Understanding and Responding to the Complaining Behaviors of Restaurant Customers from Collectivist Cultures

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine how frontline employees in individualistic cultures such as the United States can better understand and respond to the complaining behaviors of restaurant consumers from collective cultures such as those from Asian countries. Previous studies suggest that customers from collectivist cultures often prefer not to complain directly and openly about service failures. They may offer indirect hints and information to their families and friends about their experiences. It is possible that frontline employees from individualistic cultures may not fully understand the complaining behaviors of restaurant customers from collectivist cultures. This may result in loss of business, customers' disloyalty and negative publicity about the business. Based on a review of previous research studies in this area, this study offers specific recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords

Culture • Service recovery • Service failure • Customer complaints • Frontline employees • Collectivist cultures

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Introduction

Food service and hospitality businesses greatly focus on customer satisfaction as it relates to service quality and growth of revenues (Lee & How, 2018; Park, Kim, & O'Neill, 2014). Understanding the complaining behaviors of customers and satisfying and meeting their expectations is essential for the survival and success of food service businesses. High quality service - such as creating a great lasting impression or guest engagement - is crucial in achieving customer satisfaction in order to gain repeat business and referrals (Kandampully, Zhang, & Jaakkola, 2018; Othman, Zahari, & Radzi, 2013). However, mistakes and service failures often happen in many food service and lodging businesses (Qiu, Li, Mattila, & Yang, 2018). It is the responsibility of these companies to respond to such service failures and overcome them to satisfy customers (Koc, 2018). In addition, even if there is no service failure, service quality may vary by employee according to the service delivery process and service expectations.

Service expectations may differ depending on each person's personality, education, income and national culture. In particular, customers from different countries and cultures may have varying degrees of service delivery expectations (Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Liu & McClure, 2001), partly because their national cultures can influence their behaviors, attitudes and expectations. For example, the increasing number of Chinese tourists traveling abroad expect a standard set of amenities (e.g. hot water and single-use toiletries) for a good value, as well as an understanding of and respect for their wants and needs (Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011). In addition to these expectations, their complaining behavior may vary according to their culture (Ergun & Kitapci, 2018; Ngai, Heung, Wong, & Chan, 2007). Therefore, frontline employees and managers in food service businesses need to understand and respond to their complaining behaviors with appropriate strategies. Moreover, service providers should be trained in understanding and responding to complaints by customers from different cultures.

Previous studies have mainly taken place in North America and Europe, focusing on local customers. However, in recent years, due to the growth of international tourism, more tourists from Asian countries, including China, India, Japan and Korea, are participating in overseas travel. Consequently, frontline employees of food service businesses in Europe and North America need to better prepare and train their employees on how to best serve customers coming from Asia. This will in turn help employees better understand the attitudes and behaviors of Asian customers, including their complaining behaviors (Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Prayag, Cohen, & Yan, 2015).

Following Hofstede's (1980) cross-cultural dimensions, customers from collectivist cultures prefer not to complain about service failures directly. In addition,

frontline employees and managers of food service businesses from individualistic cultures may not easily understand the indirect complaining behaviors or gestures of customers from collectivist cultures. Although this is an important area of study, there has been limited research looking into the complaints of restaurant customers from different cultures and how food service companies and frontline employees can better handle such complaining behaviors and overcome a potentially negative situation. Given this, this article aims to examine how frontline restaurant employees in an individualist culture can better understand and respond to the complaining behaviors of consumers from collectivist cultures such as those from Asian countries and offer service recovery strategies.

This study was developed based on a critical review of previous research in this area. A systematic review of relevant previous studies was undertaken and emerging themes were identified and discussed. The next two sections offer discussions on measuring service quality, service failure and complaining behaviors. In the fourth section, service recovery issues are reviewed and evaluated. In the fifth section, cross-cultural differences in guests' complaining behavior and service recovery strategies are discussed. The following section discusses how to respond to the complaining behaviors of restaurant guests from different cultures. Finally, the study offers specific conclusions, practical implications and recommendations for future research.

Measuring Service Quality

Service quality shows the difference between perceived service performance and expected level of service (Donthu & Yoo, 1998). According to Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1993, p. 2), service expectations refer to "beliefs about service delivery that function as standards or reference points against which performance is judged." In simple terms, quality of service is high when the performance is greater than service expectations, meaning service quality is crucial for all organizations including food service businesses. Therefore, customers' needs and expectations should be met and exceeded when delivering services and products.

Previous studies have aimed to measure service quality in the services field (Bitner, 1990; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991) and the hospitality field (Amin, Yahya, Ismayatim, Nasharuddin & Kassim, 2013; Lai, Hitchcok, Yang, & Lu, 2018; Oh, 1999; Oh & Kim, 1996; Oh & Parks, 1996). For example, Parasuraman, Berry, and Zeithaml (1991) proposed the SERVQUAL model, which has been widely used to measure service quality. SERVQUAL has five dimensions: reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles (Akbaba, 2006; Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1993; Roy, Lassar, Ganguli, Nguyen & Yu, 2015; Leisen Pollack, 2009). It

is stated that a pleasant service environment positively influences guests' expectations and satisfaction (Kandampully, Juwaheer, & Hu, 2011; Rauch, Collins, Nale, & Barr, 2015).

For the lodging industry, previous studies proposed different models. For example, LODGQUAL and the Lodging Quality Index (LQI) were proposed by previous studies based on the SERVQUAL model (Amin et al., 2013; Deng, Yeh, & Sung, 2013; Getty & Thompson, 1994; Getty & Getty, 2003; Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Knutson et al., 1990; Ladhari, 2009; Mei, Dean, and White, 1999; Salazar, Costa, & Rita, 2010; Wilkins, Merrilees, & Herington, 2007). Mok and Armstrong (1998) stated that while expectations in service quality can differ in different cultures, the reliability dimension of service quality is equally expected.

For the food service industry, DINESERV was proposed as a reliable instrument to determine consumers' views on service quality (Kim, Ng, & Kim, 2009; Stevens, Knutson. & Patton, 1995; Markovic, Komsic, & Stifanic, 2013). Using this instrument, validation of the dimensions of DINESERV has been evaluated in different countries such as Korea (Kim, McCahon & Miller, 2003), Croatia (Marković, Raspor & Šegarić, 2010), Malaysia (Bougoure & Neu, 2010), Jordan (Ala'a, Ahmad, & Ahmad, 2015) Sudan (Diab, Mohammed, Mansour, & Saad, 2015) and some western countries and cities such as London (Mhlanga, Hattingh, & Moolman, 2014), England (Truong, Nisar, Knox, & Prabhakar, 2017), Turkey (Murat & Memis, 2017) and in the capital cities of Europe (Radojevic, Stanisic, Stanic, & Sarac, 2014). Overall, the research findings from these studies indicate that DINESERV is a valid tool in different cultures, and the quality of service may differ considerably according to guests' and food service outlets' characteristics. Hansen (2014) combined SERVQUAL and DINESERV and proposed a tool to measure meal experiences. Hospitality businesses need to analyze their services and ensure they exceed their customers' expectations in all these dimensions (Zeithaml et al., 1993). They should map out their service delivery process and identify potential gaps and eliminate them to deliver high service quality. However, even after measures are taken to deliver high service quality, customers may still complain (Hartini & Avenina, 2013; Huang & Miao, 2016). The next section will discuss this in some depth.

Service Failures and Complaining Behaviors

Errors and failures often happen in the process of service delivery due to interactions between employees and guests, this is in addition to problems with the physical aspects of the service design (Kim, Lee, & Mattila, 2014; Koc, 2018). It is possible that there may be a misunderstanding between what an organization officially promises to deliver and what the guests expect to receive. Regardless of the

reason why customers complain, Guest dissatisfaction with service quality may harm a hospitality company's reputation. This may result in customer disloyalty, leading to a decline in repeat business and sales. Customers do not often complain, especially if they think their complaining will not do any good. Even when customers show dissatisfaction, managers and frontline employees may not hear such complaints or might choose to ignore them (Wisdomjobs, 2018). However, customer complaints offer insights into the problems that they are experiencing, helping the company identify areas for improvement.

Customers' complaints can be grouped into three categories: contacting the provider directly, telling colleagues and family members about the experience, and contacting an agency or pursuing legal action (Hartini & Avenina, 2013; Park, Kim, & O'Neil, 2014; Sing 1988). When businesses fail to identify and handle customers' complaints properly, the outcomes can have major negative impacts on the business's performance. However, customer complaints can offer opportunities to readdress service failure incidents to improve service quality and improve customer loyalty (Kim et al., 2014). In short, customers' complaints can provide important opportunities for businesses to fix their problems and improve their service delivery process, which can result in improved business performance (Aguilar-Rojas, Fandos-Herrera, & Flavián-Blanco, 2015).

Previous studies found that e-word of mouth (eWOM) intentions of customers are high regarding service failure and complaining behaviors about restaurants. Customers' negative eWOM becomes more aggressive as the service failure escalates (Israeli, Lee, & Karpinski, 2017). High levels of unfairness, locus, personal identity and firm responses influence customers' complaints towards a service provider (Balaji, Jha, & Royne, 2015; Mattila & Patterson, 2004). Cultural backgrounds of customers influence their expectations, satisfaction, and evaluations (Ayoun & Moreo, 2008). For example, Chen and Chang (2011) found that customers from North America and China complain about similar issues but their responses differ in the linguistic forms and content. In other words, customers from North America tend to voice complaints about service failures in front of their family and friends more often than customers from Eastern countries such as China (Fan, Mattila, & Zhao, 2015; Zhang, Beatty, & Walsh, 2008). It is also important to note that there may be differences in complaining behaviors of guests from different collectivist cultures. For example, Jahandideh, Golmohammadi, Meng, O'Gorman and Taheri (2014) compared Arab and Chinese guests and found that Arab guests tend to share their negative experiences at a hotel with their friends and relatives while Chinese guests tend not to share their negative experiences. Moreover, Jahandideh et al. (2014) found that Arab guests prefer to be more vocal and talk to the manager while Chinese guests prefer to complain formally.

Service Recovery

Service recovery refers to businesses' efforts and strategies to correct errors and failures in the service delivery process that can result in customer dissatisfaction (Johnston, 1995; Lu, Gursoy, & Chi, 2018). Kanousi (2005) referred to service recovery as a service provider's efforts to eliminate and overcome the undesirable impact of a service failure. Relevant and effective recovery strategies can satisfy customers and sustain a healthy relationship with them (Sparks & McColl-Kennedy, 2001). Previous studies have looked at customer complaints and the service delivery process in service businesses and suggested that if customers complain, this is an opportunity for a service business to correct and improve the service delivery process. At this stage, customers can reevaluate the situation based on the service provider's service recovery actions. If they do not feel that the business's actions are satisfactory, customers may never come back to that organization (Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Yavas et al., 2003).

Many customers may prefer not to complain openly but instead share their dissatisfaction with their friends, colleagues and relatives. For example, Broadbridge and Marshall (1995) suggested three options in customer complaining behavior. First, they may decide not to do anything. Second, they may take private action by changing to another brand and becoming disloyal to the original company. Third, they may take public action by seeking direct compensation from the company, following legal action and sharing the situation on social media platforms. Given this, it is better for food service and hospitality businesses to ask their customers directly and frequently during the service delivery process whether the customers have any comments and feedback. Park et al. (2014) state that successful service recovery strategies can positively influence dissatisfied customers' overall feelings and make them satisfied, which can result in customer retention, loyalty and positive publicity.

The justice theory is useful in analyzing the effectiveness of service recovery strategies (Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Park et al., 2104; Tax & Brown, 2000). This theory has three dimensions: interactional justice, procedural justice and distributive justice (Park et al., 2104). Boshoff (1999) and Kanousi (2005) proposed a service recovery instrument called RECOVSAT, which has six dimensions: tangibles, empowerment, explanation, atonement, communication and feedback. Previous studies found a positive relationship between customer satisfaction and the employees' responses to mediate the service failure (Mohr & Bitner, 1995). Employees' interpersonal behavior, interpersonal skills, courtesy, respect, and honesty towards customers can recover a service failure and make dissatisfied customers happy (Goodwin & Ross, 1992; Park et al., 2013). There are four steps to service recovery: a real apology, reviewing what went wrong with the customer's experience and how it can be fixed, fix the issue within 2 minutes, and document the problem in detail (Solomon, 2014). It is evident that frontline employees' understanding and ability to respond

to customers' complaining behavior is crucial. However, if a restaurant customer is from a different culture than the frontline employee, the employee may not be able to fully understand the complaining behavior due to cross-cultural differences. The next section will focus on this issue.

Cross-Cultural Differences in Guests' Complaining Behaviors and Service Recovery in Restaurants

Culture is defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from those of another" (Hofstede, 1991, p. 5). National culture is a complex concept and there is no single guide to evaluate culture (Hofstede, 1994). Based on an extensive study with 72,215 employees working for IBM, Hofstede (1980) proposed five cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity and time orientation. Power distance refers to the extent to which the low-ranking employees accept an unequal distribution of power. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the level which the members of a culture feel threatened by unknown and risky situations. People from such cultures tend not to feel comfortable with uncertain circumstances and they have a strong need to control situations.

Individuals in collectivist societies from birth are integrated and taught to help and support close relatives and friends; they typically prefer harmony and peace and may sacrifice their own benefits for their family or group. Regarding masculinity, masculine societies prefer assertiveness, strength, dominance, and egotism. Finally, time orientation is looked at along short-term and long-term dimensions. A short-term orientation with a focus on the present is more common in Western culture, while long-term orientation tends to reflect Eastern cultures that look toward the future (Hofstede, 1980). In cultures with a high power distance, customers often expect service providers to be more respectful and treat customers nicely (Furrer, Liu, & Sudarshan, 2000) and deliver quality service, as service employees' status is typically perceived as low (Mattila, 1999).

According to Furrer et al. (2000), in collectivist cultures like China, customers tend to be cooperative and not egocentric. Due to their compassion for others, they may be more tolerant if the service is not very efficient and they may not raise concerns openly and directly. In individualistic cultures such as the United States, customers expect fast service that is delivered correctly and at a high level of quality the first time. In high masculinity cultures customers often expect a male worker to be more skilled, reliable, and responsive than a female worker, and in long-term orientation cultures, customers expect to form long-term partnerships with businesses and service providers (Furrer et al. 2000).

Culture is a key factor that influences guests' service quality perceptions and their reactions to service failure (Wan, 2013). Previous research has found that complaining behavior of guests differs across individualistic and collectivist cultures (Chan & Wan, 2008). In reference to cross-cultural differences and service quality expectations, Donthu and Yoo (1998) found that guests from high power distance cultures have lower service quality anticipations and lower expectations of responsiveness from hospitality providers. These authors further noted that customers from high uncertainty avoidance cultures put more importance on tangibles, and customers from individualistic cultures have higher service quality expectations. Customers from individualistic cultures also expect a higher level of empathy and assurance from employees than do collectivist customers. Customers from long-term oriented cultures may have lower expectations of service quality than customers from short-term oriented cultures. Finally, responsiveness may be less important for customers from long-term oriented cultures (Donthu & Yoo, 1998).

Customers from collectivist cultures may evade direct conflict and opt for more non-confrontational complaining actions (Le Clarie, 1993). Customers from collectivist cultures believe that face-to-face dispute often results in losing face and damaging harmony (Hwang, Francesco, & Kessler, 2003). In a relatively recent study in this field, Park et al. (2014) found important variances in complaining behaviors between South Koreans and Americans. These authors concluded that individualistic and collectivist cultures demonstrate dissimilar actions in complaining behavior and service recovery efforts, and found complaining behavior in various cultures can be explained by service recovery expectations. Wong (2004) found that compensation can improve customers' assessment of the service encounter. An apology was also found to improve satisfaction in Singapore and Australia (Wong, 2004). According to Au, Buhalis, and Law (2014), familiarity with the local environment and culture helps customers better understand the failure. However, these authors state that managers should understand that even if Chinese customers do not openly complain, this does not guarantee they are satisfied. Moreover, Wan (2013) notes that the complaining behaviors of customers from collectivist cultures depends on the degree of embarrassment and losing face in a service failure situation.

Responding to Complaining Behavior of Restaurant Guests from Different Cultures

Customers of food service businesses from collectivist cultures visiting an individualistic culture may not directly and openly complain when they experience service failure, as they do not want to lose face and break harmony (Leung, 1987). As a result, when complaints of customers from collectivist cultures are observed and handled, food service businesses need to develop strategies that may allow

and encourage these consumers from collectivist cultures to share their complaints directly and openly (Park et al., 2014). When customers share their complaints, food service businesses should respond to such complaints quickly.

Employees and managers in food service organizations should offer timely service recovery efforts with fair strategies to elucidate a solution (Park et al., 2014; Yuksel, Kilinc, & Yuksel, 2006). If and when guests from collectivistic cultures raise a service failure openly to frontline employees and managers, the food service businesses should offer reimbursement and fast and fair solutions to handle the problem. Frontline employees and supervisors in food service and hospitality businesses in individualistic cultures serving customers from collectivist cultures should be trained to demonstrate effective interpersonal skills so they can provide genuine efforts to overcome such complaining actions (Ergün & Kitapci, 2018; Park et al, 2014).

The RECOVSTAT framework developed by Kanousi (2005) describes employee empowerment as particularly important when dealing with complaining customers from countries with high individualism, as these individuals do not like to be passed along to another employee or a manager. On the other hand, when addressing the concerns of customers with lower individualism and higher long-term orientation, it is more productive to emphasize explanations and tangibles (Kanousi, 2005). For example, appearances of frontline employees and workplace should be tidy and professional, and employees should take care to offer a satisfactory explanation and apology for the service failure. Patterson, Cowley, and Prasongsukarn (2006) found additional support for the importance of recognizing an individual's level of individualism/collectivism when addressing a service failure, and also pinpointed power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980) as essential dimensions to understand. For example, consumers with a higher level of power distance orientation prefer an apology from an employee with higher status within the organization, and those with higher uncertainty avoidance prefer to be kept informed of the progress toward resolving the failure.

The above discussions suggest that the service recovery process is crucial in responding to the complaining behaviors of restaurant customers. In the process of service recovery, some frontline restaurant employees and supervisors may handle customers' complaints even when they are not responsible for the service failure and errors. Customers may see these employees and managers as the agents of the food service company and evaluate their performance in the service recovery process (Liao, 2007). It is therefore important to offer specific training programs for frontline employees working in food service and hospitality businesses in individualistic cultures about the direct and indirect complaining behaviors of customers from collectivist cultures. Such training programs should cover possible service recovery

strategies for customers from specific cultures. If customers from collectivist cultures choose to share their opinions through social media, hospitality companies should also focus on how to respond to such comments and also prevent similar service failures in the future. In addition to monitoring social media, technology solutions such as customer relationship management (CRM) systems are effective in identifying and flagging individual customer issues to avoid service failure repeats. Although culture is not synonymous with nation of origin (Patterson, Cowley, & Prasongsukarn, 2006), simply being aware of a traveler's home country may offer a base insight on how to interact with that customer.

Discussion, Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

The aim of this review article was to examine how frontline employees in individualistic cultures such as the United States can better understand and respond to the complaining behaviors of restaurant consumers from collectivist cultures such as those from Asian countries. One may argue that due to globalization, cultural differences are slowly fading away and interactions between cultures may lead to similar behavioral and attitudinal patterns. Although customers from all countries share a basic need for clear communication and a goal of recovering satisfactorily from a service failure (Kanousi, 2005), it is clear that culture has an effect on how the process should best be handled. This review article has discussed how frontline food service employees in individualistic cultures such as the United States can better understand and respond to complaining behavior of consumers from collectivist cultures such as China, Korea and Japan. Previous studies suggested that customers from such cultures often prefer not to complain directly and openly about service failures. They may offer indirect hints or complain to their friends and relatives. It is possible that employees from individualistic cultures may not fully understand these complaining behaviors of customers from collectivist cultures. This may result in loss of business, customers' disloyalty and negative publicity about the business.

Based on the above analysis, the following conclusions and propositions are hereby proposed. First, culture has an impact on service delivery expectations, guest complaining behaviors and service recovery expectations. Second, there are differences in complaining behaviors between customers from collectivist cultures and customers from individualistic cultures. Customers from masculine cultures may openly express their concerns about service failures. Customers from collectivist cultures may be less likely to complain openly and directly to the service providers compared to customers from individualistic cultures. In addition, there may also be differences among customers' complaining behaviors and expectations coming from collectivist cultures. Customers from collectivist cultures tend to express their service quality expectations less than customers from individualistic cultures. Customers

from long-term oriented cultures express lower service quality expectations than customers from short-term oriented cultures. Forth, frontline food service employees from individualistic cultures can better understand complaints from customers from similar individualistic cultures, whereas the same frontline employees can face difficulties in fully understanding direct complaints from customers from collectivist cultures. Therefore, frontline food service employees and managers from individualistic cultures need to be trained in understanding complaints from customers from specific collectivist cultures. Fifth, food service businesses can review and discuss specific cases of previous service failures and their service recovery efforts with their frontline employees and managers. In addition, such service failures and service recovery strategies can be shared with frontline employees and managers via food service companies' training platforms. In addition, during training sessions, scenarios of service failures and recovery strategies can be utilized. Finally, given the importance of social media, food service businesses should review social media posts on leading social media platforms both in the United States and also in those collectivist cultures/countries regarding their businesses and respond to them in a timely manner, not only in English but also in those languages, e.g. Chinese.

This study was developed based on a critical literature review. The theoretical discussions provided in this study are not based on empirical findings. It is therefore suggested that future research in this area might offer useful empirical findings on service delivery expectations, complaining behaviors and service recovery efforts for customers from collectivist cultures. Future studies might also provide empirical findings on whether and how frontline employees, especially in the food service business, can understand and handle customers' expectations and complaints. These studies could explore using technology such as CRM systems and social media to prevent and recover from service failures, and possibly identify contextual signals such as body language or key words that may indicate displeasure with the service. Based on these clues, employees could be trained to ask questions designed to identify factors such as the customer's level of individualism/collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance to provide a tentative path forward. As China, Korea, Japan and Brazil are becoming main tourist markets for the United States, the study findings will be important to offer better service recovery strategies for customers from these countries.

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