Research Article

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Consumer profile of Portuguese local food restaurants

Abstract: This study focusing on local food restaurants aims to evaluate the variables that influence consumers' restaurant selection, and the most important variables that need to be addressed by those establishment managers. With this assessment it will be possible to structure different strategies which enterprises can resort to in order to obtain management advantages.

A management model based on selection variables and how restaurants can influence the choice process is proposed in this article. Therefore, it is possible to maximise profit and the number of customers, to increase service quality, to create new services and dishes, to define strategic promotion plans, and to produce effective corrective measures.

Keywords: Local food restaurant, Consumer profile, Restaurant selection, Management implications.

1 Introduction

Typical gastronomy emerges as a link between the local community and touristic activity. Due to globalisation, the search for authentic products and services has been increasing, instigating a true opportunity for the affirmation of typical gastronomy as a differentiating element of a given culture or society, and as an echo of the local people and history.

When consumers select a certain establishment, there are several variables that may influence their choice, such as internal factors, demographic factors (age, profession, gender, education level) and meal motivations. The typical gastronomy consumers can be loyal to a given type of food or, as tourists, be willing to try new flavours, and the authentic food of the visited area.

Therefore, it is important that restaurant managers get to know the weak points of their establishment so that they can undertake corrective measures. This way, the owners of restaurants should control the critical quality attributes and, if needed, act in order to maximise the satisfaction of their customers and optimise possible future favourable behaviours. Having a profound knowledge of the establishment key attributes, restaurant managers can also manage their financial resources more efficiently.

Furthermore, being aware of the customers' needs, restaurant owners may create new services and products tailored to the needs of the specific segment market.

Many attributes of different nature can be considered; however, due to the scope of this study – strategic variables for the local food restaurants management – 4 main attributes were considered: food quality; price; ambience/atmosphere and employees' kindness.

Food quality is pointed out by several authors as the most important attribute in the restaurant selection (Lewis, 1981; June & Smith, 1987; Auty, 1992; Lo & Lam, 2004, Sulek & Hensley, 2004). These studies demonstrated the importance of food quality for consumers' satisfaction and loyalty with the restaurant industry.

Ranaweera and Neely (2003) concluded that a reasonably perceived price has a positive influence on client memory. According to Auty (1992), price is one of the most important factors, although it may shift in the order of importance depending on the occasion;- in family dinners and business meals, the price becomes more relevant.

In the work of Yüksel & Yüksel (2003), a comfortable atmosphere is seen as a key factor, attracting customers to the restaurant and influencing their intention to return. Particularly, they found that the service environment (e.g.

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tables distribution, music and decoration) has a central role in defining consumers' behaviour, their reactions and their social interactions. Auty (1992) states that among the restaurants serving the same kind of food and with similar quality, the ambience or style is a critical factor for site selection.

The way we communicate influences other people's reactions and, following Clark and Wood (1998), employees' kindness is an element that ensures customer loyalty. For Kincaid et al. (2010) the quality of staff is one of the most important factors that influence the consumer to repeat a particular restaurant.

Gender, age, occupation and education level are key factors to enable customer segmentation and to create services that meet their needs. Socio-demographic changes, such as more and better jobs and education, can be important factors that influence food selection (Wadolowska et al., 2008). In a study prepared by McFarlane and Pliner (1997), young people were the most reluctant in choosing novel food, contrary to older people who were more willing to have this kind of experience, suggesting that neophobia decreases with age.

In a research carried out by Mori et al. (1987), it is shown that in different social environments the perception of food differs for male and female customers. Education raises awareness of our own thinking, which leads to higher differences between the views and the existence of contradictory arguments (Kajanne & Pirttilä-Backman, 1996).

For Auty (1992), the type of consumers' motivation – which may be up to five distinct types: celebration, social occasion, quick meal or convenience, business meal, or a new experience – will assign a degree of varying importance to internal factors. Thus, there may be different perceived images, depending on the kind of reason considered. The range of options to choose a restaurant will also be different, depending on the type of meal occasion.

For Gartner (1993), image construction is a continuous process and for Auty (1992) in the case of the restaurants, the image and the atmosphere appear to determine the final choice.

Several authors argue that motives influence the process of image construction and selection (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Stabler, 1995; Um & Crompton, 1990).

In this work, we consider the case of Portuguese local food restaurants. The main objective is to study the relationship between the following customers' characteristics: demographic factors, motivation to attend the restaurant and perception of the restaurant attributes.

2 Methodology

A survey questionnaire was developed to collect data about the variables to be studied. The measurement of the perception of the restaurant attributes considered the following kind of attributes: food quality, price, ambience and employees' kindness. The elaboration of the questionnaires was based on the literature, as is represented in Table 1.

The restaurant attributes were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, where 7 was 'strongly agree' and 1 was 'strongly disagree'. This scale was used by many authors (Auty, 1992; Namkung & Jang,2008; Kim et al.,2009; Ryu & Han, 2011).

As far as the motivations were concerned, a multiple response strategy was used (Liu & Jang, 2009).

The survey was applied to a total of 622 customers of 10 typical Portuguese restaurants, located in the North (Guimarães and Porto), Center (Aveiro, Coimbra, Leiria, Caldas da Rainha, Peniche and Lisboa) and South of the country (Évora and Vilamoura). The restaurants were selected by consulting the regions' official tourist website and choosing the most popular in the category of typical restaurant. In each restaurant the survey was answered by, at least, 60 customers.

In the data analysis, the following tools were applied: the Cronbach alpha coefficient, to assess reliability of scales; Pearson and Spearman coefficients, to study bivariate correlations; independent-samples t-test and one-way analysis of variance ANOVA to compare groups. The analyses were performed with IBM SPSS Statistics.

3 Results

The socio-demographic data of the respondents is summarised in Table 2.

Reliability for each of the 4 attributes scale was assessed using the calculation of the alpha Cronbach coefficient. For all of them, in the current study, the alpha Cronbach indicated good internal consistency (Food Quality 0.83; Price 0.82; Ambience 0.84 and Employees Kindness 0.88).

Considering the average of all the items for each attribute, the correlations among the attributes were studied with the Pearson coefficient. All of them are significant (p<0.01) and the Pearson coefficient ranged from 0.4 to 0.6.

We studied the relationship between the perception of each attribute and the socio-demographic characteristics. In the case of the variables age, academic education

Table 1: Questions to evaluate internal attributes

	Items	References
Food Quality	The food presentation is appealing.	
	The amount of food is enough to satisfy me.	Kivela et al.,(1999)
	The food is served to the right temperature	Namkung, Y., Jang, S., (2008)
	The food is tasty.	
Price	The price is appropriate.	Auty, S., (1992)
	The relationship between quality and price is good.	Liu, Y., Jang, S., (2009)
Ambience	The interior design of the restaurant is appealing.	Stevens, P., et al., (1995)
	The decoration is attractive.	Namkung, Y., Jang, S., (2008).
	The furniture is comfortable and of good quality.	Ryu, K., Han, H., (2011)
	The lighting creates a comfortable atmosphere.	
	The background music is nice.	
Employees' kindness	The waiters are friendly.	Liu, Y., Jang, S., (2009)
	The waiters make eye contact during service.	Ryu, K., Han, H., (2011)
	The waiters have suitable conversations in the appropriate tone.	
	The waiters are dressed accordingly.	

and income, these correlations were investigated using the Spearman rho coefficient. The statistically significant correlations found are presented in Table 3.

The statistically significant correlations are not very strong, but let us interpret the corresponding directions. There is a positive correlation between age and perception of food quality, price and employees kindness, that is, older customers tend to have better scores as far as these attributes are concerned. In the case of academic education and income, the significant correlations with restaurant attributes are negative and, therefore, higher educated customers tend to have smaller scores related to food quality and ambience.

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare the attributes' perception scores for males and females. For the attributes pertaining to food quality, price and employees' kindness there were no significant differences for males and females. There was a statistically significant difference between the ambience scores for males (M=5.15, SD=1.23) and females (M=5.35, SD=1.12), t(557)=,-1.67, p<0.1 (2-tailed).

A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of marital status on the attribute scores. There were no significant differences in the attribute scores for the different groups of customers who were divided into 4 groups according to their marital status.

Finally, independent-samples t-tests were applied to compare the attribute scores for customers according to motivation. The food quality scores of those customers who went to the restaurant for a celebration (M=6.15, SD=0.79) were significantly higher than the food quality scores of those who went there for a different reason (M=5.92, SD=1.02): t(598)=-2.382, p<0.01(1-tailed). For the other attributes there were no significant differences for customers per motivation.

4 Conclusions

The results of this study provide some managerial implications. The findings can help the restaurant managers to

Table 2: Respondent profile

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	314	50.5
Female	289	46.5
N/A	19	3.1
Age		
18-25	77	12.4
26-35	174	28.0
36-45	135	21.7
46-60	146	23.5
> 60	71	11.4
N/A	19	3.1
Academic education		
Primary education	14	2.3
Secondary education	157	25.2
First-degree	238	38.3
Masters	121	19.5
Ph.D	46	7.4
Another	12	1.9
N/A	34	5.5
Marital status		
Single	171	27.5
Married/ Living common law	380	61.1
Divorced	35	5.6
Widowed	8	1.3
N/A	28	4.5
Monthly income (€)		
<500	37	5.9
500–750	31	5
750–1000	63	10.1
1000–1500	102	16.4
1500–2500	109	17.5
2500–3500	67	10.8
3500–5000	33	5.3
>5000	68	10.9
N/A	112	18

N/A=Not Answered

better understand how various attributes can contribute to customer experience.

Managers of restaurants should place emphasis on food preparation, ingredients and taste to deliver unique restaurant experience. Thus, the restaurant managers need to deliver quality service and food above a certain standard to achieve the desired customer outcomes.

When female customers evaluate ambience music of a restaurant highly, the positive mood created by that ambience can enhance the effect of perceived quality on both selection and satisfaction. Therefore, the physical environment can play an important role in creating favourable emotions before any actual service is provided, which in turn enhances the relationship between quality and satisfaction and/or loyalty. These results support the importance of ambience as an effective marketing tool for the restaurant female segment.

Last but not least, to deepen the understanding of the relationship between internal attributes and restaurant selection, other factors such as past experiences, information research and different restaurant types could also be incorporated in future research models.

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Table 3: Spearman rho coefficient between perception of restaurant attributes and social-demographic characteristics of customers

	Age	Academic Education	Monthly Income
Food Quality	0.161**	-0.181**	
Price	0.142**		
Ambience		-0.108*	-0.098*
Employees' kindness	0.087*		

*p<0.05; **p<0,01

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