An Evaluation of Customers' E-servicescape of Branded Websites: A Case in the Foodservice Industry

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Abstract
The advent of the Internet has created a new type of electronic virtual environment, the e-servicescape. The Internet provides a unique opportunity for the service firms to influence customers before they visit the physical property. This study attempted to identify key factors that affected customers' e-servicescape with websites. Results of the study indicated that the design and ambience of the website significantly influenced customers' satisfaction with the website viewing experiences. Moreover, customers' satisfaction affected their return intention to the website or to an actual service provider significantly. Therefore, restaurant owners should pay attention to those factors when they design the website. E-servicescape has appeared to become a significant and unique influential website attribute of contemporary marketing and information technology strategy development. This study contributes to the growing body of information technology and branding literature that supports the use of e-servicescape construct to persuade and engage customers.
Keywords: e-servicescape, customer satisfaction, return intention, branded websites

1. Introduction

Service providers have difficulty promoting their service due to its intangibility. There is often no physical aspect of the product to evaluate since service is intangible (Wakefield & Blodgett, 2016). Instead, the tangible cues in the environment help shape consumer attitudes and behaviors (Ariffin, Bibon, & Abdullah, 2017). In fact, the more intangible the product is, the stronger the influence is of those tangible cues on consumers' evaluation (Ariffin, Bibon, & Abdullah, 2012). The physical environment is rich in such cues (Yan, Yurchisin, & Watchravesringkan, 2011) and may be very influential in communicating the firm's image and purpose to its customers. Even before purchase, consumers commonly look for cues about the firm's capabilities and quality (An, 2014). Research suggests that the physical setting may also influence the customer's ultimate satisfaction with the service (Carlson & O'Cass, 2010). Therefore, the physical environment is very important for service firms to enhance their service for their customers.

The advent of the Internet has changed the nature of the servicescape (Teng, Ni, & Chen, 2018). The physical environment has typically been conceptualized as in-store variables such as lighting, music, color, smell, and store layout, but the Internet has created a new type of electronic virtual environment, the e-servicescape, based on the cyberspace (Wu, Quyen, & Rivas, 2017). This new environment often eliminates the need for customers to visit a firm's physical facility. Instead, they can visit a company's website to acquire information or even purchase products and services. The Internet provides a unique opportunity for the service firms to influence customers before they visit the actual location (Alcántara‐Pilar, Del Barrio‐García, Porcu, & Crespo‐Almendros, 2017).

A restaurant website can overcome the intangibility dilemma through e-servicescape management. E-servicescape management of a restaurant website can effectively show whole images of the destination and facility. To summarize, increasing tangibility by presenting the physical facility virtually, and explaining the service in detail, can enhance the promotional effect of service firms and reduce customers' perceived risk derived from uncertainty of the restaurant and travel destination (Pantelidis, 2010). Furthermore, the good quality of websites has a positive effect on customers' satisfaction of websites and then attracts customers to revisit those websites. According to Park & Gretzel (2006), "Maintaining a high quality is crucial for websites to increase customer satisfaction and encourage customers to return." The relationship between satisfaction and intention is well established and similarly it is established that e-satisfaction has an impact on intention (Prybutok & Zhang, 2005). Although customers cannot experience products/services directly, they can search for and compare numerous alternatives online (Kim, 2009) before they make a purchase decision. Therefore, customers' satisfaction with a website could motivate them to try and patronage restaurants.

The primary purpose of this study was to identify determining factors that affect customers' e-servicescape with restaurant websites. With this purpose, the author attempts to answer the following research questions:
1. What key factors of e-servicescape for a restaurant website positively influence perceived service quality?
2. Does perceived service quality influence customer satisfaction in a restaurant website?

3. Does customers' satisfaction affect their intentions to return and to buy when individuals visit the restaurant website?

This study could draw attention of restaurant owners on e-servicescape of websites and provide a guideline for ways of improving the quality of websites. Many previous studies have been conducted related to servicescape in general but not to e-servicescape, with emphasis on the overall physical environment. However, this study as an experimental stage of identifying e-servicescape, assessed customers' e-servicescape with restaurant websites and their behavior consequences of e-servicescape.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Serviscape
As a company's tangible and physical cues appeal to its customers, the servicescape construct has been shown to strongly influence customer behavior and satisfaction (Choi, & Kim, 2015). Jobst and Boerner (2015) indicated that physical evidence enabled customers to form "mental reality" for a service. Similarly, Bruwer and Kelley (2015) indicated that individuals used appearance to judge realities, and the more intangible the product, the more the packaging –how it is presented, who presents it—influenced a customer's judgment. Thus, the physical environment creates a tangible representation—an image—of the service. If other factors in the service delivery equation are similar in the customer's mind, (e.g., pricing, product mix, location), then the physical environment –servicescape may become an important determinant of a customer's choice of restaurants (Baker, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988). The key to differentiate and to provide a reason why a customer should choose one restaurant over another—may rely on the image it presents. Bitner (1992) also claimed that servicescape played an important role in creating expectations about intangible service. She stressed that the servicescape was of great importance for inexperienced customers or new employees when few intrinsic cues were available.

Servicescape is defined as the physical environment of service companies (Kim, 2006). Consumers' attitudes and behaviors were affected by the tangibility of the physical environment of facility-based firms such as restaurants and hotels (Bitner, 1992) and the servicescape can help increase the tangibility of service in the service industry (Baker et al, 1988). Pelletier and Collier (2018) suggest that individuals react to places with two general, and opposite, forms of behaviors: approach and avoidance. Approach behaviors include all positive behaviors that might be directed at a place, such as desire to stay, explore, work, and affiliate. Avoidance behaviors reflect the opposite (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Positive (negative) internal responses to the servicescape lead to approach (avoidance) behaviors. For customers, approach includes such behaviors as coming in, staying, spending money, loyalty, and carrying out the purpose for being in the organization. Avoidance is represented by the opposite behaviors. The approach/avoidance behaviors of customers are determined largely by individuals' internal responses (cognitive, emotional, and physiological) to the environment (Bitner, 1992).

2.2. Internal responses that influence behaviors
Perceptions of the servicescape lead to certain emotions, beliefs and physiological sensations that in turn influence behaviors (Ellen & Zhang, 2014). Behaviors are thus mediated by a person's internal responses to a place. The perceived servicescape may elicit cognitive responses (Wakefield & Blodgett, 2016), influencing people's beliefs about a place and their beliefs about the people and products found in that place. In other cases, perception of servicescape may simply help people to distinguish a firm by influencing how it is categorized. In addition to influencing cognitions, the perceived servicescape may elicit emotional responses that in turn influence behaviors (Bitner, 1992). The emotional-eliciting qualities of environment are captured by two dimensions: pleasure-displeasure and degree of arousal (i.e., amount of stimulation or excitement). Environments that elicit feelings of pleasure are likely to be ones where people want to spend time and money whereas unpleasant environments are avoided. Similarly, arousing environments are viewed positively unless the excitement is combined with unpleasantness (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The perceived servicescape may also affect people in purely physiological ways. When people are physiologically uncomfortable because of ambient temperature, their affective response to strangers is less positive than when they are physically comfortable (Chang, 2016). A complex mix of environmental features constitutes the servicescape and influences internal responses and behaviors.

2.3. Composite dimensions of environmental features
Bitner (1992) identified three composite dimensions relevant to the present study: ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and signs, symbols, and artifacts. Ambient conditions include background characteristics of the environment such as temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent. Spatial layout refers to the ways in that machinery, equipment and furnishings are arranged, the size and the shape of those items and the spatial relationship among them (Ogbuji, Onuoha, & Abdul, 2016). Functionality refers to the ability of the same items to facilitate performance and the accomplishment of goals. Labels (e.g., name of company) and

directions (e.g., entrance, exits) are examples of signs. Signs, symbols and artifacts are particularly important in forming first impressions.

2.3.1. E- servicescape

The Internet has redefined the traditional physical environment of the company and has created the e-servicescape (Teng, Ni, & Chen, 2018). E-servicescape refers to "the electronic physical environment based on cyberspace" (Koernig, 2003). The biggest barrier that service firms confronted was the difficulty in communicating information about service due to its intangibility. The Internet enabled customers to experience a firm's physical facilities by visiting a company's website in virtual reality. Compared to the traditional physical environment, the Internet allows consumers to enhance their own search and evaluation capabilities, thereby minimizing the risk of post-purchase dissatisfaction at the brick and click property. Moreover, it allows them to do this search and evaluation beyond traditional distribution channels and physical environments, designed and planned to manipulate internal cognitive and emotional responses. The Internet allows customers to explore a broader range of products and product attributes as well as to compare features and prices in a most convenient way (William & Dargel, 2004).

Based on Bitner's servicescape (1992), this study attempted to measure e-servicescape. In this study, the e-servicescape can be measured by three components: ambient conditions, functions, and design which can be present online. The effect of ambient conditions of e-servicescape is the same as that of the ambient conditions of servicescape; ambient conditions create the atmosphere of the service environment. Ambient conditions of e-servicescape comprise pictures, music, virtual tour and writing style of the website. As for functionality and spatial layout factor proposed by Bitner, we divided them into two different factors (functions and design) because they had respective functions when presented online. Functions here mean that the tasks which customers can accomplish or obtain online such as reservations, reviews from other customers, directions and any other helpful information. The third factor in Bitner's study- symbols, signs and artifacts is categorized as design factor in our study. Design includes the aesthetics of the website such as the layout, the signage, the color and the theme of the website.

Besides the e-servicescape, this study measured customers' perceived service quality of the restaurant website, their satisfaction with the restaurant website, and their behavior intentions. As for satisfaction, generally this study defines it as an affective consumer condition that results from global evaluations of all the aspects that make up the consumer relationship (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). Satisfaction shows a customer's favorable attitude toward the company's offerings (Delgado & Munuera, 2001) and its degree of an individual's satisfaction depends on the relationship between the initial expectations created and the results obtained (Oliver, 1980). The consumer will feel satisfied if he perceives the fulfillment and the required level of honesty, benevolence and competence on the website (Flavián, Guinalíu, & Gurrea, 2006). And then, customer behavior intentions here refer to their willingness to revisit the restaurant website, to recommend the restaurant website to family or friends, to tell others about the restaurant website and to dine in the restaurant. In the service marketing literature, satisfaction is considered as one of the antecedents of customers' commitment to their behavior (Zablah, Carlson, Donavan, Maxham III, & Brown, 2016).

Therefore, it can derive that there is a positive relationship between satisfaction and customers' behavior intentions (Park & Kim, 2006). Based on the previous literature review, the authors proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Ambient conditions positively affects the perceived service quality in restaurant websites
H2: Function attributes positively affects the perceived service quality in restaurant websites
H3: Design positively affects the perceived service quality in restaurant websites
H4: Perceived service quality positively affects customer satisfaction in restaurant websites
H5: Customer satisfaction positively affects customer intentions in restaurant websites

Figure 1 depicts the study's conceptual framework to measure e-servicescape of restaurants' websites.
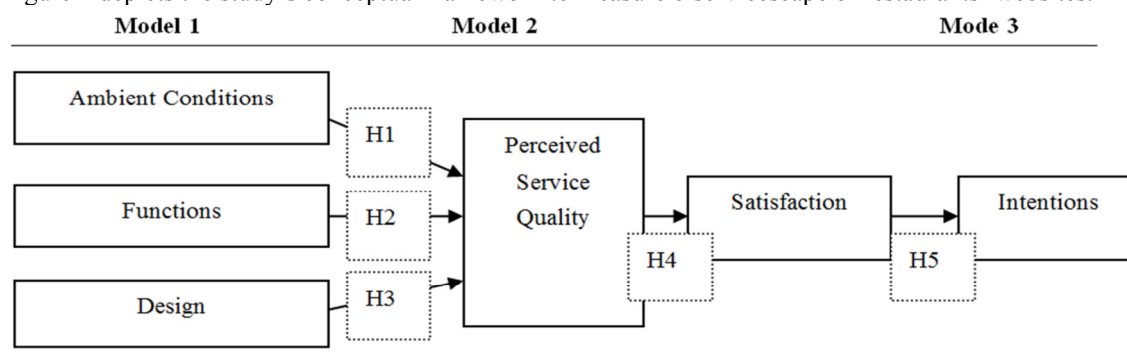

Figure 1. A conceptual framework for e-servicescape

3. Methodology

An on-line field survey was used to test key factors of e-servicescape in this study. Three local independent restaurants' websites were selected to evaluate e-servicescape and approximately 300 potential diners were contacted as a convenience sample in this study. The restaurant websites were chosen to measure e-servicescape rather than hotel ones because the restaurants are less complex and more focused on the service delivery than hotels. The services hotels provide are much more diversified including rooms, banquet and meetings, compared to those of restaurants. The multi-function of hotel operation would be complicated to measure e-servicescape of all detailed functions of hotels on the website; therefore, the author decided to use the restaurant websites to measure e-servicescape. In addition, independent and local restaurant websites were selected to identify their potential variability. Typically, chain restaurant websites have a standardized format and layout, not specific to each individual restaurant that does not provide any unique e-servicescape of the website. Furthermore, chain company websites can influence viewers' pre-established perceptions of the chain restaurants by presenting advanced features of the website that might distract the customers from certain critical components of e-servicescape such as the functions provided on the website.

3.1. Questionnaire development

Based on Bitner (1992) servicescape model and scale, in this study the self-administered questionnaire consisted of questions regarding e-servicescape of the restaurant website, perceived website quality, satisfaction, behavior intentions and demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. A set of questions was developed based on our conceptual framework and modified to examine the determining factors of e-servicescape of restaurant websites. The questions of e-servicescape include three factors which are ambient condition (4 items), function (4 items), and design (7 items). Then we developed two questions for perceived website quality, two questions for customer satisfaction and three questions for behavior intentions. A 5-point Likert scale was used from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for questions above. In addition, the measurement questions were followed by three open-ended questions regarding restaurant websites. Finally, demographic questions such as gender, age, income, ethnicity, and education were included.

3.2. Sample and survey distribution

This study conducted a pilot test first with 30 respondents to clarify wordings of the questionnaire and identify a potential measurement structure of the e-servicescape. Based on the results of the pilot test, we modified several questions and refined the questionnaire. Then, the survey questionnaire was sent randomly to those who were on school mailing database, Facebook, msn and Internet forum. Each respondent was asked to browse the linked restaurant website first and then answer the questions based on his/her browsing experience of the website.

4. Results

4.1. Data collection

This study contacted 300 emails and obtained 165 responses, resulting in a 55% response rate. All respondents were evenly distributed throughout the three restaurant websites (50 from Japanese restaurant, 60 from fine-dining restaurant, and 55 from American pub). Of the 165 respondents, 54.6% were female, 94% were aged between 18 and 34, and 20% had master's degree as the highest education level. Regarding respondents' ethnicity, more than half of respondents (58%) were Asian, followed by Caucasian (26.4%) (See table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' demographic profile

Demographic characteristics		n	Percent
Gender (n=162)	Male	73	44.2
	Female	89	54.6
Age (n=162)	18-24	77	46.7
	25-34	77	46.7
	35-44	6	3.6
	45-54	1	.6
	Above 54	1	.6
Annual household income (n=156)	$25K-$49,999	32	19.4
	$50K-$74,999	8	4.8
	$75K-$99,999	9	5.5
	$100K-$149,999	5	3.0
	$150K-$200,000	1	.6
	Above$200K	4	2.4
	under $25 K	97	58.8
Ethnicity (n=161)	Caucasian	43	26.4
	Asian	96	58.2
	Latino/Hispanic	9	5.5
	African American	2	1.2
	Other	11	6.7
Highest level of education (n=98)	High school	8	4.8
	Some college	28	17.0
	Bachelor degree	18	10.9
	Master degree	34	20.6
	Doctoral degree	10	6.1

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation of each construct after conducting descriptive analysis. Mean values of all items in the three constructs ranged between 3.06 and 3.85, which indicates that respondents felt good about overall feelings of the website relatively.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis of three constructs of e-servicescape and their consequences

Constructs	Measurement items	Mean[a]	Std.
Ambient	1. The website has attractive photos of the restaurant and foods.	3.30	1.24
	2. The website's virtual tour gives me a vivid image of the real restaurant.	3.12	1.17
	3. The website clearly tells me the type of the restaurant.	3.80	1.05
	4. Viewing the website stimulates my appetite.	3.18	1.15
Function	1. Previous diners' online reviews of this restaurant are useful.	3.50	.99
	2. Directions to the restaurant on the website are helpful.	3.81	1.03
	3. The direct interaction with the restaurant online is convenient.	3.51	1.06
	4. The menu on this website is clear to me.	3.77	1.02
Design	1. The layout of the website is good.	3.23	1.17
	2 .The signage of the website is clear and sufficient.	3.34	1.11
	3. The website uses the space adequately.	3.31	1.11
	4. It is easy to use the website.	3.84	1.01
	5. The restaurant logo on the website is unique and appealing.	3.40	1.08
	6. I like the colors of the website.	3.06	1.16
	7. I like the theme of the website.	3.11	1.06
Quality	1. I like the overall service environment provided on this website.	3.40	.90
	2. The website portrays the quality of the restaurant.	3.24	1.00
Satisfaction	1. I am satisfied with the website.	3.20	1.14
	2. Browsing this website meets my needs.	3.31	1.05
Intention	1. I would like to visit this website again.	2.95	1.09
	2. Based on the website, I plan to visit this restaurant.	3.05	1.05
	3. I would recommend this website to my family or friends.	3.04	1.02

[a] A 5-point Likert scale from 1: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree

Overall, respondents perceived moderately good service quality of the website as well as were satisfied with browsing the website. After visiting the website, respondents seemed to develop moderate intention to visit the real restaurant or recommend it to their acquaintances. In order to understand the underlying structure of the 15

e-servicescape items, the study employed principal component analysis with varimax rotation to identify the underlying factor structure of e-servicescape. As a result of factor analysis, three items were cross loaded between the two factors and one item had low loading value. Thus, this study eliminated four items from the initial factor analysis. As a result, only 11 e-servicescape items were rerun the principal component analysis with varimax rotation. Two factors were extracted with 65% variance, which was slightly different from what this study originally proposed. The first factor was named as ambient and designs based on the items in this factor, while the second factor was as functionality.

Table 3. Results of factor analysis of e-servicescape items

Factor	Measurement items	Factor loading	α
Factor 1: Ambient & Designs	I like the colors of the website.	.861	.896
	I like the theme of the website	.860	
	The restaurant logo on the website is unique and appealing.	.794	
	The layout of the website is good	.777	
	The signage of the website is clear and sufficient.	.679	
Factor 2: Functionality	It is easy to use the website.	.635	.835
	Previous diners' online reviews of this restaurant are useful.	.831	
	Directions to the restaurant on the website are helpful.	.787	
	The direct interaction with the restaurant online is convenient.	.759	
	The website clearly tells me the type of the restaurant.	.613	
	The website's virtual tour gives me a vivid image of the real restaurant.	.567	

The other three key constructs, perceived service quality, customer satisfaction, and intention were uni-dimensional, respectively. In order to see the relationship among all variables and to identify key factors that affect customers' return intentions to the website or to dine in the restaurant, multiple regression analysis was conducted. As a result of regression analysis in Model 1, both ambient & design and functionality were significant predictors of quality of website, explaining 63.1 % of the variance. Table 4 summarizes the results for model 1, model 2 and model 3.

Table 4. Effects of e-servicescape on its consequences

	Model 1[a]		Model 2[b]		Model 3[c]	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
(Constant)		-.238		.034		.634
Factor1	.613	12.153**	.490	8.265**	.280	3.510**
Factor 2	.516	10.240**	.288	5.276**	.192	2.887**
Quality			.353	5.167**	.090	1.080
Satisfaction					.457	4.923**
R^2	.631		.751		.700	
F-Value	124.135		144.042		80.468	

[a] Dependent variable is Perceived quality; [b] Dependent variable is Satisfaction; [c] DV is Intention ** p <.01

In Model 2, 75% of variance in satisfaction were explained by three independent variables, factors 1 and 2 and perceived service quality at p<.01. As shown in Model 3, customer satisfaction was a key predictor (.457) for return intention, followed by ambient and design (factor 1) and functionality (factor 2). The explanation power of this model was 70%.

Additionally, more than 50 % of the respondents wanted to see the pictures of the food on the menu on the restaurant website. Not only the pictures of the food but also the pictures of the restaurant itself were considered important items on the website. Also, the respondents expressed that they would like to see the online order feature and the price of the food on the menu as well.

Based on the results of the factor analysis and regression analysis, this study proposed the following model in Figure 2 to assess customers' e-servicescape of the restaurant website.
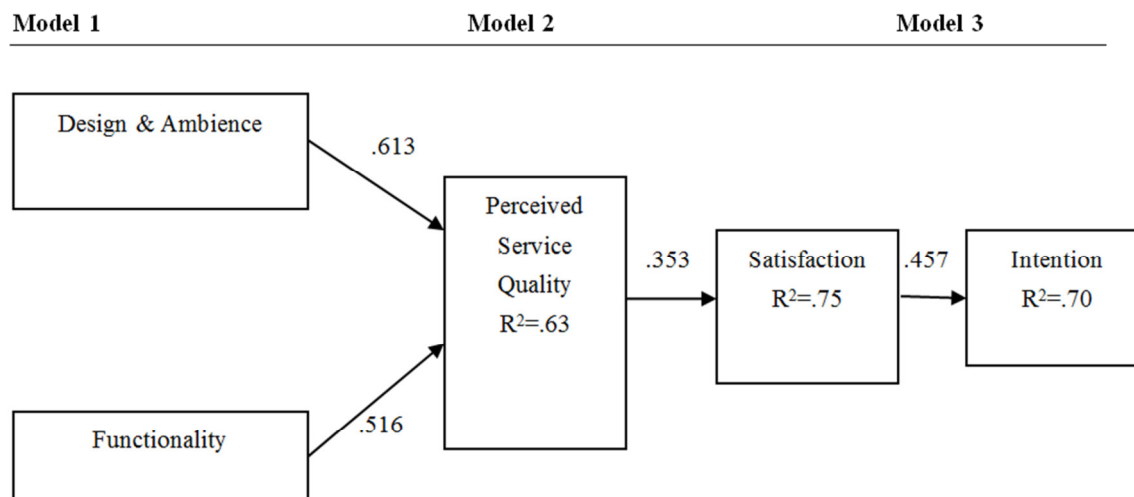
Figure 2. The revised model of e-servicescape

5. Conclusions & Discussions

In this study, we identified key factors of e-servicescape of restaurant websites. Findings of the study indicated that satisfaction (.457) affected the intentions to visit the website again or to dine in the restaurant significantly. On the other hand, the design & ambience (.613) influenced the satisfaction the most. Therefore, restaurants' owners should pay attention to the design & ambience aspect of the website focusing on the layout, the color and the theme of the website that can reflect the real atmosphere of the restaurant to satisfy customers with their viewing website as a holistic virtual experience.

As for the layout, the ways in that the words, the pictures and the signage are arranged, the size and the shape of those items, and the spatial relationship among them should be designed to make the customers feel comfortable (Bitner, 1992). Also, the color, the theme and the logo of the website are supposed to reflect the style of the restaurant. For example, the color, the theme and the logo used in the fine dining restaurant should represent the elegant atmosphere of the restaurant. In addition, the signage is an important item of the website as well. Each signage on the website contains different information of the restaurants. The signage on the website could be considered symbols, signs and artifacts of the servicescape. Those items are particularly important in forming first impressions (Bitner, 1992). Thus, it is essential that the signage is named appropriately to tell the customers about what it entails. The well-designed signage saves customers' time to look for the information they needed and make them feel easy to use the website.

Furthermore, the functionality of the website such as the virtual tour, the online reviews of the website is an important factor for customers to obtain more information about the restaurants or to accomplish certain tasks that are needed. The online reviews from other diners become increasingly important these days as the advance of the Internet. The Internet provides customers a convenient and timely way to share their experiences regardless of the degree of experiences. The Internet allows customers to do their search and evaluation beyond traditional distribution channels and physical environments, designed and planned to manipulate internal cognitive and emotional responses (William & Dargel, 2004). Risk is commonly conceived as an uncertainty regarding possible negative consequences of using a product or service. In many cases, customers may not purchase product or service, even if they perceive a high service quality value in a product or service. High perceived risk related to purchase product or service is important in consumption or adoption decision (Rotchanakitumnuai, 2008). To reduce perceived risk, the potential customers tend to gather information about the restaurants before they visit to feel secure about their potential dining experience. Therefore, the restaurant website can provide this function to satisfy customers' needs. From the restaurants' perspective, restaurant owners should review customers' comments on a regular basis to listen to what the customers feel about their restaurants and to manage the potential word of mouth communication appropriately.

Besides, the virtual tour is another tool to reduce customers' perceived risk as well. The customers can watch the virtual tour to have an idea how the dining environment would be for them. The restaurant owners must notice that the virtual tour or the pictures of the restaurants on the websites should present the exact real restaurants because the customers would be disappointed if the restaurant did not look as good as the image provided on the websites. Certain information about the restaurants such as the directions or the hours of

operation is considered important for customers. The direct interaction with the restaurants is considered a convenient feature on the website, too, even though this function is not popular on the websites we used for the current study. The direct interaction with restaurants saves customers' time to call or to send messages to the restaurants if they have any questions. Instead, they can get instant reply from the restaurants if they have any issues when they browse the websites.

The restaurant owners should pay attention to the details explained above to increase their customers' return intention whether to the website or to the real restaurants by increasing customers' website viewing satisfaction. Results of this study give the guidelines for restaurant owners to improve their website quality and sheds some light on understanding customers' preferences of the website experience.

6. Limitation & Suggestions for Future Research

First, the data collection speed is not as fast as we expected due to the lack of the incentives and the insufficient amounts of potential respondents' contacts. Secondly, the profile of our respondents is not evenly distributed. More than 50 % are Asians and 94 % respondents' age range from 18-34. In addition, our respondents are from the local area instead of from nationwide. However, the results of this study provide the general guidelines for the restaurant website design. To target the restaurants' specific customers, the survey could be sent to the population with matched profile groups. The questionnaire used in this study could be a great sample that only needs little adjustments dependent on the features presented on websites. For the future study, e-servicescape study can also be done to evaluate how respondents' demographic characteristics differ in their perceptions of the website viewing experiences. By obtaining such results, the owner can design the website based on their target group's preferences. Furthermore, the e-servicescape can be studied in a different field since customers' preferences might differ according to the purpose of the website visit. For example, the customers who visit the bank website might care more the online banking function than the design aspect of the website. It should be mentioned that there are some other constructs not considered in the proposed model. This provide an opportunity for future research. For instance, this theoretical model may be tested in other business sectors including retail stores, hotels, resorts, just to mention a few of them. In addition, a sample of respondents that include different cultural backgrounds may provide interesting findings to consider. Some differences among these samples may be considered when targeting consumers in different locations.

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