

Consumer values among restaurant customers

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Abstract

The research presented in this article focuses on consumer values in restaurant meal experiences from the restaurant customers' points of view. Based on a set of data, the purpose is to evaluate the customers' perceived consumer values in restaurant meal experiences and to compare the results with other studies on consumer values and service quality and with studies of meal experiences. A modified grounded theory approach has been followed. The empirical data are based on seven semi-structured interviews of experienced restaurant customers in two cities in Norway. A conceptual model illustrates the coding process that shows the connection between the different categories. The data analysis produces different categories of consumer-specific values on three levels of integration. The lowest level includes 29 consumer values that are integrated into 13 specified values. On the highest level, five value categories of consumer-oriented values are specified. These are excellence, harmony, emotional stimulation, acknowledgement, and circumstance value, of which harmony is the most emphasised value among the restaurant customers.

This study offers the restaurant industry increased insight into consumer values among their actual and potential customers. It also lays a foundation for conducting a quantitative study in the future to test the validity of the determined values in customer meal experiences.

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Keywords: Restaurant meals; Meal experience; Consumer values; Grounded theory

1. Introduction

The meal experience represents a moment in the everyday life of human beings (Mäkelä, 2000), and individuals will have their own experiences of meals—whether they eat at home or in a restaurant (Warde and Martens, 2000). Meals occur as complex phenomena, and

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for an understanding of the different facets of meals in practice increased acknowledgement of the complexity of the meal is required (Meiselman, 2000). The first person to be credited with formalising marketing insight into restaurants was Campbell-Smith (1967). The key elements in restaurants as identified by Campbell-Smith (1967) were food, atmosphere and service that could influence commercially provided meals. According to Warde and Martens (2000), meal research was scattered prior to their research on eating out; there was scanty systematic social scientific research before they started. The complexity of the meal was discussed from different perspectives (Meiselman, 2000). Scientific studies or discussions about meals are sparse, especially about meal experiences (Andersson and Mossberg, 2004; Bugge and Døving, 2000; Douglas et al., 1997; Gustafsson, 2004a, b; Jonsson, 2004; Warde and Martens, 1998; Warde and Martens, 2000; Wood, 1994).

Generally, most of the research on restaurant meals seems to have been conducted from a restaurant producer's point of view. However, there is obviously a need to acquire increased knowledge about meal experiences from the customers' points of view (Andersson and Mossberg, 2004; Warde and Martens, 2000). Several factors can influence consumers' perceived meal experiences in restaurants; these include information search, consumer value set, attitudes towards enjoyment, and practical expectations. Due to the absence of research on consumer values in restaurant meal experiences, the intention of this article is to contribute to increased insight into the consumer values involved within this context. Such insight can also be useful for restaurant managers in their struggle to fulfil the preferences of their guests through their service concepts and their conduct of the meal process.

The purpose of this study is to reveal and discuss dimensions of customers' consumer values within the context of the meal experience in à la Carte restaurants. Because of the lack of adequate empirical documented studies linked to the restaurant context, it has been found appropriate to choose a methodological approach that facilitates revealing new dimensions of this phenomenon. Following a partly inductive qualitatively based approach inspired by grounded theory (GT) (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), this study will be based on data derived from focus group and semi-structured interviews, and the results of the data analysis will be confronted and complemented with other comparable research findings. The latter includes dimensions of relevant service contexts.

2. What are consumer values

Consumer value is defined by Holbrook (1999) as "...an interactive relativistic preference experience". The preference aspect includes the assumption that consumers purchase products and services because they want to achieve value-related goals or benefits. Solomon assumes that value implies "...a belief that some condition is preferable to its opposite" (Solomon, 2004), such as when consumers buy products that will make them appear young and trendy, which is preferable to appearing old (Solomon, 2004). Consumer values can generally be understood as perceived values (Oliver, 1997) and from a consumer research perspective it could be argued that both these terms should be understood as synonymous concepts (Gallarza and Gil Saura, 2006).

References to consumer values derived from the literature include contributions, such as Bagozzi (1998), Bagozzi et al. (2002), Brown (1999), Craig Smith (1999), Grayson (1999), Holbrook (1999), Leclerc and Schmitt (1999), Oliver (1999), Richins (1999a, b), Sheth et al.

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