



Customer experiences and return patronage in restaurants at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

Considering the fact that OR Tambo International Airport is the biggest and busiest airport in Africa, restaurant sales at the airport have been relatively low, with restaurants realising below-industry-average revenue. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into restaurant customers' experiences and return patronage in an airport context. A mixed-methods research design was utilised. The views of restaurateurs and airport managers were explored (qualitative) and 602 customers from 16 restaurants situated at the airport completed questionnaires (quantitative). Analysis of variance, correlation analysis and regression analysis were performed to reach the objectives of the study. The research found a relationship between female restaurant guests and return patronage. Furthermore, 'reliability,' and 'empathy,' were the most important attributes contributing to customers' restaurant experiences whilst 'responsiveness,' and 'empathy' significantly impacted on customers' intention to return to the restaurants. To improve customer experiences, restaurateurs should make use of social and/or economic rewards. The findings could inform restaurateurs of a range of strategic implications which could be useful for marketing endeavours aimed at enhancing customer loyalty and the bottom-line.

Key words: Mixed-methods, airport restaurants, restaurant sales, customer experiences.

Introduction

Given that OR Tambo International Airport (in Johannesburg, South Africa) is the biggest and busiest airport in Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2016), it is surprising that restaurant sales at the airport have been low (Forster, 2017), with restaurants realising below-industry-average revenues. Forster (2017) claims that the low restaurant sales do not match the growth in domestic travellers at the airport. However, identifying customer experiences and return patronage could improve restaurant sales (Mhlanga, Hattingh and Moolman, 2014) and unlock a restaurant's potential for future financial sustainability (Mhlanga and Machingambi, 2016).

Research confirms the strategic importance of customer experiences for restaurants. Positive customer experiences have a direct impact on a restaurants' financial performance (Mhlanga and Tichaawa, 2017), long-term survival and positive word-of-mouth communication (Ladhari, Brun and Morales, 2008). Restaurant customer experience is regarded by many researchers (Ganesh, Arnold and Reynolds, 2000; Soriano, 2002; Han, Back and Barrett, 2009; Mhlanga, 2013) as the antecedent to customers' return patronage. It is estimated that more than ninety per cent of dissatisfied restaurant customers do not return to the same restaurant (Markovic, Raspor and Segaric, 2010) and complain to approximately ten people about a negative experience they have faced (Vijayvargy, 2014).

In spite of the growing international interest in restaurant customer experiences and return patronage research, only Moolman (2011) has investigated this topic in South Africa, albeit from a mall context. International studies on customers' experiences and return patronage in



airport restaurants might not be applicable to the South African hospitality subsector, since Chin and Tsai (2013) cautions that national culture has an effect on customer experiences. The findings of research on restaurant customer experiences should therefore be interpreted in the light of national culture and should not be generalized to other countries because of the influence culture has on service experiences (Prayag, 2017). The theoretical contribution relates to critically articulating customer experiences and return patronage from a developing context, where such findings could mirror similarities and differences, and inform restaurateurs of the strategic implications which could be useful for marketing and management endeavours.

Study Context

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2016) more people are now travelling for leisure, recreation, and business purposes, and most of them are travelling as a part of their employment more so than ever before. The WTTC (2016) expects an increase in the global travel and tourism industry's contribution towards gross domestic product (GDP) from 9.2% in 2010 to 9.6% by 2020. The WTTC further estimates a rise in total employment by the tourism industry from nearly 236 million jobs in 2010 to more than 303 million by 2020 (WTTC, 2016).

The South African tourism industry, is also regarded as one of the fastest growing sectors in the country's economy (RSA NDT, 2011). Statistics South Africa (SSA, 2015) reports that the tourism industry in South Africa recorded a growth of 6.6% between 2013 and 2014, exceeding the average global growth in the sector while the direct gross domestic product (GDP) from tourism rose from 93.5 billion in 2012 to R103.6 billion in 2013. Restaurants are classified under the hospitality sub-sector which is one of the six subsectors of the South African tourism industry (CATHSSETA, 2017). Statistics South Africa (SSA, 2007) estimates that restaurants employed almost 93 000 employees in 2007, while the total income generated by restaurants and coffee shops increased from R1 452 million in September 2009 to R1 592 million in September 2010 (SSA, 2010). Restaurants are therefore a critical cornerstone of the hospitality subsector, which is a pillar of the tourism industry (RSA NDT, 2011).

The restaurant industry is regarded as one of the largest sectors in the Western economies (Mueller, Palmer, Mack and McMullan, 2003). It is the largest private sector employer in the United States of America (USA), employing nearly 12.9 million people and contributing four per cent to the USA GDP in 2015 (National Restaurant Association, 2017). The Australian restaurant industry also performs well. The restaurant sector is the largest contributor to Australia's tourism industry, employing nearly 554 200 people, or 7.4% of the total workforce (Restaurant and Catering Australia, 2017). The growth in the restaurant industry over the past years can be attributed mainly to changes in the contemporary way of life (Mhlanga, Hattingh and Moolman, 2013). Consumers are nowadays experiencing an increasing scarcity of time. As a result, consumers prefer to eat out rather than to spend their scarce time cooking meals at home (Andaleeb and Conway, 2006). However, despite the increasing popularity of eating out, the international failure rate for restaurants is considered to be higher than the average failure rate for small businesses. Parsa, Self, Njite and King (2005) estimated that thirty per cent of restaurants fail during the first year of operation, although claims are made that it is closer to ninety per cent. Researchers (Soriano, 2002; Chi and Gursoy, 2009; Mhlanga, 2013; Mhlanga and Tichaawa, 2017) identify restaurateurs' inability to satisfy their customers' experiences as one of the main reasons for a restaurant's failure.

Literature Review

International researchers have investigated restaurant customer experiences and return patronage using various models. The most famous model was a seminal work proposed by

Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). It has five dimensions namely, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. According to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988:25) tangibles refers to “the degree to which physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel are adequate” whilst reliability denotes to “the degree to which a promised service is performed dependably and accurately”. Responsiveness refers to “the degree to which service providers are willing to help customers and provide prompt service” whilst assurance refers to “the extent to which service providers are knowledgeable, courteous, and able to inspire trust and confidence”. Empathy refers to “the degree to which the customers are offered caring and individualised attention”. However, after Parasuraman *et al.*'s (1988) model, researchers have investigated restaurant customer experiences and return patronage from various perspectives.

In 1994, Bojanic and Rosen found that “knowing the customer”, “reliability”, and “assurance” were the most significant dimensions influencing customer experiences. In 1995, Lee and Hing (1995) determined that “assurance” and “reliability” were the most significant dimensions influencing customer experiences in French and Chinese restaurants. Their research identified the highest experience scores for the following items; “taste of food” and “value for money” in Australian restaurants while in Chinese restaurants the highest experience scores were; “excellent service” and “taste of food” and the lowest experience scores were for the items “pleasant odours”, “visually attractive menu”, “spatial layout and functionality” and “restaurants’ decor typical to its image and price range”. In another study, Qu (1997) found “food and environment”, “service and courtesy,” and “price and value,” as significant factors that impacted customers’ return patronage.

In 2009, Oubre and Brown (2009) found “reliability” to be the most important dimension influencing customer experiences in fine dining restaurants, followed by “tangibles”, “assurance”, “responsiveness”, and “empathy”. Polyorat and Sophonsiri (2010) found “empathy”, “tangibles” and “assurance” dimensions to be the most significant whilst Moolman (2011) found overall customer experience to be the most important variable influencing customers’ decisions to return to restaurants. In 2012, Ramseook-Munhurrun (2012) found “reliability”, “responsiveness-assurance-empathy” and “tangibles” to be the most significant dimensions influencing customer experiences.

In 2013, Chin and Tsai (2013), identified “empathy”, “tangibles” and “assurance” dimensions as the most significant. Vijayvargy (2014) noted “tangibles”, “convenience”, and “empathy” as the most significant dimensions influencing customer experiences whilst Diab, Mohammed, Mansour and Saad (2016) found “assurance” and “empathy” as the most significant variables influencing restaurant customer experiences. Their study also revealed that “empathy”, “tangibles”, and “assurance” all have a significant influence on customer loyalty to restaurants.

Researchers have been reporting contradictory findings on the link between demographical variables and restaurant customers’ return patronage. In his study on restaurant guests’ return patronage in restaurants in Spain, Soriano (2002) found that male and female restaurant guests did not rate the dining attributes quality of food, service, value and ambience differently. Siegel (2002) found a significant link between guests’ age and restaurant experiences with guests in the 35 to 44 year age group recording the highest experience score. Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha and Yun (2007) found no significant relationship between Chinese female restaurant guests and return patronage, but found a significant link between their ages and return patronage.

Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (2000), however, found in a study in Hong Kong, that age is significantly related to the return patronage of male restaurants guests, but not to the return patronage of female restaurant guests. In their study on the influence of demographic variables on customers’ experiences in formal full-service restaurants in South Africa, Mhlanga, Hattingh and Moolman, (2015) found a significant link between guests’ gender, age,



monthly income and level of education and the notion of return patronage. Therefore, a better understanding of the demographic variables affecting restaurant guests' return patronage will provide important practical implications for restaurant operators.

Methodology

OR Tambo International Airport houses leading retail outlets, hotels, car rental companies, a train station (Gautrain), banks, bookshops, money markets, airline offices and twenty one restaurants. Sixteen of the 21 restaurants were included in the study. These restaurants complied with the criteria set by SSA (2016:6) for classification as a restaurant, namely "Enterprises involved in the sale and provision of meals and drinks, ordered from a menu, prepared on the premises for immediate consumption and with provided seating." The other food and beverage outlets could not be classified as restaurants, but as fast-food outlets and were therefore excluded. These enterprises provide food and beverages intended for takeaway purposes and thus in a packaged format.

A mixed-methods research design (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010) was followed. An exploratory discussion meeting (qualitative) was held with six of the eight airport restaurateurs, the airport manager and the marketing manager to explore their views on the study. The group interview was followed by the development and completion of structured questionnaires (quantitative) by airport restaurant customers in order to collect data for the study.

The purpose and extent of the study were discussed with the airport managers and restaurateurs during the scheduled meeting. They were also given the opportunity to give their opinions about the study. Based on the outcomes of the meeting, the research design needed to be guided by two overriding concerns.

Firstly, the restaurateurs and managers of the airport stipulated that only domestic customers that had previously dined at least twice in restaurants at OR Tambo International airport in the past six months should be targeted.

Secondly, the restaurateurs prescribed that the data collection should not have a disruptive effect on the customers' dining experience. They required that the questionnaire should not exceed two pages in length and should be easy to read.

Two standard surveys, namely the SERVQUAL (developed by Parasuraman *et al.* in 1988) and DINESERV (developed by Stevens, Knutson and Patton in 1995) have been applied in previous restaurant research, but were deemed unsuitable for this study. The SERVQUAL questionnaire was too long and not restaurant-specific (Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece, 1999a; O'Neil and Palmer, 2001; Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Although the DINESERV questionnaire was restaurant specific, it was also too long (Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Consequently, a self-administered questionnaire was customised to address the objectives of the study. Questions related to respondents' gender, age, education, home language, monthly income and frequency (to airport restaurants) were included in the questionnaire. Customers were requested to rate their experiences with the following dining attributes: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and price. The first five descriptors were selected, since the extensive literature review identified these factors as the most obvious determinants of restaurant customer experience (Mhlanga, 2015) and return patronage (Soriano, 2002; Susskind, 2002; Sulek and Hensley, 2004).

Discussions with airport management and restaurateurs called for the inclusion of the last attribute on the questionnaire. They were of the opinion that customers gauge their dining experience on the trade-off between the money they spend and the quality service they receive. It was therefore believed that price could have a significant impact on customer experience and return intentions.



The independent variables were tested by requesting restaurant customers to rate their overall experience and intent to return to the restaurant (return patronage). A five-point Likert scale was used. Since each point in the Likert scale had a descriptor, a fully anchored rating scale (Johnson and Christensen, 2004) was applied. The five response alternatives measuring customer experiences were very low (1), low (2), neither high nor low (3), high (4) and very high (5). The response alternatives for customers' intention to return to the restaurant were definitely not (1), probably not (2), unsure (3), probably (4) and definitely (5).

Only domestic customers who had frequented restaurants at OR Tambo International Airport in the past six months were targeted. A scanning question, on whether the respondent was a domestic visitor who had frequented restaurants at the airport at least twice in the past six months, was used to identify the target sample. The clarity of the instructions, ease of completing the questionnaire and time taken to complete the questionnaire (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013) were piloted using 16 guests dining in each restaurant and the questionnaire was also distributed to the airport management and restaurateurs of the airport for their input. No changes were made to the questionnaire.

The study was voluntary and permission and ethical issues was obtained from the restaurants whilst verbal consent was obtained from the customers. Restaurateurs were assured that all information collected would be treated as anonymous. The results of the study would be made known to all restaurateurs. It was, however, agreed that the identity of all restaurants would only be revealed to the management of the airport, while each restaurateur would only be informed of the identity of his or her own restaurant. In order to guarantee equal representation of each of the restaurants, proportional stratified random sampling was used to find the sample size for a particular restaurant taking into account its seating capacity.

The sample size per restaurant in this study was calculated at 25 per cent of each restaurant's seating capacity during lunch and dinner. This sampling method is comparable to the technique used by Kivela, Reece and Inbakaran (1999b). These researchers calculated the sample size per restaurant at 25 per cent of each restaurant's capacity and used the following formula: $\text{Sample Size} = (Z\text{-score})^2 * \text{Std Dev} * (1 - \text{Std Dev}) / (\text{margin of error})$. Consequently, with a proportional sample of 25% of each restaurant's capacity, a confidence level of 95%, margin of error at 6.5% and standard deviation being 0.5, it was insured that the sample would be large enough and this resulted in a sample size of at least 594 respondents.

Restaurants were visited for data collection in January and February 2017. Questionnaires were provided by the researcher to the restaurant customer after paying the bill. The researcher explained the purpose of the survey, indicated that participation was voluntary and requested one guest per table to complete the questionnaire voluntarily. Random sampling (Leedy and Ormrod, 2013) was therefore used. Completed questionnaires were collected by the researcher upon payment of the customers' bills.

Findings

Results and discussion

A total of 602 fully completed questionnaires were gathered, which corresponded with the calculated sample size per restaurant. The respondents' demographic profile is depicted in Table 1. Of the 602 respondents, 55% (n=329) were male. The median age of the respondents was 35 years (inter-quartile range: 23-47 years). Most of the respondents were in the age group 35 to 44 years (25%), followed by respondents in the age group 45 to 54 years. English was the language most frequently used by respondents (29%). Most of the respondents (66%) had a monthly income equal to or above R20 000 and had frequented restaurants more than once (62%).

Table 1: Demographic information and overall means and standard deviations

Demographic variables	n	%	Dining attributes												Overall experience		Return patronage	
			Tangibles		Reliability		Responsiveness		Assurance		Empathy		Price		M	SD	M	SD
			M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Gender																		
Male	329	55	4.52	0.86	4.09	0.92	4.03	0.80	3.86	0.64	4.23	0.71	3.85	0.72	4.25	0.95	4.26	0.85
Female	273	45	4.37	1.06	3.89	1.05	3.81	0.73	4.09	0.72	4.04	0.56	4.02	0.64	4.06	0.53	4.67	1.01
Age																		
≤24	79	13	4.51	0.56	4.36	0.54	4.16	0.51	4.02	0.56	4.29	0.76	4.07	0.89	4.42	0.84	4.44	0.56
25-34	107	18	4.38	0.62	4.08	0.61	4.21	0.71	4.16	0.45	4.12	0.95	4.03	0.62	4.38	1.29	4.49	0.95
35-44	152	25	4.44	0.76	4.41	0.74	4.31	0.67	4.29	0.72	4.22	0.81	4.28	0.51	4.71	0.58	4.62	0.62
45-54	127	21	4.32	0.89	4.15	0.83	3.83	0.55	4.03	0.70	4.02	0.93	4.13	0.77	4.23	0.61	4.43	1.12
55-64	94	16	4.49	0.64	4.07	0.63	3.90	0.96	4.15	0.63	4.25	0.64	4.21	0.66	4.07	0.81	4.47	0.74
≥65	43	7	4.53	0.93	3.93	0.79	3.99	0.72	4.23	0.79	4.39	0.90	4.23	0.84	4.23	0.96	4.50	0.88
Education																		
No schooling	32	5	4.55	1.25	4.40	0.65	4.46	1.35	4.34	0.66	4.36	0.79	3.89	1.21	4.46	0.73	4.48	0.91
Primary school	65	11	4.51	0.61	4.22	0.66	4.25	0.72	4.13	0.94	4.33	0.81	4.06	0.55	4.37	0.67	4.43	0.84
High school	96	16	4.40	0.80	4.29	0.94	4.14	1.02	4.01	0.81	4.21	0.75	4.23	0.93	4.25	0.57	4.30	0.43
Tertiary Diploma	191	32	4.24	0.93	4.17	0.82	4.06	0.68	3.61	0.75	4.14	0.72	3.80	0.59	4.39	1.06	4.24	0.68
Tertiary Degree,	125	21	4.38	0.75	4.02	1.03	3.97	0.72	3.59	0.56	4.02	0.91	4.16	0.74	4.20	0.83	4.32	0.73
Other Postgrad	93	15	4.17	0.70	3.92	0.63	4.23	1.26	3.88	0.73	4.17	0.56	4.09	0.83	4.01	0.54	4.18	0.80
Home language																		
English	173	29	4.32	1.27	3.86	0.71	3.98	0.61	3.66	0.75	3.87	0.55	4.23	0.66	4.06	1.04	4.25	0.54
Afrikaans	91	15	4.40	0.91	3.73	0.86	3.92	1.11	3.98	0.63	3.94	0.89	4.37	1.28	4.15	0.87	4.32	0.62
IsiXhosa	137	23	4.52	0.53	4.33	0.54	4.26	0.73	4.11	0.81	4.11	0.69	4.01	0.52	4.49	0.61	4.30	0.71
IsiZulu,	116	19	4.56	0.64	4.20	1.08	4.31	0.96	4.01	0.97	4.26	0.86	4.11	0.61	4.37	0.80	4.23	0.53
Other	85	14	4.34	0.91	4.04	0.73	4.20	0.81	4.07	0.62	4.04	0.63	4.14	0.76	4.29	0.91	4.21	0.74
Monthly income																		
≤R10 000	53	9	4.56	0.73	4.53	1.26	4.31	0.62	4.28	1.05	4.23	0.45	3.84	1.23	4.60	0.64	4.34	0.90
R10 001-R19 999	151	25	4.51	1.05	4.02	0.83	4.19	0.78	4.06	0.62	4.20	0.56	4.09	0.87	4.41	0.85	4.13	0.65
≥R20 000	398	66	4.43	0.73	3.58	0.61	3.96	0.61	3.75	0.52	4.09	0.88	4.21	0.71	4.13	0.76	4.07	0.73
Frequency																		
Twice	103	17	4.25	0.86	4.06	0.75	4.14	0.70	3.98	0.64	4.01	0.69	4.25	0.62	4.28	0.97	4.17	0.86
3-5	129	21	4.39	0.72	4.13	0.88	4.21	0.63	3.89	0.53	4.17	0.78	4.13	0.56	4.41	1.07	4.35	0.92
More than 5 times	370	62	4.57	0.68	4.19	0.66	4.32	0.81	4.12	0.75	4.34	0.83	4.06	0.89	4.58	0.73	4.49	0.51
All	602	100	4.43	0.82	4.11	0.79	4.13	0.79	4.01	0.70	4.16	0.74	4.10	0.77	4.31	0.81	4.35	0.75

Table 1 depicts the variable mean scores and standard deviations calculated for the total sample and different demographic groups. An initial glance at the data reveals that respondents' experience levels varied from 4.01 for assurance to 4.43 for tangibles, with five being the highest possible score. Respondents reported a high score with the overall dining experience (4.31) and a high return patronage (4.35).

A further investigation of Table 1 shows that respondents in the age group 35 to 44 years recorded the highest overall mean experience score (4.71) whilst female respondents reported the highest return patronage score (4.67). Consequently, because of its importance to various restaurant attributes (such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and price), gender and age are frequently used in marketing research (Harrington, Ottenbacher and Way, 2010).

Descriptive analysis was used to analyse customers' experiences. The results are depicted in Table 2.

Customer experiences

Table 2 shows the results with the means and standard deviations for the customers' experiences of tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for customers' experiences

	Attributes	Experiences	
		Mean	S.D
V1	Visually attractive parking areas and building exteriors	4.48	0.73
V2	Visually attractive dining area	4.61	0.89
V3	Clean, neat and appropriately dressed staff	4.55	0.66
V4	Restaurants' décor typical of its image and price range	4.21	1.05
V5	Easily readable menu	4.72	0.92
V6	Visually attractive menu	4.40	0.78
V7	Comfortable seats in the dining room	4.71	0.91



V8	Clean rest rooms	4.76	1.09
V9	Clean dining rooms	4.74	0.57
V10	Effective signs, symbols and artefacts	4.22	0.65
V11	Service in the promised time	3.46	0.70
V12	Quick correction of wrong service	3.49	0.82
V13	Dependable and consistent restaurant	4.32	0.51
V14	Accurate bill	4.31	0.74
V15	Error-free-served order (food)	3.46	0.82
V16	Maintaining speed and quality of service during busy times	3.97	0.61
V17	Provision of prompt service	4.08	0.79
V18	Extra effort for handling special requests	4.25	0.99
V19	Employees can answer questions completely	3.78	0.46
V20	Comfortable and confident feeling	4.13	0.62
V21	Staff provide information about menu items, their ingredients and method of preparation	3.64	0.86
V22	Feeling safe	4.09	0.57
V23	Anticipation of customers' individual attention	4.01	0.80
V24	Restaurant supports the employees	4.13	0.73
V25	Employees provide individual attention	4.26	0.55
V26	Special feeling	4.01	1.14
V27	Anticipation of customers' individual needs and wants	3.99	0.62
V28	Sympathetic and reassuring employees	4.38	0.59
V29	Customers' best interests at heart	4.02	0.76
V30	Expensive food items	3.97	0.63
V31	Paying more than planned	4.08	0.95
	Overall mean	4.17	0.76

*V: Factor attribute; *SD: Standard deviation $p < 0.05$

Customers' experiences were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale. An initial glance at the data reveals that the overall mean scores for experience items was 4.17, indicating rather high experiences of restaurant customers in airport restaurants. Customers' mean experience scores ranged between 3.46 (V11) and 4.76 (V8). Items with the highest experience scores were "Easily readable menu" (V5), "Clean rest rooms" (V8) and "Clean dining rooms" (V9) whilst items with the lowest experience scores were "Service in the promised time" (V11), "Quick correction of wrong service" (V12) and "Error-free-served order (food)" (V15).

The results in this study deviate from the findings presented by Lee and Hing (1995) who concluded that in French fine dining restaurants, the highest experience scores were "taste of food" and "value for money", while in Chinese restaurants the highest experience scores were "excellent service" and "taste of food" whilst the lowest experience scores were for the items "pleasant odours", "visually attractive menu", "spatial layout and functionality" and "restaurants' decor typical to its image and price range".

The reported differences in the studies mentioned above might have occurred due to different sample characteristics, for example customers of different types of restaurant settings in the study by Lee and Hing (1995). The other reason might be the cultural differences in restaurants in South Africa and French and Chinese restaurants in Lee and Hings' (1995) study. The 31 restaurant attributes on customers' experiences were factor-analysed, using principal component analysis with orthogonal VARIMAX rotation, to identify underlying factors. The extraction of the factors and the variables were based on the eigenvalues and the factor loadings of the variables.

Only factors with an eigenvalue larger than one and attributes with loading > 0.50 were considered. The exploratory factor analysis extracted six factors, which accounted for 75 per cent of variance in the data. Since the sixth factor contained only two items, it could not be considered as a factor and is not interpreted. Table 3 illustrates the results of this VARIMAX process.

Table 3: Factor and reliability analysis results of restaurant customers' experiences

ITEMS	FACTORS						Communalities
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	
V1	0.798						0.691
V2	0.792						0.746
V3	0.769						0.549
V4	0.752						0.692
V5	0.741						0.608
V6	0.720						0.633
V7	0.703						0.541
V8	0.681						0.567
V9	0.645						0.636
V10	0.622						0.443
V11		0.791					0.798
V12		0.776					0.761
V13		0.741					0.770
V14		0.709					0.733
V15		0.682					0.651
V16			0.713				0.670
V17			0.686				0.689
V18			0.659				0.578
V20				0.697			0.608
V21				0.681			0.665
V22				0.662			0.568
V23				0.637			0.657
V24				0.608			0.539
V25					0.649		0.583
V26					0.595		0.758
V27					0.591		0.713
V28					0.550		0.589
V29					0.461		0.693
V30						0.738	0.675
V31						0.681	0.598
Eigenvalue	5.963	4.971	4.284	3.041	2.689	1.956	22.904
% of variance	19.608	17.851	14.774	9.772	7.356	5.839	75.200
Cronbach alpha	0.929	0.938	0.895	0.793	0.781	-	0.968
Number of items	10	5	3	6	5	2	

Most of the factor loadings were greater than 0.60, implying a reasonably high correlation between extracted factors and their individual items. The communalities of 31 items ranged from 0.443 to 0.798 indicating that a large amount of variance has been extracted by the factor solution. Only one item ('Effective signs, symbols and artefacts' V10) was below the suggested value of 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson and Tatham, 2006). In other words, this variable was not significant enough according to the mentioned criteria, hence it was not included in the analysis.

The five factors identified by VARIMAX as reliable and consistent with an Eigenvalue greater than one are labelled as follows: F1 - 'Tangibles' (Visually attractive parking areas and building exteriors, Visually attractive dining area, Clean, neat and appropriately dressed staff, Restaurants' décor typical of its image and price range, Easily readable menu, Visually attractive menu, Comfortable seats in the dining room, Clean rest rooms and Clean dining rooms), F2 - 'Reliability' this factor contained five factors (Service in the promised time, Quick correction of wrong service, Dependable and consistent restaurant, Accurate bill, and Error-free-served order). F3 - 'Responsiveness' this factor contained three factors (Maintaining speed and quality of service during busy times, Provision of prompt service, and Extra effort for handling special requests), F4 - 'Assurance' this factor contained six factors (Employees

can answer questions completely, Comfortable and confident feeling, Staff provide information about menu items, their ingredients and method of preparation, Feeling safe, Anticipation of customers' individual attention, and Restaurant supports the employees) and F5 - 'Empathy' this factor contained five factors (Employees provide individual attention, Special feeling, Anticipation of customers' individual needs and wants, Sympathetic and reassuring employees and Customers' best interests at heart).

The results of the reliability analysis showed that Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the extracted factors ranged from 0.781 to 0.938. That is well above the minimum value of 0.60, which is considered acceptable as an indication of scale reliability (Hair *et al.*, 2006). Thus, these values suggest good internal consistency of the factors. Finally, Cronbach's alpha value for the overall experience scale is 0.968 and indicates its high reliability.

The five orthogonal factors (Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy) were used in a multiple regression analysis to test whether the underlying dimensions of dining attributes impacted significantly on the customers' overall experiences.

Regression results of customers' overall experience

The equation for the customers' overall experiences, based on the dining attributes derived from regression analysis of the study, is expressed as the following:

$$Y_s = \beta_0 + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + B_3 X_3 + B_4 X_4 + B_5 X_5$$

- Y_s : Customers' overall experience;
- β_0 : Constant (Coefficient of Intercept);
- X_1 : Factor 1 (Tangibles);
- X_2 : Factor 2 (Reliability);
- X_3 : Factor 3 (Responsiveness);
- X_4 : Factor 4 (Assurance);
- X_5 : Factor 5 (Empathy);
- B_1, \dots, B_5 : Regression Coefficients of Factor 1 to Factor 5.

Table 4 shows the results of the regression analysis.

Table 4: Regression results of customers' overall experiences

Dependent variable: Customers' overall experiences (used as a surrogate indicator)				
Independent variables: Five orthogonal factors representing dining attributes impacting on customer experiences: Tangibles (Factor 1), Reliability (Factor 2), Responsiveness (Factor 3), Assurance (Factor 4) and Empathy (Factor 5).				
Prediction: Goodness-of-fit				
Multiple R	0.813			
R Square	0.741			
Adjusted R Square	0.702			
Standard Error	0.458			
Analysis of Variance				
	Degree of freedom	Sum of squares	Mean square	
Regression	5	361.118	107.882	
Residual	617	149.883	0.305	
F=476.641	Sig. F=0.000			
Durbin-Watson	1.87			
Explanation: Variables in the equation				
Independent variable	Un-standardised coefficients (β)	Standardised coefficients (β)	T-value	Sig.
Tangibles – Factor 1	0.522	0.443	6.289	0.000
Reliability – Factor 2	0.683	0.716	29.734	0.000

Responsiveness – Factor 3	–	0.342	0.351	16.038	0.000
Assurance – Factor 4		0.303	0.310	15.982	0.000
Empathy – Factor 5		0.636	0.654	23.445	0.000
Constant		4.650		204.370	0.000
Collinearity Diagnostics		Tolerance	Variable inflation factor (VIF)	Condition Index	
Tangibles – Factor 1		0.999	1.000	1.000	
Reliability – Factor 2		0.999	1.000	1.008	
Responsiveness – Factor 3	–	0.999	1.000	1.010	
Assurance- Factor 4		0.999	1.000	1.000	
Empathy- Factor 5		0.999	1.000	1.000	
Constant				1.024	

In order to predict the ‘Goodness-of-Fit’ of the regression model, the multiple correlation coefficient (R), coefficient of determination (R^2) and F-ratio were examined. First, the R of independent variables (five dining attributes, or X_1 to X_5) on the dependent variable (customers’ overall experience, or Y_s) was 0.81, which shows that the customers had positive and very high overall experiences with the five dining attributes. Second, the R^2 was 0.74, suggesting that more than 74% of the variation of the customers’ overall experience was explained by the five dining attributes. Lastly, the F-ratio explains whether or not the results of the regression model could have occurred by chance, had a significant value of 476.64.

Results showed that Factor 2 (Reliability, beta coefficient = 0.72) was the most important underlying dimension affecting the customers’ dining experience followed by Factor 5 (Empathy, beta coefficient = 0.65) and Factor 1 (Tangibles, beta coefficient = 0.44). The other two factors, Factor 3 (Tangibles, beta coefficient = 0.35) and Factor 4 (Assurance, beta coefficient = 0.31) had comparatively less influence on customers’ experiences. The results of the study compared favourably with the findings of previous studies of Bojanic and Rosen (1994), Lee and Hing (1995), Oubre and Brown (2009) and Ramseook-Munhurrun (2012) who found “reliability” as the most significant dimension influencing customer experiences. However, the results deviate from the findings of some scholars. For instance, Polyorat and Sophonsiri (2010) found empathy, tangibles and assurance dimensions to be the most significant whilst Chin and Tsai (2013), identified empathy, tangibles and assurance dimensions as the most significant. Furthermore, Vijayvargy (2014) noted tangibles, convenience, and empathy to be the most significant dimensions influencing customer experiences whilst Diab, Mohammed, Mansour and Saad (2016) found assurance and empathy to be the most significant variables influencing restaurant customer experiences.

Regression results of customers’ return patronage

The equation for the customers’ likelihood of returning, based on the dining attributes perception derived from regression analysis in this study, is expressed in the following equation:

$$Y_{ret} = \beta_0 + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + B_3 X_3 + B_4 X_4 + B_5 X_5$$

Y_{ret}	:	Return patronage;
β_0	:	Constant (Coefficient of Intercept);
X_1	:	Factor 1 (Tangibles);
X_2	:	Factor 2 (Reliability);
X_3	:	Factor 3 (Responsiveness);
X_4	:	Factor 4 (Assurance);
X_5	:	Factor 5 (Empathy);
B_1, \dots, B_5	:	Regression Coefficients of Factor 1 to Factor 5.

Table 5 shows the results of the regression analysis.

Table 5: Regression results of customers' return patronage

Dependent variable: Customers' return patronage (used as a surrogate indicator)				
Independent variables: Five orthogonal factors representing dining attributes impacting on customer return patronage: Tangibles (Factor 1), Reliability (Factor 2), Responsiveness (Factor 3), Assurance (Factor 4) and Empathy (Factor 5).				
Prediction: Goodness-of-fit				
Multiple R	0.679			
R Square	0.446			
Adjusted R Square	0.405			
Standard Error	0.933			
Analysis of Variance				
	Degree of freedom	Sum of squares	Mean square	
Regression	5	361.270	122.603	
Residual	617	516.514	0.865	
F=169.805	Sig. F=0.000			
Durbin-Watson	1.88			
Explanation: Variables in the equation				
Independent variable	Unstandardised coefficients (β)	Standardised coefficients (β)	T-value	Sig.
Tangibles – Factor 1	0.136	0.194	2.698	0.000
Reliability – Factor 2	0.595	0.634	15.386	0.000
Responsiveness – Factor 3	0.697	0.723	19.337	0.000
Assurance- Factor 4	0.119	0.127	6.857	0.000
Empathy- Factor 5	0.496	0.578	11.241	0.000
Constant	3.871		96.836	0.000
Collinearity Diagnostics				
	Tolerance	Variable inflation factor (VIF)	Condition Index	
Tangibles – Factor 1	0.999	1.000	1.000	
Reliability – Factor 2	0.999	1.000	1.005	
Responsiveness – Factor 3	0.999	1.000	1.010	
Assurance-Factor 4	0.999	1.000	1.000	
Empathy- Factor 5	0.999	1.000	1.000	
Constant			1.003	

In order to predict the 'Goodness-of-Fit' of the regression model, the multiple correlation coefficient (R), coefficient of determination (R^2) and F-ratio were examined. First, the R of independent variables (five dining attributes, or X_1 to X_5) on the dependent variable (customers' likelihood of returning, or Y_{ret}) was 0.68, which shows that the customers had quite a high likelihood of returning based on the five dining attributes. Second, the R^2 was 0.45, suggesting that about 45% of the variation of the customers' likelihood of returning was explained by the same dimensions. Last, the F-ratio, which explains whether or not the results of the regression model could have occurred by chance, had a significant value of 169.81.

Factor 3 (Responsiveness, beta coefficient = 0.72) was found to be the most important underlying dimension affecting the customers' likelihood of returning to the same restaurant. Factor 2 (Reliability, beta coefficient = 0.63) and Factor 5 (Empathy, beta coefficient = 0.58), were found to be the next important underlying dimensions affecting the customers' likelihood of returning to the same restaurant.

The results deviate from the findings by Moolman (2011) who found overall customer experience to be the most important variable influencing customers' decisions to return to a restaurant while Qu (1997) found 'food and Environment', 'service and courtesy,' and 'price



and value,' as factors that significantly impacted customers' return patronage. The reasons for the differences might be the different restaurant categories targeted. For instance, Moolman (2011) investigated mall restaurants whereas this study investigated airport restaurants.

Conclusions

Restaurateurs should continuously strive to increase the levels of customer experience by emphasising the five significant dining attributes for overall customer experience, namely reliability, empathy, tangibles, responsiveness and assurance. Reliability had the strongest influence on customers' overall dining experience, and management should therefore focus most of their attention and money on this dining attribute.

To improve customer experiences restaurateurs should conduct customer experience surveys at regular intervals to monitor the attributes that have an impact on customer experience in order to obtain pertinent information to assist managers to improve their offerings. These periodic surveys can also act as confirmation to guests that restaurateurs value their input and actively strive to improve customer experiences (Mhlanga, 2015). Periodically repeating the process can also enable restaurateurs to spot trends in customers' experiences. Furthermore, it can also alert restaurateurs to changes in the relative importance of the attributes, which might impact on overall customer experiences (Mhlanga and Tichaawa, 2017). Restaurateurs should focus on the attributes significantly related to customers' return patronage, namely responsiveness, reliability and empathy. To increase return patronage, restaurants should make use of social and or economic rewards. Khattab and Aldehayyat (2011) claim that social or economic rewards make restaurant guests feel special, important and appreciated. Social benefits, include any preferential treatment or personalised recognition and attention given to individual customers whilst economic rewards include a complimentary meal and discounts. Such preferential treatment is very meaningful to customers and they become disinclined to switch to any competing restaurant that offers equal or even better financial incentives (Mhlanga, 2013).

It is clear from the findings of this study that the demographic variables of restaurant customers had an impact on their experiences and return patronage levels. Since customers' experiences vary with age, restaurants may find it useful to tailor their offerings based on the age groups of customers (Mhlanga, 2015). When a restaurant targets a specific group of customers differently it is likely to exceed their expectations and ensure high customer experiences in an accumulating manner (Shaw, 2012).

Study Limitations

Despite the importance of this study, it is not free of limitations.

Firstly, the first regression model failed to explain 30 per cent of the variation in customer experience, and the second regression model could only explain 60 per cent of the variation in return patronage.

Secondly, the research was based on customer experiences in restaurants situated in a specific South African airport. Caution is therefore required when generalising the findings of this study to other segments of the restaurant industry or airport restaurants in other geographic areas, since a replication of this study in other types of restaurants or other geographic areas might reveal varying levels of importance.

Lastly, the reliability of the study might have been negatively influenced by the decision to measure restaurant customers' intention to return to a restaurant directly after their dining experience. O'Neil and Palmer (2001) warned that customers' decisions to return to a



restaurant might be different after the dining experience when compared to the time when a decision to return to a restaurant is made.

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