

The Assessment of Restaurants' Authenticity from the Perspective of Young Population

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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the elements that assess the authenticity of a restaurant. The analysis was realized from the young population perspective. This segment of population has been chosen following the idea that in Romania, like in all developed countries, representatives of this age group will use the restaurants services at a much greater extent than older generations. In this respect, it was conducted a quantitative marketing research based on a sample of 228 students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration, from the Transilvania University of Braşov. The results have enabled a hierarchy of factors that are considered relevant for evaluating the authenticity of a restaurant and, also, to identify the profile of an ideal restaurant.

Key words: authenticity, restaurants, young population.

J.E.L. classification: M31, Z32.

1. Introduction

Globalization has favored consumption uniformity. In this context, well renowned brands proliferated and this trend has influenced the profile market in a decisive way. In the tourism industry, when the analysis is restricted to restaurants' activity, the general conclusion is that the phenomenon McDonalds' has changed consumers' behavior to a significant extent. Based on the McDonalds' model of consumption, the fast food restaurants have become a constant in customer choices, especially among the young population.

Standardization or McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1998, cited in Erkuş-Öztürk *et al*, 2016, p.477) stands for mass consumption, absence of class- and life-style distinction, economies of scale, standardization, efficiency, predictability of quality, low prices, the transformation of authentic tourism places into standardized 'non-places', and disenchantment of consumption. In this framework, the development of authentic or even innovative restaurants represents an interesting demarche.

2. Literature review

When customers dine out at a restaurant, they evaluate what they experience. Prior studies suggested that the perceived quality of a product or service is a critical factor determining future behaviors, especially loyalty related behaviors (Chiou *et al*, 2002; Gonzalez *et al*, 2007). Accordingly, a higher perception of the quality of product and service attributes and satisfaction with the dining experience induce more favorable behavioral intentions (Ha *et al*, 2013, p.155). From a restaurant operator's perspective, it is important to determine why customers seek variety in

their restaurant choices in order to better understand customers in choice situations and develop effective management strategies.

Ha *et al* (2013, p.156) stated that variety seeking in consumption situations are focused primarily on variety seeking behavior in product or brand choice situations and unlike product or brand choices, customer variety seeking in service environments, such as restaurants, is affected by personal relationships between customers and employees, unique restaurant attributes including employee services, foods, and environmental dining factors. In this respect, innovation in restaurant operations has gained significant importance.

Innovation represents, in a broad definition, (1) the introduction of a new good or of a new quality of a good, (2) the introduction of a new method of production, (3) the opening of a new market, (4) the conquest of a new source of supply, and (5) the carrying out of a new organization of an industry through, for instance, mergers and take-overs or the breaking up of a monopoly position (Schumpeter, 1934, Erkuş-Öztürk *et al*, 2016, p.478). Innovations in the restaurant industry has been focused primarily on culinary innovations (Ottenbacher *et al*, 2009), but innovations in services and ambiance are also very important to restaurants because they are major constituent parts of dining out (Rahman, 2010, pp. 330-331). As Erkuş- Öztürk *et al*. (2016, pp.487-488) argued (1) higher-quality restaurants are significantly more innovative than lower-quality restaurants. (2) restaurants that are visited by a mix of locals and tourists are more innovative than restaurants either visited by locals or tourists, and (3) the fact that they are, to a large extent, visited by locals reduces the uncertainty that is always associated with innovations.

Over the last few decades, increasing awareness of cultural diversity and quest for authentic experiences are resulted in a rapidly growing demand for authentic and unique experiences (Okumus *et al*, 2007). Discovering this emerging trend, marketers have begun using authenticity as a brand-positioning and a product appeal strategy (Sedmak *et al*, 2008; Robinson *et al*, 2012) and hospitality and tourism marketers have been incorporating the concept of “authenticity” into their marketing strategies for years (Sedmak *et al*, 2008).

MacCannell (1971, 1973 cited in Mkono, 2012, p.388) portrayed tourists as hungering for an authentic experience to compensate for what had become mundane existence in their home environments. During holidays tourists pay important attention to cultural objects, which highlights a concern for the authenticity of the “Other”, apart from their search for the authentic “Self” (Mkono, 2012, p.392). Generally, the authenticity has been categorized into three dimensions: objective, constructive, and postmodern (Lu *et al*, 2015, p. 37). Authenticity is not equally important for all tourists and destinations. Each destination must decide which tourist segment to encourage and adopt the degree of authenticity to match target group expectations (Walton 2000, cited in Sedmak *et al*, 2008, p.1010). At the same time, Sedmark *et al* (2008, p.1024) found out that customers’ educational level has a positive effect on attitude towards authenticity.

Consumers’ authenticity perception has significantly positive relationships with consumers’ brand awareness, brand image and perceived quality of that restaurant and, therefore, it is vital for restaurant managers and operators to invest a significant amount of time and effort in monitoring and improving every aspect of their service delivery process to ensure an authentic dining experience for their consumers (Lu *et al*, 2015, p. 43).

3. The research methodology

The aim of the present quantitative marketing research is to identify the attitudes, opinions and behaviors of the young generation from Brasov regarding the dining-out experience in an authentic restaurant.

The research method chosen was the survey based on questionnaires, and the sample included 228 students from the Faculty of Economic Sciences and Business Administration of Braşov. The objectives of the research were the following:

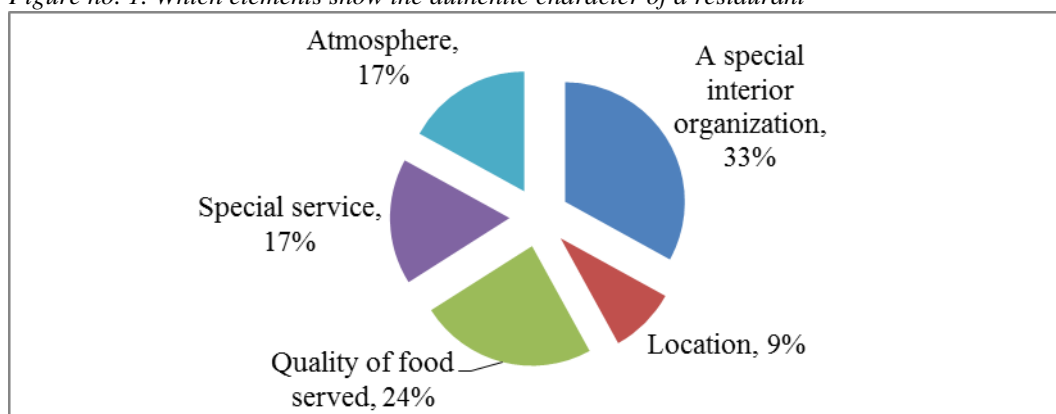
- Identification of elements which highlight the authentic character of a restaurant;
- Ranking the elements considered relevant for the assessment of a restaurant’s authenticity ;
- The description of the ideal restaurant.

4. Results and Discussions

It was first analyzed the frequency of dining out behavior for the respondents. Out of 228 interviewed persons, 40% eat at the restaurant at least once in two weeks, 30% at least once in a month, 19% dine out at a restaurant 2-3 times a week, and the lowest percentage, 11% was recorded for the respondents who have mentioned to eat at the restaurant only when they are away from home.

At the question that shows if authenticity at the restaurant level is valued, the percentage of affirmative answers was 93%. Further, there were underlined which are the elements that, in respondents' opinion, substantiate the authentic character of a restaurant (figure no.1).

Figure no. 1. Which elements show the authentic character of a restaurant



Source: Research conducted by the authors

Being a multiple choice question, the total number of answers obtained was 434 distributed among the five factors mentioned. The interior organization of the restaurant is considered the factor that influences in the highest degree the authentic character of a restaurant (33%), followed by the quality of food (24%), the exceptional customer service and atmosphere had the same percentage in respondents' assessments, namely 17% and the factor that can contribute in the lowest degree at defining the restaurant's authenticity is location, which obtained 9% of the given answers.

Further, the respondents have underlined which is, from the previous list of factors, the element considered by them defining for the assessment of the restaurant's authenticity. In table no.1 is shown the ranking.

Table no. 1. The ranking of factors considered relevant for the assessment of a restaurant's authenticity

Factor	Rank	Priority assessment rate
Quality of food served	1	41%
Special interior organization	2	21%
Atmosphere	3	16%
Location	4	14%
Special service	5	8%

Source: Research conducted by the authors

This analysis shows a completely different valuation of the factors that define the authenticity of a restaurant. Therefore, when they have chosen one factor from the list, the most important factor and with a substantial percentage of answers, namely 41%, was the quality of food. Indeed, this point outlines once more, the idea that the most important element and the main reason for the consumption of the food services is associated to the quality of food offered. The second factor as importance is the special interior organization, with 21% of the assessments, and on the third place is atmosphere (16%), location is no longer the factor with the lowest number of assessments, in ranking is considered the fourth as importance, with 14% of choices, and the last factor assessed is special service, which has 8% of the analyzed answers. The ranking is relevant for the restaurant

managers, because it shows the most important elements taken into account by the customer in assessing these units.

Also, the respondents were asked if they appreciate the frequent change of the menu list in a restaurant, the percentage of affirmative answers being 91%, and the reasons brought to give arguments for this choice are numerous. Of these, the most commonly stated were: curiosity, the desire to try several choices of dishes made with the same raw materials, the desire to know the new trends in culinary arts, in case of loyal customers the need to diversify the offer, etc. Finally, the respondents have described the ideal restaurant, this being a free question included in the questionnaire. The issues mentioned in identifying this feature, namely “ideal”, were among the most diverse, standing out the pleasant atmosphere, quality and fresh cuisine, diversified menus, special services and location, intimacy. There were also stated the elements that underline the aspects which cannot be easily found in most of restaurants, such as: kind and friendly staff, reasonable waiting time, warm served dishes, a balanced ratio quality- price or fair prices.

5. Conclusions

The need for authenticity in a restaurant is a current issue due to McDonaldization, which was accompanied by many negative aspects, such as standardization, lack of innovation, menus' reduced quality, etc. In order to balance this phenomenon, restaurant managers, in their attempt to attract important segments of customers, among which the most important is the young population, are in the position to achieve management and image changes, and to emphasize their major differences as against the fast-food restaurants. Among the existing trends the need to improve authenticity and innovation becomes a prerequisite to success. Small businesses, and most of the restaurants fall into this category, must understand that innovation is the tool that can help them to survive on the market and can offer the advantage in a highly competitive environment (Epuran, 2015, p.61).

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