



The impact of personal and functional aspects of restaurant employee service behaviour on customer satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Employee behaviour plays a significant role in satisfying restaurant customers, however, there is a paucity of research highlighted personal and functional aspects of employee behaviour and their influence on customer satisfaction. Accordingly, this study aims to bring a deeper insight of the impact of restaurant employee service behaviour on customer satisfaction. Using survey approach, the current study collected data from 212 tourists who had a dining experience in Jordan. The results of data analysis showed that both functional and personal aspects of service behaviour were able to explain customer satisfaction, with higher contribution of personal aspects over the functional ones. Depending on study's findings, some implications were suggested including a recommendation to foodservice managers to adopt reinforcement programs that improve functional and personal aspects of their employees. A further recommendation was proposed to marketers, to give a higher attention to personal aspects of foodservices in their marketing activities.

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1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction with foodservice can be evaluated through a set of factors including service quality, product quality, hygiene, and atmosphere among others (Yuksel and Yuksel, 2002). While the total meal experience that considers both food quality and service quality contributes to the conceptualizing of the customer satisfaction concept (Johns and Pine, 2002). Pizam and Ellis (1999) reported that customer satisfaction in restaurant services represents a harmonious mixture of elements that may include food and beverages, the behaviour and attitude of employees, food service, and the environment. In a more specific view, customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction, as a result of the employee–customer interaction process, is affected by employee behaviour (Emery and Fredendall, 2002). In addition, Medeiros and Salay (2013) stated that the attitude and friendliness of employees are strongly related to customer satisfaction in foodservice.

Accordingly, previous research highlighted the service quality aspects of restaurants and foodservice establishments as a major determinant of customer satisfaction. Employees' interaction with customers has greater impact on customer satisfaction than any other factors; the focus here is on increasing customers' positive experience through enhancing high levels of service quality delivered through the interaction process (Juwaheer, 2004; Ariffin and Maghzi, 2012; Turkey and Sengul, 2014).

The importance of service employee interpersonal characteristics in a service quality context is salient in both marketing and quality literature. For instance, Customer Relationship Marketing is built on service encounters; it is concerned mainly with personalized marketing communication between service provider and service customer (Beatson et al., 2008; Wang and Hsu, 2012; Turkey and Sengul, 2014).

The main application of employees' interpersonal characteristics in the service context is the employee–customer service encounters. Service encounters depend on the communication, customer orientation, customization of service, employee adaptability and employee's emotions, among others (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Therefore, there is a great focus on the commitment of front line employees to the basis of service encounters to improve the overall performance and quality of the establishment.

Various scholars claimed that not much research has been done on the role that employees are playing in providing excellent ser-

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vice in restaurants (Hanna et al., 2004; Voon et al., 2013), and very little attention was given to personal and human characteristics of restaurant service employees (Baker et al., 2013). Therefore, the focus of this research is to understand the extent to which employee behaviour affects customer satisfaction in restaurants. Hence, the research aims are set to target actual customers in a fine dining environment in order to enrich the research overall outcomes and its contribution to service behaviour knowledge. For that purpose, the employees-related factors of restaurant servers are studied deeply in two major portions: personal aspects and service related aspects.

2. Literature review

Application of service quality basis in foodservice industry is the focus of abundant research. Food quality, employee behaviour and friendliness, service quality, atmosphere and physical environment are among factors that affect customers' evaluation of their dining experience (Medeiros and Salay, 2013; Gagić et al., 2013). In the same context, Lashley et al. (2004) discussed the meal experience from its emotional and social perspectives, considering occasion, atmosphere, food and service as its major components. Having considered the need for an approach to explain the accumulative customer experience with restaurant services; the Five Aspects Meal Model (FAMM) developed by Gustafsson (2004) and Gustafsson et al. (2006) involves aspects of room, product, management system, atmosphere and meeting as the main elements of the customer experience in restaurants. The latter one named 'meeting' is concerned with the interaction process between guest and waiters as well as with other guests. In another viewpoint, Gibbs and Ritchie (2010) looked at the meal experience from a "drama" point of view reporting that customer, food, staff and setting are the components of customer experience in fine dining restaurants. Therefore, the server-guest interaction is one of the most significant reasons for going out to a fine dining restaurants.

Employee behaviour links between the organization and its customers which represents its values and service orientation (Gracia et al., 2010). Within this context, employee behaviour is an important factor which explains customer perception of quality and overall satisfaction (Saad and Amy, 2007). However, it was admitted that little attention is given to the exploration of behaviours displayed by frontline personnel who play a key role in creating satisfactory service encounters (Hanna et al., 2004; Baker et al., 2013). The focus here is on the employee's skills related to the successful communication and satisfying customer needs. Hence, the concept of 'soft skills' is important here; soft skills, according to Weber et al. (2009), refers to the ability of the employee to communicate and understand others in the interpersonal and emotional levels. Furthermore, the social role of both restaurant staff and customers depends heavily on staff's soft skills; the 'off-script' role in the restaurant drama (Gibbs and Ritchie, 2010).

Customers tend to perceive employee behaviour as shaped by the organisation's policy of service orientation (Liljander, 2000; Beatson et al., 2008). The behaviour of service employees affects customers' perception of service quality; the success and failure of service delivery depend basically on the attitudes and behaviours of the contact employees. Previous studies found that employee behaviour is the most influential factor in shaping customer's perceptions (Hennig-Thurau, 2004; Wall and Berry, 2007; Baker et al., 2013).

Furthermore, it was concluded by Nicolini and Salini (2006) that customer evaluation of service is affected highly by the psychological interaction between customers and employees as well as technical characteristics of service delivery process. Baker et al. (2013) reported that the behaviour of employees during the ser-

vice encounter is a major factor in affecting customers' evaluation of the service, as well as their satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Hence, employees' behavioural characteristics of bringing comfort and personal attention to customers are highly emphasized as part of service quality dimensions (Hennig-Thurau, 2004).

Tsaura and Linb (2004) defined service behaviour through the prescribed role of employee during the service encounter (formal role) and the personal behaviour of employees while serving customers. Additionally, employee behaviour is concerned with the actions taken by the employee while performing a service. Employee behaviour has more importance in the service sector because of the uniqueness of employee-customer interaction there (Chien-Wen et al., 2013).

Earlier research identified employee-related aspects as dimensions of service quality assessment; for example, responsiveness, assurance and empathy as three out of five major dimensions of the popular SERVQUAL are concerned with the behaviour of employees (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Accordingly, it is the customer's dining experience in the restaurant that creates customer satisfaction and intention to repurchase. Yuksel and Yuksel (2002) stated that customers are likely to spend their time and money in a pleasant service environment. They also argued that customer evaluation of dining experience includes the time spent (waiting time and dining time), the service environment (tangibles and intangibles), social interaction and value for money. In addition, there is a large focus on restaurant staff's attentiveness, attention to details, flexibility, tolerance, amiability and desire to serve as the dominant aspects of meal experience (Gibbs and Ritchie, 2010).

In 2003, Kusluvan distinguished between the effect of the individual aspects (personal characteristics of service employee) and situational aspects (the employee role and attitude while performing service). In a broader view, Wall and Berry (2007) contributed to the service behaviour characteristics by considering the functional clues and humanic clues of service. Functional clues are related to the technical quality of the service, particularly relating to whether the service is performed competently; the focus here is on food quality and the efficiency of service. While humanic clues consider service employee behaviour and characteristics; including body language, smiling, greeting and friendliness among others. It is believed that both functional clues and humanic clues are determinants of service quality and service excellence. It is believed also that humanic clues moderate the effect of mechanic clues. In restaurants, customers' perceptions of service quality are highly affected by humanic clues than functional ones (Wall and Berry, 2007). In a latter research, it was highlighted that humanic clues in restaurants can be summarized as friendly and helpful employees with cordial greetings, body language, tidiness and appropriate appearance; while functional clues relate to the competence of the service process itself (Wall and Berry, 2007; Garg, 2014). However, it was concluded by Gibbs and Ritchie (2010) that only staff who are technically skilled and at the same time can go beyond their predetermined role can achieve a positive meal experience.

Chien-Wen et al. (2013) referred to service attitude as the behavioural tendency which is more frequently demonstrated by service employees during the interaction process with customers. They concluded that service attitude is a key factor to improve competitive advantages in the hospitality and tourism industries. But, research rarely explores the role played by service attitude in forming personality and service behaviour. Chien-Wen et al. (2013) claimed that good service quality must include reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy of first-line employees; it also involves service attitude. Hence, Employee behaviour depends on emotional and aesthetic attitude besides their external appearance and behaviours (Turkey and Sengul, 2014).

In relation to employee's service behaviour measures, previous researches suggested numerous factors including personal

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