Original Article

Exploring The Service Quality of Different Fast-Food Restaurants in Faisalabad City

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ABSTRACT

Background: The fast food industry in Faisalabad has experienced significant growth, making the evaluation of service quality an important area of study to sustain this growth and competitive edge. Previous research has emphasized the importance of service dimensions such as tangibility, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy in shaping customer satisfaction and loyalty, particularly in the context of rapid globalization and increasing customer expectations.

Objective: This study aimed to assess the impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction within international fast food franchises in Faisalabad, with a focus on identifying key areas for improvement to enhance overall restaurant performance.

Methods: A systematic random sampling method was used to select 300 participants aged between 18 to 35 years from prominent fast food franchises. Data were collected using a structured SERVQUAL questionnaire, which measured five dimensions of service quality. Statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics and reliability testing, were conducted using SPSS version 25.0 to evaluate the data.

Results: The results indicated a generally high level of customer satisfaction, with 65% to 75% of respondents expressing satisfaction across the service dimensions. The dimensions of reliability and responsiveness were particularly noted for their positive impact on satisfaction levels. The mean scores for service dimensions ranged from 3.74 to 4.00, demonstrating a favorable reception of service attributes. However, the assurance dimension scored lower in terms of internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.551), suggesting variability in this area.

Conclusion: The study confirmed that service quality significantly influences customer satisfaction in the fast food industry in Faisalabad. While the majority of customers are satisfied with the current level of service, continuous improvements in staff training and operational efficiency are recommended to further enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Keywords: Fast Food Industry, Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, SERVQUAL Model, Faisalabad, Systematic Sampling, SPSS Analysis, Reliability Testing, Service Dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

The fast food industry in Pakistan has experienced notable growth and is increasingly focusing on international expansion through multinational franchises and outlets. This industry is considered a crucial part of the global services sector, where the quality of service can significantly influence a restaurant's success or failure. Recognizing the importance of service quality, fast food restaurants in Faisalabad are implementing advanced technologies to enhance customer service and meet evolving expectations[1,2].

The understanding of consumer expectations is essential, as the gap between expected and perceived service quality is a fundamental metric for assessing customer satisfaction(3,4). This study utilizes the gap model developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry in 1985 to explore the factors influencing service quality in the fast food sector(5-7). The model identifies five critical gaps: the knowledge gap (misalignment between customer expectations and management's interpretation), the standards gap (differences between management's perception of customer expectations and service standards), the delivery gap (variance between service delivery and the expected standard), the communication gap (discrepancies between promised and delivered services), and the service gap (the overall disparity between customer expectations and their perceptions of received service)(8,9). Moreover, the SERVQUAL model further delineates service quality into five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibility, which collectively form a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of service delivery. Reliability ensures services meet customer expectations in a consistent and satisfactory manner. Responsiveness pertains to the promptness and attentiveness of the service, empathy involves understanding and addressing individual customer needs, assurance relates to the confidence and courtesy extended to customers, and tangibility refers to the physical representations of the service (10-12).

The primary objective of this research is to examine how these service dimensions affect customer satisfaction and loyalty in the fast-food industry. The physical environment and the manner in which services are provided are pivotal in evaluating service quality and thereby influencing customer satisfaction. This study aims to bridge the theoretical understanding of service quality with practical outcomes, emphasizing the importance of aligning customer expectations with service delivery to foster customer satisfaction and loyalty in the competitive fast-food industry.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this study, we selected 300 participants from various international fast food chains in Faisalabad, including KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Hardee's, to investigate service quality. These participants, encompassing both genders and aged between 18 to 35 years, represented diverse socio-economic backgrounds and occupations. Selection was achieved through a systematic random sampling technique; for every hundred customers at a restaurant, one in every four was chosen based on the formula K=N/n, where N is the total number of customers and n is the sample size for one restaurant.

Prior to data collection, authorization was obtained from the managers of the selected fast food outlets. While some restaurants fully cooperated, others exhibited reluctance. Data was gathered using a self-administered questionnaire, which was meticulously developed after an extensive review of the existing literature on restaurant service quality. The questionnaire comprised two sections: the first collected demographic information including name, age, occupation, monthly income, and gender, while the second part assessed service quality using the SERVQUAL model, encompassing dimensions such as tangibility, responsiveness, assurance, reliability, and empathy.

To ensure the relevance and clarity of the questions, the questionnaire was preliminarily reviewed by experts in the field and revised accordingly to eliminate any redundancy, irrelevance, or ambiguity. Upon finalization, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants at the end of their meal. Initial hesitancy and discomfort from respondents were overcome through engaging and motivational conversation, encouraging their participation. Responses were gauged on a Likert scale, ranging from one (strongly agree) to five (strongly disagree).

Following data collection, each questionnaire was meticulously checked to confirm participant consent and completeness of responses. The validated data were then coded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25.0, employing both descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation, and inferential statistics including logistic regression. These analyses aimed to explore relationships between variables such as product reliability, tangible and intangible aspects of service, assurance, responsiveness, empathy, comfort, promotion, and overall customer satisfaction.

Ethical considerations were rigorously followed throughout the research, adhering to the Helsinki Declaration principles. This included ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participant data and obtaining informed consent from all participants involved in the study. These measures upheld the ethical integrity of the research while allowing for a comprehensive assessment of service quality within the fast food industry in Faisalabad.

RESULTS

The analysis of service quality in fast food restaurants in Faisalabad city utilized various dimensions of the SERVQUAL model, revealing significant insights into customer perceptions and satisfaction. The results, delineated across several tables, highlight the descriptive statistics of variables such as reliability, tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy. Focusing first on reliability, data from Table 1 indicated that the prompt delivery of food orders within the promised time scored an average of 3.8867 with a standard deviation of 0.76317, ranking fifth among reliability factors. The highest-ranked reliability factor was the provision of good quality

food, with an average score of 3.9233 and a standard deviation of 0.77855, followed closely by responsiveness to problems and focus on error-free service, with respective means of 3.9067 and 3.8900. The overall reliability of providing a satisfactory catering experience garnered a lower mean of 3.8600, reflecting slightly varied perceptions of service consistency.

In terms of tangibility, as seen in Table 2, the adequacy of the sitting arrangements received the highest ranking with a mean of 3.9233, suggesting a strong satisfaction level with physical accommodations. Cleanliness and hygiene also scored highly with identical means of 3.8867, reflecting the importance of a clean environment to customers. However, aspects like modern infrastructure and visually appealing interiors scored slightly lower, though still above average, which indicates room for improvement in these areas. Assurance variables, detailed in Table 3, showed that clear and understandable communication from employees received the highest score (mean of 4.0000), indicating that clarity in interaction is highly valued by customers. Employee efficiency and courtesy also scored well, with means of 3.9600 and 3.8667 respectively, while knowledgeability of staff was slightly lower at 3.7933, pointing to a potential area for training and development.

Regarding responsiveness, described in Table 4, the fast response to customer requests ranked highest with a mean of 3.8467. Estimates on service times and guidance in food selection were also rated positively, indicating that timely and informative interactions play a crucial role in customer satisfaction.

Empathy, as reported in Table 5, was strongly demonstrated through staff politeness and individualized attention, with the highest scores of 3.9267 and 3.8533 respectively. Understanding customer needs and keeping their interests in mind also rated well, underscoring the significance of personal engagement in enhancing customer experiences. Lastly, the reliability analysis in Table 6 showed robust internal consistency for the dimensions measured, with Cronbach's Alpha values ranging from 0.551 for assurance to 0.946 for reliability, indicating varied levels of coherence within dimensions but strong overall reliability in measuring service quality.

DISCUSSION

The study elucidated the considerable impact of service quality dimensions—tangibility, assurance, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy—on consumer satisfaction within the fast food sector in Faisalabad. The majority of respondents reported a positive experience, with 65% to 75% expressing satisfaction across the aforementioned service dimensions, whereas a smaller fraction (5% to 10%) expressed dissatisfaction, and 20% to 25% remained neutral. This distribution highlights a significant positive tilt towards satisfaction, underscoring the pivotal role of service quality in influencing consumer perceptions and restaurant performance[13].

Despite the generally favorable outlook on service quality, there were noted discrepancies in consumer perceptions, particularly concerning the operational efficiency and its correlation with customer satisfaction. It was observed that enhanced operational efficiency does not invariably align with increased customer satisfaction; in some instances, it might even detract from the quality and efficiency of customer service[13]. This finding echoes observations from other regions, such as in Hong Kong, where the rapid expansion of fast-food outlets necessitates a strategic focus on staff commitment and alignment with customer-centric practices[14]. In Korean fast food outlets, contrary to a functional approach, the hedonic aspects—such as the ambiance of being social and friendly spaces—were strongly correlated with customer patronage, indicating a divergence in consumer expectations and satisfaction drivers in different cultural contexts[15]. This aligns with global trends where the experiential elements of dining are becoming as significant as the food quality itself.

The study also integrated the popular attitude-behavior aim model, which examines the interplay between service quality expectations, personal identity factors, and perceptions of global fast-food chains among consumers[16]. This model helped identify key drivers of customer retention or turnover, such as food quality, staff interaction, and the overall dining environment, with food freshness and taste being particularly crucial.

Challenges were identified in adequately addressing customer complaints and personalizing service to meet specific consumer preferences. This gap signifies a potential area for improvement, particularly in training staff to better understand and respond to customer needs, thus enhancing personalized service delivery.

The effectiveness of service quality in fostering customer loyalty was substantiated, affirming that high-quality service enhances customer satisfaction, which in turn fosters loyalty and repeat patronage[17]. However, the influence of empathy in service provision was ambiguous, suggesting that it may not significantly affect customer satisfaction levels, a finding that merits further exploration to align staff behaviors with customer expectations.

In light of these findings, the study recommends ongoing customer satisfaction surveys to gauge and improve service delivery continually. Training programs focused on enhancing staff responsiveness and empathy could bridge the identified gaps in service provision. Moreover, investing in the personal development of staff to elevate the service experience could serve as a strategic investment for fast food outlets, aiming to optimize the perceived value of their service offerings[18-20].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while the fast food restaurants in Faisalabad generally met the reliability and responsiveness expectations of their customers, there is a need for a more nuanced approach to handling customer complaints and customizing services to meet diverse consumer demands. The limitations of this study, including its focus on a specific age group and geographical location, suggest that future research could expand the demographic and geographic scope to enhance the generalizability of these findings. Furthermore, integrating qualitative methods could provide deeper insights into the subjective dimensions of customer satisfaction and service quality in the fast food industry.

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