

International Students' Perception on University Cafeteria in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT: The number of higher education institutions in Malaysia is increasing and continuously attracts a large number of international students. Therefore, it is important for foodservice operator to understand the perception of international students towards the university cafeteria in order to create student satisfaction. The aim of this study was to identify the perception of international students towards the university cafeteria, and this paper explored four research questions in order to identify the factors affecting it. The findings of this paper included a list of factors such as food quality, choices and sanitation, price, ambience and facilities and service quality of the cafeteria. This research significantly enabled the foodservice operators to gain deeper knowledge about the factors that influence the perception of international students towards the university cafeteria, which can meet the quality standards of the university.

Keywords: international students, university cafeteria, cafeteria quality, food quality Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

University foodservices have become one of the major issues concerned by the management as it affects the perception of the students and the quality of the university[1]. Universities are required to provide quality in educational experience, which includes the quality of university cafeteria. In Malaysia, the numbers of international students are increasing (refer appendix ii), with their origins ranging from China, Indonesia, Iran, Yamen, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Bangladesh and Botswana. Thus, understanding their perception towards the university foodservices is essential. Due to the perception differences, individuals would tend to perceive the same situation differently from another based on their personal senses. Therefore, it is difficult for the foodser-

vice operator to understand each of the international students' perception and satisfaction towards the university foodservices. The most common students' complaints regarding the university foodservices include poor ambience, shortage of staff, pricing, poor food choices and low food quality[2]. Moreover, university cafeterias play a vital role in the overall satisfaction of the international students towards the university[22,23]. University foodservice operators need to provide a selection of food choices, fresh products and ingredients and tasty food in order to create student satisfaction[3,23]. Other than that, the university foodservice operator should improve their service quality of staff and evaluate the staff performance in order to maintain good quality. Student satisfaction would actually influence their buying intention and behavior, which in turns affects the or-

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ganization future long-term profit and revenue[24].

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors or attributes which contribute significant impact on international students' perceptions toward the university cafeteria. In addition, the objective of the study was to find out which particular factors will affect the students' perception toward the university cafeteria the strongest. The respondents for this study were limited to international students that are pursuing higher education in university. The following research questions were highlighted:

- (1) How does overall food quality influence international students' perception on university cafeteria?
- (2) How do you feel about price at the university cafeteria?
- (3) How do you think about the ambience, environment and facilities of the university cafeteria?
- (4) How do you think about the service quality of the university cafeteria's staff?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Food Quality and Choices

One of the factors affecting individual perception towards the university foodservice was the food quality and choices[4]. Food quality was ranked as the most essential factor affecting the customer satisfaction. Moreover, Othman et al[5] clarified that students' satisfaction on the university foodservice was related to the food quality such as the freshness of ingredient, temperature, appearance, taste, smell etc. Quality of food and freshness of ingredients are the significant reasons on the return rate of customers to a food outlet. Good quality of food and beverages helps the foodservice operator in satisfying and maintaining their customers[6].

The importance of product and service functionality, in terms of the freshness of the ingredients and the taste of the foods, which would influence the customer's buying perception[7]. For instance, foods that are produced by poor quality ingredients would affect the food quality and appearance, which would affect the business operation of the university cafeteria operators. Dollah, et al[3] revealed that the appearance, taste, smell and texture of the food are

the attributes that influence the customer's perception. In addition, the appearance of the food such as color, texture and gloss would determine the perception and acceptability of an individual[3]. Food temperature was one of the attributes that would affect the food quality, customer's perception and satisfaction.

Price

One of the most crucial factors that affects customer's buying behavior is price. In the study of Nasir et al[8], pricing perception of an individual must be examined to understand its effect on the buying decisions. Price was defined as "which is given up in an exchange to acquire good or service"[9]. It is the willingness of a consumer to pay for a product or service which interrelated to their price sensitivity and perception towards the price and perceived quality of an individual[10]. It is crucial for the organization to set a right price for the products and services that offered to the customers and the price that set by the organization must be able to look into the customer's perspective and the value perceived by customers[11].

The customer's perspective of price was generally from the concept of consumer rationality. Consumer rationality was the tendency of the consumer to purchase the products based on belief that it would benefit them[11]. Some customers tend to judge the product quality based on the prices; higher price would have high quality and lower price would perceive as low quality[8]. The price perception of the customer should be examined in order to understand the customer's buying decision[8]. Majority of the researchers agreed that the product value was highly related to the product price, whether or not the customers are willing to pay for the quality with a certain price. Specifically, when the customer perceived the price as reasonable, the product value would tend to increase and thus create customer satisfaction[12]. Thus, it is crucial for the food service operator to spend time in investigating the customer expectation in pricing and value perception.

Price fairness has significantly influenced the students' perception towards the university cafeteria[3]. Researchers stated that the lower the price perceived, the lower the expectation and the customer would

view the price as fair[3]. For example, customers tend to compare the price with their own expectations, and evaluate whether the price is fair like it should be. When the customers perceived price as unfair, the possibility of dissatisfaction level would increase and generally would affect the customer's perception[13]. In addition, the customers who are not economically strong might find that price was the most essential factor in attracting them to a restaurant[6]. Therefore, it is crucial for the university food service operator to ensure that the price of the foods and beverages is perceived as fair, which helps to satisfy the group of students in the university.

Ambience and Facilities

Atmosphere or ambient as the element that helps to enhance the restaurant environment with the combination of different attributes such as color, lighting, music, temperature and odor[14]. The store attributes including lighting, color, music, and scent would affect the customers' perception towards the university foodservice operator[14]. Ambience of the restaurant was one of the most critical factors that led to customer satisfaction and their dining experience in the restaurant[15]. Therefore, it is crucial for the food service operators to identify the factors that would affect the ambience and environment of the restaurant.

Furthermore, services are intangible and required the presence of the customer during the service process, and the physical environment would help to enhance the tangibility of the product and services in the food service industry[12]. For example, the landscape light or the decorative lighting has to match the environment of the restaurant as it would affect the customer satisfaction. Researchers believed that brightness would actually help to create positive customers' perceptions, it also helps to increase the transaction speed and accuracy service at the cashier's table[12]. The cafeteria physical environment factors affecting an individual include plate shape, package, lighting and dining setting[1].

Many researchers stated that ambience such as design of the restaurant play an important role in creating positive customers' impression[1]. The design of the cafeteria is one of the factors that influence the eating behavior and food choices of an in-

dividual, because it would influence the customers' perception and satisfaction[14]. Research has been proven that design of the restaurant such as the table and seating arrangement was an important element to take into consideration as it prevents the customers from feeling crowded[16]. Appropriate seating arrangement in the restaurants helps the food-service operators to prevent lack of seating problems that would create customer's dissatisfaction[21].

Service Quality

Sabir et al[16] stated that service was a performance by an individual that proposed by another person, where the better the service provided to the customer, the better the customer satisfaction and vice versa. Moreover, 'Service delivery' was also a part of service quality, which involved interaction between the organization employees and customers. The attitudes and behaviours of the employees positively influenced the customers' satisfaction and perception towards the foodservice operator[5]. Researchers stated that service quality and customer satisfaction are interconnected and it is one of the main factors affecting customer satisfaction[17]. Tan et al[17] also mentioned that intangible element was one of the important elements in service quality. Service quality is difficult and complex to be measured because services are intangible. The intangible aspects could be the performance of the employees, responsiveness of the employees towards problems or conflicts, attentiveness and courteousness of the employees to customers.

METHOD

Data Collection

This research was conducted at Sunway University, Malaysia. Due to the increasing numbers of international students in Malaysia, it is important for the foodservice operator to understand their perception of university cafeteria. Furthermore, Sunway University was ranked in the Top 10 private universities in Malaysia which became the choices of many international students to further their studies. Firstly, international students from various countries were selected to participate in this research and a total number of six international students were selected. The set-

ting of the focus group interview took place in Sunway University cafeteria, as this allows the participants to observe the overall cafeteria environment, ambience and staff service quality while doing the focus group interviews. Data was collected in August, 2015 and it included two instruments which are brief demographic information and focus group interviews.

RESULTS

Food Quality and Choices

The majority of the international students in the focus group stated that food choice was the most critical factor that affects their perceptions and satisfaction. Only two (2) respondents indicated that the food choices offered in the university cafeteria are limited because the students have less or fewer choices which lead to student dissatisfaction. Respondents noted:

"I've been study here for 4 years, and the food choices are still the same. So I think it is necessary for them to improve and increase the food selection." (Respondent H)

"... I think the food choices are quite limited. I think they should offer something faster and quick." (Respondent D)

In addition, most of the respondents emphasized the need for the university to keep an eye on the vending machines and maintain it well, as the machines always break down. Findings indicated that the respondents commented that there are too many students using the vending machines and they regularly experience running out of stock which makes them frustrated and thus creates dissatisfaction towards the vending machine services provided by the university. The respondents shared that:

"Sometimes even when you put in your money, but you can't press anything." (Respondent H)
 "They should have change it because sometimes it is not working, only the new one works very well." (Respondent Z)

Although there were a lot of negative feedback from the respondents, but some of the respondents

commented that the food portion was good and the taste was acceptable. The majority of the international students commented that the taste of foods provided in the university cafeteria was at least acceptable. The respondents stated,

"The taste is acceptable, as well as the food temperature was good." (Respondent D)

"The portion is quite filling as well." (Respondent S)

Moreover, findings also stated the average food waiting time provided by food operator was acceptable within the time range of five to ten (5~10) minutes and the food temperature was satisfying because the food will only be cooked once the students have ordered it.

Research stated that it is crucial for the foodservice operator to consider customer tastes, preferences and choices as it helps to determine customer's satisfaction where customer is the main factor that influences the businesses[18]. Thus, it is extremely important for the university cafeteria operator to increase the food choices in order to attract and create student's satisfaction.

In addition, findings indicated that the importance of food and beverage vending machines in the university. Respondents stated that the availability of vending machine increasing the convenience level of the students where they can purchase foods and drinks easily. This denoted that the installation of vending machine in schools and universities are increasing due to the customers' demand and need for fast and convenient food and beverage products. With the increase demand of the vending machine, it is crucial for the university management to maintain and install different types of vending machines and minimize the probability of out of stock conditions.

Price

It was found out that majority of the international students think that the price charged at university cafeteria was affordable and acceptable for them. Based on the respondents replied, it can be conceived that the university cafeteria is charging a fair and reasonable price of food, which majority of the international students can afford the food and beverages charged by the university operator. Below Five (5) of

the respondents noted that:

"The price is acceptable and it won't be too expensive, i.e.: we can still purchase one meal for RM5.00" (Respondent H)

"I think it's quite fair for students, because sometimes it is even cheaper than the shop outside university" (Respondent Z)

"I think the price is very affordable where students can have a rice with two dishes from price range of RM5.00 to RM6.00" (Respondent S)

"Generally, I think most of the student can afford the price" (Respondent K)

"I think the price was acceptable for us international students, because in our country like Vietnam, the food cost is much more expensive compare with Malaysia" (Respondent R)

However, every human being has different thought and different mindset, in which not everyone has the same pricing perception about the foods and beverages charged by the university cafeteria operator. In this case, minority of One (1) of the respondent reported that the foods and beverages prices are considered expensive compared with her country and this eventually affects her perception on the university cafeteria and overall satisfaction. The respondent shared:

"I think the price is considered expensive, I was born in Korea, and the food in Korea University is very cheap compare with Malaysia. I.e.: The same brand like San Francisco, the selling price in Korea is half the price compares in Malaysia." (Respondent D)

Moreover, respondents also stated that in their own country, part of the students' meals costs are subsidized by the university, where the students would be able to purchase their meals at very low prices. This is why some of the respondents commented that the food price charged by the university cafeteria operator is expensive and not reasonable for international students.

Previous studies stated that price was the most crucial factor affecting customer's buying behavior and customer's price perception should be clearly examined as customers are price sensitive, and they

would only be willing to pay if they think it is reasonable[8]. This study was consistent with the previous studies whereby when the customer perceived the product price as reasonable, the product value would tend to increase and thus create customer satisfaction. Five (5) of the international students perceived the price charged by the university foodservice operator as fair and affordable for the international students.

However, different customers have different price perception and expectation which is crucial for the university to set a reasonable price for all the students. However, there were still one (1) of the respondent complained that the food and beverages price of the university cafeteria is much more expensive compared with her country.

Ambience and Facilities

Every respondent agreed that the university cafeteria has poor ambience and environment. Respondents shared that the temperature of the university cafeteria was very warm and there was no proper air ventilation in the cafeteria. The findings indicated that the university cafeteria operator and the university management have poor management on the cafeteria's environment in terms of the air ventilation which has caused student dissatisfaction. Respondents commented that:

"...the cafeteria is very packed and crowded, there will be no air flow circulated." (Respondent H)

"Every time you went to eat there, you smell like food, because the smell stay on your cloth". (Respondent K)

In addition, respondents also indicated that the seating capacity in the university cafeteria were limited, especially during peak period like lunch hours. Respondents noted:

"Especially when you go on peak hour like lunch hour, it is impossible and difficult to get a seat." (Respondent S)

"...definitely not enough. It's always packed and full." (Respondent Z)

Which indicated the seating area in the cafeteria

actually did not meet the demand of the students, especially during lunch hour. Respondents stated that sometimes they felt annoyed when the empty plates on the tables are not being clear by the service staff, which leads to dissatisfaction on the university cafeteria. Respondents also mentioned that they are not satisfy with the cleanliness of the cafeteria:

"I always see flies, there are empty plates on the table, which I think it's not clean." (Respondent H)
 "...the overall time for them to clean up the table is quite slow" (Respondent D)

As the respondents emphasized that the hygiene of the cafeteria was the most crucial factor that affecting the students' perception. Furthermore, they also remarked that the cutleries provided by the cafeteria operator should have been changed, which leads to the negative students' perceptions and poor students' satisfaction towards the university cafeteria. The respondents stated:

"I think they really need to change it. It can be bend easily into different direction" (Respondent S)
 "Their cutleries is like have been used for so many years" (Respondent H)
 "Sometimes the cutleries didn't clean well" (Respondent D)

It is explained that the university cafeteria has bad odor, ambience and poor environment and previous studies stated that ambience and facilities of the cafeteria can influence the student food consumption. Previous study done by[19] mentioned that unpleasant odors and warm temperature of the environment are likely to shorten the duration of a meal and it would lead to an unpleasant impact on the food consumption. Where the odors of the cafeteria would influence the customer's buying behavior, emotions and customers' perceptions[20]. Thus, the result of this study raises the awareness of the university foodservice operator, in terms of the improvement of the ambience and facilities of the university cafeteria in this current situation.

Service Quality

When it comes to the services provided by the

staff in the cafeteria, total five (5) of the respondents agreed that the staffs have poor and bad attitude and service behavior. Respondents aggressively pointed out that:

"There is an old guy behind the counter is so rude. He likes to shout on people" (Respondent Z)
 "I think the cashiers should learn to be more polite because whenever I go there, they always show their angry and unfriendly faces" (Respondent K)
 "Some of them are quite rude, especially the cashiers. They seem like angry the whole day and don't smile at all" (Respondent S)

These indicated that the international students have negative perceptions towards the services provided by the university cafeteria operator. Thus, when students have bad perceptions on the services provided by the cafeteria operator, it would lead to the students' dissatisfaction in the long run.

However, although there were many negative feedbacks from respondents about the poor services provided, but a few of the respondents stated that there are still some of the staff that are polite, friendly and able to provide good services to the students. As mentioned by the respondents:

"Some of the staffs are friendly, i.e.: when you order food from them, they will smile with you and greet you etc" (Respondent H)
 "The service delivery time quite good, we don't really need to wait and queue long time" (Respondent D)

The majority of the respondents stated that they preferred to be served by friendly staff instead of the rude staff. They stated that because good services able to increase the students' satisfaction towards the university cafeteria. Whereas students will get more irritated by the way the staffs treat them, thus leading to negative perceptions on the university cafeteria.

Past research by Tan, et al,[17] indicated that service quality and customer satisfaction are interconnected, and service quality was one of the main factors affecting customer perception and satisfaction. In other words, the higher the service quality pro-

vided by the university foodservice operator, the higher the level of the customer satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study were to identify the factors that influence the international students' perceptions on the university cafeteria. The results enable the university foodservice operator to improve their services and products quality that would meet the expectations of the international students. Furthermore, it also helps the universities to increase the quality standard and build positive reputation for the university itself, thus, attracting more international students to further their studies in the particular university. The results showed that food quality, choices and sanitation, ambience and facilities highly influence the international students' perceptions on university cafeteria.

This research draws an attention for the university management and the foodservice operator to further improve the university cafeteria in the future. Findings indicated that the majority of the international students are not satisfied on the university cafeteria. In the foodservice industry, it is crucial for the foodservice operator to consider consumer tastes and preferences into the foodservice operating decisions, because customers are the main factor that influences the businesses. The results showed that food quality and choices, ambience and facilities, service quality highly influence the international students' perceptions on university cafeteria.

This study has provided meaningful managerial implications for cafeteria operators. Firstly, food quality and choices were one of the primary themed factors that affected students' perceptions of the university cafeteria. Based on the findings above, food quality remains the crucial factor that influences perceptions of the international students. In order to maintain the food quality, it is recommended that cafeteria operators invest in fresh quality from suppliers. Secondly, findings stated that the food choices were limited. Therefore, it is recommended that cafeteria operators introduce strategies, such as cycle menu planning. Cycle menu planning is a series of food menus that are planned by the foodservice operators for a specific period of time. Thirdly, in terms of price,

although it is not significant factors that affect the international students' perceptions, it is still recommended the cafeteria operator to take into consideration of the customer's perception in price. It is crucial for the foodservice operators to have better understanding of the customer's price expectation and value perceived, which allows them to set the right price for the right customer segment. This should allow the cafeteria operator to meet the needs and wants and value perception of the international and local students. The ambience and facilities influence the students' perception. Most of the respondents indicated that the university cafeteria has poor ambiances and facilities such as poor air ventilation, crowded and packed, lacked of seating capacity, dirty and unclean tables. The majority of the respondents agreed that they were dissatisfied by the service quality provided by the cafeteria employees. Therefore, it is crucial for the cafeteria operators to ensure that their employees are provided with proper training and development in order to create student's satisfaction.

A Few of the limitations and suggestions for future research of this research should be noted. First of all, this research did not have a large sample size, which only consisting of six international students in a focus group. Thus, the result of the small sample size may not be able to represent the larger population. Also, this research was conducted based on the case of Sunway university cafeteria, in which the results may not be beneficial for the other universities in other cities and countries. As different geographical or demographic settings may alter the results of the research significantly. Future researchers could eventually explore to other universities in Klang area to allow more in-depth identification of the student's perception on university cafeteria, such as Taylor University, Segi University, Monash University and many more. Adding on, future researchers may not only look into the perception of international students, but also to investigate on the local students' perceptions on the university cafeteria.

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Received: 08 September, 2016

Revised: 19 September, 2016

Accepted: 26 September, 2016