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Influence of Food Quality, Hygiene, and Price on Word-of-Mouth: A Case Study of Local Restaurants in Surat Thani Province, Thailand

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Abstract

This research aims to study the influence of quality, hygiene, and price factors on word-of-mouth: A case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province. Data were collected through questionnaires from consumers who dined at the restaurants, totaling 400 sets, using non-probability convenience sampling method. The statistics employed were descriptive statistics including percentage, mean, and standard deviation, and inferential statistics including multiple linear regression analysis. The research findings revealed that food quality influence, hygiene influence, and price influence significantly affected consumers' word-of-mouth in the case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province at the 0.05 statistical significance level. The hierarchical order of variable influence from highest to lowest was: price influence ($\beta = 0.34$), followed by hygiene influence ($\beta = 0.26$), and food quality influence ($\beta = 0.17$). Therefore, local restaurant operators should prioritize serving food at appropriate temperatures, maintaining clean surrounding environments with proper ventilation, and setting reasonable prices when compared to food portions to ensure consumers perceive value for money, leading to satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Keyword: Word-of-Mouth, Food Quality, Hygiene, Price

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the restaurant industry, including the tourism sector, plays a crucial role in generating revenue for the domestic economy, demonstrating a consistent recovery trend. The market value is projected to grow by approximately 11% in 2024, driven by expansion and supported by contributing factors such as the increase in tourist arrivals and improved purchasing power, resulting in revenue growth from an increasingly diverse customer base (Economic Data Center Siam Commercial Bank, 2023). Surat Thani Province represents one of the southern provinces characterized by its distinctive identity, abundant with pristine natural tourist attractions, rich historical heritage, unique cultural attributes, and remarkable culinary diversity, which serve as compelling factors attracting tourists to visit Surat Thani

Province (Baothaisong & Nakpin, 2023). The renowned cuisine of Surat Thani Province includes Surat Thani oysters and Tapee River prawns. Furthermore, Surat Thani Province possesses herbal raw material resources that are intrinsically linked to its food culture, creating distinctive culinary diversity that functions as an attractive factor (Naksawat & Thammabut, 2018).

Local restaurants in Surat Thani Province prioritize food quality, from the selection of fresh ingredients to the development of distinctive menus (Hemphaiboon, 2019). However, the food market in Surat Thani Province faces intense competition from competitors including nationally renowned restaurants and franchise or chain-type establishments that have significantly increased in number. This competitive landscape necessitates local restaurants to adapt their business strategies. Initially, these establishments employed advertising through influencers and online channels; however, this approach was found to incur high costs while failing to substantially increase the number of new customers. Consequently, these restaurants have shifted toward implementing word-of-mouth marketing strategies (Jitsuwan, 2018), as word-of-mouth communication possesses inherent credibility (Al-Kilani & Hedhli, 2021). Word-of-mouth communication represents the sharing of consumer experiences and the expression of opinions regarding restaurant service utilization to other consumers. Word-of-mouth communication generated by consumers possesses greater credibility than information received from businesses or created by marketers (Angkasri et al., 2023).

Word-of-mouth communication plays a crucial role in disseminating information about services, products, and experiences. Word-of-mouth thus represents one of the primary factors in establishing relationships between customers and restaurants, serving as an agent that supports positive word-of-mouth (WOM) propagation (Kiyani, Salman & Tao, 2021). The benefits of word-of-mouth communication include reducing advertising costs and constituting a marketing approach that can contribute to business success. This is because word-of-mouth communication enables consumers to perceive food quality, restaurant hygiene standards, and food pricing, thereby allowing restaurants to generate increased sales revenue (Jitsuwan, 2018).

Trust in word-of-mouth recommendations from friends significantly impacts restaurant business success in attracting new customers, with 92% of consumers being influenced by such recommendations (Wibisono & Lukito, 2020). The primary factors influencing word-of-mouth communication include food quality, restaurant hygiene, and pricing. Food quality directly affects consumer satisfaction, serving as a fundamental factor

in service utilization decisions. Consumer-accepted food characteristics, including taste, aroma, freshness, nutritional value, and appropriate temperature, contribute to positive customer experiences, subsequently leading to willingness to engage in word-of-mouth communication (Watthanakul, 2023). Additionally, restaurant hygiene represents another critical factor. Consumers perceive hygiene risks as significant concerns due to their inability to directly observe food storage and preparation processes. The cleanliness of equipment and quality of raw materials consequently affect customer trust. When restaurants maintain high hygiene standards, this enhances confidence and stimulates positive word-of-mouth communication (Kiyani, Salman & Tao, 2021). Regarding pricing, consumers typically compare food prices with received quality and tend to select food that offers value for money (Yacharoen, 2023). Price serves as a crucial purchasing decision factor and functions as a quality indicator. When prices exceed competitors', consumers expect superior quality. Conversely, when prices are reasonable but quality remains high, consumers perceive value and are inclined to recommend the establishment to others. Fair and quality-appropriate pricing creates satisfaction, stimulates repeat spending, and generates widespread word-of-mouth communication, representing an effective strategy for attracting new customers without incurring high advertising costs (Kee et al., 2024).

Given the critical issue of intensifying competition among restaurants and the emergence of commercial competitors offering similar food products or business models to local restaurants in Surat Thani Province, consumer patronage has consequently diminished. To address this challenge, restaurants have employed food reviewers for promotional purposes to enhance brand recognition, which necessitates substantial financial investment. Therefore, business operators must develop strategic approaches to expand their consumer base through word-of-mouth marketing, as this strategy requires minimal capital expenditure while enabling restaurant entrepreneurs to understand the influential factors affecting word-of-mouth communication. This knowledge can be leveraged to develop more effective marketing strategies that enhance both sales performance and attract new consumers to utilize their services. The implementation of word-of-mouth marketing strategies fundamentally requires maintaining food quality, hygiene standards, and competitive pricing. Restaurant operators can subsequently apply these strategic insights to develop their establishments and achieve greater brand recognition.

1.1. Literature Review

Word-of-mouth communication refers to a method of communication from one person to another, which creates effects in terms of impression creation, emotion control, information

seeking, and social bonding. Marketers have turned their attention significantly to this approach because it is an easy, effective, and low-cost strategy that is suitable for the current era of high competition and rapid changes in consumer behavior (Charoenthap, 2014). Word-of-mouth is important for business in this era because word-of-mouth communication is a process where consumers who are satisfied or impressed with products and services engage in conversations with other consumers, sharing information about those products and services. Moreover, word-of-mouth communication is extremely important for marketing as it helps reduce the level of risk perception and uncertainty related to purchase decisions and stimulates consumers to make purchase decisions. However, it cannot replace advertising because advertising can still create interest better. Therefore, to further enhance consumers' purchase decisions, word-of-mouth must be used in conjunction with advertising, where consumers will develop trust from creating advertisements with valuable content through various channels (Jitpakdee-pharratch & Phuripakdee, 2020). The content should include information related to products by presenting details or entertainment to the audience. Word-of-mouth communication cannot be overlooked in current business operations because technology has changed, making communication convenient and fast. Entrepreneurs need to monitor mentions of their brands or services on various online media (Saengkaew & Pakdeemualchon, 2023).

Food quality refers to the level or properties of products and services when considered overall, while simultaneously meeting production standards that build consumer confidence in those products and services (Chulasatit & Chunhachachrachai, 2022). Consumer confidence in food quality comes from dining experiences in restaurants, which can be measured by food freshness, good taste, plate presentation, food temperature, cleanliness of the dining area, and absence of unpleasant odors (Poomnikom, 2021). Since the quality of external appearance is what impresses customers first, the quality of external appearance is therefore a key factor for new consumers when purchasing food. Consumers thus prioritize safety and cleanliness, such as fresh ingredients for cooking, good taste and health benefits of various menu items. The perception of good food quality is therefore important in purchase decisions and leads to word-of-mouth communication (Jing, 2022).

Hygiene refers to the ability of restaurants to create a good image regarding cleanliness or hygiene of the restaurant by demonstrating that the restaurant or service provider maintains cleanliness or follows standards set by the Ministry of Public Health. The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined hygiene as the prevention of disease spread, practices that help maintain health and hygiene, such as environmental cleaning, equipment

disinfection, hand hygiene, water hygiene, and sanitation. Therefore, restaurant cleanliness reflects the safety of food served in the restaurant. Restaurant businesses need to have strict control measures for safe sanitation and hygiene systems. Staff must build confidence in safety when serving consumers according to SHA (Safety Health Amazing) guidelines (Wankham et al., 2023), which consists of 5 factors:

- a. Food handlers, including food preparers, food cooks, and food service staff.
- b. Food, including the selection and purchasing, cooking, storage of food, ice, drinking water, and food additives that are hygienic and meet standards.
- c. Equipment and utensils, including proper selection, cleaning, and storage methods.
- d. Facilities, including sanitary premises for food preparation, processing, and distribution or service.
- e. Disease-carrying animals and insects, including the control and prevention of disease vectors in areas where food is prepared, cooked, and served in a hygienic manner (Phaka & Sirikaensai, 2022)

Price refers to the monetary amount charged for products and services. Price represents what customers are willing to pay to obtain goods or services. Given that consumers with different socioeconomic backgrounds place varying importance on the value that products or services provide, their price perceptions differ accordingly. Specifically, even when the actual price levels are identical, consumers with higher socioeconomic status may have lower perceived price levels. Thus, price constitutes the value that customers pay in exchange for goods or services (Assarat & Rattanaphan, 2020). Food pricing should be appropriately aligned with food quality and clearly presented to facilitate consumer purchasing decisions. Visual food displays, attractive menu presentations, clear pricing information, and multiple price tiers that offer appropriate value-for-money are essential elements. Additionally, service organization, including accurate and prompt food delivery according to queue order, as well as efficient billing and change processes, significantly influence customer behavior at food establishments. These factors collectively impact word-of-mouth recommendations regarding food consumption choices (Yacharoen, 2023).

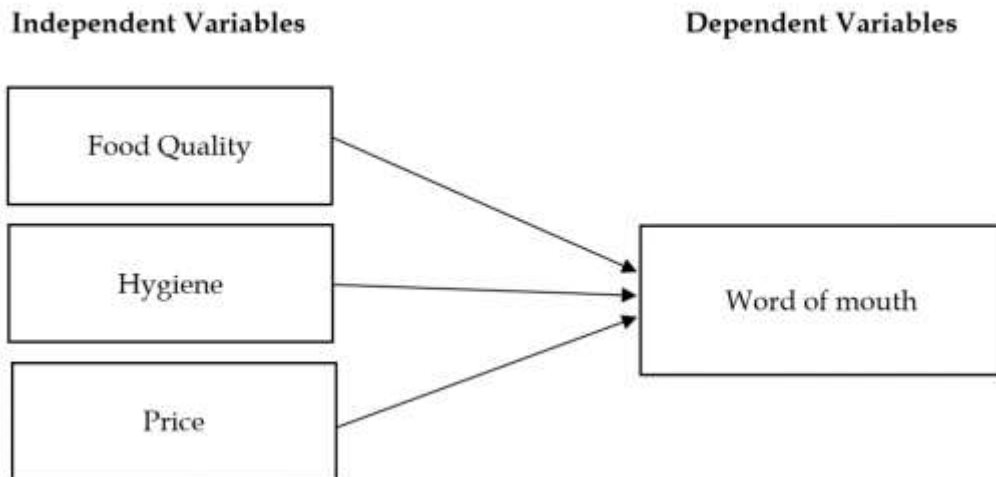


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework
Source: (Weng et al., 2022)

Hypotheses

H1 Food quality at local restaurants in Surat Thani Province has a positive influence on word-of-mouth communication.

H2 Hygiene and sanitation at local restaurants in Surat Thani Province has a positive influence on word-of-mouth communication.

H3 Food pricing at local restaurants in Surat Thani Province has a positive influence on word-of-mouth communication.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Methodology

a. Population and Sample

Consumers aged 18 years and above who dine at local restaurants in Surat Thani Province. The sample size was calculated using the sample size determination formula of (Cochran, 1977) The sample for this research consists of consumers aged 18 years and above who dine at restaurants in Surat Thani Province. The sample size was calculated using the sample size determination formula of Krejcie & Morgan (1970) The calculation revealed that the appropriate sample size for consumers using the services at a 95% confidence level was 384 samples. To prevent potential errors that might arise from incomplete questionnaire responses from the sample group, the researcher prepared a total of 400 questionnaires

b. Research Instruments

Based on the study of relevant concepts, theories, and research findings. This instrument serves as a data collection tool to examine the influences affecting word-of-mouth communication. The questionnaire is divided into 3 sections

Section 1 : Demographic information of respondents, consisting of 6 closed-ended questions including gender, age, marital status, occupation, education level, and average monthly income.

Section 2 : Questions regarding influences affecting word-of-mouth recommendations for restaurants in Surat Thani Province, consisting of 14 closed-ended questions covering food quality, hygiene and sanitation, and pricing. The questions utilize a 5-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The food quality questions in this section were adopted and adapted from the article by Weng et al. (2022). The hygiene questions in this section were adopted and adapted from the article by Polsanchoktrasap (2016). The pricing questions in this section were adopted and adapted from the article by Wongkotwarin (2021).

Section 3 : Questions on word-of-mouth communication regarding restaurants in Surat Thani Province, consisting of 5 closed-ended questions utilizing a 5-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The word-of-mouth communication questions in this section were adopted and adapted from the articles by Weng et al. (2022), Al-Kilani & Hedhli (2021).

Quality validation of the research instrument was conducted through content validity assessment of the questionnaire by three experts to determine the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC). Questions with IOC values greater than 0.5 were retained for use in the survey (Samanphan et al., 2023). The testing results indicated that the questions had Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) values ranging from 0.67 to 1.00. Therefore, the questionnaire was pilot tested with 40 participants whose characteristics were similar to those of the target sample group. The collected data were then analyzed to assess reliability using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The reliability testing results for Section 2 of the questionnaire revealed the following Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for each dimension: food quality ($\alpha = 0.73$), hygiene and sanitation ($\alpha = 0.75$), price ($\alpha = 0.72$), and word-of-mouth communication ($\alpha = 0.83$). Since all dimensions demonstrated coefficients exceeding 0.70, the questionnaire was considered reliable and appropriate for data collection purposes (Wanichbancha, 2005).

c. Data Analysis

Data analysis using descriptive statistics was employed to describe general information about the sample group, such as gender, age, marital status, occupation, education, and average monthly income. The analysis was conducted using frequency distribution tables, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Data analysis using

inferential statistics was conducted to analyze the sample data, employing Multiple Linear Regression as the analytical method to examine the relationship between one dependent variable and two or more independent variables.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Analysis of General Demographic Data

The demographic characteristics of 400 questionnaire respondents were classified by gender, age, marital status, occupation, education level, and average monthly income, and analyzed using frequency and percentage statistics. Regarding gender, the data showed that the majority of respondents were female, numbering 228 people (57.00%) and male, numbering 172 people (43.00%).

Regarding age, the data showed that the majority of respondents were in the age range of 18-26 years, numbering 182 people (45.50%), followed by those aged 27-35 years, numbering 103 people (25.75%), those aged 36-44 years, numbering 87 people (21.75%) and those aged 45 years and above, numbering 28 people (7.00%).

Regarding marital status, the data showed that the majority of respondents were single, numbering 252 people (63.00%), followed by those who were married, numbering 127 people (31.75%), and those who were divorced, numbering 21 people (5.25%).

Regarding occupation, the data showed that the majority of respondents were students, numbering 122 people (30.50%), followed by private company employees, numbering 115 people (28.75%), self-employed individuals, numbering 88 people (22.00%), government officials/state enterprise employees, numbering 68 people (17.00%), and others, numbering 7 people (1.75%).

Regarding education level, the data showed that the majority of respondents had education below bachelor's degree level, numbering 263 people (65.75%), followed by those with bachelor's degree or equivalent, numbering 121 people (30.25%), and those with education above bachelor's degree level, numbering 16 people (4.00%).

Regarding average monthly income, the data showed that the majority of respondents had average monthly income below 15,000 baht, numbering 197 people (49.25%), followed by those with average monthly income between 15,001-30,000 baht, numbering 133 people (33.25%), those with average monthly income between 30,001-45,000 baht, numbering 60 people (15.00%), and those with average monthly income of 45,001 baht and above, numbering 10 people (2.50%).

3.2 Analysis of Basic Statistical Values of Research Variables

The analysis of mean and standard deviation of data regarding the influence of food quality, hygiene, and price on word-of-mouth communication: A case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province, based on 400 questionnaire sets, categorized by food quality, hygiene, and price dimensions using mean and standard deviation statistics, revealed that the influences affecting word-of-mouth communication were as follows: hygiene influence had the highest mean of 40.70 with a standard deviation of 0.36, followed by food quality influence with a mean of 4.69 and a standard deviation of 0.38, and price influence with a mean of 4.67 and a standard deviation of 0.39.

Table 1
Mean and Standard Deviation of Word-of-Mouth Communication

Influences Affecting Word-of-Mouth Communication	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Food Quality Dimension	4.69	.38	Highest
Hygiene Dimension	4.70	.36	Highest
Price Dimension	4.67	.39	Highest

The analysis of explanatory power of hygiene influence, price influence, and food quality influence was derived from the Adjusted R Square value of 0.378, indicating that hygiene influence, price influence, and food quality influence account for 37.8% of the variance in consumers' word-of-mouth communication in the case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province.

Table 2
Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Food Quality, Hygiene, and Price Influences on Word-of-Mouth Communication

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.619a	.383	.378	.315

The multicollinearity assessment using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), which should not exceed 10, revealed VIF values ranging from 1.60 to 2.50, indicating no multicollinearity problem among independent variables. Therefore, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The multiple linear regression analysis results, when tested using F-statistics (F-Test) through analysis of variance at the 0.05 significance level, showed that the variables influencing word-of-mouth communication in the case study of restaurants in Surat Thani Province were food quality influence, hygiene influence, and price influence, accounting for 38% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.38$). When tested using t-statistics (t-test), it was found that food quality dimension (X_1), hygiene dimension (X_2), and price dimension (X_3) significantly

influenced word-of-mouth communication in the case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province at the 0.05 significance level. The hierarchical order of variable influence from highest to lowest was: price influence (X_3 , $\beta = 0.34$), followed by hygiene influence (X_2 , $\beta = 0.26$), and food quality influence (X_1 , $\beta = 0.17$). The relationship can be expressed in the following equation:

$$\hat{y} = 1.088 + .172 X_1 + .257 (X_2) + .335 (X_3)$$

Table 3
Results of Regression Analysis for Examining the Relationship Between Factors
Influencing Word-of-Mouth Communication Among Consumer Groups

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	VIF
Constant	1.088	.230		4.735	.000	
1. Food Quality Influence (Q)	.172	.061	.163	2.808	.005	2.173
2. Hygiene Influence (H)	.257	.070	.229	3.661	.000	2.506
3. Price Influence (P)	.335	.051	.325	6.502	.000	1.600

Note: R²=.38 F = 81.95 P-Value = .000*

The analysis of explanatory power of hygiene influence, price influence, and food quality influence was derived from the Adjusted R Square value of 0.378, indicating that hygiene influence, price influence, and food quality influence account for 37.8% of the variance in consumers' word-of-mouth communication in the case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province.

4. DISCUSSION

From the hypothesis testing, the food quality influence of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province affects consumers' word-of-mouth communication. This is demonstrated through appropriate serving temperatures, such as food served while still warm, which helps build confidence in food safety and cleanliness, resulting in customer satisfaction and leading to word-of-mouth recommendations to others. The study findings are consistent with the research by Foithong, Somboonrattanachok, and Rueangrop (2022), which indicated that food quality is a significant factor influencing consumer satisfaction, and word-of-mouth communication serves as an important tool for expanding the customer base. Additionally, research by Ali et al. (2020) demonstrated that food that is beautifully presented and nutritionally valuable promotes positive word-of-mouth communication regarding quality food and generates customer referrals.

The hypothesis testing revealed that health and hygiene influence significantly affects word-of-mouth communication among consumer groups in the case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province. This is attributed to the fact that restaurants in Surat Thani Province maintain clean dining utensils that are stored safely away from dust and insects. Additionally, food at restaurants in Surat Thani Province is freshly prepared before serving, resulting in consumer confidence in the hygiene standards of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province. Consequently, this generates positive word-of-mouth communication among consumers. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Yacharoen (2023), who examined hygiene factor variables affecting word-of-mouth communication. The study found that hygiene aspects require quality supervision of food and services to meet public health standards, including maintaining cleanliness of raw materials, food preparation equipment, and food service delivery, as well as utilizing hygienic and environmentally-friendly food containers to enhance service quality standards. This approach helps create customer satisfaction, encouraging repeat patronage and generating word-of-mouth recommendations, which ultimately increases the volume of food consumers.

Hypothesis testing revealed that price influence significantly affects word-of-mouth communication among consumer groups in the case study of local restaurants in Surat Thani Province. This finding is attributed to the value proposition offered by local restaurants in Surat Thani Province, where food prices demonstrate cost-effectiveness when compared to food quality, coupled with diverse price ranges available for consumer selection. These factors consequently generate word-of-mouth communication among food consumers. This finding aligns with the research conducted by Yacharoen (2023) on "Development Approaches for Roadside Food Services for Tourism in the Talad To-rung Area within the Old Moat District, Chiang Mai Province," which identified price as a critical factor capable of attracting consumer interest in food quality. This occurs because consumers prioritize purchasing food with prices commensurate to the quality received. When consumers perceive price value, it facilitates easier purchase decision-making and generates word-of-mouth communication. This finding is consistent with the research by Chanklin et al. (2022) on "Factors Influencing Continuous Service Usage Intention and Word-of-Mouth of Customers Using Online Food Delivery Services in Bangkok Metropolitan Area," which demonstrated that price exerts a positive influence on consumer word-of-mouth communication. Specifically, when food prices are appropriate relative to the food quality consumers receive, it results in consumer word-of-mouth behavior. Therefore, it can be concluded that increased customer perception of food pricing factors leads to correspondingly increased word-of-mouth communication.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Recommendations for Utilizing Research Findings

a. Influence of Food Quality. Entrepreneurs should prioritize the utilization of fresh, safe, and nutritionally valuable ingredients, emphasizing the selection of standardized raw materials such as pesticide-free vegetables, meat, mushrooms, or grains that are beneficial to health, while preserving maximum nutritional value to ensure customers receive food that is both delicious and health-promoting. Regular quality inspection of raw materials and consistent control of food preparation standards will enhance customer confidence and facilitate word-of-mouth communication.

b. Influence of Hygiene. Survey respondents emphasized the importance of hygienic dining facilities, clean surrounding environments, and well-ventilated atmospheres. Therefore, local restaurants in Surat Thani Province should consider their outdoor service areas and create innovative atmospheres that allow customers to choose seating in well-ventilated spaces where they can feel refreshed.

c. Influence of Price. Survey respondents emphasized the importance of reasonable pricing when compared to food portions. Therefore, entrepreneurs should consider adjusting food portions to be appropriate for the established prices, ensuring that consumers perceive value for money through adequate food servings.

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