

Research Paper

Service Clues' Influence on Customers' Dining Experience in Fine Dining Restaurants

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Abstract: There was a time when individuals used to purchase facilities on the basis of eminence only. Today, customers wish to experience a complete service delivery that takes into account the physical atmosphere, employee performance, and food excellence. An excellent dining experience is a significant factor for both customers as well as restaurants. Studies in the past have shown the important effect of food quality, physical environment, employee behavior and service on customers' dining experience. Thus, the concept of customers' experiential value is a key component in restaurant service quality studies. This study sheds light on how food and service excellence, physical setting and employee behavior impacts on customers' dining experience. The objective of this study is to explore the collective effect of mechanic, functional, and humanic clues on customer's dining experience in fine dining restaurants. Subsequently, a quantitative research methodology examines the combined effects of the physical setting (mechanic clues), the conduct of employees (humanic clues) and the quality of the food (functional clues).

Keywords: : Mechanic clues, humanic clues, functional clues, dining experience

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Introduction

Feasting in a fine dining restaurant is a multifaceted practice that comprises of three types of clues. Although food quality is primary, the atmosphere and service performance greatly stimulates the customer's assessment of a specific establishment (Wall & Berry, 2007). Customers use different clues to review a restaurant experience: functional clues to understand the quality of the food and service; mechanic clues to learn about the environment and design and humanic clues for the performance,

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conduct, and appearance of the employees. While customers' observations of mechanic clues are completely associated with their expectations of the service, humanic clues dominate the influence of mechanic clues (Wall & Berry, 2007).

With intense competition among restaurants, every restaurant manager or owner is hard-pressed to generate distinguished food value, employee performance, physical setting, reasonable price and other essentials that can determine customer retention (Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Kim, Ng, & Kim, 2009). These main characteristics can specify the prospects for exceptional dining experience (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). Everything related with the dining experience, for example, visual, aural, or tangible is a sign to observed value (Berry et al., 2006). A consumer's response to his or her dining experience at a restaurant can communicate about the service team's attitude and appearance, design and décor of the restaurant, the cleanliness of the facilities, the presentation of the menu, and the taste of the food. Outwardly, every clue in a restaurant is believed to transmit messages to clientele. The clues and messages combine to generate the customer's complete service experience (Berry et al., 2006). Consumers look not only for decent foodstuffs and services, but also exceptional and unforgettable service experiences (Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011).

Clues are divided into three categories: mechanic, humanic and functional (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002; Berry et al., 2006). Mechanic clues refer to physical objects in a restaurant setting (Chua, Jin, Lee, & Goh, 2014). These are non-human essentials in the service atmosphere comprising of design and ambient factors (Wall & Berry, 2007). Functional clues refer to the practical qualities of service (e.g., food quality), mainly concerning if the service is executed proficiently (Wall & Berry, 2007) and humanic clues relate to the performance of service staff as well as their body language, tone of voice and passion towards their work (Berry et al., 2006; Wall & Berry, 2007). In restaurants, due to the imperceptible features of service, consumers frequently look to the physical atmosphere to assess an organisation's excellence, prior to experiencing the actual service and food (Ezeh & Harris, 2007). Specifically, physical settings have the ability to help consumers interpret food and service quality and therefore their expectations of food and service quality (Wall & Berry, 2007). In a restaurant, customers understand service through different clues, comprising of the restaurant atmosphere, service staff, and food. Due to this, customers are expected to nurture perceptions of value toward these clues.

This study was guided by the fact that in fine dining restaurants, consumers' involvements can be instantaneously exaggerated by numerous internal and external factors such as ecological inducements, social communications, specific features, and situational issues (Walls et al., 2011). It is commonly known that fine dining restaurants offer customers a diversity of dining experiences such as an inviting atmosphere, good food, and outstanding services. These factors (e.g. physical

environment, food quality, and human interaction) are all important to the success of any restaurant and may significantly affect customers' total dining experiences (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Wall & Berry, 2007; Wu & Liang, 2009; Walls et al., 2011). To attract and retain customers, the experience provided must deliver value (Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001). Delivery of a positive dining experience signifies a restaurateur's exertion to upsurge consumers' behavioral objectives (Keng, Huang, Zheng, & Hsu, 2007; Walls et al., 2011).

This has increased the interest of researchers to study consumers in a hospitality and tourism environment (Yuan & Wu, 2008; Wu & Liang, 2009; Walls et al., 2011). Wu and Liang (2009) studied the circumstances of first-hand values in luxury hotel restaurants and established that restaurant setting, service staff presentation, and other customer communication are significant essentials that affect customer experiential value.

Therefore, this study empirically examines a conceptual model using mechanic, functional and humanic clues, and customer's fine dining experience. Explicitly, the objective of this research is to study the effects of mechanic clues, humanic clues and functional clues on the dining experience of customers in fine dining restaurants.

Conceptual Framework and Hypothesis

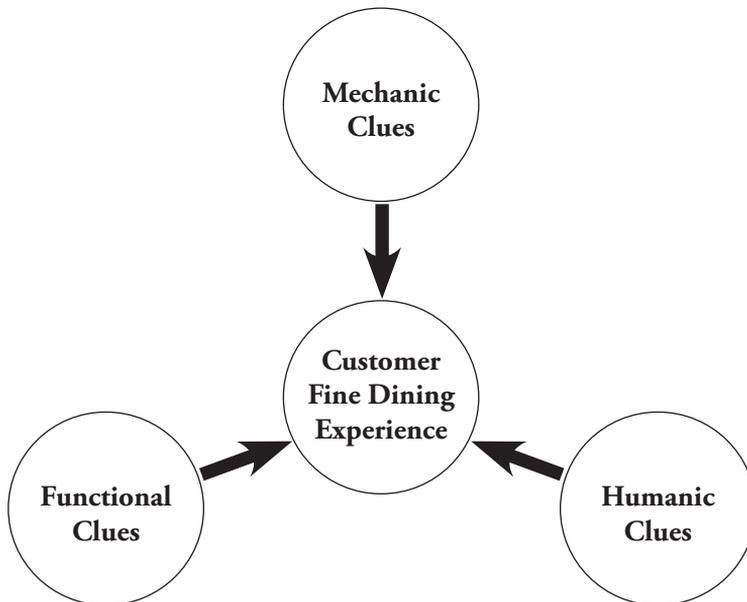


Figure 1. Conceptual framework model showing relationship among study variables

- H1: Mechanic clues positively influence customers' fine dining experience.
 H2: Functional clues positively influence customers' fine dining experience.
 H3: Humanic clues positively influence customers' fine dining experience.

Figure 1 exhibits the conceptual model used for this study. It displays the connotation between mechanic clues, humanic clues, and functional clues towards customer's dining experience in fine dining restaurants. The deviations in mechanic clues, humanic clues, and functional clues will result in the alterations of customers' experience towards fine dining restaurants.

Literature Review

Functional Clues

Functional clues refer to deliverables to consumers e.g. food (Berry et al., 2006) and the clues are the basis for a restaurant's achievement (Wall & Berry, 2007). In restaurant settings, the functional clues refer to food and they express the applied quality of the food (Wall & Berry, 2007). The taste, appearance, variability, freshness, temperature, healthiness of food and any other quality-related clues are vital to a confident dining experience (Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 2000; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Sulek and Hensley (2004) addressed the issue of the relative importance of food quality, atmosphere, and fair waiting time in a fine dining restaurant and the results showed that food quality had the strongest impact on customers' satisfaction and reconsidering plans.

Influence of food quality on dining experience

Studies conducted in the past have recognised that food is the King of a meal (Pantelidis, 2010). In other words, food plays a vital role in the dining experience (Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Food excellence is usually acknowledged as the main factor influencing customer satisfaction and an essential situation to please the desires and expectations of customers (Peri, 2006). Sulek and Hensley (2004) examined the comparative importance of food class, environmental constituents and service quality in a fine dining restaurant. They found that food quality was the most important determining factor for customer satisfaction. Similarly, Ma, Qu, Njite and Chen (2011) found that food was the most important factor influencing customer gratification.

While the significance of food quality in the hospitality industry is widely acknowledged, there is however, no agreement on the specific characteristics that make up food quality (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Food quality has been measured using various features, such as food presentation, variety of menu items, healthy

options, taste, freshness and temperature (Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2014). Among these features, taste is believed to be the main feature that influences restaurant choice and customer gratification (Koo, Tao, & Yeung, 1999; Kivela et al., 2000). Namkung and Jang (2007), in studying characteristics of food-related qualities that were considered important in cultivating satisfaction, established that taste and appearance were the two top. These days, more and more consumers have become food aficionados, and thus, taste has also become gradually significant (Cortese, 2003). Parsa, Self, Njite and King (2005), in their study, specified that food quality did not necessarily guarantee the success of a restaurant, but it was one significant aspect that contributed to it. These studies were conclusive in that decent food quality is a vital measure for a sustaining a dining experience (Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2014).

Influence of service quality on dining experience

Service excellence and consumer happiness are two significant factors in marketing philosophy and practice (Spreng & Mackoy, 1996). In a restaurant industry, customers evaluate the quality of food as well as the service they experience during their dining experience equally. Previous studies have revealed that perceived service quality is a critical element of customer satisfaction. Namkung and Jang's (2008) study recognised service excellence as the main factor for extremely gratified patrons. Similarly, Ladhari, Brun and Morales (2008) determined that service quality is a key predecessor of dining satisfaction.

Some studies even suggested that service quality is more important than food. Yuksel and Yuksel (2002) reported that service quality has the most important influence on the dining experience. Similarly, Andaleeb and Conway (2006), in their study on fine dining restaurants, established that service quality is the greatest determinant of customer dining experience – more significant than food quality, physical design and price.

Mechanic Clues

Mechanic clues are the self-determining physical features which improve or restrain staff and patron activities (Bitner, 1992). Mechanic clues are related to senses; seen, felt, heard, smelled, and touched by employees and customers, as signals of a convincing excellent service (Santos, 2002). Lin (2004) characterised the measurement of impartial physical influences into three main groups of clues: (1) visual clues: color, lighting, space and function, personal artifacts, layout, and design; (2) auditory clues: music and noise; and (3) factory clues: scents. Mechanic clues are vital because consumers largely use tangibles to evaluate the prospective quality of the service provided by the restaurant (Aubert-Gamet, 1997; Chua et al., 2014). The clues may be very powerful in communicating the organisation's competence

and quality (Ezeh & Harris, 2007). In restaurants, the imperceptibility of the service often leads customers to depend on mechanic clues to measure the dining experience and the clues can have a strong impact on their dining experience (Namasivayam & Mattila, 2007). All the mechanic clues are crucial in generating an impression of service experiences (Bitner, 1992).

The Influence of Mechanic Clues

During the dining experience, patrons are affected by numerous mechanic clues, as highlighted by studies in environmental psychology and marketing (Wall & Berry, 2007). A study on environment psychology (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974; Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996) found that a physical situation can strongly influence people's thought, feelings and conduct. Research in services marketing has shown that in close-contact services where both the customer and service provider must be present (Wall & Berry, 2007), such as those found in restaurants and hotels, the physical environment where the service is performed influences the customer's perception of service quality (Bitner, 1990; Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994). Mechanic clues are particularly significant in service marketing because the imperceptibility of the offering leads customers to depend on tangibles to assess the experience (Wall & Berry, 2007). The mechanic clues in the service atmosphere help customers in understanding the service (Carbone & Haeckel, 1994). Mechanic clues inspire consumer service observations as these clues are a fragment of the experience (Wall & Berry, 2007). Customers' observations of service quality are specific calculations of a service experience, and customers' expectations are the standards against which such experiences are arbitrated (Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1993).

Humanic Clues

Humanic clues include service employee actions, such as body language and tone of voice (Wall & Berry, 2007). The humanic clues can help customers in observing service quality (Bitner, 1990) and their experiences with the restaurant (Walls et al., 2011). Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, and Sideman (2005) specified that staff friendliness influences the customer's impression of the restaurant's service. Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha, and Yun (2007) mentioned that customer–employee relations are an important forecaster of service quality and it affects the customer's valuation of the service received. Keng et al. (2007) established that well-mannered, well-informed, and well-organised service providers could lead to an image of distinctive service. Thus, possibly, humanic clues can play a key role in customer assessment of service experiences (Chua et al., 2014). A restaurant staff who exhibits a welcoming smile, offers a sincere greeting, and attends conscientiously to a customer's requirements is

expected to inspire the customer's service experience even more (Chua et al., 2014). Moreover, these interactions can powerfully impact customers' after-service behavior such as loyalty, switching choice, or complaining (Zeithaml et al., 1996).

The Influence of Humanic Clues

In addition to mechanic clues, employees' behavior during a service also delivers influential evidences that contribute to customers' insights of service quality (Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1985; Bitner, 1990; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Zeithaml et al., 1993; Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Berry & Bendapudi, 2003). The customer's assessment of the employee's effort and service performance has also been found to have a strong effect on customer satisfaction and their switching behavior (Keaveney, 1995; Mohr & Bitner, 1995). A server's pace in serving a meal and his/her attention to customers' readiness for the next course can influence perceptions of service quality (Wall & Berry, 2007). Therefore, while mechanic clues can establish the platform by swaying consumer's anticipations, humanic clues characteristically play a considerable part in assuring this further through the service provider's performance (Wall & Berry, 2007). The humanic interface in service interaction offers the chance to nurture an emotional connectivity that can communicate admiration and esteem to customers, surpass their expectations, strengthen their trust and deepen their loyalty (Garg, 2014). This effect is amplified when the service provider performs with unusual gentleness, caring or resourcefulness. Humanic clues are the most significant factor in exceeding customers' expectations. To exceed a customer's expectations, the components of pleasant surprise and best-timed opportunity are required.

Experiential Value

Empirical or experiential value can be referred to as a consumer's opinion of value arising from his/her understanding and is the outcome of an uninterrupted interface throughout the ingesting procedure (Mathwick et al., 2001). Assessment can be generated from an involvement, through effectively concluding the proposed objective or through providing pleasure (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). Experiential value generally consists of two types of values—extrinsic and intrinsic (Mathwick et al., 2001; Keng et al., 2007; Wu & Liang, 2009). Extrinsic value results from an involvement that is practical in nature and is an outcome of task conclusion (Bloch & Richins, 1983; Babin et al., 1994). Extrinsic value results from a complete assessment of practical welfares and incidentals such as financial worth for money, suitability, and time savings (Overby & Lee, 2006). Extrinsic value comprises consumers' expressions over the ability to complete a task (Babin et al., 1994). An extrinsically-focused consumer assimilates perceptive features of attitude

when assessing an ingesting involvement (Zeithaml, 1988), for instance, a consumer may be a regular to a restaurant due to its fair price and positive inducements (Park, 2004). On the other hand, intrinsic values such as enjoyment, enthusiasm, attraction, relaxation, and impulsiveness, is engendered from a hedonic experience and is more particular and subjective (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Babin et al., 1994). An intrinsically-oriented consumer integrates the expressive features of approach when assessing an ingesting involvement (Babin et al., 1994; Overby & Lee, 2006). These consumers seem to create craving from the gratitude of hedonic experiences (Babin et al., 1994).

Research Methodology

The research objective of this study is to test the effects of mechanic, humanic and functional clues on customers' dining experiences in fine dining restaurants. Based on past studies, a set of research framework that describes the relationship between dependent variable (DV) and independent variable (IV) was developed. A set of hypotheses was then established to examine the association between the independent variables (*Mechanic Clues, Humanic Clues, and Functional Clues*) and the dependent variable (*Customer Dining Experience*).

Profile of Respondents and Sampling Methods

In order to assess the dining experiences of customers towards environmental factors, employees' behavioral factors, technical quality of food and service in fine dining restaurants and the hypothesis designed for the framework, a questionnaire survey was used to collect detailed information from a sample size of 152 respondents who had dined at various fine dining restaurants located in Malaysia through physical distribution as well as using social websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. All items in the questionnaire were measured on a 5-Likert scale, and that scale ranged from '1' being 'very low' to '5' being 'very high'. The current measurement scale was based on three (03) independent variables such as *Mechanic Clues* (16-items), *Humanic Clues* (10-items) and *Functional Clues* (7-items) which were used to evaluate the dependent factor, *Dining Experience* (14-items) level and to test the hypotheses formulated. A total of 47-items which included three independent and one dependent variable were measured to test hypotheses individually.

Research Design

Conceptual framework and a thorough literature review was referred to in developing the questionnaire. The survey looked at the perceptions and dining experiences of the customers who had dined in the fine dining restaurants by asking respondents the frequency of their visits, the choice of their restaurants and the most significant

reason for them to dine in a fine dining restaurant. Part A involved demographic questions, Part B, C and D consisted of questions on mechanic clues, humanic clues and functional clues, respectively, while Part E measured respondents' dining experience against the three different clues covered in this study.

Data Analysis Methods

We used Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software to compile and organise the collected data. The collected data were entered into Microsoft Excel and then exported to IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for processing. SPSS was used to run correlation analysis, regression analysis, reliability analysis and descriptive analysis. The statistical instrument used to test for internal-consistency reliability was Cronbach's alpha (1951). For Cronbach's α coefficient, the norm of 0.70 set by Nunnally (1978) was used. Results generated through SPSS 18 were further analysed to determine the fine dining experience of the respondents against mechanic, humanic and functional clues. The results obtained were analysed to determine if they are coherent with the hypothesis of this study. Finally, areas that need further improvements were determined in order to provide necessary and relevant recommendations. Descriptive analysis such as frequencies, reliability analysis, correlations of study variables and regression analysis were conducted to test the hypotheses.

Findings, Analysis & Discussion

Reliability Analysis

Reliability is the degree to which a measure will produce consistent results. The internal reliability of the measurement instrument is commonly assessed by Cronbach's alpha. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 or higher indicates that the measurement scale that is used to measure a construct is reliable (Nunnally, 1967). Table 1 shows that the overall reliability of the study was found to be coefficient alpha 0.950, which is deemed acceptable (Nunnally, 1978; Churchill, 1979). This proposes that the measures are free from random error and thus, reliability coefficients estimate the amount of systematic variance (Churchill, 1979). Reliability analysis is usually used to test the degree of consistency between measures of the scale (Mehrens & Lehmann, 1987); when each factor (study variable) such as *Mechanic Clues*, *Humanic Clues*, *Functional Clues* and *Dining Experience* was examined, it was found to be reliable with a coefficient alpha of more than 0.70 at the aggregate level and cut-off point (Nunnally, 1978; Churchill, 1979). The high alpha values indicate good internal consistency among the items, and the high alpha value for the overall scale indicates

that convergent validity was met (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithmal, 1991).

Table 1. Reliability of the study

	Variables	Cronbach Alpha (α)	Number of Items
Independent Variable	Mechanic Clues	0.909	16
	Humanic Clues	0.888	10
	Functional Clues	0.877	7
Dependent Variable	Dining Experience	0.950	14
Overall		0.950	47

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 below illustrates that from the total sample size of 152, the majority (71%) of respondents preferred to dine in a fine dining restaurant less than once a week but more than once a month. The remaining 17.8% preferred once a week or more whilst 11.2% dined only once in a month. The most preferred type of restaurant was casual dining restaurants (63.8%) while 29.6% liked to visit fine dining restaurants. Only 6.6% of respondents choose fast food restaurants. The most significant reasons given for eating at fine dining restaurants was food (41.4%), restaurant environment (23.7%) and celebrations (17.8%). Surprisingly, only 10.5% cited service as a factor. The remainder 6.6% selected price, promotions and social status as reasons for dining in a fine dining restaurant. None of the respondents visited the fine dining restaurants for business meeting purposes.

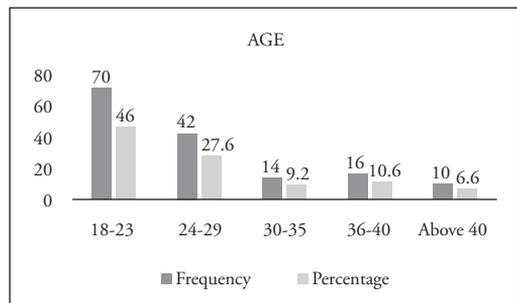
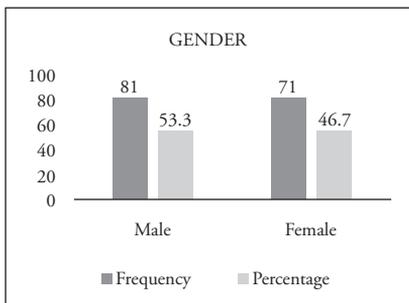
Table 2. Details of sample (n = 152)

	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Frequency of dining in a fine dining restaurant		
Once a week or more	27	17.8
Less than once a week but more than once a month	108	71.1
Once a month or less	17	11.2
Total	152	100.0
Preferred restaurant to dine in		
Fine dining restaurants / Gastronomic restaurants	45	29.6
Fast food restaurants / Snack bars	10	6.6
Casual dining restaurants / Mamak restaurants	97	63.8
Total	152	100.0

Table 2 (cont)

Most significant reason to dine in a fast food restaurant		
Food	63	41.4
Service (staff attitude)	16	10.5
Restaurant environment (ambience, facility layout, lighting)	36	23.7
Price	5	3.3
Promotion or advertisements	4	2.6
Social status	1	0.7
Celebrations	27	17.8
Business meetings	0	0.0
Total	152	100.0

The gender distribution of the respondents was 53.3% females and 46.7% of males. From the total of 152 respondents, 46% were aged 18 to 23 years and 27.6% was in the age range of 24 to 29 years. This indicates that most of the diners were either those who started working after they finished their graduation or diploma studies or otherwise, they might be the students who were actually studying. Among the total respondents, 58.6% were Bachelor Degree holders and 17.1% were diploma holders, whereas 23% of the respondents were either Master or Ph.D. degree holders. The majority of the respondents who participated in the survey were Malaysian nationals (65.8%), followed by nationals from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Australia, Turkey, Italy, Korea, Nepal, France, Iran, Sri Lanka, etc (19%). The participation from Indonesians was 13.2% and Chinese nationals was 2%. With regard to occupation, 55.3% of the respondents were working in the capacity of either professionals, holding administrative positions or were entrepreneurs. Surprisingly, a big share of the respondents were students (44.7%). The income level of the respondents was found to be quite diversified.



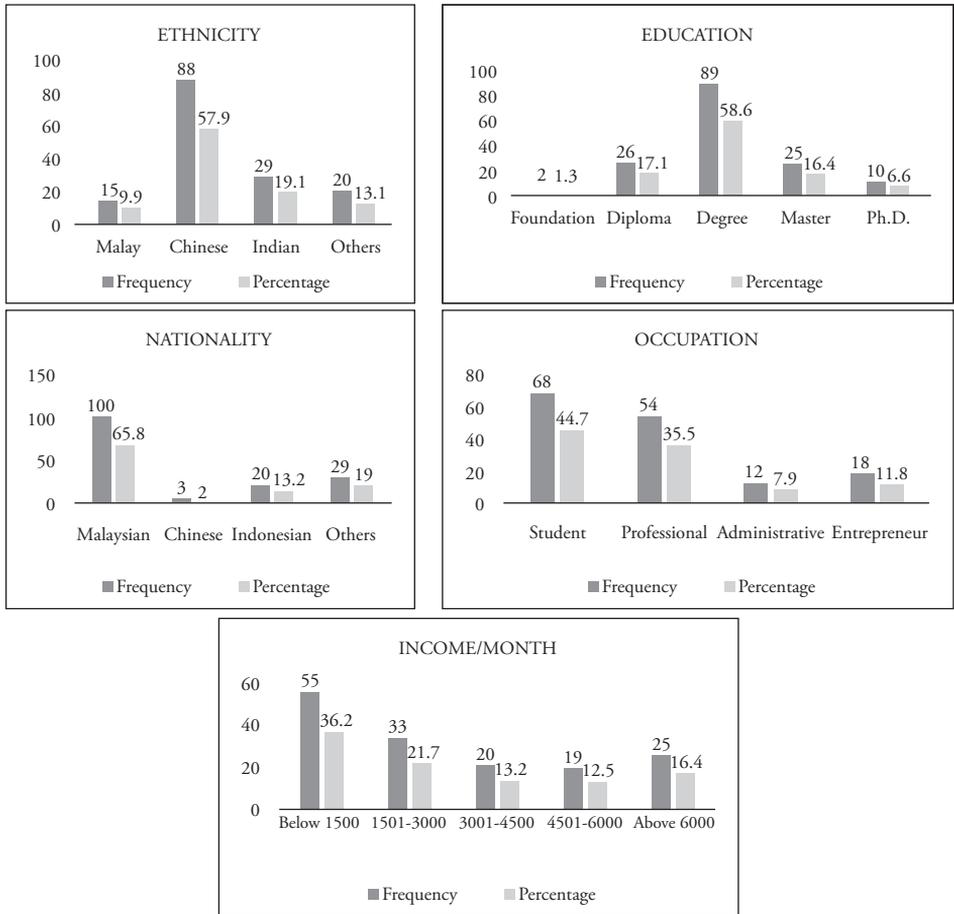


Figure 2. Demographic details

Correlation of the Study Variables

In the present study, correlation analysis was employed since correlation analysis involves measuring the closeness of the relationship between two or more variables; it considers the joint variation of two measures (Churchill A. G., 1995; Pallant, 2010). Table 3 shows that the results of correlation analysis are significant at the 0.01 level. When the correlation coefficients matrix between the study variables was examined, there was no correlation coefficient equal to 0.90 or above. This examination provides support for the discriminant validity of this study, which means that all the constructs are different/distinct (Amick & Walbery, 1975).

Table 3. Correlations of the study variables

Scales	Variables			
	1	2	3	4
Mechanic Clues	1			
Humanic Clues	.577**	1		
Functional Clues	.514**	.682**	1	
Dining Experience	.324**	.406**	.365**	1

Note: ** All the correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2- tailed)

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis is the technique used to derive an equation that relates the criterion variables to one or more predictor variables; it considers the frequency distribution of the criterion variable, when one or more predictor variables are held fixed at various levels (Churchill, 1995). In order to test the hypotheses, a stepwise regression was undertaken. It is an effective statistical process to determine the least number of predictors required to make an important influence in explaining the maximum amount of variance in a dependent variable (Zhang, 2009). In addition, it can decide which independent variable is the best predictor followed by the second best predictor and so on.

Table 4 displays *Dining Experience* as the dependent variable and *Mechanic*, *Humanic* and *Functional Clues* as the independent variables. One concern that emerges when conducting regression is multi-collinearity. Multi-collinearity may be defined as the extent to which a variable can be explained by other variables on the analysis. As multi-collinearity increases, it complicates the interpretation of the variate because it is more difficult to ascertain the effect of any single variable, owing to their interrelationships (Hair Jr., Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Multi-collinearity exists when two or more independent variables are “highly” correlated with one another (Zhang, 2009). In the analysis, a multi-collinearity check was reached by investigating the correlation matrix, and the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values and tolerances (1/VIF). According to Kennedy (1998), as a rule of thumb, for standardised data, a VIF>10 indicates harmful collinearity. Table 4 demonstrates that all variables have a high tolerance and a low VIF value representing a low degree of multi-collinearity. The Durbin–Watson statistic is a test statistic used to detect the presence of autocorrelation in the residuals from a regression analysis. It has a range of 0 to 4 with a midpoint of 2 and ideally should be somewhere between 1.5 and 2.5 for independent observation (Zhang, 2009).

Table 4. Regression analysis

Dependent variable: Dining Experience						
Independent Variables	β	t- value	p- value	Tolerance	VIF	Hypothesis
Mechanic	0.110	1.183	0.239	0.640	1.563	H1 – Not Significant
Humanic	0.248	2.283	0.024	0.465	2.151	H2 - Significant
Functional	0.139	1.343	0.181	0.513	1.950	H3 – Not Significant

Notes: Durbin-Watson = 1.723, $R^2 = 0.187$, $F = 11.352$, $p \leq 0.05$

It was necessary to use regression analysis to predict the implications of ‘Dining Experience’ level and Table 4 shows that there is a positive correlation with a coefficient of determinant (R^2) of 0.187, F value of 11.352 at the significance level of $p \leq 0.05$. The results also indicate that *Mechanic Clues* ($\beta=0.110$) and *Functional Clues* ($\beta=-0.139$) did not exert a significant positive effect on *Dining Experience* making hypotheses H1 and H3 void. However, it was found that *Humanic Clues* ($\beta=-0.248$) exerted a significant positive effect on the *Dining Experience* level of diners, thus making hypothesis H2 acceptable.

Conclusion

The outcome of this study adds to the understanding of the effects of mechanic clues, humanic clues and functional clues on customers’ dining experience in fine dining restaurants. The results of this research show that mechanic and functional clues do not have a significant influence on the dining experience; however, humanic clues exhibit the strongest impact on dining experience in fine dining restaurants. These outcomes of the study also propose that the quality of food and staff service are important factors that engender customers’ positive dining experiences in full-service restaurant settings. The humanic clues prove to be a stronger predictor of the customer’s experience as compared to functional clues and mechanic clues. This result supports the finding of Wu and Liang (2009) in which the performance of service personnel determines the value of a customer’s experience. In contrast, mechanic clues and functional clues insignificantly influence customers’ dining experience in the context of full-service restaurants.

The findings of this research offer fine dining restaurant owners a better understanding in managing their restaurants. Restaurant managers should pay attention to the physical atmosphere, excellence of food and staff services in their restaurants to help boost customers’ perceptions. Pleasant music, adequate lighting, comfortable furniture and stunning interior décor are some physical characteristics that can enhance a consumer’s perspective of the food quality and staff service.

For example, the restaurant's lights and music can be adjusted to suit customers' preference. Restaurant managers should also allocate sufficient budget for interior design and decoration to enhance the physical aspects of the dining experience.

To encourage positive dining experiences in fine dining restaurants, restaurant managers should also pay attention to functional and humanic clues by serving good food. The taste of food, its presentation and variety, and other related characteristics should be made attractive and appealing. The management should also ensure that their staff is trained well to deliver satisfactory service to customers. Sincere greetings, welcoming smiles, and attention to customers' needs are just some instances of excellent service that can enhance a customer's experiential value.

To create constructive behavioral intentions from customers, restaurant managers should thoroughly look into food and service quality and customers' experiential values. Customers are expected to return to the same restaurant or may recommend it to others, and spread optimistic word-of-mouth about the restaurant if they are pleased with the food and excellent dining experience. In addition to food quality, restaurateurs should also look into customers' perceptions of aesthetics, playfulness, service quality, and customers' ROI (Chua et al., 2014). Providing good food and generating auspicious experiential values are vital for producing optimistic customer behavioral intentions.

This study also provides restaurateurs a distinctive viewpoint for understanding the combined effects of attributes on customer satisfaction. Restaurant management should arrange training programmes for their staff to develop culinary skills and to improve service skills such as courtesy, helpfulness, ability to handle customer complaints, ability to describe specials etc. Also, the management of the restaurants should acknowledge and appreciate their employees and keep their employees engaged. Otherwise, both food quality and service will suffer due to demotivated staff.

Despite its contributions, this study is not free from limitations. One of the limitations of this study is the sample size which was very small. Another limitation was that nearly 50% of the respondents in this research were below the age of 25 years. Therefore, future research should extend the current study with a much larger sample size and more mature respondents.

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