

## A MULTI-ATTRIBUTE APPROACH INTO THE SELECTION OF A LOCAL FOOD RESTAURANT – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Cátia C. Siopa  
Polytechnic Institute of Leiria / School of Tourism and Maritime Technology  
Peniche, Portugal  
e-mail: catia.siopa@ipleiria.pt

and

Pedro López  
Extremadura University /Business Management and Sociology Department  
Badajoz, Spain  
e-mail: pelopez@unex.es

### ABSTRACT

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

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

**Keywords:** typical restaurant, strategic variables, management model, management implications.

### INTRODUCTION

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

Consumer's choices are influenced by several variables of decision. These will differ depending of his or her profile. The typical gastronomy consumers can be loyal to this type of food or, while tourist, willing to try new flavours, and the authentic branding of the visited area. To assemble a management model, it is essential to understand the main variables that influence the selection of a restaurant. This model will allow the establishment managers to take measured corrective form value and the customers' expectations. This way a more effective and efficient local food restaurants administration will be possible.

#### 1. Bibliographical Revision

Many attributes of different nature can be considered, however due this study's scope - strategic variables for the local food restaurants management - 8 main attributes were considered: service quality; price; ambience / atmosphere; menu variety; food quantity; service timings; employees' sympathy; and location.

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

Ranaweera and Neely (2003) concluded that a reasonable perceived price has a positive influence on client memory. According to Auty (1992) the price is one of the most important factors, although it may shift in

the order of importance depending on the occasion - in family dinners and business meals the price becomes more relevant, given the other attributes.

In the work of Yüksel and Yüksel (2003), a comfortable atmosphere is seen as a key factor, attracting customers to the restaurant and shaping their intention to return. Particularly, they found that the service environment (e.g., tables distribution, music, and decoration) has a central role in defining consumer behaviour, their reactions and their social interactions. Auty (1992) states that among the restaurants serving the same kind of food and with similar quality, the ambience or style are critical factors for site selection.

Chang et al. (2010) suggest that the meal should comprise a variety of items. This is due to the fact that consumers wish to experience local cuisine at its splendour. They look for restaurants that offer a wide range of options, so that they can have a wide and extensive image of that particular culture.

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

Authenticity is an attribute that can be especially relevant to local food restaurants. Authenticity refers to the possibility of food and the ambience to reflect the genuine flavour and the culture of the original place. In other words, the environment and the cooking process are not adjusted to suit local tastes, and thus, customers can get familiar with the typical culture and customs and judge its authenticity (Ebster and Guist, 2004).

Many authors argue that external factors, also known as information sources, that people are exposed to, together with several other factors determine possible selections (Um and Crompton, 1990; Gartner and Hunt, 1987; Woodside and Lysonsky, 1989).

For Régnier (2009). promoters such as public figures and the media, have an important role in the menu choice, because they possess the ability to make restaurants the their dishes popular. Furthermore, they can tend to create consumption trends for certain type of foods.

Pedraja and Yagüe (2001) found that the search for external global information is affected by shifts in prices and the level of prior knowledge. Moreover, the level of prior knowledge exercises a positive effect on the demand for external information.

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

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

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

The consumers' previous experiences, as suggested by Clow et al. (1995) can influence the choice of the individual, at the same time that it will shape their perceptions about the internal factors. If the individual's past experiences are positive, then they will have a positive influence in the choice of the establishment and the scale of importance of each internal factor attributes. The criteria most intangible such as security, trust, quality of service, convenience and reputation can be influenced by the criteria most tangible as the price, appearance, location, alternatives, advertising, word-to-mouth, advises, and the past experience.

Clark and Wood (1998) reports that many people are loyal to a restaurant. They showed that their loyalty is reciprocal by the owner and restaurant staff upon arrival, being more attentive speeding up the service, making tables available when the restaurant is full, or offering complimentary bottle of wine..

On the other hand, when choosing a restaurant, the fact that the customer has a past positive experience and loyalty to a restaurant will make his choice, regardless of the reason for the meal. After the knowledge about

the restaurant service, customers consider the quality of the food, the friendliness of the staff, the atmosphere, the speed of service and opening hour, the main attributes for their loyalty.

In general, according to Pliner and Hobden (1992), individuals who exhibit neophilia have been identified as being capable of identify ingredients during their flavour assessments. This way, they tend to try new things in order to intensify the feeling of pleasure. On the other hand, the food neophobiacs might feel very reluctant when experiencing novel food. According to Fischler (1988), people have a natural tendency to dislike or have suspicions concerning new and non-family foods.

Both trends (neophilia and neophobia) can be easily found, and there are relevant differences in cultural level of countries and regions of the planet, encouraging neophilic trends. Since eating requires a real involvement of the body with the unknown destinations' environment, the tourist neophobic trend will, without a doubt, become more prominent (Fischler, 1988).

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

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

Some authors, such as Beerli and Martin (2004), Gartner and Hunt (1987), Pearce (1982) and Phelps (1986) indicate that after a individual visits a destination, the image formed after tends to be more realistic, complex and different from the one initially formed based on secondary sources.

The restaurant selection is the result of the perceived image and customer loyalty, and can also be influenced by the state of mind of the consumer at the stage of decision.

Namkung and Jang (2008) concluded that restaurants managers can undertake corrective measures, after knowing the weak points of their establishment. This way, the authors state that the owners of restaurants should act in the critical quality attributes to maximize the satisfaction of its customers, and possible future favorable behaviors. On the other hand, the managers having a profound knowledge of the establishment key attributes, they can also manage their financial resources more efficiently.

Furthermore, knowing the customers' needs of their value, the restaurants owners may create new services and products tailored to the needs of the specific market segment.

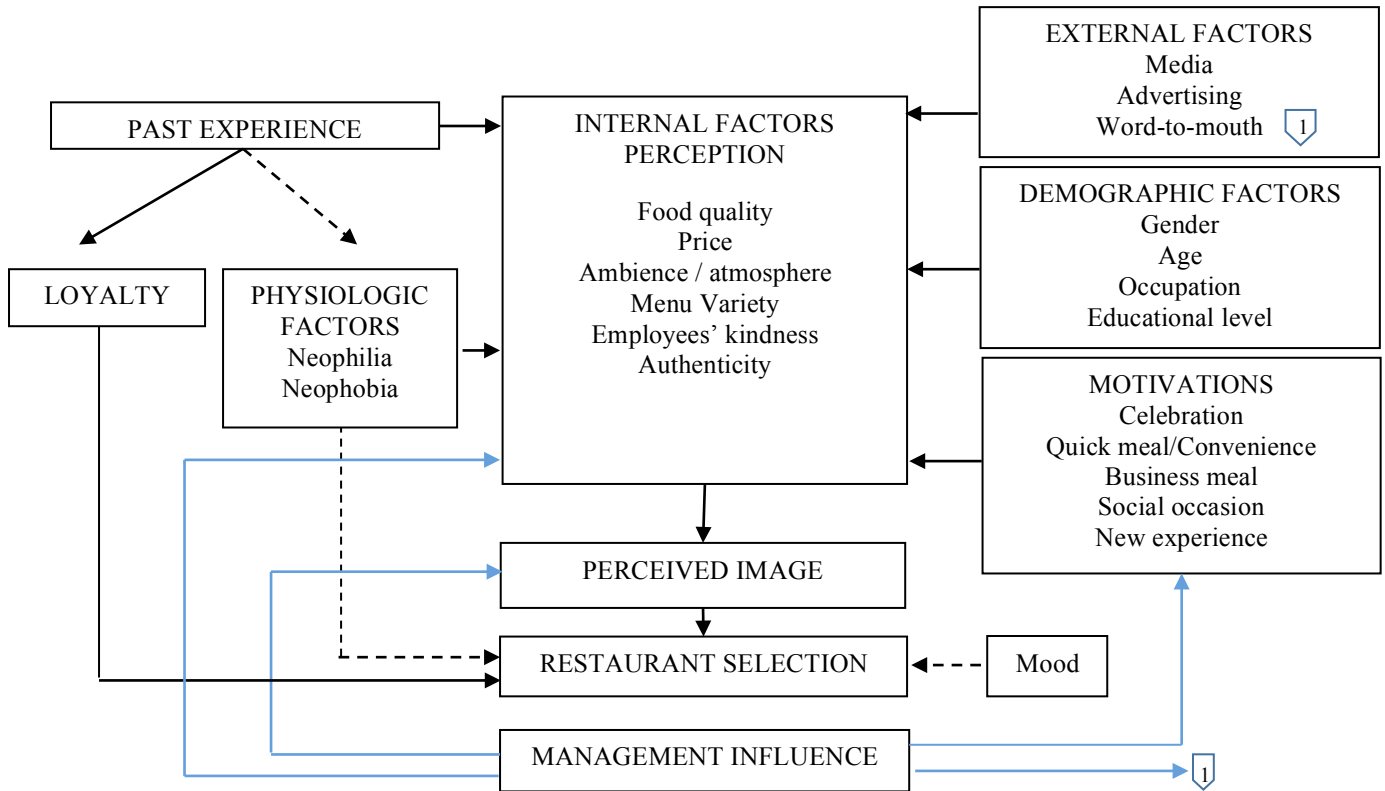
## 2. Results

After the analysis of several demand models and assessment of the various factors, attributes and variables involved in the consumer decision-making process, a local food restaurant management model is proposed. In this proposal, various factors that can influence the decision of consumer choice are present. Some of them that may actually be controlled by the management of the establishment.

This model results from the fusion of several analyzed models, with the adaptation of some of the concepts, and the insertion of an innovation: the influence of the management. This factor does not have direct influence on clients' decision. However it can coerce its choice, adapting the supply to the consumers' needs.

Figure 1

Proposed model for local food restaurant management



### 3. Discussion and Management Implications

Managers are often occupied in ordinary management operations, thus failing to detect discrepancies between the consumer's needs and the managers' perception about them (Verma et al., 2002).

Additionally, the information obtained about the clients choices, can be used to create services and to improve the process management. For example, assuming that the customers of a particular restaurant give more weight to the (lower) time of waiting rather than the number of dishes from the menu, the managers should focus on the process of finalizing the orders, resulting in the reduction of the waiting period. This will enable also for some or all of the following improvements: efficient scheduling of labor, to optimize the operations and minimize redundancies, and limit the number of dishes on the menu in order to speed up the preparation cycle of the client request.

In an increasingly competitive operational environment, the restaurants have to struggle to create gastronomic experiences that satisfy its customers, in order to retain and increase the market share. For this reason, they must understand the link between performance and friendly staff, and the customers satisfaction in the gastronomic experience. This information may also be used for an improved employees training (Kim et al, 2003),

However, the price seems to be the decisive factor for the consumer's choice and at the same time the key factor for the success of a restaurant. To maximize profit it is mandatory to combine marketing strategies with the various operation perspectives. When a pure strategy of marketing or procedure is used, the decision may not be so rich and may create a strategy worse than the first. For the managers of the restaurants, the price is a sensitive factor, because part of their profit depends on it, and for the clients this variable is decisive in the

hour of opting for a restaurant. Thus, it is necessary to control this variable and to know the maximum price that the customer is willing to pay and on the other hand, the minimum price that the restaurant can apply.

The knowledge of the variables that lead to the choice of a restaurant is an added value for the management, enabling the development of corrective measures, and for the creation of new procedures and services. Only by cross-checking the data of the most relevant variables for the customers and for managers, will allow for the creation of a complete management strategy.

#### 4. Limitations and Future Investigations

The literature is very abundant in relation to the consumer's profile subject. However, when we are dealing with the typical gastronomy consumer profile there are few data available due to the scarce studies in this gastronomic area.

The variables regarding the consumers' decision, given that this is very connected with consumer behavior, are widely reported. In this work we concentrated the work ensuring data synthesis in order to focus on the variables most relevant to local food restaurants.

#### REFERENCES

- Auty, S. (1992). Consumer choice and segmentation in the restaurant industry. *The Service Industries Journal*, 12 (3): 324-339.
- Baloglu, S. & McCleary, K. (1999). A model of destination image formation. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 26 (4): 868-897.
- Beerli, A. & Martín, J. D. (2004). Factors Influencing Destination Image. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 31(3): 657-681.
- Chang, R. et al. (2010). Attributes that influence the evaluation of travel dining experience: when East meets West. *Tourism Management*, in press: 1-10.
- Clark, M. & Wood, R. (1998). Consumer loyalty in the restaurant industry – a preliminary exploration on the issues. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 10 (4): 139-144.
- Clow, K. E. et al (1995). An Exploratory Study into the Purchase Decision Process Used by Leisure Travelers in Hotel Selection. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management*, 2 (4): 53-72.
- Ebster, C. & Guist, I. (2004). The role of authenticity in ethnic theme restaurants, *Journal of Food Service Business Research*, 7 (2): 41-52.
- Fischler, C. (1988). Food, self and identify. *Social Science Information*, 27: 275-292
- Gartner, W. & Hunt, J. (1987). An analysis of state image change over a twelve-year period (1971-1983). *Journal of Travel Research*, 26 (2): 15-19.
- Gartner, W.C. (1993). Image Formation Process in Uysal M. & Fesenmaier D. R. (Ed.), *Communication and Channel Systems in Tourism Marketing*. New York: Haworth Press.
- June, L.P. & Smith, S.L.J. (1987). Service attributes and situational effects on consumer preference for restaurant dining. *Journal of Travel Research*, 26 (2): 20-27.
- Kajanne, A. & Pirttilä-Backman, A. M. (1996). Toward an understanding of laypeople's notions about additives in food: clear-cut viewpoints about additives decrease with education. *Appetite*, 27: 207-222.
- Kim, H. J. et al (2003). Service orientation for contact employees in Korean casual-dining restaurants. *Hospitality Management*, 22: 67-83.
- Kincaid, C. et al. (2010). What really brings them back? The impact of tangible quality on affect and intention for casual dining restaurant patrons. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 22 (2): 209-220.
- Lewis, R. (1981). Restaurant advertising: appeals and consumers intentions. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 21 (5): 60-74.
- Liu, Y. & Jang, S. (2009). Perceptions of chineses restaurants in the US: what affects customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions?. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 28: 338-348.
- Lo, A. & Lam, T. (2004). Long-haul and short-haul outbound all-inclusive package tours. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 9 (2): 161-176.
- McFarlane, T. & Pliner, P. (1997). Increasing willingness to taste novel foods: effects of nutrition and taste information. *Appetite*, 28: 227-238.
- Mori, D. et al. (1987). Eating lightly and the self-presentation of femininity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53: 693-702.

- Namkung, Y. & Jang, S. (2008). Are highly satisfied restaurant customers really different? A quality perception perspective. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 20 (2): 142-155.
- Pearce, P. (1982). Perceived chances in holiday destinations. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 9: 145-164.
- Pedraja, M. & Yagüe, J. (2001). What information do customers use when choosing a restaurant?. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality*, 13 (6): 316-318.
- Phelps, A. (1986). Holiday destination image – the problem of assessment. An example developed in Menorca. *Tourism Management*, 7: 168- 180.
- Pliner, P. & Hobden, K. (1992). Development of a scale to measure the trait of food neophobia in humans. *Appetite*, 19: 105-120.
- Ranaweera, C. & Neely, A. (2003). Best student paper: some moderating effects on the service quality-customer retention link. *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, 23 (2): 230-248.
- Régnier, F. (2009). *How we consume new products: the example of exotic foods (1930-2000)*, World Congress Book: Global Issues in Food Science and Technology, Elsevier.
- Stabler, M. (1995). The image of destination regions: theoretical and empirical aspects In B. Goodall and G. Ashworth (Eds.), *Marketing in Tourism Industry: The Promotion of Destination Regions* (pp. 133-159). Routledge, London: United Kingdom.
- Sulek, J. & Hensley, R. (2004). The relative importance of food, atmosphere, and fairness of wait: the case of a full-service restaurant. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 45 (3): 235-248.
- Um, S. & Crompton, J. (1990). Attitude determinants in tourism destination choice. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 17: 432-448.
- Verma, R. et al (2002). Understanding customer choices: a key to successful management of hospitality services. *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 15-43.
- Wadolowska, L. et al (2008). Food choice models and their relation with food preferences and eating frequency in the Polish population. *Food policy*, 33: 122-134.
- Woodside, A. & Lysonsky, S. (1989). A general model of traveller destination choice. *Journal of Travel Research*, 27 (4): 8-14.
- Yuksel, A. & Yuksel, F. (2003). Measurement of tourist satisfaction with restaurant services. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 9 (1): 52-68.