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PERCEPTION OF KITCHEN DEPARTMENT STAFF IN HOTEL TO IMPROVING SERVICE QUALITY FOR ELDERLY CUSTOMERS

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ABSTRACT

Kitchen department in hotels is one of the sections that should give priority to food service quality. Especially for food production and preparation, because satisfying and trusting customers will encourage them to come back for a revisit, as it is related to their health and consumption quality of customers directly. The research investigated perceptions of kitchen department staff of five hotels in service quality improvement for their customers in Bangkok. This qualitative research uses Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's (1990) service quality model as a theoretical conceptual framework. The in-depth interview method was used to collect data from kitchen department staffs of five hotels in Bangkok and using content analysis. The findings showed that kitchen department staff of hotels place great importance in all five dimensions of service quality components which include 1) Tangibility, 2) Reliability, 3) Responsiveness, 4) Assurance, and 5) Empathy. More importantly, the kitchen department staffs in five hotels are of the utmost importance to reliability and the front-line hotel staff as they are a main factor in encouraging elderly customers and representing the kitchen department in food presentation. In addition, the findings of this study can be used as a guideline for the development of kitchen department service quality in food production and preparation which will benefit the hotel operators as well as government agencies who are responsible for the food service business.

Keywords: Perception, Service Quality, Elderly customers

Introduction

Nowadays, the mortality rate of the population is decreasing and increasing their longevity, which affects the structure of the population and entering an aging society because of advances in the medical and public health

development of the country. Thailand has been entering the aging society since 2005 and it is forecast that by 2030 the Thai population over 60 years old will increase to 15.7 percent (National Statistical Office, 2019). This rising number of elderly consumers may have an impact on hotel businesses that need to be ready for change. After retirement, most elderly customers are well-timed and financially prepared, thus making them more focused on taking care of their own health. Therefore, they are classified as an important and quality target customer (Nella and Christou, 2016). This growth in the number of elderly customers has enabled many hotel service organizations to prepare specialty and quality products for their target group to meet the needs of their customers especially in food preparation and production (Nikitina and Vorontsova, 2015). Therefore, the future of hotel business is challenging in identifying the quality and diversity of services and products to meet the needs of the elderly customers (Suksutdhi, 2020). To meet special needs of the elderly customers has become so important for the hotel business, which directly contributes to the positive experience of these customers. However, little empirical evidence is presented regarding service quality assessments in the kitchen department in hotel business, especially from food preparation and production perspectives. Hence, this research aimed to study perceptions of kitchen department staff in hotel to improving food service quality for elderly customers.

Theoretical Review

Elderly customer, the tremendous increase in the number of seniors around the world has made them more demanding of consumers, thus being a potential customer segment of one fifth of the population (Alén, Domínguez, and Losada, 2012). Elderly customers include retired and non-retired seniors from 55 years and older, have different income levels and are physically and mentally self-sufficient, and are available in time and finance for taking care of their health (Alén et al, 2012). Some research has shown that both external (such as social progress, time and personal finance, facilities, activities, safety and cleanliness) and internal desires (such as novelty and pursuit of knowledge, rest, well-being, normal escape, social and Personal reward) are the factors that motivated elderly customers (Jang and Wu, 2006). Hotel service providers need to customize their offerings to meet the differing needs, values, and concerns of their elderly customers (Cleaver, Green, and Muller, 2000). The lack of a well-understood interaction between elderly customers and kitchen department (such as food preparation, cooking, or nutritional) has led to the misunderstanding of the needs, values, and expectations of elderly customers (Tsang and Qu, 2000). Therefore, it is important for hotel owners, kitchen staff, and front-lined service staff to understand the needs and expectations of this elderly customers group to be able to provide quality of food products and services that meet these expectations (Luk and Layton, 2002).

Service Quality Model, the latest research on service quality was carried out within the framework of the service quality model (Parasuraman,

Berry, and Zeithaml, 1990; Aderemi-Williams, Soremekun, Oluwatosin Caleb, and Isaac, 2017)obtained from 5 dimensions: 1) Reliability, the ability to provide contractual service to customers, 2) Assurance, the ability to build confidence by demonstrating knowledge and service skills to meet customer needs, 3) Responsiveness, the ability to perform service that is attentive and ready to act quickly, 4) Empathy,the ability to take care of customers thoroughly and pay attention with the highest customer interest, and 5) Tangibility, means tangible things, including physical qualifications, personnel, facilities and the environment, such as location, equipment, tools and documents, and service providers, are courteous, caring, caring and willing.Service quality affects consumer satisfaction levels in many businesses (Thanakitputimed, 2016), especially the elderly customers due to the safety and special needs (Viwatkamolwat, Boonpalit, and Keonil, 2017; Thammasane, 2012).

Research Method and Data Analysis

Application of the Parasuraman and his team service quality model (1990), this qualitative research studiedthe kitchen departmentstaff perceptions of improving service quality for elderlycustomers.The in-depth interview was used to collect information from kitchen department staff in five hotels in Bangkok. As Bengtsson (2016) suggested, this research used a qualitative content analysis to systematically analyze the data to find the meaning, pattern, or concept of kitchen department staff perception for service quality improvement.

Findings

Kitchen department staff in five hotels in Bangkok participated in the interview. Results showed that all kitchen department staffsfocused on improving the quality of food service in five dimensions: 1) Tangibility, 2) Reliability, 3) Responsiveness, 4) Assurance, and 5) Empathy. The summary below explains the results of the study as follows:

1) Tangibility improvement, kitchen department staffsattach great importance to the development and improvement of food service quality in a way that supports the elderly customers and creates a good impression. Most kitchen departmentsare organized in a clean and modern style with an emphasis on lightness and safety. The facilities must be built to facilitate and accommodate cooking for the elderly, considering the safety, convenience, and ease of consuming. The findings also highlight that kitchen department staff'splace great importance on cleanliness, modesty, and dress code of their service workers to impress their elderly customers during their service.

2) Reliability improvement, the image of a service area is important in the perceived reliability of food service providers.As the elderly customers group attaches importance to safety, the service area must have a good image and trust, and the service provided by service staff is one of the most important factors. It is very important for front-line staff to be able to provide accurate customer service and to solve elderly customer problems in a timely

manner; therefore elderly customers will have trust in food service providers, thus improving their perception of reliability.

3) Responsiveness improvement, all kitchen department staffs agree that responding quickly to elderly customer needs is a key factor as it leads to repeat purchases. Elderly customers require special care and on-time service. Therefore, kitchen department should always have sufficient staff to meet their needs. They must have service mind, knowledge, and problem-solving skills, must be reliable and enthusiastic to meet elderly customer needs. In addition, they should offer a variety of food preparation assistance for elderly customers when needed.

4) Assurance improvement, most kitchen department staffs focus on security, as they always give elderly customers peace of mind. A sense of security is very important for elderly customers because they have to make sure that when consuming the product is safe and the safety must meet the standards.

5) Empathy improvement, the results showed that empathy was a challenge for improving cognitive services of kitchen department staffs. Most of them focus on front-line staff as they interact directly with elderly customers; thus, being the intermediary for impressing elderly customers other than the kitchen department staffs. Front-line staff must understand the different needs of the elderly customer groups and be able to meet them. They must pay attention to gestures such as greeting. They must also be treated with all elderly customers equally and without discrimination.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this qualitative research show that kitchen department staffs are highly aware of the potential of the elderly customer group and have continuously improved the quality of their services to better serve this elderly customer group. Similarly, the study results of the experts (Nella and Christou, 2016), expanding marketing among elderly customers. As with previous research on other service businesses providers' perceptions of service quality (Tsang and Qu, 2000), this research suggests that the five dimensions of service quality model (Parasuraman et al, 1990) can provide an insight into the provider's perspective on how to improve the quality of service (Aderemi-Williams et al, 2017). This is different from the results of some scholars (Tsang and Qu, 2000) which indicated that pharmaceutical service providers understand the needs and expectations of elderly customers and strive to improve service quality to meet their needs and expectation. Kitchen department staffs attach great importance to improving convenience in their food preparation and production, guaranteeing safety, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy to better serve the elderly customers. This discovery is based on past research (Jang and Wu, 2006; Hsu, Cai, and Wong, 2007; Sangpikul, 2008) which shown that facility, safety, and cleanliness are key factors that motivate elderly customers to use their services. Providers need to meet high levels of consumer needs, values, and concerns. The findings will benefit service providers in the hotel business. Employees can

also use these results to improve service efficiency, especially their knowledge and skills to perform their jobs with accuracy and precision. Private and government agencies (such as skilled labor development institutions, universities, and colleges) can use the perceived information of service kitchen department to develop employee knowledge and skills to meet the needs of this service business. Importantly, the results of this research may be inconclusive due to limited information provided only by kitchen department in hotel in Bangkok. Further studies in other areas are needed to provide more information about the perception of the kitchen department staff.

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