



Effect of experiential value on customer satisfaction with service encounters in luxury-hotel restaurants

Cedric Hsi-Jui Wu^a, Rong-Da Liang^{b,*}

^a Department of Business Administration, National Dong-Hwa University, Hualien county, Taiwan

^b Department of Marketing and Logistics Management, National Penghu University, Penghu County, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Exactly how the restaurant industry creates good quality service experiences has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners. Some scholars advocate creating high quality service encounters to enhance customer satisfaction. However, recent research has not examined hotel restaurant service, and a detailed understanding of its potential effects on the customer meal experience and customer satisfaction is needed. Consequently, this study of service encounters and restaurant consumer behavior constructed a comprehensive framework via a literature review. Empirical data were collected by a questionnaire distributed to luxury-hotel restaurant customers. The empirical results indicated that restaurant environmental factors and interactions with service employees and other consumers positively influence the consumer experiential value. Additionally, only interactive relationships with service employees directly and positively affect consumer satisfaction. Restaurant environment factors and interactions with other consumers indirectly and positively influence consumer satisfaction through experiential value. Finally, with respect to marketing and development initiatives, the results of this study can help improve the physical attractiveness of the examined luxury-hotel restaurants.

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1. Introduction

Exactly how the restaurant industry provides high quality lodging and food experiences has attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners (Davis and Vollmann, 1990; Dubé et al., 1994; Jensen and Hansen, 2007). Once consumers are satisfied with a service and its associated products, they become more likely to re-purchase or shop, which then increases company profits (Gupta et al., 2007; Heskett et al., 2004). Scholars have explored many different perspectives of how customer satisfaction is achieved by meeting customer needs. For instance, Sulek and Hensley (2004), in a survey of 239 service staff in a full-service restaurant in the southeastern United States, found that food quality, restaurant atmosphere and fairness and efficiency of seating procedures significantly influence customer satisfaction. Additionally, service quality, personnel response, food price and convenience directly influence customer satisfaction with their meal experience (Dubé et al., 1994; Robson, 1999; Sulek and Hensley, 2004).

Marketing scholars have also postulated that customer service encounters instill good customer impressions of a company (e.g.,

Grove et al., 1998). Customer service encounters are defined as the lasting personal impressions that customers receive upon first encountering a product, service and/or company, which they hopefully take with them and communicate to others (Pine and Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Poulsson and Kale, 2004). Customer service encounters can also provide basic information about customer preference, and businesses can use this information to improve their service. In the literature on customer service encounters, Shieh and Cheng (2007) analyzed several studies of the relationship between user experience and satisfaction; Keng et al. (2007) studied the relationships among sales interaction, online contact, customer experiential value and behavior intention; Mathwick et al. (2002) investigated the effect of environmental design on experiential value (including consumer return on investment, service excellence, playfulness and aesthetics).

However, consumer dining experiences and the significance of customer value in restaurant management have seldom been studied empirically (Andersson and Mossberg, 2004; Jonsson, 2004). Jensen and Hansen (2007), in a study of consumption behavior in restaurant customers, found that customer cognitions regarding the meal experience depend on their information-seeking behavior, whether or not they have a pleasant attitude and whether or not they perceive value. They measured customer value according to excellence, harmony, emotional stimulation, acknowledgement and circumstance value. Additionally, Spark

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: austra@ms53.url.com.tw (R.-D. Liang).

et al. (2008) investigated the correlation between customer value and satisfaction in the timeshare industry. Moreover, Spark et al. (2008) and Jensen and Hansen (2007) mentioned that future studies would empirically study the “relationship between customer value and satisfaction and related dimensions of customer value after customers receive service from food and tourism products.” Research in pre-factors affecting customer value and satisfaction therefore remains inadequate.

Consequently, this work stressed the design of service encounter factors in the restaurant business and the relationship between customer service encounters and satisfaction. Overall, exactly how antecedents, experiential value and customer satisfaction are related to the dining service environments is of priority concern.

This study has the following objectives. After examining the associations between service encounter elements, experiential value and customer satisfaction, an overall concept and framework were proposed to examine these relationships. Four- and five-star hotel restaurants in Taiwan were then sampled due to their high quality service and excellent atmosphere as well as their high prioritization of meeting customer needs. Finally, a linear structural model was performed to examine how these variables are related and, hopefully, to help scholars and practitioners understand how to design profitable restaurants that successfully attract and satisfy consumers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Consumer satisfaction

Oliver (1997) described satisfaction as “a judgment that a product or service feature, or the product or service itself, provides pleasurable consumption related fulfillment”. Satisfaction is thus conceived as a fulfillment response employed to understand and evaluate the consumer experience. Additionally, consumer satisfaction is an attitude change resulting from the consumption experience (Oliver, 1981). Gibson (2005b), in a study of the hospitality industry, found that satisfied consumers become repeat purchasers of products or services and provide family or friends with positive feedback regarding their experiences. Hence, understanding what influences consumer satisfaction can help business owners and managers design and deliver appropriate offers that cater to market demand. Consequently, this study applied the measure of consumer satisfaction developed by Oliver (1997) and later applied in related research in consumer satisfaction (e.g., McCollough et al., 2000).

2.2. Service encounter elements

Service encounter elements are often studied by service marketing scholars to reveal personal interaction because increasing the pleasure of service encounters can “reduce the perceived risk associated with purchasing a service and improve the buying experience” (Julian and Ramaseshan, 1994). Service encounter elements are thus the antecedents of experiential value. The influence of service encounter elements can be reduced to three main components (Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1992; Baker et al., 2002; Keng et al., 2007).

The first is environmental elements, *i.e.*, consumer interactions with intangible and tangible elements in the service environment (e.g., lighting, music and internal and external environmental design) or the periods during which a consumer interacts with physical facilities and other tangible elements in the service environment (Bitner, 1990). Baker et al. (2002) proposed three store environment cues (social, design and ambient) as exogenous constructs. These cues, which correlate with consumer merchandise value, subsequently influence patronage.

The second component comprises service employee factors, including the kind of employees providing service to consumers. Hence, the interactive relationship between consumers and service employees is important to consumer evaluations. Specific behaviors, including the behavior of service employees, are the key determinants of perceived service quality and also of consumer satisfaction (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Wu and Liang, 2005). Keng et al. (2007) found that personal interaction encounters and physical environmental interaction encounters positively influence customer experiential value.

The third component is consumer factors such as whether the consumer is influenced by the appearance, behavior and perceptions of other customers (Bitner, 1992; Baker, 1987; Baker et al., 2002). Moreover, the observed behavior of other consumers affects consumer perceptions. Because consumer-to-consumer interactions can influence consumer service satisfaction, managers must be sensitive to such interactions (Baker and Cameron, 1996; Brocato and Kleiser, 2005; Sommer and Sommer, 1989). One consumer-to-consumer interaction is social facilitation, which positively impacts consumer-to-consumer interaction and provides entertainment. The second type is social intrusion, in which customer service satisfaction is adversely impacted by the consumer perception that other consumers in the service setting are intruders. Negatively affected states may result when other customers are unwelcome. For example, others may engage in behaviors viewed by consumers as intrusions on their personal space, such as smoking or talking loudly (Baker and Cameron, 1996).

Fiore and Kim (2007) presented a conceptual framework for the influences on the consumption experience exerted by environmental variable inputs (*i.e.*, the physical elements of the service environment), individual variables (namely, individual attributes such as intelligence), and person-environment interaction variables or situations (e.g., shopping with friends). Overall, this work posits that environmental factors, including interactions with service employees or other consumers, influence how consumers subjectively judge their service experience. The value of experience thus increases when service encounter elements are perceived as positive.

H1. Positive cognition regarding physical environment factors and perceived experiential value are positively related.

H2. Positive cognition regarding interactions with service employees and perceived experiential value are positively related.

H3. Positive cognition regarding interactions with other consumers and perceived experiential value are positively related.

The physical environment may provide cues regarding the influence of consumer perceptions on the brand image of business. Hutton and Richardson (1995) proposed that a health center environment positively impacts its consumer satisfaction. Other scholars have posited that environment influences consumer satisfaction (Baker et al., 2002; Bitner, 1990; Minor et al., 2004). For example, Sulek and Hensley (2004) argued that the atmosphere of a restaurant significantly affects its customer satisfaction.

Both service employees and consumers influence cognition, emotion and physiological response regarding service environments. For instance, Bitner (1992) proposed that businesses deliver service in a manner that encourages customers to participate in service activities and to interact with service employees. Additionally, Brocato and Kleiser (2005) proposed that the presence of other consumers in the same service environment may directly influence individual satisfaction. This investigation thus concludes that satisfaction level increases with service

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