



## IDENTIFYING THE IMAGE ATTRIBUTES OF FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS USING DELPHI SURVEY

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### ABSTRACT

People's hectic routines have now led to mushrooming of fast-food restaurants (FFRs), especially in urban areas. Therefore, FFR owners need to find ways to control the demand of the market. Image is one of the drivers that influences customer satisfaction, behavior intention, trust, and loyalty. FFR owners should therefore take into account all possible attributes that may affect their image, before executing any improvement strategies. Unfortunately, the image evaluation attributes proposed in past scholarly works appear to be either incomprehensive or highly redundant to each other. This study thus aims at introducing a set of attributes, which are all-inclusive yet distinctive from one another other, which could be utilised by any future studies to evaluate the image of FFRs without too much revision. The study begins by extracting an initial list of image attributes by reviewing pertinent past literature. This tentative list was then verified via a two-round Delphi survey that was participated by 10 well-experienced fast-food restaurateurs. The contribution and limitation of the study are summarised in the conclusion section.

*JEL classification: M31.*

*Keywords: Delphi method; fast-food restaurants; restaurant image.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's highly materialistic and fast-paced lifestyle, a significant change can be observed in the food consumption practices among urban Malaysians. Most of them no longer have sufficient time to cook and eat at home, rather they tend to dine at nearby fast-food restaurants (FFRs) as a result of their hectic routine (Lee & Tan, 2007). It is undeniable that the increasing demand and preference of urban Malaysians favoring fast foods have led to mushrooming of new FFRs across the nation. This situation stiffens the competition among the FFRs operating in a same region. As a result, many of these FFRs are now employing every possible way or strategy to magnetise and retain customers (Ling et al., 2011).

Various studies on consumer satisfaction, behavioral intentions or both have been conducted to identify the key factors that would increase repurchases. In accordance to the findings of such studies, it can actually be concluded that restaurant image plays a salient role in determining its survival in a competitive business environment. According to Ryu et al. (2008), every restaurant owner should attempt to form a

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unique image that distinguishes them from their competitors. A positive restaurant image, which in a way indicates the quality of dining service for customers, is proven to have strong association with increasing of repetitive or loyal customers, who may then voluntarily involved in positive word-of-mouth marketing. In fact, Otengei et al. (2014) regarded restaurant image as one of the principal interpreters of loyalty towards a restaurant.

Identifying and implementing the ideal strategies to improve the image of a FFR is somewhat cumbersome seeing that it involves the consideration of multiple attributes. Omitting any crucial attributes may lead to infeasible strategies. To worsen the situation, a review of past literature reveals that not too many studies that have discussed and presented a proper list of attributes that can specifically be used to evaluate the image of FFRs (Wu, 2013). While some lists appear to be incomplete, some comprise attributes that overlap to each other. Owing to these issues, this study intends to present a comprehensive yet appropriate set of image attributes that are distinct from one to another, with the hope that they could be adapted by any future FFRs image evaluation studies without too much of modification.

This paper is organised as follows. Section 1 discloses the necessity for a FFR to maintain a favorable image amidst the customers, apart from highlighting the issues in evaluating the image of FFRs. Section 2 provides descriptions on the initial list of image attributes that were mainly identified by surveying the past literature. Section 3 details out the Delphi survey that was executed to verify the list of attributes extracted in the former section. Section 4 concludes the main contribution and limitation of the study.

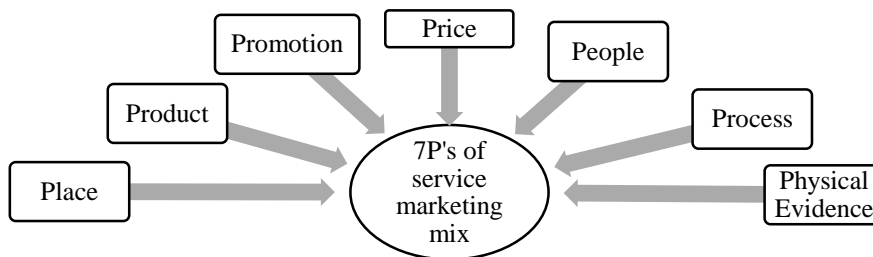
## **2. A REVIEW ON RESTAURANT IMAGE**

Fast-foods are prepared and served speedily, using standardised techniques and ingredients served to the end users for consumption. FFRs also emphasise convenience, the speed of service, inexpensive price, simple décor, standard preparation, and have reasonable pricing (Cardas Research and Consulting Sdn Bhd, 2015; Royle & Towers, 2002). FFRs should carefully manage their image if they wish to maintain their customers and avoid problems associated with their reputation.

Restaurant image is defined as the sum of the emotional perceptions, ideas, or symbolic attitudes that customers associate with restaurants (Ryu et al., 2012). Restaurant image has a significant influence on the behavioral intention of customers in repurchasing (Trimulyo et al., 2015). Moreover, restaurant image also serves a role in providing guidance or a checklist in serving customers, determining whether their needs are fulfilled and can influence favor or preference towards a restaurant (Wang, 1990).

The elements of marketing mix can actually be used as the base for assessing the image of a FFR as it has been widely applied as a decision making tool to market a company's brand or product. The original marketing mix model was created by McCarthy (1964) which includes price, place, product and promotion (4Ps) (McCarthy, 1964). Sadly, this model was found to be incomprehensive in catering the needs of service based companies. As the result, Booms and Bitner (1981) expanded the existing 4Ps to 7Ps by including the following three factors; "people", "process", and "physical evidence" (refer Figure 1). Although 7Ps has been generally accepted by servicing companies, it is known to be too complex, where the newly added 3Ps are claimed to be overlapping over the original 4Ps (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995).

This study has decided to narrow its attention on the following three distinct elements or attributes: People, process, and physical evidence. Some of the crucial sub-attributes that could describe each of these three main attributes were identified as shown in Table 1. The identification was done through a series of brainstorming involving a group of lecturers from Labuan Faculty of International Finance as well as by reviewing some related previous literature, so that none of these sub-attributes is carrying redundant information. At this stage, the identified main and sub-attributes were assumed to be inclusive enough for characterising the overall image of a FFR. However, the validity of this list was then verified by taking into account the opinions from the practitioners through a two-round Delphi survey as explained in Section 3.



**Figure 1: 7P's of service marketing mix.**

**Table 1: Initial list of FFR image attributes.**

Main attribute	Sub-attribute
<p><b>People</b> is defined as the behaviour of the employees that interact with the customers (Jin et al., 2012).</p>	<p><b>Hospitality</b> is under people's factor because it involves employees who act as the front line of the restaurants who to interact with customers. When employees communicate with clients with ease and have quality personal time with them, this may generate repurchase from the customers.</p>
	<p><b>Knowledgeable employees</b> who can provide prompt responses towards customers' questions also serves as an important aspect in determining the image of a FFR (Jin et al., 2012).</p>
	<p><b>Managing client's attitude</b> is where the employees able to identify any customers that may interrupt the dining of other customers and request them to behave so that everyone's needs will be taken care of. The dining experience will affect the FFR image, customer satisfaction and behavioral intention of restaurants (Otengei et al., 2014).</p>
<p><b>"Process"</b> is defined as steps, strategies or procedures used by restaurants to deliver satisfying service.</p>	<p><b>Taste of food</b> results when a restaurant has standard cooking method or steps used in the kitchen. Taste of food plays significant roles that increases a customer's trust by raising the FFR image (Bouzaabia et al., 2013).</p>
	<p><b>Healthy food</b> relies on the procedure or steps used in maintaining the freshness as well as the hygiene of the food.</p>
	<p><b>Service response time</b> is defined as an efficient flow in serving the customers by employees from the time an order is taken until food receive. The amount of time for a service to be completed directly influences the FFR image (Ryu et al., 2008).</p>
	<p>Promotion, itself is defined as marketing activity used to communicate about services or products for customers to know, use or adapt (Amaral, 2008). Promotion refers to plans introduced by the FFRs as to value or maintain or increase their loyal customers. While, <b>promotion process</b> is mean by way, procedure or eporation of promoting FFRs deals and promotion to the customers.</p>
	<p><b>Value of money</b> refers to procedure or steps applied in ensuring that food is worth its price. Another name for value is price. Value for money for a product charged by the restaurant should be equivalent to that actually received (Astuti et al., 2015); as value for money of a product influences the FFR's image which directly affects customer's purchasing decision.</p>

**Table 1 continued.**

Main attribute	Sub-attribute
<b>Physical evidence</b> is an impression that is conveyed to clients from the surroundings of the services provided; this can be virtual surrounding attributes or the facilities (Garoufallou et al., 2013).	<b>Informative menu</b> refers to a menu design that provides all necessary details (e.g. price and ingredients) of each item. This help the customers to order their preferred food easily (Marinkovic et al., 2015), with minimal hesitation, and at the same time helps in creating a positive image about the restaurant.
	<b>Employee's appearance and costumes</b> is noted as one of the qualities of services that influences the FFR's image (Soriano, 2002).
	<b>Physical cleanliness</b> is recorded as one of the most weighty attributes in restaurants that can ultimately affect customers' dining experience and also encourage them to come again in future (Ryu et al., 2008).
	The restaurant's location, particularly with a lot of convenient <b>parking</b> lots is also proven to influence the image of the restaurant (Prendergast & Man, 2002).
	<b>Internal ambiance</b> aspects such as good lighting, air-conditioning, and spatial layout of a restaurant could help in creating a better dining experience for customers to repurchase (Harris & Goode, 2010).
	<b>Overall safety</b> factor of a restaurant can be assessed from whether the restaurant has basic features such as CCTVs, smoke detectors, fire extinguisher, and emergency exits (Krishnan et al., 2014).
	<b>External appearance</b> is the first observation that the clients will experience even before getting restaurant (Rande, 1995); Worn-off paint or burnt-out lights may create a poor impression of the restaurant.

### 3. APPLYING DELPHI METHOD

Delphi method is known as one of the practical ways of achieving consensus on a particular matter through several rounds of discussion or assessment involving a group of experts whose identities are kept anonymous to each other (Hartman, 1981; Hill & Fowles, 1975; Sung, 2001).

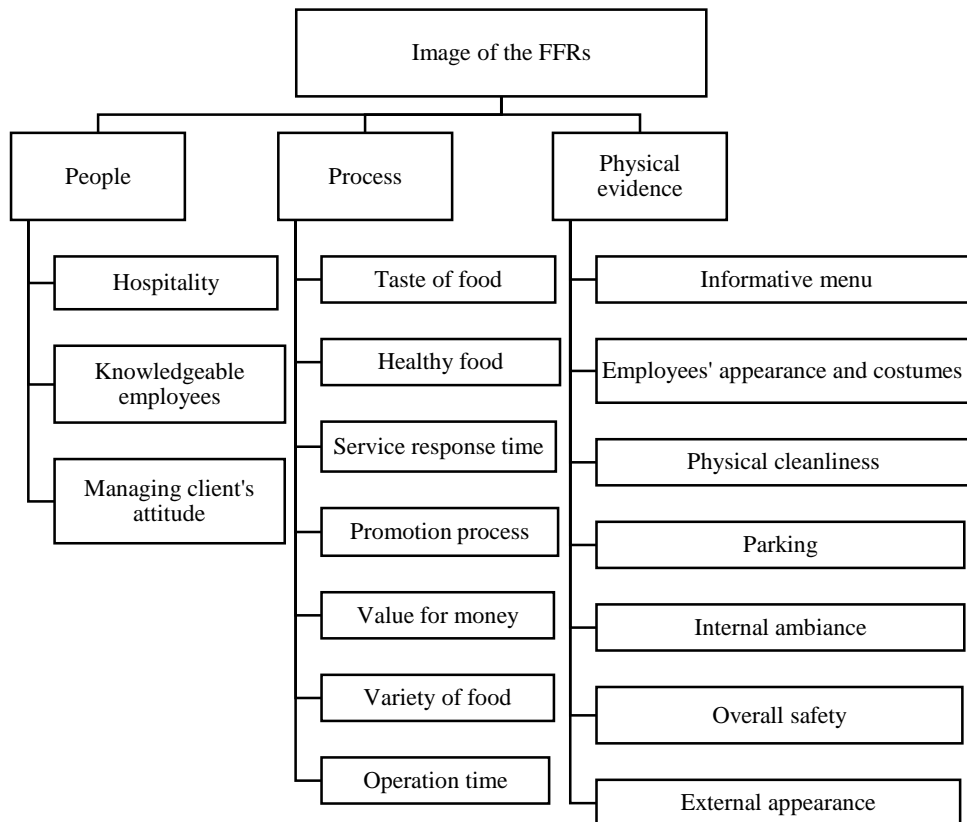
In this study, a modified Delphi method as suggested by Wang et al. (2016) was used to validate the list of attributes (main and sub-attributes) identified in the former section. A group of experts that comprised 10 well-known fast-food restaurateurs was formed before commencing the survey. The survey was divided into two assesment rounds.

In the first round, the restaurateurs were asked to indicate the importance carried by each attribute over the image of FFRs, based on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 and 5 denotes "unimportant" and "important", respectively. At the same time, the experts were encouraged to notify if there were any crucial attributes absent from the provided list, supported with some acceptable reasons. A new list of attributes was then formed by: (1) Eliminating the attributes with the mean ratings below than 3.50 or the coefficient of variation (CV) values above 20%; and (2) adding the suggested attributes. In actual, by the end of first round, none of the attributes identified earlier was discarded as they fall within the retention points (mean > 3.50 and CV < 20%). However, two new sub-attributes namely, "variety of food" and "operation time" were added under the "process" attribute, after taking into account the suggestions from some of the experts.

Table 2 presents the list of attributes that were finalised post of the second round of survey, together with their mean and CV values. Meanwhile, Figure 2 shows the hierachical model of the finalised attributes. The range of mean ratings that lie between 4.00 and 5.00, and the CV values that lie between 10% and 19% (refer Table 2) indicate the experts' strong agreement towards the validity of main and sub-attributes in measurig the image of FFRs.

**Table 2: Finalised list of FFR image attributes.**

Main Attribute	Sub-attribute	Mean	CV (%)
People		4.82	8.40
	Hospitality	4.91	6.14
	Knowledgeable employees	5.00	0.00
	Managing client's attitude	4.64	10.88
Process		4.91	6.14
	Taste of food	5.00	0.00
	Healthy food	5.00	0.00
	Service response time	4.82	8.40
	Promotion process	4.64	14.54
	Value of money	4.64	10.88
	Variety of food	4.82	8.40
	Operation time	4.82	8.40
Physical evidence		4.82	8.40
	Informative menu	4.91	6.14
	Employees' appearance and costume	4.91	6.14
	Physical cleanliness	4.91	6.14
	Parking	4.00	17.95
	Internal ambience	4.82	8.40
	Overall safety	4.91	6.14
	External appearance	4.91	6.14



**Figure 2: Hierarchical multi-attribute model for measuring the image of FFRs.**

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

This study has finally proposed a proper multi-attribute hierarchical model that could be utilised by any future studies which intend to measure the image of FRRs. The model constituted by a comprehensive set of non-overlapping attributes. To be exact, the model comprises three main attributes, namely people, process, and physical evidence, where each of these main attributes is further explained by a few important sub-attributes. The comprehensiveness and validity of the model in describing the image of FFRs are deemed to be adequate as it was actually endorsed by a group experienced restaurateur via a two-round Delphi survey. However, one limitation of the proposed model is that it may only be suitable to be applied for the evaluation studies involving FFRs operating in Malaysia. This is because the experts involved in the Delphi analysis may have assessed the image attributes by merely considering the preference of Malaysian customers. A major amendment on the model would be required for studies beyond Malaysian context, as people's preference on dining services tend to change from one country to another.

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