Assessing Service Quality: From the perspective of people who perform prayers

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Abstract

This paper tries to delineate customer behaviour in assessing service quality, focusing on visit intention to restaurants and hotels that are providing prayer rooms (surau) for Muslims to perform their prayers during the month of Ramadhan. The remaining dimensions of service quality were included to portray a larger picture in measuring the relationship and predictory model of customer behavior. It was found that service quality elements contribute significantly to customer behaviour. The element of religiosity was found to mediate the relationship between surau and customer behaviour.

Keywords: service quality, customer behavior, praying space, surau

1.0 Introduction
Elements of religious and spiritual beliefs in addition to ritual or behaviour play a major role in the lives of many. Hence, religious based market niche needs to be exploited and optimized by restaurateurs by integrating religious tenets, namely prayers. Since customer satiety is the utmost outcome of quality services provided by restaurants or hotel, every meticulous detail must be carefully scrutinized. Thus, physical environments i.e. *surau* are added to the study to ensure such facilities can influence factors affecting a customer's psychological state and behavior in hospitality service situations.

2.0 Literature Review

The subject of service quality has come to the forefront of service marketing research over the last several decades (Barringer, 2008). Zeithaml and Bitner (1996) suggested that satisfaction with service quality has been identified to have a positive effect on customer loyalty to the organization, which leads to increased organizational profits (Young, 2000). Despite the paucity of research literature related to the restaurant industry, Barringer (2008) also mentioned in the National Restaurant Association (2006) reports that there will be approximately 950,000 dining establishments in 2007 compared to 505,000 in 2002. These statistics illustrate significant growth and increased competition in the restaurant industry.

Barsky and Nash (2003) shared the same opinion as Young (2000); satisfaction with service quality has directly influenced customer intent to return and customer willingness to recommend. Young (2000) added that the dynamic and competitive landscape in this industry has led restaurant organizations to search for tactics to attract new customers while retaining existing ones. However, many organizations have changed their focus to aspects of customer loyalty than just mere satisfaction because according to Chang and Chen (1998); Oliver (1999); Pullman and Gross (2003); customers who are loyal are likely to return and spend more money, and engage in positive word-of-mouth communication. In addition, Ryu and Jang (2007) declared that hospitality researchers have paid limited attention to understanding how the physical environment influences customers within the hospitality service settings. Baker (1987); Bitner (1986); Boom and Bitner (1982); Kotler (1973); Shostack (1977); Upah and Fulton (1985); Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1985) expressed the same thought that the ability of the physical environment can influence behaviors and create an image particularly apparent for service businesses such as hotels, restaurants, professional offices, banks, retail stores and hospitals. McColl-Kennedy and Schneider (2000) and Reichheld and Sasser (1990) pointed out that customer satisfaction is important for a restaurant's success. Cacioppo (2000) concluded that the 5% increase in customer loyalty increases profits by 25%. A very satisfied customer is nearly 6 times more likely to be loyal and he/she will recommend the restaurant service more than a normally satisfied customer. Zeithmal and Bitner (1996) believed that the extent of satisfaction

depends on service quality, product quality, price, and personal factors.

Zeithaml (1998) defined service quality as the judgment of a customer about a product's overall excellence. Cronin and Taylor (1992) agreed that service quality has a significant impact on the customer purchase intentions. Service quality is a critical component of customers' value perceptions that, in turn, becomes a determinant of customer satisfaction; therefore, customers perceive greater value for their money when they experience a high level of quality (Oh, 2000). According to Tam (2000), there is a close link between service quality and customer satisfaction. Lowenberg, Todhunter, Wilson, Savage and Lubawski (1979), Wood (1995) and Finkelstein (1989) concluded that customers' choice of restaurant and their subsequent return is a result of dining satisfactions that are often influenced by the customers' psychological rather than physical needs. As service quality is deemed a significant factor in increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty, the significance of service quality has been studied by academics and practitioners (e.g., Dukart, 1998; Leal and Pereira, 2003; Umbrell, 2003; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985, 1988, 1994). Service quality has been well recognized for playing a crucial role in improving organizational profits because it is directly related to customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Leal and Pereira, 2003; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000)

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in their exploratory research in 1985 on service quality determined that there are ten dimensions in assessing the service quality. In 1988, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry identified common themes in the ten dimensions and condensed the dimensions down to five, namely – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Based upon their findings, they developed an instrument known as SERVQUAL (Kim, 2000). SERVQUAL measures service quality by examining the gap between "expectations" (the service that customers think they should receive) and "perceptions" (what customers think they have actually been provided). Kivela, Inbakaran, and Reece (1999) and Koutroumanis (2005) mentioned in their research, the smaller the gaps, the higher level of service quality. Although it is a simple and inexpensive instrument, SERVQUAL has been applied in various fields and it has provided meaningful information (Heung, Wong and Qu, 2000). Within hospitality academia, many studies using SERVQUAL have been conducted (Johns and Tyas, 1996; Fu and Parks, 2001; Tsaur, Chang and Yen, 2002). Other researchers have devoted themselves to developing modified versions (i.e., LODGESERV, DINESERV, and ECOSERV) of the SERVQUAL instrument for the hospitality industries (Stevens, Knutson and Patton, 1995; Khan and Murrmann, 1997). Stevens, Knutson and Patton (1995) adapted the SERVQUAL instrument to measure service quality in restaurants; and produced the hierarchy of dimensions of importance to restaurant customers ranking from first to last in the following order: reliability, tangibles, assurance, responsiveness and then empathy.

Customers react to the store's characteristics, as they view them, in an emotional way (Eliwa, 2006). Image is considered abled to influence customers' minds through the combined effects of advertising, public relations, physical image, word-of-mouth, and their actual experiences with the goods and services (Normann, 1991). When image is related to restaurant loyalty, it does become meaningful from a strategic viewpoint (Downs and Haynes, 1984; Oh, 1995). Research shows that the most successful restaurants are the ones, which are fully aware of customer preferences and develop their services in line with targeted market needs (Victorino, Verma, Plaschka and Dev, 2005). Magnini and Honeycutt (2005) reported that customer emotions play an important role in influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty. Image including excellent service, atmosphere, colors, symbols, and words that convey a consistent message and not merely the name (Berry, Lefkowith and Claek, 1988; Tepeci, 1999). Image plays an important role in the customer choice (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991; Tepeci, 1999). While, Lindquist (1975) and Oh (1995) synthesized store image frameworks into nine independent categories referred as image attribute groups. Rosenbloom (1981) and Oh (1995) stated that they are considered as the most comprehensive empirically image attributes and are able to provide a good general base that restaurant managers can use in formulating store image; classified as merchandise, service, clientele, physical facilities, convenience, promotion, store atmosphere, and institutional factors.

Religiousness is used here as a broad term, encompassing different ways of referring to transcendence in one's own life. Predictors of religiousness, conversion, and deco version include contextual and situational factors such as religious socialization (mainly through family; Hood, Hill and Gorsuch, 2009), negative life events (Streib, Keller, Csöff and Silver, 2009), and positive self-transcendent experiences (Saroglou, Buxant and Tilquin, 2008). However, individual differences, either alone or in interaction with situational factors, may also play a role in inter individual variability in religiousness. Attempts to understand religion and religiosity from the individual or personal perspective have naturally been the domain of psychologists of religion. Since psychology has the overall goal of understanding people and their behavior, psychologists attempt to do this by studying human motivation, cognition and behavior (Spilka, Hoo, Hunsberger and Gorsuch, 2003). Serajzadeh (1998), in his study on the Iranian Muslim youth and crime, developed an adapted measure for religiosity based on the Glock and Stark's (1965) model. Serajzadeh included or applied the aspects of the Islamic faith into the model. For example, for the 'Ideological' dimension, the Islamic 'articles of faith' or the 'five pillars' were used. For the 'Ritualistic' dimension, Serajzadeh included the daily prayer routine (*salat*) and fasting during the month of Ramadan (as part of the "Pillars of Islam"), reading the Holy Book, the "Koran", attending public prayer (both daily and during the Friday prayer), taking part in ceremonies held on holy days in mosques and others.

3. 0 Results

3.1 Subject Demography
There were 54 males (56.8 percent) and 41 females (43.2 percent) surveyed, with majority of the respondents between the age of 21 and 25 years (78.9 percent). The educational level of the respondents ranged from High School (12.6 percent), Diploma (17.9 percent), Bachelor Degree (51.6 percent), Post Graduate (4.2 percent) and others (13.7 percent).

3.2 Reliability
Commonly accepted measure of testing the reliability is through measuring the value of Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1990), and calculated using SPSS version 17. Part 1 consisted of 34 items which measured respondents' beliefs and attitude toward the service quality of the restaurant or hotel they recently visited or patronized. Reliability of six sub-dimensions was measured for tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and *surau* of restaurant or hotel and they respectively indicated reliability values of 0.87, 0.80, 0.74, 0.84, 0.84, 0.86. Part 2 consisted of all dimensions that measured respondents' behavior in relation to restaurant service and *surau* availability elements namely the attitude to the restaurant, word of mouth intentions and revisit intention which scored 0.40, 0.81, and 0.74 respectively. In part 3, respondents were asked to rate themselves with regards to level of agreements on statements concerning their religiosity. In this part, 10 statements were listed which indicated Cronbach Alpha scores of 0.71. All values that were found to be above 0.70 were hence considered reliable as proposed by Pallant (2005).

3.3 Multiple Regressions
Multi regression analysis was made to test how well elements of service quality predicted customer behaviour in terms of attitude to the restaurants, word of mouth intention, and revisit intention. Generally, service quality elements were found to be significant (sig. value = 0.000 < α = 0.05); thus the model can be used for explanation or prediction of customer behaviour. However, other variables (attitude to the restaurant, word of mouth, revisit intention, and religiousity) were found to be insignificant to be included in the model (sig. value > α = 0.05). Therefore, these variables were removed in order to improve the model. In addition, Beta coefficient indicates which variables are important to the model by looking at the largest value derived. Prediction of customer behaviour is explained in Figure 1.
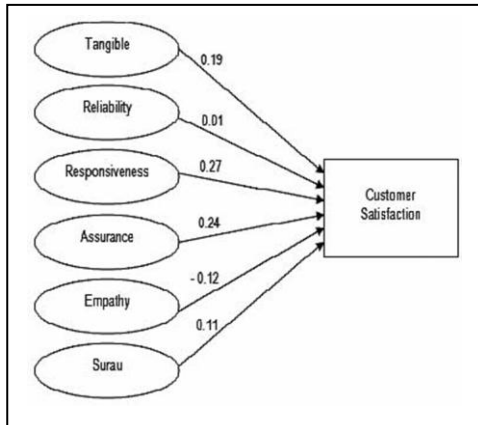
Figure 1: Standardized beta scores by significant variables of
service quality to customer behavior

3.4 Hierarchical Multiple Regression

Pallant (2005) precisely describes hierarchical regression as when the independent variables are entered into the equation in the order specified by the researcher based on theoretical grounds. In this research, the dimension of *surau* was taken out as independent variable and being assessed in terms of what it adds to the prediction of the dependent variable (customer satisfaction), after the previous variables (religiosity) have been controlled. From the model, it was found that after the variable in Block 1 (religiosity) had been entered; the overall model explained 39.4 percent of the variance (.394 x 100). After Block 2 variables (*surau*) had been included, the model as a whole explained 59.2 percent (.592 x 100).   Nevertheless, in order to find out how much of this overall variance is explained by *surau* after the effects of religiosity are removed, the R Square change value must be looked into. In the research, *surau* explained and an additional 19.5 percent (.195 x 100) for the variance in customer satisfaction, even when the effects of religiosity was statistically controlled for. This is a statistically significant contribution and the value of Sig. F change value for this line (.000). It was also indicated that the mode as a whole (which includes both blocks of variables) was significant [$F(2,91) = 24.56$, $p < .0005$]. The *Surau* factor made statistically significant contribution to the equation, with a beta value of 4.53. Religiosity made a unique contribution based from calculated beta value of 2.94. All in all, the interaction effect explained and addition of 19.5 percent of the variance in customer satisfaction scores and can be said as significant.

4.0 Discussion, Implication and Conclusion

It is very essential to discover the importance of dimensions involved in effort to clutch the

complexity of customer behaviour projected from assessments of service quality – which in this research, customers who patronizes the Ramadhan buffet line in hotels and restaurants. Restaurateurs and hoteliers need to be tactful in order for such aspects in ensuring that the standard of service quality is being upheld irregardless of facilities offered (i.e *surau*), time (Ramadhan month) and types of service involved (buffet).

The study has identified that assurance and responsiveness projected the strongest link to customer behaviour. Assurance might be translated into forms of Halal certifications, hygiene, and consistency of service and flavours of foods lined up. Responsiveness indicates how restaurateurs and hoteliers react to any given situation, usually best portrayed with efficiency of food service. Reliability indicated the lowest value of projection in the model. This might be expected as large crowds flooded the buffet line during break fast period thus expectations were lessened to get reliable service, dependency and accuracy of service during that particular time. With regards to religiosity of the patrons, it was found that even with the allocation space for *surau* being allotted by restaurateurs or hoteliers; a dimension of religiosity mediates the relationship to produce desired customer behaviour. Meaning, customers' level of religiosity will influence the customer behaviour with regard to existence of *surau* in relation to Ramadhan buffet.

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