THE EFFECT OF QUALITY DIMENSIONS ON INFORMAL FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

ALPHEAUS LITHEKO

School of Management Sciences, North-West University, Private Bag X2046, Mmabatho, 2790, South Africa
E-mail: 16513207@nwu.ac.za

Abstract – The informal fast-food restaurant sector has been growing rapidly in South Africa over the past decades. The sector is important for the development of township economies, as it creates opportunities for self-employment and jobs in township communities. The quality dimensions such as food, service and physical environment of a food restaurant are crucial determinants of customer satisfaction and continual business growth. The objective of this paper is to examine the influence of quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in an informal micro-fast-food restaurant; quality dimensions are important to the survival and growth of informal micro-fast-food restaurants. A survey was conducted on customers of informal micro-fast-food restaurants using a convenience sampling method. The collected data was transferred to the Statistical Package of Social Science (SPSS) for data analysis. The results showed how to enhance customer satisfaction and increase loyalty by means of improving quality dimension of restaurant, in particular the setting and environment of business. The results further suggest that the continuous improvement of the ambiance of the restaurant as it is essential to creating an atmosphere in the restaurant that will attract more customers.

Keywords - Quality Dimension, Customer Satisfaction, Informal Sector, Micro Fast Food Restaurants.

I. INTRODUCTION

The informal micro-fast-food restaurant (IMFFR) sector has been growing rapidly in South Africa over the past decades, more specifically in townships. The sector is important for the development of township economies, as it creates opportunities for self-employment and jobs in township communities (Mhlanga, 2018; Petersen & Charman, 2018a; Petersen & Charman, 2018b; Knox et al., 2019). The rapid growth of the IMFFR in townships brings along a progressively multifaceted and highly competitive sector, according to Mhlanga (2018). In such environment, restaurant owners should have an understanding of the market environment and its influence on the restaurant's performance, and more importantly it growth prospects. In this study, the micro-fast-food restaurant sector in South Africa is typically located in the informal trading sector along the township streets and side-walks near busy transport nodes and marketplaces. They operate in areas of heavy foot traffic, as indicated by Battersby et al., (2016) and Knox et al. (2019), where people conveniently buy a meal or snack near or on the way to and from work or school during the day and into the evening. The micro fast food restaurants prepare and sell a range of affordable food products such as traditional meals, sandwiches, roasted meat, deep fried foods, boiled eggs, cold drinks and many others. Customers can take these snacks away with them or eat them at the seating areas provided, which often are inadequate. According to Musara and Nieuwenhuizen (2020), given the high proportion of this informal enterprises that operate in the food restaurant sector, it is difficult to measure the full size of the sector or the number of people who depend on the incomes that they generate. However, it is estimated that globally more than 60 percent of employed people earn their livelihoods in the informal economy, with figures going up to 86 percent in Africa, as analysed by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2016), Medina et al. (2017) and International Labour Organisation (2018). In South Africa, 20 percent of the people are employed and earn their livelihoods in the informal sector (Rogan & Skinner, 2020; StatsSA, 2020), which suggests that the South Africa's economy, while significant, is comparatively small, combined with high levels of unemployment, with the official and expanded rates of unemployment in the first quarter of 2020 at 30 percent and 40 percent respectively (StatsSA, 2020).

Generally, the informal sector provides employment with below-average wages for survival and informal workers and informal micro-entrepreneurs operating at the survivalist level, as established by Mahadea and Zogli (2018) and Etim and Daramda (2020), underlining the importance for the micro-enterprises to gradually step from survivalist to developmental levels in the business life-cycle. In order for the enterprises to survive, grow and generate greater profits, the micro-fast-food restaurants must pay more attention to price, service quality, food quality and physical environment (Kotler &Amstrong, 2010; Zhang & Moon, 2020). Maintaining customer satisfaction is very important because it can lead to repeat purchase by customers and increased sales. The objective of this paper is to examine the influence of quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in an IMFFR, the dimensions are important to the survival and growth of businesses. Presented here are the objectives of the paper based on the importance of quality dimensions on IMFFR in the North West province, South Africa.

The importance of the informal economic sector in South Africa

The informal economy plays an integral role in addressing the socio-economic issues confronting many developing nations (Gurtoo& Williams, 2009; Webb et al., 2013; Autio& Fu, 2015; Williams & Youssef, 2015). South Africa's informal sector accounts for a significant contribution towards the total employment in the country. StatsSA (2015), in its third quarter, revealed that over 2 million South Africans are employed in the informal sector. This accounts for about 16.7% of the total employment in South Africa. Similarly, Rogan and Skinner (2017) observed that about 2.5 million people in South Africa are employed in the informal sector, of whom about 1.5 million people are self-employed. Rogan and Skinner (2017) further note that, for the period between 2008 and 2014, informal sector entrepreneurship continued to contribute between 16% and 18% of South Africa's total employment figures. The contribution of informal sector entrepreneurship towards the gross domestic product (GDP) is also remarkable, as analysed by Musara and Nieuwenhuizen (2020). Saunders and Loots (2005), in their study of informal sector contribution to the GDP, established that the informal sector entrepreneurship averaged 9.5% of the country's GDP during the period from 1967 to 2002. The South Reserve Bank (SARB) (1999) also estimated that the contribution of the informal sector towards the country's GDP was at approximately 7% in 1999. In relatively recent estimates, StatsSA (2018) and SARB (2019) have estimated that the informal sector contributes up to 5.5% of the country's GDP.

Generally, the informal sector, consisting – of unpaid workers in family enterprises, casual wage employment, seasonal employment, home-based worker, employment for immigrants, street vending, are the means for survival for poor communities in townships and rural areas (Mahadea&Zogli, 2018), which is also prevalent when there are slower growth and cycles of downturn in the economy, resulting in a decline in the national GDP as a result of external factors such as the Coronavirus pandemic that has adversely impacted the economy and people's livelihoods. Consequently, these have widened the output gap and have led to an expanding inequality in income distribution, as supported by Etim and Daramda (2020). The inadequacies of government and the formal sector to provide employment for communities, in particular in the township and rural areas, have meant that the communities have been involved in the informal sector out of necessity and survival (Petersen &Charman, 2018a; Etim&Daramda, 2020; Musara&Niewenhuizen, 2020). The informal micro-fast-food restaurants should be considered the grass roots of economic self-reliance and entrepreneurship with the township economy, as explained by Petersen (2020). Many of these enterprises, as explained by Botha (2012), represent an important financial income stream and subsidised food source for township communities who may otherwise be unable to access formal employment.

The South African government has not yet understood the influence of the micro-environment on informal micro-fast-food restaurants, resulting in high restaurant failure (Maumbe, 2012; Mhlanga, 2018). According to StatsSA (2016), approximately 62% of micro-fast-food restaurants fail during their first year of operation, and 87% fail within five years. The numbers are startling considering the importance of micro-businesses for the South African, as the economy struggles with a high unemployment rate (StatsSA, 2021).

The importance of quality dimensions on customer satisfaction

Beyond the formal retail economy in the streets of Central Business Districts (CBDs) and shopping malls, as indicated by Ligthelm (2008), Charman et al. (2017) and Petersen and Charman (2018a), lies a real of business activity that is typified by micro-enterprises in rural-township settlements. These businesses are considered to be informal in that they generally lie outside the legal and institutional regulatory framework, and are generally unregistered (Statistics SA, 2010). The enterprises form part of the informal economy, and among these enterprises operating in the informal economy are micro-fast-food restaurants. The micro-fast-food restaurants are facing intense competition from established fast food restaurants in South Africa (Nair, 2016). Among the established brands is Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) which is the biggest player with over 771 restaurants across the country (Sullivan, 2018; Masocha&Mandipaka, 2020). The IMFFRs are also facing stiff competition from major supermarkets, namely: Checkers, Pick'n Pay, Spar, Shoprite, and other retail chains (Insight Survey, 2016). These major supermarkets now offer increasingly popular ready-to-eat meals in their deli sections (Veitch, 2017).

These competitive nature of the fast-food-chain industry present micro fast food restaurant managers with a special challenge regarding how to maintain profitability in a shrinking market while providing the customers with high quality products and services (Mhlanga et al. 2014; Goko, 2017). In order to compete successfully, the micro-fast-food restaurants must pay more attention to quality dimensions namely: price, service quality, product quality, and physical environment. If customers are satisfied with the quality dimension, they will repeat purchases, show loyalty, and act as representatives for the micro fast food restaurants by telling other people of their experience (Nindani et al., 2018). On the contrary,

should customers be dissatisfied with the quality dimension of the restaurant, as assessed by Nair (2013), it will have an adverse effect on the restaurant's image and probably their long-term survival. The results of Bowen and Chen's (2001) study verified the nonlinear and asymmetric relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and more importantly the importance of the correlation with business growth. However, the relationship between satisfaction and loyalty is expected to be dependent on the quality dimensions produced. In the IMFFR industry, every restaurant must strive to attain customer satisfaction as this leads to a stronger competitive position under intense competitive environment, as explained by Samudro et al. (2020), as these micro-businesses are not only competing with homogeneous businesses that sell foods having great similarities often using the same components, but are competing with established restaurants and supermarkets that have superior resources in general.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

Secondary data research was undertaken in order to lay the theoretical foundation upon which this paper is based, and a survey instrument was used to collect primary data from customers of an IMFFR in Mahikeng, South Africa (Leedy&Ormrod, 2013), to gather their views concerning the quality dimensions offered by the restaurant.Positivism philosophy was applied in this paper because positivism philosophy assists in addressing the objective of this paper, namely to examine the influence of quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in a micro fast food restaurant, and to determine the relationship between variables.

A core characteristic of the non-probability sampling technique, as proposed by Ivankova (2015), is that samples are selected based on the subjective judgement of the researcher, rather than random selection. Furthermore, a non-probability convenience sampling was used in this paper, and the target group was customers of the IMFFR situated in the township of Mahikeng that represented the research population with a predetermined sample size of 180 customers. A questionnaire was used to gather customers' viewpoints and perceptions of the quality dimensions offered by the restaurant, that is the product, service, physical environment and price.The questionnaire consisted of the following sections, starting with section (A) obtaining a demographic description of the research population and their level of association with the restaurant. This was followed by section (B), a series of questions concerning customers' insight concerning the restaurant's product and service provided. The following section (C) dealt with measuring the respondents' level of satisfaction with the restaurant in general. Lastly, section (D) dealt with general comments. In designing the questionnaire as research instrument to collect the quantitative data needed, validity and reliability were considered. For measuring the variables of this study in the quantitative method approach relevant items were selected from various authors (Sun, 2011; Trentin et al. 2012; Cruz, 2015; Khoironi et al., 2018) that were guided and aligned to the study's objectives and literature review section to form the measurement scales for the study. The measurement scales were used to measure the customers' perception concerning the quality dimensions offered by the restaurant.

In light of the research objectives and nature of the study, fieldwork was conducted by distributing questionnaires to the business site by the researcher. The questionnaires were placed at the restaurant for respondents to complete whilst waiting for their meal or after consumption. Participation in the study was voluntary and data was collected for a period of four months. From the 180 questionnaires that were distributed to respondents for data collection, 132 were completed and then data cleaning process was undertaken to remove incomplete and incorrect data for analytical purposes and as a result only 104 questionnaires were analysable. The questionnaire was assigned numeric codes for analytical purposes.Having collected the quantitative data, the next step was to analyse the data. All responses from the survey questionnaires were assigned numeric codes, as explained in the data collection process section, and subsequently inserted into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) that included bi-variant, multivariate and regression analysis, as mentioned by Field (2013).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings comprise of the demographic description of the customers of an IMFFR and the customers' views on the quality of product offered by the restaurant and their level of satisfaction with the restaurant. The results indicate that of the 104 customers who participated in the survey, 68.3% were customers were students, with 82.7% of participants being below the age of 30 years. From the 104 customers that participated in the survey, only 48 (46.2%) answered the question relating to their income level, and 26 out of 48 customers revealed that they have an income of R1 000 or less in a given month.Customers' preference for a particular product may be as a result of how the customer rated the quality and the degree to which it satisfied their stated needs, as suggested by Agwu and Afieroho (2016). In addition, Table 1 reveals that most customers were satisfied with the quality of food as it had a mean score of 1.45. Overall, customers indicated that they were satisfied with the quality dimensions of the restaurant, however they were neutral and slightly dissatisfied with the

restaurant's comfort and sitting arrangement as it has the highest mean score of 2.68.

Subsequently, it has the highest standard deviation score of 1.176, which indicates that the data points are spread out over a large range of values, and the results proposes that customers had dissimilar views with regards to comfort and sitting availability of the restaurant; and this point is substantiated by a high median score of 3. As shown in Table 2, customer loyalty has no relationship with value for money; the result obtained is -0.008, which is close to 0. If the correlation coefficient is 0, no relationship exists between the variables, whereas, the correlation between food quality and value for money is positively significant as the value is close to 1. There is a positive relationship between the variables, and this means that if one variable moves a given amount, the second moves proportionally in the same direction. A positive correlation coefficient less than 1 indicates a less than perfect positive correlation, with the strength of the correlation growing as the number approaches 1. It is important to note that customers of the restaurants are well satisfied with the price of the food as they get value for their money. The results will suggest that the food offered at the restaurant is reasonably priced, and can be afforded by its customers, specifically as the greatest number of its customers are students who have a low monthly income allowance.

Statement	N	Mean statistics	Median statistics	Std. dev statistics
The food is served hot and fresh	104	1.41	1.00	.719
The food is tasty and rich in flavour	104	1.39	1.00	.703
The quality of food is excellent	104	**1.45**	1.00	.695
The food meets the price value	104	1.68	1.00	.839
Menu has a good variety of items	104	1.89	2.00	1.023
Availability of sauces and beverages	104	2.26	2.00	1.005
Comfort and sitting availability	104	2.68	3.00	1.176
Friendly service	104	1.36	1.00	.723
Staff knowledgeable of items sold	104	1.46	1.00	.835
Cleanliness and hygiene	104	1.91	2.00	.883

Table 1: Quality Dimensions

Variables		Pearson correlations			
		Occupation status	Value for money	Customer loyalty	Food quality
Occupation status	Pearson correlation	1	.088	.097	.153
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.375	.328	.120
	N	104	104	103	104
Value for money	Pearson correlation	.088	1	-.008	.631**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.375		.934	.000
	N	104	104	103	104
Customer loyalty	Pearson correlation	.097	-.008	1	.104
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.328	.934		.295
	N	103	103	103	103
Food quality	Pearson correlation	.153	.631**	.104	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.120	.000	.295	
	N	104	104	103	104
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					

Table 2: Correlation of variables – Pearson correlation coefficient

Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean statistics	Std. dev statistics	Std. error mean	Skewness
Quality of food	104	1	5	1.67	1.065	.104	1.869
Quality of service	104	1	5	1.67	1.028	.101	1.953
Setting and environment	104	1	5	2.47	1.292	.127	.464
Product price	104	1	5	1.80	.969	.095	1.397
Overall satisfaction level	**104**	**1**	**5**	**1.90**	**1.09**	**.110**	**1.420**

Table 3: Measurement of overall satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the result of the correlation between a customer's expectation and experience. As observed from Table 3, the customers' overall satisfaction levels were high as it had an aggregate mean score of 1.90, which indicates that an overwhelmingly majority of customers from the study were satisfied with the performance of the restaurant. In addition, the satisfaction level with the quality of food and service both had a mean score of 1.67, and this indicates that the majority of the customers were satisfied. However, it is important to note that the results further revealed that customers were relatively neutral concerning the setting and environment of the restaurant. The more satisfied the customers are with the quality of food and overall performance of a restaurant, the more likely they will repeat they purchase, become loyal customers, share their positive experiences, recommend restaurants to their friends and family, and share their good experiences online with strangers. Specifically, IMFFRs are reliant on positive word of mouth, existing customers disseminating information to other people or prospect customers on their encounter with the restaurant, more importantly because micro-businesses do not have the advertising budget of established fast-food brands.

IV. CONCLUSION

These restaurants are essential for township economies in South Africa, as they provide community members an opportunity to start their own enterprises and be economically self-reliant, and typically will create employment for those members of the community who might not acquire jobs in the registered business market segment. In general, the informal sector is important to the country's economy as it significantly contributes towards the total employment in the country. The purpose of this research was to examine the importance of the quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in an informal micro-fast-food restaurant. The findings revealed an aggregated mean score of 1.90 for the level of satisfaction with quality dimensions offered by the restaurant, which clearly indicates that customers were satisfied with the restaurant. In addition, customers who participated in the study indicated that they were very satisfied with the taste and rich flavour of the food. However, customers had differing views concerning the seating and comfort of the restaurant as the statement had the highest standard deviation score as compared to others as previously shown. Therefore, in order to enjoy customer loyalty and an increased market share, the quality dimensions of the restaurant must be constantly improved upon. In addition, the restaurant should adopt a learning approach to gain knowledge and be committed to customer satisfaction through continuous improvement such as the improvement of the ambiance of the restaurant, as it is crucial to create an atmosphere in the restaurant conducive to the type of food the restaurant serves, as well as the type of customers the restaurant attracts. A need exists for further research into the examining the importance of total quality management in the growth of informal micro-fast-food restaurants.

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