The dining experience: do restaurants satisfy customer needs?

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Abstract

This is an exploratory paper where the main idea is to develop an analysis of dining as a multidimensional experience. In order to assess the relative importance of various aspects of restaurant services, customers were asked to estimate their willingness to pay for six aspects of the dining experience: food, service, fine cuisine, restaurant interior, good company and other customers. Customers were asked to evaluate an ideal restaurant experience as well as their latest restaurant experience. Thus the actual evaluation could be compared with an ideal value to explore where restaurants have opportunities to enhance customers' restaurant experiences. Results clearly indicate that social needs are important for customers at evening restaurants whereas physiological needs dominate for customers at lunch restaurants.

Background

To understand customer needs should be an essential part in the product development of services and goods. We must understand *why* we consume. Economists may tell you *how much* and to *what price* you will consume, but do not seem to have much of an answer to the question *why*. The focus of this explorative study is to understand to what degree restaurants are able to satisfy the needs of their customers.

The objective is to describe the relative importance of certain aspects of a restaurant experience both for an ideal and an actual situation and to compare and discuss gaps and discrepancies between the two. The methodological objective is to explore the usefulness of measurements based on 'willingness to pay' as an alternative to ordinal scale measurements that dominate the satisfaction/quality literature.

Our sense of well-being may be discussed and described in terms of arousal and stimulation. There is, according to psychological theories, an optimal level of arousal (OLA), which implies that we could experience too much as well as too little arousal. We continuously regulate our level of arousal by various means and amounts of stimulation. The objective is for each individual to seek or avoid stimulation in such ways that his/her level of arousal is, as much as possible, close to this optimum.

Theories of arousal have been discussed and developed during the last 50 years (Moruzzi & Magoun 1949; Lindsley 1951; Hebb 1955; Berlyne 1960; Zuckerman 1979; Farley 1981; Strelau 1985; Björck-Åkesson 1990) and much attention has been paid to biological and biochemical processes in the brain that reflect the level of arousal. The degree of activation in the Ascending Reticular Activating System in the midbrain activates all areas of the cortex and can be measured by an EEG. A gamut of biochemical substances has been used as indicators of arousal level and stimulation (Zuckerman 1987).

The optimal level of arousal is individual and so is the need for seeking and avoiding stimulation. There is a large body of psychological research dealing with a discussion of personality vis-à-vis optimal level of arousal (Guilford 1967; Cattell & Kline 1977; Eysenck 1984). In this paper, it is recognized that we are different in OLA whether that depends on introversion/extraversion (Eysenck 1976) and/or other factors.

Eysenck (1976) values the level of arousal as having a 'positive hedonic tone' and a 'negative hedonic tone' respectively. Part of our consumption can thus be explained by a need for seeking stimulation to overcome a negative hedonic tone, that is, to relieve hunger, thirst, etc., whereas other parts of our consumption only serve the purpose of an increased well-being, that is, to increase the positive hedonic tone.

The dividing line between negative and positive hedonic tones is called *comfort*, which indicates a level where we are satisfied but not excited. In customer satisfaction literature, Oliver (1996) calls this level con-

tentment. Customers may be satisfied with a fast-food meal and it is often a matter of contentment. The customers are usually not very involved and what they primarily want is to relieve hunger. Contentment is a passive response and characterized by low levels of emotional arousal (Arnould *et al*. 2002). When customers have a pleasing sensory experience at a restaurant, they may have a pleasure response – they feel joy. In this case, the customer confirms expectations and has moderate to high arousal, and most likely high to moderate involvement as well.

These models from psychology and marketing thus give a clue to *why* we consume. Stimulation from goods and services seems to be necessary in order to overcome a negative 'painful' hedonic tone and attain (at least) the comfort level of our needs. These underlying needs thus hypothetically direct our consumption of goods and services.

The discussion of how stimulation influences arousal and how it affects our sense of well-being has so far been one-dimensional. But human needs may be of various kinds, well known is the classification into five basic needs by Maslow 1987): physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem and self-actualization needs. Scitovsky (1986) suggests personal comfort, social comfort and stimulation as three categories of human satisfaction. Henceforth, Scitovsky's categorization will be used in terms of the following three categories of needs:

1 Physiological needs are based on the satisfaction of biological needs and desires. Food, drink, clothing, sex, heating and health in required amounts form the basis of physical comfort as do machines and services that reduce unpleasant levels of physical effort.

2 Social needs are based partly on our sense of belonging to groups that we wish to belong to, and partly to our self-esteem based on our ranking in the hierarchy of those groups. These needs may be satisfied by memberships, titles, status symbols and conspicuous consumption.

3 Intellectual needs are based on all sources of interest, entertainment and excitement. Danger and novelty of an appropriate degree (i.e. not too much) can be essential ingredients in entertainment and excitement. Enjoyable work, music, literature, watching sports, gambling, arts, etc. may satisfy intellectual needs.

These three categories are not intended to classify goods and services, although such examples were used above, but primarily to classify human needs, which are often satisfied by goods and services. Many goods and services provide some degree of satisfaction for all three needs. Dining out, for example, will satisfy *physiological needs* by relieving hunger, no matter if it is 'eating out for pleasure' or 'eating out for work', according to Edwards (2000) or Warde & Martens (2000) way of categorizing meals. It might also satisfy *social needs* if we go to a restaurant highly approved by our group and/or if we go there with friends (group members). *Intellectual needs* may also be stimulated through novel and delicious dishes, an exciting milieu or an entertaining evening with our companions.

It is obvious that personal needs influence customer expectations. According to Zeithaml & Bitner (2003), personal needs and philosophies about service are the two largest influences on desired service level. Conceptions of product and service features can be described in terms of concentric rings (Levitt 1983; Clemmer 1990; Rust & Oliver 2000). In the inner ring are certain product attributes, the so called 'musts' that are central to the product. In a restaurant setting, food is an attribute that must be provided, as it is central to the basic function. If this attribute is missing, the product cannot perform its basic function. The next adjacent ring contains adornment to the basic product and the included attributes can be called satisfiers (Rust & Oliver 2000). In a restaurant, high level of service quality and air quality are examples of features that can create extra satisfaction. At the next level, an outer ring, are delights. These are above the unexpected features, which are surprisingly enjoyable (Hanefors & Mossberg 2003). It can add utility to the product beyond that which is expected, for example, a famous singer who entertains might be a delight.

Based on reviews of related studies, we suggest the following model described as concentric rings (including the 'must' and the satisfiers) to illustrate what aspects influence a customer's multidimensional meal experience. The 'must' is food in the center, and in the adjacent ring there are five groups of satisfiers: (1) service; (2) fine cuisine; (3) restaurant interior; (4) good company; and (5) other customers (Fig. 1). Numerous articles point out the importance of personnel in service settings, and satisfier 1 relates to this phenomenon. The

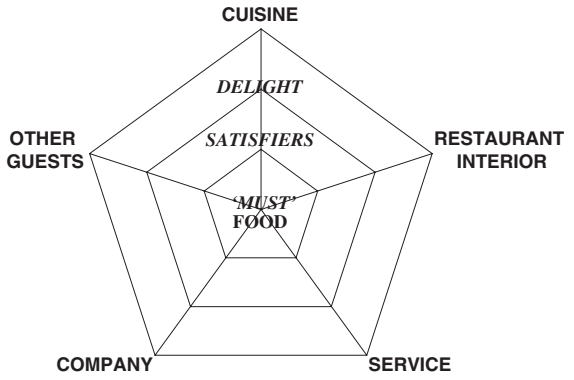

Figure 1 Factors influencing diners' experience.

degree of service varies depending on whether it is a fast-food chain or a 'formal' establishment (for categories of restaurants, see Finkelstein 1989). Satisfier 2 relates to the cuisine. The food may vary from very basic and plain to delicious and extraordinary. Satisfier 3 deals with the interior, that is, the physical environment. Many have focused on the restaurant interior in various contexts (Belk 1975; Baker 1986; Bitner 1992; Wakefield & Blodgett 1994, 1996; Aubert-Gamet 1997) and it has been proven that the interior is an important satisfier when the customer stays for some time in the environment and when the motive is pleasure (Wakefield & Blodgett 1994, 1996), which is the case for most diners. Satisfier 4 relates to the dining company sitting at the same table. Andersson (1991) found this aspect an essential factor influencing diners' satisfaction both at lunch and dinner.

Service encounters often occur in the presence of other multiple customers (Langeard *et al*. 1981; Baker 1986; Grove & Fisk 1997; Zeithaml & Bitner 2003) and satisfier 5 relates to positive and negative effects that other customers may have upon one's restaurant experience. Finkelstein (1989) looks at eating out as a sociology of modern manners where customers imitate each other, in response to fashions, and act with artifice and pretence. Finkelstein (1989) suggests that customers are unaware of this and that they view it as a pleasure, highly convenient and entertaining, with social formulae that are linked to the rise of modern bourgeois culture (cf. Beardsworth & Keil 1997).

The five satisfiers correspond well with the five aspects of meal model, which aim to achieve maximum satisfaction in various meal situations (Gustafsson 2004).

Methodology

Against this theoretical background, the dining experience has been broken up into a number of satisfiers, and for each one of these aspects of the restaurant experience, customers' *monetary value* should be estimated. The method to be tried in this study is an estimation of the customers' *willingness to pay* for various aspects of the dining experience. Contingent Valuation Methods (e.g. Mitchell & Carson, 1989), where the respondent is asked for the maximum amount of money he or she is willing to pay for a certain hypothetical experience, provide a methodology that has so far been seldom used in hospitality research but merits more attention. Ordinal-scale measurement instruments, such as *Servqual* (Parasuraman *et al*. 1988), are unable to assess the monetary value of the experience. This type of instruments is therefore less adequate for our purposes. In this study, a stepwise increasingly pleasant experience was described for the respondent who had to make no less than 11 monetary assessments of 11 hypothetical situations. Some examples are:

> What is the maximum amount of money you would be willing to pay for the following experience?
>
> Q1: Imagine you had simple take-away food that relieved you from hunger. It did not taste well but not bad either.
>
> Q2: Imagine the actual food you had today but as take-away food.
>
> Q3: Imagine the actual food you had in the restaurant where you actually ate today. Imagine that it was self-service and that you were alone at the table.
>
> Q4: Imagine the actual food you had in the restaurant where you actually ate today. The food was served at the table but you were alone at the table.
>
> Q5: Imagine the actual food you had in the restaurant where you actually ate today. The food was served at the table and you were eating together with your best friends but, apart from your company, the restaurant was empty.
>
> Q6: Imagine the actual food you had in the restaurant where you actually ate today. The food was served at the table and you were eating together with your best friends and the restaurant was full of pleasant other guests that did not disturb.

These six questions (Q1–Q6) about the *actual* experience were then followed by five questions (Q7–Q11) related to an *ideal* experience. To estimate the value of the ideal experience, the wording was changed and, for example, 'the actual food' (Q2) was replaced by 'the most delicious food' (Q7); 'the actual restaurant' (Q3) was replaced by 'the most exquisite restaurant' (Q8), and so on. The baseline value (Q1) did not need to be reworded as answers to Q1 served as the baseline for both the actual and the ideal experience.

The analysis was then based on average values for the 11 answers which made it possible to calculate values for five components of a dining experience by simply deducting the value of a 'lower' experience from the value of a 'higher' experience. The value of 'fine cuisine' was, for example, calculated as the difference between the answer to Q2 and Q1 for the actual experience and as the difference between answers to Q7 and Q 1 for the ideal experience. Using this approach, it was possible to calculate the values of the five components not only for the *actual* experience at a particular restaurant (answers to Q1–Q6) but also for an *ideal* dining experience (answers to Q7–Q11).

Estimates are thus based on customers' assessments of their willingness to pay for a dining experience ranging stepwise from a simple 'take-away' to a dinner in an exquisite restaurant and in the company of your best friends. The advantage of this method is that estimates are made in monetary value and that the interpretation of the results is quite straightforward. The major disadvantage is that estimates refer to a hypothetical situation when the ideal experience is explored and not to a transaction that has actually taken place (as hedonic prices do). The Contingent Valuation Method used in this study has undergone a strong methodological development related to needs of environmental economics (cf. Garrod & Willis 1999). The Nobel Prize in Economics in 2000 was awarded to Daniel McFadden for work in this area.

Data were collected in October 2002 from 310 interviews of customers to 14 restaurants in a Swedish city (Gothenburg) with a population of approximately 500 000. Most interviews (255) were carried out during lunch hours and answers received refer to a luncheon. Part of the data (55 interviews) does, however, refer to a more expensive dinner and this will thus provide an opportunity to compare two subsamples for differences in willingness to pay for the various aspects of the dining experience.

Results

Customers' evaluation of the ideal dining experience

The average results in terms of percentages as well as monetary values of total willingness to pay for a full-fledged *ideal* dining experience are illustrated in Table 1.

There are interesting differences between a luncheon and a dinner regarding the value that customers place on stimulation. Most striking is the increase in willingness to pay for stimulation of social and intellectual needs (i.e. restaurant interior, service, other guests and good company) during a dinner compared with a luncheon. This difference comes out even more clearly when we compare the two types of restaurants in absolute money terms. Whereas the willingness to pay for physiological comfort (i.e. to relieve hunger) remains virtually the same, the willingness to pay for intellectual and social stimulation increases dramatically; there is a twofold increase in willingness to pay for fine cuisine, a sixfold increase in willingness to pay for restaurant interior, an eightfold increase for good company and a 12-fold increase in value placed on the importance of other guests (all differences are significant at 1% level of significance).

Customers' evaluation of the actual dining experience

When customers were asked to evaluate their latest restaurant experience, there was a good deal of discrepancy between the actual and the ideal restaurant experience. Figure 2 describes the ideal as well as the actual restaurant experience as an average of all 310 inter-

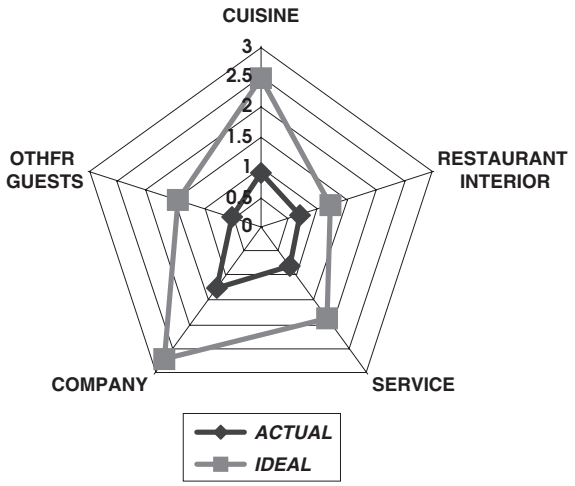

Figure 2 A comparison of the value of the various aspects for the *ideal* and the delivered *actual* restaurant experience. Evaluation in terms of willingness to pay ($).

	Luncheon ($n = 255$)		Dinner ($n = 55$)	
	% of total	In USD	% of total	In USD
Food	43	3.48	13	3.76
Service	8	0.68	19	5.78
Fine cuisine	25	2.00	13	3.90
Restaurant interior	7	0.57	11	3.28
Good company	12	1.00	28	8.30
Other guests	5	0.38	17	5.05
Total	100	8.12	100	30.10

Table 1 A *relative* and an *absolute* comparison of various aspects of the *ideal* dining experience

viewed customers. It thus comprises customers to lunch as well as evening restaurants.

The scope for improvement in satisfying social needs (i.e. service, company and other guests) seems clear for the average restaurant. For the category of evening restaurants, this need stands out even more clearly.

Customer segments

It would, of course, be a mistake to analyse only the average restaurant customer. Consumer needs are different and so are the restaurants. The analysis will therefore proceed by looking closer at two particular restaurants and their customers. They are both evening restaurants but differ particularly in the importance customers place on social needs, which is illustrated in Fig. 3. One restaurant, 'Etc.', seems to be a place for customers who enjoy good food and an interesting restaurant milieu whereas 'Gallini' is a place where the customers most of all like to socialize and to meet other people.

Do 'Etc.' and 'Gallini' satisfy customer needs?

A limited number of interviews refer to a visit to 'Etc.' (20 interviews) and to 'Gallini' (15 interviews). Because customer expectations are so different for the two restaurants, it may be expected that the two restaurants are also quite different in character. A comparison in terms of percentages calculated as the actual value divided by the ideal value does however, indicate that 'Gallini' scores poorly in the three social needs that characterize its customers.

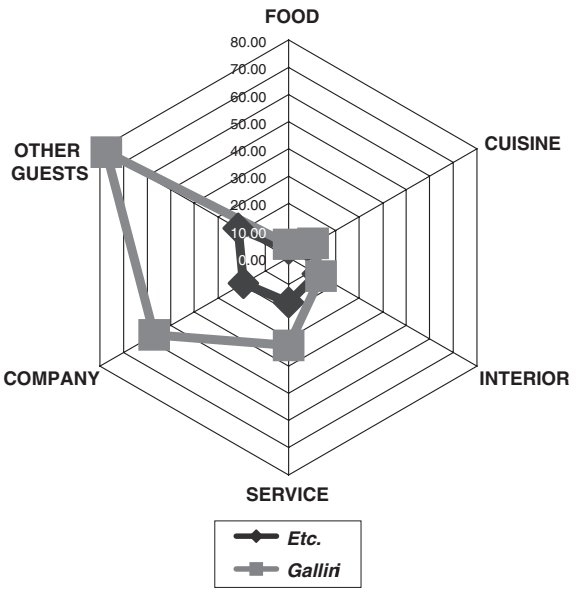

Figure 3 A profile of how customer expectations differ between two particular restaurants. Evaluations are made in terms of customers' willingness to pay ($) for an *ideal* restaurant experience.

The high scores of 'Etc.' are thus partly explained not only by a more modest ideal experience among its customers but also by a better performance and service delivery. Particularly, its cuisine and restaurant interior are much appreciated by its customers. 'Etc.' also scored significantly (5%) higher than 'Gallini' in a separate evaluation of total satisfaction on a scale of 0%–100%. 'Etc.' got an average of 91% while 'Gallini' got an average of 79%. It should once more be underlined that the limited number of respondent-customers for these two restaurants means that these results must be considered, at best, as explorative.

Discussion

The optimal aim of all restaurants is to get satisfied and in the best cases delighted customers, no matter if it is eating out for pleasure or work, lunch or dinner. We agree with Gustafsson (2004, p. 11) who states that '. . . meals consist of much more than the food to be eaten'. It is shown in this study that customers are willing to pay more for 'other customers visiting the restaurant at the same time' compared to the food during dinner time. Besides good food and the ability to socialize, they are also willing to pay a quite big portion for nice interior and quality service. The practitioners might be aware of this matter but it seems to be a rather new phenomenon in research as still a lot of focus is put on the food as a competitive advantage.

In some contexts it is hard for the company to get delighted customers. Customers may be satisfied with a Happy Meal at MacDonald's or a pizza at a lunch restaurant but only few will be delighted. In fast-food and low-price lunch context, it is more about contentment and to fill physiological needs. The customers are not very involved; it is a passive response characterized by low levels of emotional arousal. Satisfaction as delight, on the other hand, should be associated with feelings of pleasure and ought to be remembered; it could be something new or add something extraordinary to the customer. The physiological, social and intellectual needs are fulfilled and the visit to the restaurant adds utility beyond what is expected. In the study, we found a number of satisfied guests but no one was delighted with the visit. Comparing the delivered restaurant experience with the ideal restaurant, some aspects were close to delight but others had a rather long way to go.

In the case of 'Gallini', the gaps between the ideal and the actual restaurant experience were extensive concerning all aspects. For 'Etc.' the situation was dif-

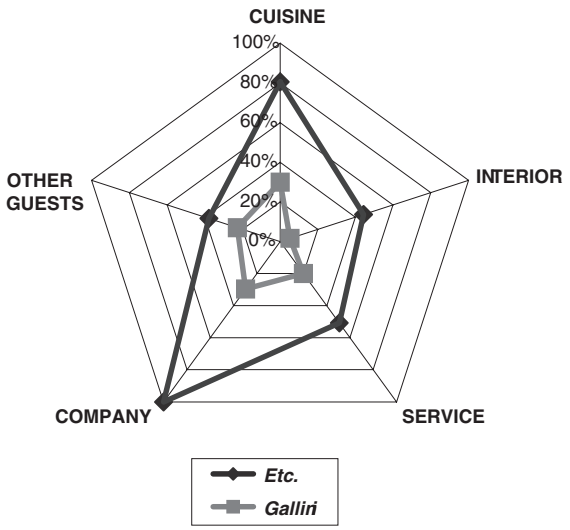

Figure 4 Need satisfaction calculated as the percentage of *actual* value to *ideal* value. Calculations are based on evaluations in terms of willingness to pay.

ferent as the actual 'cuisine' was close to an ideal 'cuisine' experience. Only a small sample of respondents were interviewed in the two restaurants and it is not possible to make any statistical inference from this material but it may still be interesting for the restaurateurs to further investigate, for example, how the service and the restaurant interior at 'Etc.' could be improved as discrepancies were found (cf. Fig. 4).

This shows that the understanding of not overestimating the individual contribution of food when assessing customers perceptions of a restaurant visit is important. The method makes it possible to assess and put dollars and cents to the sum of impressions as well as on the various satisfiers, such as food, service quality, dining company and the interior during the visit. Another advantage is that it is also possible to compare these impressions with an ideal restaurant experience. The latter is often done in service quality research, such as when using the Servqual scale (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988), but theses scales measure attitudes and not perceptions in monetary value. The great benefit of using Contingent Valuation Methods is that the interpretation of the results is straightforward and easy to understand and use for implication.

Conclusions

This study has explored the restaurant as an arena for a multidimensional experience. The idea has been to assess how important the various aspects are and to what degree restaurants succeed in providing need satisfaction for customers.

Related to need dimensions discussed by Scitovsky (1985), customers expect evening restaurants to mainly satisfy social and intellectual needs whereas lunch restaurants mainly cater for physiological needs (see Table 1). The study strongly indicates that social needs are dominating for evening restaurants.

It may be tempting to disregard dimensions such as *dining company* and *other guests in the restaurant* on the ground that these factors are beyond the control of restaurant managers. However, it is more than likely that, restaurant managers can influence these dimensions a great deal and that successful managers (and restaurant concepts) also do so. The results of this study do suggest that these dimensions have not yet gotten the research attention they merit.

Measuring customer satisfaction by *willingness to pay* has been possible and should be encouraged. The advantage of monetary values are not only statistical in the sense that a ratio-scale allows for much more statistical elaboration of the results than ordinal ('Likert-') scales do. It is also a considerable advantage that monetary values make more sense in a business context. There may, for example, be a scope for a discussion of what investments a restaurant should consider, for example, a restoration of its interior, if the restaurant also has a monetary estimate of the value that customers experience from an upscale, tasteful restaurant interior.

Restaurant managers must be aware of customer needs and produce services that comply with what the customers want. Physiological needs (satisfied by food and beverage) are not the only needs that customers wish to satisfy by going to a restaurant. Evening restaurants, particularly, must provide services directed to other needs. To be able to develop an attractive restaurant product, managers must learn more about customer needs and the results of this explorative study may help restaurant managers find a blueprint of how a restaurant experience should be designed in order to suit the tastes of customers.

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