Ethnic Restaurants' Meal Experience: Egyptian Customers' Perceptions

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Abstract

One of the important components of ethnicity is expressed in the manner ethnic groups prepare and serve their food. Each ethnic group has preserved distinct characteristics in the food service industry, which make their cuisine unique. Currently, restaurateurs combine the influences and traditions from a variety of ethnic origins in a fusion of food and flavours. Because the majority of customers are Egyptians who are likely trying new cuisines, ethnic restaurant managers need to know what customers want and expect from a dining experience. The purpose of this study is to examine customers' authentic perceptions of the food and the overall dining experience, and customers' perceptions of the ethnic restaurant meal experience.

The study used a questionnaire to collect data from 379 Egyptian customers to perceive their opinions on the ethnical meal experience. It has employed linear regression to measure the effect of the predictors of ethnic restaurants dining and its effect on meal experience. The study has revealed very useful results in the way it evaluated customers' perceptions of ethnic meal experience and depicted the factors that ethnic restaurant managers have succeeded to offer in their meal to support customer experience and attract Egyptian customers to dine in ethnic restaurants. The study highlighted the positive effect of sense of place, healthy issues, service quality, food quality, and staff behavior on customers' ethnic meal experience. On the other hand, ethnic restaurants defects are price fairness, employee skills, and marketing communication which negatively affect meal experience.

Key words: *Ethnic food, Authenticity, Ethnic Restaurants Egypt.*

Introduction

"Ethnic" refers to any group of individuals that claims a distinct peoplehood or an identity that sets them apart from others (Hirschman, 2001). The word "ethnic" originates from the Greek word "ethnos," which originally meant heathen or pagan (Eriksen, 2002). Eriksen (2002) points out that the term was used in this manner until the mid-nineteenth century. The term "ethnicity" still connotes minority issues; however, it also refers to aspects of relationships between groups that consider themselves and are regarded by others as culturally distinct (Hirschman, 2001). Among various cultural factors representing national identity, food is cited as a common signifier because food itself can be a cultural symbol (Jang et al., 2012). Jang et al., (2012) argue that, food can penetrate foreign cultures and bridge cultural barriers; as well as, foods from other countries can appeal to foreigners as unique and sometimes exotic characteristics reflecting the culture of a country. This uniqueness and difference is often referred to as 'authenticity; which has a strong impact on customers in other countries and is an important element of ethnic foods that differentiates them from the local cuisine (Jang et al., 2012).

The restaurant industry is highly competitive and to attract and retain customers, restaurant managers have to have a deep understanding of the wants, needs, and perceptions of customers who will be most likely to choose their establishment (Josiam et al., 2007, Gregoire et al., 1995). People are eating out more often, but they increasingly put a premium on saving time and eating healthy in better eating environments. A major trend in the restaurant industry is the growing number of

ethnic restaurants; this growth is a result of changing demographics and increased interest in ethnic cuisine (Kwon et al., 2010). Turgeon and Pastinelli, (2002) argue that, food is mobile, multifocal, and polysomic; it moves from one group to another, it expresses different voices, and it can take on different meanings depending on the intention of the consumer. Ethnic restaurants usually represent a special culture, which affords consumers the opportunities to experience something new and exotic (Ebster and Guist, 2005).

In Egypt, the number of new restaurants in Cairo has increased during the last years. Cairo is globally renowned for its vibrant oriental cuisine and diverse restaurant industry, with more than 40,000 food-service establishments. Only 37% of these food service enterprises are classified into five, four and three star restaurants, such as floating restaurants, classical restaurants, ethnic and theme restaurants, and fast food operations (Abdelhamied, 2011).

Restaurant operators need to understand and satisfy consumers' needs, wants, and demands to be successful in the competitive foodservice industry (Gregoire et al., 1995, Josiam et al., 2007, Ryu and Zhong, 2012). Restaurant consumers use different criteria when making restaurant decisions (Liu and Jang, 2009). Interest in ethnic foods appears to be continuously increasing in Egypt. Restaurant customers consider ethnic food uniquely, variety of menus and innovative. They also tend to perceive ethnic food as healthy and nutritionally balanced. It is presumed that these attributes of ethnic food could attract Egyptian customers who want to experience new tastes and healthy food.

Recent research related to ethnic restaurants has merely paid attention to customers' perceptions about the ethnic food or the ethnic restaurant itself (Ebster and Guist, 2004, Ebster and Guist, 2005, George et al., 2007, George, 2001, Ha and Jang, 2010a, Josiam et al., 2007, Liu and Jang, 2009, Munoz and Wood, 2009, Ryu and Zhong, 2012, Jang et al., 2012). However, restaurant customers not only seek tasty and nutritious foods but also pursue fun and exciting experiences when eating out at ethnic restaurants (Ha and Jang, 2010a). research studies on authentic ethnic restaurant focused on customers' motivations, selection criteria for eating, the role of authenticity, perceptions and expectations related to dining experiences, and the attributes affecting customer satisfaction and behavioural intention in authentic ethnic restaurants (Liu and Jang, 2009, Ebster and Guist, 2004, Josiam et al., 2007, George, 2001, Jang et al., 2012). However, to the best of the author knowledge, none of the previous studies have addressed one important question: What affects Egyptian customers' ethnic restaurant, and how does the decision influence their meal experience in the authentic ethnic restaurant context?

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore Egyptian customers' perceptions of the ethnic restaurants meal experience, one of the fastest growing sectors for dining out in Egypt. More specifically, the following objectives of the study are to explore the relationships among food quality attributes, service quality elements, authentic atmosphere (and other aspects) and customers' meal experience of ethnic restaurants. This study not only will fill some of the existing research gaps, but will also help authentic ethnic restaurant management understand Egyptian customers' decision making process in selecting restaurants so they can develop relevant marketing strategies.

Literature review

Eating away from home goes beyond just satisfying hunger and has become a popular form of entertainment. People go out to eat, and they expect to derive

pleasure and satisfaction from it, especially whenever the food is presented in a charming place (Abdelhamied, 2011). In an increasingly competitive environment, restaurants must be customer oriented using marketing concepts that identify customer needs thus leading to their satisfaction and increased retention (Barber et al., 2011).

Abdelhamied, (2011) mentioned several factors can explain the reasons behind the movement of eating out in Egypt: increasing participation of women in the labor force, longer workdays, urbanization, and growth in the tourism movement to Egypt. Other factors have also contributed to the flourishing of eating out, such as the increasing numbers of foreigners living in Egypt, the increasing convenience in eating out, the increasing per capita income, and the increasing number of restaurants, such as floating restaurants, casual dining outlets and fast food restaurants (Abdelhamied, 2013).

A growing attention has been paid to the context of authentic ethnic restaurant in the hospitality industry by scholars and practitioners. Scholars and practitioners argue that, ethnic restaurants usually represent a special culture, which affords consumers the opportunities to experience something, new and exotic (Ryu and Zhong, 2012, Ebster and Guist, 2004, Munoz and Wood, 2009). Authenticity is considered a method that a restaurant uses to distinguish itself from competitors, and a process of negotiation between the ethnic culture and the host culture (Lego et al., 2002). Ryu and Zhong, (2012) mentioned that, ethnic food, over time, has made an even bigger impact on the tastes of the nation, with 75% of ethnic food consumers are not members of the ethnic group represented by the food.

Meal experiences
Hospitality services consist of a harmonious mixture of three features: the material product, the behavior and attitude of the employees, and the environment (Reuland et al., 1985). Berry et al., (2002) also proposed three categories of cues that present themselves in the service experience: functional cues (technical quality of the service), mechanic cues (nonhuman elements in the service environment) and humanic cues (behavior of service employees). As a general concept, experience includes knowledge of or observation of objects or events through involvement in or exposure to them (Jeong and Jang, 2011). Jeong and Jang, (2011) argue that, customers' restaurant experiences are comprised of their knowledge or observation of restaurant attributes gained through the course of their dining experience. Customers' positive and negative restaurant experiences are designated by their subjective judgment of the current experience and previous experiences. Through prior restaurant experiences, customers may acquire certain expectations for restaurant services. By the time the customers dine at a restaurant and experience the service, they are able to judge whether the restaurant experience is good or not.

Factors affecting restaurant experiences
Customers select their restaurants of choice based on many factors. Most people believe high quality, good-tasting food is the first priority in restaurant selection. Research has revealed three commonly accepted categories for measuring restaurant experience: food quality, service quality, and atmosphere (Ha and Jang, 2010a, Jang and Namkung, 2009, Jeong and Jang, 2011). Ryu and Zhong, (2012) argue that, ethnic restaurant consumers prefer to experience a different culture, and they are eager to try new dishes. Besides they usually dine where the natives eat and authentic cuisine is offered (George, 2001). George (2001) mentioned that, the attraction of

authentic food consumers are the decoration, music, and uniforms in an authentic restaurant setting. In addition, George et al., (2007) found that, authenticity of the restaurant is one of the main reasons ethnic consumers choose the dining place. George et al., (2007) argue that, ethnic consumers favored authenticity of the ethnic food in their dining experience more so than the overall authentic atmosphere. However, they also considered convenience, price, and authentic design when they made their decision (George et al., 2007). Based on the literature review, this study investigated customers' perceptions of ethnic restaurants in terms of food related attributes, service-related attributes, atmosphere-related attributes and other attributes (price and authenticity), and identified the key attributes affecting Egyptian customers meal experience and behavioural intentions.

Food quality
Food is the core product of a restaurant; it plays a pivotal role in the restaurant experience. Food quality has been generally accepted as a major factor influencing customer satisfaction and post-dining behavioral intentions (Liu and Jang, 2009, Namkung and Jang, 2007, Dube et al., 1994, Sulek and Hensley, 2004). To measure food quality, researchers rely on food attributes, Dube et al., (1994) measured the relative importance of seven restaurant attributes in repeat-purchase intention in an upscale restaurant setting and found that food quality was far more important to restaurant customers than all other attributes. Sulek and Hensley (2004) investigated the relative importance of food, physical setting, and service in a full-service restaurant and found that food quality was the most important factor influencing satisfaction and the only factor predicting behavioral intention. Namkung and Jang (2007) evaluated the relationships of individual attributes that constitute food quality (e.g. food presentation, menu variety, healthy options, taste, food freshness and temperature) with customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The findings indicated that food presentation, taste and temperature were significantly related to customer satisfaction whereas food presentation, taste and healthy options (instead of temperature) were significant predictors of behavioral intention. Besides the above-mentioned six individual attributes, 'food safety' is also an important cue for evaluating food quality. Qin and Prybutok, (2008) used cleanliness, healthy options, freshness, variety of food and beverages, and food attributes to measure the food quality in fast-food restaurants. Kim et al. (2009), measured food quality on Chinese restaurants by freshness, taste, and presentation. Since there is no consensus on the individual attributes that constitute food quality, in order to have a concrete measure of the customers' perceptions of food quality it may be important to look at many aspects of food quality. However, Liu and Jang (2009) added two food attributes, food safety and menu variety, to their investigation. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H1: Food quality has a positive impact on Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Service quality
Previous studies have emphasized the importance of service quality and food quality in the restaurant industry, suggesting that customers' perceptions of quality have a significant impact on satisfaction and positive post-consumption behaviors, including loyalty (Ha and Jang, 2010a, Liu and Jang, 2009). One of the most important things about the restaurant experience is the measurement of restaurant quality as perceived by the customers. This is conceptually very close to the measurement of perceived

service quality. In the service literature, perceived service quality is defined as the customer's judgment of the overall excellence or superiority of the service (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000, Parasuraman et al., 1988).

In the restaurant industry, restaurant customers not only evaluate the quality of food but also service encounters during their dining experience, perceived service quality is seen as another core determinant of customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. Employee service at a restaurant consists of the restaurant experience and the overall level of service by restaurant employees. The impact of restaurant service quality on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions, has been demonstrated by many studies (Jeong and Jang, 2011, Liu and Jang, 2009, Kim et al., 2009, Ladhari et al., 2008, Yuksel and Yuksel, 2003, Kivela et al., 1999, Kivela et al., 2000, Yüksel and Yüksel, 2002).

To measure perceived service quality in marketing, Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model. Based on SERVQUAL, the DINESERV technique was developed to measure perceived service quality in restaurants (Stevens et al., 1995). DINESERV consists of five dimensions; reliability, assurance, responsiveness, tangibles, and empathy, measured by 29 items. Kivela et al., (1999, 2000) proposed a comprehensive model for dining satisfaction and return patronage. Their study indicated that the probability of return patronage was dependent on customers' satisfaction with five aspects of a restaurant: first and last impressions, service quality, ambience quality, food quality and feeling comfortable eating there, and reservations and parking. For instance, Yuksel and Yüksel (2002) suggested that service quality had the most significant effect on dining satisfaction at an aggregate market level, and particularly for adventurous or healthy food seekers.

Depending on the DINSERV model, Ladhari et al. (2008) found that perceived service quality affected customers' satisfaction in terms of both positive and negative emotions and influenced their post-dining behaviors. Liu and Jang (2009) employed the DINSERV items to measure restaurant service quality and found that the service attributes for dependent and consistent service and friendly and helpful employees were significantly related to customer satisfaction and were the most important attributes influencing customers' behavioral intentions. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H2: Service quality has a positive effect on Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Authenticity Atmospherics (Sense of Place)
Authenticity is an attribute that could be specifically relevant to ethnic restaurants. It refers to whether the food and environment reflect the genuine or 'real' taste and culture of the ethnic origin. Another attribute of restaurant experience, atmosphere, has been shown to be a powerful factor in customer satisfaction (Ebster and Guist, 2005, Liu and Jang, 2009). Atmospherics is perceived as the quality of the surrounding space According to Kotler, (1973), atmosphere generates an image of the surrounding space in customers' minds, and the customers' perceived value of the space modifies their affective state, which may change or influence their buying behavior. Atmospherics in ethnic restaurants is usually make use of ethnic art, decor, music and various signals to create an ''authentic'' dining experience for customers (Liu and Jang, 2009). Mehrabian and Russell, (1974) first introduced a theoretical model to explain the impact of environmental stimuli on individual behavior. The model claims that the physical environment could influence people's emotional

responses (such as pleasure and arousal), which in turn elicits approach or avoidance behavior toward the environment. This model has gained consistent support from numerous empirical studies in different service settings, such as retail stores and hotels (Jang and Namkung, 2009, Ryu and Jang, 2007). In the restaurant context, Ryu and Jang, (2007) explored the combined effect of multiple atmospheric variables on behavioral intentions in upscale restaurants. Their findings supported that ambience (e.g. music, aroma and temperature) and employee appearance had the most important influence on customers' emotional responses, which in turn affected customers' post-dining behavioral intentions. They claimed that the environment created an emotional response in individuals that elicited either approach or avoidance behaviors. Ryu and Jang, (2008) developed the DINESCAPE model to measure restaurant customers' perceptions of the physical environment. DINESCAPE deals only with the internal dining environment of restaurants and excludes external attributes (e.g., parking and building design) and non-dining environments (e.g., restrooms and waiting areas). DINESCAPE consists of six constructs: aesthetics, lighting, ambience, layout, dining equipment, and employees. Ryu and Jang, (2008) found that ambience and employee appearance had the greatest impact on customers' emotional responses and that they affected customers' post-dining behavioral intentions. As a research extension, Liu and Jang, (2009) used DINESCAPE's items to measure the atmosphere of restaurants and found that environmental cleanliness, interior design and décor, and neat, well-dressed employees were significantly related to customers' overall satisfaction with a restaurant. Furthermore, the atmosphere attributes of interior design and decor and environmental cleanliness were found to be the most important in affecting customers' behavioral intentions. Some scholars even describe ethnic restaurants as cultural ambassadors of the home country and the dining experience in an ethnic restaurant as ''culinary tourism'' (Wood and Munoz, 2006). Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H3: Sense of place is positively affecting Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Price Fairness
In addition to the restaurant quality attributes, perceived price fairness has a strong influence on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006). Perceived price fairness is often defined as whether the price is seen by consumers as reasonable, acceptable, and just (Kimes and Wirtz, 2002, Kahneman et al., 1986). It is based on consumers' internal reference prices, which could be generated by the last price paid, the price most frequently paid and market prices in similar transactions (Kahneman et al., 1986). Kimes and Wirtz (2002) suggested that customers might view the price as unfair if it is not justified by prevailing market conditions. In addition, perceived price fairness can also be explained by the principle of dual entitlements (Kahneman et al., 1986). In their study on ethnic restaurants, Liu and Jang (2009) perceived fairness of price as positively related to customer satisfaction and loyalty, whereas perceived unfairness of price may lead to negative behavioral responses, such as dissatisfaction, complaining, and bad WOM. A study by Kim et al. (2009) of the components of a dining experience in influencing customer satisfaction and post-dining behavioral intentions in a university dining facility revealed the importance of price factors, which followed only food quality in importance. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H4: Price fairness has a positive impact on Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Healthy Issues

Sulek and Hensley, (2004) argue that, consumers are more concerned with their health and are therefore driving a growing demand for healthy food choices. The findings of Namkung and Jang (2007) showed a significant relationship between healthy food options and behavioral intentions. Sriwongrat (2008) reported that, a large number of restaurants are adding items and adjusting their menus to accommodate and attract consumers who are concerned about health and nutritional value of a meal. Restaurant consumers highlighted that, ethnic foods are healthy. According to Bailey and Tian (2002), American consumers viewed Indian food as much healthier than American food. In addition, White and Kokotsaki (2004), found healthy issues are the most important value of eating Indian food for English consumers in the UK. Choi and Zhao, (2010) concluded that, people's knowledge of healthy ways to eat and cook, as well as consumers' knowledge of nutritional matters, become crucial factors in choosing meals.

The study of Barta, (2008) found that healthy foods were seen as one of the important motivation factors for eating out at ethnic restaurants in Bangkok, The study of Myung et al., (2008) suggested that ethnic restaurant managers needed to add healthy food items to menus to meet health conscious consumers' demand. Also, the study showed that the current trend toward consumers' interest in health issues suggested that restaurants needed to offer meal items linked to nutritional benefits to enhance consumers' menu item selection decisions for a fixed price. The study of Choi and Zhao, (2010) supported the results of previous studies and suggested healthy food appealed to consumers as an important factor when selecting a restaurant and they added that people were concerned about eating healthy food when selecting a restaurant at which to dine, so that, restaurateurs and marketers should create a variety of healthy meals. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H5: Healthy issues have a positive impact on Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Staff aesthetic behavior

The importance of service staff to the service operators is widely recognized in the service marketing literature (Cowell, 1989, Sriwongrat, 2008). According to Wall and Berry (2007), service staff behavior is particularly important when the other mechanic clues such as restaurant atmosphere were perceived negatively. In this situation, Wall and Berry indicated that, humanic clues such as impressive employee behavior could help level up consumers' perception of meal experience. Consumers generally expect restaurant service employees to be attentive, courteous and possess a good knowledge of the menu (Sulek and Hensley, 2004, Pratten, 2003, Sriwongrat, 2008). In addition Grove et al., (2004) found that, contact personnel have a critical role for fashioning a positive experience for the customer. Gatta et al., (2009) argue that, by aquiring aesthetic skills will enable employees to 'look good' and 'sound right' by presenting themselves appropriately to customers. This presentation involves body language, dress style, personal grooming, and voice or accent, and a working knowledge of culture (Gatta et al., 2009). Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H6: Employees' aesthetic behavior has a positive impact on Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Employees' skills

Environmental factors, have given rise to the need for a new type of employee in organizations (Caligiuri et al., 2000). Caligiuri, et al., (2000) argue that, organization of today needs employees who are open and receptive to diversity and can work effectively in foreign environments, with foreign colleagues, clients, etc. according to Grove et al., (2004), service actors are a key component in the design of any service system; as service organizations are dependent on their employees, for the delivery of service excellence. In fact, across various services, consumer satisfaction is frequently influenced by the quality of the interpersonal interaction between the customer and the contact employee. Employees of these jobs are now expected to display initiative in problem-solving (Mason, 2002). Hancer, and George, (2003) added that, by helping employees find quick solutions for customers' problems will increase the overall effectiveness of the organization toward both its customers and employees.

Recent research provides strong evidence that a clearly communicated restaurant concept is highly associated with restaurant success (Parsa et al., 2005). Magnini et al., (2011) mentioned that, consumers may view a foreign language restaurant as a signal of food authenticity; and they added that, Language is a critical tool of human cognition, In other words, language can serve as an attribute of an experience (Magnini et al., 2011). Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H7: Employees' skills have a positive impact on Egyptian customer's ethnic meal experience.

Marketing Communication
Services operators use marketing communications as the way to inform, persuade, and remind customers (Lovelock et al., 1998). The marketing communications employed by restaurateurs are advertising, sales promotion, and publicity (Mill, 2007). In addition, sales promotion encompasses all promotional activities other than advertising, personal selling and public relations (Abdelhamied, 2013).

Mill, (2007, p.83) define *advertising* as "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor". Also Mill added that, advertising may come in the form of television, newspaper, radio, magazines, yellow pages, and internet. Consumers are using information from advertising, and the information provided at the restaurant when searching for external sources of information (Pedraja and Yague, 2001). Pedraja & Yague argue that, restaurant's customers are using the information from the advertising as a source to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty.

Sales promotions, such as special offers and discounts, can act as short-term incentives motivating consumers to choose a particular service provider (Mill, 2007). In addition Abdelhamied, (2013) mentioned several promotional tools used in restaurants which include; *Samples*, (refers to offers of a trial amount of a product), *Coupons*, (refers to certificates that offer buyers savings when they purchase specific products), *Premiums* (refers to goods offered either free or at low cost as incentives to buy a product), *Price–off,* (promotion, refers to offering the products lower than its regular price during the promotion period), and Contest and *Sweepstakes* (refers to giving the consumer a chance to win something, such as cash or a trip). Jackson, et al., (2004), argue that, high-price restaurants benefited from coupon promotions to a greater extent than lower price restaurants. According to the previous finding Sriwongrat (2008) suggested that, the patronage of consumers in restaurant establishments can be motivated by sales promotions.

Publicity refers to non-paid communications such as a press release and press conference (Mill, 2007). Publicity provides more credibility for consumers; therefore, publicity has the advantage of being able to reach consumers who are particularly cynical about advertising (Kotler et al., 1998). Positive media relations can create a positive image for a restaurant; according to Robinson (2007) the media influence the growth of interest and demand in ethnic cuisines. Thus, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

H8: Marketing communication has a positive impact on Egyptian customer ethnic meal experience.

Methodology
Questionnaire and sample size
The study used a questionnaire to collect data from customers. The questionnaire comprised a series of Likert-type (1-5 disagree/agree) statements adapted from extant studies (Table 1). The final form includes 34 items used to measure the eight constructs of the developed model. The eight constructs are 'food quality' (measured by 4 items), 'food service' (measured by 6 items), 'sense of place' (6 items), 'healthy issues' (3 items), 'staff aesthetic behavior' (4 items), 'employees' skills' (2 items), 'price fairness' (3 items), 'marketing communication' (5 items), and 'meal experience' (1 item). The form included a number of questions to collect information on respondents' gender, age, eating in ethnic restaurant, and regulatory of eating ethnic food.

Cover letters requesting the cooperation filling the questionnaires were sent to restaurant's managers. Questionnaires were distributed and collected face to face by researcher for a two-month period employing random sampling technique. Surveyed restaurants are located in Cairo, the capital of Egypt, where most ethnic restaurants exist (The Egyptian Tourism Board Publication, 2012). The researcher was staying in the selected restaurant three times per week and he chooses randomly Egyptian customers to complete the questionnaires. Five hundred questionnaires were sent out for data collection purposes from ethnic restaurants' customers in Cairo. 20 out of 40 ethnic restaurants were randomly selected to be the setting of the study. 379 questionnaires were returned and were found usable, and the other 121 ones were not completed by respondents. Accordingly, the response rate was 0.758 which is found sufficient

Table 1: Ethnic restaurant attributes influencing customer meal experience

Sense of Place	
Interior décor of ethnic restaurant	(Ryu and Zhong, 2012, Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007)
Ethnical Background music entertained me	(Ryu and Zhong, 2012, Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007, Liu and Jang, 2009)
Ethnical restaurant furniture	(George, 2001)
Ethnical restaurant style to use tools and equipment	(George, 2001)
Ethnical style menu design by ethnic language	(Magnini et al., 2011)
Ethnical style uniform	(Ryu and Zhong, 2012, George, 2001)
Healthy Issues	

I liked healthy food options in the ethnical restaurant	(Choi and Zhao, 2010, Sriwongrat, 2008, Ha and Jang, 2010b)
I liked healthy information in the ethnical restaurant	(Choi and Zhao, 2010, Sriwongrat, 2008, Liu and Jang, 2009)
I can customize the calories of my meal in the ethnical restaurant	(Choi and Zhao, 2010)
Service quality	
Ethnical restaurant provides prompt and quick service	(Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007, Sriwongrat, 2008, Liu and Jang, 2009)
Ethnical restaurant are providing an acceptable knowledge about food ingredients	(Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007, Sriwongrat, 2008)
Employees are paying attention to your personal needs	(Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007, Sriwongrat, 2008)
Ethnical restaurant staff appearance were neat and well dressed	(Barber et al., 2011)
The restaurant dining areas were thoroughly clean	(Barber et al., 2011)
Employee offering suggestion	(Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007)
Food Quality	
Variety of ethnical menu items	(Ryu and Zhong, 2012, Sriwongrat, 2008, Ha and Jang, 2010b)
The food presentation was visually attractive	(Sriwongrat, 2008)
The restaurant provide high Quality items of food and beverage	(Qu, 1997, Sriwongrat, 2008, Ha and Jang, 2010b)
The restaurant provide Unique Tastes and Ingredients	(Barta, 2008, Choi and Zhao, 2010)
Price Fairness	
The dining experience was a good value for the money I paid.	(Jang et al., 2012, Qu, 1997, Ha and Jang, 2010b)
The food price was appropriate and the Invoices accurate	(Jang et al., 2012, Sriwongrat, 2008)
The service was good for the price	(Jang et al., 2012, Liu and Jang, 2009)
Staff aesthetic behavior	
The restaurant had friendly and helpful employees	(Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007, Qu, 1997)
Employees are Smiling while serving you	(Barber et al., 2011)
Employees are using the eye contact while talking to you	(Gatta et al., 2009)
Employees are using the appropriate tone of voice	(Gatta et al., 2009)
Employees' skills	
Problem solving	(Sriwongrat, 2008, Mason, 2002, Hancer and George, 2003)
Language and communication skills	(Magnini et al., 2011)
Marketing Communication	
The restaurant use an effective internal marketing tools	(Sriwongrat, 2008, Abdelhamied, 2013)
Restaurant website and media provide	(Sriwongrat, 2008)

effective information	
Restaurant advertising tools provide me the information I need	(Qu, 1997, Sriwongrat, 2008)
I used to eat at this restaurant because of its special offers and discount	(Sriwongrat, 2008)
It is easy to find the restaurant location	(Qu, 1997, Auty, 1992, Haghighi et al., 2012)

Validity and Reliability

For validity concerns, the survey was piloted on a sample of 50 customers to check its face and content validity. The comments of respondents related to language and design of questionnaire were considered in the final form. For reliability of constructs, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated and exceeded 0.70 for all constructs meaning that the questionnaire results are reliable (Hair et al., 2010).

Analysis Technique

General Linear regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses and to investigate the causal relationships between independent factors for eating in ethnic restaurants and customers' meal experience. Frequencies, and means were calculated for all variables, besides, Independent sample t-test and ANOVA were employed to measure the variance between means for independent variables (age, gender, eating in ethnic restaurants, and frequency of eating). SPSS (version 22) software was used in analysis.

Research findings
Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics showed that 67.3% of the respondents are males while 37.4% of them are females. 50.1% of the respondents are less than 25 years, 35.4% of them are between 25 and 40 years, and 14.5% are more than 40 years old. 90.5% of the respondents are eating in an ethnic restaurant before, and 9.5% are not had this experience before. 25.6% of respondents are rarely eating in ethnic restaurants, 36.1% of them are eating from one to two times per month, 20.6% are eating 3-5 per month, and 27.7% are eating more than five times a month (Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents

Description		Frequency	Per cent
Gender:	Male	289	76.3
	Female	90	23.7
Age:	Less than 25 years old	190	50.1
	25to 40 years old	134	35.4
	More than 40 years old	55	14.5
Eating in an ethnic restaurant before:	Yes	243	90.5
	No	36	9.5
Eating in an ethnic restaurant/month:	Rarely	97	25.6
	From 1 to 2 / month	99	26.1
	from 3 to 5/month	78	20.6
	More than 5/month	105	27.7

The Regression Conceptual Model

To test the regression model, Table 3 outlines the construct corrected item-total correlation, Tolerance, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), and Cronbach's alpha. Looking at Corrected Item-Total Correlation statistics, the revealed values of all constructs are between, 0.30 and 0.80 which is evident of construct validity. In total and from Table 3, considering Cronbach's alpha, all values of Cronbach's alpha are greater than 0.70. For normality, Skewness values for all items are less than (1), Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are less than 10, and the findings are reliable.

Table 3: Statistics of study's constructs

Dependent Constructs		Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Tolerance	VIF	Cronbach's alpha
Sense of place	SOP1	0.793	.228	4.378	0.911
	SOP2	0.655	.237	4.216	
	SOP3	0.470	.165	6.043	
	SOP4	0.772	.176	5.688	
	SOP5	0.663	.205	4.888	
	SOP6	0.734	.222	4.496	
Authentic Service quality	ASQ1	0.648	.359	2.782	0.753
	ASQ2	0.619	.444	2.254	
	ASQ3	0.692	.399	2.509	
	ASQ4	0.742	.334	2.995	
	ASQ5	0.498	.408	2.450	
	ASQ6	0.565	.454	2.203	
Staff aesthetic behavior	SB1	0.779	.422	2.369	0.717
	SB2	0.675	.388	2.576	
	SB3	0.533	.416	2.404	
	SB4	0.644	.434	2.305	
Employee skills	ES1	0.703	.364	2.746	0.747
	ES2	0.788	.346	2.887	
Healthy Issues	Hi1	0.544	.513	1.949	0.833
	Hi2	0.477	.465	2.152	
	Hi3	0.456	.549	1.821	
Price fairness	PR1	0.760	.528	1.893	0.743
	PR2	0.790	.314	3.186	
	PR3	0.533	.399	2.509	
Food quality	FQ1	0.654	.454	2.201	0.810
	FQ2	0.765	.439	2.280	
	FQ3	0.444	.466	2.153	
	FQ4	0.554	.315	3.182	
Marketing & communication	MAR1	0.567	.528	1.893	0.845
	MAR2	0.450	.313	3.176	
	MAR3	0.621	.444	2.254	
	MAR4	0.740	.399	2.509	

	MAR5	0.661	.334	2.995	

Note: *VIF*: Variance Inflation Factor

The Regression conceptual model is used to measure the causal relationships among the constructs. It is found that the model components have a significant effect on improving customer experience about ethnic restaurants. The findings revealed that the eight hypotheses measured in the study are supported and the factors involved in this study are significantly affecting the customers' meal experience within ethnic restaurants. However, the independent factors have different effect on the customer meal experience within ethnic restaurants. Some factors were found positively affecting customer experience to restaurants while some others had a negative effect. The interpretation of positive and negative effects reflects how customers perceive ethnic restaurant services offered and ethnic food experience (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Regression Model of the Independent Features Affecting Egyptian Customer meal experience
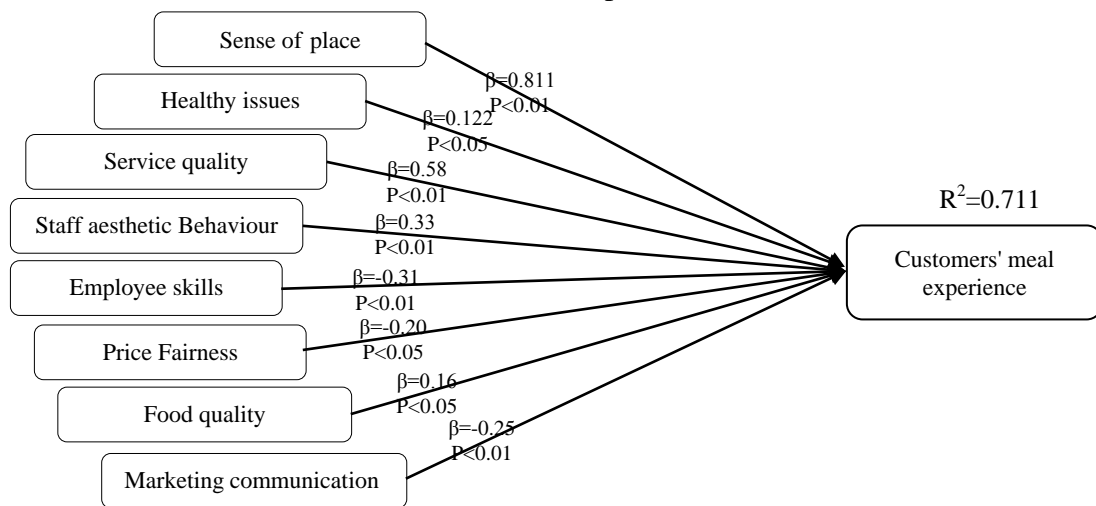
Respondents perceive five constructs out of eight to have positive effect on the Egyptian customers' meal experience within ethnic restaurants. The sense of place content is positively affecting customers meal experience ($\beta=0.811$ and $p<0.01$). This construct depicts the importance of ethnical atmosphere, décor and music to customers and how this supports the meal experience on an ethnic restaurant. Furthermore, the healthy issues of the ethnic food is found positively affecting the meal experience of the ethnic restaurants ($\beta=0.122$ and $p<0.05$), this construct reflects how important the healthy component are features to the ethnic restaurants in a way customers can customize their healthy food options, can customize their meal calories, and receive healthy information. The service quality, in terms of providing prompt and quick service, providing acceptable knowledge about food ingredients, caring about customers' special needs and well appearance of staff, has a positive impact on the restaurant dining experience ($\beta=0.58$ and $p<0.01$). The staff aesthetic behavior of the ethnic restaurant was shown to have a positive effect on the restaurant dining experience and business ($\beta=0.33$ and $p<0.01$). This construct demonstrates the importance of staff behavior of ethnic restaurant, and the degree to which they are friendly with customers, offering suggestion, and showing positive attitude (smile, tone, and eye contact) within their working time in the restaurants and its importance on the attitude of the customer towards the ethnic restaurants. Finally, food quality has revealed a positive effect on the restaurant meal experience for Egyptian ($\beta=0.16$

and p<0.05), this construct reflects the role of ethnic food as an alternative to traditional food of attracting Egyptian and how much is ethnic food tasty, uniqueness, attractiveness and menu variety comparing with traditional restaurants.

On the other hand, three constructs were perceived negatively affecting the dining experience of the ethnic restaurants, these are price fairness (β=-0.20 and p<0.05), price fairness in this context refers to the value for money Egyptian spent in ethnic restaurant. Employee's skills, such as problem solving and language in addition to communication skills negatively affect the dining experience of the ethnic restaurant (β=-0.31 and p<0.01). Marketing communication (with β=-0.25 and p<0.01) means that restaurants' managers could not converts and reflects the image of ethnic restaurant and supports its dining experience. These constructs reveal that the ethnic restaurants lack some crucial features to be competitive in the food industry. Therefore, these findings help ethnic restaurant managers to improve these features. These negative constructs can be considered as the defects in the ethnic restaurant which contribute to the failure of the ethnic restaurant to be competitive in the Egyptian food market and they must be addressed.

Discussion of findings

Studying the factors affecting Egyptian customers' meal experience is an important concern for ethnic restaurant in a fierce competition among food enterprises to satisfy, retain, and expand their customers. Ethnic restaurants are growing sector of food industry that seeks to improve their image and increase their Egyptian customer-base. They have their own authentic to promote, market, and sell their services. Believing in the saying that ethnic restaurants usually represent a special food culture, which are new to traditional ones for Egyptian customers push ethnic restaurants to improve their presence and consider the opinions of their customers to enhance the quality of their interface to Egyptian. In this study, ethnic restaurants' customers in Egypt have expressed their opinions in eight critical components of meal experience factors. Sense of place is ranked first positively affecting Egyptian ethnic meal experience. This is reflected in the interior décor of ethnic restaurant, the entertainment of ethnical background music, ethnical restaurant furniture, using ethnical tools and equipment, designing menu by ethnic language and the ethnical style uniform. Customers scored a mean value of (4.65) meaning that they are very satisfied with these atmospheric features on the ethnic restaurants. Ebster and Guist, (2005) recommended restaurant managers, planners and designers, to consider the patrons' backgrounds when planning ethnically themed restaurants. Also, this finding is in line with Liu and Jang, (2009) who studied the factors affecting customer satisfaction and behavioral intention within Chinese restaurants in US.

Staff aesthetic behavior is a crucial factor for ethnic restaurant meal experience; it could be a result of high level of helpful and friendly employees, particularly in smiling when delivering customer service and using eye contact with appropriate tone of voice. Staff aesthetic behavior of an ethnic restaurant is a feature of success. This finding is consistent with a previous study of Wall and Berry, (2007) in their study of the combined effect of physical environment and employee behavior upon restaurant service quality. Contact employees have a critical role for fashioning a positive experience for the customer. friendly and helpful employees were significantly related to customer satisfaction and were the most important attributes influencing customers' behavioral intentions (Liu and Jang, 2009). In addition Gatta et al. (2009) noted that, by aquiring aesthetic skills will enable employees to 'look good' and 'sound right' by presenting themselves appropriately to customers. Body language, dress style,

personal grooming, and voice or accent, and a working knowledge of culture are the main elements of presentation in ethnic restaurants.

The service quality construct comes next in affecting the ethnic meal experience of a restaurant. Having a mean value of (4.51) means that customers are very satisfied with the service quality of ethnic restaurants. This finding is consistent with previous research by Ha and Jang, (2010a) in their study of service quality in an ethnic restaurant segment. The service quality concept includes the delivering of prompt and quick service, providing acceptable knowledge about food ingredients, paying attention to customers' personal needs, staff appearance, the cleanness of restaurant dining areas and the employees' ability to offer suggestion for customers. Add to this the easy sequenced steps customers follow when booking their meal. This finding is in line with Yüksel and Yüksel, (2002) who claimed that service quality had the most significant effect on dining satisfaction, and Ha and Jang, (2010a) who confirmed the importance of the measurement of restaurant quality as perceived by customers to evaluate restaurant experience.

Food quality is ranked fourth in the list of factors affecting the meal experience in ethnic restaurants. The mean value of customers on this component is (4.15) which means that customers are satisfied with food quality of ethnic restaurants. This finding is in line with Namkung and Jang, (2007) in their exploratory research of food quality in restaurants. Food quality includes menu variety, the attractiveness of food presentation, delivering high quality items of food and beverage, and providing unique tastes and ingredients. Namkung and Jang, (2007) mentioned food presentation, menu variety, taste, cleanliness, variety of food and beverages (Qin and Prybutok, 2008), and food presentation (Kim et al., 2009), as indicators for food quality and they were significantly related to customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. These components are vital for any restaurant; however, food quality is a crucial success factor. Food quality is of the most important feature of customer satisfaction and restaurant experience as claimed by Kim et al. (2009) and Ha and Jang, (2010a). Customers in the authentic ethnic restaurant can be pleasantly surprised by new menu choices. Therefore, restaurant's managers should take into account customers' evaluations of menu items, particularly unfamiliar items. If the menu items do not meet customers' expectations, these menu items can be adjusted quickly to avoid customer disappointment (Ryu and Zhong, 2012).

The next factor affecting meal experience of restaurant is its healthy issues content. This construct includes a number of items: these are healthy food options, healthy information, and customizing the calories of customers' meal. Having a mean value of (4.01) means that customers are solidly satisfied with the healthy issues content of meals in the ethnic restaurants. The positive effect of healthy issues is consistent with previous studies by Choi and Zhao, (2010) in their trying to answer the question 'is health issue one of the factors influencing customers' behavior when selecting a restaurant. This construct reflects the importance of healthy issues application on the menu content and how it helps customers in their decision-making process. In addition it affects their decision in selecting this meal or moving to search for another restaurant. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted by Choi and Zhao, (2010) who mentioned that healthy food appealed to consumers as an important factor when selecting a restaurant (Barta, 2008). Therefore, it is better for ethnic restaurants to include items and adjusting their menus to accommodate and attract consumers who are concerned about health and nutritional value of a meal.

On the other hand, the results showed the defects in the ethnic restaurants', meal experience. The factors negatively perceived by customers are employee's skills,

marketing communication and price fairness. In employee skills construct, customers believe that employees have to display initiative in problem-solving, and communication skills. Ethnic restaurants are not developed a marketing communication tools in a creative way. Managers do not project an image consistent with restaurant's image, and do not match that image of the company for Egyptian customers. The previous result is not in consistent with (Ryu and Zhong, 2012) who suggested that, offering free samples would help to promote the novel food; and management will be able to increase customers' dining experience and reduce customers' disconfirmation, which will impact customer satisfaction and subsequent future behavior. In order to meet a fierce competition with local and international restaurants, austenitic ethnic restaurants should develop strategies to promote novel foods, such as appealing presentation of the menu entry, suggesting servers introduce novel food to consumers in groups and provide pictures of novel foods and reviews from previous customers. Furthermore, the negative perception of customers towards the price fairness of menu items, new dining experience and services implies unpleasing appeal. The negative effect of price fairness is not consistent with previous studies by Kimes and Wirtz, (2002) about the perceived fairness of price in ethnic restaurants. The study of ethnic restaurants conducted by Liu and Jang, (2009), found that, the perceived unfairness of price may lead to negative behavioral responses, such as dissatisfaction, complaining, and bad WOM. These factors are crucial for management of ethnic restaurants to improve the meal experience of their restaurants and staying ahead of competitors.

It is also clear that the positive meal experience of a restaurant increases the potential intention of Egyptian customers' meal experience; which drive to purchase services from that restaurant. In other words a restaurant that provides high level of marketing communication tools, and price fairness will help to give a credible image to customers about the restaurant. The adequate, atmosphere, service and food quality, healthy information, staff behaviors/skills, price fairness and accurate marketing communication tools in ethnic restaurant affects the customer meal experience and intention to purchase the restaurant services.

Conclusion and limitations
This study investigated the perceptions of ethnic restaurants customers' meal experience. The study has tested eight hypotheses of how these factors (sense of place, healthy issues, service quality, staff behavior, employees' skills, price fairness, food quality, and marketing issues) affect the dependent variable (ethnic meal experience). The study revealed the perceptions of Egyptian customers on meal experience and determining factors that restaurants have succeeded or failed to offer in their meals. Meanwhile, the study has provided ethnic restaurants managers and operators some feedback on the overall perception of their meal difficulties from Egyptian customers' viewpoint. It is important for ethnic restaurants to recognize their defects and improve the positive factors to improve and maintain their meal experience in the time of fierce competition.

The five constructs positively affecting the meal experience of the ethnic restaurants (sense of place, healthy issues, service quality, food quality, and staff behavior) need to be considered by restaurants' managers if they are searching to retain their customers and develop their working environment.

The factors negatively affecting the meal experience of the ethnic restaurants need to be addressed seriously by marketing managers particularly in relation to the price fairness, employees' skills, and marketing communication. These factors represent the

main target of the restaurants that need enhancement. Failing to achieve this target leads restaurants to falling behind their competitors and in turn losing opportunities to increase their Egyptian market-share and sales. This concludes that the ethnic restaurants still have critical issues and need to address some defects in their meal experience to improve their sales, and satisfy their customers. However, the restaurants have succeeded in introducing meal experience that the customers believe it is positive and affect their potential purchasing decision.

It must be admitted that this study has some limitations. One limitation is the need to conduct qualitative interviews to fully understand how customers perceive the negative aspects of the restaurant meal experience. Another limitation is the inability to compare the expectations and perceptions of customers on Ethnic restaurants. Future research studies will compare the expectations and perceptions of customers on restaurants in addition to comparing two different categories of ethnic restaurants in Egypt, which could be Chinese restaurants and Arabian restaurants. The quantitative-qualitative approach will be useful in future studies to fully understand the subject of the study.

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