THE EFFECT OF RESTAURANT ATTRIBUTES ON CUSTOMERS' OVERALL PERCEPTION AND RETURN PATRONAGE: A CASE STUDY ON EBONY RESTAURANT, BANGALORE, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to determine the effect of restaurant attributes on customers' overall perception and return patronage, and whether dining occasions affect return patronage in Ebony Restaurant, Bangalore (India). A sample survey method was used, with a structured questionnaire as the research instrument, at Ebony restaurant Bangalore, (India). Data from 400 guests, as respondents, was used for statistical analysis.

Findings showed that there is a correlation between restaurant attributes and customers' overall perception. Results also indicated that there is a relationship between return patronage and restaurant attributes and dining occasions. Managerial implications are addressed and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Dining out in restaurants is a ubiquitous, significant and growing international phenomenon. Everywhere one travels, people from all ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, ages, socioeconomic groups and both genders can be observed eating and drinking out in independent, locally owned and operated establishments or in strongly branded multiunit chain outlets (Powers & Barrows, 2003). Restaurants serve both our social and biological needs. Restaurants can be divided into two categories: those serving predominantly our social needs- the dining market, and those serving our biological needs- the eating market. Because dining is predominantly a social event, service is important. The servers are expected to be friendly, as signified by a warm smile. In relatively expensive restaurants serving the dining market, the operation that falls short on significant measures of service is likely to lose customers quickly (Dittmer, 2002).

There is a movement towards trying out new and exotic foods, increasing interest in vegetarian items, as well as a growing use of spices, herbs, and hot peppers. Asian foods are getting more popular with cuisines from China, Thailand, and Japan in the lead

(Bharath and Prema, 2004). Indian cuisine is hot, spicy, flavored with herbs, and offers many vegetarian options. Eating has long been central to the culture of India, as diet is linked to notions of purity and self-control. The cosmopolitan Indian is now eager to explore new tastes and absorb global trends and is no longer limited by geographical or cultural boundaries. India has several thousand multi-cuisine eateries that dot the cities. (http://www.bangalorebest.com/cityresource).

For the last few years, the restaurant industry has experienced changes in Bangalore, a fast developing metropolitan city of India, such as heightened competitive pressures from the new upcoming upscale restaurants and increased consumer expectations, there is a growing need for the management of Ebony Restaurant to better understand to develop and maintain customer satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, competition is arising from new restaurants that offer food and services, of a similar nature to Ebony. Consequently, the existing customers of Ebony may find a number of alternate options and switch to other restaurants. Therefore, the management of Ebony has to be aware of the customers' overall perception of the restaurant and work on its weak spots to boost the

customers' return patronage. Attributes of Ebony Restaurant along with the occasions for dining, play an important role in the decision making process of the customers. Hence it has to be determined, "What are the factors that influence the consumers' overall perception and return patronage to the restaurant; and whether dining occasions affect return patronage intentions?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumers are becoming increasingly interested in cuisine and visiting destinations for culinary experiences (Faulkner et al., 1999). In light of emerging trends, various tourism and industry bodies have become progressively more aware of the need to market, develop and promote the restaurant industry as part of the tourism product.

Sparks et al. (2000) aimed to develop a better understanding of the contribution of the restaurant sector to tourist destination attractiveness. Besides serving excellent food, good service, the location of the restaurant, its d cor and intangible aspects such as the ambience and atmosphere were reported to be important factors essential to enhance patrons' culinary experiences.

The SERVQUAL model has received a great deal of interest since it offers a practical instrument; the SERVQUAL scale and, it is claimed, the five empirical factors in the model (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) are generic and are therefore valid and reliable for any service organization (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Despite being refined over a period of years (Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml 1991; Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1994), SERVQUAL continues to display a lack of consistency in replicating these dimensions in different service environments (Babakus and Mongold, 1992).

In the restaurant context there is a lack of survey instrument development, with the exception of guest comment cards. Equally, service quality models such as SERVQAL and DINQUAL have not been able to identify the salient attributes that are particular to restaurant operations (Kivela et al., 1999). In addition, due to high levels of fragmentation and diversification in both the range of products, i.e. menus and menu items and market segmentation, it is difficult to gener-

alize restaurant customer satisfaction results. This is because the restaurant industry has a distinct product structure that is differentiated by price, location, theme/ambience, service level, cuisine and style, which at the same time demand a wide variety of market segments for the same products.

Of the numerous studies that have applied modified SERVQUAL models, few have been specifically for foodservice. One of them is TANGSERV (Raajpoot, 2002), which focused on measuring only the tangible dimension. The TANGSERV instrument included a three-factor structure for Tangibles: layout/design, product/service, and ambience/social.

Recently, a number of researchers have applied customer satisfaction theories, developed by consumer behaviorists, to food service (Almanza et al., 1994; Johns and Tyas, 1996). Auty (1992) studied restaurant customers' expectation and satisfaction perceptions in various restaurants and to investigate the way they select an eating place. It showed that food type and food quality are the most frequently-cited choice variables, while Dube et al. (1994), Lee and Hing (1995) and Qu (1997) have investigated customer satisfaction in more traditional restaurants, which prompted Oh and Jeong (1996) to lament the paucity of studies into dining satisfaction and return patronage.

There is an agreement among consumer researchers that loyal customers are essential for long-term business success, and that repeat patronage is a fundamental marketing objective of any business (Lowenstin, 1995; Spreng and Mackoy, 1996). Return patronage is the act or condition of going back to be a regular customer or client of a commercial establishment. Kivela (2000) argued that the customer's post-dining decision whether or not to return to the restaurant, is the moment of final truth for the restaurateur, as opposed to simply a customer's decision to go to the restaurant. The decision to return to the restaurant signifies whether or not the restaurant's performance met or exceeded customer expectations. For the restaurant marketer, this may also confirm whether the restaurant's marketing strategy has lived up to it's expectations and effectiveness, or whether it was ill-conceived. Restaurant customers are more likely to return if they are satisfied with their dining experience.

Finkelstein (1989) in particular, has emphasized that the customer's dining needs are often linked with

the restaurant's attributes. Restaurants' attributes are most likely to be perceived and evaluated within the context in which they are experienced (Finkelstein, 1989). Furthermore, both Finkelstein (1989) and Wood (1995) have argued that these attributes, collectively, gave the restaurant its particular identity and character, which directly or indirectly intervene in the act of dining and post-purchase behavior, i.e. return or non-return.

In the present study, willingness to return (or not to return) to a restaurant served as the behavioral measure (dependent variable) and was compared with the responses relating to restaurant attributes, namely food, service, ambience and convenience factors (Kivela at el., 1999) which were considered (independent variables).

Each of these variables was further subdivided as shown below:

People eat out for a variety of reasons: social needs, business needs, ego and self-fulfillment and such. Kivela (1997) studied selection and segmentation of restaurants. The study gave due prominence to the dining out occasions in order to establish if the restaurant choice varied by this factor. The dining out occasions that arose from the pilot interviews were a place to meet someone, for fun, for enjoyment, a social occasion, for a business necessity, family outing and for a celebration (birthday, anniversary and such). These were then collapsed into a social occasion, business necessity and celebration.

METHODS

The methodology used in this research was sample survey. Convenience sampling was used as the sur-

Table 1.1: Restaurant Attributes (Sub Variables)

Atmosphere	Convenience	Service	Food
• Level of comfort	• Handling of telephone reservations	• Speed/efficiency of service	• Presentation of food
• Level of noise	• Location/ accessibility	• Friendly/polite, helpful staff	• Menu item variety
• View from the restaurant	• Parking facility	• Attentiveness of staff	• Nutritious food
• Overall cleanliness	• Opening/closing hours	• Food/beverage knowledge of staff	• Tastiness of food
• Restaurant's appearance			• Freshness of food
			• Temperature of food

vey technique, with the target respondents comprising customers dining at Ebony Restaurant, Bangalore. The survey was conducted while the subjects were about to exit after dinning at the restaurant. All potential subjects were approached by the researcher and sought their approval for participation, before finally handing over the questionnaire. The sample size for this study was 400. Approximately 70 questionnaires were distributed each day from April 27 to May 2nd 2005, until a total of 400 were obtained.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The research instrument used was the structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was written in English. It contained four sections. The first section evaluated the customers' dining experience based on the restaurant attributes, the second section measured the overall perception of the customers, the third section explored the occasions that the customers had visited Ebony Restaurant for and the last section asked "Will you return to this restaurant?" Anchored to the scale 1 = I will definitely not return and 2 = I will definitely return, reveals the customers' post-purchase behavioural intentions.

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses were divided into three groups. In Group A, each of the four categories of restaurant attributes, consisting of atmosphere, convenience, service and food, was hypothesized to be related to all the facets of customers' overall perception. Group B hypothesized a relationship between each of the four restaurant attributes and return patronage intention. The return patronage intention was also hypothesized to be related to dining out occasions, which comprised a celebration, a social need and a business need, in Group C.

RELIABILITY

Several researches have studied the reliability of selected multi-item scales: Oh and Jeong (1996) and Qu (1997) for the Likert scale. A reliability analysis (Cronbach's 1951) was performed to test the reli-

ability and internal consistency of most of attributes measured were high, ranging from Atmosphere 0.63, Convenience .80, Service .88, Food .67 and overall perception .84. These were well above the minimum value of 0.5, which is considered acceptable as an indicator of reliability (Hair et al., 1995).

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Spearmans' rank-order correlation was used to determine the relationship between the restaurant attributes and customers' overall perception of the restaurant. The variables for this were measured using the five-point likert scale. The Chi-square statistic was used to investigate the association between the restaurant attributes and customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant. The Chi-square statistic was also used to examine the association between dining out occasions and return patronage intentions of the customers.

DESCRIPTIVE

A descriptive statistical procedure was required to develop profiles of the total sample. Frequencies were tabulated to identify the distribution of respondents' dining occasion and return patronage. Respondents dined for special event 51.3%, business 28.5% and social reasons 20.3%. The majority of respondents 98% said that they would definitely return to the restaurant.

The top two mean responses in customers' dining experience with regard to the restaurant attributes were atmosphere (4.0335) and service (4.0331) (see Table 1 in appendix). The sub-variable in 'atmosphere' with the highest mean was 'view from the restaurant' (4.41). 'Level of noise in the restaurant' (3.5175) had the least mean in 'atmosphere' (see Table 2). The sub-variable in 'service' with the highest mean was 'friendly/polite and helpful staff' (4.1125). 'Speed/efficiency of service' (3.9375) had the least mean in 'service' (see Table 2).

The bottom two mean responses in customers' dining experience with regard to the restaurant attributes were food (3.9404) and convenience (3.7869). The sub-variable in 'food' with the highest mean was 'tastiness of food' (4.1375). 'Menu item

variety' (3.8075) had the least mean in 'food' (see Table 2). The sub-variable in 'convenience' with the highest mean was 'location/accessibility of the restaurant' (4.125). 'Parking facility' (3.455) had the lowest mean in 'convenience' (see Table 2).

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Group A: Restaurant's Attributes Vs. Customers' Overall Perception.

The relationship between the restaurant attribute 'Atmosphere' and customers' overall perception of the restaurant, which was tested, using Spearman's rank order correlation, showed that there was a weak positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 4). An Oklahoma State University foodservice survey in 2004, showed that customers' perception has as much to do with the look and feel of a foodservice facility as the food itself. Another study conducted by Auty (1992) to determine consumers' perceptions of restaurants, affirmed that atmosphere or style were attributes that affected the perception and choice of restaurants.

The relationships between the restaurant attributes 'Convenience' and 'Service' and customers' overall perception of the restaurant, which were tested, using Spearman's rank order correlation, showed that there were weak positive relationships between the two variables (.253 and .298) (see Table 4). Elan (2004) postulated that the public's perception of a restaurant is not just about the food; it's also about the look, the service and the location. According to the result of the study of Narasimhan and Sen (1992), there is a relationship between a product's attributes and the perception of the respondents.

The relationship between the restaurant attribute 'Food' and customers' overall perception of the restaurant, which was tested, using Spearman's rank order correlation, showed that there was a weak positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 4). Auty (1992), in the study conducted on consumers' perceptions of restaurants and to investigate the way they select an eating place, insists that food type and food quality are the most frequently-cited choice variables regardless of occasions.

Group B: Restaurant's Attributes vs. Customers Return Patronage Intention to the restaurant

The relationship between the restaurant attribute 'Atmosphere' and customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant, which was tested using Chi-square, showed that there was a positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 5). Dube (1994) studied the connection between specific attributes and return patronage in a small, independently owned up-scale restaurant. The study found that atmosphere was one of the restaurant attributes that lead to the final decision of the customers to repeat a purchase in a pleasure situation and in a business situation.

The relationship between the restaurant attribute "Convenience' and customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant, which was tested using Chi-square, showed that there was a positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 5). A similar research conducted by Wood in 1995 concluded that location (convenience) was one among the features of the restaurant that gives the restaurant its particular identity and character, which directly or indirectly intervene, in the act of dining and post-purchase behaviour, i.e. return or non-return.

The relationship between the restaurant attribute 'Service' and customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant, which was tested using Chi-square showed that there was a positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 5). According to a study conducted by Brumback in 1998, customers need reasons to return to a restaurant. The study confirmed 'service' to be one of the most important attributes of return patronage and restaurant success.

The relationship between the restaurant attribute 'Food' and customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant, which was tested, using Chi-square showed that there was a positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 5). The findings of studies on return patronage conducted by Bumback (1998), Wood (1995) and Dube (1994) in the restaurant environment showed that the most important reason for customers to return to the restaurant was the type and quality of food.

Group C: Dining out occasion Vs. Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant.

The relationship between dining out occasion and customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant, which was tested using Chi-square showed that there was a positive relationship between the two variables (see Table 3). Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece

(2000) studied the relationship between dining-out occasion and return patronage in their research "Consumer research in the restaurant environment: A conceptual model of dining satisfaction and return patronage". The relationship between dining-out occasions and customers' intention to return was found significant. It implied that the dining occasion does have a significant effect on return patronage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study show that there is a relationship between restaurant attributes and customers' overall perception of the restaurant and return patronage. It is therefore very important for the management of Ebony Restaurant to ensure that the attributes of the restaurant lead to a favourable perception of the restaurant and ensure return patronage of the customers.

It is to be noted that the weak positive relationship between the restaurant attributes atmosphere, service and convenience and customers' overall perception of the restaurant; and the moderate positive relationship between food and customers' overall perception of the restaurant, does not mean that the customers' overall perception is not good. It merely shows that the correlation that exists between the two variables (restaurant attributes and customers' overall perception of the restaurant) is not strong, though they have high scores when taken individually.

The following are the main restaurant attributes that the management of Ebony Restaurant should pay particular attention to. The atmosphere in Ebony can be enhanced by reducing the level of noise in the restaurant. To execute this, soft music can be played in the background and the staff must ensure that the food and beverages are served as noiselessly as possible; without the clatter of plates, cutlery and movement of chairs. Making things convenient for the customers, adds to their comfort. The management can make the experience of dining at Ebony more convenient, by providing adequate parking space for its guests. The initial contact the customers make with the restaurant's employees is when they make the reservations by telephone. To create a favourable impression on the guests, telephone courtesies should be strictly followed.

The staff must be extremely competent. The service at Ebony can be made better by retraining the staff, so that they may become faster and more efficient and have good knowledge about the food and beverages that they serve. The menu item variety can be augmented to improve the 'food' served in the restaurant. The restaurant could therefore offer more vegetarian and fish items, especially during buffets. Consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about their diets and are health conscious nowadays. Therefore it is important to make nutritious food available for the diners. A commendable feature to be noted is that the majority of the customers have stated that they will 'definitely return to the restaurant'. Therefore the management of Ebony must continuously monitor the restaurant attributes to ensure that it not only maintains, but also enhances its quality of service and food; keeps up the pleasant ambience and keeps their guests comfortable through the conveniences it offers.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The main limitations of this study are: Firstly, the number of attributes selected for this study was limited to four - atmosphere, convenience, service and food.

Secondly, the design of the study allowed the results of the sample to be drawn exclusively from respondents who dined in the restaurant at a specific time only. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized for other time periods. Thirdly, since this study was conducted in India, where the geographical and socio-economic setting is not identical to that of other countries, the findings of this study may not be generalized to restaurants in other countries.

There is a vast scope for further research in this field. A demographic study of the customers (taking into account their gender, level of income and age) can be conducted to give the management of Ebony Restaurant an accurate idea of the type of guests it caters to. This will help the management to advertise and position Ebony better.

A detailed study can be conducted taking into consideration each of the restaurant's attributes, comprising atmosphere, convenience, service and food. A detailed study in this field will help the management to detect even the minute elements that leave the guests dissatisfied. In order to understand

the food habits and preferences of the customers better, a study of the customers' preference and estimation for each of the four cuisines (Tandoori, Provencal French, Parsee and Thai) served in Ebony Restaurant, can be carried out.

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Appendix

Table 1: Customers' Dining Experience and Overall Perception

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Atmosphere	4.0335	.53450
Convenience	3.7869	.58010
Service	4.0331	.59208
Food	3.9404	.53867
Customers' overall perception	3.8120	.68865

Table 2: Restaurant attributes - Sub variables.

Atmosphere	Level of comfort	Level of noise	View from restaurant	Cleaniness of restaurant	Restaurant's appearance	
Mean	4.1150	3.5175	4.41	4.0875	4.0375	
Std. dev.	.744	1.064	.790	.7114	.759	
Convenience	Telephone reservations	Location/ accessibility	Parking facility	Opening/ closing hours		
Mean	3.785	4.125	3.4551	3.7825		
Std. dev.	.718	.791	.086	.819		
Service	Speed/ Efficiency	Friendly/ polite	Attentiveness of staff	Food/ beverage knowledge		
Mean	3.94	4.112	4.06	4.0225		
Std. dev.	.762	.718	.720	.747		
Food	Presentation of food	Menu item variety	Nutritious food	Tastiness of food	Freshness of food	Temperature of food
Mean	3.8625	3.8075	3.865	4.1375	4.0525	3.9175
Std. dev.	.920	.931	.845	.797	.791	.805

Table 3: Dining out occasion Vs. Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant.

Variables	Type of statistic	Sig. (2 tailed)
Dining out occasion - Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant.	Chi-Square statistic	.023

Table 4:   Restaurant's Attributes Vs. Customers' Overall Perception.

Variables	Statistic value (Spearman's rho correlation coefficient)	Sig. (2 tailed)
Atmosphere - Customers' overall perception of the restaurant	.203**	.000
Convenience - Customers' overall perception of the restaurant	.253**	.000
Service - Customers' overall perception of the restaurant	.298**	.000
Food - Customers' overall perception of the restaurant	.384**	.000
**Values statistically significant at 1%		

Table 5:   Restaurant's Attributes Vs. Customers Return Patronage to the Restaurant

Variables	Type of statistic	Sig. (2 tailed)
Atmosphere - Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant	Chi-Square statistic	.000
Convenience - Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant	Chi-Square statistic	.005
Service - Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant	Chi-Square statistic	.000
Food - Customers' return patronage intention to the restaurant	Chi-Square statistic	.000