Malay Restaurants Dining Experience*. The research was conducted in three Malay family restaurants in Malaysia by using an inductive Case Study research approach. The aim of the research was to propose a conceptual framework for customer satisfaction dining experience. It focused on dining experience satisfaction consumption related to factors in, and the management of, customer satisfaction. The implications of the findings provide a theoretical and methodological contribution to the knowledge in both, Malaysia and the rest of the world.

Adopting the Case Study research approach gave an opportunity to collect data that stems from three Malay family restaurants in Malaysia using a wide variety of data collection methods. The findings presented in this thesis were based on an in-depth interview with 108 restaurant customers who dined at the restaurants and 18 restaurant staff, particularly front of house and kitchen staff, besides the owner and manager of each restaurant. Daily participant observation for each restaurant took 5 to 9 hours a day for between 27 and 30 days. The findings were also based on a number of supplementary data from documentary evidence such as staff working timetables, menu cards/ books, staff attendance punch cards, stock check lists, reservation records and restaurant organisational charts.

The contributions of this study comprise of six major themes:

Firstly, dining experience is a continuous process which starts with the customers' first engagement with the restaurant at the reservation stage and continues until they leave the restaurant at the departure stage. Therefore, to ensure customers' loyalty, restaurateurs needed to ensure all tangible and intangible factors that influenced satisfaction at each stage of the dining process (pre-meal experience; antecedent experience; reservation experience and arrival experience; the actual meal experience: seating experience and food experience; and post-meal experience: payment experience and departure experience) were integrated together (they did not work as separate entities and should not be treated individually) to provide valuable, meaningful, memorable and holistic satisfaction to every customer who dined at the restaurant.

Secondly, factors influencing customer satisfaction at the pre-meal experience were the availability of a reservation service, both formal and informal, and customers' phone calls for reservations being answered quickly by restaurants' polite and professional staff. Meanwhile, at the dining arrival stage, factors influencing customers' satisfaction were being assisted by a free parking attendant, having a parking area close to the premises, punctuality of restaurant business hours and offering a 24-hour restaurant operation to the public. The meal experience stage was found to be a major stage among seven stages of the dining experience process, with menu variety, and food presentation and display as the core of restaurant service.

Factors influencing dining satisfaction during the actual meal experience were related to a unique cultural preference concept for Malay restaurants such as private dining space, food quality attribute of authenticity, eating style, restaurant decoration, waiting activities, prayer room, and traditional live band. Satisfaction influence factors for post-meal experience were self service payment, being bid farewell and being escorted to the exit door.

Thirdly, this study because it adopted a qualitative research approach, managed to venture the role of Maslow's Theory in customer satisfaction through the hierarchy of satisfaction of dining experience. The lowest level satisfaction was achieved when the basic needs of the customers' dining at the restaurant was fulfilled or what restaurants provided to the customers was adequate or equal with customers' expectation. A moderate level of satisfaction was achieved when customers could control their own dining activities. A high level of satisfaction resulted when the restaurants offered something above ordinary or which exceeded customers' expectation. The highest level of satisfaction was achieved when the restaurants provided something that was outstanding and which surpassed the ordinary needs of the customers.

Fourthly, the major way of managing factors influencing customer satisfaction dining experience was based on a systematic restaurant operation system. However, the key element that was responsible for the management of a systematic restaurant operation system depended on human resource management (the restaurant manager, front of house staff and kitchen staff), staff training and development, and restaurant rules.

Fifthly, the analyses of customer satisfaction in a new socio-cultural context: Malaysian Malay restaurants provided an opportunity for a cross-comparison of 'western' and 'eastern' research findings and the identification of what was the same and what was different depending on the cultural context.

Sixthly, the development of a conceptual framework had three major concepts: the input for the dining experience satisfaction (which consisted of factors influencing dining satisfaction and ways of managing it); the consumption of dining experience satisfaction at three phases: pre-meal, the actual meal and post-meal experience and the cognitive evaluation process of dining experience that led to satisfaction. And, lastly, the outcomes of dining experience satisfaction (in a form of pleasurable feelings and behavioural changes) which aided the understanding of customer satisfaction with the dining experience and ways managing it.

This research suggested future research should consider additional factors to explain the overall satisfaction with the dining experience at Malaysian Malay restaurants (and /including) cross- type of restaurants and demographic profiles of customers; expand this research throughout the country to improve the transferability of the findings to other types of restaurant to assist restaurant managers in better matching the needs of each customer segment; extend the research to different ethnic restaurants that have different characteristics and attributes; undertake a comparative study of factors influencing customer satisfaction in Malay restaurants between two different groups of customers, such as Eastern versus Western; conduct a longitudinal study to compare changes in factors that influence customers' satisfaction with dining experience at different times; and investigate whether the meal experience stage still plays the most important role in different types of restaurants.

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