



CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN MALAYSIAN MALAY RESTAURANTS DINING EXPERIENCE

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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.

LIST OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT STATEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
LIST OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF TABLES	xiv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	xvi

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT	1
1.3 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	4
1.3.1 Research Questions	4
1.3.2 The Study Content	4
1.3.3 Research Locations	5
1.3.4 The Potential Contributions of the Study	7
1.3.4.1 The Malaysian Context	7
1.3.4.2 The Wider Contribution of the Research	7
1.4 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS	8

CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTEXTS OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 INTRODUCTION	11
2.2 THE MALAY RESTAURANT CONTEXT	
2.2.1 Demand for Eating Out in Malaysia	12
2.2.2 The Importance of Malay Restaurants Service in Johor Bahru	14
2.2.3 Food Premises in Johor Bahru	18
2.2.3.1 Category I Food Store	19
i) Up-market Restaurants	19
ii) Mid-market Restaurants	20
2.2.3.2 Category II Food Store	22
2.2.3.3 Category III Food Store	22

2.2.4	Malay Restaurants in Malaysia	22
2.2.4.1	Selling Halal Products	23
2.2.4.2	Restaurant Concept	27
	i) Malay Menu	27
	ii) Malay Restaurant Ambience	31
	iii) Malay Restaurant Service	32
2.3	THE ACADEMIC RESEARCH CONTEXT	33
2.3.1	The Review of Research into Customer Satisfaction	34
2.3.1.1	Customer Satisfaction Factors in the Restaurant Service	34
	i) Pre- 2005 Literature	34
	ii) Post- 2005 Literature	40
2.3.1.2	The Management of Customer Satisfaction	51
2.3.1.3	Conceptual Framework of Customer Satisfaction	51
	i) Macro-Models of Customer Satisfaction	52
	ii) Micro-Models of Customer Satisfaction	56
2.3.2	The Concept of Customer Satisfaction	61
2.3.2.1	The Significance of Customer Satisfaction in Providing an Understanding of the Background to the Study	62
2.3.2.2	The Need for Sustainable Customer Satisfaction Management	62
2.3.3	The Definitions of Satisfaction	62
2.3.3.1	Cognitive (Rational/Physical)	63
2.3.3.2	Affective (Emotional)	64
2.3.3.3	Connative (Subsequent Actions Such As Repeat Purchasing..	65
2.4	THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT	65
2.4.1	Behavioural Theories	65
2.4.1.1	Classical Conditioning Theory	66
2.4.1.2	Operant Conditioning Theory	67
2.4.2	Cognitive Perspectives	67
2.4.2.1	Attribution Theory	68
2.4.2.2	Equity Theory	68
2.4.2.3	Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory	70
2.4.2.4	Gestalt Theory	71
2.4.3	Social Perspectives	71
2.4.3.1	Social Cognitive Theory	71
2.5	CONCLUSION	74
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY		
3.1	INTRODUCTION	75
3.2	RESEARCH PROCESS	75
3.2.1	Research Aim	77
3.2.2	Research Objectives	78

3.3	INTERPRETIVE SOCIAL-SCIENCE PARADIGM	78
3.3.1	Ontological Basis	79
3.3.2	Epistemological Basis	79
3.3.3	Methodological Basis	80
3.4	SELECTING QUALITATIVE METHODS	82
3.5	RESEARCH DESIGN	83
3.5.1	Phase One – Choice of Settings (Restaurants)	83
3.5.1.1	Sampling Strategy	83
	i) Sampling Strategy for Malay Restaurants	85
	ii) Sampling Strategy for Restaurant Customers	86
	iii) Sampling Strategy for Restaurant Staff	87
3.5.1.2	Sampling Procedure	88
	i) Selecting Time Frame for Fieldwork	88
	ii) Selecting Sampling Criteria	88
	a) Number of Restaurants	88
	b) Type, Ownership and Capacity of the Restaurants	89
	iii) Determining Sample Size	90
	iv) Gaining Access to the Restaurants	91
	v) Identifying Samples within the Restaurants	92
	vi) Determining Sample Size within the Restaurants	93
3.5.2	Phase Two – Observation Phase	93
3.5.2.1	Justifying of Observation	93
3.5.2.2	Designing of Observation	95
	i) Close Observation	95
	ii) Participant Observation	96
3.5.2.3	Piloting the Study	96
	i) Pre-Pilot Study	97
	ii) Pilot Study	97
	iii) Issues Discovered from the Pilot Study	98
3.5.2.4	Selecting Participants' Criteria	99
	i) Front of House Staff	99
	ii) Restaurant Operation	100
	iii) Restaurant Administration Department	100
3.5.2.5	Observing Procedures	100
	i) Determining Time and Period of Observation	101
	ii) Designing and Writing Field Note	101
	iii) Organising Observation Data	104
	iv) Short Conversation	105
3.5.2.6	Evaluating of Observation	106
	i) Modification of Behaviour	106
	ii) Observation	106
	iii) Reported Data	107
3.5.3	Phase Three – Interview Stage	107
3.5.3.1	Justifying of Interview	107

3.5.3.2	An Interview Process and Instrument	108
3.5.3.3	Piloting of the Interview	111
3.5.3.4	Interviewing Procedure	112
3.5.4	Phase Four – Documentary Evidence	116
3.5.5	Phase Five – Data Analysis	117
3.6	RESEARCH ETHICS	117
3.7	CONCLUSION	119

CHAPTER FOUR: THE PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS

4.1	INTRODUCTION	120
4.2	THE PROCESS OF DATA ANALYSIS	120
4.3	THE USE OF NUDIST IN WITHIN RESTAURANT ANALYSIS	123
4.3.1	Introduction to Data Analysis	123
4.3.2	NUDIST	124
4.3.3	Preparing Document	125
4.3.3.1	Transcription of Interview Recordings	125
4.3.3.2	Typing Field Notes	125
4.3.3.3	Importing Documents	125
i)	Memoing	126
ii)	Interpretation of Text	128
4.3.4	The Coding Process	130
4.3.4.1	Open Coding	130
4.3.4.2	Axial Coding	135
i)	Matching the Categories between Sources of Evidence	138
ii)	Displaying of Findings in a Matrix Diagram	139
4.4	CROSS-RESTAURANT ANALYSIS	141
4.4.1	Selective Coding	150
4.4.1.1	The Development of the Core Category	150
4.4.1.2	Matching Between Categories of the Customer Satisfaction Factors and Categories of the Management of Customer Satisfaction	155
4.4.2	The Adoption of Coding Strategy	157
4.5	CONCLUSION	157

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1	INTRODUCTION	158
5.2	THE FACTORS IN, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	158

5.2.1	Antecedent of Experience	159
5.2.1.1	Previous Experience of the Repeat Customers	163
5.2.1.2	First Time Customer Knowledge of the Restaurant	165
	i) Convenient Access	165
	ii) Restaurant Promotion Programs	167
5.2.2	The Reservation Experience	169
5.2.3	The Arrival Experience	171
5.2.3.1	Parking Spaces	172
5.2.3.2	Reception Service	174
5.2.3.3	Punctual Business Hours	175
5.2.3.4	24-Hour Business Operation	177
5.2.4	The Seating Experience	178
5.2.4.1	Spacious Restaurant Layout	180
5.2.4.2	Restaurant Capacity	181
5.2.4.3	Cheerful Restaurant Interior Design	182
5.2.4.4	Choice of Dining Areas	185
5.2.4.5	Peaceful and Relaxing Atmosphere	189
5.2.4.6	Waiting Activities	192
5.2.4.7	Restaurant Cleanliness	193
5.2.4.8	Prayer Room	197
5.2.5	The Meal Experience	198
5.2.5.1	On Time Attending Customers	199
5.2.5.2	Attending by Professional Staff	204
	i) Responsive Towards Complaints and Requests	205
	ii) Treating Customers Equally	208
	iii) Staff Performance	210
	iv) Staff Appearance	214
	v) Good Personality Traits	217
5.2.5.3	Unique Cultural Experience	222
5.2.5.4	Serving on Time	232
5.2.5.5	Accuracy	236
5.2.5.6	Serving Group Orders Simultaneously	238
5.2.5.7	The Core Restaurant Service	239
	i) Menu Variety	239
	ii) Food Presentation and Display	254
5.2.6	The Payment Experience	248
5.2.7	The Departure Experience	250
5.3	CONCLUSION	252

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

6.1	INTRODUCTION	255
6.2	DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF THE BASIC FINDINGS	255

6.2.1	The Process of the Dining Experience	255
6.2.2	The Pre-Meal Experience	258
6.2.2.1	The Antecedent Experience	258
6.2.2.3	The Reservation Experience	260
6.2.2.4	The Arrival Experience	260
6.2.3	The Actual Meal Experience	261
6.2.3.1	The Seating Experience	261
6.2.3.2	The Food Experience	263
6.2.3.3	The Service Quality Experience	269
6.2.4	The Post-Meal Experience	270
6.2.4.1	The Payment Experience	270
6.2.4.2	The Departure Experience	271
6.3	SUMMARIES AND OVERALL COMPARISON WITH THE LITERATURE	272
6.4	DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF THE AGGREGATED FINDINGS	275
6.4.1	Discussion of the Overall Aggregated Findings	276
6.4.2	Discussion of the Meal Experience Aggregated Findings	281
6.4.2.1	The Gestalt Theory	281
6.4.2.2	The Attribution Theory	286
6.4.2.3	The Equity Theory	293
6.4.2.4	The Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory	295
6.4.2.5	The Classical Conditioning Theory	299
6.5	THE MANAGEMENT OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	301
6.5.1	Previous Research	302
6.5.2	The Management of the Satisfaction Dining Experience	303
6.5.3	Human Resource Management	305
6.5.3.1	Restaurant Owner/ Manager	305
6.5.3.2	Front of House Staff	309
6.5.3.3	Kitchen Staff	310
6.5.4	Staff Training and Development	311
6.5.5	Restaurant Rules and Operation System	312
6.6	THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION DINING EXPERIENCE	315
6.6.1	The Inputs of Dining Experience Satisfaction (Satisfaction Causes)	318
6.6.2	The Consumption of Dining Experience Satisfaction	319
6.6.3	The Outcomes of Dining Experience Satisfaction	321
6.7	DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH	329
6.7.1	Critical Reflection on Methodology	329
6.7.1.1	Epistemology – Subjectivity	330
6.7.1.2	Ontology-Exploration of Multiple Realities Leading To New Knowledge	331
6.7.1.3	Trustworthiness of the Research Methodology-Validity	332
6.7.1.4	Structure of Data Collection-Theoretical Sampling	334

6.8	CONCLUSION	335
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CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

7.1	INTRODUCTION	336
7.2	SUMMARIES OF RESEARCH FINDINGS	336
7.3	THE RELATION OF THE FINDINGS TO RESEARCH PROBLEM	338
7.4	THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY	340
7.5	SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	343
7.6	CONCLUSION	345

	LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	346
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	REFERENCES	347
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Interview Session Invitation Letter	371
Appendix 2	Field Notes	372
Appendix 3	Interview Guide for Customer	373
Appendix 4	Interview Guide for Staff	374
Appendix 5	Interview Guide for manager	375

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure 1.1</u>	Overview of study	5
<u>Figure 2.1</u>	Map of Johor (not to scale)	15
<u>Figure 2.2</u>	Key Flagship Zone of <i>Iskandar</i> Malaysia in Johor State	17
<u>Figure 2.3</u>	Traditional Macro-Model of Customer Satisfaction	53
<u>Figure 2.4</u>	Model of Linkage of Customer Value to Customer Satisfaction	53
<u>Figure 2.5</u>	Model of Linkage between Satisfaction and Value	53
<u>Figure 2.6</u>	Model of Two Levels of Satisfaction and Perceived Service Quality	54
<u>Figure 2.7</u>	Model of Sources of Customer Satisfaction	54
<u>Figure 2.8</u>	Sources of Customer Satisfaction of Al-Mutawa <i>et al.</i> , (2006)	55
<u>Figure 2.9</u>	Model of Customer Satisfaction of Kano (1984)	58
<u>Figure 3.1</u>	Research Process	76
<u>Figure 3.2</u>	Inductive Research Process of the Interpretive Social-Science Paradigm	81
<u>Figure 3.3</u>	Sampling Framework	85
<u>Figure 4.1</u>	The Framework of Data Analysis	122
<u>Figure 4.2</u>	Importing Document	126
<u>Figure 4.3</u>	Selecting Text Unit Analysis	127
<u>Figure 4.4</u>	Creating Node	131
<u>Figure 4.5</u>	Creating Node Using Text Search	132
<u>Figure 4.6</u>	Creating Category and Sub-category by Grouping Nodes	134
<u>Figure 4.7</u>	Category and Sub-categories of “word-of-mouth” in Tree Display	135
<u>Figure 4.8</u>	Theoretical Memo for Node of “word-of-mouth”	137
<u>Figure 4.9</u>	Searching Particular Node Cross-Reference	138
<u>Figure 4.10</u>	Categories and Sub-categories Emerged	139
<u>Figure 4.11</u>	The integration of Sub-categories of the Factors and Managements of Customer Satisfaction to Find Core Category	154
<u>Figure 4.12</u>	Cross-restaurant Causal Network Diagram (overall findings of the study)	152

<u>Figure 5.1</u>	Stages of Dining Experience Process in a Restaurant for Return Customers	159
<u>Figure 5.2</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Antecedent Experience	161
<u>Figure 5.3</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Reservation Experience	169
<u>Figure 5.4</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Arrival Experience	172
<u>Figure 5.5</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Seating Experience	179
<u>Figure 5.6</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Meal Experience	200
<u>Figure 5.7</u>	The Handling of Food Delay Complaints	208
<u>Figure 5.8</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Payment Experience	250
<u>Figure 5.9</u>	Customer Satisfaction with the Departure Experience	251
<u>Figure 6.1:</u>	Summary of Overall Findings of the Study	257
<u>Figure 6.2</u>	Conceptual Framework of Customer Satisfaction Dining Experience	317
<u>Figure 6.3</u>	Outcomes of Dining Experience Satisfaction	326

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Population of Capital State in Malaysia	16
Table 2.2	Statistics of Food Premise under Business Category in Johor Bahru City Council	19
Table 2.3	Malaysian Population According to Race in 2010	24
Table 2.4	Malaysian Population According to Religion in 2010	24
Table 2.5	Premises that Having <i>Halal</i> Certificate in Johor State	25
Table 2.6	Customer Satisfaction Attributes of Oh and Jeong (1996)	36
Table 2.7	The Ratings of Customer Satisfaction Determinants of Pettijohn <i>et al.</i> , (1997)	36
Table 2.8	Four Dimensions of Customer Satisfaction Variables of Qu (1997)	37
Table 2.9	Customer Satisfaction Attributes of Kivela (1999b)	38
Table 2.10	Customer Satisfaction Factors of Yuksel and Yuksel (2002)	39
Table 2.11 a-c	Meta Analysis of Literature of Factors Influencing Customer Satisfaction in Restaurant Service	48
Table 2.12	Potential Inputs and Outputs of Situation	69
Table 3.1	Details of Sample Criteria	89
Table 3.2	The Structure of Data Collection	94
Table 3.3	Time Framework of Data Collecting Activities	102
Table 4.1	The Categories and Sub-categories of Customer Satisfaction Factors of Case 1	140
Table 4.2	The Categories and Sub-categories of Customer Satisfaction Factors of Restaurant 1	141
Table 4.3	Cross-Restaurant Analysis of Categories and Sub-Categories of Customer Satisfaction Factors From Customer Interviews	143
Table 4.4 a-e	Cross-Restaurant Analysis of the Management of Customer Satisfaction from Staff Interviews and Observations	145
Table 4.5	List of Customer Satisfaction Factors From Cross-Restaurant Categories and Sub-Categories From Customers' Perspectives That Ready To Be Integrated	152
Table 5.1	Service Stations of Restaurant 1	201
Table 5.2	Service Station of Restaurant 2	202

Table 5.3	Kitchen Department Available at the Restaurants of Study	243
Table 6.1a	Summary of Customer Satisfaction Factors of Previous Studies	273
Table 6.1b	Summary of Customer Satisfaction Factors of Previous Studies (cont.)	274
Table 6.2	The Overall Aggregated Findings	277
Table 6.3	Aggregated Findings that Develop Satisfaction	279
Table 6.4	The Hierarchy of Satisfaction Themes	280
Table 6.5	Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	281
Table 6.6	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings of the Study	282
Table 6.7	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to Gestalt Theory	286
Table 6.8	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to Attribution Theory	288
Table 6.9	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to Attribution Theory	290
Table 6.10	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar To Unique Action Assigning Internal Attributes of Attribution Theory	290
Table 6.11	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to Self-Perception of the Attribution Theory	291
Table 6.12	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar To Object-Perception of Attribution Theory	293
Table 6.13	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to the Equity Theory	294
Table 6.14a	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Contrary with the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory	296
Table 6.14b	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Contrary with the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory	297
Table 6.14c	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Contrary with the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory	298
Table 6.15	Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory	299
Table 6.16	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to Classical Conditioning Theory	300
Table 6.17	Specific and Overall Focus of Findings that Similar to Social Cognitive Theory	301
Table 6.18	Comparison between Conceptual Framework of this study with Al-Mutawa's	328

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