

## Research Article

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# The first impression in a fine-dining restaurant. A study of C Restaurant in Tampere, Finland

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**Abstract:** Food business has become a popular trend for entrepreneurs these days. However, it seems that many entrepreneurs do not know how important is the first impression and the services offered to their guests. Consequently, many restaurants have a generally poor service, and therefore, many are closed as soon as they are opened. This study concerns more on how the first impression works in a fine-dining restaurant; hence, restaurateurs will be able to know how to build on a customer's good first impression. Previous studies, experts' opinions, and the theories related to the topic of this study were referred and used in this study. The study was carried out in restaurant 'C', located in Tampere, Finland. Samples were collected from the guests who visited the restaurant 'C'. This study contributes new knowledge regarding the first impression, and how it affects the customers' decision behaviour as well as three different types of service clues (mechanic, humanic, and functional clues) and how they influence the customers' perception.

**Keywords:** First impression, Fine-dining restaurant, Customer behaviour, Customer perception, Service clue.

## 1 Introduction

In this globalisation era, the first impression is very crucial to every business, mainly in the hospitality

industry. According to Dye (2004), the opinions formed in the first few minutes after meeting someone play a major role in determining the course of a relationship. Hence, the primary effect forms the first impressions. According to Ambady, Bernieri, and Richeson (2000), 'First impressions are the fundamental drivers of our relationship'. They also added that 'in a sense, it's a little like the principle of chaos theory, where the initial conditions can have a profound impact on the eventual outcome. A first impression is your initial condition for analysing another human being'. It is similar to the theory called the 'butterfly effect' from the chaos theory. The complexity tells about the sensitivity to the initial conditions, which describing the small changes can make huge impacts. The same goes with the first impressions. Thus, no matter how delicious the food is, the ambiance, and the prices, if a guest having the bad impression for her/his first impression, he/she will never eat in that particular restaurant anymore (Ambady, Bernieri & Richeson, 2000). The quality-service-oriented business has a belief that there is only one chance to make a good first impression. Therefore, it is very crucial to have good first impressions in a food business, such as a restaurant (Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006). The quality of the staff in delivering the service can affect the first impression of the guests, especially in a fine-dining restaurant. To contextualise it in the food business, if the waiters start off on the wrong footing with dinners and make a blunder at the beginning, it is going to be very difficult to recover the bad impression projected from the dinners later because we only have a short time to form a first impression based on the personalisation or the appearance (Federaro, 1985). Hence, full sequencing in a fine-dining restaurant is important and will impact the guests' first impression. Trahan (2014) stated that it has been believed that the staff recruitment and proper training are needed for the staff, mainly because they are the best publicity asset. For instance, a new worker must know the rules and regulations applied in that particular fine-dining restaurant, such as the waiter/waitress must always look neat. According to Federaro (1985), 'That means hems are intact, shoes un-scuffed, buttons secured, shirts pressed, stockings free of runs, collars clean and

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hair trimmed. This concern for a meticulous appearance – obvious, yet sometimes overlooked – reflects the way you feel about yourself, which, in turn, affects the way people perceive you’.

The first impression brings benefits to the youngsters due to the generation gap between Gen Y and Gen X. Gen Y had a bright, clear picture of the way they work and they used to get what they want (Tolbize, 2008). In addition, it also brings benefit to Gen X, who has a restaurant and in which they can recruit Gen Y as their staff. Davis (2014) mentioned that ‘In fact, the only thing that Generation Y obsesses over more than themselves are other people’. Perception is an extremely crucial element in the first impression. It enables others around us to perceive and judge based on what they saw, heard, and felt from us. Basically, it means that how we are perceived usually affects how others treat and relate to us. This condition can be seen through personal acquaintances, such as interviews and first impressions. Hence, it is very important to represent the staff with the highest esteem possible (Davis, 2014). Gen Y or who called Millennials think very quick, and they do multiple things at the same time, while Gen X is the reverse side of Gen Y. Gen Y employees would stay longer in an organisation that has sophisticated technologies and make their job interesting, challenging, and also entertaining (Angeline, 2011). Thus, Gen Y can build the first impression very fast and perceive the first impression quickly because they tend to think fast about something (Asghar, 2014).

A first impression itself can be defined as the initial perception and forming the thoughts about the other. According to Rule and Ambady (2008), ‘We begin with the initial perception of a person, a face, or an object from an environment. Although initial perception can occur by means of input from all five senses, it usually takes place via vision and/or hearing’. Research has found that the more people with better appearance or good looks, the more persons trusted those people. They also conclude that disorder leads to distrust (Nicholson, 2011). The first impression can be determined by how the staff looks. In the business world, clothes can say things more than words. Based on the attire, we can see the confidence, professionalism, attention to detail, and many more (Foderaro, 1985). According to Smith, Simpson, and King (2011), we judge a book by its cover, and this idiom may be right because the way we perceive things has a connection with the appearance of the staff, and that perception has a big impact on realities.

A good first impression starts from a relationship with the customers, while, bad first impressions can cut the relationships with the customers. The word of mouth plays

an important role because the customers may talk bad or good things about their first impression of our restaurant. A bad first impression is possible to undo; however, it takes a lot of efforts. On the other hand, if we start off with a great first impression, things will get easier (Porter, 2009). Customers would love to visit the restaurant again if good customer service with good food is provided in the restaurant (Mealey, 2007). However, rude, slow, and unknowledgeable staffs are an annoyance to the customers. Evans (2011) explained that it is worsened when the customers have to pay for a full-service charge while they did not receive the ‘true services’. Previous studies (Evans, 2011) stated in the Square Meal’s 2011 restaurant survey in London that a service is as important to diners as outstanding food, and determines not only the company’s image, but also the likelihood of repeat customers in London. However, the Square Meal’s 2011 restaurant survey showed that most of the restaurants had a generally poor service in London’s restaurant.

Since the first impression is the most important factor for the fine-dining restaurants, the first question could be: What is the service sequence in a fine-dining restaurant, and does it affect the first impression in the fine-dining restaurant? It is interesting to know the exact relationship between the service sequence and first impression, which will lead to an understanding of the basic requirements that will help to build a great first impression in a fine-dining restaurant. The study will focus mainly on the staffs’ services, particularly in a fine-dining restaurant. It is crucial to understand the relationship between the service sequence in a fine-dining restaurant and how it affects the first impression as mainly because people do not know how important a first impression is and the first impression could affect their later behaviour (Nauert, 2011). The two main research objectives of this study were (1) to understand the concept of full-service sequencing and how it influences the first impression in a fine-dining restaurant and (2) to discover the factors influencing the first impression in a fine-dining restaurant.

## 2 Literature review

The word ‘first impression’ has been known and described as ‘hard to eradicate from the mind’. Within few seconds, people can assume and give judgment to other people as human beings more likely to be judgmental (Pham & Miyake, 2010). There are two types of restaurants, fast service restaurants and full-service restaurants (Chung & Kim, 2011). A fine-dining restaurant can be categorised as

a full-service restaurant. It is mainly because of the table service (Gregoire & Spears, 2007). Guest expectations towards the services depend on the type of the restaurant (Kim & Moon, 2009). Three crucial factors in a fine-dining restaurant that will affect customer impression are food quality, service of the restaurant, and the atmosphere (Namkung & Jang, 2008). Fine dining is identical with the highest price level among restaurants with the high standard operating procedure, finest ambiance, and atmosphere. It is because business works best when the standards are set. Food hygiene and cleanliness of the place are also crucial for the customers' experiences as they expect that everything is hygienic in the restaurant. Fine-dining restaurants are expected to be exceptional from the regular restaurants, in terms of everything (Parpal, 2014). Based on the standards, staffs are needed to be trained well and they must have enough knowledge about handling a customer in a fine-dining restaurant.

Every customer who comes to the full-service restaurant will observe more on the performances rather than the object (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). They eventually pay attention to every little thing in the service performance. Consequently, people will build their perception and turn it into a set of feelings about the service, and this is called customer perception. The usual element to evaluate is based on the quality. However, quality is very broad and subjective, because every person could give different assessment and criteria on the quality (Bakar *et al.*, 2013). With or without realisation, customers will eventually filter the experience clues and set them into rational or emotional. An experience clue is something that the customer can see, hear, smell, taste, or hear (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). As for example, when the customer first arrives at the fine-dining restaurant, they will see the décor of the restaurant and feel the ambiance and atmosphere. Further, they will observe the performance of the waiting staff. The important thing is, of course, how the food is got to be served and the presentation (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). The result of clues management is the success of a restaurant (Wall & Berry, 2007). Some of the successful companies who followed the clue management are Federal Express, Mayo Clinic, and Starbucks (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). The clues management consists of functional, mechanic, and humanic clues. The functional clues create rational perceptions, while both mechanic and humanic clues create emotional perceptions (Haeckel, Carbone, & Berry, 2003).

## 2.1 Functional clues

The technical quality of the restaurant's service is one of the main aspects of functional clues. It indicates what the true services are and whether the service is reliable and competent or not (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). It is believed that the restaurants' successes are based on the functional clues (Chua, Jin, Lee, & Goh, 2014). Therefore, these clues have become the base for the dining experience. The freshness of the food, food plating, healthiness of the food, and all things related to the quality of the food are crucial to making a positive impression on a dining experience (Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 2000; Namkung & Jang 2007). People will always be a 'detective' to observe whether the service provided is accurate and efficient or not. According to Sulek and Hensley (2004), besides the atmosphere and waiting time, food quality is the most important aspect of a full-service restaurant. They also added that food quality is the reason why people keep visiting the same full-service restaurants. Food quality can be defined as a manufacturing condition because consumers are vulnerable towards contamination that may happen during the manufacturing process (tcmwell.com, 2010). Food quality may not be the only factor that leads restaurants to success; however, it is one of the crucial factors that helps the success of the fine-dining restaurants (Parsa, Self, Njite, & King, 2005). These theories advise that food quality is the most important criterion to make customers satisfy and make a good impression on their dining experience.

## 2.2 Mechanic clues

According to Berry, Wall, and Carbone (2006), all objects in the restaurant environment involve five senses of human beings, which also comes from the mechanic clues. These five senses of humans, such as the sense of smell, hear, see, feel, and touch, can build a customer's perspective on the quality of the fine-dining restaurant (Santos, 2002). Non-human aspects in the restaurant service are mechanic clues, such as the ambiance of the restaurant, design, and so on. Bitner (1992) added that all physical factors within the company's control can force both customer and employee actions. On the contrary of the functional clues, the mechanical clues focus on the presentation of the service (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). One of the examples for the environment is the design. If the restaurant has their own unique design and colour, it will enhance the customer's purchase power (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). The atmosphere of a restaurant

is included in the mechanic clues because it is something that a customer can feel by their senses (Santos, 2002). The objective physical factors are categorised into three groups: visual clues, auditory clues, and olfactory clues (Lin, 2004). Visual clues consist of all things related to our eyes, so we can see the design, lighting, and the colour. Auditory clues include all things that we can hear, which in this case, are music and some noises. The example of olfactory clues is scented, is that something we can smell. These clues were believed to be important in resulting customer satisfaction (Lin, 2004). It can be concluded that the mechanic clues are very important because customers evaluate their experience by tangible aspects.

## 2.3 Humanic clues

Humanic clues come from the staffs' behaviour. According to Berry, Wall, and Carbone (2006), staffs' behaviour is not the only aspect of humanic clues because staffs' appearance also comes from humanic clues. The physical appearance of the staffs is tangible, meaning that a customer can see whether the staffs dress professionally, neatly, clean or not. The simplest rule to make good customer relations is that every little thing counts, including the appearance of the staffs (Tracy, 2013). The physical appearance of the staffs can influence the first impression as well. It has been proven that clothes that the staffs' wear could affect 95% of customers' first impression (Tracy, 2013). The staff needs to be trained so that they know how to dress appropriately and professionally because there is no chance to make the second impression to the customers (Tracy, 2013). Moreover, guests who have a good first impression will be more likely to come back to the restaurant. Therefore, the return of a guest is more useful and profitable for a restaurant (Miller & Kelli, 2013). Wall and Berry (2007) added that humanic clues also include the body language and tone of speech.

The service quality could be assessed by the customer through humanic clues; therefore, these clues play an important role in a customer's perception. A smile and warm greetings of the employee take an important part of a customer's impression. In addition, the employee should know the time between each course is served. Therefore, knowledgeable staffs are important assets of a company. It has been believed that customers satisfaction depends on the perceived performance and the staffs' efforts (Chua, Jin, Lee, & Goh, 2014). Moreover, customers are more likely to judge based on what the firms have promised to them and how the company will deliver the service to customers to fulfil their needs and wants (Berry,

Wall, & Carbone, 2006). Typically, the humanic clues take a crucial part of sending the promise through the staffs' performance. The first impression of a customer can be influenced by the friendliness of the staffs (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005). In addition, Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) explain that the interpersonal interaction could develop three types of customer behaviour, which are stay loyalty, switching behaviour, and complaining behaviour.

## 2.4 First impression

It is in 'The Nine Basic Principles of Hospitality and Service' (Wiley, 2000) that 'You only have one chance to make a good first impression'. The article says that first impression is very crucial for quality-oriented service restaurant (Wiley, 2000). In the restaurant business, 90% of the people will form up to 11 opinions about the restaurant within the first 45 seconds in the restaurant (Robertson, 2008). That is why we must determine how we want people to develop an image that is consistent with our goal (Robertson, 2008). People always judge others when they meet for the first time. This has been proved in a survey conducted by Princeton University, which stated about how people can make thoughts about some political candidates at a first glance, and the results were amazing as 70% of the respondents' answers were proved to be correct (Willis & Todorov, 2006). A new study shows that first impressions influence future behaviour and co-operation. When the first impression is negative, the expectation is difficult to overcome (Nauert, 2011). The previous study shows that the 'halo effect' does exist (Nowlin, 2010). 'Halo effect' is the term described when initial impressions influence later behaviour (Thorndike, 1927). It also defined when first impressions do matter even after people knowing the contradict facts (Rosenzweig, 2007). The 'halo effect' makes impact on the peoples' minds, ensures them that their first impressions are often misleading (Nowlin, 2010). However, other researchers stated that their evaluation based on personality is mostly accurate (Gladwell, 2005; Willis, & Todorov, 2006). The theory is based on thin-slicing, which means people only get a few seconds to evaluate other people for the first time to get the initial impression with minimum exposure (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). The factors affecting peoples' judgment consists of two traits, which are micro and macro traits.

The moments that people could recall are when they meet someone creepy or someone pleasant. These moments come from the macro traits (Thompson, 2012). However, the micro traits are hard to detect and remember.

It is easier to remember people in general rather than remembering them in specific details (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). Therefore, this is dangerous because people only look and judge based on the cover. Their impression will affect their relations with the particular firms or employee. Thus, the first impression is crucial to influence customer relations. When the customers see or sense something below their expectations, they will automatically run to our competitors (Mack, n.d.).

## 2.5 Service sequences

A service sequence is the bridge between the production system, beverage provision, and the customer experience (or process). The choices on how the service is designed, planned, and controlled are made taking into account a number of organisational variables (Cousins, Foskett, & Gillespie, 2002). To have a good impression, a restaurant must deliver the right service sequences to the guests (Kumar, 2013). The service sequence may vary from one restaurant to another. However, there are various steps involved in a service sequence. There is another theory explaining about the seven elements of a service sequence, which are preparation for service, taking orders, the service of food and drink, billing, clearing, dishwashing, and clearing following the service (Cousins, Foskett, & Gillespie, 2002). Within those seven elements, there is a variety of alternative ways of achieving the service (Cousins, Foskett, & Gillespie, 2002). The following figure shows the alternative service sequence of a full-service restaurant.

A service in the restaurant is provided by the staff in the service setting to the consumer (Ryu & Jang, 2008). Good service by the staff will give a great experience to the consumers. Sweeney, Johnson, and Armstrong (1992) indicated that good manners of the staff have the greatest influence of expectations and restaurant selection. Besides, service quality is positively linked to consumer satisfaction (Ting, 2004) and return benefaction (Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 2000). This was agreed by Sureshchander, Rajendran, and Anantharaman (2002) where they suggested that service quality has a relationship with customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Four aspects that matter for giving a good service are being prompt, friendly, available, and exceptional (Morley, n.d.). Customers will not come back to the restaurant if they experience bad service, no matter how delicious the food is. Being prompt means staffs giving appropriate time for taking care of the customer. In other words, the waiting time should be fair. Customers' experience

will turn bad if they have to wait for the food too long. The most important in service is the staff. The staffs should be well-trained to be friendly. If the customer feels satisfied with the service, they will be happy and will definitely visit the restaurant again in the future. Being available means just be there to watch over guests or may be talking with the guests (Morley, n.d.). Guests will eventually feel honoured and will have respect for the restaurant owner. Last but not least, being exceptional means being different or be unique compared with another restaurant. As for example, the chef may create some variations to some loyal guests, so they will feel more appreciated or even treated like a VIP guest (Morley, n.d.).

## 2.6 Staff capabilities

Capabilities are referred as the capacity of self-realisation towards company goals through the development of employees in a long term (opic.com.au, 2011). This also means that staffs are willing to learn to promote the business in a company (businesscasestudies.co.uk, n.d.). The elements of this theory consist of teaching, assessment, demonstrating, coaching, and mentoring (Kumar, Chengappa, & Pandya, 2013). It is believed that this theory is truly effective to develop staffs' capabilities because they are given proper instruction with training that are relevant to their needs and based on their roles (Kumar, Chengappa, & Pandya, 2013). Nevertheless, there are few roles needed for the staffs to move forward, which are to analyse the targets for the different position of an organisation, team leader to teaching and analysing the chances for improving the system, and advisor, particularly in the human resources department to recruit and select the right staffs (businesscasestudies.co.uk, n.d.). The staffs' capabilities can be included in two clues, which are functional and humanic clues. When the chefs are able to provide high-quality food, means that is presentable and delectable and is called functional value (Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 2000; Namkung & Jang, 2007). The humanic clues are more towards the staffs' behaviour, such as smiling and warm greetings, which leads to the friendliness of the staffs (Berry, Wall & Carbone, 2006; Wall & Berry, 2007). From the guests' perspective, they will feel functional value through the food that is given to them, and they will see how the staffs dress and the friendliness of the service given as a humanic value. Positive body language is probably needed to maintain a good relation with a customer, which are greeting with a smile, maintaining eye contact with the guests, and looking calm. Therefore, the staffs needed to be trained to be capable, when they do

something wrong, there have to be able to handle the consequences of what they have done (Lipsman, 2010). Thus, when the staffs are capable in many things, the customer will feel satisfied, and the employees are more likely to maintain good relations with the customer.

## 2.7 Customer perception

Good service is tangible, and it is created by the employees; therefore, it generates an emotional connection between the customer and employee. Human interaction in service is believed to give out a good emotion, which leads to a good first impression, strengthens the bond between both parties, and the chance for customers to be loyal to a particular company (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). When the employee of a fine-dining restaurant offers friendly and caring service, the customer tends to see the effort in delivering the promised service and becoming satisfied and loyal (Keaveney, 1995; Mohr & Bitner, 1995). The product and service perceived by the customers are called as customer perception (Bakar et al, 2013). In other words, it is how the brand is in the customer's viewpoint. The functional clues cause calculative or rational perception, while the mechanic and humanic clues lead to emotional perception. Functional clues, means the technical competence, could not build a strong image in the customer's perspective (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). A fine-dining restaurant needs the emotional perspective of a customer to build a strong image in their mind (Chua, Jin, Lee, & Goh, 2014). The functional clues relate to anything in technical competence in service performance and the customer knows whether it meets their expectations or not. When the functional clues go wrong for the first time, the customer will straight away switch to another restaurant or competitor, which is called switching behaviour (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006), while, the mechanic clues relate to anything beyond the company's control, and it is important because customers use tangibles to evaluate a particular restaurant (Aubert-Gamet, 1997). It also influences customer perception directly, such as an uncomfortable seat in the restaurant, broken table, and so on. The humanic clues play an important role because customers come to a fine-dining restaurant to seek for services and for being served (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). It is believed that customers' satisfaction is strongly influenced by the staffs' effort in delivering the service to them (Keaveney, 1995; Mohr & Bitner, 1995). Thus, customer perception is very important and comes in two ways, which is emotional and rational. Rational perception only

works for short term to impress the guest, while emotional perception makes the guest stay loyal to a particular firm.

There are five aspects of service quality, called RATER (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). RATER stands for Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Tangibles. These aspects lead to customer satisfaction (Mosahab, Mahamad, & Ramayah, 2010). As an example, if a waitress in a fine-dining restaurant gives full information about the products and menu, the customer will feel satisfied because it is equal to what the guest expected or even beyond their expectations. The customer will feel assured by the service given by the waitress, resulting in customer loyalty. The key to maintaining a good relation is customer satisfaction (Mosahab, Mahamad, & Ramayah, 2010). In addition, customer satisfaction leads the power of future purchasing (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001). More importantly, according to Jamal and Naser (2002), a word of mouth plays an important role in customer relations. It is because when people feel satisfied with the product or service given by a restaurant, they will talk to another person, this happens especially in middle-eastern cultures.

## 3 Research methodology

In order to assess the dining experiences of the customers towards the environmental factors, employees' behavioural factors and the technical quality of food and service in fine-dining restaurants and the hypothesis formed for the framework, quantitative research techniques of questionnaire survey were adopted to congregate in-depth information. The questionnaire was distributed and collected from a sample size of 177 respondents who were the customers of 'C' restaurant located in Tampere, which is the third largest city in Finland, through the physical distribution of the questionnaire, which helped to understand how these guests feel or experience the service in a fine-dining restaurant. The measurement scale of the questionnaire for all items was based on 5-Likert scale, and that scale ranges from '1' being 'strongly disagree' to '5' being 'strongly agree'.

The collected data was compiled and organised using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software. The data collected were entered into Microsoft Excel and then exported to the IBM SPSS for processing the data. SPSS was used for reliability analysis, descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, and multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The statistical instruments used were Cronbach's alpha (1951) for the test of internal

consistency reliability. For Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient, the norm of 0.70 set by Nunnally (1978) was used. The results generated through SPSS 22 were further analysed to determine the fine-dining experience of the respondents. The results generated by SPSS then can be analysed to determine the effect of a service sequence (as one of the main components of the three service clues) towards the first impression (in relation to customer perception) in restaurant C. Also, it analyses which factors affect the guests' first impression of a fine-dining restaurant. The obtained results were analysed if they are coherent with the hypothesis of this study. Finally, areas that need further improvements are determined in order to provide the necessary and relevant recommendations.

### 3.1 Conceptual framework and hypotheses

There are five hypotheses that the author used as the measurement to test the study. For a better understanding of the hypotheses, the relationship between each hypothesis has been drawn in the following figure.

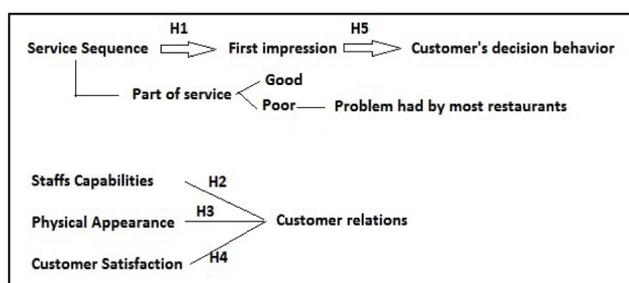
H1: Service sequences significantly affect the first impression on a fine-dining restaurant.

H2: Staffs' capabilities affect customer relations.

H3: The physical appearance of staffs can affect customer relations.

H4: Customer satisfaction has an impact on customer relations.

H5: The first impression on a fine-dining restaurant influences customers' decision behaviour.



**Figure 1:** A conceptual framework model showing the relationship among study variables

Sources: Adapted from Thorndike (1927); Cousins, Foskett, & Gillespie (2002); Mosahab, Mahamad, & Ramayah, (2010); Evans (2011); Kumar (2013); Tracy (2013)

## 4 Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

### 4.1 Reliability analysis

Reliability is the extent to which a measure will produce consistent results. Internal consistency is highly desired by the measurement of Cronbach Alpha. The norm of alpha used is 0.70, which had been set by Nunnally to indicate that the data is reliable (Nunnally, 1978). The table 1 shows that the overall reliability of the study was found to be coefficient alpha value 0.945, meaning that the data is considered as very reliable and the measures were free from random error. The individual reliability of each variable was also found to be more than coefficient alpha 0.70, which means each variable is reliable. The high alpha values indicated good internal consistency among the items, and the high alpha value for the overall scale indicated that convergent validity was met (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991).

### 4.2 Descriptive analysis

The following graphs illustrate that from the total sample size of 177, the percentage of the gender distribution of the respondents were 50.3% for females and 49.7% for males. It also indicates that 33.9% of the respondents were aged between 18 to 25 years, 33.3% were aged between 26 to 35 years, and 31.6% were aged between 36 to 45 years, while only 1.1% were aged between 46 to 55 years old. As the Figure 2.3 shows, the marital status of the respondents was evenly distributed as 50.3% were married, while the rest were single (49.7%).

**Table 1:** Reliability of the study

Variables	Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Number of items
Service sequence	0.712	3
Customer satisfaction	0.809	2
Staffs' capabilities	0.819	1
Physical appearance	0.819	1
First impression	0.714	2
Customer behaviour	0.949	1
Customer relations	0.949	1
Overall	0.945	11

### 4.3 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). Multi-collinearity is one step further in regression to check if the two variables (independent and dependent) are correlated with one another. VIF (Variance Inflation Factor) and tolerances are the way to investigate multi-collinearity. According to Kennedy (1998), the VIF should not be higher than 10, because it shows dangerous collinearity. The following tables show that all variables have low VIF, indicating that there is a low degree of multi-collinearity. Another test used is Durbin–Watson, which indicates the auto-correlation existence in the residuals from the analysis. It should show the range of number from 1.5 to 2.5 for the test. In this analysis, the hypotheses tested were:

H1: Service sequences significantly affect the first impression of a fine-dining restaurant

H5: The first impression of a fine-dining restaurant influences the customers’ decision behaviour.

Table 2 shows the regression analysis between an independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV), where ‘Service Sequence’ is the IV and ‘First Impression’ is the DV. A positive correlation was found with R<sup>2</sup> of 0.590, F value of 251.314, and the p-value of 0.000 at the significant level of  $p \leq 0.05$ . This also indicates that hypothesis H1 is accepted since the  $\beta$  value is 0.768; therefore, hypothesis H1 was found to be significant. This finding was also in line with the findings of Cousins, Foskett, and Gillespie (2002) and Kumar (2013) who also mentioned in that a service sequence does have an effect on the first impression.

Second regression was analysed by using ‘Customer Decision Behaviour’ as a dependent variable and ‘First Impression’ as an independent variable. Table 3 shows

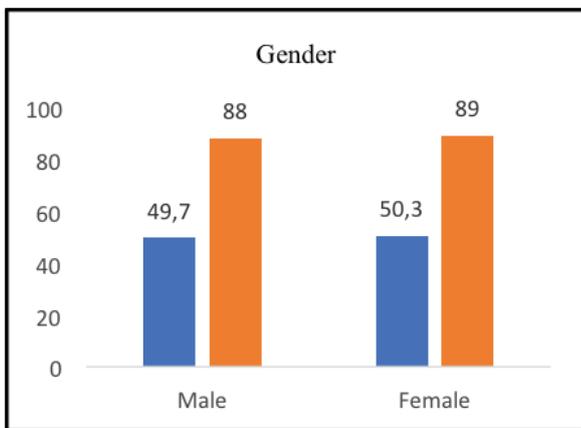


Figure 2.1: Gender distribution

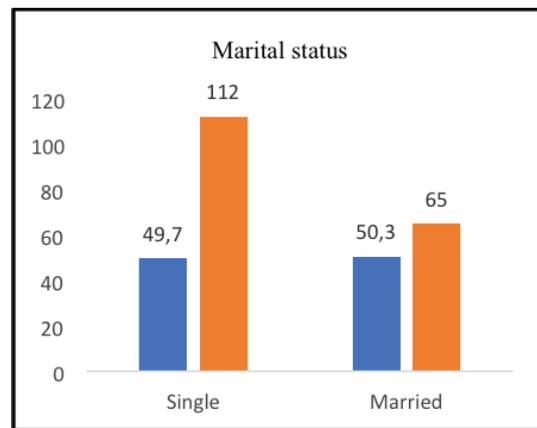


Figure 2.3: Marital status

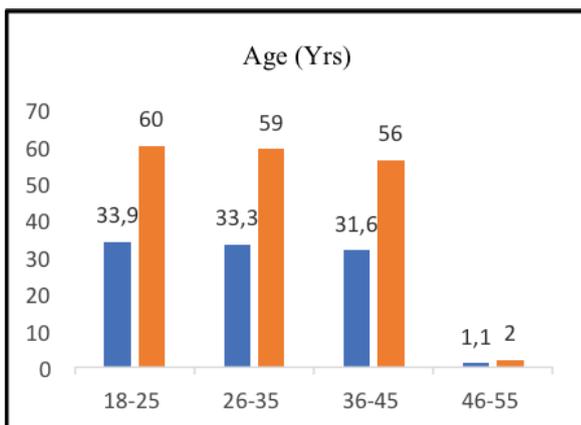


Figure 2.2: Age distribution

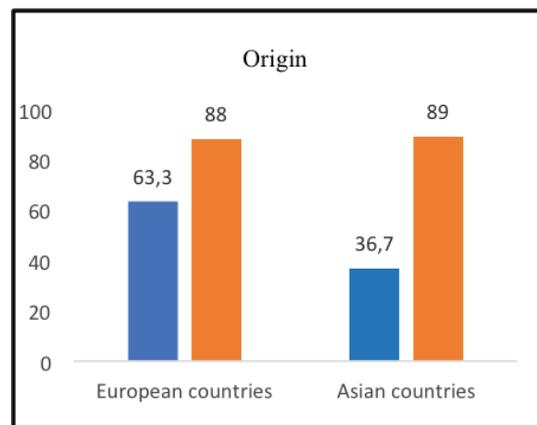


Figure 2.4 Respondents origin

Figure 2: Percentage and frequency of demographics for guests (N = 177)

there was a positive correlation with  $R^2$  of 0.810, F value of 745.867, and the p-value of 0.000 at the significant level of  $p \leq 0.05$ . It indicates that hypothesis H5 is considered accepted, due to  $\beta$  value 0.900. Thus, the first impression also influences the customers' decision behaviour. This finding supports the findings of Ambady and Rosenthal (1993), Wiley (2000), Robertson (2008), and Thompson (2012) who also mentioned in their studies that a customer's behaviour is being influenced by the first impression.

#### 4.4 Correlation analysis

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, 1995). The correlation analysis was used for independent variables 'staff's capabilities', 'physical appearance', and 'customer satisfaction' towards the dependent variable 'customer relations' to test following hypotheses:

H2: Staffs' capabilities affect customer relations.

H3: The physical appearance of the staffs can affect customer relations.

H4: Customer satisfaction has an impact on customer relations.

In Table 4, the results of correlation analysis are significant at the 0.01 level. When the correlation coefficients matrix between the study variables is examined, no correlation coefficient is 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). This also indicates that there is a strong positive correlation between the variables, hence, hypotheses H2, H3, and H4 were also found to be significant.

## 5 Conclusion

The objectives of the study were to have a better understanding of the relationship between a service sequence in a fine-dining restaurant and how it affects the first

**Table 2:** Regression analysis

Dependent variable: first impression						
Independent variables	$\beta$	t-value	p-value	Tolerance	VIF	Hypothesis
Service sequence	0.768	15.853	0.000	1	1	H1 Significant

Notes: Durbin–Watson = 2.021,  $R^2 = 0.590$ ,  $F = 251.314$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$

**Table 3:** Regression analysis

Dependent variable: customer decision behaviour						
Independent variables	$\beta$	t-value	p-value	Tolerance	VIF	Hypothesis
First impression	0.900	27.311	0.000	1	1	H5 Significant

Notes: Durbin–Watson = 2.078,  $R^2 = 0.810$ ,  $F = 745.867$ ,  $p \leq 0.05$

**Table 4:** Correlation analysis

Variables				
Scales	1	2	3	4
Staffs' capabilities	1			
Physical appearance	0.701**	1		
Customer satisfaction	0.801**	0.867**	1	
Customer relations	0.653**	0.828**	0.797**	1

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

impression of the customers. Restaurateurs who focus more on maintaining the service quality should balance the mechanic and humanic clues in the restaurant (Wall, Berry, & Carbone, 2006). From the findings, humanic clues, such as the service provided by the staffs, their body language, the tone used, and all things regarding the service provider, have a strong influence on the first impression. Also, it was found that the first impressions have a strong impact on the customers' decision behaviour. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that a service sequence does affect the first impression in a fine-dining restaurant. First impressions also have an impact on the customers' decision-making behaviour, and the customers' behaviour indicates whether they wish to become a loyal customer. The authors recommend that the food business entrepreneurs should focus more on training the staffs to deliver the service in the right sequence. By delivering the right service to the customers, it will automatically affect the perception of the customers. The customers' perception will then process to their mind-set, and eventually become their first impression. In order for the restaurateurs to keep customer relations, they should maintain good staffs' capabilities, the physical appearance of the staffs, and customer satisfaction. Once the service given by the staffs is disappointing, customers will not come back to the restaurant. The first impression happens only once in a short period. Thus, the humanic clues, which are the staffs and service provided to the guests, should not be ignored. Food business nowadays has to understand the service clues and details, as they have an impact on the customers' perception and experience (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). Future research can be carried out using both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. By doing so, the results of the study would have a much clearer picture of the customers' first impression and their decision-making behaviour. In addition, the customers' decision behaviour should be explained more in detail, because it has strong relations with the first impression. Finally, other aspects besides the humanic clues should be considered, too. The mechanic and functional clues are both important in influencing the customers' perception, which leads to the first impression (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). An entrepreneur of a food business may be benefited from this study, as they will be able to provide a good dining experience together with a good first impression. Moreover, through the research, an entrepreneur can capture a customer's needs and wants and fulfil them. It is just like the connection between the customers and restaurateurs. For the customers, they will have a broad knowledge of how the fine-dining

restaurants should provide service to them and the service sequences should be.

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