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A Study of the Factors Affecting Customers' Satisfaction and Behavioral Intentions on Korean Food in Malaysia

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KEYWORDS

Customer satisfaction Malaysia Korean food Behavioral intentions

ABSTRACT

In the competitive food and beverage industry, customer satisfaction is vital to a restaurant for repeat guest. Food is the fundamental element of a restaurant, as it would directly affect the degree of consumer satisfaction, as well as the future dining behavioral intentions. Interest for Korean food is proliferating globally, as there are a high number of Korean restaurants scattered around the globe. This study aimed to examine the attributes (quality of food, perceived value, country of the image and Korean culture, foreigners' perceptions) that affect the perceptions of Malaysian customers toward Korean food. This study also attempted to examine the significance and impacts of each attribute on the consumer satisfaction, as well as the future dining behavioral intentions. Moreover, this study also revealed the relationships between each attribute and customer satisfaction by employing ethnography methods, such as an interview. The data collected, and analyzed by employing a thematic analysis. This study is vital because it enabled restaurant operators to gain essential information on the important food attributes so that it facilitates the expansion of ethnic restaurants in the world. Besides, it also assisted traditional Korean restaurants in developing strategies to strengthen the degree of consumer satisfaction and behavioral intention.

1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in Asian food such as Korean food has been rising globally, as consumers perceive Korean food as unique, and nutritionally-balanced compared to other Asian cuisines (Ha & Jang, 2009). Food is the basic element of the dining experience in a restaurant, and it imposes a significant impact on customer satisfaction and return patronage (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Despite that, the majority of the restaurant qualityconcerned research has shown that the importance of foodstuff as the core competency of the restaurants is frequently neglected.

The factors included in this study were quality of food, customer satisfaction, behavioral intentions, perceived value, country image and Korean culture (Hallyu), as well as foreigners' perceptions of Korean food and patronage of Korean restaurants. It was strange to realize that no solid proof was observed for examining the level that the quality of food affects the overall dining experience of the consumers (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Besides, only a few studies and limited effort were exerted in determining customer satisfaction towards Korean food (Nam & Lee, 2011). On the other

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hand, a positive relationship is shown between the country image, the popularity of Korean culture, and the consumption of Korean food. Nonetheless, the only a small amount of research was conducted regarding the impacts of a country image, and Korean culture on consumers' perceptions towards Korean food (Lee, Ham, & Kim, 2015).

Consumers evaluate a specific product based on emotional value and utilitarian value. Hence, it is necessary to identify, and to understand the relationship between perceived value and consumption behaviors (Ha & Jang, 2009). Moreover, attributes such as behavioral intentions, foreigners' perceptions of Korean food, and patronage of Korean restaurants were also under-explored in the food and beverage industry. Only a few studies have been done to examine the attributes of Asian food, and also to focus on the specific characteristics of ethnic food (Jang, Ha, & Silkes, 2009).

In a nutshell, the purpose of this study was to verify the effects of the different attributes of food quality on customers' perception towards Korean food, to investigate the concept of country image on consumers' purchase decision in dining services, to examine the impact of past experiences and the attributes that influence the degree of consumer satisfaction, to inspect different effects of perceived value on product evaluation, and post-consumption behavioral intentions, for instance, revisit intention, and affirmative word-of-mouth, as well as the tendency to recommend to surroundings, and also to determine the factors that affect return patronage of Korean restaurants.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Quality of Food

Quality is commonly defined as attribute performance of a specific product or service that has impacts on the product's value to the consumers (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Food as the main product of a restaurant is crucial in regulating consumers' dining experience in the restaurant (Liu & Jang, 2009). By combining these 2 terms, food quality can be known as a vital factor that affects consumers' contentment, as well as their future dining behavioral intentions. Dube and Renaghan (1994) proved food quality to be an influential factor compared to other attributes by measuring seven different restaurant characteristics in the repeat-purchase model in a high-end dining venue (Liu & Jang, 2009).

Other elements that complement food quality are a presen-

tation, menu item varieties, taste, texture, freshness, nutrient content, temperature, food safety, and processing method of the food (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Researchers have assessed the connections among these independent elements (Liu & Jang, 2009; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Based on the research outcome, they found that foodstuff presentation, taste, and temperature are notably associated with consumers' satisfaction whereby presentation of foodstuff, taste, and healthy alternatives are outstandingly related to behavioral intentions.

The presentation is described as how appealing the food is presented, garnished, and it also serves as a visible cue for consumers to perceive the food quality. Then, the temperature is a sensory element used to determine food quality (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Next, taste is a sensation of flavor perceived in the mouth on contact with a substance, and it is a crucial element that would influence the consumption experience (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Furthermore, healthy options indicate nutritious and well-balanced diet is offered in the restaurant. National Restaurants reported that Korean food was positioned at seventh among other ethnic cuisines regarding taste and distinctiveness in the year 2011. Furthermore, the percentage that concerned about the favoritism of Korean food in the global market had risen by 12% from the preceding year (Jang, Ha, & Park, 2012).

2.2. Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is interpreted as how customers can get more advantages than their expenses (Cho, 2004; Hwang, 2009). The term of customer satisfaction is essential in marketing literature for a long period because satisfied customers would be able to generate long-period advantages for the restaurants that involved customer patronage and prolonged profitability (Liu & Jang, 2009). Customer satisfaction is also an indispensable guide for a company to measure its past, current, and future performance. Thus, the marketing practitioners and intellectuals viewed it as an important focus (Namkung & Jang, 2007).

It is shown that the satisfaction evaluation results from the comparisons between consumers' prior expectation and the perceived performance according to an assessment standard (Hossain, 2012). Disconfirmation is explained as the gap between consumers' expectations and perceived performance (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2008). For instance, if perceived performance exceeds consumers' expectations, it would be a positive disconfirmation where the consumer feels gratified. On the

contrary, the consumer would feel dissatisfied when the perceived performance falls short of consumers' expectation. Hence, satisfaction is the consumers' overall judgments of the product or service received (Namkung & Jang, 2007).

2.3. Behavioral Intentions

Behavioral intentions are explained as the level to which a person has established aware schemes to carry out or not to carry out some future conducts (Liu & Jang, 2009). Behavioral intentions and customer satisfaction are correlated because the outcome of customer satisfaction has a strong impact on customers' decisions to use products from specific brands (NamKung & Jang, 2007). Even so, some attributes affect customer satisfaction that do not impose a significant impact on behavioral intentions. Sulek and Hensley (2004) identified that the quality of foodstuff, ambiance, as well as equity of seating arrangement, played essential roles in customers' entire dining contentment. However, only the quality of food can affect post dining behavioral intentions (Kim, 2003).

2.4. Country Image and Korean Culture (Hallyu)

Past research has proved that customers would evaluate products that were from a specific country with consistently positive or negative perspectives. Country image would affect customers' perception towards product directly (summary effect), and indirectly through beliefs (halo effect) (Hsieh, Pan, & Setiono, 2004). When customers are not familiar with a particular country's product, customers tend to use halo images of the county to assess the quality of the product, and also to create inferential brand beliefs (Hsieh et al., 2004). On the other hand, if customers were familiar with the country's product, the customers would refer to product-related information to the country directly causing a summary to construct effect (Lin & Chen, 2006).

Korean wave, or Hallyu that comprised music, celebrities, television dramas, and games is expanding intensely in different countries and has caused the local cultures to be infused with this trend. Hallyu's spillover effects lead to an increase in foreign customers' interests in Korean popular cultures such as Korean food. Visual effects of dramas have a significant impact on promoting, as dramas offer viewers with familiarization process with a specific country. As the familiarization processes continue, dramas would be a powerful tool to stimulate foreigners' interests in different countries. For example,

the actors in Korean dramas consumed Korean dishes such as Barbeque pork, and rice cake frequently, and this stimulated consumers' interest in Korean food. Therefore, the new generation of consumers would imitate Korean lifestyles in food, vogue, and other spending behaviors (Lin & Chen, 2006).

2.5. Perceived Value

Perceived value is viewed as a crucial concept for gaining knowledge about consumers in the service industry. Overall, the perceived value can be interpreted as the consumer's integrated evaluation about the usefulness of a good or the average value of service in comparison with its competitors (Ryu & Han, 2009). Consumers rarely recall the actual charges of goods. Instead, they convert prices into coded forms that are consequential to them (Zeithaml, 1988).

Zeithaml (1988) stated that perceived value involved both monetary and non-monetary value, consisting the necessity to square up the non-monetary expenses spent by consumers in the consumption experience such as effort, energy, and time (Ryu & Han, 2009). Customers who focus on monetary sacrifice would spend time collecting food coupons or traveling to different places to acquire the best bargains. Thus, a decline in the monetary sacrifice would increase these customers' perceived value of the products (Zeithaml, 1988). To support the statement, it was identified that the connection between the recognized sacrifice and perceived value is more intense compared to the relationship between recognized quality and recognized value (Sanchez-Fernandez & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007).

METHODS

The setting of research was at independent Korean restaurants in Ampang Jaya in Malaysia. The reason being was independent restaurants were more unique compared to chain or franchise restaurants, as independent restaurants' owners possessed their concept, and made business judgment independently, unlike franchise restaurants where franchisor's dominant frequently obtained main fraction of residual decision rights leading to the centralized decision. In addition, Ampang Jaya was generally known as Little Korean town with plenty of Korean restaurants, and this caused it to be a highly favored area in Kuala Lumpur.

The participants that met the criterion of the research study were targeted for interviews. One criterion of a research study,

foremost, was the setting for interviews and observations to be carried out, and the Korean restaurants in Ampang Jaya were selected. This permitted the researcher to look around and examine the concept of the restaurants, customer volume during operating hours, and also any incidents that happened during business operations. Next criterion was the participants who were observed and interviewed were the customers who were consuming Korean food in the selected Korean restaurants. This is because customers are individuals who would have expectations before consumption, and customers would compare their expectations with perception after consumption of a product.

The number of participants being interviewed was 15 individuals, as this range was large enough to obtain different perspectives and small enough so that it will not be fragmented or disorganized. However, it was subjected to the changes based on the level of saturation of data. Data saturation is defined as a point where researchers are no longer obtaining new or relevant information related to the research study.

Data was collected from July to August 2015, and the interview method was adopted as a tool to collect data. Conducting an interview is a popular method for data collection of qualitative research, as it is perceived as conversing, and conversing is natural. Hence, an interview is defined as a skill in collecting data from participants by asking them questions and getting participants to provide their feedback verbally. In this research, a face-to-face interview was employed. This is because it enabled the researcher to observe non-verbal cues displayed by participants denoting confusion, or hesitancy. Consequently, the researcher can react to the cues in constructive methods to reduce the task difficulty, and increase participants' enthusiasm.

Besides, a face-to-face interview helped the researchers to eliminate the notable time delay between question and response and hence, researchers and participants can react directly on what the other party says or does.

During the interview, a structured format of questions was asked regarding participants' perceptions toward Korean food. The researcher was asking the following questions:

- 1. What do you think about the overall quality of Korean food?
- 2. What factors do you think that would affect your satisfaction towards Korean food?
- 3. How do you perceive your Korean food consumption

- experience? Do you have the intention to revisit Korean restaurants?
- 4. What do you think about the price of Korean food? If you think it is reasonable, why? If not, why?
- 5. What do you think about the value of Korean food by comparing the food and service quality with its price?

4. RESULTS

Based on the analysis of the survey questionnaires, it was noted that 12 of respondents were of Chinese ethnicity, and the remaining were 1 of Malay and 2 of Indian ethnicity. It was clearly shown that the ratio between male and female (N=15) is quite balanced with 7 males and 8 females. 10 of the respondents are in the range of 20 to 29 years old, 2 of them are younger than 20 years old, and remaining 3 respondents are 30 years old and above.

The qualitative data collected were categorized into few major elements: (1) overall quality of Korean food; (2) factors that influence satisfaction toward Korean food; (3) perception of Korean food consumption experience; (4) price of Korean food; and (5) value of Korean food by comparing service and food quality with its price.

4.1. Overall Quality of Korean Food

The result has shown that the overall quality of Korean food is in between the range from average to top-notch quality. 10 out of the 15 respondents stated that the overall quality of Korean food is good, and 1 respondent mentioned that Korean food is of top-notch quality due to the factors such as service quality, and quality of food that encompassed freshness, temperature, nutritious value, as well as the presentation of food. One of the respondents mentioned that "Korean food uses different types of vegetable in both their side and main dishes" [Respondent A] causing it to be healthier compared to other types of cuisine.

4 respondents mention the quality of Korean food is moderate. One of the respondents also emphasized that "overall quality is average, and the food taste is mostly adjusted to fit the Malaysian palate" [Respondent B]. Hence, it is shown that not only the price factor affects the quality of food, the taste is also significant in determining whether Korean food is acceptable by the Malaysians' taste buds. Based on research, taste bud of the mammals consists of few fundamental taste modalities that are sweet, sour, bitter, as well as salty. Taste-

bud offers individuals with precious sensory particulars for assessment of foodstuff.

4.2. Factors that iNfluence Satisfactions toward Korean Food

Based on the result acquired, the majority of the respondents that is 11 out of the 15 respondents mentioned that food quality has a significant impact on their satisfaction toward Korean food. Food quality that being mentioned in the literature review above includes food safety, hygiene, menu item varieties, nutrient value, presentation, temperature, and taste of food.

To highlight the importance of food quality, a total of 8 respondents mentioned that a variety of menu items is essential. One of the respondents stated, "I hope they can serve more dishes that do not include kimchi" [Respondent C]. Since not many people can accept the taste of traditional Korean food such as kimchi that is a fermented side dish made from vegetables with different types of seasonings, restaurants that serve a more different variety of menu items would undoubtedly lead to higher customers' satisfaction.

In terms of food safety and food hygiene, 3 respondents mentioned that it would be a factor that affects their satisfaction toward Korean food. Furthermore, one of the respondents also stated "If there is any cockroach or bugs in my food, I will definitely complain and will not go back to the restaurant anymore" [Respondent D]. Hence, it can be said that food safety and hygiene play a vital role in evaluating customers' satisfaction. Therefore, the result has proved that respondents believe that all of the elements in food quality affect their overall satisfaction toward Korean food.

Then, 7 respondents stated that food portion is one of the factors that influence their satisfaction because they realized some of the restaurants that they have visited served small portion of food that does not worth the price charged. Next, 5 respondents also think that the price of the food would affect their satisfaction toward Korean food, as some of them only received a low quality of food at a high price. Other factors that have been mentioned were service quality and the physical environment of the restaurant.

4.3. Perception of Korean Food Consumption Experience

A total of 13 out of 15 respondents have stated that their

Korean food consumption experiences have been good, and satisfying due to different factors such as nutrient value, service quality, and high quality of food. In addition, all 15 respondents also emphasized that they will definitely revisit Korean restaurants. Only 2 Chinese ethnic respondents mentioned that the food consumption experience was average, as one of the respondents do not like the kimchi taste in most of the Korean dishes. However, the respondent stated, "I will revisit because I like the buffet that serves pork" [Respondent C].

Contrarily, another Malay ethic respondent has stated that her first Korean food consumption experience was good at B Station in Ampang area, and she stated, "I would like to revisit the Korean restaurants that are halal with friends and family" [Respondent E]. According to Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) guidelines, the definition of halal is food that is not made of or consisting pieces of animal origin that Islamic law prohibits to be consumed. Hence, food can be considered halal if it does not come in contact with pork, alcohol, or blood. Based on these two responses, the variety of menu items would affect the revisit intention of customers due to the difference in their religion.

Furthermore, one respondent also mentioned that she is quite satisfied with her Korean food consumption experience and the respondent stated, "it serves food differently in terms of taste with the combination of meat and vegetables like cabbage" [Respondent A]. This respondent has perceived Korean food to have higher nutrient value and tastier compared to Western food that is oily and high in calories. As a result, this respondent emphasized that she will revisit Korean restaurants to try out other menu items.

4.4. Price of Korean Food

Zeithaml (1988) stated that perceived value is made up of both monetary and non-monetary value. Based on the responses, 13 respondents have stated that the price of Korean food is fair and reasonable. One of the respondents indicated, "The price is justified as the meat, vegetables, and the variety of spices and herbs used into preparing the meals are expensive and of good quality" [Respondent D]. Hence, customers believed that the price is justified, as they were able to taste the authenticity of Korean food.

Additionally, 5 respondents were generally satisfied with the price of Korean food due to the refillable side dishes. One of them stated, "Their side dishes are refillable which to them is also a kind of cost" [Respondent F]. As customers under-

stand that the food is passably priced to cover the cost and to maintain the restaurant's revenue, the customers' willingness to pay would be higher. Willingness to pay is interpreted as a maximum amount an individual is willing to pay for a product or service. However, the remaining two respondents think that it is not reasonable, as it is overpriced.

Although 13 of the respondents have stated that price is reasonable, the majority of them also think that the price of Korean food differs from place to place, as there are some restaurants such as franchise restaurants that charge a high price for the small portion served. This leads to the inconsistency in the price of Korean food that may create confusion in customers. As a result, it may influence the perceived value of customers toward Korean food.

4.5. Value of Korean Food by Comparing Service and Food Quality with Its Price

A total of 11 out of 15 respondents agreed that the value of Korean food is generally high after comparing the service and food quality with its price. Most of them mentioned that the service provided by service providers is satisfying, and the food quality is good that result from it to worth the price charged. One of the respondents mentioned that the value is good, and has given his opinion, "even if the food quality is great, it is not worth it if the service quality of the place is poor, and patrons would enjoy it less" [Respondent G]. Based on the response, it has successfully proved that poor service quality would affect the perceived value of customers adversely even if the food quality is good.

Then, 3 respondents mentioned that the value of Korean food is just moderate. Furthermore, among 15 respondents, only 1 respondent mentioned that the value of Korean food is not up to the expected value due to the high price charged. This has strongly supported the literature review above that mentioned about utilitarian value is perceived by comparing service quality and foodstuff quality with its price charged.

Therefore, it can be said that customers would only perceive Korean food to have a high value provided they are satisfied with the service quality and food quality, and the menu items are charged at an appropriate price.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The components such as quality of food, portion, service quality, and price played vital roles in affecting customers'

satisfaction toward Korean food. Since all these elements were able to affect customers' perceived value toward Korean food, the restaurateurs must understand the importance of each element so that to have a comprehensive understanding about the distinct roles of each element. With a clear understanding, restaurateurs will be able to utilize the elements effectively to generate higher value for Korean food.

Additionally, the findings of this study reinforced that food quality is the most crucial factor influencing customer satisfaction, which in turn influenced the perceived value, and behavioral intentions such as revisit intention, and affirmative word-of-mouth. Hence, it is recommended that the restaurateurs should focus on enhancing high-quality Korean food rather than saving cost to establish a positive image towards Korean food that differentiates it from other ethnic cuisines. Not only that, restaurateurs are suggested to offer customers Korean cuisine with a combination of great taste, nutritionally-balanced, a variety of menu item, appealing food presentation, appropriate temperature, and freshness to meet or exceed the demands or expectations of customers.

Moreover, this present study denoted that customer satisfaction can be affected not only by the quality of food, but also the service quality, and the restaurant physical environment. It is obvious that a distinctive food consumption experience merely depending on the food is insufficient to attract and ultimately retain the customers to the restaurant. For example, based on expectancy disconfirmation theory, customers will have a higher perceived value and perform positive behavioral intentions when their perceptions exceed their expectations.

This study had successfully proved the importance of both excellent service quality and pleasing physical environment in affecting customer satisfaction. Therefore, restaurateurs should train the employees to perform good manners and service quality toward the customers to establish favorable restaurant image. In addition, restaurateurs must continually improve the restaurant's physical environment to build an inimitable image that differentiates it from its direct, and indirect competitors. For instance, Korean restaurant can utilize unique decorations such as Korea traditional hand-carved items, and traditional Korean music to communicate the distinct image of an authentic Korean restaurant to the consumers.

Lastly, the findings also indicated that customer satisfaction, in turn, affects the perceived value and behavioral intention. Thus, it is urgent for restaurateurs to strengthen the relation-

ship among the 3 elements that are customer satisfaction, perceived value, and behavioral intention to enhance customers' loyalty conducts such revisit intentions, and the willingness to recommend to their surroundings. Specifically, restaurateurs should manage and promote the restaurant food quality, service quality, and physical environment to establish the advantageous image of Korean restaurant that leads to an increase in customers' perceived value and affirmative behavioral intentions.

Interview method was used to collect data from 15 restaurant customers who dined in Korean restaurants in Ampang Jaya. One of the limitations was the time commitment, as the time allocated for data collection was not sufficient causing the number of respondents to be little. Besides, the participants selected were customers that dine in Korean restaurants in Ampang Jaya only. Hence, the generalization of the results was conducted attentively (Ryu & Han, 2009). For example, the findings were interpreted carefully when applied to Korean restaurants in different areas. If the interview was expanded to include more areas in the future study, the results might be different.

Lastly, this study had limited the concept of behavioral intentions to only positive viewpoint such as revisit, and willingness to recommend as many of the previous researches to explain customers' behavioral intentions. However, the negative viewpoint of behavioral intention such as intention to complain was not measured when investigating customers' behavioral intentions in this study. In future, researchers are suggested to adopt a multidimensional construct formed by four significant categories that are referrals, price sensitivity, repurchase, as well as complaining behavior to measure customers' specified probability to engage in some behaviors.

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