The impact of a primary service provider on customer satisfaction and engagement behaviour in dining experience: a cross-national study

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1. Introduction

The global restaurant industry is flourishing and dining out accounts for a large proportion of family expenditure while competition in the market is also increasing. In order for a restaurant to be sustainable in this fierce market, it is of particular importance to understand what enhances the customers' dining experience and how to establish and maintain the profitable relationship with customers (Bowden, 2009). One of the outcomes of having a strong relationship with customers for service firms is customer engagement that supports service providers and enhances the service experience for other customers (Kumar et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Verleye et al., 2014).

The primary purpose of this study is to examine a service provider's attributes in terms of customer orientation, professional competence and social skills by measuring both their importance (before dining) and perception (after dining), and their impact on customer satisfaction and engagement behaviour of New Zealand and U.S. restaurant diners. In addition, this study investigates whether the structural relationships of interest are differently manifested by restaurant types (i.e. counter service vs. table service) and national differences (i.e. New Zealand and USA).

2. Literature and hypotheses

As service is produced, delivered and consumed simultaneously during a service encounter between service providers and customers (c.f., inseparability), frontline employees interacting with customers have a critical effect on the customers' dining experience (Grönroos, 1990; Kandampully, 1998). Continued business success is dependent upon the careful management of service providers who represent their firm during a service encounter. This is because the customers' commitment to the employee often translates into their commitment to the service firm (Hansen et al., 2003). Hence, it is crucial for service organisations to establish and maintain a quality provider-customer relationship. Although the topic of the service provider-customer relationship has been studied extensively (e.g., Gountas et al., 2011; Mechinda & Patterson, 2011; Shemwell et al., 1998), little is known about the effect of a primary service provider's attributes on customer satisfaction which leads to customer engagement behaviours in the restaurant context.

The key attributes of a service provider that positively influence the customers' dining experience include customer orientation, professional competence and social skills (e.g., Brady and Cronin, 2001; Gazoli et al., 2013; Hausman, 2004; Henning-Thurau, 2004; Lin & Hsieh, 2011; Rafaeli et al., 2008). Whereas most previous studies examine one of these service provider attributes and its influence on customers' service experience, this study investigates the relative contribution of each of these attributes to customers' dining satisfaction and their engagement in the service experience. According to Brown et al. (2002), customer orientation is an individual tendency to satisfy customer needs in an on-the-job context which leads to service performance. Professional competence is defined as "the degree to which employees can apply to work condition their professional knowledge, skill, motives, and traits" (Ko, 2012, p. 1005). Research suggests that customers' service satisfaction is positively

influenced by a service provider's professional competence (e.g., Henning-Thurau, 2004; Lin & Hsieh, 2011). Lastly, social skills used by the service provider also influence customers' evaluation of the service experience (Li et al., 2002).

Customer engagement behaviour has been examined as customers' behavioural manifestations toward the service provider (Kumar et al., 2010) as well as psychological state reflecting customers' interactive, co-creative experiences with a service provider (Brodie et al., 2011). According to Zeithaml et al., (2009), customers have chances to demonstrate their engagement to the service provider as they are increasingly taking part in creating, producing, and delivering service. This study examines customer engagement in terms of cooperation, feedback and compliance based on the work of Verleye et al. (2014). The following hypotheses direct this research.

H1. The attributes of a primary service providers (i.e., customer orientation, professional competence and social skills) are positively related to customers' dining satisfaction.

H2. The attributes of a primary service providers (i.e., customer orientation, professional competence and social skills) are positively related to cooperation, a dimension of customer engagement behaviour.

H3. The attributes of a primary service providers (i.e., customer orientation, professional competence and social skills) are positively related to feedback, a dimension of customer engagement behaviour.

H4. The attributes of a primary service providers (i.e., customer orientation, professional competence and social skills) are positively related to compliance, a dimension of customer engagement behaviour.

H5. Dining satisfaction mediates the positive relationships between the attributes of a primary service provider and customer engagement behaviour.

This study also examines whether the above relationships are moderated by restaurant types and national differences. In order to strengthen the external validity of the proposed model, we explore whether the impact of a primary service provider's attributes on customers' dining satisfaction and engagement in the service experience vary for consumers of counter service restaurants vs. table service restaurants, and in New Zealand vs. USA.

3. Methods and results

The target population for this study was customers of counter service and table service restaurants in New Zealand and USA. A total of 635 respondents took part in the on-site survey from counter service (n=317) and table service (n=318) restaurants. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to ensure an expected factor structure with each measure, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the research hypotheses. The proposed model for this study demonstrated overall a high degree of good fit to the data and hypothesized relationships which are statistically significant at .05 level. In the sub-group analysis, the proposed structural relationships were stable for both counter service and table service restaurants as well as both New Zealand and USA samples.

4. Discussion

Based on the findings, this study presents theoretical implications such as dimensionality of customer engagement and construct validity of evaluation of the attributes of a primary service provider, and managerial implications such as relationship marketing along with talent management. Further, study limitations are discussed for future research.

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