AN ASSESSMENT OF CUSTOMER SERVICE QUALITY IN FOOD FRANCHISE RESTAURANTS OF MTHATHA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in the area of Mthatha, OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape. The study used a qualitative research method. The overall aim was to have an in-depth understanding of these perceptions. Due to its qualitative nature, the researcher adopted thematic analysis to analyse the primary data collected from in-depth interviews. The main research question was around the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha. The secondary research questions were around the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations in Mthatha, the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants in Mthatha, and the factors that contribute to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha.

The findings of this study indicated that customers expect a warm welcome, focused attention by the staff and administrators, quick service at all fronts from being seated to receiving the bill and everything in between, a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere without unwanted disturbances, a high-quality food that sits at par with the standards of the restaurant, a kind and cordial treatment by the restaurant staff throughout their dining experience, and easy payment methods.

DECLARATION

I, Lundi Thiyane, 46858598, hereby declare that the work submitted is my own original work that has not been submitted in any university or academic Journal for purposes of both publication and partial fulfillment of examination procedure. I, further declare that work cited in this study is fully referenced as per academic requirements of the School of Business Leadership.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Food Franchise Restaurants	FFRs
Franchise Association of Southern Africa	FASA
Restaurant Association of South Africa	RASA
Fast Moving Consumer Goods	FMCG

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

Customer service is considered to be a critical point amongst the key focus areas of food franchise restaurants (Canfield & Basso, 2017). The study sought seek to identify variances on how customer service quality is perceived by customers and how customer service is provided by food franchise restaurants. The report of the study will advance the factors relating to challenges of quality customer service in food franchise restaurants. A description of the factors considered to be basis or variances will be provided. Therefore, this section will outline the background, problem statement, research question and objectives of the study. A definition of important terminologies that differentiate their use in this study from the general use, will also be provided.

1.2 General Background

Auka, Bosire and Matern (2019) were of the opinion that customer service quality is essential to the success of businesses: customer service is mission-critical, customer service is about being there when the customer wants something, needs something, or just wants to gripe about something. Being there for a customer means a swift response to customer orders, care display for the entire stay in the restaurant, timeous deliveries for orders, a warm welcome to customers and regular check-ups on tables as a value add (Nguyen, Nisar, Knox & Guru, 2018). Consumers often divide their purchases across different franchise restaurants. Nguyen et al. (2018) claimed that there is a significant difference in service quality and some specific elements of customer service that individually and or collectively affect consumer's satisfaction in food restaurants and the consequent contribution of such elements towards repeat purchase behaviour.

Pre-COVID-19 studies on customer service quality have presented a paradigm shift by franchise restaurants (Nguyen, et al. 2018; Canfield & Basso, 2017) from service quality to focusing on increasing revenue for restaurants, a factor that leads to a low footprint of customers. During COVID-19, in attempts to meet the demands of the pandemic, the sector incorporated the use of robotics, in developed countries (Slack, Singh, Ali, Lata, Mudaliar & Swamy, 2021). Attempts to improve customer service in

food franchise restaurants where the needs of diverse consumer groups have to be addressed, proved to be even more challenging (Tlapane, 2017).

Global studies have reflected that customers may purchase items based on what they need and may purchase items based on the assistance from waiters serving them in order to make an informed decision before purchasing items (Al-Rasheed, 2018; Almohaimmeed, 2017; Tlapane, 2017; Govender & Tefera, 2017). This is where, amongst other aspects in food franchise restaurants, customer service quality plays a significant role (Almohaimmeed, 2017). In a competitive market environment, intentional effort is needed to improve customer service quality for food purchasing experience to be perceived as more rewarding for customers. Service quality in food franchise restaurants becomes crucial in terms of the potential to facilitate customers in concluding informed responsible buyer decisions (Mesala & Paul, 2018). In addition, if customer expectations are not met, a customer is likely to be dissatisfied. A dissatisfied customer is likely to leave the restaurant to look for other options (Canfield & Basso, 2017). In view of that, restaurants should be cognisant that customer expectations move continuously upwards and that only satisfied customers are likely to remain loyal in the long run.

Customers in developing countries, such as some in Africa, tend to focus on the core benefits of service, being the functional aspects in their choice criteria due to personality factors that are shaped by culture related characteristics and philosophy of life (Wilson, 2018, Tlapane, 2017). These customers would typically consider choice alternatives in terms of product ranges second to the importance of the human touch of the service (Mhlanga, 2018). In this geographical area, studies found that patrons and customers are accustomed to lower quality expectations and tend to show a wider zone of tolerance for ineffective customer services, compared to customers in developed countries (Namin, 2017; Canfield & Basso, 2017; Mhlanga, 2018). Customers in developing countries show a higher regard for personnel in terms of a positive customer service judgment while customers in developed countries regard time related aspects as more important, i.e., responsiveness through effective, correct transactions and competency of staff (Wilson, 2018; Namin, 2017).

The South African commercial sector is made up of various industries and the retail sector, whereby the retail sector is composed of goods retail and food retail sub-

sectors, to mention a few (Canfield & Basso, 2017). The fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) or food retail sub-sector as it is known, contains retail supermarkets and fast-food restaurants under its wing. For instance, within the formal sector (FASA, 2022), there are food chain restaurants whose brands are privately owned but ownership of stores rests with business individuals, namely food franchise restaurants.

Food franchise restaurants in South Africa have to take into consideration that restaurant customers come from various backgrounds of society (Namin, 2017). The country has people from all corners of the world who become customers and patrons of restaurants. Such an aspect influences a variance in perceptions of service quality in a restaurant (Almohaimmeed, 2017). Restaurants make an effort to reach the satisfaction of its customers through an approach best suitable by their capabilities. The Corona virus has generally and socially changed how society does things in general and so it has changed how restaurants seek to add value to their customers. Along with such changes is an uncertainty on restaurants reaching the satisfaction of their customers.

1.3 Problem Statement

The principal focus of the study was to assess the perceptions of customers on service quality of franchise restaurants, in the area of Mthatha in the Eastern Cape (Annexure A). According to Mhlanga (2018), service quality combined with selling skills attracts more attention in recent years than ever before, a big influence being the increasing sensitivity towards service by customers. In South Africa the persistent decline in the socio-economic environment has led to the food franchise industry becoming more concerned about the revenue in their businesses in the same way redirecting the focus and priorities away from service quality (Rita, Oliveira & Farisa, 2019; Petzer & Mackay, 2014). Studies on customer service quality in food franchise restaurants in the Eastern Cape (Mhlanga, 2018) indicated a variance between customer perceptions and expectations about service quality and how franchise restaurants render customer service quality (Rita et al., 2019).

This study focused on the perceptions of customers towards service quality provided by franchise restaurants in Mthatha; and it described the reasons for the differences. There is no literature available on the problem having been investigated nor assessed in the area of Mthatha. One factor could be that the small town is at its developing

stages whereby investors have only in recent times begun to consider it as a viable and sustainable area with future returns. The town consists of only three shopping malls with few food restaurants; hence the study focussed on customers of selected food chain restaurants.

1.4 Primary research question
Following the problem statement, the main research question and sub questions are presented below:

- What are the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?

1.4.1 Secondary research questions
- How is the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations in Mthatha?
- What are the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?
- What are the contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha?

1.5 Research objectives
Consistent with the problem statement and research questions above, the following research objectives were formulated.

1.5.1 Primary research objective
- To explore the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants.

1.5.2 Specific research objectives
- To assess the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations.
- To determine the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants.
- To evaluate contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service.

1.6 Literature Themes

Customer

Customers are the core of food franchise industry at large and its profits depend on customers (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In this study, a customer refers to the recipient of a service from a food franchise retailer.

Service Quality

Refers to the combination of service activities provided by food franchise restaurants towards satisfaction of a customer being efficiency, timeous responsiveness and frequency of updates on the progress of a service (Tang & Shen, 2018).

Food franchise restaurant

According to Tlapane (2017) a food franchise restaurant is defined as a privately-owned chain of food stores and may or may not belong to a larger national food chain. In this study food franchise restaurants refers to privately-owned franchise restaurants.

Customer Service Quality

Customer service refers to the combination of activities provided by food franchise restaurants towards satisfaction of a customer (Govender & Tefera, 2017).

Customer satisfaction

Is defined as an attitude-like judgement following the customer experience, its essential determinants being the confirmation or disconfirmation of pre-consumption (Govender & Tefera, 2017).

Models on Service Quality

There are various models used on measuring service quality. Auka et al. (2019) defined service quality as the degree to which a restaurant's service matches up the expectations of the customer, which are then driven by perceptions. It is thus very important to understand the extent to which quality service and customer perceptions contribute to customer service. When quality service is provided, customer expectations are highly possible to be met. Studies allude to the fact that a satisfied customer has a positive purchase and repurchase intention or a return for a service, positive word-of-mouth, and loyalty in the long-term (Slack, Singh, Ali, Lata, Mudaliar & Swamy, 2021).

1.7 Research Methodology

The research methodology serves as the framework or a plan of study that guides the collection and analysis of data (Churchill, Brown, & Suter, 2014). This section will clarify the research method, research design and data collection tool and techniques that were used in the study. It will also indicate the target population, sampling process, and conclude with the elements of ethical consideration. The study was conducted on customers of food franchise restaurants of Mthatha in the OR Tambo district Municipality under the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality (Annexure A – map of Mthatha). The town has been chosen on the basis of costs and practical reasons because of the limited time frames, as well as the potential of obtaining the relevant data of the study.

1.7.1 Qualitative research approach

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted and used. Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2014) described qualitative research approach as a process to find the meanings people give to reality. Qualitative research is often guided by a philosophy of interpretivism (Creswell, 2014). This chosen approach allowed the researcher to objectively interpret and describe the meaning that customers of food franchise restaurants give to a service quality based on their perceptions. The method provided an explanation for; and a description of, the perceptions of participants on service quality provided by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha. In view of such description, restaurants managers or supervisors will be able to align their service strategies to precisely satisfy their customers, retain them and increase their revenue through an improved service quality.

A qualitative approach achieved the objectives of the study through selected responses from a pre-determined set of open-ended questions for the interviews. The researcher was able to assess the service quality compared to customer perceptions; was able to determine the aspects of service quality valued the most by customers and to evaluate contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as service quality.

1.7.2 Population Size

The population of Mthatha, based on the latest census conducted in 2016 by Statistics South Africa, is about 96 114 (Statistics SA, 2016). The target population of interest was customers who choose to buy from food franchise restaurants of this town; regardless of being regular or irregular customers of the restaurant during the period of conducting the study. The study was conducted in a manner that ensured that customers from formal food franchise restaurants (FASA, 2022) of Mthatha are represented. The town has three malls and 16 food franchise restaurants, some food franchise restaurants are inside the three malls and some are stand-alone in town.

1.7.3 Sample Size

Sample size is defined as a set of a unit that is to be used in the population (Blumberg, et al., 2014). The sample was drawn from the population of Mthatha customers of food franchise restaurants. Consistent with Creswell and Creswell (2017), a sample size of 10 participants is sufficient to produce reliable findings in a qualitative study. Therefore, the sample size of 10 participants was implemented in the context of the research study at hand.

The sample was drawn from the population of Mthatha customers of food franchise restaurants. The participants were from three restaurants (named A, B, & C). Two restaurants (A & B) were from the malls as they were identified by the researcher's observations to have a larger flow of customers and extended hours of trading than those outside the malls. One restaurant (C) was from the restaurants that are not in one of the malls.

1.7.4 Sampling Technique

A sampling technique is defined as the basis for the selection of the sample size (Blumberg et al., 2014). According to Churchill et al., (2014), non-probability sampling design is used to allow each element in the population to get an equal and independent chance of selection from the sample. For the purpose of this study, a non-probability sampling was used to select the participants. Blumberg et al., (2014) defined convenience sampling as a process of selecting participants for practical convenience. Restaurant customers were convenient for the objectives of this study to give responses based on their experience of customer service.

Table 1.1: Summary: Population, sample size and sampling method

Restaurant	Total Daily Customer Population	Sample size	Sampling technique
Restaurant name A	280	4	Non-probability Sampling
Restaurant name B	175	3	Non-probability Sampling
Restaurant name C	195	3	Non-probability Sampling
Total	**650**	**10**	

Source: Designed by the researcher (2022)

1.7.5 Data collection method and instruments

The researcher used face-to-face interviews for primary data collection. In-depth interviews not shorter than 40 minutes were granted. The permission granted by UNISA SBL was used for access to customers in a restaurant and to request a scheduled appointment for an interview with the customer. If a customer consented to respond immediately in the restaurant, the researcher sat with them for the interview, otherwise an appointment was scheduled. Structured interviews (Annexure B) containing pre-determined set of open-ended questions were used. This type of interview will provide a uniformed and comparable data. Questions were informed by the research question, literature review and overall objectives of the study. The responses were recorded and transcribed.

1.8 Limitations of the study

Consistent with research questions, objectives and hypothesis, the following limitations are noted.

- This study was limited to the area of Mthatha in the Eastern Cape.
- This study was limited to primary data and collection process.
- This study was limited to qualitative data analysis process.

1.8.1 Delimitations of the study

- This study was delimited to all secondary data collection processes.
- This study was delimited to quantitative research analysis.

1.9 Research Significance

Consistent with the problem statement, the significance of the study is twofold. First, the significance of the study is that the knowledge development process attempted to solve a management problem that links customer services problems and management and organisational performance through using a qualitative research approach. Thus, the findings from this study are significant in developing organisational policies that enhance customer services in the retail industry. Second, academic significance, although this study did not intend to develop a theoretical framework, nonetheless, this study did intend to qualitatively validate the conceptual underpinnings of the SERVPRF model in the context of customer service in the retail industry.

1.9 Organisation of the study

The study is organised as follows:

- Chapter One: This chapter presented the orientation of the study, illuminating the background, research questions and objectives. This chapter provided the background and the context of the study.
- Chapter Two: This chapter will present the literature review and analysis. In particular, this chapter will inform on theoretical constructs that inform literature analysis and synthesis.
- Chapter Three: This chapter will present the methodological framework that informed the research procedures such as data collection, population and sample size. In particular, this chapter will detail the process of data collection and analysis that will be presented in Chapter Four.
- Chapter Four: This chapter will present the results of the data analysis, presentation and discussion. This chapter will provide detail of the results of thematic analysis that were used to explain the customer service protocols in the retail industry.

- Chapter Five: This chapter will present recommendations and conclusions. These recommendations were informed by the scientific research process as explained in in Chapters Two, Three and Four. In particular, these chapters were informed by the literature analysis, methodological framework and data analysis, interpretations and discussions.

1.10 Conclusion

In this chapter, the orientation of the study was presented in the background, context, problem statement, research questions, objectives. Thus, in the next chapter, a discussion on literature analysis and synthesis is presented in the context of the research gap as illustrated in the initial research questions and objectives.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on presenting the existing literature and the works of authors who have conducted research on customer service quality in food franchise. This chapter is structured in three broad areas in which the first section examines the variables under the conceptual framework. The second section is the empirical review of other scholars' work on the topic under study. The third section discusses the theories that are relevant in explaining why customers of food franchise restaurants behave or act the way they do. The third section in which the theories are discussed is relevant in explaining the results of the study. Literature was reviewed in order to identify the research gap on customer service quality in food franchise restaurants.

Increased disposable income, urbanisation, and the effect of communication have all contributed to a high demand for eating out in restaurants in South Africa (Auka, Bosire & Matern, 2019). People have become accustomed to eating in restaurants in recent years, from cities to villages. Restaurants compete fiercely to deliver excellent service to their customers in order to survive. An increase in competition for a larger market share led to a fragility of customer service for the majority of food franchise restaurants (Almohaimmeed, 2017). Additionally, owners and managers of restaurants have become aware of the importance of customer service quality. Satisfaction is also increasingly becoming more important given the highly competitive environment in food franchising (Auka, et al. 2019).

2.2 The Restaurant Industry

The restaurant industry can be divided into distinct sections based on unique characteristics that characterise each segment. Despite the fact that many of the common highlights can be perceived across more portions; being sit-in restaurants or take-aways, each portion has distinct qualities. Customers are more likely to rate their post-purchase experience at the property rather than the item level. This quality-based methodology enables specialists to conceptualise a client's mixed feelings about a product or service (Hill, Brierley & McDougall, 2017). The goal of this study was to investigate the relationships between restaurant service quality and client satisfaction

which is demonstrated by behavioural plans which are return proposition and comfortability.

According to Anouze, Alamro and Awwad (2018), return expectation is defined as a client's desire to participate in repeated appearances to a foundation. As a result, return plan and return behaviour must be clearly distinguished and these should help in understanding the level of satisfaction that the customers are at. According to Hohenberg and Taylor (2021), return proposition and return behaviour have a general relationship. Nonetheless, determining what the client actually does versus what they intend to do is difficult. Anouze, et al. (2018) were of the view that spoken exchange is the extent to which a client informs friends, relatives, and partners about an event that has resulted in a certain level of consumer loyalty or disappointment.

Hill and Alexander (2017) stated that positive and informal spoken exchange occurs when a client is extremely satisfied with a service experience and wishes to share this positive experience with other potential clients. As a result, verbal exchange has been identified as one of the most critical client practises that occur after the purchase of products and services and this was used by Budiyono, Maluasari and Putri (2021) as a measure to determine the satisfaction of customers over the products or services that are offered by an organisation. It is generally agreed that higher levels of consumer loyalty lead to higher levels of behavioural aim, as evidenced by return customers and word-of-mouth (Tandon, Kiran & Sah, 2017). Previous research has found a link between quality, consumer loyalty, and behavioural intentions in the context of restaurants; and have all been found to have a positive effect on consumer behavioural plans (Budiyono, et al., 2021).

2.2.1 Food Franchise Restaurants

Food franchise restaurants have been around in some form or another for a long time, but they usually catered for travellers at first (Almohaimmeed, 2017). The history of food franchise restaurants is associated with the establishment of McDonalds as the first food franchise in America (Auka, et al. 2019). This restaurant seems to have set the path for many food franchise restaurants that followed suit. Nowadays, there are various food franchise restaurants that offer a variety of food items to their customers. Customers have different reasons to choose one over the other and might also have other reasons for ignoring one over the others (Veloso & Monte, 2019). According to

Namin (2017), such reasons could range from how food is being prepared to being fried food versus grilled food, to the location of the restaurant, to catering or not catering for the whole family, to the efficiency in serving food, to handling queries and waiting time to be served.

Around the world, there are various food franchise restaurants that offer readily prepared food for their customers. These included but not limited to McDonald, Spur, Wimpy, Steers, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Nando's, John Dory's, Mike's Kitchen, Mugg and Bean, Chicken Licken, Debonairs, Panarottis and Fishaways (FASA, 2022). These restaurants are specialising in providing food service in the shortest possible time; however, they compete with one thing in common; customer service, being the determining factor if a customer will return to the restaurant in the near future and be a loyal customer (Goclowska, Piatkowska & Lenartowicz, 2019).

2.3 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Below is a framework that the study used in the understanding of customer perceptions and what constitutes what the customers view as service quality. Based on the previous studies by Eklof, Podkorytova and Malova, (2020), this conceptual framework is comprised of the following aspects: (i) Service Expectation, (ii) Food Quality and (iii) Food Price. It is when these concepts are addressed that the customers can judge if the service quality is worth appraisal or not.
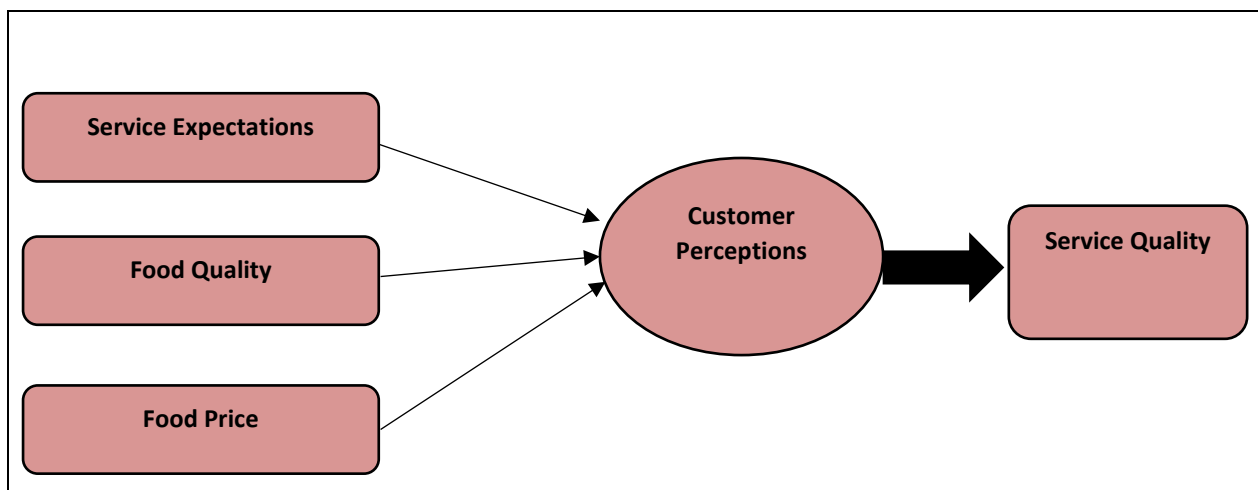
Figure 2.1: Proposed Conceptual Framework of Service Quality

2.3.1 Customer Expectations and Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction has become a key intermediary goal in service operations because of the benefits it provides to organisations (Tsafarakis, Kokotas & Pantouvakis, 2018). According to Veloso and Monte (2019), customer satisfaction in the marketing context is a key factor that leads to long-term customer retention because dissatisfied customers can switch brands, whereas satisfied customers will likely tell others about their positive experiences. This implies that customer satisfaction is critical to the survival of the business. Customer satisfaction is the ability of a service provider to generate a high rate of satisfaction, which is critical for product differentiation and developing strong relationships with customers (Tandon, Kiran & Sah, 2017). Customer satisfaction from a service can be described by comparing service perceptions and expectations.

When expectations are not met, service quality is deemed unacceptable, resulting in dissatisfaction. Quality is satisfactory when expectations are confirmed by perceived service (Kurdi, Alsurieh & Alnaser, 2020). Quality service and customer satisfaction are inextricably linked. The majority of businesses have implemented total quality management (TQM) programmes in recent years, with the goal of constantly improving the quality of their products, services, and marketing processes. Quality has a direct impact on the performance of a product or service, and thus on customer satisfaction (Kurdi et al, 2020). Previous studies have indicated that the links between restaurant quality traits and customer behavioural expectations are both positive and direct (Goclowska, et al., 2019). In a study by Goclowska, et al., (2019) it was expected that as study participants reported higher levels of nourishment and or service quality, there would be a corresponding increase in their behavioural plans. Different studies, however, have found these connections to be indirect or irregular (Eklof, et al. 2020; Long, O`Connor & Tuyen, 2017).

Although previous studies (Schirmer, Ringle, Gudergan & Fiestel, 2018, Rajendran and Suresh, 2017) have consistently demonstrated that the connections between nourishment quality and client behavioural propositions are both positive and direct across a wide range of eateries, this is not the case for a portion of the other more common restaurant qualities. Rather, upscale restaurant customers expect higher levels of general service quality, and exceptional service results in higher return propositions and more positive verbal feedback (Goclowska, et al. 2019).

2.3.2 Prices

The price of the items on the menu can also have a significant impact on customers as it has the ability to attract or repel them (Huang, Lee & Chen, 2019). Prices of restaurant items differ depending on the type of restaurant. Customers are likely to expect high quality if the price is high, or they may feel "ripped off." Similarly, if the price is low, customers may be sceptical about the ability of a restaurant to deliver high-quality products and services (Almohaimmeed, 2017). Furthermore, (Anouze, et al. 2018) asserted that because of the competitiveness of the restaurant industry, customers can establish internal reference prices. When setting restaurant prices, an internal reference price is defined as a price (or price scale) in buyer's memories that serves as a basis for judging or comparing actual prices.

Various studies (Govender, K. & Tefera, O., 2017; Auka et al. 2019 & Zhang & Chen, 2020) have hypothesised and experimentally investigated the relationship between service quality and fulfilment in a variety of commercial ventures, including Internet banking, the US air transport industry, retailing, and administration plants (Huang, Lee & Chen, 2019). Kurdi, Alshurideh and Alnaser (2020) gathered a sample of 700 customers from restaurants and emphasised the importance of links between representatives and visitors and reasoned that the workers' level of learning was a key factor in fulfilling the needs of the customer.

Customers showed that reckless spending provides better value than standard residence in the territories of dishonour and quality (Veloso & Monte, 2019). As a result, customers anticipate that higher classified prices will provide common fulfilment through better service and offices. Otto, Szymanski and Varadarajan (2020) recognised that a high level of management, a pleasant environment, and an interesting background are all essential for customer satisfaction. According to Hallencreutz and Palmler's (2021) research, the climates of lodging anterooms and the nature of nourishment are critical factors in visitor fulfilment. Also important in determining inn visitor satisfaction are the cleanliness of inn rooms, the nature of service, and the learning and service of workers. Furthermore, cutting-edge service suppliers in hotels must provide an institutionalised, organised, and simplified conveyance procedure to completely satisfy their visitors (Hohenberg & Taylor, 2021). Otto, et al. (2019) demonstrated that frequent visitors are educated about service quality, and that visitors are likely to dismiss the same on their next visit.

Numerous authoritative experts like (Nguyen, Nisar, Knox & Guru, 2018 & Anouze, et al. (2018) have proposed that service quality is an important indicator of client retention and consumer loyalty. Service quality as a consumer loyalty driver that influences client dependability (Zhang & Chen, 2020). Consumer loyalty is also influenced by service quality as it is a critical tool for restaurants to increase their share of the overall restaurant industry (Maioli, Kusumawardani, Wiguna, Supriyadi & Yulita, 2020). Furthermore, considering the various stages of the client relationship life cycle, highlights critical issues and serves to define the level of consumer loyalty at each stage. It also serves to emphasise specific client needs and desires at all stages of the relationship (Zhang & Chen, 2020). In addition to this, (Govender, K. & Tefera, O., 2017) postulated that consumer loyalty denotes the long-term relationship between the client and the service supplier.

2.2.3 Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Previous research has looked at customer satisfaction and service quality and discovered a link between the two (Huang, Lee & Chen, 2019; Safitri, et al., 2020). Zhang and Chen, (2020) stated that service quality dimensions are specifically or directly related to service delivery, whereas satisfaction is based on a variety of factors, both directly and indirectly related to service delivery. For example, Veloso and Monte (2019) stated that overall service quality is significantly associated with; and contributes to, overall customer satisfaction. According to Tsafarakis et al, (2018), high perceived service quality leads to increased customer satisfaction.

Furthermore, these authors argued that service quality leads to customer satisfaction, which supports Huang, Lee and Chen's claims, (2019), as they acknowledged that customer satisfaction is based on the level of service quality provided by the service provider. This implies that when Food Franchise Retailers (FFRs) are able to meet or exceed customers' expectations, the customer will certainly be satisfied with the service. Most researchers (Long, et al. 2017; Safitri, et al. 2020) believed that a high level of service quality should be delivered by the service provider in order to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction, as service quality is normally considered an antecedent of customer satisfaction. According to Safitri, et al. (2020), there is also a link between the quality of a service and customer satisfaction. Based on this review, researchers were able to identify the relationship between customer satisfaction and

service quality as two distinct but closely related concepts and as one depending on the other.

2.4 Models on Service Quality

There are various models used for measuring service quality. Auka et al. (2019) defined service quality as the degree to which a restaurant's service matches up the expectations of the customer, which are then driven by perceptions. It is thus very important to understand the extent to which quality service and customer perceptions contribute to customer service. When quality service is provided, customer expectations are highly possible to be met. Studies allude to the fact that a satisfied customer has a positive purchase and repurchase intention or a return for a service, positive word-of-mouth, and loyalty in the long-term (Slack, Singh, Ali, Lata, Mudaliar & Swamy, 2021). Various models will be discussed below.

2.4.1 SERVQUAL Model (1988)

One model of service quality is the well-known SERVQUAL model which is a multi-item scale developed for purposes amongst others; to assess customer perceptions of service quality. The model was pioneered by Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml in 1988 (Parasuraman, et al. 2002) with the aim of providing a generic instrument for measuring service quality across a broad range of service categories and disciplines. The study by Parasuraman, et al. (2002) discussed that customers evaluated service quality by comparing expectations with perceptions on ten dimensions.

The original SERVQUAL tool consisted of 10 criteria and dimensions through which service quality could be assessed, namely competence, communication, credibility, security, understanding, tangibility, accessibility, courtesy, reliability, and responsiveness. These 10 dimensions were later refined and integrated into only five, (as shown in Figure 1) namely reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman, et al. 2002). The SERVQUAL model's core content remained unchanged. Figure 1 below shows the original model as pioneered by Parasuraman, et al. (1988).

Service Quality Dimensions	Definition
Responsiveness	Willingness or readiness of employees to provide prompt service.
Empathy	The providing of caring, individualised attention to customers.

Figure 2.1: SERVQUAL Model

Adopted from: Parasuraman, et al. 2002

2.4.2 Responsiveness/Timeous Service

Responsiveness is as much an important aspect of customer service. It is conceptualised as a willingness to help customers, respond to their requests and provide prompt service (Kumar, 2017). This variable underlines the attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customer requests, complaints and problems. Responsiveness manifests in the time that customers have to wait for assistance, answers to inquiries or attention to problems, as well as the flexibility and ability to customise the service to the customers' needs (Mhlanga, 2018). To excel on the responsiveness dimension, restaurants ought to be well-staffed, and have knowledgeable employees with responsive front-line staff. Customers' positive perceptions on responsiveness may gradually diminish in instances when they wait longer to get inside the restaurant, when they cannot get through by telephone to place an order and are put on hold or put through complex automated telephone options. According to (Mujinga, 2019) some customers look to employees for advice or assistance and get frustrated if they cannot obtain a convincing response that shows knowledge of products.

2.4.3 Empathy

Empathy is referred to as caring and extending an individualised attention that the restaurant provides to its customers (Kumar, 2017). Empathy, as discussed by

(Mujinga, 2019) is a significance that the restaurant understands customers' needs, performs in their best interests, as well as provides customers with individual personal attention. Restaurants should have convenient business hours to meet customer needs. Parasuraman, et al. (2002) stated that the essence of empathy is conveyed via personalised or customised service so that customers feel that they are special, and their needs are understood. Therefore, one can say that there is a need for communication from the waiter to brief the customer and prepare the customer for the service process: for example, the time which the order will take to prepare in busy times.

2.4.4 Findings of the SERVQUAL Model

The SERVQUAL model enables restaurants to ascertain perceived service quality by calculating the gap between customers' expectations of the service and their perceptions of the actual service delivered (Parasuraman, et al. 2002). The model shows an existing variance between the delivered service to customers and their expectation-driven perceptions of service. This could be the main factor in food franchise restaurants of Mthatha (Mujinga, 2019). Service quality is an outcome of the difference between service expectations and customer perceptions of actual service performance.

2.4.5 GAPS Model of Service Quality (1985)

The GAPS model of customer service is another model introduced by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1985. The study leading to the introduction of the model was about the service marketing strategy focusing on delivering processes, experiences, and intangibles to customers rather than physical goods and transactions (Budiyono, et al., 2021). The model addressed how executives of service institutions, including restaurants, have long struggled with how to approach service design and delivery in an organised manner (Zhang & Chen, 2020). Budiyono, et al., (2021) referred to the model as a dominant approach to viewing the delivery of service quality in a structured and integrated way. Therefore, it is relevant to conclude that this model positions the key concepts, strategies, and decisions in delivering quality service in a manner that begins with the customer and builds the restaurant tasks around what is needed to close the gap between customer expectations and perceptions.

2.4.6 Constructs of the GAPS Model

The central focus of the model is within two variables: "customer gap" being the difference between customer expectations of what will be delivered and perceptions of the service as it is actually delivered (Zhang & Chen, 2020). The other four gaps in the model are known as the "provider gaps" and each represents a potential cause behind a restaurant's failure to meet customer expectations. This study sought to highlight one of the provider gaps; being the performance gap, as a tool for closing customer gap. For purposes of this study, we seek to exploit the performance gap as a means to closing the customer gap.

According to Zhang and Chen (2020) provider gaps are tasks performed by the restaurant as a service to its customers. This study categorised performance gap as a task towards closing the customer gap, amongst others. Provider gaps can be sorted into four other gaps, each of which needs to be closed in order to close the customer gap. The following four provider gaps are the underlying causes behind the customer gap and performance gap (Zheng & Chen, 2020). Only the performance gap will be discussed for the emphasis of relation to the study.

Gap 1: The listening gap

According to (Haming, et al., 2019 p. 21), "it is the difference between customer expectations of service and company understanding of those expectations."

Gap 2: The service design and standards gap

This is the next step in preventing such failure (Listening gap). According to Hill, Brierley & McDougall (2017), this gap is concerned with the translation of consumer expectations into actual service designs and the development of standards to test service operations versus customer expectations.

Gap 3: The performance gap

Hill and Alexander (2017) stated that it is the discrepancy between an employee's present and desired performance levels. Simply put, employees have a performance gap when they are required to accomplish a certain activity in their role but do not know how to do so. This was used for this study; it is explained in detail below.

Gap 4: The communication gap

This occurs when the meaning intended by the speaker or sender differs from what the recipient understands (Hallencreutz & Parmler, 2021).

The Performance Gap (Gap 3)

Franceschini, and Mastrogiacomo, (2018) stated that a primary cause in restaurants for not meeting customer expectations is the restaurant's lack of accurately understanding exactly what those expectations are. This fact, therefore, highlights the importance of fulfilling the listening gap before performance gap (Zhang & Chen, 2020). Every gap and every strategy used to close the performance gap in the model retains a focus on the customer at its core (Franceschini & Mastrogiacomo, 2018). At its most basic level, the logic of this model suggests that customer gap is a function of any one or all of the four provider gaps.

2.4.7 Findings of the GAPS Model based on Performance Gap

In Franceschini and Mastrogiacomo's (2018) evidence, it was found that the GAPS model provides a comprehensive and integrating framework for delivering service excellence and customer-driven service innovation. According to Hill, Brierley and McDougall (2017), the model is particularly relevant for a customer service strategy because it captures the cross functionality inherent of service management. Many reasons exist for managers not being aware of what expectation-driven customer perceptions are - such as not interacting directly with customers, unwillingness to ask about expectations, or unpreparedness to address the expectations.

2.5 Empirical Review

Namin (2017) affirmed that the modern customer has evolved in such a way that their demands, perceptions and expectations are more sophisticated than ever before, resulting in an even more competitive food franchise industry. In view of changes in demand and customer expectations, a likely succeeding tool in offering quality service as per customers' perceptions would be to provide service up to their expectations (Hartson & Pyla, 2018). In addition, the importance of customer perceptions on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants has been further demonstrated by various researchers in the past (Long, O'Connor & Tuyen, 2017; Rita, Oliveira & Farisa, 2019). This study intended to assess customer perceptions on service quality, provide a description of service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants, determine the aspects of service quality that contribute to customer perceptions, and lastly, describe service quality if customer perceptions are matched to satisfaction.

2.5.1 Food Prices

A study on food prices and their effect of customer satisfaction was done in a quantitative research project by Cheng, Gan Imrie and Mansori (2018), with a population of 22,577 customers. According to the findings of this research, the price and quality of the product have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. According to this conducted research, the higher the quality of the product and the better the price determination, the greater the customer satisfaction. Overall, the study concluded that customer satisfaction will suffer if the price and quality of products are both low.

2.5.2 Pricing and Customer Satisfaction

According to Schirmer, et al. (2018), customers receive an important message from pricing. According to research by Mukherjee (2019), as prices rise, so do customer perceptions of quality of the products on the market. This is primarily due to people's natural scepticism of prices that appear "too good to be true." Exceptionally low pricing suggests to the customer that the product is not particularly valuable or is of lower quality than higher priced products (Rajendran & Suresh, 2017). Using very low pricing for food at the restaurants can also make the customer more aware of the product's overall quality, and they may be more likely to identify flaws or potential shortcomings (Hanaysha, 2016). Tandon, Kiran and Sah (2017) stated that this is problematic for customer satisfaction because it contributes to the perception that what they are purchasing is not particularly unique or valuable.

Given the issues that can arise with both a low-price and a high-price strategy, a middle ground that avoids these issues must exist in order to improve the level of satisfaction of customers. Haming, Murdifin, Syaiful and Putra (2019) claimed that customers are significantly more likely to express customer satisfaction when products are reasonably priced. This implies that pricing products between "too expensive" and "too cheap" is a good way to keep customers satisfied. A price that is neither too high nor too low conveys to the customer a positive message about the product's quality and the value of their purchase (Haming, et al., 2019). Kumar and Soni (2020) stated that reasonable pricing strategy not only improves customer satisfaction, but it also makes it easier to raise prices when and if necessary.

2.5.3 Food Quality and Customer satisfaction

A study by Kumar and Soni (2020) also attempted to determine which food-related qualities are important in increasing satisfaction and increasing revisit intention of the customers. The research used a structural equation modelling technique and found that overall food quality has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions, and that satisfaction mediates the relationship between food quality and customer behavioural intentions. A subsequent regression analysis by Eklof, et al. (2020) revealed that taste and presentation were the two most important factors influencing customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions in a study in the United States of America. Thus, managers in the restaurant industry should pay attention to the key food quality attributes that elicit customer satisfaction and increase return visits.

According to Long, et al. (2017), customer satisfaction is regarded as a critical priority for business success. As a result, determining the factors that influence customer satisfaction is critical. Hanaysha's (2016) study was aimed at investigating the effects of food quality, price fairness, and physical environment on customer satisfaction in the Malaysian fast food restaurant industry. The information was gathered from 242 customers of international fast-food restaurants on the East Coast of Malaysia. According to the findings, food quality has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the results revealed that price fairness and the physical environment have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. Overall, these findings provide useful recommendations and guidelines for policymakers in the fast-food restaurant industry, as well as confirmation of the significance of the selected factors in influencing customer satisfaction.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

2.6.1 The Discomfort Theory

Ebrahimpour and Hoseini (2018) proposed and developed the expectancy disconfirmation theory. The theory highlights that "satisfaction is related to the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience that occurs as a result of comparing service performance to expectations" (Silva, Guntijo, Bornia & Silver, 2022:248). Several studies have tested and confirmed this theory (Levy, Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2018). In a meta-analysis, Huang, Lee and Chen (2019) discovered

that the disconfirmation paradigm is the best predictor of customer satisfaction. "Satisfaction is the guest's fulfilment response", say Silva, et al. (2022:250), providing an updated definition of the disconfirmation theory. It is a decision a product or service feature or the product or service itself provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under- or over-fulfilment. Positive disconfirmation occurs when the service perceived is better than expected, whereas negative disconfirmation occurs when the service perceived is worse than expected. Customer satisfaction results from the confirmation or positive disconfirmation of consumer expectations, whereas dissatisfaction results from the negative disconfirmation of consumer expectations (Kada, Satinovic, Booth & Miller, 2017).

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter was structured in three broad sections in which the first section discussed the conceptual framework of the study by highlighting the variables of the study. The second section reviewed empirical studies on the topic of customer satisfaction as discussed by previous studies. The third section of the study discussed the discomfort theory as an explanation that can be used to understand why customers behave or can be rendered satisfied or not. The following chapter will discuss the methodology and design that was used by the researcher in conducting the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The research methodology serves as the framework or a plan of study that guides the collection and analysis of data (Churchill, Brown, & Suter, 2014). This section explains the research method, research design and data collection tools and techniques that were used in the study. The chapter will also indicate the target population, sampling process, and concludes with the elements of ethical consideration. The study was conducted on customers of food franchise restaurants of Mthatha in the OR Tambo district Municipality under the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality (Annexure A – map of Mthatha). This chapter provides descriptions of the specific procedures that were followed by the researcher in taking on the study as well as gathering the information for the study. The following are the research questions and the objectives that the study sought to address:

3.2 Research questions

Following the problem statement, research questions below are formulated, with the main research question being:

- What are the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?

3.2.1 Specific research questions

- How is the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations in Mthatha?
- What are the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?
- What are the contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha?

3.3 Research objectives

Consistent with the problem statement and research questions above, the following research objectives were formulated:

3.3.1 Primary research objective

- To explore the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants.

3.3.2 Secondary research objectives

- To assess the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations.
- To determine the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants.
- To evaluate contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service.

3.4 Qualitative research

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative research method was adopted and used. Qualitative research determines relationships between collected data and observations. Daniel and Harland (2017) emphasised that statistical methods can be used to prove or disprove theories relating to naturally occurring phenomena. Uygarer and Uzunboylu (2017) posited that researchers rely on qualitative research methods to determine "why" a particular theory exists as well as "what" participants think about it. Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2014) described qualitative research approach as a process to find the meanings people give to reality. Qualitative research is often guided by a philosophy of interpretivism (Creswell, 2014). This chosen approach allowed the researcher to interpret and describe the meaning that customers of food franchise restaurants gave to a service quality based on their experience and how they saw service quality at the restaurant (subjective). The method provided an explanation for; and description of the perceptions of participants on service quality provided by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha. In view of such descriptions, restaurants managers or supervisors will be able to align their service strategies to precisely satisfy their customers, retain them and increase their revenue through an improved service quality.

A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to achieve the objectives of the study through selected responses from pre-determined set of questions for an interview. The researcher was able to assess the service quality compared to customer perceptions; to determine the aspects of service quality valued the most by customers and to

evaluate contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as service quality.

3.4.1 Exploratory design

A research design is the framework for the methods and techniques the researcher uses in conducting research. According to Molina-Azorin and Fetters (2022), the design enables the researcher to focus on research methods that are appropriate for the topic at hand and set up their studies for success. Kapelevich (2021) stated that to choose which design to use for a study, the researcher must first understand the various types of research designs. The design of a study, like research itself, can be broadly classified as quantitative or qualitative or mixed design which comprises of the qualitative and quantitative. Since this was qualitative research, the researcher used the exploratory research design.

Exploratory research is described by (Daniel & Harland, 2017) as research conducted to study an undefined problem. This research was carried out to gain a better knowledge of the current situation, but the results of the study cannot be said to be definite findings based on the fact that the study was inductive. Camic, (2021) asserted that a researcher begins with a broad concept and then utilises the study to discover difficulties that might be the subject of future research. Therefore, a key consideration here is that the researcher be willing to shift course in response to the discovery of fresh data or insight. According to Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2014), such a study is typically conducted when the problem is in its early stages. It is also known as the grounded theory method or interpretative research since it is used to address questions such as what, why, and how (Daniel & Harland, 2017).

3.5 Research philosophy

According to Nayak and Singh (2021), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) in ancient Greece was the first to notice the distinction between deductive and inductive argumentation or philosophies. The distinction between deductive and inductive arguments is not found in the words used in the arguments, but rather in the intentions of the arguer. Durdella (2017) also noted that it stems from the relationship that the arguer believes exists between the evidence and the conclusion or the study and the results. With that

being said, the research becomes deductive if the researcher believes that the truth of the premises absolutely establishes the truth of the conclusion. On the other hand, the study is inductive if the researcher believes that the truth of the evidence provides only good reasons to believe the conclusion is probably true. This study followed inductive reasoning.

3.5.1 Inductive Reasoning

An inductive argument is one that the researcher believes to be strong enough that, if the results are true, it is unlikely that the conclusion is false. Unlike deductive arguments, the success or strength of an inductive argument is a matter of degree, all based on the results of the current study. According to Bairagi and Munot (2019), weak inductive arguments are those that do not have a clear-cut line between strong and weak. The argument will also become stronger the more times the results of the study are the same, regardless of how many times the research has been conducted. The researcher is of the view that this is the reasoning for the study based on the fact that a deductive argument cannot be influenced by acquiring new evidence, whereas an inductive argument can.

3.6 Research Paradigm

A paradigm in research constitutes a mental model that influences in structures how the members of their stage community perceive their field of study (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Chih-Pei and Chang (2017) asserted that it is a set of commonly held beliefs and assumptions within the research community about ontological, epistemological and methodological contains. A research paradigm is the entire set of beliefs, values, and techniques, that a member of a given community share (Ishtiaq, 2019). The three most common paradigms are positivism, constructivism or interpretivism, and pragmatism. Each of these can be subdivided further based on their ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Fundamentally, ontology refers to the nature of reality, epistemology refers to the relationship between the investigator and their version of reality, and methodology refers to the various techniques and tools used to analyse their research (Blumberg, et al., 2014). Based on the research topic that is under investigation, the study adopted the interpretivist research paradigm.

3.7 Population

The population of Mthatha, based on the latest census conducted in 2016 by Statistics South Africa, is about 96 114 (Statistics SA, 2016). The target population of interest was customers who chose to buy from food franchise restaurants of this town regardless of being regular or irregular customers of the restaurant during the period of conducting the study. The study was conducted in a manner that ensured customers were from Formal Food Franchise restaurants of Mthatha (FASA (2022). The town has three malls and 16 franchise restaurants, some restaurants existing in each of the malls and some not. The town was chosen on the basis of costs, practical reasons because of the limited time frames and the potential of obtaining the relevant data of the study.

3.8 Sample Size

Sample size is defined as a set of a unit that is to be used in the population (Blumberg, et al., 2014). The sample was drawn from the population of Mthatha customers of food franchise restaurants. Consistent with Creswell and Creswell (2017), a sample size of 10 participants is sufficient to produce reliable findings in a qualitative study. Therefore, the sample size of 10 participants was implemented in the context of the research study at hand.

The sample was drawn from the population of Mthatha customers of food franchise restaurants. The participants were from three restaurants (named A, B, and C) – as shown in Table 3.1. Two restaurants (A & B) were from the malls, as they were identified by the researcher's observations to have a larger flow of customers and extended hours of trading than those outside the malls. One restaurant (C) was from the restaurants that are not in one of the malls.

3.8.1 Sampling Technique

A sampling technique is defined as the basis for the selection of the sample size (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). For the purpose of this study, a non-probability sampling was used to select the participants and more specifically convenience sampling. Blumberg et al., (2014) defined convenience sampling as a process of selecting participants for practical convenience. Restaurant customers were selected

conveniently to give responses based on their experience of customer service for the objectives of this study.

Table 3.1: Population, sample size and sampling method

Restaurant	Total Daily Customer Population	Sample size	Sampling technique
Restaurant name A	280	4	Non-probability Sampling
Restaurant name B	175	3	Non-probability Sampling
Restaurant name C	195	3	Non-probability Sampling
Total	**650**	**10**	

3.9 Data collection method and instruments

The research used face-to-face interviews for primary data collection. The researcher approached customers outside as they left the restaurant to secure an appointment for an interview at a later convenient time for the customer. An appointment schedule was used to record appointments. An in-depth interview was conducted for at least 40 minutes with participants. Mishra and Alok (2017) stated that in-depth interviews are a qualitative data collection technique that yields a wealth of information about the customer's behaviour, attitude, and perception. During in-depth interviews, researchers and participants are free to explore additional points and change the process's direction as needed (Mishra & Alok 2017), which was an advantage that the researcher had when conducting the research. A semi-structured interview covers a few topics based on a discussion guide, and they allow the interviewer to cover areas relevant to the customers by adding some questions during the interview sessions (Camic, 2021).

In-depth interviews employ a variety of probing techniques to ensure that results are understood through exploration and explanation (Kapelevich, 2021). The interviewer

managed to ask follow-up questions to gain a better understanding of the participant's point of view. Interacting with participants or target audience frequently generates new knowledge. For example, by conversing with restaurant customers, the researcher was able to learn more about their purchasing habits. Semi-structured interviews (Annexure B) containing pre-determined set of open-ended questions were used. This type of interview provides a uniformed and comparable data. Questions were informed by the research question, literature review, and overall objectives of the study. Responses were recorded and transcribed.

The researcher used breakfast times between 7am to 11am and dinner times from 6pm to 10pm as these were observed to be peak times for the selected three restaurants. The study was conducted over two days during the week and a Saturday until a total of 10 participants was achieved. These times had customers seeking customer service in various times of the day; ultimately assisting the researcher to analyse the consistency of service quality.

3.10 Data analysis and presentation

Data analysis is a process of transferring raw data into aspects that can be analysed to produce information constructed by the researcher (Kumar, 2011). In order to analyse the collected qualitative data, the researcher used thematic analysis. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Creswell and Creswell (2017) defined thematic analysis as a detailed and systematic examination of the themes of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases. The thematic analysis process was done in six steps.

The first step was for the researcher to familiarise himself with the data that was gathered. According to Blumberg et al., (2014), during the first step, the researcher has to become acquainted with the data. If there are audio recordings, it is frequently required to make some type of transcription in order to work with the data. In step two, the researcher has to give codes to the data. According to Durdella (2017), a code is a concise explanation of what is stated in an interview; hence, whenever the researcher noticed something noteworthy in the data, it was coded. It is important to highlight that a code is a description, not an interpretation, and that it is a technique to begin organising data into meaningful categories Blumberg et al., (2014).

Themes are wider and include active interpretation of the codes and the data, whereas codes highlight important information in the data (Ishtiaq, 2019). The researcher reviewed the list of codes and their related extracts, then attempted to group the codes into bigger themes that reveal something intriguing about the data. In step four, the researcher revised and refined the themes found in phase three (Leavy, 2017). In this step, the researcher went through the extracts connected to the codes to determine whether they support the theme, to determine if there are any conflicts, and to determine if themes overlap. "Data inside themes should cohere meaningfully, but there should be obvious and observable boundaries between themes," in Leedy and Ormrod's words (2019:127).

During step five, the researcher named and explained each of the previously discovered topics. Theme names, according to Blumberg et al., (2014), should be descriptive and feasible entertaining. In the topic description, the researcher not only stated what the theme is about, but also what is interesting about the theme and why it is important. During step five, the researcher named and explained each of the previously discovered themes.

3.11 Trustworthiness

3.11.1 Credibility

Credibility relates to how confident readers are in the research findings (Daniel & Harland, 2017). To accomplish this goal, the researcher employed a technique known as member checking (also known as participant or respondent validation), which entails interpretations, sharing data, and conclusions with research participants in order for them to confirm that their intentions were presented in accordance with their expectations.

3.11.2 Dependability

This is the extent to which other researchers can replicate the study and get consistent results (Kapelevich, 2021). Separate from the data collection and data analysis processes, the supervisor of the researcher ensured dependability by examining the data collection, data analysis, and research study results.

3.11.3 Conformability

This means that the findings of the study are solely based on the responses of the participants, rather than any potential biases or personal motivations of the researcher (Leavy, 2017). This study ensured that the data was derived from the research participants rather than the researcher by keeping papers in which the themes were generated from, for proof.

3.11.4 Transferability

Leavy, (2017) claimed that this metric assesses how well the study can be applied to other similar situations. This study demonstrated that the results can be applied to other situations by using a rough description. The samples for this research were drawn from different restaurants hence the results can be transferred to other restaurants.

3.11.5 Genuineness

Authenticity in research implies that research is conducted and evaluated in a genuine and credible manner, as well as that the research is worthwhile and contributes to the field (Camic, 2018). To ensure authenticity, this research addressed previously unanswered questions, thereby bridging pre-existing knowledge gaps.

3.12 Ethical considerations

According to Shrestha and Dunn (2019), privacy is defined as "the freedom of the individual to pick and choose for themselves, the time and circumstances and most importantly the extent to which their attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and opinions are to be shared with or withheld from others". To respect the participant's constitutional right to privacy, anonymity was ensured by not requiring identification from the participants. The process of data collection was based solely on interviews with no use of videos or audios. An ethical clearance certificate from the UNISA SBL Ethics Committee was obtained prior to data collection. Following are three elements of ethics under which the researcher ensured adherence to: informed consent, protection from harm and right to privacy. Research ethics were the central concern for this study in the planning, designing, execution, and reporting of research with human participants.

3.12.1 Permission to conduct the research

Permission to take on the study was sought from the UNISA SBL. The researcher submitted a proposal for conducting the study which was one of the requirements of the institution for it to allow a researcher to take on a study. The ethical clearance certificate from the SBL was provided to the three restaurants where the researcher undertook the study.

3.12.2 Informed consent

Creswell (2014) stipulate that a critical issue in every research is that the participants should grant informed consent before participating in the study. In ensuring the above, the researcher clarified the nature of the study and participation in it, that it was voluntary and based on informed consent. Participants were given assurance that they are free to discontinue their participation at any given time without being required to offer an explanation. Participants who could not continue in the study for personal reasons were allowed to withdraw from the study.

3.12.3 Protection from harm

The study contained no foreseen danger to human participants (Shrestha & Dunn, 2019). Participants were not subjected to any physical or mental discomfort. The contents and recommendations of the study were provided only to the UNISA SBL, and all information in this regard was kept confidential.

3.12.4 Right to privacy

One common way of keeping personal data confidential is to assign various pseudonyms to different participants and to use those pseudonyms both during data collection and in the final research report (Blumberg, et al., 2014). Restaurant names were not used in the study - as shown in Table 3.1 above, (Kandeh, Botha & Futcher, 2018). Participants' identifying information were not required, as this is also in line with South African government legislation referred to as Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act); neither were the participants required to state the restaurants at which they experienced a service (Kandeh, Botha & Futcher, 2018).

3.13 Conclusion

The chapter discussed the approaches, the design and the specific methodologies that were used to carry the study. The researcher used inductive reasoning and followed a qualitative and exploratory design. The chapter also provided the specific sample size for the study after defining the target population of the study. The data analysis through thematic analysis was established in the chapter. In-depth interviews were used as the data collection methods for the study. The procedures were used by the researcher in a manner to establish credibility, trustworthiness and authenticity. The following chapter will present the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter advances the interpretation of results and discussion of the study findings on the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurantsof Mthatha in the OR Tambo District Municipality. The study was qualitative and sought to understand these perceptions in an in-depth fashion. Due to its qualitative nature, the study adopted thematic analysis to analyse primary data collected from in-depth interviews.

The discussion in this chapter is arranged in the context of the research objectives. The research questions will firstly be reiterated, and the results and the findings will then be presented based on the research questions and objectives. In Section 4.6.1, the researcher presents the research questions that informed the objectives and are central to the organisation of this chapter. In Section 4.6.2, the researcher discusses the perceptions around the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations. In Section 4.6.3, the researcher presents and discusses the aspects of service quality that customers value the most in food franchise restaurants. Here, the discussion is mostly on the contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service.

4.2 Research questions
The primary and secondary research questions were:

4.2.1. Primary research question

The main research question was:

- What are the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?

4.2.2. Secondary research questions

- How is the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations in Mthatha?
- What are the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?
- What are the contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha?

4.3 Response rate of participants

The target was to interview 10 of the customers of food franchise restaurants of Mthatha in the OR Tambo District Municipality under the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality (annexure A – map of Mthatha). The study adopted a sample size of 10 participants out of a possible 650 participants. This is because the research used in-depth interviews to collect data. and this needed to be a manageable sample. Table 4.1 illustrates the response rate or participant ratio of study participants.

Table 4.1: The participant ratio of study participants.

Restaurant	Total Daily Customer Population	Sample size	Interviewed customers	Percentage
Restaurant name A	280	4	4	100
Restaurant name B	175	3	3	100
Restaurant name C	195	3	3	100
Total	**650**	**10**	**10**	**100**

Evidence in Table 4.1 illustrates that the study achieved its data collection objectives, which was to collect primary evidence through in-depth interviews from a sample of 10 out of a possible 650 participants, and 10 were interviewed. This is because the research used a purposive sampling technique to recruit the participants. Purposive sampling is when a researcher approaches people that are likely to yield the data relevant to the research. It is always linked to qualitative research. Creswell and

Creswell (2017) indicated that where a sample of at least 60 % is achieved, the data collection process is considered valid and reliable in the process of knowledge development process. These authors further suggested that the validity and reliability of the sample size and data collection process is measured by the achieved percentage of the data collection process. The researcher was able to interview the 10 selected customers, it can be said that 100% of the sample realised, making the data reliable and valid.

4.4 Data collection

The researcher purposively selected 10 customers of three restaurants in the OR Tambo District Municipality for in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted in person, face-to-face, mostly in the said restaurants.

4.5 Demographic Details

The researcher tried to balance demographic issues in approaching the people for interviews. While other interviews were agreed to on the day of approaching and conducted on the same day, other interviews were scheduled for some other day. The demographic details of the population as presented in the sample statistic enhance the process of knowledge development through informing knowledge and relative experience (Creswell and Creswell 2017). As a result, the demographic details and traits of participants in this study were carefully selected to provide knowledge and experience in the knowledge development process. In this research the experiences of the customers at these restaurants were important. The demographics of the participants are captured in Table 4.2:

Table 4.2: Demographic information of participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Career	Level of Education
1	45	Female	Teacher	Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).
2	47	Male	Teacher	Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).
3	34	Male	Police	Policing diploma
4	48	Female	Nurse	Nursing degree
5	46	Male	Municipality employee	Honours Degree
6	35	Male	Teacher	Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE).
7	28	Female	Municipality employee	Degree
8	38	Female	Finance	BCom degree
9	36	Female	Self-employed (Hair salon)	Grade 12
10	33	Male	Electrician	Diploma

The interviewer approached an equal number of customers in terms of their gender, five males and five females, for interviews. This was meant to balance views in terms of gender. From Table 4.2 above, it is clear that most of customers were highly educated with university degrees. The lowest qualification was Grade 12, which is also a mark of adequate education. This means that the customers were people who had the language to describe their experiences and perceptions about the restaurant's services. Most of them were public servants and therefore can be regarded as the middle class. The middle class are the most likely customers of these restaurants because in as much as they have a disposable income to spend at a restaurant, they cannot go to the most expensive ones. These demographic variations are discussed in-depth in the next section.

4.5.1 Age of participants

In terms of age range, the participants were mostly young to middle aged ranging from 28 – 47 years of age. The median age was 39. The urban populations in South Africa especially among the working class still active are quite young. In a scientific research process; experience, occupation and the level of education present value adding imperatives in the scientific research process.

4.5.2 Gender

As already mentioned, the researcher approached an equal number of customers in terms of their gender, five males and five females, for interviews. This was meant to balance views in terms of gender.

4.5.3 Occupation

In terms of occupations, only two were self-employed or worked outside the public service circle; namely a female who worked at a salon and a male who worked as an electrician - mostly as part of a group of electricians who were not necessarily employed by the government or the private sector. This is important for understanding the kind of people interviewed and their ability to find language to explain their perceptions and experiences of the restaurants from which they mostly have their lunch. The occupations show that they had a good basic education.

4.5.4. Level of education

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), education is a critical aspect and a cornerstone of the scientific research process. The level of education conveys the quality of knowledge of the sample statistic as this convey reliable insights on the research phenomenon. Except for one participant, with Grade 12, and two with diplomas, the rest had university degrees that qualify them to work in their specific industries.

4.6. Presentation and Discussion of Results

In this section of the study, the data analysis and research findings will be presented and discussed. According to Cypress (2018), qualitative data analysis is coded, analysed and presented. In this research, this is done in the context of understanding the customers' perception of service quality in restaurants that they patronise. Data analysis is a critical process of any scientific development process as it presents data analysis and research findings in the context of new knowledge and enhance management recommendations and policy initiatives.

Therefore, consistent with this objective, the study ensured issues of validity and reliability through aligning contents of the conceptual framework with the research instrument (criterion and content validity). In this instance, the research instrument was specifically designed to capture primary data to validate existing literature evidence and develop management recommendations. In connection with validity and reliability considerations, this section is presented in the context of study objectives as stated in Chapter One and Section 4.2 of this chapter.

4.6.1. Objective One: To assess the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations.

Perceptions about service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations will be discussed and presented in this section. Table 4.3 below, illustrates the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants when compared to customer expectations. The results were analysed according to what Vardhan (2021) calls the five SERVQUAL dimensions of service quality, which are:

- TANGIBLES - Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.
- RELIABILITY - Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- RESPONSIVENESS - Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- ASSURANCE - Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
- EMPATHY - Caring, individualised attention the firm provides its customers.

According to the interviews, these can be tabulated as follows:

Table 4.3: Service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations

Interviewee	Tangibility	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy
Customer 1	"I like clean restaurants…"		"We expect the restaurants to respond on time when we have challenges with their service"		"the human to human relationship matters to us"
Customer 2	"The people who handle the food must look clean…."	"I should get a properly done meal, according to what we have agreed on…."		"When we suspect that there might be something wrong with the food, we always want that assurance that we are wrong."	
Customer 3	"I like to have my food in a modern space…."			"We want assurance that the ingredients are properly sourced."	
Customer 4	"I am just worried by the fact that there is not enough parking space for this restaurant."		"When I have a problem with a meal, my restaurant quickly offers to make an amend…."		

Customer 5		"Meals should be properly done and served timely…."			"I love the way the waitresses, especially, ask me about my situation. It is as if they want the food they serve to heal me."
Customer 6	"The cooks and other staff must look presentable…"		"When I complain about the food or the treatment, my restaurant pays attention and do everything to make up…"		
Customer 7	"I hate the sight of flies in a restaurant…"		"My restaurant is caring and listens although they can take lesser time in addressing orders gone wrong."		"I can say without any shadow or doubt that they emphathise."
Customer 8	"I would not like a smelly restaurant like some I see in some places."	"I wouldn't like to have badly cooked food…"		"I hardly ask questions because sometimes I know it's putting waiters and waitresses on the spot."	

Customer 9	"I can trust that the food is clean if it is from clean hands…"		"When I place an order, there is such a high level of attention that makes me feel like their only customer…."		"All I can say is that they care and always endeavour to address what is within their means."
Customer 10	"The parking issue worries me a lot that is why I walk here. Thank God, it's close to where I work."	"Some of the papa in other restaurants is just badly done…"		"I ask a lot about how food is prepared and most of the time the waitresses seem not to know"	

The study sought to understand the expectations of the customers and how they feel the restaurants meet or satisfy them. The results as tabulated above reveal how loyal customers were to a particular restaurant as a result of the fact that that particular restaurant met their expectations well. In a longer quote, Customer 4 explained that:

"This restaurant has served me well for the past four years and this is where I always come with my workmates for lunch. I cannot carry a lunch box to work because I know that the kind of food that I will get here is more like a home cooked meal. For me, in the past four years, the food has been served with love, respect and the warmth one would expect from home."

The interview was conducted at the restaurant that Customer 4 patronised. While the five SERVQUAL dimensions of service quality seemed rigid, Customer 4 extended them by bringing in the metaphor of home and 'home cooked meal.' According to Customer 4, a home cooked meal is one made with love, respect and warmth. To extend this metaphor in describing the meals and the environment at the restaurant that customer 4 patronised, showed that the restaurant indeed met this customer's expectations. Customer 7 described this satisfaction:

"When I am at this place, I feel that sense of familiarity one can associate with home. I hardly feel like I am at a public space but always feel as if I am home; I am safe, secured and that nothing can happen to me. I enjoy the food, but I

enjoy the atmosphere here more. The waiters are very friendly and always cordial. They go an extra mile. They are extra. The management is always on its feet to ensure that all goes well."

For Customer 7, it is a combination of the many factors that counted for the pleasant experience that they get at the restaurants. These factors included the attitude and the way they were handled by both the staff and the management. Elsewhere in the interview, Customer 7 also spoke about a cordial environment with fellow customers. This combination of factors in forming their experiences and perceptions of the restaurants was generally alluded to by all the customers.

The results discussed this far support the literature reviewed in Chapter Two in terms of the experience of the customers as wholesome and made up of many factors. This is further discussed in the next chapter. The customers expect a warm welcome, focused attention by the staff and administrators, quick service at all fronts from being seated to receiving the bill and everything in between, a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere without unwanted disturbances, a high-quality food that sits at par with the standards of the restaurant, a kind and cordial treatment by the restaurant staff throughout their dining experience, and easy payment methods. Paying attention to the customers' expectations is an integral part of a restaurant's success as customer service and satisfaction levels significantly determine whether they are likely to return to your restaurant or not.

4.6.1.1. Proper etiquette and going an extra mile

Customers emphasised that what contributes mostly to their experiences of the restaurants that they patronise and their perception of it is the level of good etiquette from the staff – from the till operators to the waiters and waitresses – and how they are prepared to go an extra mile in giving them satisfactory service:

Most of the staff at the restaurant that I patronise are quite well dressed, smart and practice a high level of hygiene around the food they serve us. It gives us confidence that there are no nasty things that happen to our food behind the scenes and we always see in some videos that are shared on social media. (Customer 4).

These are the reasons why they are repeat customers and therefore clients in the restaurants that they patronise. The staff are well trained in proper customer etiquette like how to speak politely to them and are well-mannered and greet them as they go in and out of the restaurant with warm smiles. This is because no one likes to eat around grumpy waiters. Customer 3 said *"the workers are always smiling. and they engage and lift up your spirit. They engage in this little chit chat and make you open up and if you are down, that just picks your spirit."* The restaurants also go the extra mile. It is as if they check other restaurants locally and see what they are neglecting in their customer experience, and then offer it in their restaurants. Sometimes, it is something as simple as offering a free bottle of water to each customer.

4.6.1.2. Surprises and seasonal extras

In line with going the extra mile, the restaurants also regularly throw a surprise or two here and there. Some of the 10 customers said their restaurants always have new dishes that the customers can try and almost all the time, the restaurant would be on time.

> *"At times, we turn up at the restaurant to be met by a big banner or picture of a new menu that we can try, developed in-house by their resident chefs. This is always good and we always look forward to surprises, wondering what new dishes are we to find". (*Customer *8).*

The restaurants also offer a "plat du jour," which is a meal that is offered by a restaurant on a specific day of the week. This meal includes a main course, a beverage, and an appetiser or dessert all in one price, which enhances the customer experience because of the potential savings. Customer 6 said *"usually the menus offer a drink. That is the most exciting aspect for me, the drink. This is a full meal."* These restaurants pay so much attention that, to regular customers, they offer such plat du jour dishes "on the house" to show them that they care about their visits. The restaurants also adapt their menu to different seasons, which makes eating at their establishments exciting.

4.6.2. Objective two: Discussion on aspects of service quality that customers value the most in food franchise restaurants

This section will discuss the second objective which is to determine the aspects of service quality that customers value the most in food franchise restaurants. Graph 4.1. below illustrates the frequency of what the customers mentioned as what they value about specific restaurants that keeps them returning to it:
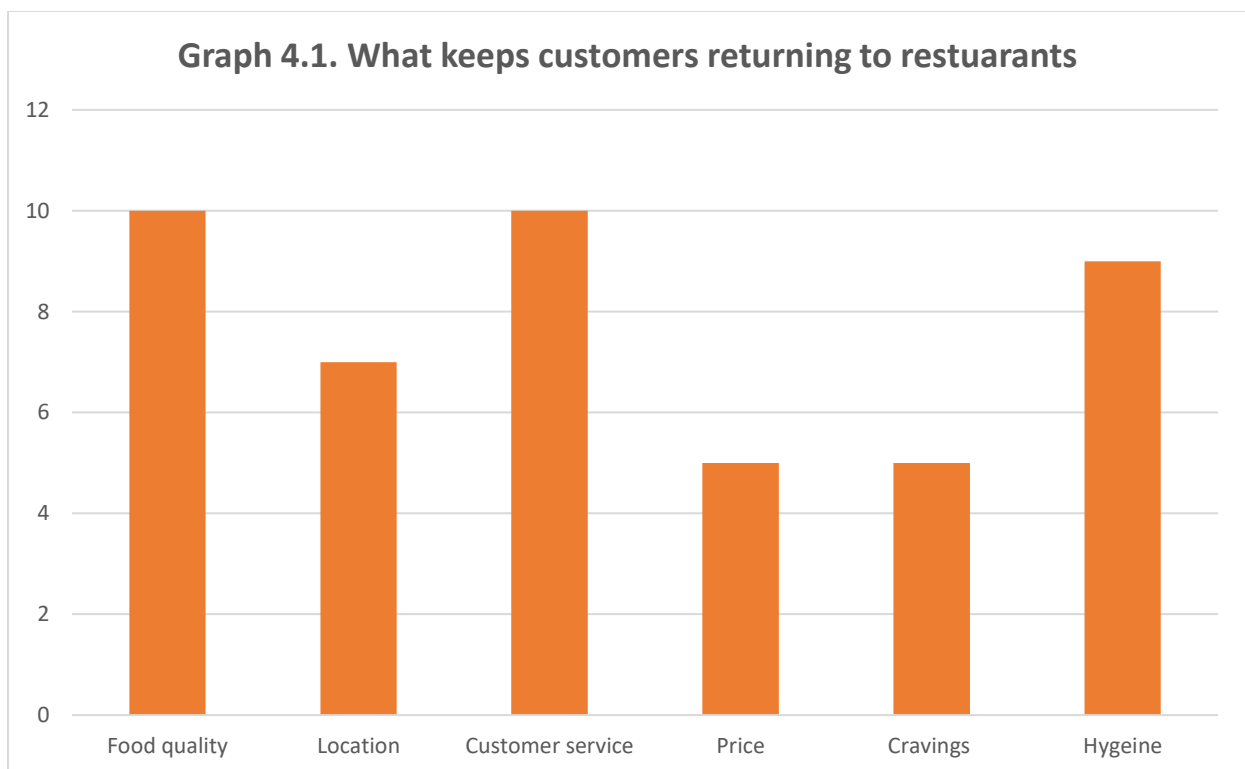
Graph 4.1: Frequency of aspects

What becomes clear is that food quality and customer service have a higher resonance among all the interviewees as they mentioned it. It is then important to understand what they mean by customer care. Table 4.4. sums up what the customers mean by customer care:

Table 4.4: Customer service meaning

Meaning of good customer service	- Customers' views
1. **Being prompt and attentive**	- Mean taking care of customers' needs in an appropriate time frame. "Having to wait 10 or even five minutes for drink refills can make a good dining experience turn sour" (Customer 5)
2. **Service with a smile**	- A friendly, welcoming service. "Not only avoiding bad service but proactively ensuring that all is in good order." (Customer 3)
3. **Being available**	- Simply means being available, being there. "Being there means that customers have a chance to proffer managers, hosts and waiters the opportunity to provide good customer service by making requests." (Customer 9)
4. **Being exceptional**	- Means going overboard in service to customers. "I like restaurants that offer special creations for guests, offering them drinks to go, bringing mints after dinner and engaging in other little practices." (Customer 1)

4.6.2.1. Being prompt and attentive

It has been said by the interviewees that by prompt service they do not expect the waiters and waitresses to be rushing or hovering around. Customer 1 emphasised that:

"We however expect that it will take reasonable time before a waiter or waitress turns up at my table when I ask for attention or assistance. I also do not expect to sit for more than five minutes waiting for a bill or for a receipt from the waiter or waitress once I have paid. This means that the restaurants have to employ enough people and also teach them well."

Customer 7 has said having to wait 10 minutes for drink refills or water "*can quickly make a good dining experience turn sour.*" This is because most of the customers

interviewed said, they usually feel awkward reminding waiters and waitresses that their request is yet to be fulfilled.

4.6.2.2 Service with a smile

All the customers said they expected to be received with a friendly, warm smile to a restaurant that they patronise. This is seen as pro-active, as Customer 6 emphasised that they expect that restaurant managers or owners not only avoid bad service *"but should positively strive to encourage the exceptional service that occurs when service workers take a genuine interest in their customers."* Some of the customers interviewed said they enjoy it when the waiters and waitresses ask them about their day and also assist them to make food choices and give them compliments.

4.6.2.3 Being available

It is possible for customers to look for waiters or waitresses and find none when they need them mostly. In that sense, some of the customers interviewed emphasised that at times, good customer service to them, simply implies being available on the part of the waiters, waitresses and even management. Customer 10 said *"it is always good when we can see managers, waiters and waitresses around. This also gives us an opportunity to make waiters, waitresses and even managers useful and relevant by making requests."* Most of the customers interviewed said they are reluctant to walk to the counter and ask for something. Customer 3 said, *"a customer should never have to shout into the kitchen."* As a result, just by being visible, the managers, waiters and waitresses make customers feel they are having a better experience because they know if they need something, they will be promptly attended to.

4.6.2.4 Being exceptional

A restaurant's service must stand out for it to be continuously attractive to its customers and clients. According to the customers interviewed, they are aware that they can get good food and decent customer service almost anywhere, but they stick to that one single restaurant because it stands out in its service to them. Interviewee 7 said what sets apart the restaurant that they patronise from the rest is the degree to which they are always willing *"to go above and beyond to be exceptiona*l." This is because every time they come to the restaurant, the waiters and waitresses are

always willing to make special creations for them "*as they offer us drinks or even water as we choose from the menu.*" Other customers also added that even the act of bringing mints after the meal and engaging in other little practices that show they are going above and beyond the competition is what keeps them loyal to one restaurant. Interviewee 2 said *"besides food is something sensitive. One has to eat where they trust the people who handle their food. We gain that trust through these small acts."*

4.6.3 Objective three: Accounting for the factors contributing to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha.

The factors contributing to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offered as a service and what customers expected as customer service in Mthatha will now be discussed.

Since the research was qualitative, the results in Section 4.6.1. might suggest that there is not a variance between the service food restaurants offer and customers' service expectation in Mthatha. However, the discussion in Section 4.6.2. shows that customers at times do experience awkward moments when the restaurant does not deliver as expected. This is seen in that out of the potential score of 10, some scores are 5 in terms of what the customers value when they choose to patronise a restaurant. Table 4.5. below illustrates what the interviewed customers think are those rare occasions when there has been a disjuncture between their expectations and the delivery of the restaurants:

Table 4.5: Variance between customer expectations and the service

Customers' expectations	
Tangibles	- Restaurants could offer attractive and safe parking. - Restaurants could offer more comfortable and easy to move around dining rooms.
Empathy	- Restaurants should try and personalise their engagement with customers rather than always relying on policies and regulations.
Assurance	- Sometimes waiters and waitresses are unsure and cannot answer questions completely around the menu, ingredients and methods of preparation.
Reliability	- Sometimes restaurants deliver wrong orders. - Sometimes it takes the restaurant time to correct wrong orders or rectify other situations.
Responsiveness	- Sometimes the restaurants take time to deliver orders and even to rectify wrong ones.

4.6.3.1. Challenges around the tangibles

Customers that were interviewed noted that most of the restaurants are located in the city center and do not own the buildings and other infrastructure that they operate out of. As a result, Customer 4 said *"these businesses rely on parking that is availed by the local municipality for their customers. This parking is not reliable at all."* It would take restaurants moving out of the city center to other areas where they can put up infrastructure of their own imagination. However, that would have taken them away from their clients and customers.

4.6.3.2. Challenges of menus, ingredients and preparation

There is always a question around the ingredients and the preparation of fast foods. It would seem like waiters and waitresses are still not able to answer questions around

those. Customer 8 has said *"this indicates that the waiters and waitresses are badly trained or that the restaurants are cagey and not forth coming about their ingredients, where they get them, if at all they are not genetically modified products and if they are safe at all."*

4.6.3.3. Challenges around reliability and responsiveness

In those cases when restaurants deliver wrong orders to customers, it takes them time to rectify the mistake. This could be because the restaurants do not have the mechanisms to go back and rectify problems and mistakes in place. Customer 6 noted that "*while they have a routine or system that ensures that they deliver orders within a reasonable tolerable time, they might not have contingent plans in place to go back and deal with those situations when things go bad.*" It is the hope of all the customers interviewed that such issues can be addressed otherwise they have a very good relationship with their restaurants of choice.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter the research findings and discussions in the context of research questions and objectives were presented and discussed. In this view, for simple analysis, the research findings were presented in line with research objectives. Customers' expectations in terms of their restaurants of choice's services were discussed, including gaps between the restaurant's service and the customers' expectations. This was discussed in the context of primary research and existing literature review and analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

In this study, the researcher sought to explore the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants of Mthatha in the OR Tambo District Municipality. The study was qualitative in design and the overall aim was to understand these perceptions in-depth. Due to its qualitative nature, the researcher adopted thematic analysis to analyse the primary data collected from in-depth interviews. The main research question was around the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha. The secondary research questions were around the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations in Mthatha, the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants in Mthatha, and the factors that contribute to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha. In this chapter the researcher will conclude the study by briefly discussing the findings and then making recommendations

5.2 Recap of the problem statement, research questions and objectives

In this section, a recap of the problem statement, research questions and objectives are represented. This is critical as it enhances the discussion of recommendations and conclusions.

5.2.1. Problem Statement

The principal focus of the study was to assess the perceptions of customers on service quality of food franchise restaurants, in the area of Mthatha in the Eastern Cape (Annexure A). According to Mhlanga (2018), service quality combined with selling skills has attracted more attention in recent years than ever before, a big influence being the increasing sensitivity towards a service by customers. In South Africa the persistent decline in the socio-economic environment led to the food franchise industry

being concerned more about the revenue in their businesses, in the same way redirecting the focus and priorities away from service quality (Rita, Oliveira & Farisa, 2019; Petzer & Mackay, 2014). Studies on customer service quality in food franchise restaurants in the Eastern Cape (Mhlanga, 2018) have indicated a variance between customer perceptions and expectations about service quality and how franchise restaurants render customer service quality (Rita, Oliveira & Farisa, 2019). The study focused on the perceptions of customers towards service quality provided by franchise restaurants in Mthatha and describe the reasons of differences. There is no literature available on the problem having been investigated nor assessed in the area of Mthatha. One factor could be that the small town is at its developing stages whereby investors have only in recent times begun to consider it as viable and sustainable with future returns. The town consists of only three shopping malls with few food restaurants; hence the study focused on customers of selected food chain restaurants.

5.2.2. Primary research question

Following the problem statement, the main research question and sub questions are presented below:

- What are the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?

5.2.3. Secondary research questions

- How is the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations in Mthatha?
- What are the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants in Mthatha?
- What are the contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha?

5.2.4. Primary research objective

- To explore the perceptions of customers on service quality rendered by food franchise restaurants.

5.2.5. Specific research objectives

- To assess the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations.
- To determine the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants.
- To evaluate contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service.

5.3 Summary of chapters

In this section the chapters that made up this research are summarised:

Chapter One: In this chapter, the orientation of the study was presented in the background, context, problem statement, research questions, objectives. This chapter provided the background and the context of the study.

Chapter Two: In this chapter, the researcher presented a literature review and analysis. In particular, this chapter informed on theoretical constructs that inform literature analysis and synthesis.

Chapter Three: In this chapter, the researcher presented a methodological framework that informed the research procedures such as data collection, population and sample size. In particular, this chapter detail the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four: In this chapter, the researcher presented the results of data analysis, presentation and discussion. This chapter provide a detail on the results of thematic analysis that were used to explain the customer service protocols in the retail industry.

5.4. Summary of findings

This section discusses a summary of research findings as presented in Chapter Four. As noted, in the previous chapter, research findings were contextualised in line with research objectives.

5.4.1. The customers' expectations in terms of service quality provided by food franchise restaurants

In terms of the first objective, the study sought to understand the expectations of the customers and how they feel the restaurants meet or satisfy them. Customer's expectations centered around clean restaurants and presentable restaurant staff, to be served food that is properly done and is served within reasonable waiting time, friendly restaurant staff, to be afforded space to lodge complaints about the food and to receive assurance from management, eat food that is properly and ethically sourced. Some of customers said they were worried by lack of parking space at the food outlets that they patronise. In a nutshell, the food outlets seem to meet the expectations of the customers. In a longer quote, Customer 4 put it this way:

> "This restaurant has served me well for the past four years and this is where I always come with my workmates for lunch. I cannot carry a lunch box to work because I know that the kind of food that I will get here is more like a home cooked meal. For me, in the past four years, the food has been served with love, respect and the warmth one would expect from home."

Interviewee or Customer 7 also described the satisfaction in glowing terms:

> "When I am at this place, I feel that sense of familiarity one can associate with home. I hardly feel like I am at a public space but always feel as if I am home; I am safe, secured and that nothing can happen to me. I enjoy the food, but I enjoy the atmosphere here more. The waiters are very friendly and always cordial. They go an extra mile. They are extra. The management is always on its feet to ensure that all goes well."

To sum up the findings here, customers expect a warm welcome, focused attention by the staff and administrators, quick service at all fronts from being seated to receiving

the bill and everything in between, a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere without unwanted disturbances, a high-quality food that is on at par with the standards of the restaurant, a kind and cordial treatment by the restaurant staff throughout their dining experience, and easy payment methods. The customers also expected proper etiquette and that restaurant go an extra mile in satisfying them. Customers emphasised that what contributes mostly to their experiences of the restaurants that they patronise and their perception of it is the level of good etiquette from the staff – from the till operators to the waiters and waitresses – and how they are prepared to go an extra mile in giving them satisfactory service.

5.4.2.The aspects of service quality that customers value the most in food franchise restaurants

 In line with the second objective, which was to determine the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants, customers emphasised good food quality, location, customer service, price, cravings and hygiene as the most important factors. What became clear is that food quality and customer service have a higher resonance as all the customers mentioned it. The customers attached a specific meaning to customer service. For example, when they said they expected prompt service they specifically said they did not expect the waitrons to be rushing or hovering around. Customer 1 emphasised that:;

> *"We however expect that it will take reasonable time before a waiter*
> *or waitress turns up at my table when I ask for attention or assistance.*
> *I also do not expect to sit for more than five minutes waiting for a bill*
> *or for a receipt from the waiter or waitress once I have paid. This*
> *means that the restaurants have to employ enough people and also*
> *teach them well."*

Customer 7 has said having to wait 10 minutes for drink refills or water "*can quickly make a good dining experience turn sour.*" In terms of service with a smile, all the customers said they expect to be received with a friendly, warm smile to a restaurant that they patronise. Customer 6 emphasised that they expect that restaurant managers or owners not only avoid bad service *"but should positively strive to encourage the exceptional service that occurs when service workers take a genuine*

interest in their customers." Being available, meant that they did not expect to fail to find a waitress when they needed one. In that sense, some of the customers interviewed emphasised that at times, good customer service to them, simply implies being available on the part of the waiters, waitresses and even management.

5.4.3. The factors contributing to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service in Mthatha

The third objective focused on the factors contributing to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offered as a service and what customers expected as customer service in Mthatha. Since the research was qualitative, the results in the two earlier sections might suggest that there was not a variance between the service food restaurants offer and customers' service expectation. However, interviewed customers said there were awkward moments when the restaurant did not deliver as expected. This is seen in that out of the potential score of 10, some scores were 5 in terms of what the customers value when they choose to patronise a restaurant. Customers said there were challenges around tangibles in that most of the restaurants are located in the city center and do not own the buildings and other infrastructure that they operate out of. As a result, Customer 4 said "*these businesses rely on parking that is availed by the local municipality for their customers. This parking is not reliable at all."* It would take restaurants moving out of the city center to other areas where they can put up infrastructure of their own imagination. However, that would have taken them away from their clients and customers.

The customers also said, at times, there were challenges around menus, ingredients and preparation of food. They noted that most of the times the waiters and waitresses are not able to answer questions around the sourcing of the ingredients and preparation of food. Customer 8 said *"this indicates that the waiters and waitresses are badly trained or that the restaurants are cagey and not forth coming about their ingredients, where they get them, if at all they are not genetically modified products and if they are safe at all."* The interviewed customers also said that in those cases, when restaurants deliver wrong orders, it still took them time to rectify the mistake. This could be because the restaurants do not have the mechanisms to go back and rectify problems and mistakes in place. Customer 6 noted that "*while they have a routine or system that ensures that they deliver orders within a reasonable tolerable*

time, they might not have contingent plans in place to go back and deal with those situations when things go bad."

5.5. Theoretical summation of the findings

In this section the findings in relation to the literature and theories that informed the study are discussed and summarised:

5.5.1. Customer Expectations and Satisfaction

It was noted that customer satisfaction has become a key intermediary goal in service operations because of the benefits it provides to organisations (Tsafarakis, Kokotas & Panto1uvakis, 2018). Some of the 10 customers spoke about how they have changed restaurants several times before settling at the current restaurant where they eat. This is because they have been searching for satisfaction. This implies that customer satisfaction is critical to the survival of the business. Customer satisfaction is defined as a service provider's ability to generate a high rate of satisfaction, which is critical for product differentiation and developing strong relationships with customers (Tandon, Kiran & Sah, 2017). When expectations are not met, service quality is deemed unacceptable, resulting in dissatisfaction. Quality is satisfactory when expectations are confirmed by perceived service (Kurdi, Alsurieh & Alnaser, 2020). Importantly, customer satisfaction is based on service perceptions and expectations. The 10 customers interviewed described what their expectations were around the food they are served. That it must be fresh and tasty. Customer satisfaction is not only important for the retention of customers but in that customers share notes on their experiences, and hence perceptions, of restaurants; customer service is also central to attracting new customers and growing the business.

5.5.2. Pricing

People make decisions on what food to buy mostly depended on whether they can sustainably afford to pay for it. Most of these customers are at work during the week and need a place to have lunch five times a week. They, therefore, have to compare buying lunch every day for those five days, or bringing food from home. It has been argued that the price of the items on the menu can also have a significant impact on customers as it has the ability to attract or repel them (Huang, Lee & Chen, 2019). Prices of food in restaurants differ depending on the type of restaurant. Over and

above affordability, customers are likely to expect high quality if the price is high, or they may feel "ripped off." In the same sense, if the price is low, customers may be skeptical about the restaurant's ability to deliver high-quality products and services (Almohaimmeed, 2017). Most of the 10 customers interviewed said after calculating, they believe that buying lunch at a restaurant is cheaper than cooking at home and carrying food to work. As a result, they have settled for buying food at their favourite restaurant. It has been noted that as a result of the competitiveness of the restaurant industry, customers establish internal reference prices (Anouze, et al. 2018). It is, therefore, important that when setting prices, restaurants define an internal reference price as a price (or price scale) in buyer's memories that serves as a basis for judging or comparing actual prices.

5.5.3. Service quality and customer satisfaction

There is a link between customer satisfaction and service quality between the two (Huang, Lee & Chen, 2019; Safitri, et al., 2020). Even when they express their experiences, the 10 customers made that link between their expectations and what the restaurants ultimately offer them. Zhang and Chen (2020) have argued that service quality dimensions are specifically or directly related to service delivery, whereas satisfaction is based on a variety of factors, both directly and indirectly related to service delivery. For example, Veloso and Monte (2019) stated that overall service quality is significantly associated with and contributes to, overall customer satisfaction. According to Tsafarakis, et al, (2018), high perceived service quality leads to increased customer satisfaction. Service quality leads to customer satisfaction. Put in other words, customer satisfaction is based on the level of service quality provided by the service provider. This implies that when Food Franchise Retailers (FFRs) are able to meet or exceed customers' expectations, the customer will certainly be satisfied with the service. As a result, and as indicated by the customers, satisfied customers will make decisions based on how the restaurants serviced them. They mostly felt that the restaurants were offering good food at affordable prices, which meant that they could do without bringing a lunch tin from home. It has been said that a high level of service quality should be delivered by the service provider in order to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction, as service quality is normally considered an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Long, et al., 2017; Safitri, et al. 2020).

5.5.4. SERVQUAL Model (1988)

One model of service quality is the well-known SERVQUAL model which is a multi-item scale developed for purposes amongst others; to assess customer perceptions of service quality (Parasuraman, et al., 2002; Berry, Parasuraman, & Zeithaml, 1988). What started off as 10 dimensions of analysing customer satisfaction was later refined and integrated into only five, namely reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness (Parasuraman, et al., 2002). The 10 interviews ticked the five boxes in describing their satisfaction with the quality of service at the restaurants that they patronise. Responsiveness manifests in the time that customers have to wait for assistance, answers to inquiries or attention to problems, as well as the flexibility and ability to customise the service to the customers' needs (Mhlanga, 2018). Empathy is referred to as caring and extending an individualised attention that the restaurant provides to its customers (Kumar, 2017).

5.5.5. The discomfort theory

The discomfort theory highlights that "satisfaction is related to the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience that occurs as a result of comparing service performance to expectations" (Silva, Guntijo, Bornia & Silver, 2022: 248; Ebrahimpour and Hoseini, 2018). The restaurant owners and operators were not interviewed to find out how they feel about the service that they offer and what they imagine to be the expectations of their customers and clients. However, the customers said that at times they are unsure about whether the services that they get from the restaurants match their expectations. This makes them uncomfortable at times. Huang, Lee and Chen (2019) discovered that the disconfirmation paradigm is the best predictor of customer satisfaction. It is argued that "satisfaction is the guest's fulfilment response" (Silva, et al., 2022:250). In a nutshell, it is a decision a product or service feature or the product or service itself provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment, including levels of under- or over-fulfilment. It is said that positive disconfirmation occurs when the service perceived is better than expected, whereas negative disconfirmation occurs when the service perceived is worse than expected (Kada, Satinovic, Booth & Miller, 2017).

5.6. Recommendations

In this section, the present study discusses management recommendations that are informed by the literature and primary evidence that was observed in data analysis, results and findings chapter. Therefore, again, in the interest of the reader this discussion is presented in the context of research objectives.

5.6.1. In terms of the customers' expectations towards service quality provided by food franchise restaurants, it must be said that the customers still remain the king or queen. In a sense, as evidenced in the literature discussion and the analysis of results, the restaurant owners will do well to ensure that they know what their customers' expectations are and endeavor to meet them. They should engage in random research, just talking to their customers and checking what their expectations are. This is because customers' expectations are not static but change all the time. They must then endeavour to develop services that meet those expectations. That way, they will keep their customers and be able to attract more.

5.6.2. In terms of the aspects of service quality that customers value the most in food franchise restaurants, managers must pay attention to good food quality, location, customer service, price, cravings and hygiene as the most important factors. These are the aspects that the customers said were most important to them or emphasised. Importantly, food quality and customer service had a higher resonance as all the customers mentioned it. Managers and owners of restaurant franchises must pay attention to these so that they may provide service that meets and satisfy their customers and client's expectations.

5.6.3. In terms of the third objective focusing on the factors contributing to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offered as a service and what customers expected as customer service in Mthatha, the managers and owners of food franchises are advised to avoid those awkward moments when their restaurant does not deliver as expected. The owners and managers of restaurants would do well to educate and coach their front-end staff – especially waiters and waitresses – on issues around their menus, ingredients and preparation of food. Customers said most of the

times the waiters and waitresses are not able to answer questions around the sourcing and the preparation of the food that they are served. This makes the customers uncomfortable and distrustful that the food they are being served might not be hygienic or clean. This mistrust might kill business.

5.7. Contribution and areas of further research

This study advanced an argument that sought to evaluate the confluence of customers' expectations and the service delivery by restaurants. That way, the study sought to open up, qualitatively, the study of service delivery in the restaurant sectors in Mthatha. This is one of the first studies to focus on franchise restaurants in Mthatha and this way it contributes to knowledge from a specific geographic setting in South Africa. Thus, this study serves to reduce the paucity of studies that evaluate issues of service delivery in the restaurant sector in areas that can be considered as small or backwaters. Over and above, the academic contribution of the present study, another contribution is that; the study suggested recommendations to the management that seek to enhance service delivery in the food outlets sector in Mthatha.

5.8. Conclusion

This chapter summed up the debates and around service delivery in the restaurant sector in the Eastern Cape, Mthatha area. It summarized the chapters the key findings of this research. The chapter, importantly, made recommendations to managers and restaurant owners so as to improve their businesses and ensure that they keep growing.

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Annexure A – Map of Mthatha

Annexure B: Proposed Discussion Guide

Thank you for taking part in this study. We would like to know your experience of service quality you received from a franchise restaurant you recently visited.

SECTION A: Demographic Data

1. Please indicate your gender:

Male		1
Female		2

2. Please indicate your race:

Black		1
White		2
Coloured		3
Indian		4

3. Kindly indicate your age group:

18-30		1
31-40		2
41-50		3
51-60		4
60+		5

SECTION B: **Your perceptions about customer service in food franchise restaurants.**

Objective One: To assess the service quality provided by food franchise restaurants compared to customer expectations.

- How would you describe the service provided by the restaurant given your expectations?
- Was the quality of food in that franchise restaurant up to your expectations? Probe: why or why not
- Does the price of food match the quality of food and quality of service delivered?

Objective Two: To determine the aspects of service quality that customers value the most on food franchise restaurants.

- Which aspects of service quality do you value most in the service delivery process?
- Was the waiting period convenient in the service delivery process?
- Was the delivery of service accompanied by quick reaction and positive attitude?

Objective Three: To evaluate contributing factors to the variance between what food franchise restaurants offer as a service and what customers expect as customer service.

- What are the factors that make service delivery sustainable?
- Did the quality of food make service delivery sustainable?
- Is the price of product and service sustainable?

What comments, changes or any additions, that you would state about food franchise restaurants regarding service quality?

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Thank you for your participation in this study !