
Original Article

Consumers' ideal eating out experience as it refers to restaurant style: A case study

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ABSTRACT Contemporary research discusses the relevance of hotel and restaurant design and style, and the impact that these elements can have on consumers. The present study seeks to add to the existing debate on the influence of style and seeks to answer the question: what particular style attributes characterise the consumers' ideal dining experience? The study shall address this question via an analysis of the personal descriptions offered by a group of 277 consumers. A total of 173 usable comments were gathered from all respondents' answers (62.5 per cent). Descriptions of rusticity or the rustic style of the restaurant are noted in every fourth comment, clearly suggesting many consumers' preference of more 'down-to-earth', authentic, local and rather unpretentious settings. To a much lesser extent, modern restaurant styles, as well as the establishment's lighting (for example, dim, 'warm' lighting or availability of natural light) also appeared to be preferred styles. Of interest was that 16.2 per cent of the comments referred to the restaurant's cleanliness as an element pertaining to the style of the establishment, whereas 8.7 per cent valued the 'comfortable' aspect of the restaurant rather than any particular style. Undoubtedly, as is also the case in this study, many different consumers patronise restaurants primarily to satisfy their needs and wants (hunger/food). However, as partly demonstrated in this study, there are also many segments with different demands. In this regard, for many patrons, dining experiences start through their eyes and other senses, even before they begin to enjoy the establishment's food and beverage offerings.

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INTRODUCTION

Countless consumers patronise hundreds of thousands of different restaurants every single day in the United States. In many different restaurant environments, especially those of small 'mom and pop' or individually run businesses, restaurateurs face a myriad of obstacles. To overcome many of these problems, restaurateurs use different ways to draw consumers' attention and their patronage, ultimately pursuing increased revenues. Clearly, and as also discussed in previous research (for example, Robson, 1999), restaurateurs' main strategy is to address consumer needs and wants by maximising their food and beverage inventories through the consistent sale of meals and drinks.

However, in many present-day hospitality environments, the consumers' ultimate perception of the meal experience may not necessarily start with their palate, or in attaining satisfaction through the delivery of food and service quality. Although food quality and food type are identified as significant variables in restaurant choice, the restaurant's atmosphere and its style can be differential elements in consumers' ultimate decision to patronise one restaurant over another (Auty, 1992). Thus, in many cases, patrons' sense perception may precede or complement the culinary delights they anticipate to enjoy at the establishment. Consequently, the view that 'restaurateurs are right to compete primarily on style' (Auty, 1992, p. 324) appears to be appropriate in some hospitality/restaurant scenarios.

In this context, contemporary consumer behaviour research discusses that consumers' purchase decisions are not only motivated by their direct responses to tangible products or services. In fact, elements that include music, scent as well as others (Milliman, 1982, 1986; North *et al*, 1999; Michon *et al*, 2005; Zemke and Shoemaker, 2007) may influence such responses. With regard to these aspects, Milliman (1986) pointed out that 'In some cases the place, or more specifically its atmosphere, is more influential than the product itself in the purchase decision' (p. 286). This influence can, for instance, apply to hospitality scenarios and environments, where consumers may be attracted or drawn to tangible as well as intangible cues of their dining/accommodation experience, other than those most assumed (for example, food, room and entertainment).

Along these lines, Lin (2004) explains that public spaces such as hotel lobbies or restaurants can create first but lasting impressions among customers, helping them gather 'information for the subsequent evaluation of the entire service organization' (p. 176). Thus, the argument could be made that, for many consumers, aspects surrounding their 'actual' intention to patronise an establishment are more than simple, marginal extensions or complements of their purchasing experience. One such aspect relates to the physical environment of restaurants, that is, their style. As Bitner (1992) suggested, the effect of physical design and decor elements on employees and consumers is widely acknowledged among industry managers and textbooks. However, 'there is a surprising



lack of empirical research ... addressing the role of physical surroundings in consumption settings' (Bitner, 1992, p. 57). Although since Bitner's assertion much has been written on restaurant style, design and related areas, certain other dimensions concerning restaurant style continue to be marginally researched. For example, limited information exists that clearly answers the following question:

What particular style attributes characterise the consumers' ideal dining experience?

The present study seeks to address this question and thus contributes to new knowledge on the influence of restaurant style from consumers' perspective. Information that identifies aspects and elements that consumers are able to describe when they dine out, as they relate to restaurant style, could have positive implications for entrepreneurs involved in the hospitality industry. Some of the benefits of added information could be in the form of consumers' preferences for particular styles and the extent to which they pay attention to them as part of their dining experience. In turn, this knowledge could assist entrepreneurs in their decision-making process concerning strategies. Strategies based on knowledge of restaurant style preferences could help draw certain groups of consumers' attention, and/or add value to their dining experience, with the potential for positive word-of-mouth advertising and further restaurant patronage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As many studies document, consumer preferences and decisions to purchase products and/or services depend on a myriad of factors, including the physical environment where the potential transaction is to take place. For businesses, and more precisely those in the restaurant sector, knowledge about these aspects can assist in the process of consumer segmentation (Reid, 1983; Bahn and Granzin, 1985; Yüksel and Yüksel, 2002). According to Riley (1994), 'Identifying population groups with restaurant types is a perfectly valid and normal practice' (p. 17). Addressing the needs and wants of certain consumer groups through segmentation can also lead to many benefits for the restaurant operation.

Arguably, the dining experience relies on the value-for-money aspect of the food and service components. However, there is much evidence that other elements are meritorious in providing the ideal environmental context in which dining can be enhanced and taken to the next level. Among the many tangible and intangible elements that can significantly contribute to memorable dining experiences, the concept of atmospherics or atmospheric responsiveness has been discussed as being of relevance (see, for example, Kotler, 1974; Baker *et al*, 1994; Sharma and Stafford, 2000; Grossbart *et al*, 2002). In referring to Baker's work (1986), Sharma and Stafford (2000) pointed out that atmospheric cues include, but are not limited to, 'ambience, design and social factors' (p. 183). Sharma and Stafford (2000) mentioned the impact that atmospherics can have, for instance, in a retail environment on consumers' expectations of

merchandise and service, their perceptions of salespeople, and on the store's image.

Atmospherics' impact is therefore a reminder that product and service components may not always be at the core of consumers' decisions to engage in buyer–seller relationships or in purchasing experiences. This outcome is further demonstrated in a study within a lodging environment, where Countryman and Jang (2006) identified lighting, style and especially colour as the most relevant atmospheric elements that their study's participants associated with their overall impressions of the hotel lobby. Along these lines and as Babin *et al* (2003) found in retail environments, the fact that '... consumers do process atmospheric characteristics holistically more than piecemeal' (p. 550) further supports the argument that, for many consumers, the product and/or service may only be one part of the consumption equation.

With regard to the restaurant branch, Riley (1994) noted that 'Many goods and services we use do not have to be "liked" but with eating out the favourable impact is crucial. Its success depends on rapid measurement of customer reaction' (p. 17). In these situations, the principle that 'first impressions are everything' appears to fit perfectly. On the one hand, 'atmospheric' or related elements such as the establishment's style, design and ambiance can quickly send positive images to consumers. On the other hand, if consumers perceive negative or less-inviting cues, they may choose another – in their view – more pleasing venue to dine. In the words of Edwards and Gustafsson (2008, p. 31), 'The restaurant environment gives an implicit promise with customers looking for tangible clues to help inform and influence their expectations'. Clearly, the restaurant environment, as well as other atmospheric elements may not only help draw consumers but also reassure them of a potentially 'low-risk' food and beverage experience.

Some studies have also illustrated that another intangible element, level of patronage, may also have an impact on consumers' perceptions and image of a restaurant. For example, in a study conducted among Hong Kong restaurant patrons, Tse *et al* (2002) identified that when confronted with a very crowded versus a quiet restaurant, consumers perceived these scenarios very differently. In fact, Tse *et al* (2002) mentioned that consumers' reaction towards crowded restaurants was more positive, as respondents associated crowdedness with high food quality, good reputation and low prices. Thus, even without tasting the establishment's food and beverage, an atmospheric cue, crowdedness, had already had an impact on potential consumers' views.

Once the decision to visit a particular restaurant is made, the overall value of the experience may also be created or judged using a combination of tangible and intangible factors. In this regard, Hansen (2005) found that the element of harmony during dining experiences was achieved through '... a balanced physical appearance in the meal, such as food and wine in combination with the interior of the restaurant ... physical structure and artefacts [sic] ...' (p. 48). According to Finkelstein (1989, in Auty, 1992), many restaurateurs appear to have accepted that the establishment's atmosphere can be as important as – or even more important than – the food component. However, subsequent research by



Clark and Wood (1999) disputes this notion. These authors found that tangible factors, rather than intangible, were identified as being more important with regard to consumer loyalty (p. 317); moreover, Clark and Wood found that food-related elements (quality, range or type) were the most determinant. Although other researchers seem to be in agreement with Clark and Wood (see, for example, Reimer and Kuehn, 2005; Wall and Berry, 2007, in Edwards and Gustafsson, 2008), they note that a restaurant's atmosphere, ambiance, design and other intangible elements need to be paid attention to as interest in them is increasing among consumers.

Although the role that the style of a restaurant may play within the dining experience is significant to many consumers, knowledge gaps still exist regarding this dimension from consumers' viewpoint. However, there are recent demonstrations of researchers becoming involved in the exploration of hospitality design and style. For example, Alonso and Ogle (2008a, b) studied the views of operators from small accommodation and winery businesses in Australia. In both cases, these authors found that simplicity and efficiency in the design of the establishment were important factors for operators. Furthermore, a balance between the physical element of the business and the surrounding natural environment was also emphasised; achieving a balance also provided an inviting element to those individuals visiting or patronising the establishment (Alonso and Ogle, 2008a, b).

Along similar lines, the present study seeks to add to the debate of dining experiences in restaurants, in this case investigating consumers' descriptions of their ideal eating out experience as it refers to the style of the restaurant they patronise.

METHODOLOGY

During the months of January and April 2010, questionnaires were distributed at a university campus in the southern United States to collect information from individuals patronising restaurants. The chosen environment to gather consumer data, a university campus, was perceived as being convenient to the research team in several respects. For example, the time of the questionnaire distribution coincided with sports events (basketball games) that are organised throughout the winter/spring months of the academic calendar. These basketball games, in which the home team is a member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association draw up close to 10 000 attendees per game. Many of the attendees are former university graduates as well as current students and university staff. Thus, the games provided an opportunity to collect information from different age groups and genders; the university also hosts women's basketball games in the same sports arena.

Gathering data from a very conveniently located area, that is, from a sports arena close by, and without the need to travel far away provided an additional element of convenience. Finally, the fact that many potential respondents may be inclined to participate in a study conducted at their 'alma mater' by researchers from the same institution was also believed to be a favourable aspect that might help elicit a sufficiently large number of responses. The questionnaire was designed to collect



information about respondents (their age, gender, ethnicity, frequency of restaurant patronage and so on), as well as investigate different aspects of the dining experience, including factors (for example, design, food, services, kitchen style and so on) that respondents may consider important. For this study, special emphasis was given to the style of the restaurant; to this end, space was provided for respondents to describe their ideal eating out experience as it refers to the style of the restaurant. The pertinent literature (consumer behaviour, hospitality) was consulted to design the questionnaire; however, the researchers' knowledge and experience in previous studies also contributed to building the questionnaire tool.

A total of 652 questionnaires were distributed between January and early April 2010, with 278 being completed and returned. When distributing the questionnaires, potential respondents were greeted and briefly introduced to the study's objectives. An envelope that contained (a) the questionnaire, and (b) a letter presenting those objectives with the seal of the Institutional Review Board's approval were handed out to those individuals who agreed to participate in the study. All envelopes were self-addressed and pre-paid; doing so allowed participants to complete the questionnaire at their leisure after the basketball games. In addition, participating was at no cost, as respondents could simply mail the envelope containing the researcher team's university address. In one of the 278 responses, the respondent indicated no restaurant patronage; this response was therefore deemed unusable, making the usable total number of responses 277, a 42.5 per cent response rate. This number, although clearly not representative of Southern or national consumers, was considered sufficient for the overall purpose of this exploratory effort.

The data collected were first entered using Microsoft Excel, and then exported to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. Doing so allowed for basic demographic analysis of responses. With regard to the comments that participants provided, these were managed using content analysis, separated in themes using both Microsoft Excel and Word. Each response, presented in the following sections, is labelled as R1 (representing Respondent 1), R2 (Respondent 2) and so on.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows some basic information related to the study's participants. For instance, the prevalence of female over male respondents is demonstrated (63.2 per cent versus 36.1 per cent); this gender unbalance is acknowledged as a potential limitation of this study. In terms of age, just over half of respondents are 50 years old and above, whereas the age group of those individuals between 30 and 39 years old is the least represented (24, 8.7 per cent). With regard to their involvement in restaurant patronage, 92.8 per cent of all participants dine at least once a week, clearly denoting their familiarity and regular exposure to restaurant environments. In addition, respondents of White/Caucasian ethnicity and those from the state of Alabama constitute the large majority in this study.

**Table 1:** Basic respondent-related information

	<i>n</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Females	175	63.2
Males	100	36.1
Missing responses	2	0.7
Total	277	100.0
<i>Age groups (years)</i>		
21–29	51	18.4
30–39	24	8.7
40–49	59	21.3
50–59	76	27.4
60+	67	24.2
Total	277	100.0
<i>Respondents' frequency of eating out</i>		
Daily	61	22.0
Once a week	196	70.8
Once a month	20	7.2
Total	277	100.0
<i>Respondents' ethnicity</i>		
Caucasian/white	246	88.8
Other (African American, Asian)	15	5.4
Missing responses	16	5.8
Total	277	100.0
<i>Respondents' home state/country</i>		
Alabama	225	81.2
Outside Alabama	51	18.4
Missing responses	1	.4
Total	277	100.0

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE IDEAL DINING EXPERIENCE AS IT REFERS TO THE STYLE OF THE RESTAURANT

A total of 217 (78.3 per cent) respondents made comments regarding their ideal dining experience as it relates to the style of the restaurant. A deeper analysis of respondents' descriptions demonstrated that the descriptions of 44 respondents (22 males and females, respectively) were not directly associated with restaurant style. Instead, 37 of these individuals referred to the food and service components as part of their ideal dining experience; however, no link was identified between these respondents' comments and their relevance concerning restaurants' style. In the other seven cases, participants acknowledged that the style of the restaurant was of little or no relevance at all in patronising restaurants. Combined, these 44 comments were deemed unusable; the remaining 173 descriptions, 62.5 per cent of the total number of participants, were considered in the study's analysis. Table 2 illustrates the themes that respondents identified in their responses and their frequency. When further analysis was conducted and comparisons between respondents' descriptions, their gender and age were made, no clear differences were noticed. Therefore, the findings of the study are provided as a whole, that is, without carrying out any inter-group comparisons.

Almost one-fourth of participants who provided comments on the style of the restaurant mentioned the aspect of rusticity or rustic design. Recent

**Table 2:** Main themes respondents identified concerning their images of open restaurant kitchens

Main themes	n	Per cent
Rusticity (rustic design)	43	24.9
Cleanliness	28	16.2
Modern	17	9.8
Comfortable	15	8.7
Lighting (eg, dim, medium)	14	8.1
Spacious/openness	8	4.6
Décor	7	4.0
Combination of factors	6	3.5
Character (unique style)	5	2.9
Simple	4	2.3
Size	3	1.7
Other (appealing, casual, atmosphere, homey feel, inviting, functionality etc)	23	13.3
Total	173	100.0

studies conducted among operators of small wineries open to the public (Alonso and Ogle, 2008b), for instance, identified the aspect of rusticity as very important. Moreover, operators whose establishments provided food and beverage (winery restaurant) sought to relate the chosen style and the natural surroundings of the winery. Clearly, as the following comments indicate, many consumers are also very interested in rusticity when choosing an establishment for their dining experience:

I like restaurants with a rustic feel, ones that have been around awhile.
 When they have pictures on the walls from the golden days ...
 Enjoy restaurants that display rustic artefacts or pictures that I can scan while dining there.
 I like a rustic setting with interesting things on the walls and hanging from ceiling.
 I like rustic elegance.
 I like the rustic look and feel.
 Enjoy the antique, farm and country items displayed on the walls.
 Warm, rustic, country.
 I prefer more rustic in any restaurant in which I dine.
 More rustic traditional than modern atmosphere.

Apart from the value respondents placed on rusticity, ten percent perceived a modern style as part of their ideal dining experience. Thus, together, just over one-third of respondents prefer rustic and modern style in the restaurants they frequent:

I prefer a bit more modern than rustic, with comfortable seating, cramped seating and tables lead to uncomfortableness.
 I like a modern (not dated) restaurant with memorabilia on walls and lots of visual appeal to the diner.
 Modern, comfortable seating with tall ceilings and open spaces. I enjoy a clean, minimalist atmosphere.
 Modern feel, brick walls, high ceilings, comfortable furniture.
 Inviting and comfortable but in a modern way, rather than down home "country" way.



More modern design/feel.

New look – cutting edge – indicates creativity with the food, good lighting and comfortable chairs – a must!

I like more modern, local, neighborhood restaurants.

However, a blend between both rustic and modern style also underlined some consumers' taste in seeing variety in the style of the restaurant, whereas other participants appeared to choose restaurants depending on the occasion, for instance, whether it was for dinner for two or a family affair:

Cross between rustic and modern. Sometimes modern is too gothic.

Use a good decorator and either rustic or modern will be nice.

Rustic combined with modern gives broader appeal.

I like modern, new restaurant for myself and my husband, but is more home-style and cozy for our family.

This [ideal dining experience] really depends on how I feel like dressing for the restaurant ... I would say I lean more towards modern feel.

I like a look that's pretty normal. Too rustic makes me think it's not as clean. Too modern makes me feel clinical.

Although not an aspect linked to atmospheric cues or style-related elements, it was interesting to notice that the second most common descriptor among participants was related to the establishment's cleanliness. The intangible aspect of cleanliness and its – often ignored – importance in dining out experiences were believed to be of merit in including this element, as opposed to food and service, two of the pillars and main reasons for consumers' patronage. That so many respondents alluded to this aspect not only demonstrates its relevance but also highlights the role of simplicity many consumers look – or hope for – when patronising restaurants. As can be identified in some of the following comments, some respondents also combined cleanliness with elements related to the restaurant's style:

Clean is more important than style. Style of what I want in a dining experience can change from meal to meal.

A clean, quiet atmosphere ... I don't really care about the décor as long as it [the restaurant] is clean.

Like both if atmosphere is clean, well decorated, not too crowded.

Ideal restaurant is clean, well lit (but not glaring) comfortable seating, tables not on top of each other.

I look for a clean environment with comfortable seating. I'm not very "theme" oriented.

Cleanliness is more important than décor.

I like all types of atmospheres as long as it is clean.

A clean comfortable setting ... does not matter if it's higher end or local lower scale.

Cleanliness is the main priority. I always check score. If door is open to kitchen I look at floor, etc. for cleanliness.

I would rather eat in a restaurant that is clean and is decorated in accordance with the type of food they serve. I like nice booths that are not worn out.



The element of comfort was also important to 15 (8.7 per cent) respondents. In this context, a comfortable experience included different aspects of the restaurant's physical environment, including seating, the way tables were positioned and the décor:

Warm, inviting atmosphere with comfortable seating and not right on top of other tables comfortable, quiet, no gimmicks.

I prefer pretty comfortable, unique space. I like to feel that it is locally respected and unique. Some try to be ultra-modern to the point that it's uncomfortable.

I am happy/satisfied if I am comfortable. Not too concerned with style so much ...

Comfortable seating, friendly, efficient service and excellent food are more important than the structure and décor.

I prefer a more relaxed, comfortable restaurant with a more rustic feel.

Comfortable seating and tables, warm colors, not "over-decorated"

An almost equal number of respondents (14, 8.1 per cent) alluded to the restaurant's lighting as important in their dining experience. Lighting was emphasised in different forms, including the more private or intimate aspect (dim lighting), or natural light through the restaurant's windows.

All that truly matters to me is having dim lighting!

Warm lighting ... cool in summer, space between tables.

Fireplace ... low light, lots of windows.

For a more formal, expensive dinner, I like a more traditional restaurant, small seating area dim lighting, tablecloths, nice china/crystal, nice art work, non-carpeted floors.

A semi-intimate dining experience with medium lighting. Semi-open floor plan, medium lights and knowledgeable staff.

Open ceilings ... dim lights and tall booths seem to be more inviting.

Good lighting, furniture that is easy to scud away from the table, high ceiling, clean floor, no ceiling fans.

Dimly lit rooms with rich colors. Nice dark study, wood furniture that's comfy.

... enough light to read the menu, but not too bright.

In line with the information shown in Table 2, respondents also made several inferences regarding the importance of spaciousness at the restaurant. However, space is not only suggested in terms of comfort for patrons to move freely at the restaurant, but also concerning privacy, that is, distance from one's table to other tables:

A place where you have enough room to move. Some privacy and be able to talk and hear conversations. So many small restaurants are not conducive to this; the sound bounces off the walls and it's hard to hear conversations at your table.

Ideal- clean, spacious, amount of room, moderate lighting ... soothing colors, some privacy. Plus sized people need more room. Really tall people also. A restaurant should accommodate to all sizes.

We don't necessarily enjoy a dark atmosphere ... openness is more likeable for us.



I prefer a somewhat private dining experience (not staring at unknown person at next table).

Some comments were also reflective of the role that décor plays in dining experiences. One respondent, for instance, acknowledged that '[I] like restaurant's décor to reflect type of foods', clearly suggesting how food consumption could be initiated or complemented by the surrounding theme or atmosphere. Other respondents' descriptions further underlined the relevance of decor:

If I crave barbeque or home-style cuisine, I prefer a more rustic or nostalgic atmosphere/décor. Otherwise, a more traditional atmosphere or décor is fine. Modern tends to lend itself to short-lived/or fads, hurting the longevity at times of a restaurant's business/success.

My ideal restaurant would be beautifully decorated possibly with some antiques and low lighting such as candlelight.

While suggesting its importance, other respondents acknowledged that fundamentally, decor was to be a complement or an add-on to their dining experience (R33, R34): 'Décor should not detract from dining experience – I go for food not entertainment and prefer quiet, traditional atmosphere;' 'The décor should be tasteful, but it does not influence my decision of whether to eat at the restaurant'.

Finally, 23 (13.3 per cent) comments referred to a variety of aspects respondents valued when dining out. Clearly, some of the comments pointed at decor, rustic versus modern style, as well as other areas related to atmospherics, including the following:

I appreciate building conversions where restaurants continue functionality already existing.

Brisk and rock – fireplaces, comfy, big chairs, more intimate areas, waterscapes.

I don't prefer one style over the other, but a restaurant that is warm, inviting, clean ...

A restaurant's atmosphere makes it a fun dining experience. As long as the atmosphere is unique to the restaurant then it is good. Whether it is rustic or modern. Unique local restaurants are better experiences than the commercial. The "look" or theme of the restaurant should be consistent throughout the décor, the food, etc.

Regarding the last comment, Kim and Moon (2009) state that '... physical environment attributes (that is, servicescape) in theme restaurants are likely to play a significant role in improving customers' perceptions and behaviors' (p. 144). Thus, despite the limited descriptions among participants concerning directly the theme of the restaurant, the comments above, nevertheless, suggest that some consumer groups pay attention to aspects closely related to the restaurant's theme (for example, building conversions, atmosphere).

CONCLUSIONS

The billions of dollars that exchange hands every year between consumers and hospitality operations, while not necessarily a sign of

profitability for many restaurateurs, does point to the importance of addressing consumers' needs and wants. In fact, the potential benefits that may be obtained by paying attention to trends and consumer demands in a number of variables are manifold: drawing new consumers, establishing a consumer base, experiencing repeat visits, positive word of mouth and increased revenues. Within the context of the restaurant sector, little doubt, if any, exists that the food and service components are the reason for consumers to patronise restaurant establishments.

However, although critical within dining environments, in many occasions food and service appear to be merely 'additional means to an end', that is, they are two of many other components acting or playing in unison to provide memorable dining experiences. Moreover, contemporary research provides, in part, contradictory versions concerning the true importance of food and service. Some researchers (for example, Clark and Wood, 1999) rather categorically refer to food and services as the uncontested pillars of the dining experience. Others (Finkelstein, 1989; Auty, 1992) contend that intangible items such as the restaurant's design, colour, acoustics, music, lighting or other elements under the umbrella of atmospherics (Kotler, 1974; Baker, 1986) can be nearly or even equally as influential among consumers.

Against this background, the present study sought to gather information concerning consumers' descriptions of those style-related factors informing their ideal dining experience. Although there are some limitations in the data collected, particularly the prevalence of female respondents over males, or the fact that the number of comments elicited (173) are not representative of Southern or United States consumers, some of the findings provide insights that could be useful for the hospitality and other sectors. First, many respondents' descriptions denote that there appears to be lack of knowledge among a subset of consumers as to the true meaning of 'restaurant style'. In fact, 37 (13.4) respondents in this study associated style with the restaurant's food and service components.

In addition, 28 (16.2 per cent) respondents' descriptions related the style of the restaurant with its cleanliness. This finding identifies concern among many consumers about rather basic requirements that should be a given in eating out situations and environments. That so many respondents described their views on restaurant style in the context of restaurant cleanliness also suggests that these individuals are looking for simplicity, safety and reassurance rather than placing high demands on other, for them, apparently less relevant components.

Most participants who provided descriptions related to style within their dining experience (145, 83.8 per cent) clearly pointed out that they do pay attention to many intangible aspects within a restaurant setting. For example, rustic restaurant designs appeared to be favoured by almost one-fourth of respondents, followed by modern and comfortable style. The importance of lighting was also underlined, as were spaciousness (openness) of the restaurant and décor. The many areas participants alluded to are also in line with several studies conducted on atmospherics in hospitality scenarios (see, for example, Countryman and Jang, 2006). Overall, what became clear were the many existing segments of



consumers who appreciate different forms of restaurant style. This outcome is not surprising, and does not mean that restaurateurs should consider a multi-faceted style approach. However, the findings also suggest that many respondents value unpretentious, down-to-earth styles, possibly because of their desire to use the dining experience to socialise or enjoy the experience as 'holistic event' in a non-threatening, non-intimidating atmosphere.

The study's findings, while far from conclusive given the limitations previously acknowledged, nevertheless, suggest several opportunities for future investigations. One area that could be further researched concerns the extent to which consumers would tend to patronise a particular restaurant based on some of the elements identified in this study (for example, rusticity, the lighting and the décor). Added information in this area could help in the segmentation of consumers and therefore be of benefit to entrepreneurs who are aware of consumer power, needs and wants. Future studies could also seek to establish the extent to which consumers follow trends, particularly restaurant- and hospitality-related trends (for example, foods, equipment, décor, design and so on). This type of study could also be carried out among a larger participant population. In doing so, the study could potentially identify whether (a) there are large numbers of individuals who favour and/or follow trends in the hospitality/restaurant sectors; and (b) whether inter-group differences do exist. Along these lines, if future research identified one or several consumer groups that may be prone to follow or become involved in industry trends, such information could be of much benefit to restaurateurs and hoteliers alike.

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