

Why Asian Restaurants? An Exploratory Study of UK Customers' Motivation to Visit

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to expand the understanding of Asian restaurants by examining customers' motivation to visit Asian restaurants in the UK. This study adopted qualitative study approach and the results of semi-structured in-depth interviews revealed motivational attributes categorized into six motivational factors for customers to choose Asian restaurants: general attributes; sensory appeal-spiciness; variety and for change; curiosity; authenticity; and cultural experience. The overall study results suggested that how Asian restaurants enhance its experience to attract more customers and how destination management organization can cooperate.

Keywords: Asian restaurants, Asian restaurant choice motivation, Asian restaurant attributes

INTRODUCTION

There has been gradual expansion of the size and variety of the Asian restaurant market, and the British customers' demand for Asian cuisines is bigger than ever. Sushi and Asian noodles are now eaten regularly, and regional and lesser-known Asian dishes have been entering the market. Having Asian Street food is one of top ten trends in the UK hospitality food and drink trends in 2023, and the market research predicts this trend will continue (Insights Lab, 2023). However, despite of the latest GDP growth in 2022 boosted by World Cup and food and drink industry, it is predicted that there will be very challenging economic recession which will cause cost of living crisis (Mintel, 2023) Therefore, it is important for these Asian restaurants to provide consumers with more tangible reasons to visit, and for this, it is necessary to find out why customers visit Asian restaurants and what they expect and experience in these Asian restaurants.

In latest restaurant market, Asian-origin such as Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Malaysian, Vietnamese, Korean and Indonesian restaurants lead the trend and drive the ethnic restaurant market sector. (Insight Lab, 2023). However, despite the popularity of Asian restaurants, research focused on this area has been comparably scarce. Studies regarding Asian restaurants have focused on customers' perception or perceived attributes of Asian food (Ma et al., 2011), or particular aspects, such as the role of authenticity, food safety, online reviews or and social media (e.g., Nakayama & Wan, 2019; Park et al., 2016; Lee et al, 2012; Kwon et al., 2010;). Most of these studies were conducted in the US and a couple of studies conducted in the UK have

focused on managers' perception of their business operation (e.g., Abdullah et al., 2009; Seaman et al., 2005).

Thus, the current study attempts to fill this research gap and was designed to explore why UK customers visit Asian restaurants and what they experience in Asian restaurants. This study is exploratory in nature; thus, the objective of this study is to obtain a broad picture with depth of data, rather than generalization, which will form the focus of a later study.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RESTAURANT SELECTION AND EXPERIENCE

Previous categorization of restaurant attributes, and which factors are included in the restaurant selection criteria, varies according to the purpose of the study. However, some common restaurant attributes have been identified, such as the food-related attributes, service, and factors regarding place such as location and atmosphere. Broadly, influences can be divided into food-related factors and non-food related factors including service, price, and atmosphere.

Amongst restaurant choice motives, food quality, food type and food safety are often included in food related attributes, with food quality playing a pivotal role in the restaurant experience (Nakayama & Wan, 2019; Liu & Jang, 2009). According to Namkung and Jang (2007), food presentation, menu variety, healthy options, taste, food freshness and temperatures constitute food quality. Thus, food quality not only involves the food itself, such as the taste of the food, but also includes menu variety, which is not directly related to food itself. Likewise, food presentation not only includes the food itself, but also includes the appearance of the dish and garnishing, and even cutlery and table setting (Wood, 1995). Healthy options seem to be important, especially in regard to ethnic restaurants, as Susheela (1988) stated that people's desire to eat flavorful and healthy meals encourages people to choose ethnic restaurants to explore different varieties of herbs and spices. Food safety has become important to food industry operators due to consumers' increasing concern about food-related risks. Food safety is a basic expectation in restaurant selection and continued patronage, even though it is not the dominant concern in ethnic restaurant selection (Lee et al., 2012). Consumers usually can judge food safety with tangible cues such as food hygiene and food serving temperature, and the sanitary condition of an open kitchen or workers' personal hygiene (Fatimah et al., 2011).

In terms of non-food related factors, service is one of the most important attributes, which consists of speed, servers' attitude, operating hour and diversity (Law et al., 2008). The attribute of convenience in restaurant selection preference includes service, such as speedy service and location, if the restaurant is easy to access (Njite et al., 2008), as well as traffic flow around the restaurant (Elder et al., 1999). Other significant attributes are mood and atmosphere, which represent the physical surroundings of the dining experience, which comprises facilities, decoration, furnishing, interior, light, music and so on. Ryu and Jang (2007) supported this view, confirming that ambience had the most important influence on customers' emotional responses, affecting customers' post-dining behavioral intentions. In terms of price, customers evaluate the fairness of the price - whether the price is perceived as reasonable, acceptable and just (Bolton et al., 2003). In the restaurant selection context, price represents value for money, including not only the value of the food but also the value of the service and atmosphere of the restaurant (Njite et al., 2008).

The attributes of restaurant selection can vary between different styles of restaurants (Johns & Pine, 2002). For example, Ayala et al. (2005) reported significant differences between levels of importance of restaurant attributes for fast-food restaurants and all other restaurants. While women who preferred fast-food restaurants rated distance, price, and child-friendly higher than women who preferred other restaurants, women who preferred other restaurants rated familiarity with food options, the quality of food and food service higher than women who preferred fast-food restaurants. In a study of fine dining restaurants (Njite et al., 2008), customer relations were the most important attribute and employee competence was the second, while price was the least important attribute. In terms of ethnic restaurants, customers seek high quality ethnic restaurants that use authentic ingredients and authenticity (Lee et al., 2012; Mintel, 2023), which is not evident in other restaurant attributes. Therefore, it is necessary to identify motivational factors and attributes influencing experiences specifically related to Asian ethnic restaurants, especially when considering the unique characteristics of ethnic restaurants.

METHODS

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the motivational factors and attributes of Asian restaurants. As little academic research on this subject has been conducted in UK context, an exploratory study was deemed to be appropriate.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are suitable for understanding the deeper self, thoughts, feelings, and making sense of the world from the respondent's point of view (Marvasti, 2004). Hence, this method is useful in exploring "why" people choose to do certain things, which is appropriate to the purpose of this research. Semi-structured interviews were used such that specific topics can be covered, but also more probing can be used to seek clarification (Bryman, 2001). Data gained adopting this method can be less conscious and less cognitive, thus more revealing. In-depth information from a small number of respondents can be valuable, since it is assumed that every person's opinion of the world is valid and that the sum of these views portrays a reasonably complete picture of the social world (Marvasti, 2004).

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviewees were recruited using convenience sampling. The sampling strategy was designed to identify people with particular skills, knowledge or characteristics (Breakwell et al., 2000). Interviewees were restricted to British residents over 18 years old who had been to Asian restaurants, such as Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Initial interviewees were recruited among the researcher's acquaintances, and others were recruited through advertisement and by direct. A snowball sampling method was then used to identify additional individuals who had been to Asian restaurants, interviewees introducing further potential participants. Interviewees were provided with information regarding the interview, such as their right to withdraw at any time and the purpose of the interview, following which they confirmed their consent to take part. The interview, including verbal consent, was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the notes about gestures and facial expressions of interviewees were taken by the researcher. Open-ended questions were asked to identify the motives and their experiences in Asian restaurants, allowing the generation of supplementary questions based on the issues that interviewees considered important and which were deemed relevant to

investigate. The first section of the interview related to interviewee's recent Asian restaurant experiences (e.g., 'When did you recently eat out in Asian restaurants such as Thai, Japanese, Chinese or Korean restaurant?', 'Why did you choose this restaurant?', and 'What do you like/dislike about those restaurants?'). The second section focused more on questions about ethnic food itself (e.g., 'What was pleasurable/not pleasurable about tasting Asian food in those restaurants?', 'What words best describe your feeling when you tasted Asian food in those ethnic restaurants?' and 'What do you think are the advantages/disadvantages of tasting Asian food in the restaurant?'). Interview took from 20 minutes to 50 minutes depending on the length of each interviewee's story.

The interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached; that is no new ideas or themes could be identified from the data (Glaser, 1992). A total of 15 interviews were conducted, 7 participants were female and 8 were male and the age of the interviewees ranged from under 24 to over 65 years old. All were generally well-educated, 10 of them are having or working toward undergraduate degree, 3 with postgraduate degree, and 2 with vocational or secondary degree. They were from different walks of life, including a lecturer, students, sales advisor, engineer, and those who were living in retirement.

A Grounded theory approach to analysis was used because the researchers came without preconception or hypotheses about what they would find. Researchers start with a competent level of knowledge of the area with a defined purpose, but also with the realization that this purpose may become modified or even altered during the research process since new theoretical positions or understandings may emerge through data analysis (Gray, 2009). Glaser and Strauss (1967) invited researchers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way in their original statement of the method, and there are many ways conducting research using the grounded theory approach, since it is set of principle and practices rather than prescriptions or packages. There has been controversy regarding how to use grounded theory, but the main underpinning of the approach is that the data collected are not the consequence of theories but are used to generate theories and understanding of a phenomenon. Theories come from the language in context and ideas produced by those being studied and it could be more real and revealing (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser (1992) asserted that it is a method of discovery and examining process, making the study of action central, creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data. Thus, a grounded theory approach was deemed appropriate, considering that there has been sparse study on this subject and the current study is more to discover a phenomenon rather than to prove existing theory. Then the data were disaggregated and categorized into conceptual units specifically related to the topic of the current research, identifying the emerging relationships among categories, and identifying principal categories and integrating them. These findings were integrated with findings from existing literature (Gray, 2009; Charmaz, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Motivation to Visit Asian Restaurants

The literature has shown that restaurant choice motives include food related factors such as food quality and taste, health concern, freshness, and non-food related factors, such as price, location and service. These factors were also found in interviews. In addition to these general restaurant choice motives, motivational factors specific to Asian restaurants were identified in

the findings: sensory appeal-spiciness, variety and for change, curiosity, authenticity, and cultural experience.

General Attributes:

Not surprisingly, most of the previously identified general restaurant selection attributes were seen in the findings of this study of Asian restaurants. This included both food related attributes and non-food related attributes. Food related attributes included food quality, taste of the food, healthiness, freshness, good ingredients and portion size:

"Well, definitely the quality of the food, definitely quality...and it's fresh. The ingredients are fresh."

Food quality has been regarded as one of the most critical attributes of a dining experience in previous research (Auty, 1992; Susskind & Chan, 2000), influencing customer loyalty (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001), as well as customer satisfaction and behavioral intention (Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Tastiness of food, menu variety, nutrition, food presentation, serving size and textures are often the factors which form food quality (Ha & Jang, 2010).

In addition, Asian foods were perceived as healthy:

"it's quite healthy as well. It's relatively healthy.... Vegetables, chicken, white meats, nothing is too fatty."

Healthiness was found to be one of the attributes of Asian food (Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese) valued by American customers (Jang et al., 2009). As seen in the interview, it seems that British customers also consider Asian food as healthy. For instance, above respondent was a sales advisor in a health club. He said he watches what he eats and is concerned about health. For him, food in Asian restaurants was perceived as healthier than British food.

Non-food related factors comprise service, price, friendly staff and menu, convenience including location and preparation, atmosphere, hygiene and good reviews, recommendation or popularity of the restaurants, as also seen in general restaurant selection attributes:

"(I chose the restaurant) one, because people are queuing, two, service needs to be good...the ambience was good, you know, the general atmosphere. I think that's what people look for"

Interviewees also mentioned the word "service" often in their interviews, and it was one of the factors they like about Asian restaurants:

"I like the service, I think most of the time the people who work there are lovely, they're very professional, they're very caring. Um...the hygiene level is a lot better than you to get in English restaurant."

General attributes for restaurant selections were also applied to Asian restaurant selection for all interviewees, and more than half of the respondents believed that these attributes are better than in British restaurants, mentioning them as the reason to visit Asian restaurants.

Sensory Appeal-Spiciness:

Although sensory appeal is one of the general motivational attributes in restaurant choice, what is distinct in Asian restaurant choice motives is that people want a specific flavor in the food, which is spiciness. Apart from good taste, spiciness was revealed as one of the factors motivating interviewees to go to Asian restaurants. Interviewees expressed their liking of spicy food while they were talking about Asian restaurants:

"I like spicy, we, I mean all people I tend to go with like spicy food, much more interested in than English food."

"The food is good, because I like spicy food." (

Also, what mood on me I suppose. If I feel like something really spicy (then I go to Asian restaurants)"

High concentrations of chili pepper are a hallmark of Asian and Latin American cuisines, and spicy/hot are revealed as appealing flavors (Ludy & Mattes, 2011; Carstens et al., 2002). Carstens et al. (2002) stated that the preference for spicy food can be acquired by mere exposure, and it is an important factor in acquisition of liking of spicy food. Through migration, tourism, globalization of culture industries, broadcasting and writing about food, and greater opportunity to eat out, people have been exposed to foods from other countries more than ever (Warde & Martens, 2000), including spicy foods from Asian countries. Consequently, it seems that people's preference for spicy food has been developed greatly, and spiciness has become a representative taste when people think of Asian restaurants, and a motivation for people to visit Asian restaurants.

Variety and for Change:

Participants related their reasons for choosing Asian restaurants to their preference for having variety in their diet and something different from what they usually have. Sixteen interviewees expressed their desire to seek variety and something different in their diet when they talked about Asian restaurants.

"I like Asian foods because they are different from English food."

"I like them (Asian restaurants) because they are a little bit different, and you can get something you might not normally get in most restaurants. Variety of the diet is always good"

Interviewees frequently used the word "variety" and "different from normal" when they described the Asian food and restaurant experience. One of general reasons for eating out is 'getting a change', which is doing or experiencing something different from what they eat every day (Warde & Martens, 2000). This also coincides with Roseman's (2006) findings that the main reasons for U.S. consumers to go to ethnic restaurants were to have food different from what they have at home and to have food with a variety of different tastes. Having change coming

from differentness also seems to derive from interviewees' not possessing the skills to cook Asian foods:

"It's different thing than the normal food you cannot make it at home. You don't know how to make it."

"it's nice going out these restaurants to try something which I wouldn't have skill to prepare at home."

It seems that not knowing how to make the foods in Asian restaurants makes interviewees more aware of differences and this provides them with more change from their daily lives than other restaurants. This seems to be one of factors that customers enjoy about Asian restaurants.

Curiosity:

Some participants reported that their reason to visit certain Asian restaurants is curiosity, simply because the restaurants were there and they had never tried them before. These participants usually describe themselves as adventurous and loving tasting different foods. One participant commented:

"I didn't really know much about the food, so I tried it. Then there're more Korean restaurants, so I tried them too. Because I've never had it, so it seems interesting."

Curiosity in trying unfamiliar food relates to the desire for new experience, new styles and tastes (Warde, 1997). According to Rozin and Rozin (2005), a person has curiosity about new foods and fear of new foods at the same time, and the balance between them may change in different individuals and different circumstances. Pliner and Hobden (1992: 107) explained this food-related tendency of a person as food neophobia. They defined food neophobia as a food-related personality, "a continuum along which people can be located in terms of their stable propensity to approach or avoid novel foods." Food neophobia is not only believed to predict a willingness to try novel foods but is also associated with the frequency of eating and intake quantity, and anticipated and actual liking of the foods (Eertmans et al., 2005). It seems that when people enjoy Asian restaurants, their curiosity overrides the fear of new foods, especially for those interviewees whose motivation to visit Asian restaurants was pure curiosity.

Authenticity:

Authenticity was found to be one of the motivational factors for visiting Asian restaurants. Participants regarded having Asian foods in Asian restaurants as having a more authentic taste compared to what they cook or what they can buy in a supermarket. One interviewee said:

"If you go to Chinese restaurant, you have Chinese chefs, um who know what they are doing to do the cooking obviously. So, you can have... like the spirits of taste in food, you can tell that it's being done proper because it's being done by proper chefs who knows what they are doing because they are from the same country. So, it's authentic."

Heldke (2005:387) maintained that Euro-American travelers are often in search of authenticity, "examples of the genuine article prepared just the way they would do it, using the ingredients, cooking techniques, pans, even cooking fuel that would be used by a cook who is an insider to

the culinary tradition". Travelers even look for authenticity while they are actually travelling in that country, so it might not be a surprise that they seek authenticity in restaurants in their own country.

Previous studies have also identified that customers value authenticity in ethnic restaurants (Jang et al., 2012). Often, traditional surroundings are regarded as attractive factors in ethnic restaurants (Ha & Jang, 2010; Liu and Jang, 2009). Interviewees regarded traditional surroundings as creating a more authentic experience, and a regarding study showed that customers were more satisfied with foods in those surroundings (Ha & Jang, 2010). Authenticity can generally be understood from two points of view: objective and subjective. Objective authenticity considers that the object should be genuine or real, so it can be judged only by an expert. On the other hand, from the constructivists' point of view, authenticity cannot be objectively determined. As such, authenticity is seen as a social construct, and it is dependent on the context and a person's possessed image (Cook & Crang, 1996). In the context of ethnic restaurants, authenticity is often considered as symbolic, which is dependent on consumers' wish to reinterpret their experiences as "genuine," rather than an accurate and real reflection of the origin country (Long, 2004). Ethnic restaurant operators also believe that the authenticity of the restaurant, reflecting their own culture, appeals to foreign customers (Lu & Fine, 1995). This is due to ethnic restaurants' unique characteristic, distinct from general restaurants, reflecting their own culture regardless of their intention, serving ethnic food which reflects culture and tradition of the country. The current study confirmed that authenticity is one of the motivational attributes for customers to visit Asian restaurants, reflecting a desire to experience another culture, which naturally lead to desire to learn about another culture.

Cultural Experience:

"They (Asian restaurants) help people getting to learn, experience more about other people and culture."

Cultural experience was identified as a major motivational factor for British customers to visit Asian restaurants. Interviewees regarded dining at Asian restaurants as giving them the chance to try and learn about other cultures. All respondents expressed their interest in experiencing new cultures through Asian restaurants. For instance, interviewees viewed visiting an Asian restaurant as "to experience the culture," "the chance to try other cultures," "place representing the cultural diversity, very ethically," "to appreciate different cultures" and "places for different culture." Interviewees regarded visiting Asian restaurants as a holistic cultural experience.

CONCLUSION

Employing face to face semi-structured in-depth interviews, this study examined the motivations of British customers to visit Asian restaurants. More specifically, this study identified six motivational factors regarding Asian restaurants: First, general attributes that are applied to other non-Asian restaurants as well. What is notable here is that not only were these general attributes also considered important for Asian restaurants, but they were often considered better than in British restaurants. This study further identified motivational factors unique to Asian restaurants, which are sensory appeal-spiciness, variety and for change, curiosity, authenticity, and cultural experience. Among the identified factors, cultural experience seemed to be one of the major motivations for all interviewees for dining in ethnic restaurants. Ethnic restaurant experiences were regarded as a great opportunity to become

aware and learn about another culture for UK customers, in line with the perceived attributes of ethnic restaurants suggested by other researchers (Turgen & Pastinelli, 2002).

The findings of this research suggest several insights for Asian restaurant operators. First, they should focus more on the basics of the restaurants, such as food quality and service, as these are the basic requirements for customers visiting Asian restaurants, and often perceived as better than UK restaurants. Secondly, adjusting the flavor of food to local people is not always a good strategy for operating Asian restaurants, since customers choose Asian restaurants for authenticity, and they are becoming more sophisticated with more cultural exposure, through visiting various Asian restaurants and travel (Ebster & Guist, 2005). Thus, the extent to which the food authenticity should be adjusted should be based on their primary customer composition (Liu & Jang, 2009). In addition, since customers think they are paying not just for food but for the cultural experience, Asian restaurant managers need to consider how they can create and provide a more cultural experience.

Asian tourism marketers could also cooperate with the restaurants serving their traditional food abroad. Through Asian restaurants in the UK, British customers become more aware of the culture. Barbas (2003) found that many housewives in the U.S. who developed their interest in Chinese cooking after having Chinese food in the restaurants further developed their interest into Asian art and history. These interests in food and culture can play a critical role to motivate people to travel to the country (Mason & Paggiaro, 2012).

This study is not free from limitations. Since this study is of an exploratory nature, a purposive sample was used and the sample was selected in a restricted area in the UK. Thus, the findings are less likely to be generalizable to the whole population in UK. Further studies can include more people from various areas in the UK, which would be helpful in establishing a more comprehensive understanding. In addition, it is necessary to empirically test the motivational factors and attributes derived from the findings, and continuously compare these with the results from new research. Finally, as authenticity has different meanings for each individual, depending on their past experience and possessed image of a country, future studies should take this factor into consideration.

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