UNDERSTANDING HOTEL' S BUFFET RESTAURANT ASSURANCE AFTER COVID-19: A CASE OF THAILAND

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Purpose: The aim of this study is to examine tourist expectations and perceptions of hotel's buffet restaurant assurance to obtain an overall understanding of restaurant assurance after COVID-19 situation. **Theoretical framework:** The concept of SERVQUAL, particularly assurance dimension, is employed to examine tourist expectations and perceptions of hotel's buffet restaurant assurance. The study expects to expand the literature in the area of service quality of restaurant assurance. **Design/methodology/approach:** The questionnaire survey is employed to collect data from 384 participants through a convenience sampling method. Factor analysis and t-test are used to analyse the data. **Findings:** The results indicate that there are two factors associated with hotel's buffet restaurant assurance, and they are identified as: 1) employee courtesy, knowledge, and service confidence and 2) sanitary restaurant environment. Both factors are related to common and new assurance attributes of buffet restaurant services. **Practical & Social implications:** The stuyd has expanded the knowledge of hotel's buffet restaurant assurance based on the current situation. Assurance is a key element of several models used to assess restaurant service quality. The current finding helps to update the literature as well as assists restaurant managers to thoroughly understand tourists' trust and confidence when dining in hotel buffet restaurants. **Originality:** The value of the study is the identfication of the two factors associated with hotel's buffet restaurant assurance. This is an initial study to integrate the new normal services into restaurant's new assurance attributes by examining tourist expectations and perceptions of hotel's buffet restaurant assurance based on the current situation (after COVID-19).

ENTENDENDO A GARANTIA DO RESTAURANTE BUFFET DO HOTEL APÓS A COVID-19: UM CASO DA TAILÂNDIA

RESUMO

Objetivo: O objetivo deste estudo é examinar as expectativas e percepções dos turistas sobre a garantia do restaurante buffet do hotel para obter uma compreensão geral da garantia do restaurante após a situação do COVID-19.

Referencial teórico: O conceito de SERVQUAL, particularmente a dimensão de garantia, é empregado para examinar as expectativas e percepções dos turistas sobre a garantia do restaurante buffet do hotel. O estudo espera ampliar a literatura na área de garantia de qualidade em serviços de restaurantes.

Desenho/metodologia/abordagem: A pesquisa por questionário é usada para coletar dados de 384 participantes por meio de um método de amostragem por conveniência. A análise fatorial e o teste t são usados para analisar os dados.

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Resultados: Os resultados indicam que existem dois fatores associados à garantia do restaurante buffet do hotel, e são identificados como: 1) cortesia, conhecimento e confiança do serviço do funcionário e 2) ambiente higiênico do restaurante. Ambos os fatores estão relacionados a atributos de garantia comuns e novos dos serviços de restaurante buffet.

Implicações práticas e sociais: O aluno ampliou o conhecimento da garantia do restaurante buffet do hotel com base na situação atual. A garantia é um elemento-chave de vários modelos usados para avaliar a qualidade do serviço de restaurante. A descoberta atual ajuda a atualizar a literatura, bem como auxilia os gerentes de restaurantes a entender completamente a confiança e confiança dos turistas ao jantar em restaurantes buffet de hotéis.

Originalidade: O valor do estudo é a identificação dos dois fatores associados à garantia do restaurante buffet do hotel. Este é um estudo inicial para integrar os novos serviços normais aos novos atributos de garantia do restaurante, examinando as expectativas e percepções dos turistas sobre a garantia do restaurante buffet do hotel com base na situação atual (após o COVID-19).

Palavras-chave: Novos Serviços Normais, Dimensão de Garantia, Restaurante Buffet do Hotel, Qualidade de Serviço.

ENTENDER LA GARANTÍA DEL RESTAURANTE BUFFET DEL HOTEL DESPUÉS DEL COVID-19: UN CASO DE TAILANDIA

RESUMEN

Propósito: El propósito de este estudio es examinar las expectativas y percepciones de los turistas sobre la garantía del restaurante buffet del hotel para obtener una comprensión general de la garantía del restaurante después de la situación de COVID-19.

Marco teórico: El concepto SERVQUAL, particularmente la dimensión de garantía, se utiliza para examinar las expectativas y percepciones de los turistas sobre la garantía del restaurante buffet del hotel. El estudio espera ampliar la literatura en el área de aseguramiento de la calidad en los servicios de restaurante.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Se utiliza una encuesta para recopilar datos de 384 participantes mediante un método de muestreo por conveniencia. El análisis factorial y la prueba t se utilizan para analizar los datos.

Resultados: Los resultados indican que existen dos factores asociados a la garantía del restaurante buffet del hotel, y se identifican como: 1) cortesía, conocimiento y confianza del servicio del empleado y 2) ambiente higiénico del restaurante. Ambos factores están relacionados con los atributos comunes y nuevos de garantía de los servicios de restaurante buffet.

Implicaciones prácticas y sociales: El alumno amplió conocimientos sobre la garantía del restaurante buffet del hotel en base a la situación actual. La garantía es un elemento clave de varios modelos utilizados para evaluar la calidad del servicio de un restaurante. El hallazgo actual ayuda a actualizar la literatura, así como ayudar a los gerentes de restaurantes a comprender completamente la confianza de los turistas cuando cenan en los restaurantes buffet del hotel.

Originalidad: El valor del estudio es la identificación de los dos factores asociados a la garantía del restaurante buffet del hotel. Este es un estudio inicial para integrar los nuevos servicios normales con los nuevos atributos de garantía de restaurante, examinando las expectativas y percepciones de los turistas sobre la garantía de restaurante buffet del hotel en función de la situación actual (post-COVID-19).

Palabras clave: Servicios de la Nueva Normalidad, Dimensión de la Garantía, Restaurante Buffet del Hotel, Calidad de Servicio.

INTRODUCTION

Assurance is an original element of SERVQUAL initially documented during 1980's by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). It has been employed as a key dimension to assess service quality in various service sectors, including restaurant business, for more than thirty years. According to Parasuraman et al. (1988, p. 23), assurance is defined as "knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence". Given such definition,

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the common assurance attributes in restaurant services mainly involve, for example, employee skills & knowledge, employee courtesy & friendliness, food quality, and customer safety (Al-Tit, 2015; Marković, Raspor and Šegarić, 2010; Ngoc & Uyen, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a number of studies proposing 'new normal' services in relation to restaurant services, for example, physical distancing, hand sanitisers, facemasks, and hygiene & cleanliness of restaurant facilities (Anastasia, Gunawan & Rahardjo 2022; Boonkaew et al., 2023; Hameed, Mahomed & Carvalho, 2021; Jeong, Kim, Ma & DiPietro, 2022; Planinc & Kukanja, 2022). Researchers argue that the new normal services are still important in building customer confidence when dining in restaurants in today's situation (Jeong et al., 2022; Siddiqi, Akhtar & Islam, 2022). However, in tourism setting, there is a lack of empirical study to re-examine hotel's buffet restaurant assurance and integrate them into the part of assurance, following to Parasuraman et al. (1988). This suggests a lack of an opportunity to strengthen knowledge in the field.

In addition, there is a need for research to update knowledge in regard to hotel restaurant assurance due to the availability of recent studies associated with COVID-19. Importantly, assurance is a key element of several restaurant service models (e.g. SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, DINESERV, and CFFRSERV). These existing models now are inadequate to fully understand and explain what can assure tourists when dining in hotel buffet restaurants during the current situation due to the lack of new or updated attributes. Consequently, a further study is required.

In this study, hotel buffet restaurants are examined because dining at buffet restaurants is likely to involve greater risk of getting diseases than other types of restaurants. For example, tourists usually walk around the restaurant to collect their meals from buffet lines. Some may talk to each other, cough or sneeze while selecting their food, and customers touch and use the same utensils to take their food, causing a high risk of disease infection/dispersion (Zandonadi, Botelho, Maynard & Akutsu 2021). Under these circumstances, restaurant managers should develop the service standards to assure tourists when dining at buffet restaurants even after COVID-19.

To fulfil the research gap, this research has the objectives to 1) examine overall assurance attributes of hotel buffet restaurants based on the current situation (after COVID-19), and 2) examine tourist expectations and perceptions of hotel's buffet restaurant assurance by using Thailand as a case study. Restaurants are the supporting facilities when tourists travel to a particular destination (Kodir, 2018; Vera, 2019). All tourists use restaurant services while traveling. It is important for restaurant managers to maintain high services standards to inspire

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customer trust and confidence in a safe restaurant environment in today's situation, even post COVID-19 (Jeong et al., 2022; Siddiqi et al., 2022). Meanwhile, they should fully understand tourist expectations and perceptions of such standards in order to deliver better services and to gain a competitive advantage.

For theoretical contribution, the current study will help to advance existing knowledge and understanding of restaurant assurance during post COVID-19. Assurance is a key element of various service models (e.g. SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, DINESERV, and CFFRSERV), so the current examination will help to update and expand service literature in relatation to hotel's buffet restaurant assuarnce based on the current sitaution. In term of practical contribution, the findings of the study expect to provide restaurant managers a better understanding of customer expectations and perceptions regarding the assurance dimension of buffet restaurant services in order to deliver better services and standards to gain customer trust and confidence during the post COVID-19. A restaurant operator who can provide customers a high level of assurance attributes is more likely to generate customer satisfaction, word-of-mouth, and repeat consumption (Jeong et al., 2022; Siddiqi et al., 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Table 1 presents the analysis of literature review in order to identify the research gap. This analysis shows the literature which has been reviewed under three periods: before COVID-19 (past studies), during COVID-19 (recent studies), and after COVID-19 (further study). Before COVID-19, the common restaurant assurance generally includes employee knowledge, employee courtesy, food quality, and customer safety as earlier mentioned. During COVID-19, there are several studies discussing about the new normal services which help to build customer confidence when dining in restaurants as already addressed. However, scholars may overlook to conduct a further study to integrate the new normal services into the new assurance attributes of restaurant services. This suggests that there is a necessity of futher research to re-examine hotel's buffet restaurant assurance in tourism setting, given the availability of recent studies associated with COVID-19, in order to extend the past literature and to strengthen knowledge development in the field.

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Table 1: The analysis of related studies and research gap regarding buffet restaurant assurance

Sources	Studies discussing common assurance attributes (before COVID-19)	Studies discussing new normal services (during COVID-19)	Studies examining new assurance attributes (after COVID-19)
Marković et al. (2010)	✓	-	-
Al-Tit (2015)	✓	-	-
Ngoc & Uyen (2015)	✓	-	-
Wu & Mohi (2015)	✓	-	-
Hameed et al. (2021)	-	✓	-
Anastasia et al. (2022)	-	✓	-
Jeong et al. (2022)	-	✓	-
Siddiqi et al. (2022)	-	✓	-
Current study*	✓	✓	✓

Source: Prepared by the author (2023)

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were employed in this study. To ensure content validity and appropriate measurement, the measurement items were developed from the existing literature regarding restaurant assurance and the new normal services proposed during COVID-19 (e.g. Marković et al., 2010; Ngoc & Uyen 2015; Jeong et al., 2022 Siddiqi et al., 2022). Later, they were reviewed by three experts (one scholar and two restaurant managers) to assure that they were suitable for the current situation of hotel buffet restaurants in Thailand. After the reviews, the number of items was reduced from 12 to 11 items. For questionnaire reliability, Cronbach Alpha was calculated with a value of 0.885 for expectations and 0.894 for perceptions, higher than the recommended value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2006). Factor analysis and t-test were employed to analyse the data.

Research participants were tourists (Thais and internationals) who had dining experience at hotel buffet restaurants in Thailand during the past 6 months. A convenience sampling was used for this study. Data were collected from the participants who attended tourism fairs/activities in Bangkok during a 2-month period (November to December 2022). They were asked for their consent, and later were asked to answer the questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, however, only 384 usable questionnaires were included in the final analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to examine overall assurance attributes of hotel buffet restaurants based on the current situation, table 2 presents the exploratory factor analysis to determine if there was any

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cluster associated with hotel's buffet restaurant assurance by using the principal component method with varimax rotation. The two factors, based on customers' actual perceptions, were identified and labelled as: 1) employee courtesy, knowledge, and service confidence and 2) sanitary restaurant environment. The total variance was 67.449%, with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, and alpha coefficients greater than 0.7. Each item had a factor loading greater than 0.5, suggesting an appropriate structure (Hair et al., 2006).

Table 2: Factor analysis of buffet restaurant assurance

Components	Factor 1 (factor loading)	Factor 2 (factor loading)
1.Employees are friendly and courteous.	.892	
2.Employees are ready/willing to assist customers.	.874	
3.Employees are knowledgeable about restaurant services.	.841	
4.Restauant provides customers a safe place.	.803	
5.Restauant provides customers with quality food.	.759	
6.Customers feel confident with restaurant transaction.	.614	
7.Restaurant utensils are clean and hygienic.		.871
8.Restaurant arranges appropriate table distancing.		.843
9.Restaurant employees wear masks (when appropriate) when preparing or cooking food for customers.		.814
10. Hand sanitisers are available to customers.		.755
11.Glove is an option available to customers when taking food from buffet lines.		.622
Eigenvalues	5.541	1.884
% of variance explained	50.372	17.127
Reliability (α)	.923	.814

Total variance explained = 67.449, KMO value = .852, Bartlett's test = 0.000 (p < .001)

According to table 2, factor 1, 'employee courtesy, knowledge, and service confidence' generally involves common assurance attributes, for example, employee courtesy, employee knowledge, customer safety, and food quality. Whereas factor 2, 'sanitary restaurant environment', mainly involves new items regarding health, hygiene, and cleanliness attributes, for example, cleanliness and hygiene of utensils, employee hygiene, physical distancing, and availability of hand sanitisers. It may be noted that the findings shown in table 2 are initial findings by presenting the factor structure of overall assurance attributes of hotel buffet restaurant based on the current situation (after COVID-19), through a case of Thailand. The current finding has extended the past literature (Al-Tit, 2015; Marković et al., 2010; Ngoc & Uyen, 2015) regarding restaurant assurance attributes, which mostly are limited to a few items as earlier mentioned (e.g. employee knowledge, employee courtesy, food quality, and customer safety) by identifying the new items related to the sanitation of restaurant services, providing important implication for future studies.

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Table 3: Paired t-test for buffet restaurant assurance

Factors and items	Expectations (mean)	Perceptions (mean)	t
Employee courtesy, knowledge and service confidence			
1.Employees are friendly and courteous.	4.31	4.34	.872
2.Employees are ready/willing to assist customers.	4.15	4.11	-1.011
3.Employees are knowledgeable about restaurant services.	4.21	4.28	.862
4.Restaurant provides customers a safe place.	4.29	4.31	.657
5.Restaurant provides customers with quality food.	4.22	4.28	1.516
6.Customers feel confident with restaurant transactions.	4.27	4.30	1.624
Sanitary restaurant environment			
7.Restaurant utensils are clean and hygienic.	4.32	4.24	-1.348
8.Restaurant arranges appropriate table distancing.	4.35	3.84	-2.897*
9.Restaurant employees wear masks when preparing or cooking food for customers.	4.24	4.22	-1.085
10.Hand sanitisers are available to customers.	4.33	3.71	-2.982*
11.Glove is an option available to customers when taking food from buffet lines.	4.17	4.21	1.055

* significant at .05 level

Table 3 presents the paired t-test of the average scores for customer expectations and perceptions regarding buffet restaurant's assurance attributes. All items received an average expectation score greater than 4.00. This suggests that customers have relatively high expectations on hotel buffet restaurant's assurance. When considering the eleven items, most of them were found to have no statistically significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions ($p > .05$), including items 1 - 7, 9 and 11. However, items 8 and 10 were found to have statistically significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions ($p < .05$). These items include physical distancing (item 8) and availability of hand sanitisers (item 10), requiring service attention.

Overall, the findings generally correspond to recent studies (Anastasia et al., 2022; Hameed, et al., 2021; Planinc & Kukanja, 2022) indicating that today many tourists have high levels of concern on their health safety when traveling (e.g. staying at hotels or dining in restaurants). Based on the current findings (table 3), hotel restaurants provided most assurance servcies that correspond to customer expectations and perceptions during the post COVID-19. In particular, the new attributes associated with the sanitation of restaurant services may be viewed by tourists as the new restaurant service standards to enhance thier trust and confidence when dining in hotel restaurants. Generally, a restaurant offering the services which meet customer expectations is likely to be perceived as having a higher level of service quality than those who may offer services that are below customer expectations (Al-Tit, 2015).

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CONCLUSION

The current study has provdied an empirical study to re-examine hotel's buffet restaurant assurance during post COVID-19, and has advanced knowledge regarding buffet restaurant assurance by identifying two factors associated with common and new assurance attributes. The common assurance attributes are related to employee courtesy, knowledge, and service confidence, following to Parasuraman et al. (1988). Whereas, the new assurance attributes, based on the current situation, are associated with sanitary restaurant environment. Before COVID-19, the common assurance attributes in buffet restaurants may be limited to a few attributes as earlier mentioned, however, the new ones are developed based on the current situation. The findings, therefore, have expanded the scope of restaurant assurance and updated the service literature as originally defined by Parasuraman et al. (1988) because it helps scholars to thoroughly understand what can assure customers when dining in buffet restaurants during the current situation. This suggest that the existing restaurant models (e.g. SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, DINESERV, and CFFRSERV), particularly the elements of assurance dimension, are inadequate to fully explain customer trust and confidence when dining in buffet restaurant services in the current situation due to the lack of updated literature. Future research examining service quality of buffet restaurants may thoroughly consider the attributes within the two factors being identified as the part of assurance measurement items to appropriately measure customer expectations of buffet restaurant services based on today's situation.

For practical suggestions, there were significant differences between customer expectations and perceptions in some attributes regarding physical distancing and availability of hand sanitisers. The service items below customer expectation require close attention and service improvement (Marković et al., 2010; Mary et al., 2023; Sezgin & Göde, 2017). Restaurant managers may enhance customer comfort and confidence of physical distancing by considering the setting of tables and restaurant layout, where appropriate (Wang, Yao & Martin, 2021). The universal guidelines from government sector may help to promote safe and comfortable physical distancing in restaurant services. For customer hygiene, the restaurants should offer hand sanitisers for restaurant customers. Several studies have recommended the hotels to provide hand sanitisers in major service areas (including restaurant) as a part of their new normal services to reduce the risk of any infections (Bonfanti, Vigolo & Yfantidou, 2021). In addition, restaurant managers should understand and act on the expectations of customers regarding the new assurance attributes, and should implement them in a sustainable way (Zandonadi et al., 2021). Customers may evaluate these new hygienic standards and develop a

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sense of trust in the high service quality of restaurants (Jeong et al., 2022), thereby enhancing customer satisfaction and increasing the likelihood of repeat patronage. Also, the current findings may be applied to other buffet restaurant categories.

This study also needs to address about research limitations and future research opportunity. The current study was conducted on a small scale with limited scope by specifically examining buffet restaurant assurance. It aimed to examine only in the area of customer expectations and perceptions of restaurant assurance based on the current situation (post COVID-19). Future studies may be conducted on a deeper/larger scope to fully understand the impact of assurance attributes on other important variables (e.g. perceived service quality, customer satisfaction, behavioural intention) or on a full scale by modifying appropriate measurement of assurance items together with other key service dimensions to re-examine restaurant service quality during post COVID-19.

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