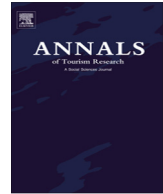




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Research Note

Chef image's influence on tourists' dining experiences

Annie Chen^a, Norman Peng^{b,*}, Kuang-peng Hung^c^a Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom^b University of Salford, United Kingdom^c Ming Chuan University, Taiwan

The purpose of this research note is to examine how restaurant chefs affect tourists' dining experiences. In restaurants such as *teppanyaki* restaurants (Appendix A) and sushi bars, chefs must interact with diners directly by taking orders from diners, preparing food in front of diners, and serving dishes to diners (Fang, Peng, & Pan, 2013; Kuroshima, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2006). Interaction with chefs can be a unique selling point for these restaurants. These restaurants offer unique dining experiences to tourists and are popular in Taiwan, France, Japan, and the US (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2006).

Kuroshima (2010), Pratten (2003a, 2003b), and Zopiat (2010) suggest that chefs' technical skills and abilities to communicate with other staff (e.g., management, service staff, and other chefs) are crucial to restaurants' performances. However, studies have not explored how chefs can influence diners directly, which is the case for restaurants such as *teppanyaki* restaurants. Tourism and hospitality scholars have been interested in tourists' dining experiences because food is an important medium in understanding a culture or society. Nevertheless, the question of how chefs affect diners has not yet been fully examined (e.g., Batra, 2008; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Law, To, & Goh, 2008; Min & Lee, 2014; Nam & Lee, 2011).

To augment the literature on tourists' dining experiences, this research examines how *teppanyaki* chefs can influence Taiwanese tourists' dining experiences. In addition, it investigates how diners' experiences can be affected by *teppanyaki* restaurants' other diners and service staff. Fang et al. (2013) and Lin and Lin (2006) note that *teppanyaki* restaurants have a significant role in Taiwan's culinary culture and appeal to tourists.

This research incorporates "chef image" into Wu and Liang's (2009) framework on diners' experiential value (Fig. 1). Experiential value has been suggested by tourism scholars to be a crucial factor when examining tourists' experiences. It can even influence how tourists experience a destination (e.g., Chang et al., 2010; Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011; Mok & Iverson, 2000; Teng, 2011).

* Corresponding author. Address: University of Salford, Salford Business School The Crescent, Salford M5 4WT, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)161 295 3072.

E-mail addresses: a.chen@shu.ac.uk (A. Chen), n.s.peng@salford.ac.uk (N. Peng), kphung@mail.mcu.edu.tw (K.-p. Hung).



Fig. 1. Research framework-main model ($N = 202$).

The first hypothesis that will be examined is the chef image's influence on diners' experiential value. In this research, diners' experience is determined based on how a chef evokes fantasies, feelings, and fun by being unique, stunning, and rare (Chen & Peng, 2014). Chef image refers to customers' overall perceptions of a chef's interpersonal skills, technical skills, and creativity (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2006; Zopiatis, 2010).

Previous literature has suggested that chefs can influence diners' experiences by being knowledgeable about the food, conducting appropriate conversation, and making delicious dishes (Lin & Lin, 2006). In *teppanyaki* restaurants, chefs prepare the dishes as the customers make their orders. In addition, chefs engage in conversation with diners to understand their preferences. Their responsibility to make all the dishes in front of diners while displaying a certain professional image separates them from other service staff (Lin & Lin, 2006). If diners perceive their chef as having a positive image (e.g., good interpersonal skills, superior technical skills, and creative), they are more likely to have a positive dining experience. This current research examines the following hypothesis:

H1. A chef's image has a positive influence on diners' experiential value.

The second hypothesis investigates the influence of other customers on diners' experiential value. At *teppanyaki* restaurants, each chef serves multiple diners and diners sitting next to one another in front of their chef; therefore, a good interaction with other diners can be expected to contribute to customers' experiential value when dining at *teppanyaki* restaurants. The works of Peng, Chen, and Hung (2015) and Wu and Liang (2009) are among the few studies that have explored and confirmed the importance of other diners' manner and behavior. Additional research on the effect of other customers will benefit the existing hospitality management literature.

H2. Interaction with other customers has a positive influence on diners' experiential value.

The third hypothesis examines the influence of service staff on diners' experiential value. To examine the interaction between service staff and diners, this study focuses on service staff quality. This factor includes customers' overall perceptions of the relative inferiority or superiority of a service staff (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The literature has confirmed that the staff's knowledge of the restaurant, their level of helpfulness, and their reliability affects diners (e.g., Jang & Namkung, 2009; Wu & Liang, 2009). This factor's influence can benefit from reexamination, as *teppanyaki* restaurant chefs have performed some duties that are traditionally performed by service staff, such as introducing the menu and answering customers' questions about the food (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed: (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010).

H3. The service quality of service staff has a positive influence on diners' experiential value.

This research used trained interviewers to collect data from Taiwanese tourists near Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung's four and five-star hotels that have *teppanyaki* restaurants. These hotels' restaurants are subject to stringent inspection; therefore, the quality of the restaurants used in this

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