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The product-related failures in restaurants

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Abstract

The foodservice industry in Malaysia is booming. While its contribution to the national economy is promising on one hand, the rivalry between the players amplifies on the other hand. This double-edged sword is promising yet challenging for industry practitioners. It certainly demands a fair standard of both the tangible products and intangible service to warrant a competitive edge. Previous studies have extensively looked into the facet of service in the restaurant setting, leaving the product aspect largely unaddressed. Particularly, identifying and categorizing the product failures in restaurants are lacking. Therefore, this study was conducted to bridge the gap. Online complaint data from January 2010 to August 2011 were sourced from two local chained-restaurant companies. A total of 450 usable complaint cases were gathered. Content analysis yielded three major categories, namely sensory quality, safety quality, and others. Among these, sensory quality was the main cause of dissatisfaction. The categorization entails noteworthy implications to researchers and industry practitioners.

Keywords: product failure; online complaint; restaurant; sensory quality; food safety

1. Introduction

The foodservice industry is growing robustly in the global market. In Malaysia, the phenomenon is evident with the rise of local (e.g., Old Town, Secret Recipe, Rasamas, The Chicken Rice Shop, PappaRich) and international (e.g., Domino's Pizza, Papa John's, Nando's, Subway, Sakae Sushi) players in the industry (Euromonitor International, 2012). From 26,106 foodservice units in 2006, the figure surged 15.1% to 30,054 units in 2011

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(Euromonitor International, 2012). Its contribution to the services sector gross domestic product (GDP) rose from RM11.7 billion in the year of 2007 to RM15.4 billion in 2012 (Ministry of Finance, Malaysia, 2012). This glory is, apparently, attributed to the Ninth Malaysian Plan of flagging tourism industry as the economic focus (Mazumder, Ahmed, & Raquib, 2011), growing trend of eating out (Tan, 2010), as well as the globalization of restaurant brands through franchising system (Olsen & Zhao, 2001). Indeed, this booming industry creates robust opportunities to entrepreneurs to savor a share from the economic pie. Nonetheless, it also engenders stiff competition within the industry, on the other hand. Hence, only the strong shall survive and the weak shall perish.

The rivalry in the foodservice business battlefield has exacted its players to deliver the level best in all the seven realms of the services marketing mix, namely product, price, place, promotion, process, physical evidence and people (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). However, owing to the intangibility and heterogeneity nature of service, the diversity of restaurant customers and the wide assortment of restaurant products, the aim to attain zero defects during the entire customer's dining experience is rather impossible (Gursoy, McCleary, & Lepsito, 2007). Service failures, if not handled appropriately, may lead to customer dissatisfaction, negative word-of-mouth, and eventually loss of revenue (Lam & Tang, 2003).

Over the past decades, the domain of service failures has cut a wide swath in both industry and academia. The categorization of service failures, in particular, has been heavily subject under the microscope (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Hoffman, Kelley, & Chung, 2003; Hoffman, Kelley, & Rotalsky, 1995; Tsai & Su, 2009). Despite the considerable efforts devoted on this categorization, the studies revolve around only two major themes in general, i.e. human-related failures (e.g., Bitner et al., 1990; Hoffman et al., 1995) and servicescape failures (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2003). No studies have looked into the core element, product failures. While previous findings revealed that food quality is one of the predominant factors accounting for customer satisfaction and repatronage intention, it is certainly necessary to identify the categories of product failures in restaurants (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). This study was thus undertaken to specifically categorize product-related failures in restaurants.

2. Methodology

The online complaint data were obtained from two locally-established chained-restaurants for the time frame spanning from January 2010 to August 2011. After removing duplications and insufficient complaint information (e.g., the food is poor, the food is disappointing), 450 usable complaint cases were gathered. Two judges were appointed for content analysis. Both the judges first achieved a clear understanding on the coding procedure and operational definitions of the categories from the literature. Throughout the process of content analysis, product-related failures were analyzed and labeled independently by judges. Subsequently, discussion was held between the judges to resolve disagreement until mutual consensus was established (Bitner et al., 1990; Flanagan, 1954). The analyses achieved inter-judge reliability values of 0.91, exceeding the satisfactory level of 0.80 (Kassarjian, 1977).

3. Results

In the context of a restaurant, food and drink constitute the two major product elements. While consumers commonly evaluate restaurant food and drink along the sensory and safety quality (Adkins, 2004; Dulen, 1998), the astute analysis uncovered some other product-related failures, giving rise to the three broad categories namely sensory quality, safety quality and others. A total of 15 sub-categories were classified under these three categories.

3.1. Sensory quality

The sensory quality of a restaurant product is assessed in terms of the taste, texture, freshness, appearance, temperature, and doneness which are correspondence to the human five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing (Stone & Sidel, 2004). Therefore, complaints related to poor taste, poor texture, not fresh, poor presentation, incorrect temperature, and undercooked or overcooked, were grouped under this category (Table 1).

Table 1. Sub-category sample incidents under sensory quality.

Category	Sub-category	Sample Incidents
Sensory quality	Poor taste	…The pumpkin soup tasted like chili soup. The taste was definitely not up to par and it was not an enjoyable lunch…
	Poor texture	…The food was not really of good quality, the food that I ordered was overcooked and soft. The rice was too hard and not soft at all…
	Not fresh	… By the way, I really had a bad experience in X outlet, prawns were really not fresh and stinky, the waitress changed only the prawns for us (not the whole bowl of food), why is there this kind of service?
	Poor appearance	…The drink was served with the whipping cream slopping all over the glass…
	Incorrect temperature	…each time I visit this particular outlet, I order hot drink but the staff always serves me drink that isn't hot, not even lukewarm…
	Under/Overcooked	…I ordered a chicken cordon blue which in fact it's good, however to my surprise it was not properly cooked! The outer part was all right until I ate a raw flesh chicken in the inner part and I told a male waiter about it…

3.2. Safety quality

The safety quality of restaurant foods and drinks, on the other hand, involves the presence of harmful substances. Following the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) guidelines, food hazards could take forms of physical, biological, and chemical contaminations. Physical contamination refers to the introduction of foreign objects such as hair, plastic, glass and stone (Snyder, 2000); whereas biological contamination involves the presence of macro-parasite or living microorganism, such as bacteria, virus, fungi, and protozoa (Untermann, 1998). Chemical contamination is related to the presence of chemicals such as pesticides, additives, preservatives, and cleaning products (Ropkins & Beck, 2003). These food hazards are potential threats to an individual's safety in the chain of food consumption. Table 2 presents the sample incidents under this category.

Table 2. Sub-category sample incidents under safety quality.

Category	Sub-category	Sample Incidents
Safety quality	Physical contamination	…40 minutes later the waitress told me to wait for 5 minutes. After another 15 minutes I got my soba and complimentary topping........HAIR!!!
	Biological contamination	…He [Colleague] ordered a Cafe Latte with caramel at your outlet. When he almost finished his drink, he sucked up a cockroach from the bottom of his glass and accidentally bit it. He felt disgusted and almost vomited. He then rushed to the washroom to clean his mouth…
	Chemical contamination	…HORRORS! The chicken was coloured bright green. There was so much colouring that the meat was stained bright green inside…

3.3. Others

Other product-related failures such as limited variety, small portion, missing ingredients, removed menu, no standardization, and deviation from menu were grouped separately from the above two categories (Table 3). Some customers were dissatisfied with the unusually small portion size while many others groused about the limited variety of products to be chosen from. In some cases, certain ingredients in a dish were puzzlingly missing. Besides, knowing that their favorite dishes were removed from the menu, some customers stumbled on their dish turned out to be different from the menu description or illustration. These could be particularly disappointing and lead to complaint. Lack of quality standardization was another noted failure within the third sub-category. This inconsistency could occur either within the same outlets or among the different outlets. Within the same outlet, customers commonly whined the products varied from time to time in terms of the sensory qualities, portion size, ingredients, and so forth. These customers are either a regular or at least have been patronized the outlet before. For

instance, one customer commented: "*I visited your [A Branch] on two occasions last week. The [product A] tasted differently from what it was usually served. The other [product B] also tasted differently, as if it's a roadside stall type of food…*" The occurrence of inconsistency was also reported among the outlets as exemplified by the complaint of this customer: "*Yesterday I went to one of your branches in Johor Bahru with my family. When the food came, we noticed that the ingredients is [were] different from other branches…*"

Table 3. Sub-category sample incidents under others.

Category	Sub-category	Sample Incidents
Others	Limited variety	…not much variety in the menu compared to previous days, limited product on display and the service provided by your crews is not consistent as well…
	Small portion	…I ordered a few items which included 1 meal set. I wondered if the portion for the chicken and rice came with only 1 small piece of chicken and it was cold when it came…
	Missing ingredients	…For those who were having the set menu, we were given ONLY the main course and vegetables. There were no potatoes or rice, just plain piece of meat without any carbohydrate…
	Menu removed	… I like to eat the food and others...but not in the menu anymore again...very disappointed…
	Deviate from menu	…The food that boasted of king prawn and deliciousness tasted like it came from the very bottom of yesterday's pot, and had 2 measly shrimp lying at the bottom of the bowl…
	No standardization	…The portion was obviously small. It was supposed to come with pan fried chicken but when we got our order we were very disappointed to see fatty chicken skin with little meat! And the taste was so different than the one I ate at another outlet. The one at another outlet was so much nicer …

3.4. Frequency incidents

Table 4. Distribution pattern of sub-categorical failure incidents.

Category	Sub-category	Incident Count	(%)
Sensory quality (n=402, 61.2%)	Poor taste	82	(12.5%)
	Poor texture	52	(7.9%)
	Not fresh	112	(17.1%)
	Poor appearance	52	(7.9%)
	Incorrect temperature	50	(7.6%)
	Under/Overcooked	54	(8.2%)
Safety quality (n=56, 8.6%)	Physical contamination	32	(4.9%)
	Biological contamination	23	(3.5%)
	Chemical contamination	1	(0.2%)
Others (n=198, 30.2%)	Limited variety	67	(10.2%)
	Small portion	43	(6.6%)
	Missing ingredients	37	(5.6%)
	Menu removed	3	(0.5%)
	Deviate from menu	15	(2.3%)
	No standardization	33	(5.0%)

Table 4 displays the distribution pattern of sub-categorical failure incidents. Out of the 450 cases, 656 incidents were extracted. In particular, sensory quality received the most complaints (61.2%). This was followed by other types of product quality (30.2%). Less than one-tenth was directed on food safety quality (56 incidents).

In detail, freshness and the taste of the food were the two aspects received the most complaints. The menu selection was also critical to consumers.

4. Conclusion

Among the three categories, sensory quality was the major source of dissatisfaction. This indicates that sensory quality remains an important aspect to satisfy customer dining experience, corresponding to previous research (Cardello, 1995; Civille, 1991; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Although the sensory quality of product is supposedly controllable and homogenous in nature with standardized recipes, the oversight by kitchen staff could eventually ruin the dish. Despite the comparatively low number of incidents related to safety quality (8.54%), the consequences could be damaging if preventive actions are not in place. Food poisoning, for instance, could lead to fatality if the condition is acute. This study suggested that the companies have generally paid sufficient attention to ensure high level of food safety.

The findings of this study have some important contributions to the theoretical and practical advancement. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to particularly classify product-related failures in restaurants. The categorization is not only explicit but also clear in highlighting the product-related problems in restaurants. Hence, this categorization offers insights to restaurateurs on the possible problems associated with the products in the restaurant as well as the preventive practices to avoid such failures. This is essential as food quality largely determines the satisfaction of customers (Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

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