

The Impact of Restaurant Noise on Customers' Dining Experience in Kowloon, Hong Kong

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Abstract:-

The purpose of this research is to answer two important questions that seem to have been neglected by many hospitality researchers. First, what is the impact of restaurant noise on the dining experience? Second, how do customers cope with noise? To answer these questions, data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations using a convenient sample of twenty customers in eight Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong. The findings indicate that noise negatively affects customers' dining experience by lowering their interest in food. Also, noise limits customers' socializing activities. Early-Late-Away and earphones are the strategies customers employ in order to cope with restaurant noise. Therefore, restaurateurs need to create quiet and relaxing environments if repeat visits are to be realized.

KEYWORDS: Restaurant Noise, Dining Experience, Customer

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the impact of noise on human beings (Yilmaz and Ozer, 2005; Goines, 2008) and wild animals and birds (Mbaiwa, 2003) has attracted considerable attention from researchers and policymakers. A number of studies have been conducted on the effects of noise in homes (Espy and Lopez, 2000; Goines, 2008), schools (Stansfeld et al., 2005; Rabinowitz, 2005) working places (Palmer et al., 2002; Abo-Qudais and Abu-Qdais, 2005) and medical centres (Wynne, 2003; Willich et al., 2006). However, the impact of noise in the hospitality sector, specifically in restaurants, has received little attention.

Generally, restaurants are not only for eating, but also places for socializing and relaxing (Lebo et al., 1994), and therefore a good atmosphere that supports such activities and brings about customer satisfaction is absolutely essential (Namkung and Jang, 2008). Satisfied customers become loyal to restaurants and make referrals (Chi and Gursoy, 2009), and this leads to repeat restaurant visits. Soriano (2002) acknowledges that the need for comfortable environment in restaurants is on the increase among customers. For example, the study of Law et al. (2008) on how the Mainland Chinese select restaurants confirmed that restaurant

environment was considered somewhat important by their respondents. This implies that restaurateurs need to understand what enhances customers' satisfaction in order to encourage return visits. Unfortunately, most restaurateurs have concentrated on the food while creating a quiet atmosphere in which to serve it seems to be rather neglected. Soriano (2002:1056) comments that "offering good food and good service is not enough to attract and retain customers". This implies that restaurateurs need to pay attention to other restaurant attributes that offer more holistic consumer satisfaction. Up to now, most restaurant studies have concentrated on producer aspects (Jensen and Hansen, 2007) but the consumer perspective, such as the impact of noise on customers, appears to be one of the under-researched areas.

When customers visit a restaurant, they are not only interested in food but also in other restaurant attributes. Some of the attributes are indicated in the study of Lim and Ya (1997) that was conducted in Korea (See Table 1). The study revealed that cleanliness of establishment (restaurants), noise, and advertising were the major inconveniences to international tourists and other visitors in Korean restaurants in 2000 and 2002. The environment in which food is served and a combination of other attributes indicated in Table 1 play an important role in customer satisfaction and retention. Generally, customer satisfaction in a restaurant cannot be attributed to a single attribute (Heide et al., 2007) but rather a combination of attributes (See Table 1). Unless hospitality managers pay attention to this fact, enhancing customer satisfaction and retention may become a challenge to them. It is emphasized that "if consumers are satisfied with a product or brand, they will be more likely to continue to purchase and use it and to tell others of their favorable experience with it ... if they are dissatisfied, they will be more likely to switch brands and complain to manufacturers, retailers, and other consumers about the product" (Peter and Olson, 1987:512). Peter and Olson's (1987) observation applies to the restaurant setting in that when customers are satisfied with a restaurant, they are most likely to return unlike when they are dissatisfied. From the marketing perspective it is acknowledged that retaining a satisfied customer is less expensive than attracting a new customer (Naumann, 1995).

According to Lim and Ya (1997), service in the restaurant encompasses personal, product and physical elements. Each of the elements has attributes that restaurant customers always look for before they regard their dining experience as

satisfactory and memorial to necessitate repeat visits. Table 1 below presents the attributes that determine customer satisfaction and post-dining intentions.

Table 1: Attributes that determine restaurant customers' satisfaction

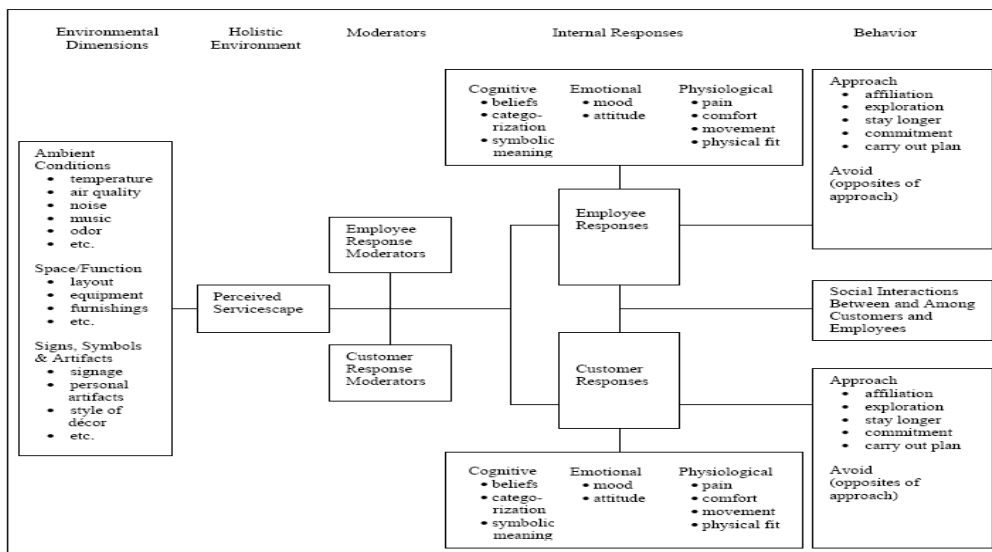
Service	Attribute
Personal	■ Attitude of employees
	■ Quickness of service
	■ Employees' communication ability in foreign language
	■ Employee appearance
	■ Accuracy of bill
Product	■ Amount of service charge
	■ Quality of food
	■ Quantity of food
	■ Food price
	■ Menu variety
	■ Quality of drinking water
	■ Taste of food
Physical	■ Availability of food on menu
	■ Cleanliness of establishment
	■ Spaciousness of establishment
	■ <u>Noise level</u>
	■ Cleanliness of restroom
	■ Availability of parking
	■ Convenience of location
■ Quality of advertising	

Source: Lim and Ya (1997:54)

Lim and Ya (1997) argue that restaurateurs should pay attention to all of these attributes, if they are to meet and exceed customers' expectation. In sum, noise falls within the physical environment. The physical environment of restaurants can lead to customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction. There are other elements under physical environment that enhance or hinder customer satisfaction in

restaurants. These include temperature, scent, colour, lighting, air quality, among others (Bitner, 1992; Heide et al., 2007). Bitner's (1992) framework presents the effects of environmental dimension on customers and employees in service organizations. The environmental dimension encompasses ambient conditions, space/function, and spaces, symbols and artifacts (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: framework for understanding environment-user relationships in service organizations



Source: Bitner (1992:60)

Restaurant noise which falls under the broad category of ambience in Bitner's (1992) framework appears to have received little research attention. This is reflected in the comment made by Heide et al (2007:1317) that "despite the considerable interest in ambience among practitioners, limited empirical research has been conducted in hospitality settings. While an important body of relevant research exists in more general disciplines such as environmental psychology, systematic research is needed to study ambience in the context of hospitality management". Although this comment was made nearly three years ago, still the aspect of ambience, particularly the impact of noise in restaurants, has not been adequately researched by hospitality researchers. As a consequence, there are relatively limited recently published conceptual and empirical research papers about the subject of the impact noise in the restaurant industry. It is against this background that this study seeks to answer the following two questions. First, what is the impact of restaurant noise on the dining experience? Second, how do customers cope with noise? In order to answer these questions, the study used the following methodology.

Methodology

There is no study without limitations (Patton, 2002). Therefore, before the data collection methods, analysis, and the results are presented, it is necessary to acknowledge the following three major limitations of this study that future studies should avoid. Firstly, this study used a non-experimental research design and a small sample size of twenty customers from eight Chinese restaurants in one location. For that reason, the generalization of the findings of this study may be limited. Secondly, no specific instruments or techniques were used to determine how quiet or noisy the sampled restaurants were. The labeling of restaurants as quiet or noisy was based on participants' personal judgment or common sense. Thirdly, the study was limited to customers who could communicate in English, the language the author clearly understands. This implies that the perceptions of non-English speakers were not explored.

Personal observations and in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposeful and convenient sample of twenty customers from eight Chinese restaurants in Kowloon, Hong Kong. Ten of the customers were Chinese (five Hong Kong and five Mainland Chinese) and the rest were international (one Ugandan, two South Africans, two Americans, one Italian, two British, and two Germans). The customers were selected on the basis that they could communicate in English. The researcher

approached each participant by first greeting him/her in English. If the customer did not respond or responded in a different language, then the researcher left and looked for another customer. Each interview session lasted approximately 30-50 minutes. This study used the qualitative content analysis technique to analyze data. Qualitative content analysis is described as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005:1278).

It should be noted that research ethics are important aspects of any research (Welman *et al.*, 2005). In this study, the following ethics were observed. First, no participant was coerced to take part in in-depth interviews (participation was purely voluntary). Second, no participant was mentioned by name or identified with information she/he shared with the author in this study. Third, all the participants requested not to be audio recorded. The author respected their request by not audio recording participants' responses. Instead field notes were taken during the interviews process.

Results and Dissuasion

Most customers indicated that restaurant noise negatively affects the dining experience by lowering their interest in food and beverages. One customer commented, "When I enter a restaurant, it means I want to eat. However, I gradually lose interest in food because my appetite just disappears whenever noise becomes unbearable". It was observed that people dining in noisy restaurant usually left food on their plates unlike those in quiet restaurants. This can be explained by the fact that people spent longer time in quiet restaurants resulting in significantly increased consumption. However, customers in noisy restaurants spent less time and additional consumption was impossible. Interestingly, most of the customers mentioned that some quiet restaurants are famous for respectable customers and offer high quality food and beverages. This finding is contrary to the study of Tse et al. (2002) where quiet restaurants were associated with low quality food and poor reputation. This study reveals that most customers expressed dissatisfaction at restaurant noise mainly because it disrupts and limits socializing activities. They argued that socializing while eating is an important aspect of their life. As a case in point, one customer said "noisy restaurants force me to seek quiet places in order to chat with my friends. Yet we all love chatting in restaurants while taking our dinner".

Most local customers valued food as the most important aspect in restaurants. In contrast, international customers were equally concerned about the issue of restaurant noise rather than simply the food. The international customers indicated that even if food is of good quality, if it is served in a noisy atmosphere the quality becomes meaningless. This finding concurs with study of Kokko (2005) which points out that restaurant atmosphere (ambience) could have a stronger impact on customer satisfaction and post-dining intentions than food itself.

In terms of gender, both local and international male customers were less concerned about restaurant noise than their female counterparts. This could imply that different customer segments are affected differently by restaurant attributes (Yüksel and Yüksel, 2003). A successful hospitality establishment strives to make sure that customers are satisfied despite their differences. Although this study noted some gender differences in the perceptions towards restaurant noise, it did not investigate this issue further.

Personal observations and interviews revealed that customers who frequently used headsets were not bothered by the noise. Even without headsets, these customers indicated that noise was not an issue. Could it be that the headsets have a negative impact on users' hearing ability? This issue calls for further investigation.

The sources of restaurant noise are consumers, producers and 'environments' outside restaurants (external noise) (Christie, 2004). For this research, participants regarded their fellow customers as one of the sources of noise. For example, participants expressed that customers generate considerable amount of noise in the way they communicate with one another or how they handle seats, especially in restaurants with no carpets. Also, participants mentioned that sometimes restaurant employees become a source of noise depending on how they handle utensils and the music they play. However, participants commented that among all the three sources of noise, their fellow customers were responsible for generating a lot of noise. This observation is akin to the finding in the study of Christie (2004). Christie's (2004) investigation of noise in bars, cafes and restaurants revealed that customers were the predominant source of noise. But the earlier study of Caldwell and Hibbert (2002) indicated that the level of noise generated by restaurant management in the form of music tempo determines the amount of time customers spend dining. The amount of time spent has some revenue implications in that when customers spend less time in the restaurant, additional consumption that usually lead to additional spending is negatively affected. Basically, the level of noise in restaurants influences customers' dining behavior. This is reflected in Caldwell and Hibbert's (2002)

observation that "Time spent in the restaurant was the most powerful predictor of money spent in the restaurant" (Caldwell and Hibbert, 2002: 895).

When the impact of noise was investigated in a non-restaurant setting (i.e. in a supermarket), it was discovered that loud music made customers spend less time shopping (Smith and Curnow, 1966 cited in Caldwell and Hibbert, 2002). In the restaurant context, Caldwell and Hibbert (2002:912) concluded that "both music tempo and musical preference appeared to significantly influence total spending and the amount spent on food and drink in the restaurant. Spending on food and drink was higher under the slow music condition". From their study, it can be concluded that loud music or unwanted music can be referred to as noise which negatively affects customers' post-dining behavioral intentions.

In order to cope with noise, customers use "Early-Late-Away" strategy where dining at a noisy restaurant is made early or late (before or after the crowds). Alternatively, food is bought and taken away to quiet places. Taking food away from restaurants is disliked by most customers. They argued that it limits social interaction and confines them at home or other usual places making them bored and isolated. Conversely, dining in restaurants is regarded as a means to escape usual environments, relax and interact with friends. One participant said that "dining out at restaurants is an important social aspect among the young Chinese because it strengthens the bond between friends". This is in agreement with Lebo et al. (1994) who argue that restaurants are not only for eating in, but also places for various socializing activities. Socializing with family members and friends was one of the most important reasons why the customers sampled like dining in restaurants. This finding differs from that of Rydell et al. (2008) where the attribute "eating out as a way of socializing" was rated low. This study suggests strongly that restaurateurs need to foster an enabling atmosphere for their customers' socializing.

It is important to remember that the success or failure of any restaurant is largely determined by its customers (Tian, 2001). For instance, when customers are dissatisfied they tend to limit repeat visits and substitute noisy restaurants with quiet ones or other food outlets. Another coping strategy that customers use is to wear headsets/earphones to produce sound (such as music) that is louder than restaurant noise. Although most customers use this strategy, some indicated that they dislike it because it isolates them from the world (friends) and loud sound makes them uncomfortable. One customer commented "I nearly became deaf due to listening to loud sounds in an attempt to compete with restaurant noise". It was observed that majority of the customers/diners come to restaurants with

headsets/earphones yet such customers generate more noise than those without headsets through their rough handling of seats when sitting down or getting up from them. This applied only to restaurants without carpets.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that noise in restaurants negatively affects customers' dining experience and post-dining intentions. Although some strategies are employed by customers to cope with noise, the end result is loss of patronage and revenue for noisy restaurants. Therefore, strategies that reduce noise in restaurants should be implemented. For example, fitting the 'legs' of seats with rubber shoe-like structures (for restaurants with no carpets) and putting up notices requesting customers to reduce noise could help. Furthermore, restaurants located near busy roads and centres should be sound-proofed against external noise.

Future Research

This study suggests that future research on restaurant noise should pay attention to the following five issues. First, future research should use the experimental research design where one would control the level of noise in different restaurants and then measure customers' reactions in terms of their satisfaction levels. Second, future studies should use instruments in order to determine the level of noise in restaurants. Third, using a large sample of customers and restaurants in different geographical locations to investigate the impact of noise would cast more light on the issue. Fourth, there is a need to investigate whether demographic variables have an impact on customers' perceptions of restaurant noise on dining experience. Fifth, since this study is qualitative, future studies should take a quantitative approach in order to statistically test and analyze the impact of noise in restaurants.

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