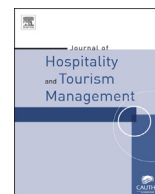




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Restaurant menu re-design as a facilitator of more responsible consumer choice: An exploratory and preliminary study



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ABSTRACT

Food service provision imposes significant environmental and societal impacts. The contemporary customer is getting increasingly conscious about these impacts, which is often reflected in restaurant food choice. The catering industry should foresee this trend in consumer choice and architect it so that it becomes more responsible. This study employs a qualitative method for primary data collection and analysis to explore how various environmental (provenance and carbon footprint) and health (nutritional and calorific) characteristics of food displayed on restaurant menus affect customer choice in the UK. It finds that while presenting the carbon footprint information is generally viewed positively by consumers, managerial and policy reinforcement is necessary for it to become a determinant of consumer choice. Displaying food provenance, nutritional and calorific values is considered paramount and these food attributes should become conventional menu items.

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1. Introduction

The global food systems play an important societal and economic role but, concurrently, impose significant environmental impacts. These impacts originate in all operational sectors of the food systems and take various forms, but are particularly pronounced in terms of carbon footprint build-up (Coley, Howard, & Winter, 2009), water use (Khan & Hanjra, 2009), eutrophication (Tusseau-Vuillemin, 2001) and waste generation (Lundie & Peters, 2005). The environmental impacts of the food systems should be reduced to make them more sustainable.

Among the different operational sectors of global food systems, the food service provision industry (also known as catering) holds substantial environmental footprint (Baldwin, Wilberforce, & Kapur, 2011), especially in terms of energy use and related greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Fusi, Guidetti, & Azapagic, 2015). Due to the on-going regulatory changes, increasing shareholder pressure and growing public demand for more environment-benign food production and consumption practices (Revell & Blackburn, 2007), food service providers have started recognising the important role they play in managing the negative environmental

impacts associated with their operations. However, while some progress has been made towards sustainability of food service provision (Gössling, Garrod, Aall, Hille, & Peeters, 2011), the industry has traditionally been slow in addressing the new market challenges related to environmental management (Kirk, 1998). This is reflected in the low uptake of pro-environmental management practices and their limited integration into the day-to-day business operations (Chou, Chen, & Wang, 2012). This calls for a change should food service provision aim to become more environmentally sustainable.

While the primary task of food service provision is to identify, accommodate and sustain customer demand, catering operators can also architect consumer choice. This can be achieved via the adoption of the 'social marketing' tools that have been designed to affect consumer behaviour so that it becomes more beneficial from the societal, economic and environmental perspectives (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Likewise, pro-environmental 'nudging' can be applied to manipulate consumer demand to encourage the purchase of more sustainable products (Hall, 2013; Phtidis & Sabbage, 2011). The penetration of 'social marketing' and pro-environmental 'nudging' into food service provision has been insufficient to-date (Truong & Hall, 2013) although this may change in the future as these techniques hold potential to positively differentiate their early adopters from competition, especially in mature and saturated food markets (Dinan & Sargeant, 2000; Reisch, Eberle, &

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Lorek, 2013). Most importantly, the application of ‘social marketing’ and pro-environmental ‘nudging’ by catering operators can facilitate more responsible food consumption, thus minimising the environmental impacts of global food service provision (Gössling et al. 2011).

The growth of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) has dramatically affected consumer decision-making and behaviour, also in the context of food service provision (Quan & Wang, 2004). It has accelerated customer interest in the health and well-being attributes of the food served; it has also contributed to the rise in public awareness of the environmental impacts of restaurant food choice (Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012). As a result, contemporary consumers have become more demanding in terms of their restaurant food choice, paying special attention to where the food comes from, what ingredients it contains and what impacts it imposes on customer health, the well-being of local communities, and the environment (Oh, Fiore, & Jeong, 2007). It is paramount that food service providers comprehend the new consumer demands imposed by the ‘experience economy’ as the failure to anticipate and address the on-going market transformations may have a long-term detrimental effect on business success. Importantly, the on-going societal changes attributed to the ‘experience economy’ correlate well with the goals of ‘social marketing’ and pro-environmental ‘nudging’ as applied in food service provision, as they all are concerned with more responsible food choices. This suggests that food service operators should more broadly integrate the principles of consumer choice architecture into their managerial agenda.

Environmental (or eco-) labelling represents one of the key communication tools designed to promote sustainable consumption (Hall, 2013) and is often considered an integral element of ‘social marketing’ and pro-environmental ‘nudging’ (Demarque, Charalambides, Hilton, & Waroquier, 2015; Ölander & Thøgersen, 2014). Eco-labels have potential to positively affect consumer choice by emphasising the environmental benefits of certain products and services (Loureiro & Lotado, 2005). Although the public recognition of environmental labelling is gradually growing (Guenther, Saunders, & Tait, 2014), including the wider field of food systems (Gadema & Oglethorpe, 2011), there is limited evidence of its effective employment in the context of food service provision. While a dedicated research stream has looked into the application of environmental labelling in grocery retail (see, for example, Hartikainen, Roininen, Katajajuuri, & Pulkkinen, 2014; Nilsson, Tuncer, & Thidell, 2004; Soler, Gil, & Sánchez, 2002; Upham, Dendler, & Bleda, 2011), little is known about the potential of eco-labels to be adopted by catering operators (Baldwin et al. 2011). Furthermore, the scope of research on environmental labelling as utilised in the context of food systems has been restricted to a handful of issues. These comprise: food production methods (for instance, labels designed to distinguish between organic (bio-) and conventional produce); localism (labels to mark local versus imported produce); responsible sourcing and animal welfare (labels to indicate ‘free range’ and ‘freedom’ food); and standards of fair trade. Lastly, while the recognition of the significant carbon impacts attributed to food service provision is rising, there is little evidence of the adoption of carbon labels in catering with the goal of affecting consumer choice (Gössling & Buckley, 2016; Spaargaren, van Koppen, Janssen, Hendriksen, & Kolfschoten, 2013). The ‘experience economy’ constructs suggest the increased consumer awareness of the environmental (which includes climate) implications of food systems. Such related topics as ‘food miles’, ‘slow food’ and ‘local food’ have been trending as a result (see, for instance, Coley et al. 2009; Hallsworth & Wong, 2012; Kemp, Insch, Holdsworth, & Knight, 2010). This implies that carbon labelling may have a role to play in managing consumer choice in the context

of food service provision. This role ought to be better understood.

This paper reports on the outcome of an ‘intervention experiment’ study carried out in the UK sector of food service provision. The ‘intervention experiment’ was designed to test the concept of utilising a restaurant menu as a ‘social marketing’ and pro-environmental ‘nudging’ communication tool in consumer choice architecture. To this end, a casual dining restaurant modified its menu card to display information on the societal (health) and environmental (provenance and carbon footprint) attributes of food choice. The reaction of restaurant visitors to the concept of this re-designed menu was captured and analysed with the help of a qualitative method. The study thus complemented the growing research stream on the determinants of restaurant food choice. Its unique contribution is seen in exploring the role of carbon label in driving consumer food choice when dining out. Managerial recommendations for food service operators on how to design more effective menus were developed. The areas for policy-making intervention required to enhance public understanding of the key issues related to sustainability of food systems were revealed.

In terms of its scope, the paper is concerned with the analysis of customer response to restaurant menu re-design which was implemented to facilitate more responsible consumer choice and undertaken in the form of an industry experiment. The issues related to the determinants of restaurant food choice, most notably the role of climate and health considerations in it, constitute the main subject of this article’s research inquiry. Due to the word count constraints, the paper does not aim to examine key theories and models of consumer choice in restaurant settings as these have been extensively covered elsewhere. Instead, it strives to explore how the availability of new factual information on a menu affects restaurant food choice.

2. Literature review

The determinants of restaurant food choice represent a long-established research topic with seminal contributions made by Auty (1992), Kivela, Inbakaran, and Reece (1999a; 1999b) and Park (2004), to mention a few. Existing research has generated a number of commonalities and contradictions (Jung, Sydnor, Lee, & Almanza, 2015). This emphasises the exceptionally complex nature of restaurant food choice (Stierand & Wood, 2012) and calls for its further, in-depth investigation, looking at the different levels (for example, consumer choice in the context of fast food, casual dining and fine dining catering establishments; public and private food service provision) and scales (for instance, exploring geographical, demographic and cultural differences in food selection) of analysis. Indeed, the determinants of consumer choice are manifold and tend to change in response to various external (for example, the effect of mass media and marketing campaigns) and internal (for instance, the influence of family members and health considerations) stimuli (June & Smith, 1987).

The outcome of the growing number of studies suggests that contemporary catering customers select food based on its environmental credentials and ‘ethic’ values (see, for instance, DiPietro, Cao, & Partlow, 2013; Dutta, Umashankar, Choi, & Parsa, 2008; Namkung & Jang, 2014). These pro-environmental changes in consumer choice are partially attributed to the effect of the ‘experience economy’. The ‘experience economy’ makes contemporary food service customers more: 1) knowledgeable about the attributes of the food they consume; 2) conscious about the quality of the food and the dining out experience provided; and 3) concerned with the detrimental effect of the food choice decisions they make, including their effect on the environment (Fiore, Niehm, Oh, Jeong, & Hausafus, 2007). The above market changes outline promising business opportunities for food service operators to intervene

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