

Customer Reaction to Service Delays in Malaysian Ethnic Restaurants

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an empirical investigation of restaurant customers' evaluations of and reactions to delays in service when choosing cook to foods in Malaysia. It also compares customers' evaluations of waiting time at two of the most popular types of ethnic restaurants in Malaysia (Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants). The findings indicate that majority of restaurant customers are clearly concerned about waiting time. Customers expressed that unacceptable waiting time does affect their satisfaction, mood and propensity to dine again. Some customer segments are more concerned about various aspects of waiting than are other customers. There are also differences between how customers view waiting times in each of the two styles of restaurant included in this study. Customers strongly believe that waiting time for cook to order food in Malay restaurants is much longer compared to the Indian Muslim restaurants, which provide better overall speed of service. These results have significant implications for Malay restaurant operators. While both styles of restaurant should always pay attention to customers' needs and expectations as part of their business strategies, Malay restaurant operators need to catch up to what their Indian Muslim counterparts are already achieving. They will to better understand and pay closer attention to customers' needs in order to be well positioned and take advantage of the general growing trends in eating habits of Malaysian customers and their service expectations.

KEYWORDS: *Waiting time, Customers, Indian Muslim, Malay, Restaurants, Cook to Order Food*

INTRODUCTION

Every individual could agree that waiting for service is becoming increasingly common in peoples' daily life. Some may experience having to wait before service is rendered, some during its delivery and some after the core service has completed (Sorel, et. al., 1999). The wait for service may be defined as the time from when a customer is ready to receive the service until the time that service commences, but it also refers to the state of readiness felt by that customer during the wait (Taylor, 1994). It is not unusual that most people who experience a waiting time that is longer than expected try to determine the reasons for the delay. They may attribute the long wait to an exceptionally slow service process, insufficient or very inefficient and poorly trained service staff, or many other assumptions. Similarly, when the wait is shorter than expected several possible causes may be attributed, including a fast and efficient service staff.

Irrespective of the attributed causes, more than 70 per cent of service consumers report being seriously concerned about waiting times (Jones and Dent, 1993). This issue has received considerable attention from researchers from diverse perspectives including

economics, marketing, management science and service industry practices including the restaurant industry. Management science and marketing studies have shown long waits to be a major source of consumer dissatisfaction (see for example; Bitner et. al., 1990; Scotland, 1991; Taylors, 1994; Tom and Lucey, 1999; Tse, 2001). Tom and Lucey (1999) found that waiting time or delay is the factor most critical to consumer satisfaction with shopping experiences. Some consumers dislike waiting in line so much that they hire people to wait in lines for them (Ittig, 1994; Davis and Heineke, 1994). There is also evidence indicating that consumers' dissatisfaction with long waits affects both their overall satisfaction with the service and their future intention to use those service providers. Pruyt and Smidts (1998) argued that negative experiences from waiting for service arise in many purchase situations and it seems to be a decisive element, not only with regard to the customer's level of satisfaction with service, but also the customer's loyalty to the service provider. A number of relationships have been identified between the perceived waiting time, the attribution of causes of delays in service which cause anger, consumer satisfaction /dissatisfaction with the service and the consumers' resultant behavioural intentions, including their propensity to complain and repurchase (Diaz and Ruiz, 2002).

Attribution research indicates that it may be the consumers' attribution of causes for the wait, as well as the length of waiting time itself, that contributes to consumer satisfaction. It is also argued that satisfaction with waiting time may differ depending on who is blamed or credited with the length of delay. Customer perception of time may also be quite subjective. Lawson (1994) argued that it is generally accepted that customers are prepared to wait only a short time before becoming impatient and the amount of time that the customer is actually prepared to wait is determined by a number of factors. For example, some customers are naturally more patient than others. Jones and Dent (1994) identified three types of customers; "Watchers" who enjoy the bustle and do not mind waiting; "Neutrals" who display neither enjoyment or frustration; and "Impatiens" who hate waiting and will consequently queue hop and complain.

Many economists see waiting time as form of price. Becker (1965) argued that the full cost of waiting activities equals the sum of market prices and the foregone value of the time used up. Zeithaml (1988) discussed the concept of perceived price and included time cost as part of perceived price and so, from a customer perspective, price is what is given up or sacrificed to obtain the products. Recently, Ittig (2002) attempted to incorporate the impact of waiting time on customer demand. He suggested that it may be appropriate for the researchers and service firms to devote more attention to the relationship between time and consumer behaviour. The perspective that time is perceived as a form of price provides an important insight. However, he added that there are difficulties in measuring such a perceived price and in accounting for a price that may differ for each customer.

In the restaurant industry, waiting time for service typically represents the first direct interaction between customers and most delivery processes (Davis, et al, 1998). Customers in a restaurant who are unhappy about their long wait for seating or food service may complain about the quality of service received. Jones and Dent (1994) argued that response time is one of the major areas of concern to restaurant customers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that nearly two-thirds of service complaints in restaurants are time related and in particular are about having to wait too long to be served.

Despite these issues starting to be recognized in the literature, relatively few empirical studies have been conducted to assess restaurants and customers interactions and any resultant impacts. Even fewer studies are based on field research involving real customers who were actually experiencing waiting time or service delays (Price, 1992; Proctor, 1994; Jones and Peppiatt, 1996 and Church, 2000). In particular there has been no reported study of customer related waiting experiences conducted in Malaysia. This current study empirically investigated restaurant customers' attitudes to service delays in general and having to wait for

cook to order food at two of the most popular types of ethnic restaurants in Malaysia (Malay and Indian Muslim (*Mamak*) restaurants). This study is also used to validate the results of an earlier study (Zahari, et al, 2005) that concluded that Indian Muslim restaurants provide faster and more efficient customer service than Malay restaurants.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was used to gain respondent views about their waiting experience in cook to order situations. The study involved customers who had experienced two or more incidents of waiting for a long time in Mamak and Malay restaurants in Shah Alam, Malaysia. A convenience sample approach was used by selecting customers at random at popular supermarkets including Giant, Tesco and Macro and three shopping complexes, SACC Mall, Plaza Alam Sentral and Complex PKNS. These shopping complexes and supermarkets were chosen because they are among the most popular in the city neighborhood. Following the same approach as Jones and Peppiatt (1996), potential respondents were initially approached and asked if they had previously experienced service delays in Mamak and Malay restaurants? If the customers reported having had such experience they were invited to take part in the study.

Sufficient respondents were included in the sample to allow subsequent analysis by various demographic characteristics. In particular, more men (75%) than women (25%) were selected to represent the understood proportions of men and women dining at the restaurants of interest. Also, attention was paid to ensuring that sufficient numbers of students of higher institutions, government servants and private company employees were included as these groups were believed to be the most frequent visitors to the restaurants in the Shah Alam area.

The survey instrument was developed by the researchers based on related published studies. Further refinements were incorporated after initial pre-testing with randomly selected subjects. The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with the first asking respondents to identify their age, gender, level of education, occupation, whether they live locally and how frequently they dined out each week. The remaining sections asked about how long respondents expected it should take to receive various categories of ethnic dishes, their levels of agreement with various statements about service delays in general and when dining in two types of ethnic restaurant in particular. Levels of agreement were rated according to a five point scale where 1 = "Totally Disagree, 3 = "Slightly Agree" and 5= "Totally Agree". These latter items were adapted from Jones (1994) with minor modification of wording to address the study objectives.

Surveys were conducted each weekend in October 2006 at the selected shopping complexes and supermarkets. Potential respondents were intercepted before entering the Mall or supermarket. A total of 480 usable questionnaires were collected.

RESULTS

The characteristics of the sample are reported in Table 1. The age of the respondents was reasonably evenly distributed across the four categories used. But there are less even distributions in terms levels of educational attainment, occupational category and residency. Nonetheless it is believed that the respective proportions are reasonable given the nature of the location and are therefore represent the patronage of the restaurants. Shah Alam area has many government offices and higher education institutions (MARA University of Technology, Industrial University of Selangor and Polytechnics). Results also show that 80.0 per cent of the total respondents were from Shah Alam compared to 20.0 per cent from outside of this city.

TABLE 1: Showing the number and percentage respondents reported by gender, age, occupation, level of education and residency

<i>Variables</i>		<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	Male	360	75.0
	Female	120	25.0
Age	Under 25	103	21.5
	26-35 years	156	32.5
	36-45 years	126	26.3
	46-55 years	95	19.8
Levels of Education	High school	10	2.1
	Diploma	151	31.5
	Bachelor Degree	244	50.8
	Master and Higher	75	15.6
Occupation	Student	99	20.6
	Self-employs	42	8.8
	Government servants	249	51.9
	Private	90	18.6
Residency	Shah Alam	384	80.0
	Outside Shah Alam	96	20.0

As can be seen in table 2, a very large part of the sample (57.5%) reported visiting a restaurant 4-5 times a week, with another large number even more frequent customers (25.4 %) visiting more than 7 times a week. A further 17.1% visited 2-3 times a week. Also reported in the table are respondents views about expected waiting times for various styles of meal. Clearly 5 to 10 minutes is the expected time for these entire cook to order foods and drinks.

TABLE 2: Showing the number and percentage respondents reported by frequencies of dining and expected time food to be delivered

<i>Frequencies of Dining</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
2- 3 times	82	17.1
4 – 5 times	276	57.5
More than 7 times	122	25.4
Expected Time for Food to be Delivered		
a. Varieties of Fried Noodle and similar meals		
5 to 10 minutes	462	96.2
11 to 15 minutes	18	3.8
b. Varieties of Fried Rice and similar meals		
5 to 10 minutes	462	96.2
11 to 15 minutes	18	3.8
c. Roti canai, capati and similar meals		
5 to 10 minutes	462	96.2
11 to 15 minutes	18	3.8
d. Freshly prepare drinks		
5 to 10 minutes	476	99.2
11 to 15 minutes	4	0.8

Attitudes of Respondents to Waiting in General

Reviewing the respondents mean ratings for each of the items dealing with waiting in general reveals some to be expected outcomes. The mean scores are shown in table 3 in rank order of the level of agreement reported by respondents. As would be expected, these

respondents do not like waiting. Clearly waiting can spoil an otherwise good meal (item 4) and affects both the mood to dine (4.63, item 3) and reduces the likelihood that the customer will spend more money (3.57, item 8). More importantly perhaps is the high level of agreement among respondents that waiting too long affects their propensity to revisit the restaurant (4.67, item 2). This should be noted along with the almost universal agreement that they would have gone to another restaurant if they had known they would have to wait a long time (4.80, item 1).

TABLE 3: Showing the mean of levels of agreement of respondents to general statements about waiting and service delay in the restaurants

	Totally Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Slightly Agree 3	Agree 4	Totally agree 5		
<i>Items</i>					<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>n</i>
1	If I had known I would have to wait long I would have gone to another restaurant				4.80	.482	480
2	Waiting too long affects my propensity to revisit the restaurant				4.67	.470	480
3	Waiting too long affects my mood to dine				4.63	.482	480
4	A good meal but a long wait is a bad experience				4.50	.677	480
5	If I see a lot customers I do not order cook to order food				4.20	.623	480
6	I do not like waiting if I know it can be done quickly				4.12	.948	480
7	An apology for serving food late makes it more bearable				3.84	.415	480
8	I do not feel like spending after I have been waiting				3.57	.640	480
9	I do not mind waiting as long as I know why				3.44	.699	480
10	I do mind waiting if the service appears inefficient				3.37	.762	480
11	I would rather pay more for not having a long wait				3.22	.951	480
12	I do not mind waiting if I know for how long				3.12	.350	480
13	The taste of the food taste is worth a long waiting				3.06	.986	480
14	The good quality of food is worth a long waiting				3.10	.604	480
15	I do not mind waiting if it is made known to me by service staff				2.98	.512	480
16	I do not mind waiting if I see something happening				2.75	.658	480
17	I do mind waiting if the restaurant is really busy				2.44	1.07	480
18	I do not mind waiting in the weekends				1.75	.859	480

However, respondents will apparently adapt their dining behaviour to suit how busy the restaurant is and not choose cook to order food if there are a lot of customers present (4.20, item 5). This should help ensure that as customers they mitigate their waiting time. Nonetheless, they do not like waiting if they know that the food can be delivered quickly (4.12, item 6). However, an apology for late service at least makes it more bearable (3.84, item 7).

While at a lower level of agreement, there appears to be some support among respondents for the idea that they do not mind as much having to wait for their food if they know why there is a delay (3.44, item 9), if the service appears to be inefficient (3.37, item 10), or if they know how long the wait will be (3.12, item 12). However, there is also some agreement that the respondents would be prepared to pay more if they did not have to wait (3.22, item 11). Slight agreement with statements about the quality and taste of the food making it worth waiting suggest that taste perceptions might at least partially moderate perceptions of time delays (items 13 and 14). The perception of delay is also moderated if the staff let the customer know what is happening (item 15), something can be seen to be happening (item 16) or that the restaurant is really busy (item 17). Perhaps particularly notable is the distinct

disagreement (1.75, item 18) with the idea that respondents will not mind waiting as much in the weekends.

Overall these results point to a clear picture that waiting does matter and that there are a number of things that can be done to moderate the level of dissatisfaction that delays cause. Making sure that customers know how long service will take in busy periods, being more visible in what the staff are doing, ensuring taste and quality are all that they can be, and offering alternatives to the cook to order menu, or even charging more and hiring more staff to speed service are possibly effective strategies to moderate dissatisfaction and avoid loss of repeat business. While these make intuitive sense, they do not present the entire picture. Further analyses of the results by gender, education, occupation, place of residency and age added some additional insights that also merit consideration by restaurant operators.

There were eleven significant differences between the means of ratings given by men and women among the eighteen items reported in table 3. Of these, five also had an arithmetic difference that merits comment. Female respondents are more likely to have long waits affect their mood to dine (4.97) as compared to males (4.52, $p = .000$; item 3). Similarly, females are less likely to revisit (5.00) than males (4.56, $p = .000$; item 2) after delays in service. In contrast to this reaction trend, males are less likely to spend more after experiencing service delays (3.66) than females (3.28, $p = .000$; item 8). Females also appear to be more tolerant of delays than their male counterpart when they notice inefficient service (1.97 versus 2.52, $p = .000$; item 10) and when the restaurant is busy (2.07 versus 2.57, $p = .000$; item 17). These latter differences between the genders perhaps reflect the traditional role of women in preparing food for others and therefore more sympathy and understanding of what is involved.

When considering the effects that age, education and occupation might have on respondents' attitudes towards waiting for service the respective distributions of these variables also need to be understood. Unsurprisingly, very few masters or higher qualifications are held among the lower age categories. In fact 90.7% of the 75 respondents in this category are 46 years or older, all of whom are employed in the private sector. Therefore, a masters or higher qualification in this sample is almost synonymous with being older and employed in the private sector. It is also not a surprise to find that 62.1% of the 25 years and younger category describe themselves as students. There are also 204 respondents who report themselves as being between the ages of 26 and 45 years old who are employed in the public service.

Again we report here only those differences that stand out between the various sub-groups not only because they are significant at the 95% level or higher, but they are also notable for their arithmetic differences. Table 4 reports the mean scores for each sub-group based on education and as can be seen almost universally those with a masters or higher qualification have either the highest or lowest mean score of each of the categories. Remembering that this group is virtually synonymous with being employed in the private sector and being in the oldest age category, we may be seeing the effects of a wider understanding and tolerance based on greater maturity or breadth of perspective, rather than a specific educational effect. The 10 respondents whose highest level of qualification was High School Certificate were excluded from the analysis as such a small sub-group would not provide reliable results.

TABLE 4: Showing the mean of levels of agreement of respondents to statements about waiting and service delay in the restaurants reported by educational attainment level

	Totally Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Slightly Agree 3	Agree 4	Totally agree 5	
Items Where Masters are MOST in Agreement						
4	A good meal but a long wait is a bad experience			5.00	4.28	4.60
9	I do not mind waiting as long as I know why			4.00	3.52	3.03
13	The taste of the food taste is worth a long waiting			4.00	2.85	2.93
Items Where Masters are Least in Agreement						
2	Waiting too long affects my propensity to revisit the restaurant			4.00	4.93	4.60
3	Waiting too long affects my mood to dine			4.00	4.87	4.56
6	I do not like waiting if I know it can be done quickly			3.00	4.25	4.50
11	I would rather pay more for not having a long wait			2.67	3.12	3.68
17	I do mind waiting if the restaurant is really busy			2.00	2.44	2.70
18	I do not mind waiting in the weekends			1.00	1.75	2.16

NB: 1. Mast = Masters or higher (n=75); Bach = Bachelor degree (n=244); Dip = Diploma (n=151).

2. The item numbers in above table refer back table 3 which reported items in mean rank order.

As can be seen from the above table, those with higher qualifications, and who are generally older and employed in the private sector hold stronger opinions in a number of aspects. Clearly for this group a long wait is a bad experience, but knowing why there is a delay means they are more likely to be less affected. Perhaps reflecting older taste palates, they are also clear that food taste is worth the wait as compared to their younger and less educationally qualified counterparts.

It is more likely that the younger and less educated respondents will react negatively to delays if they know things can be done more quickly (item 6). Their reactions are more likely to be seen in not revisiting the restaurant or affected moods (items 2 and 3). In contrast, older respondents are less likely to agree to pay more in order to avoid delays (item 11). They are also less likely to mind waiting if the restaurant is really busy (item 17), but distinctly more likely to mind having to wait in the weekends.

When assessing the worth of customers to a business two core dimensions need to be considered. Firstly, the average revenue or amount spent on each visit. This will be determined by whether expensive or low price items are chosen along with how many of these items are purchased per customer at any given sitting. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, is the frequency of each customer visiting a given establishment. In this study the value of expenditure is limited by the nature of the cuisine being investigated, but frequency of dining out is included. Respondents who dine out more frequently are of greater value to the restaurateur than infrequent diners as they provide a larger revenue stream. Their views are therefore more important and should be paid greater heed.

In this study, respondents were categorised into one of three groups according to their weekly dining out frequency. Low frequency diners were identified as those eating out 2 to 3 times each week (n=82), the moderate group were those reporting dining out 4 to 5 times a week (n=276), with the most frequent being those dining out more than 7 times each week (n=122). Analysing responses by means of the Scheffe post hoc procedure to compare these groups provided statistically significant differences between at least two, and commonly all three of the groups, for all 18 items reported in table 3. While significant, many of the differences were relatively slight. However, a number of items that showed distinct arithmetic differences receive some comment.

The most frequent diners clearly have a different set of values about waiting overall. They slightly agree that they do not mind waiting as long as they can see something happening (3.34) while the other two groups both slightly disagree (2.52, 2.71). While the moderate group slightly agrees (3.45), the frequent group very clearly agrees (4.00) that they are less likely to mind waiting if they know why there is a delay. In contrast, the infrequent diners (2.59) do not seem to see this as a moderating factor. Paralleling this finding, the least frequent diners distinctly (3.97) see apparent inefficient service as excusing delays whereas the more frequent diners distinctly disagree with mean scores of 1.93 and 2.31.

Greater frequency of dining out also seems to influence views about whether a good taste experience overcomes dissatisfaction from delays. The least frequent diners agree that taste does compensate (4.10) whereas moderate diners only slightly agree (3.00) and frequent diners slightly disagree (2.66). However, while these differences suggest that different groups might have slightly differing tolerances to delays in service, there is a very important distinction with regard to weekend operations that should be noted. Infrequent diners do not particularly mind delays during the weekend (3.10), but the moderate (1.68) and frequent diners (1.00) do not accept weekend delays. It is this last rating that stands out as particularly important as it suggests a need for operators to identify and pay special attention to their more frequent customers if delays might be experienced.

Comparisons between Shah Alam residents and non-residents did not reveal any differences that were especially enlightening, despite all but two of the eighteen items reported in table 3 showing significant differences between these two groups.

CUSTOMERS EXPERIENCES OF WAITING TIME AT MALAY AND INDIAN MUSLIM RESTAURANTS

Respondents were also asked to compare their experiences of waiting times for cook to order food in Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants. Paired samples t- test was used to compare responses. Table 5 presents the mean scores from this analysis and highlights the nine items where statistically significant differences were identified.

TABLE 5: Comparison of respondent ratings of Indian Muslim and Malay restaurants

	Items	Rest	Mean	S.D	t- value
1	Provides a good meal but always with a long wait	Indian Mus	2.43	.496	-9.120 *
		Malay	3.02	.992	
2	Less waiting time for cook to order food	Indian Mus	4.13	.335	65.580 *
		Malay	2.28	.446	
3	Less waiting time for freshly prepared drinks	Indian Mus	3.64	.845	6.304 *
		Malay	3.29	.453	
4	Openly accept complaints without negative remarks	Indian Mus	2.88	.988	1.826
		Malay	2.75	.816	
5	Experiencing a longer waiting for most cook to order food	Indian Mus	2.44	.497	-25.465 *
		Malay	3.69	.623	
6	Have more neglectful service staff	Indian Mus	2.28	.446	-34.194 *
		Malay	3.69	.889	
7	Experiencing too many long waits affects my propensity to revisit	Indian Mus	3.10	.771	-12.036 *
		Malay	3.60	.489	
8	Frequently provide inconsistent service	Indian Mus	2.67	.471	-53.397 *
		Malay	3.92	.389	
9	After a long wait the food was still delivered incorrectly	Indian Mus	1.99	.091	-36.294 *
		Malay	3.46	.885	
10	An apology always received after a long wait	Indian Mus	2.31	1.238	-16.499 *
		Malay	3.29	.700	

- Note: 1. * = 2-tail statistical significance with $p < .001$ using paired t-tests.
 2. Scale 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly agree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree
 3. $n = 480$

As shown in table 5, it is clear that Malay restaurants are perceived as more likely to have longer delays in serving both food and drink (items 1, 2 and 3). Item 5 reconfirms this by asking the reverse of item 2. The mean score for Malay restaurants (3.69) shows distinct agreement with the statement that cook to order food involves longer waiting as compared to Indian Muslim restaurants (2.44).

Perhaps critically important than the delays and waiting times are the views about the service cultures of these restaurant styles. When asked about whether the staff are neglectful (item 6), respondents are clear that Malay restaurants do have neglectful staff (3.68) while they somewhat disagree (2.27) that this is true of Indian Muslim establishments. Malay restaurants are seen as frequently providing inconsistent service (3.91) as compared to Indian Muslim (2.66, item 8). Worse still is the view that Malay restaurants are more likely (3.45) to deliver food wrongly even after a long wait. Indian Muslim restaurants are seen as not being likely to make this mistake (1.99, item 9). Some confirmation of the effects of these types of perceptions can be seen in item 7 which asked about respondents' propensity to return to the restaurant after experiencing long waits. Clearly the Malay restaurants get a much worse response with a mean level of agreement of 3.60 as compared to Indian Muslim restaurant mean rating of 3.10. Despite this latter score showing that these restaurants would also suffer negative customer reaction to delays in service, the view is less strongly stated.

In terms of how each of the styles of restaurant deal with delays respondents see two distinct patterns. They are slightly in disagreement with the statement that the restaurants openly accept complaints, but make no distinction between the two restaurant styles. In other words, neither Malay nor Indian Muslim restaurants are seen to be especially good in this regard. However, there is a significant difference between them with regard to corrective or recovery actions. Respondents see Indian Muslim as less likely to provide an apology (2.31) than their Malay counterpart (3.29). This seems to be the only aspect where Malay restaurants outshine their Indian Muslim competitors.

It would appear from this analysis that Indian Muslim restaurants generally provide faster service, have more attentive staff and provide a consistent of service when compared to Malay restaurants. This perhaps leads to the finding that Malay restaurants are more likely to apologise as they seem to have more need to do so, given customers views about the frequency of delays and mistakes being made. However, it also seems that neither style of restaurant especially wants to hear from customers about any complaints they might have. This seems to ignore a good source of feedback information on how to improve customer service. Given these customer impressions, it is not surprising to see in hindsight that many of the Indian Muslim restaurants were consistently attracting more customers, regardless of whether it was for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Analyses of the items reported in table 5 in terms of age, gender, education, occupation, residency or frequency of dining out, revealed several significant differences. However, none of these differences showed any clear pattern and all appeared to be anomalous rather than showing any underlying useful distinction. These differences are not reported.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

None of the findings from this study are really all that surprising. The evidence from this study has reconfirmed previous investigations related to restaurant service (for example, Jones and Dent (1994), Sarel and Marmorstein (1999)) that long waiting has a negative impact on customer satisfaction. Some of the views expressed are universal, while others are more

dominant among particular segments of the customer population. Overall, customers do not like waiting and will take various steps to moderate a potentially negative experience. Such steps include not ordering food to order food when they see a lot of people waiting or even going to another restaurant. As reported in other studies, an explanation of any delay, that the restaurant is obviously really busy, or having staff apologise for delays, are things that reduce the customer's sense of dissatisfaction.

What is new in this study though is perhaps more useful to the restaurateur. Females appear to be more sensitive to delays and react by not revisiting the restaurant, although they are perhaps more understanding of why the delays might be occurring. Males on the other hand are more likely to limit their expenditure at the time of the visit after experiencing delays. Also notable are the findings relating to older, better educated, private sector employees, who are clearer that delays are a bad experience. However, they are more tolerant of delays if they know why, or if the food is good when it does arrive. This group is also less likely to react negatively by not revisiting or allowing the delay to influence their dining experience. These are matters of degree of difference between categories of customers and in no way obviate the restaurateurs from striving to meet customer expectations.

While older and better educated customers might be less likely to react negatively in the face of slow service, they are least likely to be tolerant of delay in the weekends. It would be wrong to assume that a more leisurely pace will be accepted by this group simply because it is the weekend. It is also notable that it is the infrequent and therefore less valuable diner who is more tolerant of delays during the weekend. Perhaps for them the total experience of being out and away from their home and job is the measure of their experience rather than just the component that occurs within the restaurant. The frequent diners must be described as very intolerant of delays during the weekend.

Comparison of customers' evaluation of waiting time at the two popular types of ethnic restaurants (Malay and Indian Muslim restaurants) included in this study revealed that delays were more commonly experienced by customers at Malay restaurants as compared to Indian Muslim restaurants. Respondents also report Malay restaurants as more likely to have neglectful staff providing less consistent service with more errors in what they serve. In contrast, the better performance of Indian Muslim restaurants must be making it easier for them to attract more customers and win repeat business and so grow their businesses more rapidly than their Malay counterparts.

On the basis of this research, efficient service is an important factor in customer's choice of restaurant. Customers report that Malay restaurants provide good food and Malay restaurant operators should not overlook this positive perception. However, their competitors in the Indian Muslim restaurants are also seen in a similar light. What differences there are seem to be centred around the respective levels of service. Malay restaurants therefore should focus on improving the level of service and staff attitudes to an acceptable level. This involves not only more prompt and efficient service but doing so consistently. Achievement of this might involve more staff training and educating them to be more sensitive to the various aspects identified in this study. While this may add cost in both resources and money, it will help staff to better understand the importance of good service delivery and so ultimately build a better business.

Any training should also deal with staff attitudes and behaviour as the study clearly indicates that staff behaviour has a significant impact on customer reaction to service delays. When customers perceive restaurants staff did everything possible to expedite service, their reactions to the delay were less negative. A more negative reaction was created when it was perceived that staffs were not doing everything possible. Thus, the way that employees' performances are perceived by the customers is critical. Accordingly the communication skills of service staff when dealing with the customers should be improved as a priority. Service staff should be trained to recognize both verbal and non-verbal customer indicators so

dissatisfaction due to service delays can be reacted to in a timely manner and possibly defused by a suitable explanation, or timely apology. This alone could go far in maintaining restaurant customer satisfaction.

In general, while Malay restaurateurs perhaps have ground to make up, the study shows all businesses in this service sector the need to attend to their customers' service expectations. This is more important given the fast growing trend in restaurants in similar styles of restaurants in Malaysia. But the findings are undoubtedly applicable in other service settings including other industries such as clothing retailing or entertainment businesses and even businesses located in other countries. This study particularly points to there being varied perceptions and expectations within the customer population. This suggests that more attention may be needed to ensure that segmentation within various styles of business may be of value in building business success. Future studies might usefully extend this theme.

Two particular aspects of this study might also be improved in future studies. The first of these would involve ensuring that the genders are more evenly balanced so allowing better understanding of how women react to service delays as compared to men. For example, do older women in particular react differently given they may well see any occasion dining outside the home as a welcome opportunity away from household responsibilities, and in fact they may even welcome longer service times as an opportunity to relax. In this regard marital and family status might be useful aspects to include in such a study. The second issue that the study might have been improved by would have been to include ethnicity as a variable. It is not possible from the data collected to determine if there is any degree of loyalty by any given ethnic group to what might be seen as their more usual choice of cuisine. In this regard it would be interesting to measure the extent to which individuals seek out cuisine styles that are different from that which they may normally find in their own home, as distinct from reacting to better or worse service experiences. Despite these possible improvements, the results are a useful addition to the service literature as it applies to the situation in Malaysia, where managing customers' waiting experience is becoming more critical in an increasingly service orientated world.

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