คุณภาพการบริการของภัตตาคารเครือข่ายในประเทศไทย: ช่องว่างระหว่างความคาดหวังและการรับรู้จริง และเวลาที่ใช้บริการ (วันของสัปดาห์และเวลาของวัน) สำหรับนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีในภาคตะวันออกเฉียงเหนือ

Chain Restaurant Service Quality in Thailand: Expectation-Perception Gap and Patronizing Timing (Day of a Week and Time of a Day) for Undergraduates in the Northeastern Region

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บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยนี้ศึกษาคุณภาพการบริการของภัตตาคารเครือข่ายในประเทศไทย โดยเน้นศึกษาช่องว่างระหว่างความคาดหวังและการรับรู้จริงในคุณภาพการบริการ 5 มิติ (สิ่งที่จับต้องได้ ความเชื่อถือได้ การตอบสนอง การสร้างความเชื่อมั่นและความเห็นอกเห็นใจ) และอิทธิพลของเวลาที่ใช้บริการ (วันของสัปดาห์และเวลาของวัน) ที่มีต่อช่องว่างการบริการ เป็นการวิจัยเชิงสำรวจ ใช้การเลือกตัวอย่างแบบใช้วิจารณญาณกับนักศึกษาระดับปริญญาตรีชาวไทยจำนวน 351 คน ผลวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นมีช่องว่างอย่างมีนัยสำคัญโดยที่ความคาดหวังนั้นมีสูงกว่าการรับรู้การบริการที่ได้รับจริงในทั้ง 5 มิติ อย่างไรก็ตามช่องว่างของการบริการไม่ได้รับอิทธิพลจากเวลาในการใช้บริการ ไม่ว่าจะเป็นในด้านวันของสัปดาห์และเวลาของวัน จากนั้นงานวิจัยนี้ได้ให้ข้อเสนอแนะและแนวทางเพื่อการวิจัยในอนาคต

Abstract

This study examines service quality of a chain restaurant in Thailand. The focus is on the expectation-perception gap in each of the five dimensions of service quality (tangibles, reliabilities, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) and the possible influences of patronizing timing (day of a week and time of a day) on service quality gap.   A survey research with judgmental sampling was conducted with 351 Thai undergraduate students. The results reveal that there are significant gaps where service expectation exceeds perception in all five dimensions.

However, these gaps are not influenced by the time of patronizing, either the day of a week or time of a day. Research implications and future research directions are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies on the improvement of service quality have been conducted in many restaurant contexts including fast-food restaurants (Lee and Ulgado, 1997), airport restaurants (Heung, Wong and Qu, 2000), full service restaurants (Chow et al., 2007) and ethnic restaurants (Ha and Jang, 2010). A meta-analysis of service quality studies by Carrillat, Jaramillo and Mulki (2009) reveals that service quality is a major determinant of customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that influences of service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty can vary from one industry to another (Fornell, 1992) and across cultures (Lee and Ulgado, 1997).

The chain restaurant (such as Pizza Hut, Sizzler and Subway) is one of the fastest growing sectors in the food service industry (Roh, 2002). In Thailand, chain restaurants are considered to cater for customers who are willing to pay more for a better service. They often offer a nicer décor, a cleaner environment or even a better service compared with those in the United States (Murase and Bojanic, 2004). Service quality is commonly used to distinguish the chain restaurant from its competitors. In other words, a high level of service quality has become an ultimate goal for many chain restaurant owners.

Few studies have examined the perception of service quality in the chain restaurant context or in any other types of restaurants located in Thailand. Therefore, the present research attempts to contribute to the literature in food service marketing by examining the perception of service quality at the chain restaurant in Thailand. In particular, it aims to investigate the gap between customer's expectation and customer's perception for service provided by a chain restaurant. In addition, the present study also investigated whether and how certain behavioral variables including day of a week and time of a day in restaurant patronizing may influence the service gaps. The research results are expected to provide some useful information on dimensions of service quality the chain restaurant should attend to Furthermore, Thailand is underrepresented in cross-cultural research on global marketing strategies (Sophonsiri and Polyorat, 2009). Given the extensive growth of the global marketing strategy (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1999), this particular study which is conducted in Thailand will then provide some directions regarding the extent to which a chain restaurant in different countries may effectively standardize or localize the service marketing practices to better meet the customers' demands. This research article is structured as follows. First, literature on service quality is reviewed. Next, a set of hypotheses are offered and, then, empirically examined by using a survey. Subsequently, data are analyzed and discussed. Finally, research implications are provided and avenues for future research are suggested.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Service quality has been defined as 'the delivery of excellent or superior service relative to customer expectation' (Zeithaml and Bitner,1996:

p.117). Gronroos (1994) indicates that service quality can be classified into two distinctive dimensions: technical; and functional. In the restaurant context, technical quality involves a meal provision while functional quality relates to how a meal is provided.

SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985) is a research-based set of general expectations that customers have for their service providers. SERVQUAL consists of five dimensions involving the core features of service provision. These dimensions include reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) proposed that meeting or exceeding customer expectations in each of these key areas can improve customer satisfaction. According to Berry and Parasuraman (1991), reliability is defined as the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Tangible represents the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communications materials while responsiveness reflects the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Finally, assurance refers to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their abilities to convey trust whereas empathy indicates confidence and the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers.

Service quality researchers have used SERVQUAL for a considerable period of time (Albacete-Saez, Fuentes-Fuentes and Llorens-Montes, 2007; Chow et al., 2007). The five components of the model have become the most popular strategy for competing in a service environment, especially where a high level of competition is evident (Akbaba, 2006). Consequently, the introduction of SERVQUAL has changed the face of the service industry. Since the items defined in the SERVQUAL instrument are thought to be too general (Akbaba, 2006), many modified versions of SERVQUAL have been developed to suit the nature of such specific contexts as lodging (Knutson et al.,

1990) and restaurants (Stevens, Knutson and Patton, 1995). In the restaurant context, DINESERV developed by Stevens, Knutson and Patton (1995) has been used by many researchers to measure service quality (e.g., Heung, Wong and Qu, 2000; Kim, McCahon and Miller, 2003; Knutson, Stevens and Patton, 1995).

Literature review (e.g., Lee et al., 2005; Qin and Prybutok, 2009) indicates that the importance of service quality dimensions perceived by customers can vary across contexts. For example, empathy was found the most important service quality dimension for explaining customer satisfaction in the family restaurant context (Lee et al., 2005). Yet, this dimension was identified as the least important among the five service quality dimensions in a study conducted with a fast-food restaurant by Qin and Prybutok (2009). Further, the importance of tangible dimension also differs from one context to another. While being a crucial service quality dimension for determining customer satisfaction with high profile golf clubs (Lee et al., 2010), the tangible dimension was perceived to be less important than other SERVQUAL dimensions in the context of airline service (Chen and Chang, 2005) and travel service (Chang, 2009).

The present study attempts to investigate the gap between service quality expectation and perception across the five service quality dimensions for the chain restaurant in Thailand. Moreover, it also examined whether behavioral variables including day of a week and time of a day in patronizing a chain restaurant may influence these service quality gaps. The hypotheses of the present study are:

H1: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception.

H1a: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in the tangible dimension.

H1b: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in the reliability dimension.

H1c: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in the responsiveness dimension.

H1d: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in the assurance dimension.

H1e: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception in the empathy dimension.

H2: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap.

H2a: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap in the tangible dimension.

H2b: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap in the reliability dimension.

H2c: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap in the responsiveness dimension.

H2d: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap in the assurance dimension.

H2e: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap in the empathy dimension.

H3: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap.

H3a: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap in the tangible dimension.

H3b: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap in the reliability dimension.

H3c: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap in the responsiveness dimension.

H3d: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap in the assurance dimension.

H3e: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap in the empathy dimension.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from 351 Thai undergraduate students attending a major Northeastern university in Thailand. The use of college students sample was deemed appropriate because they are a very important market segment in a restaurant industry (Knutson, 2000), one of the biggest revenue generators due to the size of the population and the number of times they patronizes the restaurant (Knutson, 2000). *Pizza Hut* is used as a restaurant in question due to its popularity, availability and affordability among college students in the area.

In this study, the respondents were first informed of the study , then asked to complete the measures of service quality expectation and perception, and measures of restaurant patronage in terms of day of a week and time of a day. Finally, the respondents were asked to provide personal data at the end.

Measures

All original scales in English were translated into Thai by using a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980). Perception of service quality was measured with Stevens, Knutson and Patton's (1995) 29-item DINESERV Scale. The respondents were

instructed to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the 29 items (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). "*The restaurant has a visually attractive dining area.,*" "*The restaurant serves your food exactly as you ordered it.,*" "*The restaurant provides prompt and quick service.,*" "*The restaurant has personnel who seem well-trained, competent, and experienced.,*" and "*The restaurant seems to have the customers best interests at heart.*" were examples of items used to assess the dimensions of tangibles, reliabilities, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, respectively. All dimensions of the DINESERV scale exhibit Cronbach's alphas higher than .70, thus suggesting the adequate scale reliabilities (Nunnally, 1970). For the day-of-a-week and time-of-a-day items, which are in a check-list format, the respondents were asked to identify (1) whether they mostly visited the chain restaurant on weekday, weekend, or special

holidays and (2) whether they mostly visited the chain restaurant in the noon time or in the evening.

RESULTS

One hundred and thirty-two respondents (or 37.6%) visited the chain restaurant at noon while 219 (or 62.4%) in the evening., , The respondents visited the chain restaurant according to the following: forty-nine (or 14 %) on weekdays , two hundred and fifty-seven (or 73.2%) on weekends, and forty-five (or 12.8%) on special holidays. The means of service quality expectation range from 5.69 for tangibles to 5.91 for reliabilities (see Table 1). Regarding the perception, the means range from 5.03 for empathy to 5.36 for reliabilities. The gap means range from .55 for reliabilities to .73 for empathy.

Table 1 Means and Standard Deviations of Service Quality

Dimensions of Service Quality	Expectation		Perception		Gap	
	Mean	**Std. Dvt.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dvt.**	**Mean**	**Std. Dvt.**
Tangibles	5.69	0.92	5.08	0.90	0.62	0.93
Reliabilities	5.91	0.96	5.36	1.01	0.55	0.98
Responsiveness	5.84	1.00	5.12	1.17	0.72	1.28
Assurance	5.78	0.97	5.21	0.97	0.57	1.03
Empathy	5.76	1.02	5.03	1.05	0.73	1.12

Hypothesis Testing

H1: There is a service quality gap between expectation and perception.

To test this set of hypotheses, paired-sample t-tests were conducted for the expectation score and perception score of each service quality dimension. The results reveal that, for every dimension, there is a significant gap and the expectation is higher than the perception. For the tangible dimension, the expectation (M= 5.69) is significantly higher than the perception (M=5.08, t=12.46, p<.001). For the reliability dimension,

the expectation (M= 5.91) is also significantly higher than the perception (M=5.36, t=10.57, p<.001). Similarly, for the responsiveness dimension, the expectation (M= 5.84) is significantly higher than the perception (M=5.12, t=10.51, p<.001). For the assurance dimension, the expectation (M= 5.78) is significantly higher than the perception (M=5.21, t=10.38, p<.001), as well. Finally, for the empathy dimension, the expectation (M= 5.76) is significantly higher than the perception (M=5.03, t=12.18, p<.001), too. Therefore, H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, and H1e are all supported.

H2: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different days of a week have different levels of service gap.

To test this set of hypotheses, one-way ANOVAs were conducted where different days of a week are the independent variable and the expectation-perception service gap is the dependent variable. The results reveal that, for each service dimension, the gaps are not significantly different among consumers patronizing the restaurant at different days of a week. For the tangible dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing on weekday (M= .50), on weekend (M=.66), and on special holidays (M=.50, F=.97, p>.1) are not significantly different. For the reliability dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing on weekday (M= .43), on weekend (M=.57), and on special holidays (M=.59, F=.63, p>.1) are also not significantly different. Similarly, for the responsiveness dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing on weekday (M= .73), on weekend (M=.68), and on special holidays (M=.92, F=.51, p>.1) are not significantly different. Likewise, for the assurance dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing on weekday (M= .63), on weekend (M=.56), and on special holidays (M=.56, F=.91, p>.1) are not significantly different. Finally, for the empathy dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing on weekday (M= .71), on weekend (M=.75), and on special holidays (M=.63, F=.91, p>.1) are not significantly different, either. Therefore, none of H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, and H1e is supported.

H3: Consumers visiting a chain restaurant at different time of a day have different levels of service gap.

To test this set of hypotheses, independent sample t-tests were conducted where different time of a day is the independent variable and the expectation-perception service gap is the dependent variable. The results reveal that, for each service dimension, the gaps are not significantly different between consumers patronizing the restaurant at different time of a day. For the tangible dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing at noon (M=.64) and in the evening (M=.60, t=.75 >.1) are not significantly different. For the reliability dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing at noon (M=.58) and in the evening (M=.54, t=.70 >.1) are also not significantly different. Similarly, for the responsiveness dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing at noon (M=.76) and in the evening (M=.69, t=.65 >.1) are not significantly different. Likewise, for the assurance dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing at noon (M=.60) and in the evening (M=.55, t=.66 >.1) are not significantly different. Finally, for the empathy dimension, the service gap of consumers patronizing at noon (M=.77) and in the evening (M=.71, t=.57 >.1) are not significantly different, either. Therefore, none of H2a, H2b, H2c, H2d, and H2e is supported.

Discussions

1. Summary

The study results reveal that, for the chain restaurant in question, the perceptions of service quality in all five dimensions (tangibles, reliabilities, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) are lower than the expectations. However, these gaps are not influenced by the time of patronizing, either the day of a week or time of a day.

2. Study Implications

Overall, the present study demonstrates that the chain restaurant in question needs to better improve its service quality as the consumers' high expectation exceed their perception of the real service received from the chain restaurant in all five service quality dimensions. The improvement could finally result in desirable consumer outcomes such as customer satisfaction, patronage, word-of-mouth, and loyalty.

The results of this study also suggest that for the restaurant manager to increase the chain restaurant patronage and other favorable outcomes the enhancement of the tangible or physical appearance of the restaurant should be paid more attention to (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). For example, in order to elicit more favorable reactions to the restaurant tangibles, the management may try to provide visually attractive dining areas, parking areas, and building exteriors. The cleanliness of every item in a restaurant, ranging from staff uniforms to restrooms, is another area for improvement. The menu itself should be not only attractive but also readable.

To improve the service quality dimension of reliability, the restaurant should, for instance, perform the service right the first time, and provide its service at the time it promises to do so (Abu, 2004). In short, the restaurant should make sure it has the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.

In terms of responsiveness dimension, the management and staff must possess the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. In addition, the restaurant should tell customers exactly when the services will be performed (Lee et al., 2005).

Further, to increase the perception of assurance, the restaurant should try to make customers feel that they can trust the restaurant personnel. However, to achieve this, restaurant employees must get sufficient support from the restaurant management to do their job well (Lee et al., 2005).

The management can also benefit from encouraging empathy by, for example, training employees to anticipate and be sensitive to each customer's needs and wants. Further, the restaurant management may consider putting special efforts to make customers feel special and should have the customer's best interest in mind.

As the two timing-related variables days of a week and time of a day- were not found to influence the gap of service quality, it could reflect that the restaurant may have already had the right staffing schedule and appropriate food inventory for the operation throughout a day and a week. Therefore, the restaurant management may attempt to see if there is any other operation-related variable that may affect the service quality to better pinpoint the improvement focus.

3. Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Though the present research provides contributions to the areas of service marketing and consumer behavior, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the results are drawn from survey data alone. Future research should employ additional research methods such as depth interview and experiment in order to have a better understanding on the gap of each dimension of service quality. Second, the scope of survey was restricted to Thai undergraduate students attending a major Northeastern university in Thailand. The result of the study should not be taken as representing the whole population of Thai patrons who dine in the chain restaurant. Future research should examine the service quality perception of respondents from other segments such as office workers or retirees. Third, this study only examined the perceived service quality in one chain restaurant. It can be argued that the perception of service quality can be varied across different types of food service establishments. Different dimensions of service quality may exhibit different levels of influence for varied types of restaurants (Sophonsiri and Polyorat, 2009). Consequently, other types of restaurants such as food courts, coffee shops or ice-cream parlors also deserve more studies.

Acknowledgement

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