# Automation of the fast-food industry: Gen Z perspectives of self-service kiosks versus employee service

**Qi Yang, Warren Goodsir and Jill Poulston**



Qi Yang graduated in 2018 with a Master of International Hospitality Management from the AUT School of Hospitality and Tourism. Her dissertation is titled, 'The Hospitality between Customers and Self-Service Technology—A McDonald's Case Study'. Qi continues to have a strong interest in the automation of daily life and the hospitality industry. She is currently working and residing in New Zealand.

Warren Goodsir is head of the hospitality department at the School of Hospitality and Tourism, Auckland University of Technology. Warren spent 18 years working in the hospitality industry prior to beginning his academic career. His research interests include wise management practice and decision making, business ethics, corporate social responsibility and

With the development of technology, self-service kiosks (kiosks) are increasingly being adopted by service providers such as hotels, restaurants, airports and banks [1, 2]. However, with the increasing search for more efficiency, calculability and control by replacing people with non-human technology, service quality and a sense of hospitality can be adversely impacted [3]. Nevertheless, many seem willing to use kiosks in fast-food restaurants [4], suggesting that these provide considerable value for some segments of the hospitality industry. Consequently, this study [5] explores young people's customer experiences of and views on using kiosks in McDonald's restaurants. The study was carried out in Auckland, New Zealand, where interviews were conducted with 16 young people (18 to 24 years old; Gen Z)[1] originating from seven countries (2 Indian, 3 Chinese, 2 Korean, 2 Vietnamese, 1 Filipino, 1 Moroccan and 5 New Zealanders).

The findings suggest that kiosks provide improved customer satisfaction but can also result in reduced perceptions of hospitableness. The respondents felt that kiosks improved efficiency by eliminating the need to queue to place an order and provided more relaxed time for making their menu selections. Therefore, although using a kiosk did not necessarily speed up the service process, it allowed time for contemplation of choices and less time waiting to be served. The kiosks also provided clear food categories with pictures, simple English language instructions, and generally simple ordering and payment processes. Compared with the amount of information provided at the service counter, the kiosks provided more detailed and clearer information about menus, ingredients, discounts and promotions. Furthermore, when using kiosks, respondents felt a sense of empowerment and control over their ordering process. Kiosks provided the ability to customise meals, discuss menu choices and change orders without feeling as if they were annoying an employee or holding up other customers. This sense of empowerment and control provided relief from the pressure to place quick orders at the service counter or delay other customers.

Many respondents were afraid of annoying employees or becoming an annoying customer in public. They cared about the perception of counter staff, while at the same time, they also cared about their personal image in public. The fast-paced restaurant environment and the need to be decisive with their menu selection added to the pressure and stress when purchasing takeaways. Additionally, those who spoke English as a second language faced increased

service design.



Associate Professor Jill Poulston currently works as a contract doctoral supervisor. Prior to this, she led the hospitality postgraduate programmes at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) where she was also an associate director of the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute. She has published her work on a variety of ethical issues and hospitality workplace problems, as well as related topics such as organic food, sustainability, sexual harassment, and diversity. Jill most recently taught leadership and ethics to postgraduate students and examines master's and doctoral research on her topics of interest.



stress while trying to select the right words and communicate with employees in front of others. These pressures increased their fear of public humiliation.

Many respondents indicated there was no pressure when using kiosks as the kiosks offered more time and a judgment-free environment for customers. The number of kiosks available and the freedom from employee and other customer expectations had a significant impact on them by releasing them from any pressure to make a quick decision. Reduced pressure also brought enough time for discussion of food choices among friends. Using the self-order kiosk provided respondents with a judgment-free environment away from other customers and busy employees.

The time-space provided by kiosks also provided respondents with a sense of safety and privacy in situations where, for example, they were upset or not confident speaking in English. Their emotions (e.g. happy, sad), skills (e.g. level of English language), appearance (e.g. lack of makeup) and eating habits (e.g. food allergy) were kept confidential in comparison to ordering in public at the counter. However, the findings also suggested that the appeal of kiosks is somewhat determined by the lack of useful and caring alternatives. This may suggest that the issue is not whether kiosks are able to do a better job than humans, but rather whether humans (service employees) are sufficiently resourced (e.g. capability and capacity) to provide both efficient and caring interactions.

The original research on which this article is based is available here http://hdl.handle.net/10292/11993

## Note

1. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'Generation Z' as the generation of people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

## Corresponding author

Qi Yang can be contacted at: kikiyangaut@gmail.com

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