

Improving Service Quality in the Fast-Food Service Industry

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Abstract

The fast-food service industry in the United States is highly competitive, with numerous players contending for consumer attention and loyalty. In this context, businesses must provide exceptional service quality to differentiate themselves, and attract, and retain consumers. This abstract examines strategies and approaches for enhancing service quality in the United States fast-food industry. This study begins by identifying the key service quality dimensions pertinent to the fast-food industry, such as responsiveness, dependability, tangibles, empathy, and assurance. These dimensions provide a framework for evaluating and enhancing fast-food establishments' service quality. Employee training and development is an essential strategy for improving service quality. Staff members who are well-trained, knowledgeable, and possess outstanding interpersonal skills can provide efficient and personalized service, resulting in increased customer satisfaction. Training programs should emphasize product knowledge, communication skills, conflict resolution, and customer-centricity, leadership potential and dynamics of emotional labor play in employee engagement and satisfaction among other factors. Service quality post Covid-19 pandemic and integration of technology also play an important role in enhancing service quality. Implementing user-friendly ordering systems, self-service terminals, and mobile applications can increase the speed and accuracy of order processing, thereby minimizing wait times and errors. In addition, digital platforms can facilitate communication and feedback exchange between consumers and the business, allowing for prompt problem resolution and personalized customer engagement. In summary, price, courteousness, cleanliness, care, speed of service, and food consistency all contribute to service quality. By prioritizing these strategies, fast-food restaurants can differentiate themselves from rivals and cultivate long-term customer loyalty, ultimately resulting in business expansion and success.

Keywords

Service Quality, Fast-Food Restaurant, Quick Service Restaurant, Customer Service, Customer Satisfaction, Transformational Leadership, Organizational Change, United States, and Covid-19

1. Introduction

Fast foods may be defined as foods that can be prepared quickly, served, and sold at chain restaurants. According to data from the National Health Nutritional Examination Survey, the National Center for Health Statistics notes that between 2013 and 2016, 36.6% of adults consumed fast food on a given day (Fryar et al., 2018). This data signifies that more than a third of all adults consume fast food, highlighting the role it plays in the daily life of the people. Fast food restaurants (FFR) strive to create a unique dining experience by blending tangible and intangible elements (Marinkovic et al., 2014). Tangibles represent things that can be seen or touched like food and silverware while intangibles are things which cannot be seen or touched like Wi-Fi, power, and cleaning of the premises, among others. Businesses need to maximize consumer satisfaction in the fast-food service industry, which may be accomplished through exceptional customer service (Kanyan et al., 2016).

For this paper, Fast-Food Restaurants (FFR) and Quick Service Restaurants (QSR) may be used interchangeably. QSR is the industry designation for the category, including the most prevalent types of restaurants, such as Burger King, Subway, and McDonald's. One may note that a robust framework of any quick-service restaurant is its customer service. Customer service may be defined as the assistance an organization offers to customers before, during, and after the purchase of a product or service. *Customer service* can be viewed as the bridge between the customer and an organization. Customer service plays a couple of roles in the operational framework of the fast-food restaurant operation. These roles include attending to queries and requests, projecting the organization's brand, providing a structure to satisfy customers, and leaving a lasting impression on the customers' minds, among many other functions.

The overall quality of delivery and management of service in an organization may be termed "service quality." *Service quality* is the level to which a customer's expectations are met or exceeded by the services provided (Shin et al., 2019). Service quality plays a vital role in driving return customers in the fast-food restaurant business and many other retail ventures. Return customers are also known as loyal customers, and they are customers who have an emotional relationship with your organization and are willing to choose you over your competitors. Villanueva et al., (2023) posit that there is a significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Other findings revealed from the research revealed that service quality has a significant relationship between

customer satisfaction and loyalty (Villanueva et al., 2023). According to studies, service quality is a crucial factor in customer satisfaction that promotes a return or purchase (Kim & Moon, 2009).

2. Increased Competition and the Need for Differentiation

A study from Statista (2020a) estimates that there were 194,395 quick-service restaurant franchise establishments in the United States in 2019. The QSRs includes cafeterias, ice-cream parlors, fast-food restaurants, and others. According to Statista (2020b), total revenue generated in the quick-service restaurant was estimated at \$280 billion in 2019. The number of restaurants could indicate a high level of opportunity in the market. The existence of several fast-food outlets today has also intensified competition for businesses. Businesses may compete for customer patronage through product, price, and brand differentiation, among many other factors. Also, the competitive position of a restaurant business may be determined by consumer perceptions of its brand at fast-food restaurants. The perception of quality by consumers is a crucial predictor of product selection.

Consumers will directly or indirectly evaluate services they will purchase or have already enjoyed (Suryani, 2012). Customers will compare their perception of the product's qualities before and after utilizing it (Serhan & Serhan, 2019). *Perception* may be defined as an individual's awareness and interpretation of stimuli. Restaurants with definitive brands will have a more significant competitive position because of consumers' perceptions (Kazmi, 2012). Consumers' overall analysis of the performance of goods or services will influence their purchase decisions (Zhong & Moon, 2020). Fast-food restaurants should pay attention to how active and passive customers perceive their overall service. Active customers look for information to make a deliberate and conscious choice. In contrast, a passive customer has not explored for purchase information and thus has fewer cognitive reasons for his or her choice (Cioffi and Garner, 1996).

Fast-food restaurants should endeavor to create an appeal cater these two groups of customers.

2.1. Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Service may be described as the efforts of service personnel to provide customer satisfaction. Through service, clients' wants and expectations can be fulfilled. According to Kotler and Keller (2012), a service is an activity or action performed for the benefit of another party that is intangible. *Service quality* is a customer's perception of the services that may meet or exceed his expectations (Shin et al., 2019). According to Kristiawan et al. (2021), the quality of service positively and substantially affects client satisfaction. Due to the enormous availability of fast-food restaurant options, a consumer would perform a review of what fast-food restaurant to patronize. The internal or external evaluation of

the FFR happens throughout the purchase process, i.e., before, during, and after purchase.

Customers review of the goods and services they purchase is an aspect of a customer's decision-making procedure called the post-consumption evaluation phase. *Post-consumption evaluation* phase may be defined as a phase where a customer reflects on the overall quality of a product or service experience after usage. Customers are either satisfied or dissatisfied with the products or services and may either be discouraged or encouraged to use the items or services again. Customers are satisfied when their expectations meet their perceptions of the performance of the goods or services and vice versa. The better the quality of service a customer experiences, the higher customer satisfaction will be. Pleased customers will return to the fast-food restaurant. Hence, a service quality strategy can help a fast-food restaurant reach its customer loyalty goals.

2.2. Inconsistency in Service Quality

Customer satisfaction and loyalty are crucial to a company's success, and service quality can substantially have an impact on both. For customer-focused businesses, customer satisfaction is one of the significant elements of success. Typically, marketers attempt to provide value and pursue customer satisfaction, and service quality is an essential component of such satisfaction. High levels of service quality may result in high customer satisfaction (Zhao & Huddleston, 2012), but if service performance falls short of consumer expectations, discontent will result (Brunner et al., 2008). This discontent of customers towards a fast-food restaurant's service could result in many negative consequences like losing business to competition, reduced revenue, and possible liquidation.

According to an independent study conducted by National Sanitation Foundation (NSF, 2022), the top six issues in a quick-service restaurant are service quality, Covid-19 regulatory requirements, increased home delivery, equipment problems, training, and staff turnover. This research examined fast-food operations in the United Kingdom and restaurants in the United States, China, India, and Latin America. New regulations and processes, personnel training and retention, and the need to handle speedy delivery and takeout orders have hampered operations' ability to keep the business running efficiently (NSF, 2022). These issues are complex and require a complete overview of the entire operation of a fast-food restaurant. This overview is necessary because resolving one of the issues and ignoring the other issues will still expose the operational defects of the organization. Hence, a transformational leadership approach is needed to address the multi-faceted issues in the food service industry.

2.3. Organizational Change and Transformational Leadership

Organizational change is distinguished from all other types of change by specific characteristics. According to Richard Bechar, a pioneer of organizational change, it entails extensive and discontinuous changes of a dramatic kind. This trans-

formational shift is initiated by external forces rather than internal forces. This form of change is also profound and pervasive, affecting every aspect of the organization and necessitating an entirely new set of actions. Leadership is required for large-scale organizational changes that necessitate substantial adjustments to the organization's mission, strategy, and culture (Burke, 2008). Studies of effective and ineffective organizational transformations have highlighted the critical importance of leadership when organizations face complex challenges, and this has given rise to the notion of transformational leadership (Hersey et al., 2001). Transformational leadership behavior raises the consciousness of followers about what is important, raises their concerns for higher-level needs on Maslow's hierarchy, and moves followers to transcend their own self-interests for the good of their group, organization or society (Burns, 1978).

Transformational leadership is different from transactional leadership. Transactional leadership behavior caters to the self-interests of followers. It uses contingent reinforcement: constructive rewards, praises and promises for follower success in meeting commitments to the leader, and negative feedback, reproof, or disciplinary action to correct failure to meet those commitments (Burns, 1978). A transformational leader, as opposed to a transactional leader, motivates, and inspires followers to achieve exceptional results (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). According to Korejan and Shahbazi (2016), Transformational Leadership refers to leaders who attempt to generate fresh ideas and views for the organization's growth and profitability. Transformational leadership may be used to evaluate and provide necessary interventions for complex organizational change issues such as the one identified in the fast-food restaurant business.

Organizations often experience change because of so many factors, including social, economic, environmental, political, and operational. A simple policy change could affect one specific organization positively and the other negatively. According to Foster and Kaplan (2001), capital markets change far more rapidly than corporations, are predicated on discontinuity rather than continuity, filter out weak performers, reward creativity and innovation, and stimulate new businesses to enter the market. The new wave of issues identified by NSF (2022) has caused significant changes in the industry directly and in-directly, impacting all the players in the fast-food market. NSF International is a global public health organization that operates in more than 170 countries, with worldwide laboratory testing facilities and expert resources across a wide range of professional fields. These include health sciences, software, food and beverages, sustainability, and agriculture. The issues identified by the NSF International research represent the evolutionary and revolutionary changes to the industry.

2.4. Revolutionary and Evolutionary Change

A step towards evaluating the issues prevalent in an organization is having a holistic review of the total operation of that organization and how external and internal changes have affected it. Understanding the difference between revolution-

nary and evolutionary change could provide more context to how changes occur in organizations and diagnose possible solutions.

Revolutionary changes occur by internal disruptions that pull sub-systems and activities out of alignment or changes that occur in the systems environment that threaten an organization's abilities to obtain resources and survive in the eco-system (Burke, 2008). According to Gersick (1991), revolutionary change is rooted in deep structure, equilibrium periods, and revolutionary periods which are all components of punctuated equilibrium.

Examples of revolutionary changes in the fast-food restaurant business range from the introduction of streamlined and affordable menus to facilitate faster service delivery and more consumer reach. The introduction of the drive through delivery service system for fast-food restaurants in the 1970s also marked a revolutionary shift in the industry. This promoted a convenient means for customers to order and retrieve their meals without having to leave their vehicles. This innovation considerably improved the service's speed and convenience, thereby increasing customer satisfaction and enhancing operational effectiveness. Also, the Internet and digitalization have paved the way for online ordering, mobile applications, and delivery services. These advancements have been adopted by fast food establishments, allowing customers to place orders, customize their meals, and have them delivered to their homes. This shift in consumer behavior has transformed the way fast food restaurants interact with their customers, allowing for increased accessibility, convenience, and customization. A period of change is often followed by a period of normalcy and then a sudden change known as punctuated equilibrium.

According to Gould and Eldredge (1977), punctuated equilibrium is a period of stability followed by an abrupt change and then a return to equilibrium. On the other hand, evolutionary change refers to incremental and continuous change. It is based on the premise that tiny, ongoing modifications made simultaneously across units can result in a significant change (Burke, 2008). In order to accommodate shifting consumer preferences and societal trends, fast food chains have made incremental, evolutionary adjustments to their operations. In response to the increased demand for healthy food options, numerous chains have expanded their menus to include salads and other vegetarian options. This transition in culture reflects a greater emphasis on health-conscious decisions and the recognition of the significance of a balanced diet.

Moreover, fast-food chains have incorporated sustainability as an integral part of their operations. They have instituted eco-friendly practices such as reducing packaging waste, sourcing locally grown ingredients, and implementing energy-efficient technologies. These evolutionary changes are consistent with the expanding awareness of corporate social responsibility and the need for sustainable business practices among these organizations' leaders and managers.

Additionally, quick food chains have utilized technology to improve the customer experience. To streamline operations and provide customized services,

fast-food restaurants deploy mobile ordering, digital loyalty programs, increased and personalized customer engagement have been implemented. These modifications utilize data analytics and customer insights to provide a more fulfilling experience for consumers.

Covid-19 regulatory requirements, increased home delivery, equipment problems, training, and staff turnover are issues in the fast-food restaurant industry that may have been predicated by the revolutionary and evolutionary changes in the industry in recent years. These issues require an in-depth review and solution proposition based on leadership theories and business management solutions.

2.5. Present Issues and Transformational Leadership Solution Approach

The transformational leadership style is the opposite of the transactional leadership style. Burns (1978) defines transformational leadership as associating communal characteristics with inspirational values. Transformational leadership characteristics include nurturing and caring, with the transformational leader's role considered one of showing consideration and developing followers to reach their full potential (Burns, 1978). Transformational leaders are prone to lead in motivating and inspiring ways, believing that community features are more effective at growing and nurturing subordinates' self-confidence (Jogulu, 2010). A transformational leader's approach to solving the present issues in the fast-food service chain is dynamic in nature, identifying and understanding the factors that promote service quality.

Service quality is identified as a crucial factor for the success of fast-food restaurants because it has a significant impact on consumer behavior by inducing either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This premise, therefore, connotes that improvement in service quality enables fast businesses to compete, build customer loyalty, and attract new clients (Wong & Fong, 2010). Service quality is connected to all areas of the fast-food restaurant operation, from food quality to inventory management to staffing and training, branding, and marketing. We may observe the listed points as service points, and a failure of any one of the service points could result in a failure in the overall service, thereby leading to a service failure. *Service failure* may be defined as the breakdown in the customer's perception of the quality of a service process. A service failure will have a negative impact on customer satisfaction and ultimately affect the company's performance to gain profit (Fitria & Yuliati, 2020). When this happens, the organization may struggle to survive, possibly leading to the dissolution of the business.

A transformational leader not only identifies factors that's promotes service delivery but educates team members on operations that lead to service failure. Advantages of transformational leadership over transactional leadership manifest in increased job satisfaction includes commitment to organizational goals (Judge & Piccolo, 2004), and efficiency in the workplace (Avolio & Bass, 2002).

With these benefits, transformational leadership stimulates performance and leadership capacity development among followers (Alkassabi et al., 2018). Generally, transformational leaders are emotionally intelligent, energetic, enthusiastic, and passionate (Alkassabi et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

A comprehensive literature review using peer-reviewed publications including publications on EBSCO database, Bowling Green State University—Summon, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and other sources are among the literature used research and analyze the topic Improving Service Quality in the Fast-Food Service Industry. Some of the search keywords include service quality, fast food industry, customer satisfaction, quick service restaurant, fast food operations in the United States, and food service delivery providing the needed information for this research. This search strategy and methodology aided in the comprehensive investigation and evaluation of the subject matter haven analyzed resulting scholarly publications, research papers, reports, and other pertinent sources from the search. The purpose of the literature review was to collect a variety of information, insights, and perspectives on service quality, organizational culture in providing quality service, as well as addressing rising labor turnover in relation to transformational leadership and emotional labor. It required analyzing academic databases, online libraries, and related websites in order to obtain credible and current literature on the topic.

The procedure included a thorough review and analysis of the identified literature, extraction of key findings, themes, and concepts, and synthesis of the data to develop a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Various aspects, such as the historical context of customer satisfaction and loyalty, increased competition and the need for differentiation, service quality and customer satisfaction, organizational change, transformational leadership, service excellence challenges, and the future of fast-food service delivery, were examined. Through the evaluation of the literature, significant patterns, gaps, and research gaps were identified. The findings provided a foundation for comprehending the current condition of Service Quality in the United States Fast-Food Service Industry. Additionally, examining potential strategies and interventions can promote service excellence.

4. Service Quality and the Covid-19 Regulatory Requirements

Wuhan, Hubei Province, China, was reported to have experienced an outbreak of pneumonia of unclear origin in December 2019. Cases of pneumonia were connected epidemiologically to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market (Ciotti et al., 2020). Inoculation of respiratory samples into human airway epithelial cells, Vero E6 and Huh7 cell lines, led to the isolation of a novel respiratory virus whose genome analysis revealed it to be a novel coronavirus related to SARS-CoV.

This virus was subsequently designated severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) (Ciotti et al., 2020). Globally, the COVID-19 health crisis has significantly impacted the trade environments of firms of all sizes (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020), while locally, the pandemic has had a variety of ripple consequences on local economies and communities.

The Covid19 epidemic is classed as an “existential hazard” by the United Nations Development Program in 1994 and the United Nations Commission on Human Security in 2003 (Rubin, 2011). Covid19 can be classified as a worldwide revolutionary event, and the government and regulatory authorities took steps to curtail the spread. Some of the regulations ranged from social distancing to total lockdown and banning people from dining at restaurants, including fast-food restaurants. The COVID19 epidemic has affected economic activities across major industries. Businesses must contend with supply chain, staffing, and consumer demand issues (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). The restrictions led to a disruption in the operation of fast-food restaurants operations including reduced demand, supply chain issues, and depleting workforce.

Fast-food restaurant operators must be environmentally conscious of structuring their operations to be strategically positioned to respond to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s ever-changing regulatory requirements. A restaurant is an open system since it continually interacts with its environment and depends on it for survival. An open system enables an organization to take energy from the environment (Burke, 2008). In contrast, a closed system exists only in the world of non-living matter. Fast-food operators should recognize that their environment determines their survival and should seek to forecast what policies might impact their businesses and how to mitigate unforeseen risks due to stringent policies and regulations. An example is to understand what party governs a state and how they might implement the policy recommendations from the federal government. Also, the operator should allow data to guide their decisions as they attempt to react to their external environment. Burke (2008) also mentions that imperative actions for organizational change must be based on data as much as possible, and operators should pay attention to and listen to the data.

4.1. Hiring, Staff Turnover, and Labor Shortages

Human resource management is an integral part of any business enterprise. The human resource department often handles employee welfare issues, including interviews, onboarding, and training. Human Resources of fast-food restaurants must have staffing strategies that place an emphasis on personnel qualities, recruitment, and selection (Batt et al., 2014). To raise the level of service quality, the human resources department should hire individuals that are proactive, have excellent communication skills, and are aware of their environment. Employees are the backbone of every enterprise because they are the ones that complete the task and activities needed to keep the organization running. In a recent study

conducted by NSF (2022), 81 percent of frontline QSR employees do not believe their training is very successful despite its obvious significance. A significant proportion of people think it is time-consuming, difficult to keep up-to-date, and given in an unengaging manner.

According to Kanyan et al. (2016), research suggested that the management team did not provide moral support to the employees. The management team did not provide good advice or constructive feedback to the employees. When employees made errors at work, they rarely offered guidance or feedback to help them improve their performance. Leadership effectiveness in managing employees needs to be reviewed for appropriate training and effective feedback for staff improvement. Scheers and Botha (2014) stated that employee training might boost employees' performance, job happiness, and, eventually, overall performance. The organization needs to provide alternative mediums for trainings to be delivered such as completing the trainings on their mobile phones and consider the possibility of taking the trainings at home.

The Burke-Litwin Casual Model of Organization posits that a change in any transformational factors such as the external environment, strategy, mission and leadership, and culture would lead to a disruption in the entire organizational system (Burke, 2008). The deep structure of the organization would have been compromised because of this change, thus requiring visionary or transformational leadership. According to Gersick (1991), deep structure is the core of an organization's structure. The underlying culture and structure are the organizational design for decision-making, accountability, control, and power allocation. It is how an organization observes, responds to, and relates to its external environment (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). If revolutionary change is called for, the deep structure of the organization must be changed. The absence of such a transformation change could lead to the ineffective operation of such an organization. Thus, transformational solutions require changing the culture, mission, and strategy, introducing new leadership, and addressing the more transactional aspects of the organization, such as structure, decision-making, accountability, and teamwork.

4.2. Transformational Leadership and Emotional Labor

A transformational approach may require the organization to empower the operators at the restaurants and provide a structure where the restaurant leaders can be emotionally aware of the needs of their team members. The restaurant leader, including the mid-level managers and the team leaders, needs to understand how to communicate emotions and the different levels of communication. Examining levels of emotional communication at progressively abstract levels of social organization is a valuable technique to help understand emotional communication.

These levels include the individual, relational, workgroup, organizational, occupational, societal, and global (Waldron, 2012). While the individual level shows

personality traits, personal skills, and bodily reactions, the relational level focuses on emotions resulting from encounters with peers, leaders, members, employees, and consumers. At the workgroup level, emotions are amplified collectively, whereas, at the organizational level, formal and informal structures are established to enforce order, enhance cooperation, and distribute power (Waldron, 2012). Effective management of employee emotions can help reduce employee job dissatisfaction and, in turn, reduce employee job turnover. Herzberg (1987) asserts that intrinsic job satisfaction is tied to the nature of work termed motivators which are achievement, acknowledgment, responsibility, advancement, growth, and the work itself, while elements such as supervision, work conditions, coworkers, salary, policies and procedures, job security, status, and personal life represent the hygiene factors and contribute to extrinsic job satisfaction. When these internal or hygiene factors are improved on employee job satisfaction increases. According to Kanwar et al. (2012), contented employees affect the total profitability of the business. High job satisfaction positively affects the company's overall profitability because it improves productivity and reduces employee turnover. Herzberg (1987) further suggested that improving the hygiene factor does not necessarily improve employee job satisfaction but reduces job dissatisfaction. This, therefore, suggests that restaurant leaders can reduce job dissatisfaction of employees when they are more emotionally aware of themselves and the team they lead, thereby reducing employee turnover.

4.3. Training, Emotional Labor, Surface Acting, and Deep Acting

Hochschild (1983) initially created the term emotional labor. She defined *emotional labor* as the management of emotion to create a publicly observable facial and bodily show in service work. She suggested that service agents undertake emotional labor when portraying socially desired emotions as part of their professional responsibilities. Perhaps the most prevalent form of emotional labor consists of service with a smile interaction in which waiters and other service personnel behave friendly toward their customers (Pugh, 2001). Surface acting and deep acting are forms of emotional labor in which employees alter their emotional expression. In most businesses and restaurants, employees are trained to surface act. Employees engage in surface acting when they alter their external emotional displays without attempting to feel the emotions they are presenting. In contrast, they are engaged in deep acting when they seek to feel the feelings they wish to portray (Hochschild, 1983). Training should be directed more towards deep acting than surface acting. Positive effects will be more significant for those using deep acting rather than surface acting (Humphrey et al., 2008). Hence, restaurant leaders will help their employees experience better emotional intelligence and stability. Fast-food restaurant leaders who perform emotional labor will be more likely to be perceived as transformational leaders. Deep acting will be more effective than surface acting at increasing perceptions of transformational leadership (Humphrey et al., 2008). Leaders need to be trained in using

emotional labor, increasing employee perception as effective communicators, and transformational leaders in the transformative change process.

4.4. Equipment Problems

Service quality hinges on several components, including equipment maintenance and technological advancement. Fast-food restaurants may need to upgrade their food service infrastructure to meet industry standards to compete. Regular maintenance of current equipment is one significant way to receive the maximum value and trouble-free service at fast-food restaurants. Regular maintenance, which includes cleaning, will maintain everything in good condition and detect minor malfunctions or worn-out parts before they lead to costly failures (Kanyan et al., 2016). Employees should be trained on the proper use of equipment, and equipment misuse could lead to equipment failure and increase the cost of repair.

1) *Increase in-home delivery (Operations and Organizational structure)*

The demand for in-home delivery is necessitated by the events of COVID-19 with its restrictions. The quick move to home delivery and order collecting during COVID-19 has had widespread effects on QSRs. For many, though, the experience has been good, indicating intriguing new opportunities for the future (National Sanitation Foundation [NSF], 2022). This research highlights two significant points. Firstly, effective management planning could help position the restaurant business for success. This planning may require adjusting the staff structure in a fast-food restaurant. For example, a restaurant might need to consider evaluating the right mix of part-time or full-time employees or those who work backstage (cooks) and frontline (servers). When customer dine-in increases, there may be more need for part-time workers and more frontline-office staff, but when home-delivery increases, more backstage staff might be needed to handle the volume and process orders just-in-time. These adjustments will ensure there is a steady balance between cost and profit. Secondly, understanding customer behavior may help an operator decide what infrastructure to invest in for strategic positioning for success. If the data has shown that customers are opting for more in-home delivery requests, then the restaurant's online channels need to be promoted by the media and communications team. Also, operators need to invest in technologies that will aid the ease of use of the restaurant's online platforms. Another consideration would be to form strategic alliances with other organizations that will allow the restaurant to maximize the opportunities in their current environment, such as partnering with several ride-sharing services to pick up orders and deliver them to customers just-in-time.

4.5. The Future of Fast-Food Restaurants

Technological advances, altering consumer preferences, and evolving societal trends are likely to bring about radical transformations in the future of fast-food restaurants. As technology evolves, fast food restaurants will likely adopt auto-

mation and digital innovation to improve consumer experiences. The prevalence of self-service kiosks, mobile ordering apps, and digital payment options will increase, allowing consumers to place orders with greater ease and convenience. Many such developments are currently being tested by several fast-food chains. From the fully automated McDonalds restaurant, to the Taco Bell Defy Drive-through and Chik-Fil-A express drive-through lanes. In addition, the rise of artificial intelligence and machine learning may result in customized menus and suggestions based on consumer preferences and previous orders. In addition, a greater emphasis will be placed on healthier food options, sustainable practices, and ingredient procurement transparency.

2) *Healthier Menus*

In the United States, fast food is considered a major contributor to the high rates of childhood obesity. A report by the National Center for Health Statistics, National Health, and Nutrition Examination Survey, 2017-2018 states that “almost 1 in 5 children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 (19.3%) have obesity” and “the rate of obesity increased from 19.4% in 1997 to 31.3% in 2018 which was notably prevalent among adults aged 20 and older, which is a concerning trend.

According to a press release about a survey conducted by (Nextbite, 2022), 46 percent of consumers want to eat healthier in 2022, making it the top-ranked lifestyle adjustment, followed by working-out more frequently and spending less money. In addition, 49% of consumers intend to order healthier cuisine delivered in 2022. In fact, offering healthier food delivery options is the third most effective method to encourage consumers to order delivery more frequently following closely behind faster delivery times and a greater variety of food. The rise in decision by the people to eat healthier should be matched by fast-food restaurants or else they risk the possibility of losing business to competitors.

Eating healthier in 2022 is a top resolution for all ages, including 48% of 18 to 24-year-olds and 45% of 25 to 34-year-olds. Eating healthier does not necessitate adopting a trendy new diet, as only 6% of respondents intend to attempt the keto or Whole 360 diet. “Restaurants have a tremendous opportunity in 2022 to adopt virtual menus to reach new customers for delivery and takeaway, as well as to offer new healthier options that consumers crave,” said Nextbite Vice President of Brand Mickey Citarella. Most consumers are aware of these changes and will reward fast-food restaurants that try to accommodate their demands by doing business with them.

3) *More customized offerings to customers*

The availability of competition has encouraged more fast-food restaurants to offer more customized menu choices. Most fast-food restaurants often regard customization as a major selling point while mobile ordering has made ordering more convenient than ever before. Mobile ordering has increased the popularity of customization over the past few years. Customers tend to place larger and more complex orders online, where they are less likely to feel judged by servers.

This shift to more food customization is partially attributable to the rapid ad-

vancements in technology employed by fast-food franchises, such as online ordering, and the fact that people have become accustomed to being at home and having everything delivered. An increasing number of customers are beginning to treat fast food as their personal catering service with several modifications to every item and no empathy or understanding for overworked employees.

Fast-food restaurants will have to accommodate these requests by hiring more staff, providing an updated training, and updating their technology and operation. Even with these modifications, fast-food restaurants will still find it challenging to keep up with demand.

4) *Unlimited bonuses through mobile app*

Today, nearly every fast-food brand has a mobile app; not only do these apps help restaurants operate more efficiently, but they also provide valuable customer data. Downloading a fast-food chain's app can save you money in the long run, as they tend to offer attractive discounts, reward points, and birthday celebration gifts. An example is the McDonald's app which awards 100 points for each dollar spent while the Chik-Fil-A app awards 12 points per dollar. Points can be redeemed for free menu items; the more points accumulated; the larger the free menu items unlocked.

As competition grows, fast-food will offer more food and discount in order to make their app the go to for consumers willing to part with very little cash while maximizing available discounts for their meals.

4.6. The Fast Adoption of Ghost Kitchen, Delivery Service and Greater Drive through Use

Ghost kitchens also known as gloomy kitchens, silent kitchens, or delivery-only kitchens, are food delivery-optimized commercial kitchens. Each delivery kitchen is situated in locations where delivery demand is highly concentrated. The facilities themselves lack a storefront, and the staff prepares delivery-only dishes from their menus. This type of kitchen is fast becoming a trend and its accelerating due to the shift in demand during the pandemic, as delivery has become the lifeblood of many establishments. In fact, 60% of consumers in the United States order delivery or pickup at least once per week ([Upserve POS Review, 2023](#)). Now, more than ever, it is prohibitively expensive to operate a traditional brick-and-mortar restaurant due to soaring administrative expenses and uncertain demand. Traditional establishments are simply not designed for delivery.

In addition, the demand for food delivery is at an all-time high, with consumers able to order from their favorite restaurants in any city. Customers are perusing their preferred foods online and placing orders from the comfort of their couches. In the quick food industry, ghost kitchens are becoming increasingly popular. The global Food Delivery market size is projected to grow from US\$ 37,690 million in 2022 to US\$ 104,050 million in 2029; it is expected to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 15.6% from 2023 to 2029. Already, major restaurant chains are taking steps to accommodate the trend. Wendy's an-

nounced in 2020 a partnership with ghost kitchen operator Reef Technology to establish approximately 700 delivery-only kitchens in the United States and Canada over the course of the next five years. While Wendy is pulling back on her original plan, ghost kitchen still tends to offer alternative options for restaurant operators to lower cost.

Taco Bell also launched a new drive through system called “Taco Bell Defy” concept opened in a Minneapolis suburb and aims to redefine drive-through. The kitchen is located on the second floor of the two-story building, and orders are delivered to customers’ vehicles via a “vertical lift” while customers wait to pull out their orders, this is similar to a drive-through banking system. Services like these are implemented to improve service delivery to consumers by reducing the time spent in the drive-through. The numerous drive-thru lanes at Defy are intended to reduce the customer wait time to less than two minutes. Each lane will serve a specific purpose, including one for customers who order through the Taco Bell app, another for delivery drivers, and others for traditional orders equipped with a two-way audio and video technology service for customers to communicate with team members and service personnel. Some of the many benefits of these new approaches are decreasing overhead cost, improving customer experience, and driving more online traffic to your business.

4.7. Policy, Centralized or Decentralized Systems

Another critical aspect of the organization framework to consider is the structure of the fast-food restaurant. An organization could either have a centralized or decentralized system. The subject of centralized versus decentralized decision making has been evident in management literature and corporate management for decades. Centralization may be seen as the concentration of management and decision-making authority at the top of the organizational structure in order to coordinate financial, human, and other corporate resources. In contrast decentralized organization’s formal decision-making power is distributed across multiple individuals or teams.

The main enquiry has been an exchange between two opposing effects of delegation: on the one hand, delegation leads to a better utilization of information scattered throughout the lower levels of the corporation’s hierarchy, while on the other hand, it results in a loss of control for upper-level managers. Organizations often use a centralized structure when size or uniformity is a significant cost factor, when specialized production capabilities are required, or when manufacturing strategy is a significant element of corporate strategy. In contrast, decentralization is preferable when distinct products are required for individual markets or when the organization must respond rapidly to changing or regionally distinct client needs. A fast-food restaurant could be classified as either centralized or decentralized depending on the structure of the organization.

A transformational approach to resolving prevalent issues mentioned earlier will consider a more decentralized structure of the whole or parts of the business

structure. Organizations often use policy as a tool in coordinating workforce behavior in both the private and public sector. Policies are an integral part of a business and help to drive consistency of action across an organization's culture. An organization's culture represents its objectives, missions, expectations, and values. It is the responsibility of the organization to define the culture that will represent your firm.

The employees will have difficulties defining the business's values and expected behaviors if the organization doesn't have a definitive mission, vision, and value statement. According to Drucker (1992) there are three things to follow while developing an organization's mission; examine your company's strengths and prior performance, consider the external opportunities and requirements, and determine the core values of your organization. An organization's policy is an extension of a company's corporate culture. Every organization needs a robust policy for effective operation but should seek to engage everyone connected to the organization in the policy formulation process.

5. Recommendation

Price, courteousness, cleanliness, care, speed of service, and food consistency all contribute to service quality. Service quality results in positive referrals, customer happiness, an improved corporate brand, an increase in customer loyalty, and enhanced commercial success.

An inherent obstacle in improving service is the fast-paced nature of the industry creating the need for prompt service which often conflicts with the extensive procedures required to improve service quality. Striking a balance between speed and efficiency while maintaining the necessary level of thoroughness to ensure cleanliness, food uniformity, and staff courtesy can be an ongoing challenge. Deploying a transformative management approach in addressing these issues could prove beneficial to improving the overall operation in fast food industry.

For a fast-food restaurant, attention should be given to on-the-job training, environmental changes, quality of food, revising the vision, mission, and corporate culture. The organization can also use strategic models and theories like the SWOT analysis to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the organization or business for an improved operation and service delivery.

Also, leaders of fast-food restaurants should be emotionally aware of their personal emotions and that of their team. Achieving service quality should be a constant objective of a fast-food restaurant due to the ever-changing nature of the environment.

6. Conclusion

The research encountered limitations in terms of both its scope and depth. Conducting a rigorous investigation of a certain food service chain would provide direct and extensive data for a thorough evaluation. Implementing this tar-

geted research approach would provide a concentrated investigation into the operations of a given chain, leading to a more profound comprehension of their efforts to enhance service quality, and offering concrete, practical observations.

Subsequent investigations into raising service quality in the fast-food sector could examine the influence of technological integration and innovation on improving customer experiences. Examining the deployment of state-of-the-art technology, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI) -powered automation, self-service kiosks, or mobile applications for ordering and payment, could yield significant observations regarding their efficacy in optimizing service procedures while preserving or even enhancing quality. Furthermore, investigating the impact of data analytics and consumer feedback systems on real-time service improvement tactics could be a fruitful direction.

In conclusion, raising consumer satisfaction and achieving long-term success in the fast-food industry heavily relies on improving service quality. The ever-changing nature of the industry necessitates that the pursuit of service quality should be a continuous goal rather than a singular effort, requiring constant adjustment and responsiveness to shifting client demands and market conditions.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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