



Perceptions of Chinese restaurants in the U.S.: What affects customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions?

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates American customers' perceptions of Chinese restaurants in the U.S., using the Importance–Performance Analysis (IPA) approach. This study also examines which attributes of Chinese restaurants influence American customers' satisfaction and behavioral intentions. The IPA shows that environmental cleanliness and attentive service are two important areas where Chinese restaurateurs can make improvements. In addition, food taste and service reliability appear to be key attributes for Chinese restaurants' success. Overall, this study indicates that food quality, service reliability and environmental cleanliness are three pivotal attributes to create satisfied customers and positive post-dining behavioral intentions. Chinese restaurant managers should reasonably allocate their limited resources to restaurant attributes based on their contributions to customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

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1. Introduction

The United States is a multicultural and multiethnic nation and this national trend of diversity is expected to consistently increase (Josiam and Monteiro, 2004; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007). One reflection of this cultural and ethnic diversity is the variety and prosperity of ethnic restaurants in the American foodservice market. The U.S. ethnic food market generates \$75 billion in annual sales, around 65% of which is attributed to the foodservice industry (US ethnic food market, 2005). Yet, the fast growth of ethnic restaurants is not driven entirely by the growing number of new immigrants. In fact, 75% of ethnic food consumption comes from non-ethnic customers (US ethnic food market, 2005). As lifestyles change and dining out becomes more and more commonplace, many customers desire new flavors and experiences.

Along with this popularity is the rapid development of Chinese restaurants. According to Chinese Restaurant News (2007), there are about 43,139 Chinese restaurants in the United States, which is more than the total number of all McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King domestic outlets combined. Chinese restaurants generate over \$17.5 billion annual sales, accounting for about one fourth of overall annual sales generated by ethnic restaurants in the U.S. (Chinese Restaurant News, 2007). Known for its good taste and

great value for the price, Chinese cuisine is among the “big three” most popular ethnic cuisines in the U.S. foodservice market (National Restaurant Association, 1995). It is estimated that 90% of the American population has tried Chinese food and 63% of Americans eat Chinese food each month (George, 2001). Facing more sophisticated American consumers and increasing competition in the restaurant industry, Chinese restaurants can no longer succeed by depending on good taste or low price alone. According to National Restaurant Association (2000a,b), due to an increased familiarity with ethnic food, American customers' attitudes toward ethnic cuisine have recently changed. Today, an exotic experience is not enough to attract consumers to an ethnic restaurant. Customers are no longer willing to trade off inferior service or atmosphere for an opportunity to try new flavors. They prefer an excellent overall dining experience. Moreover, Chinese restaurants are facing increasing challenges from other emerging Asian restaurants and from the changing tastes of American customers who prefer healthy or spicy food. Therefore, a better understanding of the key attributes influencing customer satisfaction and post-dining behavioral intentions in Chinese restaurants will provide important practical implications for Chinese restaurant operators.

From an academic perspective, despite the importance and popularity of ethnic restaurants in the foodservice industry, this area has received little research attention. Among the few studies of ethnic restaurants, topics focused on customers' motivations, selection criteria for eating at an ethnic restaurant, and the role of authenticity in ethnic restaurants (Qu, 1997; Josiam and Monteiro, 2004; George, 2001; Ebster and Guist, 2004; Sukalakamala and

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Boyce, 2007). There has been no research exploring the key attributes affecting customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in ethnic restaurants, which are of central interest to restaurant operators. Often, perceived quality has been seen as one of the most important antecedents of customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in the service industry (Namkung and Jang, 2007). For a restaurant, perceived quality mainly consists of food quality, service quality and atmospheric quality. Based on the linkage of perceived quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions, the overall purpose of this study is to identify the key attributes affecting customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions in Chinese restaurants. More specifically, the research objectives are: (1) to identify American customers' perceived importance of restaurant attributes when selecting Chinese restaurants; (2) to examine American customers' perceptions regarding the performance of Chinese restaurants; (3) to discover the restaurant attributes that influence American customers' satisfaction with Chinese restaurants; and (4) to identify the attributes affecting post-dining behavioral intentions toward Chinese restaurants.

2. Literature review

2.1. Ethnic cuisine development and Chinese restaurants in the U.S.

In the past few decades, with the influx of new immigrants as well as the diversifying tastes of Americans, ethnic foods have become widely available and increasingly popular in the U.S. foodservice market (Josiam and Monteiro, 2004). Traditional ethnic cuisines such as Italian, Mexican and Cantonese Chinese have become so familiar to American customers that they are perceived as mainstream American foods (Mills, 2000). In the meanwhile, many emerging ethnic cuisines such as Caribbean, Mediterranean and Pan-Asian have also gained wide acceptance in recent years (US ethnic food market, 2005).

Chinese cuisine arrived in the U.S. with the first railroad-construction workers brought over to the west coast of the U.S. in the nineteenth century (Freeman, 2008). From the first Cantonese style Chinese restaurant opened in San Francisco in 1849, it rapidly penetrated towns and cities all over the U.S. and became part of the American experience (Chen and Bowen, 2001). Cantonese style cuisine, characterized by its light sweet and sour flavors, is the most popular Chinese cuisine in the U.S. In recent years, other styles of Chinese cuisine have also become familiar to American customers, such as Szechwan, Hunan and Mandarin styles. The first two styles are famous for their hot and spicy flavors, while the last one is characterized by light, elegant and mildly seasoned foods (George, 2001). According to the National Restaurant Association (1995), customers perceived Chinese cuisine as a great value for the price, good for carryout, rich in flavor and difficult to prepare at home.

Although there are a few Chinese restaurant chains operating in the U.S., such as P.F. Chang's China Bistro and Panda Express, most Chinese restaurants are family-owned or single shop restaurants. A typical Chinese restaurant has a Chinese name outside, is decorated with Chinese-styled pictures and artifacts, such as Chinese Brush Landscape Paintings and red lanterns, offers a menu printed in both Chinese and English, and provides Chinese-characterized tableware, such as chopsticks and Chinese teakettles and cups. In the last twenty years, Chinese restaurants have been facing intense competition among themselves due to fast development and expansion in the U.S., as well as from other emerging Asian restaurants such as Indian, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese (Jang and Ha, *in press*; Jang et al., 2009). Thus, maintaining customer satisfaction and repeat patronage may be more important for Chinese restaurants than ever before.

2.2. Customer satisfaction and related theories

The topic of "customer satisfaction" has held a significant position in the marketing literature over the decades since satisfied customers can generate long-term benefits for companies, including customer loyalty and sustained profitability (Homburg et al., 2006). Researchers have explained the mechanism of customer satisfaction with a number of distinct theories, such as expectancy-disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1981), contrast theory (Howard and Sheth, 1969), assimilation or cognitive dissonance theory (Anderson, 1973), equity theory (Oliver and Swan, 1989), and value-percept theory (Westbrook and Reilly, 1983). Among them, the most widely accepted theory is the expectancy-disconfirmation theory. According to this theory, customers' satisfaction judgments are the results of comparisons between customers' expectations and perceived performance. If the perceived performance exceeds the expectation, the expectation is positively disconfirmed and the customer is satisfied. On the contrary, if the perceived performance falls short of the expectation, the expectation is negatively disconfirmed and the customer is dissatisfied. Another influential theory for customer satisfaction is the equity theory. This theory suggests that satisfaction occurs when customers perceive that they have obtained more benefits compared to their cost (e.g. money, time and effort) and perceived value is an appropriate factor in measuring satisfaction (Oliver and Swan, 1989; Yuan and Jang, 2008).

Another commonly used theory, the three-factor theory, provides a basic explanation for the structure of customer satisfaction. This theory claims that three independent satisfaction factors influence customer satisfaction in different ways (Kano, 1984; Matzler and Sauerwein, 2002). Basic factors (dissatisfiers) are minimum requirements for satisfaction. Failure to fulfill the minimum requirements causes dissatisfaction, whereas fulfilling or exceeding them does not necessarily lead to satisfaction. Excitement factors (satisfiers) increase customer satisfaction if delivered but do not cause dissatisfaction if not delivered. Performance factors (hybrids) lead to satisfaction if performance is high and to dissatisfaction if performance is low (Fuller and Matzler, 2008). This theory has been validated by empirical studies (e.g. Fuchs, 2004; Matzler et al., 2006) and could provide an additional perspective for understanding the effects of restaurant attributes on customer satisfaction. Basic factors can be seen as the prerequisites for satisfaction, signifying that customers take them for granted. Performance factors are a critical competitive area and directly related to customers' explicit needs and wants. Excitement factors are unexpected by customers, so they can be a "surprise gift" that generates extra delight (Fuller and Matzler, 2008).

2.3. Behavioral intention

Behavioral intention can be defined as the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). According to the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), behavioral intention is the motivational component of a volitional behavior and is highly correlated with the behavior itself (Jang and Feng, 2007). Although there are still arguments about the level of correlation between behavioral intentions and actual action, it seems to be generally agreed that behavioral intention is a reasonable variable for predicting future behavior (Quelette and Wood, 1998). Thus, a good understanding of the determinants of favorable post-dining behavioral intentions such as saying positive things about the restaurant, recommending the restaurant to others, and repeat purchasing can provide practical guidance for restaurant practitioners.

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