

Do All the Satisfied Customers Promote the Service? A Closer Look at the Effect of Dining-out Behaviour

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Abstract

Purpose- The purpose of this research is to examine the influence of dining experience (developed from food quality, service quality, physical environment, and price) on dining satisfaction (developed from cognitive and affective factors) in the context of emerging fast fine-dining restaurants (FFDRs); to test the effect of customers' dining satisfaction on word of mouth (WoM) marketing; and to examine the moderating effect of dining-out behaviour.

Design/methodology/approach- Data were collected from 294 foreign diners dining in ethnic-based fast fine-dining restaurants (FFDRs) and analyzed through Structural Equation Modeling using SmartPLS software.

Findings- The results indicate that dining experience has a significant influence on dining satisfaction which leads to higher WoM. The results also show that dining-out behaviour moderates negatively on the relationship between dining satisfaction and WoM.

Practical Implications- This study contributes to the body of knowledge on food services by understanding the predictors of dining experience and the potential impacts of marketing tactic variables, specifically in the context of FFDRs.

Originality- The study specifies that restaurant attributes are the primary features that influence customer satisfaction; however, customers need to be delighted to promote restaurants.

Keywords: Dining-out behaviour, Customer satisfaction, Behavioural intentions, Fast fine-dining restaurants, Word of mouth.

Introduction

There have been growing concerns that restaurant businesses are becoming very competitive, and each business will thus need to find ways to build its own competitive strategies (Mannan *et al.*, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). In response to such concerns, similar to other businesses, restaurant businesses have attempted to enhance their business by improving the value they can offer to their customers in factors ranging from the quality of food to services and relationships (Choi and Jeon, 2020; Jalilvand *et al.*, 2017; Line and Hanks, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). However, most of these initiatives aimed at improving products and services are centered on what the business can offer to customers. Although, indisputably, these are essential elements to focus on, as they are the core of its offerings, to be competitive, the business will need to think beyond the conventional strategic approach. Recent study claimed that the restaurant industry in servicing the foreign customers is facing challenges of incongruent service encounters due to the language and cultural diversities between foreign customers and service providers (Akhtar *et al.*, 2020). According to the study, incongruent service encounters can create situational abnormalities and affect consumer satisfaction and intention to promote the restaurant. As customers' regular visits and willingness to promote, minimize the cost of marketing and promotion (Alegre and Juaneda, 2006; Kim *et al.*, 2013a), contribute to profitability, and are the secret to successful marketing strategies. It is important to minimize the incongruent service encounters to avoid adverse reactions such as negative word of mouth (WoM). While some scholars suggest identifying language and cultural limitations as important solutions to overcome incongruent service encounters, this study argues that efforts to improve customer satisfaction and enhance behavioral intentions should be explored beyond improving restaurants' key attribute offerings and communication barriers.

Restaurants should understand the importance of customers' pre-existing dining experiences in influencing their behavioral intentions. In reality, customers walk into restaurants with perceptions and expectations that they have already built, based on their dining-out experience. Whatever services offered at the restaurant will be mapped against the mental scheming that runs consciously or unconsciously through their minds, and their former dining experience will influence their delight and/or satisfaction regarding the dining experience at the time of dining in the restaurant (Liu and Tse, 2018; Taylor *et al.*, 2018). We argue that this pre-existing diner experience, which is dominated or driven by their recent dining experience, will influence diners' satisfaction and behavioral intentions with respect to revisiting or WoM. We wonder whether all satisfied customers will promote the restaurant or whether something will trigger them to promote it if they are satisfied. Understanding dining-out behavior is important because it reflects the dining experience or dining maturity that customers carry with them. Studies suggest that customers who usually go out to dine have a good range of exposure to a variety of food and dining experiences; which in turn influences the diner's expectations in terms of enjoying more unique and memorable experiences (Liu and Tse, 2018; Taylor *et al.*, 2018). Most of the previous empirical studies on dining-out experience have examined the recent dining experience generated through the services offered by restaurants, and this customer experience has been compared across customer characteristics such as generation (Jin and Lee, 2016; Kim and Jang, 2019; Taylor Jr and DiPietro, 2018). However, no studies have examined the relationship between dining-out behavior and the behavioral intention to promote restaurants. This study examines whether dining out behavior encourages satisfied customers to promote restaurants.

This study contributes to the existing literature on food services in several ways. First, it examines the common predictors that drive customers' dining satisfaction in the context of emerging fast fine-dining restaurants (FFDRs), as distinct from other types of restaurants, such as full-service fine-dining restaurants and fast casual dining restaurants. Second, this study tests

the effect of customers' dining satisfaction developed from cognitive and affective factors on behavioral intention, particularly on behavior to promote what is conceptualized as WoM. Next, this study makes an exclusive contribution by examining the relevance of dining-out behavior in motivating satisfied customers to promote a restaurant to others. For this purpose, this study provides empirical evidence to explore whether customers' dining-out behavior moderates their dining satisfaction towards developing a sense of promotion, measured by WoM. This study, therefore, contributes to understanding the significance of dining-out behavior and suggests how employees' ability to understand diners' pre-existing experiences can be extended as an additional strategy by restaurant businesses to inspire diners to promote their restaurants.

Literature Review

Many studies examining the customer dining experience have examined the effect of a number of elements in predicting customers' experience in dining restaurant settings. Factors such as food quality, service quality, the physical environment of restaurants, and price have received significant attention. Food quality is a fundamental element of customer satisfaction with the restaurant dining experience (Choi and Jeon, 2020; Lee and Whaley, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Quality of service is considered significant in determining the level of customer dining satisfaction (Choi and Jeon, 2020; Lee and Whaley, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2019; Slack *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, the effect of a restaurant's physical environment attributes (decor/artefacts, spatial layout, and ambient conditions) on customer satisfaction has been well documented (Line and Hanks, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Studies have also claimed that price can be used as a cue to evaluate dining experiences and customer dining satisfaction (Peng *et al.*, 2020; Shahzadi *et al.*, 2018; Singh *et al.*, 2021). Customers weigh the benefits against the sacrifices they make to obtain a product or a service. Studies have demonstrated the importance of perceived financial value in dining satisfaction (Ing *et al.*, 2019; Liu and Tse, 2018). It has been established that these elements have a collective direct effect on customer emotion towards dining in a restaurant, and the emotional outcome is usually measured as customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is defined as "the consumer's fulfillment response" (Oliver, 2010 p. 8) and is often explained as "a post-choice evaluative judgment of a specific transaction" (Jahanshahi *et al.*, 2011 p. 255). In the context of dining at a restaurant, customers judge the pleasurable level of fulfillment they can obtain as a result of dining and consuming food and services at that restaurant (Choi and Jeon, 2020). This study adopted the conceptualization of Choi and Jeon (2020) that customer satisfaction is a subjective evaluation contingent upon the customer's affective reactions and cognitive judgment and is measured as overall dining satisfaction. Based on the findings from the above-listed studies on factors predicting diners' experience and dining satisfaction, this study predicts the overall dining experience, comprising food quality, service quality, environment, and price, which are foreseen to influence customer dining satisfaction in an FFDR setting. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. The overall dining experience at FFDRs has a positive effect on customers' overall satisfaction.

Dining Satisfaction and WoM

Positive WoM is regarded as a powerful influential indicator of acquiring new customers (Kim and Kim, 2017; Sukhu and Bilgihan, 2021). The direct effect of dining satisfaction on customers' WoM in restaurant dining settings has been widely documented (Kim and Kim, 2017; Line and Hanks, 2020). WoM is defined as "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, product,

organization, or service (Harrison-Walker, 2001 p. 63). This type of behavior reflects a sense of promotion. Consumers can develop a sense of promotion for various purposes, such as sharing their experiences with others, guiding other consumers, or helping promote the business (Jeong and Jang, 2011; Yang, 2017). Customer satisfaction is a strong predictor of the future intention to purchase or recommend to others. Studies have confirmed that customers with a high level of satisfaction recommend restaurants to others (Peng *et al.*, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Satisfaction is also predicted to influence loyalty and the intention to return to a restaurant (Ing *et al.*, 2019; Jin and Lee, 2016; Mannan *et al.*, 2019). In line with the findings of existing studies, the following hypothesis was proposed to examine this relationship in the FFDR context:

H2. *The overall dining satisfaction at FFDRs has a positive effect on customers' WoM.*

Dining-out Behavior

Although customers' pre-existing experiences have attracted attention in the consumer behavior literature, there remains a gap in the food service literature regarding how the dining-out experience influences diners' behavioral intentions. Studies in the food service industry have typically examined the factors that influence customers' decision to choose a restaurant in which to dine (Shahzadi *et al.*, 2018; Taylor Jr and DiPietro, 2018) and the outcome of the dining-out experience based on the domains that influence their experience at the time of dining at the restaurant (Jin and Lee, 2016; Taylor Jr and DiPietro, 2018). In these studies, provider control attributes, quality domains (e.g., food, service, atmosphere), and price have been studied as common influencing factors. Studies have not looked into the pre-existing dining-out experiences that form diners' expectations and perceptions as the influencing domains and lead to determining behavioral intentions.

Although satisfaction is an important criterion that consumers consider when they decide to promote products or services, its significance value is not consistently high. This raises the question of whether there are any other moderating variables between attitude and behavioral intentions that influence consumers' propensity to promote a product or service. Some studies have claimed that overall satisfaction does not directly mediate the relationship between dining experience attributes and future intention to revisit and recommend (Richardson *et al.*, 2019). This study argues that another set of customer experiences can influence the impact of satisfaction on WoM. For example, according to Kim *et al.* (2012) and Hyun and Kang (2014), among customers who emphasize dining-out behavior, those with high-involvement conditions will devote more cognitive effort to evaluating food and non-food offerings at restaurants than customers with low-involvement conditions. Hence, to attract and deliver a proper dining experience to their customers and to be assured that they are delighted to pass on positive WoM, it is important for restaurateurs to understand their customers' dining maturity. This study examines how theoretically relevant customer characteristics and dining-out behavior may affect the relationship between satisfaction and WoM. Thus, the current study hypothesizes that dining-out behavior moderates the relationship between total satisfaction and WoM.

H3. *The relationship between overall satisfaction and WoM is moderated by customers' dining-out behaviour.*

Many researchers have investigated the value-attitude-behavior relationship in the context of customers' dining experience (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Taylor *et al.*, 2018). Based on existing studies, the objective and conceptual framework of this study has been developed to explain the relationship between customers' dining experience attributes (food quality, service quality, physical environment, and price), overall dining experience, overall dining satisfaction, and WoM (see Figure 1). However, the uniqueness of this model can be observed from the

extension of the model to include personal experience, which is the dining-out behavior using the personal construct theory underlying explanation. Kelly (1955 p. 84), using personal construct theory, defines a personal construct as “a property attributed to several events by means of which they (the events) can be differentiated into homogeneous groups.”

Customers, through their pre-existing dining-out experience, form a cognitive psychology that makes it easier for them to recognize and categorize phenomena (Babin *et al.*, 2019) while they progress with their current dining. This study follows a line of research that theorizes the presence of personal constructs as a process that triggers people to create hypotheses, test hypotheses, and revise their perceptions based on the experience they have obtained through several events that can differentiate them into a homogeneous group (Babin *et al.*, 2019; Kelly, 2020). Jin and Lee (2016) claimed that comparing dining customers’ maturity is important because these customers have different expectations and motivations when dining out. Likewise, customers who practice frequent dining behavior will have different exposure to and experience in dining than those who dine out infrequently (Babin *et al.*, 2019; Baek *et al.*, 2006).

We posit that not all customers had the same dining exposure. Customers with high or frequent dining-out experiences may think, act, and adapt differently, and their preferred and perceived restaurant experiences differ from those of customers with infrequent dining-out behavior. Customers tend to differ in their consumption motives, perceptions, behaviors, and evaluations (Jin and Lee, 2016). Hence, this study argues that customers’ personal values in terms of dining-out experience, ranging from low to high, drive and capture the true value of customer-provider interactions in real-time. By testing a model that combines value, attitude, behavior, and personal value, this study assesses how the dining-out experience encourages satisfied customers to promote restaurants. This study aims to suggest to restaurateurs how they can develop strategies for their business to help diners towards achieving a desirable experience in consuming their service and trigger them to promote the restaurant.

Methods

This study used a quantitative research approach to examine the hypothesized relationships within the research framework. Data were collected from customers dining in ethnic-based FFDRs in Malaysia. Studies have found that customer interest in making the choice to dine in is based on the following reasons: to have a relaxing diner, to taste the local or authentic food, to have some drinks, to fulfill needs pertaining to nutrition and companionship without having to take the trouble to commute (distance), wait longer, and spend more money. This study chose ethnic-specific FFDRs, as dining in this restaurant context differs from their typical dining cuisine and experience; therefore, the respondents can remember the experience well and are able to participate in the survey effectively. This study was conducted in the context of ethnic restaurants among foreign customers, as food and process quality significantly influence the satisfaction and behavioral intentions of travellers (Hussain *et al.*, 2018). Data were collected from one of the main tourist and expatriated focus regions in Malaysia. The data are strongly representative, as they involve foreigners from a number of different nationalities.

Through a structural survey instrument using a purposive sampling method, foreigners who visited FFDRs were targeted to participate in this study. They were briefed on the purpose of this study and informed that participation was voluntary. A filtering question was asked at the beginning of the survey, asking respondents whether they were foreigners and had visited an ethnic-based FFDR within the last two weeks. A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed and 294 completed and usable questionnaires were received. In the final sample, approximately 50 percent of the foreign customers were Caucasian/white, 33 percent were Asian, and the rest were African/American. With respect to gender, 54 percent of the respondents were male, and

46 percent were female. Regarding the age of the participants, 9 percent of the respondents were under 24, 43 percent were between 25 and 34 years, 32 percent were between 35 and 44 years, 12 percent were between 45 and 54 years, and 4 percent were older than 55. In the questionnaire, we asked respondents, 'How did you discover the restaurant?' About 18 percent of respondents discovered it from a tourism brochure, 15 percent from traveller websites, 24 percent from Internet surfing, 32 percent from friends' recommendations, and the rest from other sources.

Fast fine-dining restaurants (FFDRs) are an emerging segment of dining settings commonly visited because of their economic and functional value (Mosia, 2018). FFDRs are distinct from other types of restaurants, such as full-service fine-dining restaurants, fast casual dining restaurants, and quick-service restaurants. Typically, the main difference is that in fast casual dining restaurants customers move down along the food dining line more quickly and casually than in full-service dining restaurants and FFDRs. In comparison, full-service dining restaurants usually reflect inclusiveness in dining with noticeable luxuries and high value. At FFDRs, interaction with employees (servers) is shorter and less frequent, and customers can settle their bills at the table or counter. FFDRs accommodate more customers at a time, and there is less emphasis on comfort and privacy than in full-service restaurants; however, they are more comfortable than fast casual and quick-service settings. The decor in FFDRs is simpler with partially open floor plans and average-quality dining features, and with more inclusion of local art and design features. As the service of FFDR dining is between that of full-service and fast casual service restaurants, the cost of dining also sits in between, being cheaper than full-service restaurants, but more expensive than fast casual service restaurants. FFDRs are known to offer a desirable dining experience at a lower price, with high-quality foods embedded in local art and culture. Hence, this study assumes that FFDRs, which sit in between the two types of restaurants (full-service restaurants and fast casual dining restaurants), create a reasonable hedonistic experience in terms of impact on diners and fit the purpose of this study for data reliability.

Findings

We examined convergent validity and discriminant validity in order to assess the measurement model.

Convergent validity was determined through factor loading, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliability (CR), as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2017). We considered cut-off values above 0.7 for factor loading, higher than 0.5 AVE, and above 0.7 for CR. While checking the factor loading, one item of the WoM was dropped due to low factor loading. The results of all other item loadings, AVEs, and CRs met equal or above the cut-off values; therefore, the convergent validity for scale measurement was fulfilled.

Discriminant validity: This is the degree to which items differentiate between constructs or measure distinct concepts (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). To assess discriminant validity, we examined Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. The criterion compares the correlations between the constructs and the square root of the average variance extracted for those constructs. The results of discriminant validity in all samples in this study indicate that all the values on the diagonals were greater than the corresponding row and column values, signifying adequate discriminant validity.

To assess the structural model (path relationship), the R^2 value, standard beta, t-value via a bootstrapping procedure with a resample of 5000, and predictive relevance (Q^2) were

considered, as suggested by Hair *et al.* (2017). Table 1 presents the results for the path relationships. The results of the structural model show that dining experience has a significant and positive effect on dining satisfaction ($\beta = 0.762$, $p < 0.01$), which supports H1. Moreover, the results show that dining satisfaction has a significant and positive effect on WoM ($\beta = 0.665$, $p < 0.01$), which supports H2.

Table 1: The Results of the Structural Model

Hs	Path relationship	Beta	SE	t-value	Decision	R ²	Q ²
Indirect effect							
H1	Dining experience -> Dining satisfaction	0.762	0.033	23.38**	Supported	0.581	0.408
H2	Dining satisfaction -> WoM	0.665	0.043	15.42**	Supported	0.460	0.326
Moderating effect		Interac-tion effect					
H3	Moderating effect of dining-out behavior	-0.180	0.045	3.98**	Supported	0.490	

Note: ** $p < 0.01$

The R² value of dining satisfaction was 0.581 and that of WoM was 0.460. It shows that 58.1 percent of dining satisfaction can be explained by dining experience and 46 percent of WoM can be explained by dining satisfaction. This study assessed the predictive relevance of the model through a blindfolding procedure (Stone–Geisser’s Q²) to assess the research model’s capability to predict. Based on the results, the Q² values of dining satisfaction (Q² = 0.408) and WoM (Q² = 0.326) are greater than 0, suggesting that the model had sufficient predictive relevance.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the food service literature, while researchers have investigated restaurateurs’ control attributes that enhance dining experience and customer satisfaction, relatively few have focused on the influence of customers’ pre-existing dining experience. From the literature review, it appears that the majority of studies on restaurant management have confirmed that the attributes of the dining experience are crucial in determining dining satisfaction (Lee and Whaley, 2019; Line and Hanks, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). This study, in addition to examining the conventional strategies of improving food, service, atmosphere, and financial value to enhance dining satisfaction and behavioral intention, emphasizes the relevance of understanding customers’ dining-out behavior. The framework was studied in the context of foreign customers dining at FFDRs. This study empirically tested the theoretical argument regarding the relationship between customers’ dining experience and dining satisfaction and extended the existing literature to investigate the potential active behavior of customers from various nationalities in promoting restaurants in the context of FFDR settings. This study examines whether all satisfied customers promote this service.

Depending on the nature of the dining setting and characteristics of customers, some differences can be noted in the effect of dining attributes on dining experience and dining satisfaction. Studies on full-service restaurants and quick-service restaurants claim that food quality and service quality are the most important factors when compared to other dining attributes in predicting overall satisfaction, intention to revisit, and WoM (Lee and Whaley, 2019; Richardson *et al.*, 2019), while in the context of the quick-service restaurant setting, the ambiance found does not directly influence customers’ overall satisfaction (Richardson *et al.*, 2019). Based on the results of the data analysis, it was found that in the FFDR context, the key determinants of dining experience formed from a mix of four dining attributes contribute

positively towards the dining experience, in line with the food service literature insights (Choi and Jeon, 2020; Lee and Whaley, 2019; Peng *et al.*, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019). However, food quality was found to have a greater influence on FFDRs. The findings also support the notion that the dining experience positively builds dining satisfaction (Line and Hanks, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019) and consequently influencing customers' intention to promote their experiences via WoM (Peng *et al.*, 2020; Richardson *et al.*, 2019).

However, the distinguishing strength of this study is that it examined and interpreted the moderating effects of customers' dining-out behavior between dining satisfaction and behavioral intention to promote. Dining out behavior was found to negatively moderate the relationship between dining satisfaction and WoM. Customers who place great importance on dining out are less motivated to promote their experience, while those who place little importance on dining-out behavior are likely to be motivated to promote the restaurant. Further analysis of the nonlinear relationship of dining-out behavior showed that although dining satisfaction was significantly more effective in enhancing the WoM in the high dining-out group than in the low dining-out group, after reaching a certain stage in dining satisfaction, the low dining-out group surpassed the high dining-out group and led to a higher WoM, with the low dining-out group showing a greater tendency to promote the restaurant. It is assumed from the findings that diners who place less importance on dining out are more delighted with the service, form dining satisfaction more strongly, and become highly motivated to promote the restaurant compared to diners with a high emphasis on dining out. Hence, we concluded that customer delight or customers finding uniqueness in their dining is important, in addition to being satisfied, to trigger customers to promote the experience.

As mentioned above, one possible interpretation of this finding could be that diners with low dining-out behavior are more easily delighted and optimized to pass on word of mouth than diners with high dining-out behavior. Therefore, initiatives should be taken to identify customer dining-out behavior through quick single-survey questions, such as "Do you love dining out" or "Do you always like dining out?" Then, they are approached to spread word of mouth about the restaurant before they leave the restaurant or get them directly engaged in a user-generated content program if any are currently held by the restaurant (e.g., posting content on social media). Knowing the characteristics of diners, such as dining-out behavior, is vital for restaurant managers and owners to optimize their customers towards user-generated marketing tactics (Gruss *et al.*, 2020; Yang, 2017). Meanwhile, for those diners who predict having an adequate dining experience, more unique services should be provided (e.g., creating more space for customer involvement) to offer more unique services and delight them. This study suggests that restaurant operators should be able to assess diners' pre-existing dining experience range and customize the service to delight them beyond their pre-existing experience.

Implications

In addition to testing the key attributes of dining experience, this study adds value to the value-attitude-behavior relationship model of past studies (Kim *et al.*, 2020; Taylor *et al.*, 2018) by extending it to include the personal construct of dining-out behavior using the underlying personal construct theory of Kelly (1955). These findings have important managerial implications for restaurant owners. This study provides guidelines to overcome the incongruent service encounter challenges in serving foreign customers, as highlighted in a recent study (Akhtar *et al.*, 2020) to enhance the perception of dining satisfaction through dining experience and the potential impact of dining-out behavior on WoM, which reflects customers' sense of promoting and generating marketing tactics. The study suggests that service managers and restaurant operators should understand and serve their customers productively to ensure that

they can be delighted and inspired to promote the restaurant. Our suggestions would help restaurateurs capitalize on their investments by training and empowering their employees to evaluate the dining experience of the diners and modify delivery to improve the service offering that is appropriate to the dining-out experience of the customer. This customized customer service approach can give their business a point of differentiation in an ever-increasing competitive market and make it easier for them to optimize customers to promote their restaurant.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study measured the dining experience at FFDRs along with only four dimensions of key restaurant attributes; hence, in future research, different dimensions, such as food variety and food authenticity, can be included. Next, the significance of overall satisfaction in improving restaurant customers' behavioral intentions needs to be explored based on other factors that are controlled by customers. This study examined dining-out behavior, but there could be some other intervening factors, such as customer involvement behavior and customer co-creating behavior. This study measures the model in the context of foreign customers, and this can be replicated among local customers or tourists, as studying the dining experience of these cohorts is equally important, as they are regular customers of dining-based restaurants. Finally, although this study examines the moderating effect of customers' pre-existing experience in the restaurant dining context, the proposed model can be tested in different service industry settings, such as hotels and entertainment. Thus, it is suggested that this model be replicated in other food service industries and relevant service industry settings to test the presence of pre-existing experience and its effect on behavioral intention outcomes.

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