

THE ROLE OF PATRON DINING EXPERIENCE AND EMOTIONS ON RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN CHAIN RESTAURANT INDUSTRY: A CONCEPTUAL PAPER

Lo Ying Tuan, Ahmad Jusoh,
Khalil Md Nor
Faculty of Management, Universiti
Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of patron dining experience (PDE) and emotions on relationship quality in the chain restaurant industry. The research includes PDE and emotions as the predictors of relationship quality and loyalty as the consequence. Hence, a conceptual framework of relationship quality expanded with PDE, emotions and loyalty construct is proposed. The present paper hypothesized emotions as the predictor of relationship quality in achieving customer loyalty where it also further discusses the relationship between PDE and emotion. Relationship quality is constructed of three dimensions (i.e. trust, satisfaction and commitment) where PDE consist of five attributes (i.e. price, food quality, service quality, location and environment). Emotions are constructed by both positive and negative emotions. The present paper hopes to provide managers in services, particularly those in the restaurant industry, relevant information to assist in improving their relationship marketing programs.

Key words: Relationship Quality, Patron Dining Experience (PDE), Emotions, Loyalty.

1. INTRODUCTION

The old approach of product-oriented marketing is being phased out by the customer-oriented relationship marketing over the years in order to capture customer satisfaction [15]. Researchers found that meeting customer satisfaction alone is no longer enough to ignite loyalty in them [35][36]. They suggested that there should be a relational bond between a firm and its customers and this relationship needs to be maintained. They referred this relational bond as relationship quality.

The research in this relationship quality remains vague and the present paper tried to address this by covering three issues. The first issue is related to nature of relationships since there is a lack of robustness due to the fast-changing and competitive environment in the chain restaurant industry. The competitive environment has made the development of relationship and sustainability of loyalty becoming increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, determining the underlying determinants is even harder [1]. The present paper suggests on possible new determinants of relationship quality in the chain restaurant industry.

Secondly, the predictors of relationship quality are changing over time. Moreover, the predictors are not generic across fields. However, according to Wang et al. [44], these antecedents of relationship quality have all along been based on relational bonds which consist of financial, social and structural bonds. The present paper proposes on forming a generic construct of patron dining experience (PDE) as the predictor of relationship quality in the chain restaurant industry consistent with the relational bonds theory.

Thirdly, to cover a gap in the relationship quality research, the present paper hopes to discuss the impact of customer emotions on relationship quality as it lacks systematic investigation. The present paper is the first to propose the role of emotions as a new predictor of relationship quality in the chain restaurant industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Relationship Quality

Smith [40] in his initial research on relationship quality been found that relationship quality can be described as the measurement of a relationship's strength. As such, relationship quality

measures the extent of the parties' needs and expectations are met based on previous events or encounters. Wong and Sohal [47] refer relationship quality as the proportion of customers' needs, goals, perceptions and desires met in the relationship. A strong relationship quality indicates how well the customer is satisfied with the past performance of the service provider, their trust in the service provider's future performance, and their wish to maintain the relationship with them [8][35][36].

In general, Woo and Ennew [48] maintain that the relationship quality construct is conceptualized as a multi-dimensional construct. While the relationship quality construct comprises of different dimensions or components, most researchers in general, agree that the key components of relationship quality are customer satisfaction, trust and commitment to the relationship with the service provider [1][32][38]. Palmatier et al. [32] further strengthened the agreement when they identified that the most studied dimensions of relationship quality are satisfaction, trust and commitment. The present paper's structure of relationship quality will be based on these three dimensions; satisfaction, trust and commitment.

Satisfaction has been defined by Liljander and Strandvik [26] as the affective and cognitive customer's evaluation based on their personal experience throughout the service exchange within the relationship. Consistent with the present paper, the relationship quality between the patrons and the chain restaurant will be measured by evaluating their satisfaction towards the restaurants.

Trust is generally separated into two dimensions. The first dimension of trust which is credibility is directed on the extent of a firm's word that the customers believe can be relied on and sincere, and its ability to perform its role effectively. This is followed by benevolence as the second dimension of trust which is directed on customers' perception, the extent of how well their welfare is taken care by the firm. Naoui and Zaiem [30] has specifically investigated creditability and benevolence trust as different dimensions in the construct on relationship quality. They found that both dimensions are positively influenced by the antecedents of relationship quality. Consistent with the literature reviews, both dimensions are viewed as the overall construct of trust.

Moorman's et al. [27] defined commitment as an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship and has been found dominating the discussion on commitment in relationship marketing literature. As a result, most subsequent studies have adopted their definition particularly those studies on commitment as a dimension of relationship quality. In line with this, their definition of commitment has been found adequate for the present paper.

2.2 Patron Dining Experience (PDE) Through Relational Bonds

Food service marketing is often subsumed into that of generalized "hospitality" [45] and in some texts is associated with "tourism" [23]. Both of these groupings tend to favor the restaurant industry. The food service industry has features which set it apart from other areas of the service sector such as financial and professional services [19]. It is also closely concerned with the choice of food and quality. As a result, the restaurant patrons' behavior is influenced by complex attributes [17][29]. They have maintained that the patrons' evaluation on these attributes influences their behavior. Consistent with the present paper, their view is

appropriate to define patron dining experience (PDE) construct in the study. PDE is defined as the response of the patrons to an action, person, environment and stimulus. Different researchers have proposed various attributes to explain patrons' behavior. However, only five of these are widely accepted. They are the quality of the food, the price, the service, the location, and clean environment [17][41]. These attributes are selected as the foundation to explain the PDE construct. The formation construct of the construct is supported by the relational bonding process (financial bonds, social bonds and structural bonds). The relationship marketing researchers focused on studying only three types of bonds which are financial, social and structural bonds. In later research, authors have suggested that only by applying all those three types of relational bonds: financial, social, and structural, firms can build relationships with their customers [28][44]. Their suggestion is consistent with the present paper, where these three relational bonds support to explain the formation of the attributes in patron dining experience (PDE).

Financial bonds are commonly related with retention marketing or

better known as frequency marketing. In restaurant marketing context, price has always been considered as an important criterion [17][29][41]. Marketers must continually improve the quality of products and lower prices in order to attract and maintain customers. Nevertheless, customers tend to expect higher quality food when the price is high [17]. A reasonable price level is considered as a critical factor influencing customer trust and satisfaction [3] and this is consistent with the construct of relationship quality of the present paper. Similarly for food quality, it has been defined as a concept that can provide insights on how to rejuvenate products and the way they are viewed by customers [28]. Patrons' behavior is seen to be greatly influenced by the quality of food by many researchers in the restaurant industry as well [4][17][20]. Furthermore, researchers have postulated that customer satisfaction is influenced by all these attributes [17][20]. Moreover, trustworthiness of a restaurant is influenced by food quality as it is related to safety issues consistent with the construct of relationship quality of the present paper [22].

Consistent with the literature, social bonds are also considered as important components in the present thesis to investigate the relationship between buyer and seller in the dining context. Service quality here is viewed as the personal linkages or ties that are established during interaction between restaurant operators and their patrons. Service quality is postulated to be a critical factor influencing patrons' behavior in the restaurant industry in a large number of studies [10][41]. Moreover, the key determinant of customer satisfaction is strongly believed by previous researchers to be service quality [10][25][29][41]. Gounaris and Venetis [14] also suggested that service quality is also a key determinant of trust consistent with the construct of relationship quality of the present paper

Smith [40] defined structural bonds as the ties linking the structure, governance, and institutionalization of relationship pattern. Structural bonds generally occur when customer problems are being solved in the form of service-delivery systems by businesses in enhancing customer relationships. In the present paper, the structural bonds are used to explain the location and environment attributes of the patron

dining behavior (PDE) construct. Soriano [41] found that restaurant patrons expect a convenient location when they dine out. Lastly, looking at the last attribute of patron dining experience (PDE) which is environment, it greatly influences patrons' behavior as it is a form of communication between a service provider with its customers [7]. It was found by Kivela, Inbakaran, and Reece [21] that patrons are likely to return if they are satisfied with the restaurant's ambience.

2.3 Emotions

The construct of emotions is often confused with other constructs related to it such as mood, affect and attitude. The different constructs need to be distinguished first. The construct of affect is seen as the broad construct in describing the common state of feelings [2][9][24]. Some researchers establish a fine distinction between emotions and moods [24]. Such researchers associate emotions with action tendencies and described emotions as a stronger turn-on than moods. In order to further distinguish the construct, Clore et al. [11] and Frijda [13] regarded moods as generally non-intentional while emotions as typically intentional. The distinction between

emotions and attitudes are also suggested by other researchers since emotions represent a more diverse and richer field of phenomenological experience. Krampf et al. [24] further maintained that emotions experience cannot be stored for a long time and then retrieved, as compared to attitudes. Burns and Neisner [9] and Krampf et al. [24] defined emotions by referring to James [18] whose work is considered the basis of studying emotions in the early nineteenth century. During that time, emotions are considered as being complex, involving different patterns of stimulation. Schachter and Singer [37] similarly viewed emotions through a cognitive appraisal process, as the general state of arousal. Bagozzi et al. [5] however provided a broader definition where they described emotions as being "a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of an events or thoughts; has a phenomenological tone; is accompanied by physiological processes; is often expressed physically; and may result in specific actions to affirm or cope with the emotion, depending on its nature and the person having it."

2.4 Loyalty

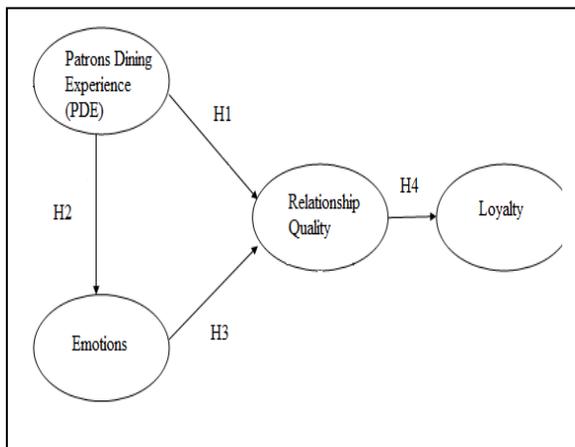
The core objective of relationship marketing has always been to achieve customer loyalty by establishing and maintaining long-term relationships. Thus, customer loyalty is treated as the concluding dependent variable in the present paper. This is supported by several researchers who have maintained that the formation of loyalty is related to relationships [35][39]. Consequently, loyalty is identified as the most important part as well as central to the paradigm of relationship marketing [16][33]. The importance of loyalty can be seen from the idea that it is more profitable to maintain a customer than to find a new one. Its importance is based on the three common concepts of which loyal customers spend more with the company, they are less price sensitive and they are cheaper to maintain [6][31][42].

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of the present paper has been developed based on the earlier literature review. The framework has five main hypotheses which are to be tested. Hypotheses H1 and H2 are proposed to reflect the

influence of patrons dining experience (PDE) on relationship quality and customer emotions respectively. The effect of emotions on relationship quality is proposed by hypothesis H3. Meanwhile, the linkage between relationship quality and loyalty is proposed by hypothesis H4.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model



3.1 Patron Dining Experience (PDE) and Relationship Quality

The key theoretical linkage in this study is that relationship quality is affected by patron dining experience (PDE), which in turn affects loyalty. As discussed in the literature review, these attributes contributing to PDE are explained through relational bonds. Smith [40] explained that a series of successive interactions is able to develop either

successful relational bonding and vice versa. Smith's [40] work provided support that relational bonds and relationship quality are linked and advocated the importance of the linkage. He stated that such bonds are able to provide satisfaction to the overall relationship as bonds provide a foundation for the trust needed to risk greater commitment while reducing the risk inherent in voluntary exchange relations with a service provider. Based on above theory and support, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: PDE positively influence on relationship quality.

3.2 Patron Dining Experience (PDE) and Emotion

The present paper also discusses whether patron dining experience (PDE) will affect customer emotions. In particular, the impact of patron dining experience (PDE) on customer emotions has not been empirically examined. To discuss on the link between patron dining experience (PDE) and emotions, it is first pointed out by Walls [43] on the possibility that emotional link between consumer and provider exist through bonding process. The existence may be at a very deep personal or a brief level.

Walls [43] has maintained that bonds are able to reduce customers' sadness, anxiety and separation distress by providing added feelings of comfort, familiarity and security within the marketplace. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: PDE positively influence on emotions.

3.3 Emotions and Relationship Quality

The theoretical and empirical grounds for this linkage have been established [38][46]. It has been found that some researchers have linked emotions with relationship quality as an overall construct consisting of satisfaction, trust and commitment. There is also some research which linked positive and negative emotions to the relationship quality construct, separately. Wong [46] provided an explanation for the relationship suggesting that customers elicit various types of emotions during the consumption experience. The service encounter experience overall relationship quality is assessed by customer with emotions conveying important information in the assessing process. Therefore, it can be said that customers are expected to develop positive perceptions towards the overall

relationship quality if he/she display positive emotions during the service encounter. In response, the below hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Customer emotions positively influence on relationship quality.

3.4 Relationship Quality and Loyalty

Strong evidence has been found in support of the linkage between relationship quality as an overall construct comprising of satisfaction, trust and commitment with loyalty. Shammout [38] in investigating the linkage between relationship quality as an overall construct with loyalty, found that satisfaction and trust are strong determinants of loyalty. The result is consistent within the hospitality context, where an increasing amount of evidence in support of the linkage between relationship quality and loyalty is found. Therefore, based on the support found in the literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Relationship quality positively influence on customer loyalty.

3.5 Construct Measurement

The choice of scale items corresponds to a business-to-customer market context and are adopted from the most relevant

literatures of consumers' perceptions as end users in buyer-seller relationship. The following items are suggested.

Table 3.1: Items to Measure Patrons Dining Experience (PDE)

Attributes	Items
Price	The price is affordable. The price is not expensive. The price is more preferable than other restaurants. The food and services are value for money.
Food Quality	Serves tasty food. Food is served at the appropriate temperature. Food presentation is attractive. Food is served at the right portion.
Service Quality	Employees are always willing to help me. The meal is served at the promised time.. Employees have the knowledge to answer. Employees are accurate with the orders.
Location	The restaurant is easy to find. The restaurant have branches in most places. The restaurant is nearly located. The restaurants is located in favorable location.
Environment	The environment is clean. Have nice decorations.. Provides comfortable environment Have sufficient amenities.

Adopted from Hyun [17]

Table 3.2: Items to Measure Relationship Quality

Construct	Items
Satisfaction	I am delighted with their performance. I am content with their performance. I am happy with their performance. I am pleased with their performance.
Trust	Employees are sincere. Employees are honest. Employees are reliable.. Employees are truthful
Commitment	I plan to maintain a long-term relationship. I like being associated with them. I am committed to my relationship with this restaurant chain. I am giving priority to this restaurant chain.

Adopted from Hyun [17] and Shammout [38]

Table 3.3: Items to measure Emotion

Emotions	Items (Using Specific Words)
Positive	Love Relaxed Pleased Happiness Welcome Gratitude Satisfied Pride Comfortable Delighted
Negative	Angry Disappointed Uneasiness Let down Ignored Guilt Sadness Embarrassment Fear Frustrated

Adopted from Shammout [38]

Table 3.4: Items to measure Loyalty

Dimension	Items
Loyalty	Say positive things about the chain restaurant to other people. Encourage friends and relatives to dine at the chain restaurant. Recommend the chain restaurant to someone who seek your advice. Visit the chain restaurant more often.

Adopted from Hyun [17] and Shammout [38]

4. CONCLUSION

After reviewing the literature, it is found that the development of the relationship quality's conceptual foundations has not been fully investigated up to date. According to Eiriz and Wilson [12], the key elements that best capture relationship quality vary and there is no agreement between researchers on which to be used in different industries. Also according to Hyun [17], the relationship marketing models are only focused and tested in very few studies in the context of current thesis which is the chain restaurant industry. This thesis plans to extend the knowledge of both relationship quality and service theory and practice for further academic understanding. Thus,

the present paper will contribute to existing theories on relationship quality applied to chain restaurants. Furthermore, although attempts have been made by many researchers to explain on how relationship marketing is developed, the importance of emotions in this process has received less attention by them [34]. The inclusion of emotions in the study context provides additional contributions. Besides, the impact of patron dining experience (PDE) on emotions in the conceptual framework is discussed as well. Ultimately, the present paper is expected to assist managers in services particularly those in the restaurant industry to improve their relationship marketing programs by providing them with relevant information and recommendations based on the paper's findings.

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