

Research Article

ASSESSING THE SUITABILITY OF THE DELPHI METHOD FOR MEASURING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION IN THE FOOD AND BEVERAGE SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper answers the question of whether the Delphi method can be used as a tool to measure customer satisfaction in the food and beverage industry in two cases: (1) when the survey respondents are regular customers and (2) when the survey respondents are a panel of culinary experts. Customer satisfaction is a key factor that determines the success of businesses in the food and beverage industry. However, traditional measurement methods, such as surveys and focus groups, may not provide the depth needed to fully understand the factors influencing customer experiences. The Delphi method, a structured approach to gathering expert opinions through multiple rounds of surveys, is commonly used in decision-making and forecasting processes. This study evaluates whether the Delphi method can be effectively applied to assess customer satisfaction in a dynamic and culturally diverse market such as Ho Chi Minh City. By analyzing the Delphi method and existing studies, combined with considerations of the specific characteristics of the local food and beverage industry, this paper evaluates the strengths, limitations, and potential applications of the Delphi method in this context.

Keywords: Delphi method, food and beverage, panel of experts, regular customers, customer experience of food and beverage.

INTRODUCTION

Customer satisfaction plays a critical role in the success of businesses, especially in competitive industries such as food and beverages. Understanding the factors that influence customer satisfaction and measuring them accurately is essential for businesses aiming to enhance their service quality and build customer loyalty. Traditional methods for measuring customer satisfaction, such as surveys and focus groups, have long been employed to gather feedback from customers. However, these methods may not always provide the in-depth insights needed to understand the complexities of customer experiences, particularly in dynamic markets like Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

The Delphi Method, a structured approach that gathers expert opinions through multiple rounds of questioning, has been successfully used in other sectors to forecast trends, make strategic decisions, and address complex issues (Linstone and Turoff, 2002). It has been particularly valuable in situations where there is uncertainty or a lack of sufficient data. In the context of customer satisfaction, the Delphi method has been explored in various fields, such as healthcare (Hsu and Sandford, 2007) and technology (Okoli and Pawlowski, 2004), but its applicability in the food and beverage industry remains underexplored. Some studies, such as those by Mullen (2003) and Rowe and Wright (1999), have shown that the Delphi method can be a useful tool for gaining consensus among experts when traditional approaches may fall short. These studies highlight the method's ability to capture a wide range of expert knowledge, which can be invaluable for understanding customer satisfaction in industries characterized by fast-paced changes and high customer expectations. However, despite its strengths, the Delphi method also faces challenges in terms of implementation and its relevance for industries where customer feedback is inherently subjective and varied.

This paper aims to evaluate the appropriateness of the Delphi method in measuring customer satisfaction within the food and beverage sector in Ho Chi Minh City. Given the city's unique cultural, economic, and social context, we will assess whether expert insights can provide a clearer understanding of the satisfaction drivers in this market, complementing or enhancing traditional customer satisfaction measurement methods.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Customer satisfaction is one of the most critical factors influencing the success of businesses in the food and beverage sector. It is a measure of how well a company's products or services meet or exceed customer expectations. Satisfied customers are more likely to return, recommend the service to others, and contribute to the overall profitability and reputation of the business. Understanding the key drivers of customer satisfaction is essential for companies in this sector to remain competitive, especially in dynamic and rapidly changing markets like Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

In the food and beverage industry, customer satisfaction is influenced by a variety of factors, including food quality, service quality, delivery speed, ambiance, staff interaction, and the overall dining experience. Many studies have focused on the importance of food quality, arguing that it is the most significant factor in determining satisfaction (Oliver, 1980). A study by Bitner (1990) highlights the role of service quality, specifically the interaction between customers and service staff, in shaping overall satisfaction levels. Similarly, Gustafsson *et al.*, (2005) suggest that companies must pay attention to multiple touch points in the customer journey, from pre-ordering to after-service feedback, to ensure high satisfaction levels. The Delphi Method, a widely-used technique to gather expert opinions, has proven effective in identifying key factors that influence customer experience. For instance, the study by Mohamadabadi *et al.*, (2024) explored factors affecting online customer experience during crises in Iran's food delivery sector using the Delphi method. Their findings revealed critical drivers of customer satisfaction, such as food safety quality,

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human-to-human interactions, and consistency in service delivery. These factors were categorized into hierarchical levels, with some, such as demographic experience and service standardization, identified as having a significant impact on overall customer experience during crises

Despite the growing body of research on customer satisfaction, measuring it effectively remains a challenge, especially in sectors like food and beverage, where individual experiences can vary greatly based on factors such as personal preferences, cultural influences, and environmental conditions. For instance, customers' expectations of food quality or delivery speed in Ho Chi Minh City may differ significantly from those in other parts of the world, making it crucial to tailor satisfaction measurement methods to the local context.

Measuring Customer Satisfaction

Traditionally, customer satisfaction is measured through quantitative surveys, which often involve a set of predefined questions with Likert-type scales where respondents rate various aspects of their experience. While this method allows businesses to gather large amounts of data quickly, it may lack the depth needed to understand the underlying reasons behind customer preferences and behaviors. Moreover, the subjective nature of customer satisfaction means that some responses can be heavily influenced by external factors, such as mood or expectations.

To address these limitations, some researchers have argued for the incorporation of qualitative approaches to measuring customer satisfaction. Qualitative methods allow for a deeper exploration of customer experience and provide richer, more nuanced insights into their perceptions and emotions. Techniques such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, and customer diaries have been used to uncover hidden factors that quantitative surveys might miss. For instance, Sweeney and Soutar (2001) suggest that customer satisfaction is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that may require qualitative analysis to fully capture.

The Delphi Method

The Delphi Method is a qualitative research technique used to gather expert opinions through a structured process of multiple rounds of questionnaires. It was originally developed by Dalkey and Helmer (1963) as a way to forecast technological developments by gathering insights from a group of experts in the relevant field. Since then, the Delphi method has been widely applied in various domains, including business, healthcare, and policy making, as a way to generate consensus and make informed decisions in the absence of concrete data.

The Delphi method involves a panel of experts who respond to a series of open-ended questions. The responses are then summarized and presented to the experts in subsequent rounds, allowing them to review and revise their opinions based on the feedback of others. This iterative process continues until a consensus is reached or the responses stabilize. The anonymity of the process ensures that participants' opinions are not influenced by the views of others, while the structured feedback provides a way to refine and validate the initial responses.

One of the key strengths of the Delphi method is its ability to capture a diverse range of perspectives. The method is particularly useful when there is limited data or when dealing with complex issues that cannot be easily quantified. It has been used effectively in areas such as healthcare (Hsu and Sandford, 2007), policy development (Linstone and Turoff, 2002), and technology forecasting (Okoli and

Pawlowski, 2004), and has shown promise as a tool for improving decision-making in uncertain contexts.

In the context of customer satisfaction, the Delphi method can be used to gather expert opinions on factors that drive satisfaction in the food and beverage sector. Experts may include restaurant managers, food quality experts, customer service professionals, and others who have in-depth knowledge of the industry. Through multiple rounds of questioning and feedback, the Delphi method can help identify key satisfaction drivers, highlight areas for improvement, and generate insights into customer expectations that may not be captured through traditional survey methods.

Applications of the Delphi Method in Customer Satisfaction Research

Although the Delphi method has been widely used in various fields, its application in measuring customer satisfaction, particularly in the food and beverage sector, is still relatively underexplored. However, there are a few studies that have demonstrated the potential of the Delphi method in understanding customer satisfaction from an expert's perspective. For example, Rowe and Wright (1999) applied the Delphi method to gather expert opinions on the factors affecting customer satisfaction in retail services. Their study highlighted the importance of factors such as product quality, customer service, and price, and the method's ability to generate consensus among experts. Similarly, Mullen (2003) used the Delphi method to identify the key determinants of customer satisfaction in healthcare services, which included service quality, accessibility, and staff interactions.

The food and beverage sector, with its unique challenges—such as maintaining food quality, managing customer expectations, and dealing with service inconsistencies—offers a valuable opportunity for the Delphi method to be applied. Experts in the food and beverage industry may be able to provide valuable insights into customer satisfaction drivers that are not always captured through quantitative surveys, such as the importance of food presentation, the role of food delivery, or the impact of cultural preferences on customer expectations.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopts a theoretical research methodology to assess the appropriateness of the Delphi method in measuring customer satisfaction in the food and beverage sector in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The research focuses on an extensive review of existing literature and theories related to customer satisfaction, the Delphi method, and its application in various industries. By critically analyzing relevant studies and theoretical frameworks, this paper evaluates the strengths, limitations, and potential applications of the Delphi method in capturing expert insights on customer satisfaction, without the need for primary data collection or expert panel development.

DISCUSSION

The discussion focuses on three key aspects of using the Delphi method to measure customer satisfaction in the food and beverage sector, specifically when the respondents are either regular customers or experts, and the challenges arising from personal taste preferences influencing satisfaction.

1) Respondents are Regular Customers

Using regular customers as respondents for measuring customer satisfaction provides valuable insights into the actual experiences and perceptions of those who use the food and beverage services regularly. Regular customers offer a realistic reflection of the service's performance and are more likely to provide accurate feedback regarding factors that impact on their satisfaction, such as food quality, service speed, and ambiance. However, relying solely on regular customers can present challenges. Unlike experts who have specialized knowledge of the industry, regular customers might lack the ability to critically evaluate the broader factors affecting food and beverage services. They may base their satisfaction on personal experiences or preferences without fully understanding the operational or service-level factors involved. This can lead to a limited perspective, where certain elements of service, such as food sourcing or logistical issues, are underappreciated.

2) Respondents are Experts

Experts, on the other hand, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of customer satisfaction, especially when the Delphi method is employed. Expert opinions are valuable because they come from individuals with extensive experience and knowledge of the food and beverage industry, who can offer an informed view of what constitutes good service, food quality, and customer experience. Experts are likely to focus on factors such as operational efficiency, the economic implications of customer satisfaction, and strategic approaches to improving service. However, the use of experts also introduces potential biases. Experts may be influenced by their own professional experience, which might not always align with the everyday customer experience. Furthermore, their responses may not reflect the diverse tastes and expectations of the broader customer base. Expert judgments can also be limited by the expert's own cultural, socioeconomic, or professional biases, especially in a multicultural environment like Ho Chi Minh City.

3) Bias and Unreliable Answers Due to Personal Taste

The primary challenge when assessing customer satisfaction in the food and beverage sector is the subjective nature of taste. Unlike more objective measures, satisfaction in this sector is heavily influenced by individual preferences, making it difficult to generate universally reliable data. Taste preferences vary significantly across cultures, backgrounds, and even personal experiences. A dish that is deemed delicious by one person may not appeal to another due to differences in flavor, texture, or cooking methods. This variability introduces bias into both expert and customer responses. Experts may generalize their opinions based on industry standards or their own food preferences, while regular customers may offer feedback heavily influenced by their personal tastes or recent experiences. As such, using the Delphi method with either regular customers or experts may result in unreliable data because it's challenging to isolate objective measures of satisfaction from personal biases. This inherent subjectivity complicates efforts to define a "one-size-fits-all" solution for improving customer satisfaction.

Ultimately, while both regular customers and experts offer valuable perspectives on customer satisfaction, the challenge lies in managing the bias introduced by individual taste preferences and ensuring that the responses, whether from customers or experts, accurately reflect broader customer sentiments. To overcome this, researchers may need to incorporate additional methodologies or triangulate data sources to ensure a more holistic and reliable measurement of customer satisfaction in the food and beverage industry.

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