



# Effective restaurant rating scale development and a mystery shopper evaluation approach



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## ABSTRACT

Dining is a major attraction for tourists visiting Taiwan. In 2008, the Taipei City Government commissioned a project to produce a list of recommended restaurants in Taipei for tourists. To facilitate the selection process, we developed a restaurant rating scale using a mystery shopper approach. This study entailed 20 questions that covered all elements of the consumers' dining experience in a table-service restaurant setting, as well as a comprehensive mystery shopper training program to ensure consistency of quality in the evaluation process. This research involved the top 500 restaurants in Taipei. The findings revealed that our rating scale achieves internal consistency, validity and model fit. This study provided an important tool for further industrial applications and research opportunities. Further, this study proposes future research directions.

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## 1. Introduction

A special and unique memorable gastronomic experience is an indispensable asset to any successful tourist destination (Fox, 2007). Gastronomy tourism development initiatives utilize locally produced foodstuffs and beverages to strengthen regional tourism products, enhance visitors' experiences, and help maintain and enhance the viability of local food production and processing sectors (Boyne et al., 2003). According to the above-cited studies, delicacies are a key reason that tourists visit different countries. For example in the West, slow food tourism is widely promoted in Italy (Nilsson et al., 2011), and wine and food are an integral part of the French culture. In Asia, tea tourism in China is popular (Cheng et al., 2010). Singapore invited hotels and restaurants to join the World Gourmet Summit, as well as promoted itself as an important Asian food center through organizing many fusion cuisine festivals (Chaney and Ryan, 2012).

Between 2008 and 2009, the inbound tourists of Taiwan grew by 14%, thereby achieving the highest tourism growth rate in Asia (UNWTO, 2010). According to a survey by the Taiwan Tourism Bureau, "scenery" and "dining" are the primary factors that attract tourists. Moreover, "dining" is a primary factor for the tourists coming from Japan, Korea, Hong Kong and Macau (Taiwan Tourism Bureau, 2014). Because most tourists include Taipei as an integral part of their itinerary to Taiwan, the tourists' dining experience in Taipei is crucial to the tourism industry and its development. Thus, recommending good restaurants to tourists has become a priority for the government. Given its rich historical and geographical environment, food culture in Taipei is vibrant and diversified. In 2008, the Taipei City Government sponsored a project to select and compile a list of recommended restaurants to enhance the quality of food and service for the restaurants in Taipei; however, there is no reliable measurement tool to evaluate restaurants nor is there a standardized restaurant rating system available in Asia.

In the foodservice industry, the Michelin Red Guide is the one of the most authoritative and popular restaurant guides. Despite its extensive influence in the foodservice industry globally, the Michelin Red Guide has never disclosed the written criteria for the quality level required for the various star levels (Johnson et al., 2005), which represents a significant research gap in the establishment of reliable and consistent criteria or scales for restaurant rating. Furthermore, a reliable measurement tool is just one important component of restaurant evaluation. The implementation process

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is equally important; in particular, we need an effective and consistent evaluation process. The Michelin Red Guide deploys mystery shoppers as “inspectors” to evaluate restaurants. The mystery shopper, also known as the secret, ghost or anonymous shopper, is a market survey technique that is applied in various industries (Cobb, 1995; Dwek, 1996). Through over a century of development and refinements, the mystery shopper technique used to compile the Michelin Red Guide now has a significant impact on the foodservice industry, particularly on restaurants. Thus, the mystery shopper approach was used to evaluate restaurants after developing the scale.

This study makes several contributions. First, although the Michelin Red Guide and restaurant reputation have received practitioners’ and scholars’ attention in the literature, inconsistent findings and the lack of a theoretical foundation suggest a need to develop a deeper understanding of how the Michelin Red Guide evaluation process relates to restaurant performance. Thus, our study extends beyond previous studies (e.g., Marini et al., 2003; Snyder and Cotter, 1998) by analyzing how the Michelin Red Guide affects restaurant performance and by developing an effective evaluation tool for restaurant ratings in Taiwan. Further, almost every model developed to explain restaurant performance (e.g., Cheng et al., 2012; Wu and Liang, 2009) is grounded in the customer’s perspective. Unfortunately, the experts’ comment links proposed by prior researchers have received limited empirical attention, especially in restaurant evaluation. Our study attempts to fill the gaps of prior studies by further integrating the mystery shoppers’ observations to analyze the critical indicators that form a restaurant rating measurement tool based on the Michelin Red Guide.

The structure of this study is as follows: first, we develop and then analyze the indicators that form the measurement tool for restaurant ratings. The selection of mystery shoppers and their training are critical for ensuring reliability and consistency in the evaluations. After a 3-day training program, we deploy 48 mystery shoppers to undertake empirical research using the newly developed measurement tool. Finally, we test the empirical data to validate our rating scale. Thus, by developing and then validating a standardized restaurant rating scale using the mystery shopper approach, this study has significant managerial implications for restaurant management, and it provides further scope for research in the foodservice industry and beyond. In summary, the Taipei City Government’s project presented an invaluable opportunity for this study to develop a new measurement tool for rating restaurants using the mystery shopper approach and to validate this tool using the rich data collected from 500 listed restaurants.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. World-renowned authoritative restaurant guides

Presently, the two most representative restaurant rating systems are the French Michelin Red Guide and the American Zagat Restaurant Survey, originating in New York. In this study, we draw reference primarily from the former. Given the growing prominence of Asia in the global economy, in recent years, the *Michelin Red Guide* has issued a 2007 Tokyo Michelin Guide and a 2008 Hong Kong and Macau Michelin Guide. The introduction of these guides indicates that Asian cuisines are now more broadly accepted and popular with international tourists (Lane, 2010).

The founder of Michelin Tire Company, French industrialist André Jules Michelin, published the first Michelin Red Guide in 1900. The guide has since become the most influential restaurant guide in France and beyond. To date, total publications have reached 1.5 million copies and covered 12 countries in Europe, four cities in the United States (US), and cosmopolitan Asian cities including Tokyo, Hong Kong and Macau. The Michelin Red Guide

evaluates restaurants by anonymously assigning inspectors to dine in restaurants (Callan, 1990; Lee, 2013). In analyzing how the Michelin Red Guide affected restaurants, Johnson et al. (2005) proposed that its influence on restaurants included changing price settings, affecting the level of revenue, and elevating chefs’ prestige and social position. Thus, these comprehensive considerations could provide customers with a reliable reference tool when selecting a restaurant.

#### 2.1.1. The Zagat Restaurant Survey

Americans Tim and Nina Zagat co-founded the first Zagat Restaurant Survey in 1979 by compiling their friends’ surveys of New York City restaurants. Zagat’s has since become one of the most trusted restaurant surveys and guides for tourists in the US and globally. Unlike the Michelin Red Guide, which uses anonymous inspectors to conduct evaluations, the Zagat survey advocates shared opinions. It relies on consumers to evaluate restaurants and then collates the results to provide the most objective and accurate information (Zagat Survey, 2007).

#### 2.1.2. The Thai select certification system

Thai Select is a certification system promoted globally by the Thai government. A certified Thai cuisine restaurant will be issued a Thai Select label by the Thai government. This label has become the Thai government’s official support for high-quality restaurants that serve Thai cuisines. The main purpose of this label is to recognize and appreciate exceptional Thai restaurants as well as to encourage Thai restaurants to achieve international standards. Presently, Thai restaurants are commonly found everywhere around the world. The Thai Select system aims to provide consumers beyond the shores of Thailand with an authentic experience of Thai cuisines. Given the proliferation of Thai Select around the world, Taiwan adopted this certification system in 2007. As of 2008, there were already 21 Thai restaurants in Taiwan that had been issued the Thai Select label (<http://thaiselect.com.au>).

#### 2.1.3. Taiwan restaurant rating reviews

Presently, restaurant ratings in Taiwan are largely based on media reports. There is an obvious gap in exploring the classification, evaluation standards and credibility in Taiwan restaurant ratings. The existing Taiwanese restaurant rating system includes a ranking of restaurants in *Vision Magazine*. The magazine employs SGS (Societe Generale de Surveillance) to undertake evaluations using the mystery shopper approach. That said, these ratings only include service quality evaluations and not all aspects of restaurant evaluations. In recent years, the Taipei City Government tried to mitigate the shortfalls in the Taiwan restaurant evaluation system by embarking on mystery shopper training and establishing a more robust method of restaurant evaluations. In addition, the Taipei Restaurant Evaluations implemented by *Jiao Tong* largely followed the Michelin restaurant guide and involved gourmet experts evaluating various recommended restaurants over a period of months. To ensure the objectivity of the evaluations, the experts dined at their own expense and did not reveal their purpose of their visit. Each expert provided a score for each item including food, hygiene, overall environment, service, wine and beverages. Finally, they decided how many stars to award each restaurant by consensus.

### 2.2. The indicators from various restaurant rating systems

The Michelin Red Guide employs a symbol system to select the best hotels and restaurants in each classification of comfort and price. For the restaurant category, the guide proposes the following primary indicators: quality of ingredients and produce; cooking skill and talent; meal characteristics, including taste, clarity and fusion; well-balanced menu; value for the money; and consistent

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