CUSTOMERS' REACTION TO SERVICESCAPE FAILURE AND ASSOCIATED RECOVERY STRATEGY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN THE FOOD SERVICE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

The term 'servicescape' refers to the physical environment in a service encounter which elicits internal reactions from customers leading to the display of approach or avoidance behaviours. This study examines the effects of servicescape failures on customers' responses to the associated recovery strategies in the food service industry. Using the critical incident technique (CIT), data on 226 servicescape failures and 287 recovery strategies were collected from 174 informants who had experienced servicescape dissatisfaction and encountered recovery strategies over various types of the food service industry. The content analysis disclosed that cleanliness issues were the most reported problem in the food service industry, followed by design issues, social issues, and functionality issues. Customers exhibited negative reactions to failures, displaying emotional, physiological, and cognitive responses. It is appears that servicescape failures can significantly diminish perceptions of service performance and evoke feelings of dissatisfaction. The results suggest that customers' recovery effort evaluations are not much influenced by the type of servicescape failures; overall, a combination of prompt action-oriented responses and sincere empathetic-oriented responses is perceived as the most important determinant of recovery effectiveness.

Keywords: Servicescape failure; recovery strategy; food service industry; critical incident technique

INTRODUCTION

The heightened significance of the importance of providing excellent service quality is well-documented in service marketing literature. Attempting to deliver superior intangibles may lead service managers to overlook the importance of tangible aspects in service quality. A brief review of previous service quality literature which focused on a variety of service quality dimensions on customers' behaviours has concluded that physical environment is apparently insignificant,

or the least important for customers' perceptions and behaviours. For instance, research examining customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry suggested that customer satisfaction was influenced most by the responsiveness of contact personnel and unrelated to physical environments (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Johnston's (1995) study on the service quality in banks found that 'tangibles' comprise the least important dimension in service quality. Wakefield and Blodgett (1999) summarized three reasons why tangibles are unimportant in service industries: (i) short duration upon service consumption; (ii) inadequate research into capturing customers' affective responses to tangibles; and (iii) inadequate dimensions of tangible aspects in SERVQUAL scales. However, the physical environment in which services are delivered, which is also known as the 'servicescape', has been receiving increasing attention in the services-marketing literature in recent decades. Several researchers have paid more attention to the insufficiency of theoretical and empirical research into the area (Bitner, 1992; Cronin, 2003; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Kotler, 1973) and the critical importance of the physical environments on customers' responses in all service settings (Bitner, 1992; Ezeh & Harris, 2007; Wall & Berry, 2007). Since the consumer is often experiencing the total service, service managers must look at all the elements of the service and should not overlook the physical environments as their abilities to have a strong impact on customers' perceptions of the service experience (Reimer & Kuehn, 2005) and psychological responses (Kim & Moon, 2009), in turn, facilitate customers' repatronage (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999).

Researchers acknowledge that tangible factors (such as servicescapes) and intangible factors (such as responsiveness, assurance, reliability, and empathy) are complementary in their effects on customers' evaluations of service quality (Kotler, 1973; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988; Wall & Berry, 2007). Services are increasingly being integrated with the physical settings in which they are rendered (Shostack, 1977) as research has demonstrated the significant influence of servicescapes on consumers' behaviour (Bitner, 1992; Mehrabian, 1977; Kim & Moon, 2009). Despite previous studies emphasizing the importance of servicescape in a service firm (Hoffman, Kelley, & Chung, 2003; Reimer & Kuehn, 2005; Santos, 2002; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999), and several studies dealing with the aspects of servicescape on behavioral effects, such as colour (Bellizzi, Crowley, & Hasty, 1983), background music (Herrington & Capella, 1996; Milliman, 1986), lighting (Areni & Kim, 1994), and getting along with other customers (Grove & Fisk, 1997), a comprehensive study of servicescape failure and its effect on customers' evaluation of recovery remains scarce, particularly in the food service industry. An earlier study shows the relevance of dissatisfied service encounters in the restaurant industry (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990). Service recovery issues have experienced a significant increase in service marketing literature and are recognized as a critical element of customer service strategy (Miller, Craighead, & Karwan, 2000; Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999). It is generally accepted that service failures combined with inappropriate recovery efforts can dramatically generate negative word-of-mouth comments (Lewis &

McCann, 2004) and devastate customer retention rates (Hoffman & Chung, 1999). Surprisingly, Hoffman, Kelley, and Rotalsky (1995) amplified that recovery from facility problems (such as bad smells, animate objects found in food, or crawling across the table, and dirty silverware) in food service operations was particularly difficult if compared to other failure types. Therefore, servicescape and recovery issues should not be overlooked in their ability to influence behaviors as they represent critical moments of truth for food service providers in their efforts to satisfy and keep customers. In general, a recovery strategy is evaluated positively when it exceeds customers' expectations, but is evaluated negatively when it fails to meet customers' expectations (McCollough, Berry, & Yadav, 2000).

This study was designed to extend the understanding of the impacts of servicescape failures on recovery strategy evaluations. This study draws upon Hoffman et al.'s, (2003) findings, whereby the authors outlined the types of servicescape failure and recovery strategy in the restaurant and hotel industry. This study helps to fill the gap by providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the issue. It is practical to incorporate these two subject streams because previous research has suggested customers' responses to failure may be critical in determining their recovery evaluations, especially in restaurant settings (Hoffman et al., 1995). The study concludes with several implications for the benefit of the food service industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Dimensions of Servicescapes

According to Bitner (1992), the term 'servicescape' refers to "… all of the objective physical factors that can be controlled by the firm to enhance (or constrain) employee and customer actions" (p.45). Bitner's (1992) definition has been widely quoted and accepted in the services-marketing literature (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Hoffman & Turley, 2002; Hoffman et al., 2003; Lin, 2004). Ezeh and Harris (2007) enlarged on this definition by incorporating customers' responses and behaviours when they defined servicescape as "… the physical environment (with or without customer input) housing the service encounter, which elicits internal reactions from customers leading to the display of approach or avoidance behaviors" (p.61).

Bitner (1992) grouped the components of servicescapes as: (i) ambient conditions: temperature, air quality, noise, music, and odor; (ii) space/function: layout, equipment, and furnishings; (iii) signs, symbols, and artifacts: signage, personal artifacts, and style of décor. Lin (2004) classified the dimensions of servicescapes into three major groups of 'cues': (i) visual cues: colour, lighting, space and function, personal artifacts, layout and design; (ii) auditory cues: music and noise; and (iii) olfactory cues: scents. However, it should be noted that the classification of servicescape dimensions varies across different service industries (Ezeh & Harris, 2007). Despite the differences in classifications and groupings,

it is generally agreed that the concept of what constitutes a servicescape includes such elements as ambience, artifacts, signage, cleanliness, number of people, other patrons' behaviours, design, layout, and functionality. All those components are essential in creating service experiences.

Perceptions of Service Quality and Customers' Behaviour in Servicescapes

Customers' perceptions of service quality are determined by a combination of tangible and intangible elements (Johnston, 1995; Parasuraman Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). Reimer and Kuehn (2005), who measured service quality (using SERVQUAL) taking into account the role of servicescapes as search qualities, concluded that servicescapes have a dual role in assessments of service quality: (i) providing clues for expected service quality; and (ii) acting as a key factor in influencing customers' evaluations of other factors (intangibles) in determining perceived service quality. In a similar vein, Wall and Berry (2007), who studied the effects of servicescapes and employee behaviour on service quality, found that servicescapes have a significant influence on customers' expectations of service quality because customers seek tangible clues to assist them in forming an expectation of service quality. In other words, servicescapes have the means of providing the 'evidence' that assists customers in making subjective assessments of service products (Hoffman & Turley, 2002).

Service encounters encompass interactions among customers, service employees, servicescapes, and all aspects of service provision (Lockwood, 1994). For the purpose of this study, a service encounter is taken to be the period of time during which a customer interacts with the servicescape. A plethora of research has confirmed that perceptions of servicescapes lead to cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses that influence customer behaviours (Bitner, 1992; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002; Ryu & Jang, 2007; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1994; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996). In particular, Wakefield and Blodgett (1999) reported that physical environments have a significant impact on customers' affective responses and post-purchase behaviour in leisure service settings. In a modern international airport setting, Newman (2007) demonstrated that helpful signage and pleasant spatial arrangements influence customers' behaviour by inducing positive moods and positive images of the service organization. This is in accordance with the view of Bitner (1992) that servicescape performs multifaceted roles within service encounters as a facilitator, socializer and differentiator. Thus, servicescape is viewed as capable of influencing a wide range of behaviours as well as providing a context in which these behaviours occur (Hoffman & Turley, 2002).

Servicescape Failure as a Form of Service Failure

Service failure can occur as a consequence of a problem with service delivery, service product, service facility, employee behaviour, other customers' behaviour,

or a combination of these (Bitner et al., 1990). Primarily, service failures are caused by inefficient staff, slow service, unavailable service, unfriendly staff, product problems, and incorrect billing. Servicescapes failures are prominent among the causes of service failure and can include foreign objects in a meal, inoperative air-conditioning, machine breakdown, offensive odors, slippery floors, broken furniture, dirty utensils, and crowds. It is apparent that the role of tangibles in service-encounter satisfaction should not be underestimated (Bitner et al., 1990).

Antecedents of Consumers' Complaint Behaviour

Servicescape failures lead to dissatisfaction and dissatisfied customers often want to take action in response to encountering a situation that has deviated from what was supposed to happen (Bougie, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2003). Complaining is the most common response to such dissatisfaction (Velázquez, Contrí, Saura, & Blasco 2006). However, as Bougie et al. (2003) have demonstrated, dissatisfaction alone is insufficient to provoke complaint behaviour unless it is mediated by anger. Customers are more likely to be angry, and therefore more likely to be assertive in complaining, if a servicescape failure causes overt harm.

Service Recovery

The term 'service recovery' refers to the actions taken to: (i) rectify the service failure; and (ii) convert the negative attitudes of dissatisfied customers to positive attitudes with a view to customer retention (Miller et al., 2000). The development of an effective recovery strategy is essential to retaining customers, preventing negative word-of-mouth communication, and generating trust and loyalty. Keaveney (1995) reported that customers tend to engage in switching behaviour if service firms do not adopt recovery strategies. However, the blind execution of a recovery strategy without adequate assessment of the effectiveness of that strategy is mere trial and error.

Mishandling customers' complaints about service failures can dramatically impair the relationship between the customer and the service organization. McCollough et al. (2000) suggest customers' satisfaction is lower after service failures and recovery (even given high recovery performance) than is the case in error-free service. However, Hess, Ganesan, and Klein (2003) found that customers with higher expectations of a continuing relationship with a service provider have lower service-recovery expectations after a service failure, are more likely to ascribe that failure to accidental causes, and have greater satisfaction with service performance after recovery. Maintaining a positive relationship with the customer is thus more important than meeting recovery expectation (Hedrick, Beverland, & Minahan, 2007).

The theory of fairness suggests that the outcome of an exchange is judged by assessing the resources expended against the rewards received. Several authors have suggested that customers are likely to use the theory of fairness to evaluate service-recovery efforts and post-recovery satisfaction (Kau & Loh, 2006; Mattila,

2001; Palmer, Beggs, & Keown-McMullan, 2000; Smith et al., 1999). Three concepts of justice are utilized in the theory of fairness: (i) distributive justice (perceived fairness of the specific outcome of the recovery effort); (ii) procedural justice (perceived fairness of the procedure used in arriving at the outcome); and (iii) interactional justice (perceived fairness of the inter-personal behaviour in delivering the outcome). The outcomes of the recovery, the procedures of the decision-making, and the inter-personal behaviour of service employees must be in accordance with perceived justice if customers are to be satisfied with the service recovery (Kau & Loh, 2006). Hoffman and Chung (1999) found that action-oriented responses are perceived by customers to be more effective than mere apologies. However, the process of recovery is more difficult when customers perceive the failures to be serious (Hoffman et al., 1995; Mattila, 1999) or if they feel offended (Mattila, 2001). Indeed, dissatisfaction can remain after a more severe failure, regardless of whether the recovery has been successful (Weun, Beatty, & Jones, 2004). Boshoff (1997) contended that a higher level of compensation positively enhances a customer's level of satisfaction with service recovery, regardless of who performs the service recovery. However, Wirtz and Mattilla (2004) found that greater compensation is effective in enhancing satisfaction only in circumstances of delayed recovery with an apology or immediate recovery without an apology. Besides, customers perceive greater justice and have higher overall post-failure satisfaction when given an opportunity to voice their recovery expectations (Karande, Magnini, & Tam, 2007). In addition, a well-handled service-recovery process has a superior impact on customers' satisfaction and behavioral intentions than does customers' satisfaction with original service outcomes (Spreng, Harrell, & Mackoy, 1995). The quality of customer-service employee encounters can have a greater impact on the way customers feel about service firms than the quality of customer-environment encounters (Kivelä & Chu, 2001). In a similar vein, McColl-Kennedy and Sparks (2003) demonstrated that customers' emotions are likely to be moderated by recovery efforts through service employees' intervention. For example, customers tend to experience negative emotions (such as anger and dissatisfaction) when service employees do not appear to put effort into recovery attempts (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954) has been used in this study to examine customers' dining experiences associated with servicescape failures and recovery strategies in the food service industry. The CIT is a fruitful approach to filling the void of the previous research in this regard because it has the ability to describe real servicescape failure phenomena and recovery effectiveness. It is a pragmatic qualitative research tool that reflects the way in which service customers think, without diminishing the reliability of the information (Viney,

1983). The CIT methodology differs from other qualitative methods by focusing on the specific incidents that are well-remembered by customers and by providing practical solutions (in the customers' own words) to the problems that confront them. The memorable incidents are desirable because they allow a more precise identification of the behaviour than incidents which are more nearly average in character (Flanagan, 1954). The CIT being a flexible method can be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand (Flanagan, 1954). Research conducted by Andersson and Nilsson (1964) on the reliability and validity aspects of the CIT directed them to conclude that the information collected by this technique is both reliable and valid. Thus, the credibility of interpreted results can be enhanced provided that standards of data collection and analysis are met.

Theoretically, critical incidents involve the disconfirmation of expectations (Hoffman & Chung, 1999) and make a significant contribution, either positively or negatively, to a phenomenon. For this study, the critical incident was defined as "an interaction between customer and physical environment whereby the customer encounters dissatisfying interaction with the physical environment and evaluates the effectiveness of the recovery strategy taken by the food service practitioner to rectify the failure". Hence, only those incidents that customers found memorable were included.

Data Collection

Data collection in CIT is conducted by record form, personal interview, self-administered survey, and/or focus group discussion (Flanagan, 1954). Research to date has tended to use self-administrated survey forms with closed and open-ended questions to examine servicescape experiences (Hoffman et al., 2003). Such approaches fail to provide probing and in-depth investigation of the issues involved. As a result, some salient points of the failure and recovery can be largely unnoticed by researchers. Of these, the in-depth personal interview was considered to be necessary because it provided a rare glimpse into the reasons consumers respond to servicescape failures and evaluate the recovery effectiveness. It allows researchers to unearth intensely the area of research to assist in understanding the effects of servicescape failures on recovery evaluations. Note that informants are asked to tell stories (self-experience) about all the things that had occurred rather than being asked to analyze why the incidents occurred (Bitner et al., 1990; Gremler, 2004; Keaveney, 1995). Prior to data collection, the researcher was provided with detailed descriptions of the ways to conduct an effective interview. Following the pretesting and development of the reliable and valid instrument, the researcher was involved in fieldwork to collect the data over a four-month period. During the interview, the informants were asked to recall the memorable incidents and provide detailed descriptions of their experiences. Prior to that, explanations were provided to the informants on the definition and examples of physical environments in food service because they may have been uncertain of the meaning of 'servicescape'. Previous CIT studies used a six-month time frame

for reliability recall of the incidents being studied (Keaveney, 1995; Susskind, 2005). This study was not restricted to a certain period but extended, provided that informants were able to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences in servicescapes and recoveries. All the interviews were successfully recorded using a digital recorder.

Classification of Incidents

An initial 102 incidents were transcribed, paying attention to transcribing the exact language used, manners, and contexts of the ways that critical incidents were described. For Malay-speaking and Mandarin-speaking informants, responses were first transcribed in written Malay and Mandarin versions and then translated into English. The written English version was then compared with the written and taped Malay and Mandarin versions and adjusted accordingly. Next, content analysis was employed in the deductive sorting process to classify data categories that summarize and describe the research phenomenon. Kassarjian (1977) defined the content analysis as 'a scientific, objective, systematic, quantitative, and generalizable description of communications pattern' (p.10). In other words, the purpose of the content analysis is a categorization scheme to provide insights into the frequency and patterns of factors that affect the research phenomenon (Gremler, 2004). The CIT relies heavily upon content analysis and it has been widely used in research applying CIT (Bitner et al., 1990; Grove & Fisk, 1997; Kivelä & Chu, 2001). The systematic analysis resulted in four major categories of servicescape failure. An additional 124 incidents were collected for validation purpose concurrently, whereby new emergent themes were explored. Given that no new servicescape incident was uncovered, we ceased data collection. This is consistent with Flanagan's (1954) suggestion that the number of incidents gathered is satisfactory when the analysis of the addition of 100 critical incidents to the sample discloses no more than two or three critical behaviours. Flanagan (1954) also emphasized that the sample size is not determined by the number of respondents, but rather by the number of critical incidents gathered which represent adequate coverage of the phenomenon being studied.

Two researchers read, sorted, reread, and recombined the 226 incidents until consensus was achieved on category labels and the assignment of each incident to the relevant category. The procedure involved first identifying broad groupings of categories, followed by a classification effort that produced specificity. Since there have been literally dozens of attempts to conceptualize servicescape dimensions and types of recovery strategies, with divergent results and confusing terminology, Hoffman et al.'s (2003) findings were referred to for categorizing the incidents in this research. In the recovery effectiveness coding scheme, it was the informants who defined whether the recoveries were positive or negative. Based on the informants' descriptions, we conclude that recovery effectiveness is certainly not an objective measure, but rather is subjective.

The unambiguity of the classification system is measured by inter-judge reliability (Kassarjian, 1977; Perreault & Leigh, 1989). Inter-judge reliability

is a measure of whether different judges classify the same incidents into the same categories and inter-judge reliability above 0.80 is considered satisfactory (Kassarjian, 1977). To establish the reliability of the classification scheme, two independent judges who were not involved in the initial sorting effort were sought to code the data. The two judges helped to place the incidents into categories. Next, the reliability of the researcher's coding was calculated by finding the percentage of agreement between the coding of the researcher and the two independent judges on each classification system. This measure is easy to calculate and its interpretation is intuitive (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). Inter-judge agreement on assignment of the servicescape incidents to the categories was 90.7% and 96.3%, all exceeding Kassarjian's (1977) recommended threshold of 0.80 for content analysis. Similarly, the two independent judges were provided with the identified recovery strategies and asked to independently sort each of the recoveries into the recovery strategy categories provided by the researcher. This resulted in recovery agreement rates of 93.1% and 96.6%. These figures indicated satisfactory reliability of the CIT categories. The discrepancies of classification schemes between researchers and inter-judges were resolved by discussion until consensus reached.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Informants

One hundred and seventy four informants were interviewed during the period of data collection. The demographic analysis depicted that 59 informants were male (33.9%) and 115 informants were female (66.1%). With respect to ethnicity, 41.9% of the informants were Malay, 41.4% were Chinese, and 16.7% were Indian. The age range of the informants was from 16 to 54 years. The profession profile revealed that 29.3% of the informants were in professional and managerial groups, 14.4% were in clerical and administrative groups, 7.5% were in technical and operational groups, 4.0% were in sales and production groups, and 44.8% were students.

Information about the Critical Incidents Reported

In a number of cases there were multiple incidents per interview, resulting in a total of 226 classifiable incidents across the 174 personal interviews. Those incidents happened between the years 1988 and 2008. The majority of the informants had better recall of servicescape incidents that had occurred within the past one to twelve months, with a total of 67.0% at the time of the interviews. The next incident time interval was more than twelve months, with totals of 29.8%. It was quite interesting to note that two informants could recall the critical incidents in detail even though they had happened more than ten years ago, which supports Kivelä and Chu's (2001) argument that customers were more likely to remember and recall negative dining experiences than positive ones. Only six

informants could not remember the year the incident had occurred. We decided to include those informants as they had the ability to recall the unsatisfactory experience and describe it in detail. Of the reported critical incidents, 62.2% were from restaurants, 14.9% from stalls/hawkers, 13.3% from cafeterias/food courts, 6.4% from cafés/pubs/coffee houses/cake houses, and 3.2% from school canteens. 63.3% of the reported incidents happened when informants had repatronized that particular outlet, while 36.7% incidents happened when the informants were new customers.

Incident Classification System – Servicescape Failures

The sorting of the incidents resulted in four major groups of servicescape failure. A total of 20 sub-categories of servicescape failures were identified within these four major types of servicescape failures. The category classification system depicted that in most circumstances, cleanliness issues were the greatest problems in the food service industry, with total of 76.1%. The second issue of servicescape failure that was of concern to the food service industry was design issues, with a total of 11.0%. The third grouping of servicescape failure was related to social interaction issues, with a total of 7.1%. Lastly, the final grouping of servicescape failure was related to functionality issues, with total of 5.8%. Clearly, design issues, social interaction issues, and functionality issues counted as minor failures of the total servicescape failures reported in the food service industry. This is not particularly surprising given that the nature of the CIT involves the collection of critical incidents from informants.

Incident Classification System – Recovery Strategies

The ability of food service providers to respond and handle the servicescape failures could result in the recovery strategies being remembered as satisfactory and unsatisfactory recoveries. The recovery strategies which evolved included the food service manager, staff, and/or authority. These recovery strategies represented truly expected, unexpected, requested, or unrequested strategies that either enhanced or detracted from the dining experience. A total of 29 types of recoveries were identified. The 29 servicescape-recovery strategies were reduced to a more manageable number of recovery strategies pertinent to the food service industry. This sorting process resulted in five major recovery categories which are empathetic, corrective, compensatory, authority intervention, and no recovery.

Customer Responses to Servicescape Failures and the Effectiveness of Recovery Strategies

The interview results greatly indicated that informants displayed unsatisfying interactions with the servicescapes. Unsatisfactory servicescape incidents represent negative and unacceptable servicescapes that detract from the mood of eating. The analysis illustrated that emotional and physiological responses were the major components in customer reactions to servicescape failures. Specifically, the servicescape failures provoked emotions of displeasure, and somehow affected

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physical comfort. As a result they elicited perceptual responses and influenced customers' evaluation of the recovery efforts. Customers' affective responses to the failures are likely to have an influence on their cognitive evaluation of the recovery strategies. The following four major issues are concerned with unsatisfactory servicescape experiences and the effectiveness of the associated recoveries:

Group 1: Cleanliness issues

Incidents in this category involved food contaminants, dirty eating surroundings, utensils and equipment, seating conditions, kitchen, and toilet. Customers were found to have emotional and physiological responses to those failures. This finding should be of particular concern for food service managers because with reference to the majority of the reported number of servicescape failures, cleanliness problems were viewed as a critical issue and greatly affected customer evaluation of the dining experience as well as leading to an exhibition of dissatisfaction. One informant revealed their dissatisfied feelings as follows:

> After I dropped home the food, I realized that there was a staple bullet in the soup. With that, I didn't think that it was good to consume the soup, so I simply ate the rice. I was sad and upset…… It is a staple bullet that we are talking about. Staple bullet made from metal. Imagine if it goes to your stomach. It was a serious case but I was lucky to detect the staple bullet before it had gone into my mouth. (Malay Male, 20 years old)

It is noticeable that time lessens customers' abilities to precisely recall critical incidents (Kivelä & Chu, 2001). Surprisingly, a customer who had a negative experience with cleanliness issues was able to describe the incident in specific detail. For example, an informant described his haunting experience which had occurred 20 years ago as follows:

> I was totally shocked when seeing a lizard tail in my food! It was so disgusting! It was so dirty to have an animal's tail in food, because it might cause diarrhea or food poisoning…….. That was an experience which is hard to get rid of from my mind. I am still able to remember until now because it was as if I was watching a 'fear factor' show – eating part of an animal's body! (Chinese Male, 38 years old)

Group 2: Design issues

This category involved design relating to poor settings of seating, lighting, kitchen, music, décor, signboard, and floor. The inappropriate design of those resulted in stimulating emotional and physiological responses. Design factors are supposed to promote pleasure in the dining experience and facilitate the behaviour of customers. The findings of this study suggest that customers evaluate design factors negatively when these hinder the service activity. This is supported by Wakefield and Blodgett (1999) who agreed that a poor design can become the critical determinant of the way customers feel about the place. For example, an informant reported the following when reflecting on this experience of dissatisfaction:

> Imagine when you are sitting while having your meal and facing straight at the toilet!! It was really ruining my appetite. We all know how dirty a public toilet is, and how should I eat with facing the toilet??............. Toilet and food make a lousy combination. (Indian Female, 23 years old)

Group 3: Social interaction issues

The findings portray that servicescapes are not only a material stimulus but also a social construct consisting of people who play a significant role in the environments. Schneider (1987) denoted that environments are a function of the kind of people acts, and these behaviours make organizations what they are. Grove and Fisk (1997) called for further research in the area as the authors reported that, in sharing servicescape, customers' satisfaction was very much affected by other patrons' behaviours. The effect of human factors in the servicescape on one's experience has since been recognized. In this study, this category included incidents in which the behaviour and appearance of staff was viewed negatively by customers as well as other patrons' behavior being particularly unruly. The performance of staff and other patrons served to inhibit the dining experience, thereby leading to displays of emotional responses, which in turn, influenced beliefs about the environment itself. Interestingly, none of the informants expressed physiological responses to social interaction failure. Two informants noted that:

> I felt disgusted and angry when saw a waiter touch the food after he touched his sneezing nose…… We didn't know what germ that was and where the waiter came from. (Malay Male, 23 years old)

> A group of customers was smoking although there was a signboard written there with 'no smoking'. I felt disturbed by the smoke and noise made by those people. (Malay Female, 20 years old)

Group 4: Functionality issues

This category included problems in which the equipment, cutlery, furniture, and faucet were functioning improperly. Customers exhibited physiological and emotional responses. Informants responded to the dissatisfaction as follows:

> We had been waiting for about half an hour but our food was not yet served. I was very angry and decided to ask a waiter what was happening. After receiving my complaint, the waiter went to the kitchen. Later, the waiter came to us and explained that the steamer in the kitchen was temporarily malfunctioning and we needed to wait. (Chinese Female, 23 years old)

Table 1 displays the findings regarding customers' perception of the effectiveness of recovery strategies according to the types of servicescape failures identified using the CIT. Ineffective recovery strategies accounted for 57.8% of total recovery responses, it was slightly higher than effective recovery strategies which made up 42.2% of the total responses. This finding suggests that it is particularly difficult to execute effective recoveries in servicescape failures, which is consistent with Hoffman et al.'s (1995) findings. The analysis disclosed that customers used the theory of fairness to evaluate the recovery process. All the three components of perceived justice must be met for the recoveries to be evaluated as effective.

Empathetic responses met interactional and procedural justice needs of customers but may not meet the needs for distributive justice. Action-oriented responses may meet the customers' distributive and procedural justice needs but somehow overlook the interactional justice needs.

Table 1 Effectiveness of Recovery Strategy According to the Type of Servicescape Failure

Category	Effective		Ineffective		Row Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Group 1: Cleanliness issues						
Empathetic responses	40	13.9	39	13.6	79	27.5
Corrective responses	33	11.5	53	18.5	86	30.0
Compensatory responses	13	4.5	12	4.2	25	8.7
Authority intervention	3	1.0	0	0.0	3	1.0
No recovery	0	0.0	26	9.1	26	9.1
Group 2: Design issues						
Empathetic responses	3	1.0	11	3.8	14	4.8
Corrective responses	2	0.7	1	0.3	3	1.0
Compensatory responses	0	0.0	2	0.7	2	0.7
No recovery	0	0.0	5	1.7	5	1.7
Group 3: Social interaction issues						
Empathetic responses	3	1.0	3	1.0	6	2.0
Corrective responses	3	1.0	0	0.0	3	1.0
Compensatory responses	1	0.3	0	0.0	1	0.3
No recovery	0	0.0	10	3.5	10	3.5
Group 4: Functionality issues						
Empathetic responses	10	3.5	1	0.3	11	3.8
Corrective responses	6	2.1	1	0.3	7	2.4
Compensatory responses	4	1.4	2	0.7	6	2.1
No recovery	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Column Total	**121**	**42.2**	**166**	**57.8**	**287**	**100.0**

Note: Most informants described more than one recovery per incident; hence the total of the recoveries does not equal the number of incidents.

Empathetic responses

Empathetic responses referred to situations in which the food service providers implied 'mouth approach' to acknowledge customers' complaints besides offering other types of tangible recovery. Effective recovery was reported by a combination of action-oriented responses (either a compensatory response or a corrective

response) with a sincere apology, explanation, concern, or promise. Reports of ineffective recovery referred to impolite and unacceptable explanations of food service providers that infuriated customers who were expecting an action to be taken. Some examples are stated in Table 2:

Table 2 Customers' Responses to 'Empathetic' by Type of Servicescape Failure

Servicescape Failure	Effective	Ineffective
Cleanliness issues	The staff member gave an explanation for the wet floor. She apologized for that and promised to be more alert. Besides, she also compensated me with free drink. (Chinese Female, 25 years old)	The staff said it was difficult for them to clean up the drain and trash site. The staff also had an expression which seemed to say that 'you can dine somewhere else if you don't like to dine here'. (Malay Male, 23 years old)
Design issues	The staff quickly put up the fallen signboard and he apologized to us. He did explain why the signboard suddenly dropped down. (Chinese Female, 32 years old)	They just told me that it was the design of the lighting and couldn't make it brighter as it would affect other customers. It was totally unacceptable! The staff should at least solve the problem for us. It was the customer's right! (Indian Male, 26 years old)
Social interaction issues	He apologized to us and compensated us with free drinks as he said he couldn't control the birthday party group of customers. (Indian Male, 21 years old)	The service staff showed his unpleasant side and told me that it was an order from his manager to clean up the visible kitchen. Instead, he should report to his manager right after my complaint. (Indian Female, 30 years old)
Functionality issues	I was satisfied with the service as when I made a complaint they even apologized and immediately replaced the glass. (Malay Female, 27 years old)	I had a bad impression of this cafeteria, although it was located in a grand hotel because the waitress was too rude and gave me a nonsensical explanation. She was just wasting my time. (Chinese Female, 29 years old)

Corrective responses

Corrective responses included replacement and correction strategies. Effective recovery was associated with food service providers that were attentive in rectifying the failures promptly and attempted to respond to the customers' request. Ineffective recovery was reported when food service providers simply corrected the failure and demonstrated impersonal correction and did not care about customers' anticipating. Examples of responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Customers'' Responses to 'Corrective' by Type of Servicescape Failure

Servicescape Failure	Effective	Ineffective
Cleanliness issues	The manager fired the worker on the spot. I expected he would apologize and did something to rectify the situation, but instead he did more than what I was expecting. (Malay Male, 22 years old)	The waitress amde a poor recovery by merely offering a replacement without an apology. She even denied her fault. (Indian Male, 18 years old)
Design issues	Although at that time it was crowded with other customers, the staff managed to get a better place for us, instead of sitting near to the toilet. (Chinese Female, 24 years old)	I had to arrange the table and chair to make myself comfortable with the seating before the worker arranged them for me. I realized that it was peak hour, but the workers should pay attention to every new customer who steps into the restaurant. (Malay Male, 24 years old)
Social interaction issues	I was surprised with the recovery because I never expected the boss would provide a new set of food for me. (Chinese Male, 36 years old)	None
Functionality issues	I was quite satisfied because the manager responded immediately to my complaint by ordering the technicians to fix the air-conditioning. (Chinese Female, 23 years old)	The recovery was not effective at all. They should replace the food for me, not just pour the remaining soup into another bowl. (Malay Female, 50 years old)

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Compensatory responses

Compensatory responses involved recovery strategies in which the customers were compensated in some ways. Effective recovery resulted when food service providers were attentive and anticipated needs without delay. Ineffective recovery occurred when food service providers poorly identified customers' anticipation of the recovery. The responses are reflected in Table 4:

Table 4 Customers' Responses to 'Compensatory' by Type of Servicescape Failure

Servicescape Failure	Effective	Ineffective
Cleanliness issues	I was very satisfied because the staff gave a prompt response to my complaint by compensating me with a free burger. (Chinese Female, 25 years old)	The service staff compensated me with a bottle of soft drink but I was not satisfied because I believe that it was not the type of recovery that I wanted. (Malay Female, 24 years old)
Design issues	None	I accepted the discount and free ice cream, but it was not effective at all. They haven't changed the arrangement up until now. (Chinese Female, 28 years old)
Social interaction issues	The recovery should be ok. At least we received a free drink for the inconvenience caused. (Indian Male, 21 years old)	None
Functionality issues	I had good impression because the manager came to me after a short time to settle the problem. He tried to restore my confidence by giving me free coupons. (Chinese Female, 23 years old)	Instead of giving me free vouchers, I would expect them to improve the water dispenser. Customers will get frustrated if the problem remains unsolved. (Chinese Male, 20 years old)

Authority intervention

This response reflected the involvement of authority in the resolution of servicescape failures. The results showed that authority intervention was presented in cleanliness issues. It generally involved third parties taking ultimate action over those service providers who did not conform with cleanliness guidelines and which finally led to customers' health discomfort. Informants who reported this

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type of response noted it was ultimately effective because the authority did more than expected, as shown in Table 5:

Table 5 Customers' Responses to 'Authority Intervention' by Type of Servicescape Failure

Servicescape Failure	Effective	Ineffective
Cleanliness issues	The stall owner had to temporarily stop operation for a few weeks. Then, a routine check-up was made of the stall. The hygiene condition had improved. (Malay Female, 22 years old)	None

No recovery

No recovery means either the food service provider failed to resolve the failure or failed to acknowledge the customers' perceived seriousness of the situation. Customers reported food service providers to be seemingly lacking in the initiative to recover from servicescape failures or else paid no special attention to the complaints, in other words, nothing was done to alleviate dissatisfaction. For example (Table 6):

Table 6 Customers' Responses to 'No Recovery' by Type of Servicescape Failure

Servicescape Failure	Effective	Ineffective
Cleanliness issues	None	It can be said there was no recovery at all because the staff didn't do anything to solve the problem. They showed no concern about the flies and didn't show respect to me as a customer. (Chinese Male, 27 years old)
Design issues	None	The person said ok when I asked him to turn down the volume, but he didn't do anything. (Malay Female, 32 years old)
Social interaction issues	None	I told the manager about the noise made by other customers. He verbally said ok and would settle it but in fact he didn't take any action. (Indian Female, 21 years old)
Functionality issues	None	None

As a summary of the effectiveness of the recovery strategy, it is recommended that a combination of prompt action-oriented responses and sincere empathetic-oriented responses be perceived as far more effective and which appears to meet customer satisfaction. A simple apology or explanation does nothing to resolve the customer's need for immediate action; meanwhile, an action without empathetic response does not guarantee customer satisfaction. The most significant contribution of the present study can be found in the results that indicate servicescape failures in the food service industry insignificantly affected customers' recovery effort evaluations. Regardless of servicescape failure types, it is apparent that customers evaluate a combination of distributive, interactional, and procedural fairness as the key factor to successful recovery strategy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The importance of servicescape in food service organizations should not be neglected as it provides the image of the organization to customers before the interaction between customers and service providers occurs (Bitner, 1992; Lin, 2004). Servicescape failures can significantly diminish perceptions of service performance and evoke feelings of dissatisfaction, thus leading to complaint behaviour. An understanding of how to handle complaints and recover from failures is a great challenge for service managers. As Bejou and Palmer (1998) observed: "… just because they forgive you does not mean they will not remember the failure" (p.21). The purpose of this study was to unearth the effects of servicescape failures on the perceived effectiveness of recovery strategies. It is hoped to fill out the gap in the servicescape and associated recovery area. The focus was on the food service industry for the reason that customers tend to have a high frequency of contact with hospitality-related businesses (Hoffman & Chung, 1999). The CIT is a method in which the 'customer defines reality', hence, by using the CIT to recall the servicescape incidents, the most infuriating servicescape failures could be explored and also the effectiveness of recoveries could be understood better. Importantly, unlike previous studies that employed quantitative survey methodology to obtain a phenomenological view of service experience, this study has confirmed the utility of the CIT as the most promising method for examining servicescape failure and recovery strategy research. This qualitative approach has used a different direction in the study of service failure and recovery. The application of the CIT has yielded valuable insights into the way customers feel about the servicescape failures and the recovery strategies implemented by food service practitioners. The CIT appears to be a practical tool in assessing customer dissatisfaction in servicescape and customer perception of the effectiveness of the recovery. It enables researchers to achieve much greater detail of understanding such as 'why' and 'how' questions than a typical service and recovery survey. The data yielded from the CIT allows food service managers to identify what control is required and what knowledge is needed for ensuring customer satisfaction. The technique can also identify what service staff need to know by recognizing what

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information customers consider important in servicescapes and recovery efforts.

The classification system of servicescape failure provides insight into several issues. Obviously, cleanliness problems were the prime issue in the food service industry. Within this category, foreign objects in food were reported as the most frequently complained of issue. The second category of servicescape failure type was identified as design problems. The third common type of servicescape failure was classified into the category of social interaction problems. Another type of servicescape failure was determined as functionality problems. Customers exhibited emotional and physiological responses to those failures. In addition, the mood for eating was being disturbed by such conditions. Perhaps the most intriguing finding from this study was that two customers remembered negative dining experiences, particularly related to the cleanliness problem, and were able to recall them, although they had occurred more than ten years ago,.

The process of classifying the recovery strategies associated with each critical incident within each servicescape failure category resulted in identifying five categories of recovery strategies: empathetic responses, corrective responses, compensated responses, authority intervention, and no recovery. Of these five, empathetic responses and corrective responses were the most frequently implemented strategies by food service providers. However, it appears that a combination of prompt action-oriented responses and sincere empathetic responses is perceived as far more effective and is likely to meet customers' satisfaction regardless of servicescape failure type. Importantly, the actions that food service providers take in response to servicescape failures should be viewed as a means to re-establish and confirm the relationship with customers. Understanding the intensity of customers' reaction to recoveries will ultimately lead to a deeper thoughtfulness about their behaviour as they seek satisfaction of the expected recoveries.

This study has implications for food service managers and practitioners who are seeking to improve the tangible aspects in their organizations. The implications of these findings are very meaningful because the findings are based on real incidents as experienced by the customers. The results from this study conclude that cleanliness problems occurred most often, thus special attention should be given to these issues. Prompt actions and special attention to the failure only lighten dissatisfaction temporarily. Hence, appropriate planning and programs should be carried out to prevent cleanliness problems, other than executing effective recovery strategy, which is the key to retaining customers. This study also suggests that some of the problems, particularly the functionality issues, can be prevented by having alternatives or quality controls in place. For instance, food service staff can check the equipment on a weekly basis, monthly basis, or any flexible schedule which seems not to be time wasting and yet is able to catch the problems. Also, an alternative should be ready and available in case the main equipment breaks down. Perhaps, a consistency in improving and maintaining the quality of servicescape seems significant in preventing serious failure emerges.

The results of this study indicate that customers' affective responses

(emotional and physiological) are measured immediately after the servicescape failure. To restore customers' confidence, the displayed emotions may be the cue that enables food service providers to perform recovery accordingly and become more closely attuned to the customers' recovery expectations. The findings also denote that the ability of a food service provider to perform a proper response is largely dependent on a function of the food service provider's knowledge and control. In some cases, the responses are not tailored to the incidents, thus resulting in failure to meet recovery expectation. Food service managers may need to improve the way in which they communicate to staff of the importance of servicescape maintenance and customer satisfaction. Also, service staff must be empowered to take whatever action is proper in a specific situation. In fact, a scrutiny of the failure and ensuring customer satisfaction serve as a starting point for an improvement in an organization, for the reason that while experiencing service, a customer can create new meanings and unusual functions which could raise opportunities to improve servicescape (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; McCollough et al., 2000).

Several limitations regarding this study should be noted. This study was exploratory in nature. Informants were asked to recall a servicescape-recovery episode which was specific and limited in scope. It has diminished the potential for misrepresenting the character of the experience and understating the importance of the issue. However, it appears to be challenging because the number of incidents between categories are very much insignificant. Future study is suggested to increase the number of critical incidents. It would be more desirable to conduct a much larger scale of study with several hundred respondents as it would allow for a high validation of the findings. Given the lack of existing empirical study on servicescape failure and recovery strategy in the food service industry, further empirical studies would be desirable. An experimental survey method is likely to be the most appropriate for strengthening the impact of servicescape failure on recovery strategy evaluations. Written scenarios, photographs, and videos can all be used as stimuli for such role-playing scenarios. Subsequently, researchers might empirically test the relationships between servicescape failure and recovery strategy. Researchers might also consider possible factors of servicescape failure and recovery. This can be achieved by tracking the information from the food service practitioners' perspective. Thus, by systematically analyzing the perspectives of both the customers and the managers, the insights can in turn be used to minimize the occurrence of servicescape failures, improve recovery efforts, and increase customer satisfaction. Finally, this study used responses merely from food service customers. It would be a fruitful avenue of study to investigate other service types, such as hedonic services, to broaden the scope of servicescape failure and recovery strategy. Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct a comparative study on whether cultural differences impact on the evaluation of servicescape failures and recovery strategies.

It is hoped that the research suggestions will provide some inspiration for future research in this under-researched area of servicescape failure and recovery.

Future empirical studies of servicescape failures and recoveries are required to increase scholarly knowledge of this contemporary phenomenon.

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