The effect of restaurant attributes on customers' expectations and experiences in formal full service restaurants in Port Elizabeth, South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the effect of restaurant attributes on customers' expectations and experiences in formal full service restaurants. The attributes included in this research were food, service and ambience as independent variables and expectations and experiences as dependent variables. The aims were to: (a) assess restaurant attributes that are important for customers' expectations and experiences, (b) to determine which restaurant attributes had a significant relationship with customers' expectations and experiences. The questionnaire was based on Markovic, Raspor & Markovic's (2010) research. In order to meet the surveys' goals, correlation coefficient and regression analysis were conducted. The results of correlation coefficient reveal that all three restaurant attributes had a significant correlation ($p<0.05$) with expectations. The strongest correlation with expectations was service ($r=0.76$). Customers' experiences showed that all the attributes had a weak to moderate ($r≤0.5$) positive correlation with customers' experiences. The strongest correlation with experiences was food ($r=0.54$). The first regression model showed that all three dining attributes were significantly related ($p<0.05$) to customers' expectations. The level of service ($t=10.73$) was rated as the most important attribute for expectations. The second regression model showed that all three dining attributes were significantly related ($p<0.05$) to experiences. The second model indicated that respondents rated food ($t=7.51$) as the most important attribute for experience. The results reveal that although good food is an essential component for customers' experiences, however, the level of service plays a pivotal role for customers' expectations in formal full service restaurants.

Keywords: ambience, customers' expectations and experiences, food, restaurant attributes, service

INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly difficult to satisfy restaurant customers (Enz, 2004; Hu, 2009; Reynolds & Biel, 2007). Customers have become more sophisticated, value and price conscious, demanding and thus switch swiftly to other alternatives in case of a single dodgy experience (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Restaurant customers progressively demand higher quality food (Hu, 2009) and service (Quan & Wang, 2004) than before. Consequently, restaurants should strive to meet and exceed customers' expectations (Kafel & Sikora, 2013).

Dining out involves a diverse array of moments of truth, all influenced by a customers' unique expectations and evaluations (Bartlett & Han, 2007; Hensley & Sulek, 2007). The dining customer is now impatient and has many choices and high expectations in all restaurant segments (Soderlund & Ohman, 2005; Soriano, 2002). If a customer is not satisfied by offered service and value in the restaurant, he will leave for another

restaurant (Kang, Nobuyuki & Herbert, 2004).

However, there is an assumption that the primary reason people go to restaurants is for the meal (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Many restaurants have a blurred perception that people only go to restaurants for the food (Massawe, 2013). Therefore, as long as customers get the food they want, they are satisfied (Coyles & Gokey, 2002). This view may not hold true for those full service restaurant customers whose main purpose is to transact business or to enjoy the company of cherished others (friends, family, spouse and so forth) (McCollough, 2000; Oh, 2000).

Gone are the days when restaurants were more focused on food quality and taste, now they have to pay equal attention to other important factors like serving, atmosphere, interior decorations, tangibles and location (Olsen, 2002). The restaurant experience includes much more than simply eating what the customer wants (Akinyele, 2010). Customers' experiences are now complex because all events and activities before and after dining can generate total experience for customers (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999). Restaurant customers now look for experiences that go beyond the food itself, and they use the restaurant as an arena where they can relax, enjoy and socialize (Soderlund & Ohman, 2005). Restaurateurs need to be aware that a restaurant visit is a social and cultural act in a context that reflect their dream and lifestyle and where people look for the fulfilment of certain desires and mood expectations (Kafel & Sikora, 2013). Offering good food and service is not enough to attract and retain consumers (Soriano, 2002).

Earlier, a restaurants' objective was to attract potential customers, but now it is becoming rather difficult to retain the existing consumers (Olsen, 2002; Kang *et al.*, 2004; Soderlund & Ohman, 2005). In order to gain a competitive advantage in today's market; restaurants have to offer meals that offer good value in a favourable

ambience (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). Therefore, when considering a multi-layered experience in a table-service restaurant (Wall & Berry, 2004), it is necessary to explore customers' experiential values to improve customer experiences in the restaurant (McCollough, 2000).

Consequently, restaurateurs should not believe that merely meeting or exceeding what is anticipated will satisfy customers, but should understand that the actual performance will have a far greater predictive effect on customers' expectations and experiences (Ladhari, Brun & Morales, 2008). Understanding the antecedents and consequences of customer expectations and experiences is of utmost importance (Edvardsson, 2005).

This article offers South African formal full service restaurants increased insight into the effect of food, service and ambience on customers' expectations and experiences. In spite of the growing international interest on the effect of food, service and ambience on customer expectation and experience, limited research has been completed on this topic in South Africa (Moolman, 2011). International studies on customers' expectations and experiences might not be applicable to South African formal full service restaurants, since researchers such as Mueller, Palmer, Mack and McMullan (2003) and Jensen and Hansen (2007) suggest that national culture has an effect on research and on restaurant customer expectations and experiences. Therefore, the findings of this research should be interpreted in the light of its national culture and should not be generalised to other cultures.

The contribution of the research on which this article reports on is unique in that, as far as can be ascertained, there is limited research in Port Elizabeth on the effect of dining attributes on customers' expectations and experiences in a formal full service restaurant context. Given the challenges of formal full service restaurants and the effect of dining attributes on customers' expectations and

experiences, research within this context was necessary.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The formal full service restaurant industry in South Africa is undergoing a period of anaemic growth (Thornton, 2009). Industry revenue declined 1.8% in 2013 as restaurant customers tightened their purse strings (Statistics South Africa, 2014). Customers are spending a slightly smaller percentage of their food budgets on formal full-service restaurants than a decade ago (Euromonitor International, 2014). According to Statistics South Africa (2014), the average customer spent 28.3% of their food budget on formal full service restaurants in 2013 compared with 30.0% in 2003.

Researchers (Soriano, 2002; Chi & Gursoy, 2009) identify restaurateurs' inability to satisfy their customers' expectations and experiences as one of the main reasons for slow growth. Despite lowering their prices and spending marketing funds on promotions, restaurants seem to be finding great difficulty in determining customer expectations and experiences (Rosslee, 2009) as customers seek more for their money when spending at restaurants (Thornton, 2009). As such, a study to determine the effect of dining attributes on customers' expectations and experiences in formal full service restaurants has been visualised. The results of the study could increase the level of customer satisfaction and conceptualise restaurant customers' probability of intention to return to Port Elizabeth restaurants (Oh & Jeong, 2000). Port Elizabeth is considered as the gate way to the Garden Route and a well-known tourist destination in the Eastern Cape province.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study was to determine the effect of restaurant attributes on customers' expectations and experiences in formal full service restaurants in Port Elizabeth. In order to achieve the primary objective, the following secondary objectives were formulated:

- Which restaurant attributes are important for customers' expectations and experiences in formal full service restaurants?

- To determine which of the restaurant attributes had a significant relationship with customers' expectations and experiences in Port Elizabeth formal full service restaurants.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

A research hypothesis can be defined as a tentative explanation of the research problem, a possible outcome of the research, or an educated guess about the research outcome (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The following research hypothesis was formulated on the basis of the research objectives:

Hypothesis 1:

Null Hypothesis (H_o)

There is no significant relationship between food, service and ambience and customers' expectations and experiences in formal full service restaurants in Port Elizabeth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A list of local registered full service restaurants was obtained from the Nelson Mandela metropolitan municipality and also from the Restaurant Directory of South Africa (2014). Only 10 formal full service restaurants complied with the criteria, of which two were used for the pilot study. The remaining eight restaurants were included in the main study. These restaurants complied with the criteria set by SSA (2014) for classification as a formal full service restaurant.

A formal full service restaurant refers to an up market restaurant that offers table service with complete, varied menus and multiple entrees for each meal period which may include soups, salads and/or desserts (SSA, 2014). Most formal full service restaurants will provide customer seating with gastronomy, sophisticated service, elegant ambience and liquor service. Usually, these restaurants will not permit casual wear (Feinstein & Stefanelli, 2008).

The research sample included in the study entailed relevant data that were collected from 400 customers of the eight selected formal full service restaurants in Port Elizabeth. A sample of 400 was adequate (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), since the total population of formal full service restaurant customers in Port Elizabeth exceeds 5 000 diners. A descriptive quantitative study design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) was followed. Probability sampling was used since it is based on the principles of randomness and the probability theory, to accurately generalise to the population (Creswell, Ebersohn, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen,

Nieuwenhuis, Pietersen, Plano Clark, & Van Der Westhuizen, 2007).

In order to guarantee equal representation of each of the restaurants, proportional stratified random sampling was used to find the sample size for a particular restaurant taking into cognisance the restaurant's seating capacity (Cooper & Schindler, 2003). A proportional sample of 22.5% of the total seating capacity per restaurant enabled the researcher to obtain at least 400 completed questionnaires. Table 1 reflects how the total sample size of 400 formal full service restaurant customers was calculated.

Systematic sampling, which is a probability sampling method, was then used to select respondents by systematically moving through the sample frame and selecting every kth element. This method is useful in situations where the population elements arrive at a certain location over time (Maree, 2005). As such, respondents were selected by systematically targeting every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant until the sample size for a particular restaurant was reached.

Table 1: Response rate per restaurant

Restaurant	Seating capacity	Respondents	Response rate per restaurant
Restaurant A	200	45	22.50%
Restaurant B	300	68	22.67%
Restaurant C	240	54	22.50%
Restaurant D	200	45	22.50%
Restaurant E	280	63	22.50%
Restaurant F	180	41	22.78%
Restaurant G	180	41	22.78%
Restaurant H	220	43	22.72%
Total	1800	400	22.22%

It was better to target every fourth customer so as to be discreet and avoid annoying other customers who were not participating in the survey (Kivela *et al.*, 1999). The restaurant manager from each mentioned restaurant was approached for permission to conduct the study. Data were collected in January 2014 during weekdays, weekends and across these two months during lunch and dinner as recommended by various researchers (Akinyele, 2010; Kivela *et al.,* 1999; Sulek & Hensley, 2004). This enabled the researcher to maximise chances of eliciting information from customers of different lifestyles, occupation, income, age and gender (Kivela *et al.,* 1999).

The following procedures were used to collect data. The researcher systematically approached every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant after they were seated in the restaurant or as they were scanning/perusing the menu. The researcher explained the aim of the study to the customers and requested them to participate. It was emphasised that the researcher would treat the information provided as confidential and anonymous.

Customers who were willing to participate in the study received a questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were collected, checked and discussed with the respondents in case of any queries. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences which is a statistical analysis software programme (SPSS 21, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Correlation coefficient of customers' expectations and experiences

Susskind (2002) posits that because the quality of food, level of service and ambience constitute the three primary drivers of a restaurant's long-term success, separating food, service and ambience is important when investigating the relationship of customer expectations and experiences with restaurant attributes. As such, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient and regression analysis were used to investigate the relationship of overall expectations (dependent variable) with the three dining attributes (independent variables) and the relationship of experiences (dependent variable) with the three dining attributes and expectations (independent variables). The results of the correlation analysis are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation results of customers' expectations and experiences

Variables	Expectations		Experiences	
	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Food quality	0.73	<.0001*	0.54	<.0001*
Level of service	0.76	<.0001*	0.37	<.0001*
Ambience	0.58	<.0001*	0.33	<.0001*
Expectations	-	-	0.46	<.0001*

* indicates significant correlation (p<0.05).

The data reveal that all three of the dining attribute variables showed a moderate to strong positive correlation (r>0.5) with expectations. All three dining attributes had a significant correlation (p<0.05) with expectations. The strongest correlation with expectations was level of service (r=0.76), followed by food quality (r=0.73).

The results are not consistent with the studies by previous researchers (Pun & Ho, 2001; Soriano, 2002; Aigbedo &

Parameswaran, 2004; Weiss, Feinstein & Dalbor, 2004) who note that in restaurants the strongest correlation with expectations is the quality of food. The results by Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (2000) also confirmed that service and food quality were strongly correlated to customers' expectations. Restaurant customers tend to expect high quality food more than any other attributes (Aigbedo & Parameswaran, 2004; Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

However, in research conducted by Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal and Voss (2002) the level of service had the strongest correlation with customers' expectations. Yuksel and Yuksel (2002) suggested that service quality had the most significant effect on dining expectations at an aggregate market level, and particularly for adventurous or healthy food seekers. In research conducted by Kim, Moreo and Yeh (2004), service quality had the strongest relationship with customer expectations. Similarly, it has been well established by a number of studies that service quality is an antecedent of customer expectations (Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha & Yun, 2007).

In a formal full service restaurant good service can save a bad meal, but a good meal cannot save bad service (Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Even though the food at a formal full service restaurant may not be as tasty as in other famous restaurants, if the service is excellent the customer will recognise the restaurant and tend to be satisfied (Cheng, 2006). Consequently, should any other dining attribute (for example; food quality and ambience) not meet the expectations of the customer, good service can compensate for that lack (Oh, 2000).

A similar examination of the relationship between the four independent variables and customers' experiences showed that all the variables had a weak to moderate ($r \leq 0.5$) positive correlation with customers' experiences. The weakest correlations with experiences were calculated for the ambience (r=0.33). All four independent variables had a significant positive

correlation (p<0.05) with customers' experiences. The strongest correlation with experiences was food quality (r=0.54), followed by expectations (r=0.46).

Based on the results of this research which is in accordance with past research, food quality has the strongest correlation with customer experiences. For example, Bartlett and Han (2007) stated that food quality had the strongest impact on customer experience. Andaleeb and Conway (2006) and Kim et al. (2004) indicated that food quality had the most significant relationship with customer experience. Hensley and Sulek (2007) and Raajpoot (2002) noted that food quality had the strongest relationship with customer experience.

However, unlike the research conducted by other researchers, Abdullah and Rozario (2009) noted that food had the lowest relationship with customer experience. The reported differences might have occurred due to different sample characteristics, for example, customers of different types of restaurant settings in the study by Abdullah and Rozario (2009). The other reason might be the different modifications of the questionnaires used in each of the studies mentioned.

Nonetheless, most research (Kim et al, 2004; Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Bartlett & Han, 2007; Hensley & Sulek, 2007) support the idea that the quality of food has the strongest correlation with customers' experience. Susskind (2002) also found that the quality of food had the strongest correlation with customers' experiences. This implies that the quality of food plays a pivotal role in increasing customers' experiences. As such, customers offer the following message to full service restaurant operators: get the food right if you want to see us again (Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

However, the possibility of co-linearity among the dining attributes should not be ignored. Conversely, Susskind (2002) states that restaurant customers usually

evaluate the components of the dining experience (for example; food quality, service quality and ambience) in isolation. The mentioned author states that this type of attribute evaluation is demonstrated by the following classic phrase: "the food was good, but the service was terrible". As such, consumers typically evaluate the restaurant attributes individually (such as food, service and ambience) rather than as a collective (Susskind, 2002).

Regression analysis of customers' expectations and experiences

Full regression models were run for each of the two dependent variables. The first full model regressed the three dining attributes against expectations, while the second full model regressed the three dining attributes and expectations against experiences. Both full regression models are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression results for customers' expectations and experiences

Independent variables	Model 1: Expectations		Model 2: Experiences	
	t-value	p-value (p)	t-value	p-value (p)
Food quality	9.14	<.0001*	7.51	0.0386*
Level of service	10.73	<.0001*	2.03	0.0274*
Ambience	6.20	<.0001*	0.85	0.1085
Expectations	-	-	4.26	<.0001*

*indicates significant relation (p<0.05).

The first full regression model showed that all three dining variables were significantly related (p<0.05) to customers' expectations. The t-values in Table 3 indicate the relative importance of each attribute in predicting expectations. The level of service (t=10.73) was rated by respondents as the most important variable for expectations, followed by the quality of food (t=9.14) and ambience (t=6.20).

The results are in line with previous researchers (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2002; Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Chow *et al.*, 2007; Jafaar, Lumbers & Eves, 2009; Wu & Liang, 2009) that found that service quality had a significant impact on restaurant customers' expectations. However, a study performed by Sulek and Hensley (2004) found that food quality ranked highest amongst the factors that had an impact on restaurant customer expectations whilst Andaleeb and Conway (2006) found that food quality ranked third highest.
The three dining attributes had a coefficient of determination (R²) of 0.5048 and thus explained more than 50 per cent

of the variability in dining expectations. As such, the regression results of this study identified food quality, level of service and ambience as significant predictors (p<0.05) of restaurant customers' expectations, which explained 50 per cent of restaurant customers' expectations. This explanation of the variability in overall expectations is almost similar to the study by Sulek and Hensley (2004). The regression results of a study performed by Sulek and Hensley (2004), identified food, ambience and seating order as significant predictors (p<0.05) of restaurant customer expectations, which explained 51 per cent of restaurant customers' expectations.

The second full regression model depicted in Table 3 showed that the quality of food (p=0.0386), the level of service (p=0.0274) and expectations (p<0.0001) were significantly related (p<0.05) to experiences. The t-values of the second model indicated that respondents rated the quality of food (t=7.51) as the most important variable in rating their overall experience, followed by expectations (t=4.26) and the level of service (t=2.03).

Previous research studies confirmed the important role of the quality of food, expectations and the level of service (Ganesh, Arnold & Reynolds, 2000; Soriano, 2002; Susskind, 2002; Barsky & Nash, 2003; Iglesias & Guillén, 2004; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Cheng, 2005; Söderlund & Öhman, 2005; Gupta, Mclaughlin & Gomez, 2007; Han, Back & Barrett, 2009; Markovic *et al.*, 2010) in restaurant customer experience. Although it might seem surprising that ambience was found not to be a significant contributor to customers' experiences, similar studies by Namkung and Yang (2008) and Andaleeb and Conway (2006) confirmed that ambience is not a significant contributor to customers' experiences.

Furthermore, the three dining attributes and expectations had an R^2 of 0.1928 per cent and thus explained just more than 19 per cent of the variability of restaurant customers' experiences. As such, the regression results of this study identified food quality, level of service, ambience and expectations as significant predictors ($p<0.05$) of restaurant customers' experiences, which explained 19 per cent of customers' experiences. However, the regression results of a study performed by Sulek and Hensley (2004:242) identified only food quality as a significant predictor ($p<0.05$) of restaurant customer patronage, which explained only 17 per cent of customers' return patronage.

The reported differences in the study mentioned above might have been due to different sample characteristics. For example, Sulek and Hensley (2004) only used customers from one Irish pub style full service restaurant whereas this study used customers from eight different full service restaurants. Furthermore, the other difference might have occurred due to different independent variables tested. Sulek and Hensley (2004) tested nine independent variables, namely; wait time, seating order fairness, wait-area crowding, server attentiveness, dining atmosphere, dining seating comfort, food quality, dining experience and return patronage whereas this study only tested four independent variables.

CONCLUSION

In formal full service restaurants customers expect far beyond food unlike other categories of restaurants where food is valued most. Although good food is an essential component of a satisfying meal, the level of service plays a pivotal role in formal full service restaurants. In this context, results may broaden the knowledge of formal full service restaurant service quality and are suitable for international comparison. In particular, the study itself is considered useful for South African academics and practitioners, as it is the first that presents the application of correlation coefficient and regression analysis in Port Elizabeth restaurants. Improving service quality in Port Elizabeth formal full service restaurants will, in turn, not only increase customer experiences and strengthen customer loyalty, but also improve the restaurant's reputation and generate greater revenue.

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