

**THE MEAL EXPERIENCE OF CUSTOMERS OF GRADE 3 RESTAURANTS IN
SEKONDI-TAKORADI**

Frances Betty Fraikue (Mrs.)

Lecturer

Takoradi Polytechnic

Department of Hospitality Management

francesfraikue@yahoo.com

0208134613/0242322480

Ishmael Mensah (Dr.)

Senior Lecturer

University of Cape Coast

Department of Hospitality & Tourism

ikmensah@ucc.edu.gh

0243134578/0204600601

Prof. F.E Amuquandoh

University of Cape Coast

Department of Hospitality & Tourism

amuquandoh@yahoo.co.uk

0243822860

Abstract

Meal experience is key to customer satisfaction and profitability of restaurants. The main objective of the study was to examine the meal experience on customers' of grade three restaurants within Sekondi-Takoradi. It further examined the effect of personal factors of customers on the meal experience. Convenience sampling was used to select 272 respondents from all grade 3 restaurants and were surveyed using a questionnaire. The statistical techniques used for the analysis were Statistical Product for Service Solution, T-test, bar graph and logistic regression.

The study revealed that gender had a significant effect on the overall meal experience. Consequently, the odds of a male having a good meal experience is less than that of a female. The main factors that influenced meal experience were food, menu, price, service and atmosphere. Also, there was no significant difference between the factors that determined the meal experience by first-time and repeat visitors to grade three restaurants.

It was concluded that, 'location' should always be of extreme importance to restaurant operators because it serves as a determining factor of choice of restaurant thereby avoiding poor patronage. It was also recommended that restaurant managers pay extra attention to food preparation, environment, location, service and periodic training for staff in order to enhance and sustain the meal experience of customers to grade three restaurants within Sekondi-Takoradi.

Keywords; meal experience, determinants, customers, restaurants,

INTRODUCTION

Food consumed outside the home has become common these days and this is partly due to the fact that more and more women are pursuing careers outside their homes, thereby making eating out a necessity for many people (Andaleeb and Caskey, 2007). In the US for instance,

consumption of food prepared away from home has been on the ascendancy, in 1970, 25.9 percent of all food spending was on food away from home but by 2012, that share had risen to 43.1 percent (US Department of Agriculture, 2012). In Ghana, though there is lack of statistics on patronage of food services, there is anecdotal evidence that restaurants in especially Accra, Kumasi and Takoradi have seen increased patronage. This has resulted in a concomitant increase in the number of food service establishments.

The foodservice sector has become fully-fledged comprising of both multinational restaurant chains like KFC, On-the-run and Mr. Bigg's as well as independent restaurants like Asanka Locals, Papaye and Frankies. This situation has also heightened competition among the restaurants. The New Harmonized Standards for Accommodation and Catering Establishments in Ghana (2005), puts food service facilities into six main categories, namely restaurants, traditional catering establishments, drinking bar, snack bar, outdoor catering establishment and fast food vendor. Restaurants are further classified into three (grades one, two and three) depending on the quality of services and facilities. Grade one restaurants are upscale and luxurious whereas Grade three restaurants which are the focus of this study "have a satisfactory choice of dishes, snacks or refreshments served in a modest or normal setting, in an informal atmosphere with staff offering a satisfactory level of service" (Mensah, 2009:41).

Ozdemir and Caliskan (2014) are of the view that offering a unique meal experience and assuring customer satisfaction are the main sources of competitive advantage for a restaurant. Meal is an essential part of a leisure journey basically for the provision of physiological and convenience need which has emotional benefits partly derived from customers' expectation (Akyeampong, 2007; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Hartwell, Edwards & Beavis, 2007b). Meal experience was first used by Campbell-Smith (1967) and later became a worldwide term used in the industry.

Meal experience begins when customers are seated at their table and ends when they vacate their table in a restaurant (Noone, Kimes, Mattila & Wirtz, 2007). Meal experience is defined by some authors as the combination of several factors like food, menu variety, service, atmosphere, group size, other customers, facilities for children, recommendation, new experience, provision of unique twist and price value in order to achieve customer satisfaction (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Davis, Lockwood, Alcott & Pantelidis, 2012; Ismail, 2012; Pantelidis & Marée, 2009).

The fact that there has been an increase in the number of restaurants operating in Ghana is a good omen for both restauranteurs and government, but meal experience which is one of the critical determinants of successful operation of restaurants has not attracted much attention from restauranteurs and researchers. There has been a modicum of studies on meal experience and customer satisfaction (Auty, 1992; Canny, 2014; Ismail, 2012; Kleynhans, 2003; Lewis, 1981; Yong, Siang, Lok & Kuan, 2013). However, such studies did not focus on determinants of meal experience. Additionally, studies on food services sector in Ghana have focused on food service quality (Mensah, 2009) and food safety (Akyeampong, 2007; Edwards, 2000 & Oliver, 2010).

In the study by Mensah (2009), he found out that the expectations of 40 percent of customers of food service outlets in Cape Coast was not met. However, to help address this, it is imperative to know what goes into the meal experience and what aspects of the meal experience did not meet customers' expectations. This study therefore seeks to examine the determinants of meal experience of customers of grade three restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi. The study is undertaken in Sekondi-Takoradi because of its fledging food service industry, since the discovery of oil in commercial quantities off the shores of Cape Three Points, Sekondi-Takoradi which is the Western Regional Capital has become the centre of attraction. A number of oil companies and allied businesses have located their offices in the city to take full advantage of the oil discovery.

Accommodation and food service businesses have also moved in to cash-in on the oil prospects. According to Ghana Tourism Authority (2013) Sekondi-Takoradi has 20 grade 3 restaurants operating in the region. However, the mushrooming of restaurants in the city to take advantage of the oil find could compromise the quality of services which could affect customers' meal experience. This study therefore seeks to examine the meal experience of customers' of grade three restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi. It further examines the effect of personal factors of customers on the meal experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Determinants of meal experience

The meal experience refers to a series of tangible and intangible events a guest experiences when eating out (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008). Meal experience takes place anytime someone eats out anywhere apart from the home such as the restaurant which involves payment for goods and services (Warde & Martens, 2000). A customer's meal experience originates from a set of interactions between oneself and a product which incites a reaction (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger, 2009). It involves direct or indirect contact with a company which involves the purchase and use of a product as well as unplanned encounters with waiter/waitress or other people within the restaurant (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

The assessment by customers in terms of their overall meal experience varies greatly in relation to food, variety of menu, price of food, service, atmosphere, location and the pace at which activities take place in the restaurant (Noone et al., 2009; Reynolds & Hwang, 2006; Shahin & Semea, 2010). Previous theories adapted from Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece (1999), Kleynhans (2003) and Ryu and Han (2010), aided the discovery of the five factors mentioned.

Food is described as the most basic and most important factor that influences meal experience and is termed as an integral part of the overall experience at any restaurant (Geissler & Rucks, 2011; Niles, 2009). Also according to Namkung and Jang (2008:144), food is the most fundamental part of the overall restaurant experience and is an unconditional requirement in satisfying the needs and expectations of restaurant customers. Discovering the sensory aspects of food includes taste of food, temperature, type of food, quality, quantity, textures, aroma and colour of food (Geissler & Rucks, 2011). Kleynhans (2003) and Davis et al. (2012) are also of the view that food enhances the total meal experience.

Menu is another factor that determines the meal experience and it is a list of food items which is either written out to form part of the décor or described to customers' when they enter restaurants (Gregoire, 2013). Restaurant menu served is mainly à la carte and table d'hôte (Hemmington, 2007, Mensah, 2009). Menu is further described by Clark and Wood (1999) and Pantelidis and Marée (2009) as the center piece of any eating establishment. Bell & Meiselman (1995) described menu as written information which often contains pictures that entice customers to try new dishes.

Price is the amount of money charged for a product, a competitive tool and a major deciding factor influencing customers' meal experience (Gregoire, 2013). Namasivayam (2004) observed that the fairness of price has been identified as one psychological factor that influences consumers' reaction and decision to purchase. Bitner, Booms and Tetreault (1990) noted that the value for money vary from one restaurant to another or from one customer to another and also it massively affects a customer's choice, as well as the number of times a restaurant is patronized. In this light, Mensah (2009) pointed out that price is the only element of food service which brings in revenue and it is influenced by food quality, menu, ambience and service. It was also emphasized by

Cousins et al. (2002) that customers will re-visit a restaurant not only because of food and service but also for good value for money spent on the meal in order to achieve a positive meal experience.

Service as a determinant of meal experience is the presentation of food to the customer which takes many forms in a foodservice establishment (Gregoire, 2013). However in a restaurant, the only point of contact that customers have with the company is through the service staff (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). Qin and Prybutok (2009) emphasize that service quality is one of the initiators of customer satisfaction. Davis et al. (2012) however discovered that service delivery has two main divisions, namely, actual/direct and ancillary/indirect services. Actual/direct service is when the waiter/waitress practically serves the food and beverage to customers, while the ancillary/indirect services are the provision of intangibles (friendly, polite, helpful, attentive and efficient staff) experienced to enhance services (Davis et al., 2012; Gustafsson et al., 2006).

Hanson, Jensen and Gustafsson (2005) stressed that service is an essential part of the experience of eating in a restaurant which is paid for by customers. Tsai (2001) also pointed out that staff can meet consumers' expectations if they pay attention and effectively provide timely service whilst Walsh (2000) emphasized that for customer satisfaction to be accomplished, service staff should focus on what is important to each guest and strive to sustain it.

The restaurant atmosphere influencing meal experience comprises of tangible and intangible aspects which is the number one point of call and the first thing that a diner notices as he/she enters a restaurant (Gustafsson et al., 2006; Warde & Martens, 2000). Furthermore, atmosphere which is part of the tangible aspects of a restaurant was seen by customers as the size, shape, colour scheme, furniture and fittings, lighting, air conditioning, temperature, appearance, music, table settings, seating arrangement, crockery and cutlery.

Heide and Grønhaug (2006) opined that atmosphere can evoke cognitive, affective, psychological and behavioural reactions on the part of guests whilst Mensah (2009) revealed that ambience and décor can both incite feelings of pleasure and relaxation instead of pressure and anxiety. Primarily, the function of the restaurant is to provide food, however, customers today do not only look up to the food aspect but rather, enhance their quality of life by eating in a better dining environment (Horng, Chou, Liu & Tsai, 2013).

Pizam & Ellis (1999) pointed out that when atmosphere possesses unpleasant levels, it is easily seen by customers, such as soiled tables, warm temperature, chipped crockery, loud music, and noisy staff leading to dissatisfaction. The location of food service facility is an important determinant of high patronage of customers. Davis et al. (2012) is of the view that a restaurant can be known for preparing reasonably priced menu with quality service, but if the distance to the premises is two to three miles away from the target population that alone can affect the customer's meal experience.

Lewis (1981) and Reynolds and Hwang (2006) emphasize that convenient accessibility to a restaurant influences meal experience, in that, customers arriving by car will expect adequate parking facility, travellers should be able to access the restaurant within a stone throw and the overall location should be safe to enhance meal experience of customers.

Personal factors and Meal experience

In the assessment of meal experience, people make use of the five senses namely, sight, taste, smell, touch and hearing (Gustafsson *et al*; 2006). Human sight gives information on colour, appearance, quantity, furniture, equipment, room and other guests. The mouth gives an assessment of taste, quality and texture whilst the nose smells aroma of the meal. Again the sense of hearing

for example through word-of-mouth allows people to assess a restaurant in their own way (Gustafsson et al. 2006).

Demographics that include gender, age, and marital status, highest level of education, employment status, monthly income and religion are dependent variables that are unique to customers in determining their meal experience (Kleynhans, 2003; Kumar & Lim, 2008).

Diners' status which basically comprise of first-time and repeat visitors may or may not have the same determinants. In restaurants, first-timers are people who may not have heard of the establishment, but would have certain expectations based on what they may have heard or seen through communication (Marone, 2011). Som and Badarneh (2011) observed that first-time customers are more positive evaluators than repeat visitors in the assessment of meal experience determinants due to the fact that they are not familiar with the establishment. Repeat visitors are generally people who have visited a place before and believe that previous experiences and familiarity influences their future behaviour (Chi, 2012; Hu & Ritchie, 1999). Bruwer (2004) states that repeat visitors are important assets to any establishments since they are averagely more likely to purchase what they already buy.

From the foregone, it is hypothesised that:

H1: Socio-demographic characteristics of customers' has no positive effect on the overall meal experience.

H2. There is no significant difference between the meal experience of first-time and repeat visitors.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Sekondi-Takoradi which is situated within the Shama Ahanta East Metropolis (SAEMA). It is the Twin City of the Western Region of Ghana. Sekondi-Takoradi

Commented [1]: Lets beef up this section of the literature review. Also, lets include some of the theories in the literature review in general

is the Western Region's largest city. It is an industrial and commercial center and has a population of 445,205 people (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Sekondi is the oldest and largest of the two cities and is the site of Dutch Fort Orange (1642) and English Fort Sekondi (1682). It also prospered from the railroad which was built in 1903. Takoradi is the site of Dutch Fort Witsen (1665) and a port city. The Twin City further boasts of an increase in hotels and restaurants, together with the expansion of some already existing ones in order to meet the growing demands.

The research philosophy of this study is the positivist approach which is based on realization through experience and has a long rich historical tradition suitable for social sciences (Galliers, 1991 & Sarantakos, 2005). The research design was a cross-sectional survey which is a non-experimental and an explanatory research (Driscoll, 2011). Primary data was collected from customers who dined out in grade three restaurants in the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolis.

The target population for the study comprised of all people who dined out in grade three restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi during the month of February, 2014. The sample size was calculated based on the formula required for accuracy in estimating proportions. This was done by considering the standard normal deviation set at 1.96 which corresponds to 95% confidence level, percentage picking a choice or response, which was 50% (0.5), and the confidence interval was $(0.05 = \pm 5)$. The calculated sample size was 384.

All 20 registered grade three restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi were selected for the study. Initially, the researcher visited all these restaurants in order to solicit information concerning their monthly and daily average covers. Information gathered from Restaurant Managers indicated that averagely, expected covers ranged from 27-100 per day depending on location, price and types of food served. The number of customers sampled in each restaurant was based on the average daily covers. Each restaurant visited gave an estimated average daily customer cover. A sample size of

384 was distributed among all the registered grade 3 restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi. This was done in proportion to their average daily covers.

$$\frac{\text{average daily cover} \times \text{sample size}}{\text{population}}$$

Convenience sampling technique (non-probability) which allows any subject available to participate in a study was used for the study (Sarantakos, 2005). The researcher personally visited all the 20 grade three restaurants during the month of February, 2014. About 75% of the questionnaires were self-administered, whilst the remaining 25% were researcher administered.

The data collection instrument made use of a standardised questioning procedure (Bryman, 2004). The first section of the questionnaire made use of a 5-point Likert scale. On the scale, 1 represented strongly disagree (SD) and 5 represented strongly agree (SA) which enabled respondents to assess the various determinants of the meal experience. The last section sought data on respondents' socio demographic characteristics.

The fieldwork commenced from 14th February, 2014 and ended on 28th of February, 2014. Permission was sought from managers in advance before visiting the premises. Out of the 384 questionnaires distributed, 272 were completed and were useful for the data analysis. This represented a response rate of 70.8%.

The data collected were coded and analysed using the Statistical Product for Service Solution (S.P.S.S.) version 17. Respondents were made up of 74.4% males and 25.6% females. Majority of respondents were between the ages of 31-50 years (50.2%) whilst 62.5% were married. Generally, 81.9% had tertiary level of education and 60.3% were employed by others. With regards to their monthly incomes, 45.8% earned Gh¢1,500.00 and over and an overwhelming majority (93.7%) were Christians.

Commented [I2]: Not clear, present mathematically and explain

Commented [I3]: What were the other sections?

FINDINGS

Determinants of meal experience

Generally, customers' rated their meal experience as good because all the items on the scale for measuring meal experience had an overall mean score greater than 3 (Mean > 3.00). The specific means were food (Mean = 3.88), menu (Mean = 3.77), price (Mean = 3.77), service (Mean = 3.67) and atmosphere (Mean = 3.60).

Food

As seen in Table 1, generally over 70% of customers thought the food served by the restaurants was good and also agreed that food temperature was right (Mean = 4.00). In addition, they agreed that food was tasty, was of good quality and healthy (Mean = 3.90). They further agreed that the food was attractive (Mean = 3.87) and had pleasant aroma (Mean = 3.86). In contrast, the nutritious status of the food offered by the restaurant was described as barely satisfactory (Mean = 3.82). However, as 67.3 percent agreed that food was nutritious, 32.7 percent did not share this opinion.

Commented [I4]: Wrong interpretation

Menu

With regards to menu, the majority of the respondents generally described the menus as good (Mean=3.77). They agreed that menu chosen was available (Mean=3.88), had different prices (Mean=3.85), variety (Mean=3.77) and was easy to understand (Mean=3.76). However, 37.3 percent of customers did not agree that their dishes were described to them (Mean = 3.75). On the whole, majority of patrons (67.8%) reported that they got value for money spent.

Table 1: Assessing the determinants of customers' meal experience

Components	% agreement	in Mean	Standard Deviation
Assessing of food (overall mean=3.88)			
Food is attractive	71.7	3.87	0.762
Food is tasty	76.7	3.90	0.792
Food has good quality	72.4	3.90	0.84
Food quantity is sufficient	71.5	3.82	0.986
Food has pleasant aroma	72.0	3.86	0.812
Food temperature is right	76.9	4.00	0.816
Food is nutritious	67.3	3.82	0.806
Food is healthy	74.2	3.90	0.796
Assessing of menu (overall mean=3.77)			
Menu has variety	73.0	3.77	1.015
Menu is easy to understand	71.9	3.76	1.053
Menu chosen was available	77.1	3.88	0.993
Menu has different prices	71.6	3.85	0.993
Dishes described to diners	62.7	3.59	1.079
Assessing of price (overall mean=3.77)			
Price of food is reasonable	72.3	3.79	1.060
Price is fair	68.4	3.75	1.011
Price has value for money	67.8	3.76	1.009
Assessing of service (overall mean=3.67)			
Staff welcome customers	59.3	3.58	1.157
Staff are polite	79.0	3.95	0.776
Staff exhibit professionalism	55.8	3.51	0.942
Staff are knowledgeable	57.3	3.56	0.825
Service is prompt	53.0	3.41	1.117
Staff do not discriminate	66.3	3.73	0.935
Staff are helpful	69.4	3.82	0.829
Staff make customers' special	56.2	3.54	0.955
Properly handled complaints	53.3	3.50	0.942
Staff are decently dressed	76.2	3.90	0.916
Requested food was served	73.7	3.89	0.958
Assessing of environment (overall mean=3.60)			
Adequate parking space	51.1	3.27	1.273
Restaurant easily accessible	79.4	3.39	0.911
Environment is safe	73.9	3.87	0.931
Restaurant is clean	73.5	3.84	0.848
Restaurant has pleasant smell	69.5	3.79	0.787
Restaurant is spacious	54.8	3.41	1.09
Restaurant nicely decorated	59.2	3.63	0.881
Restaurant is not noisy	66.9	3.74	0.984
Clean cutlery and crockery	71.3	3.82	0.853
Comfortable table and chairs	73.2	3.85	0.971
Restaurant has toilet facilities	33.5	2.96	1.223

Source: Fieldwork, 2014

Price

According to Mensah (2009) price is the only element of food service which brings in revenue to a restaurant, this means that pricing is of vital importance to restaurant operators. The result showed that patrons of the restaurants assessed food prices as reasonable (Mean = 3.79).

Service

Respondents were generally rated services rendered by staff of the restaurants highly though almost half of the respondents did not agree that restaurant staff were prompt and handled complaints well. Staff of the restaurants were considered to be polite (Mean = 3.95), decently dressed (Mean = 3.90), knowledgeable (Mean = 3.56) and professional (Mean = 3.51). However, just a little above half (53%) of the customers agreed that the service was prompt and 53.3 percent agreed that complaints were handled properly.

Environment

Respondents indicated that the restaurant environment was good (Mean=3.60). Customers' agreed that the environment was safe (Mean=3.87), furniture was comfortable (Mean=3.85) and the atmosphere was clean (Mean=3.84). Slightly more than 50% of respondents agreed that the restaurants had adequate parking spaces (Mean=3.27) and were spacious enough (Mean=3.41). Reynolds and Hwang (2006) stated that convenient accessibility to a restaurant amidst adequate parking facility enhances the meal experience of customers. On the contrary, availability of toilet facilities in restaurants (Mean=2.96) was below average. That is, as 33.5 percent agreed that restaurants had toilet facilities, 66.5 percent did not share this opinion.

Effect of socio-demographic characteristics of respondents on meal experience

A logistic regression model was used to examine the effect of socio-demographic characteristics of respondents on the overall determinants of meal experience. The result of the

goodness-of-fit test gave a significant value of 0.380 meaning that the model fitted well to the data. In testing for the significance of predictors, the *p*-value for constant (0.403), age (0.272), marital status (0.359), level of education (0.43), employment status (0.423), monthly income (0.583), and religion (0.707) were all greater than the alpha value of 0.05 and therefore were not important in explaining the model. However, gender was found to be important in explaining the model since its *p*-value of 0.021 was less than the alpha value of 0.05. From Table 2 below, the predicted logit of meal experience was -1.165 for gender.

Table 2: Logistic regression analysis on the effect of socio-demographic characteristics of customers on the overall determinants of meal experience

Predictor	B	S.E. β	Walds χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	β e Odd: ratio
Constant	1.592	1.906	0.698	1	0.403	4.916
Gender (male)	-1.165	0.505	5.317	1	0.021*	0.312
<i>Age</i>			2.603	2	0.272	
< 30 years	-1.229	0.821	2.238	1	0.135	0.293
> 30 years	-640	0.72	0.791	1	0.374	0.527
<i>Marital status</i>						
Marital status (single)	0.421	0.458	0.843	1	0.359	1.523
<i>Level of education</i>			1.689	2	0.43	
Basic	0.045	1.231	0.001	1	0.971	1.046
Secondary	0.761	587	1.685	1	0.194	2.141
<i>Employment status</i>			1.723	2	0.423	
Employed	1.138	1.111	1.048	1	0.306	3.119
Self-employed	0.777	1.161	0.447	1	0.504	2.174
<i>Monthly income</i>			1.949	2	0.583	
< Gh¢300.00	0.016	1.028	0	1	0.987	1.016
> Gh¢300.00	0.061	0.479	0.016	1	0.898	1.063
<i>Religion</i>			0.694	2	0.707	
Christianity	-0.019	1.32	0	1	0.988	0.981
Islam	0.684	1.528	0.2	1	0.655	1.981
Test			χ^2	df	<i>p</i>	
Goodness –of-fit-test						
Hoser & Lemeshow test		7.492	7	0.38		

* Predictor that was statistically significant

Source: Fieldwork, 2014

According to the model, the log of odds of a respondent having a good meal experience changes with gender. Thus given the same factors that influence meal experience, males are less likely to have a good meal experience. Also from Table 8, the odds of a male having a good meal experience is 0.312 less than that of a female.

This findings confirms what Saad and Gill (2000) discovered. They found out that males and females differ in their assessment of food quality, taste and physical environment. They further add that males are more adventurous than females. Also, Kleynhans (2003) is of the view of that males and females attach different importance to food and other factors related to it. All these support the results revealed in the logistic regression analysis which states that gender has a significant effect on meal experience.

Thus the hypothesis that there is no significant effect on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics on the overall meal experience was partially supported.

Difference in meal experience between first time and repeat diners

The independent sample T-test was used to assess the differences in meal experiences of first-time and repeat visitors to grade three restaurants. Table 3, presents the results on the differences in meal experience for first-time and repeat visitors which was made up of 25% first-time visitors and 75% repeat visitors. On the average, the result revealed that there was no significant difference between the mean of first-time (Mean = 3.80) and repeat visitors (Mean = 3.93) in terms of food. Again, the *p value* of 0.114 is greater than the alpha value of 0.05 meaning that the null hypothesis, failed to be rejected. However in relative terms, assessment of food by repeat visitors was slightly higher than that of first-time customers. Also, a value greater than 0.05 means that the variability for the two conditions is about the same and therefore it supports the decision not to reject.

Similarly, there was no significant difference in the assessment of the menu made by first-time visitors (Mean = 3.72) and repeat visitors (Mean = 3.85). It was noted that repeat visitors assessed menu higher than that of first-time customers and their *p value* of 0.194 was greater than the critical value of 0.05. Furthermore, price had a significance level of 0.952 which is greater than 0.05, meaning that there is no significant difference between first-time and repeat visitors to restaurant. However, assessment of menu by first-time visitors (Mean = 3.76) and repeat visitors (Mean = 3.77) are relatively the same, so it supports the decision not to reject the null hypothesis.

On the average, there was no significant relationship between the assessment of service by first-time visitors (Mean = 3.57) and repeat visitors (Mean = 3.71). It was also noted that repeat visitors assessed the service higher than that of first-time visitors. Again, service had a significance level of 0.166 which is greater than the critical value of 0.05 therefore the null hypothesis could not be rejected.

Table 3: Difference in the determinants of meal experience between first-time and repeat visitors

Factors influencing meal experience	Status	Frequency	Mean	Sig. (2 tailed)
Food	First-time visitor	60	3.80	0.114
	Repeat visitor	190	3.93	
Menu	First-time visitor	57	3.72	0.194
	Repeat visitor	196	3.85	
Price	First-time visitor	61	3.76	0.952
	Repeat visitor	205	3.77	
Service	First-time visitor	46	3.57	0.166
	Repeat visitor	188	3.71	
Environment	First-time visitor	56	3.76	0.985
	Repeat visitor	183	3.75	

Note: Equal variance not assumed was used for the analysis

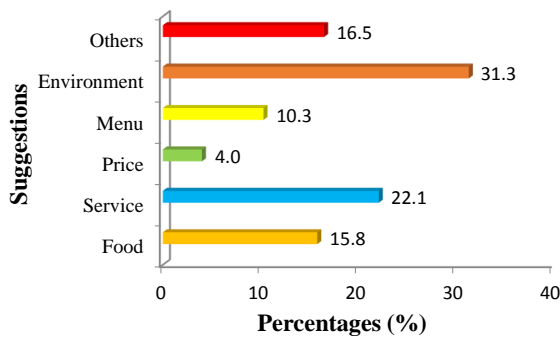
Sig. (2-Tailed) *p value* > 0.05

Source: Fieldwork, 2014

On the average, there was no significant difference between the assessment of environment by first-time visitors (Mean = 3.76) and repeat visitors (Mean = 3.75). This implies that, the null hypothesis could not be rejected. On the contrary, the findings revealed that there was a subtle difference between first-time and repeat visitors' meal experience (Petrick, 2004). Although Ryu and Han (2010) discovered that assessment of physical elements (environment) and service showed significant differences between first-time and repeat visitors. Generally, it could be concluded that there is no significant difference between the determinants of meal experience by first-time and repeat visitors to grade three restaurants within Sekondi/Takoradi.

Suggestions for improvement in meal experience

Respondents were asked to offer suggestions towards improvement in the meal experience. Suggestions were classified under the determinants of meal experience; food, menu, price, service, environment and others.



About 16% made suggestions towards food improvement. They specifically recommended limiting the use of spices, salt and oils in the preparation of food, improving the quantity of foods and taste, of the food, serving more local dishes and serving foods hot.

Also, 22.1 percent of the respondents made suggestions for improving upon food services. The suggestions included ensuring prompt service, training of staff, providing good customer service, responsiveness and improvement of staff physical appearance. Again, four percent of respondents offered suggestions in relation to the prices of food. The suggestions were that, price should always be attached to menu and should remain stable for some time.

Furthermore, 10.3 percent of respondents offered some suggestions for menu improvement. Among the suggestions were that, menu should always be displayed, more variety should be added to the menu, there should be provision of special menus on a particular day and requested dishes on the menu should be made available all the times.

About one-third of respondents (31.3%) made suggestions for improving the restaurant environment. Some of the suggestions were that restaurants should improve ventilation, provide fans, provide air conditioners, and acquire fire extinguishers and also generators. They further suggested that the surroundings of restaurants should be kept clean, volume on television and radio sets should be reduced, adequate parking spaces should be provided plus toilet facilities for customers. Finally, other suggestions for improvement (16.5%) were that, managers should solicit for food contracts from firms, free dessert should be provided occasionally, restaurants should be advertised, new branches should be opened, suggestion boxes should be provided and regular customers should be occasionally rewarded.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Main findings

The main objective of the study was to examine the determinants of customers' meal experience of grade three restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi. It outlined their determinants of meal experience as food, price, menu, service and atmosphere. The study also revealed that more than

Commented [MIM5]: This section of the paper is weak. The discussion should focus on what is new with the findings and how the results compares with literature/theories.

70% of customers assessed the temperature of food as right, menu chosen available and price of food as reasonable. In the same vein, customers stated that staff were polite and restaurants were easily accessible. Furthermore, a logistic regression analysis indicated that, gender was a statistically significant predictor of the overall meal experience. More so, T-test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in meal experience between first-time and repeat visitors.

CONCLUSIONS

The term ‘location, location, location,’ should always be of extreme importance to restaurant operators because it serves as a determining factor of choice of restaurant. Again restaurants situated far from customers place of work or residence could suffer reduction in patronage. As a result the expected expenditure is likely to exceed the expected income. When this persist for some time, managing the establishments becomes a challenge. Such restaurants begin to operate at a loss and when the situation is not rectified on time, it could result in the collapse of some restaurants. However, restaurants that were situated at vantage locations had no problem with patronage.

Some conclusive observations were that, most patrons of grade 3 restaurants were males. This is no exception from literature reviewed because traditionally males eat out more than females especially during lunch time in grade three restaurants. Also, given the same factors that influence meal experience in grade three restaurants in Sekondi-Takoradi, females are less likely to have a good meal experience than their male counterparts. Previous theories adopted from Kivela et al. (1999), Kleynhans (2003) and Ryu and Han (2010) did not include price and menu as factors influencing meal experience. However, previous studies indicated that food, price, menu, service and atmosphere were significant determinants. Additionally, price and menu were also found to be significant determinants in this study

Most customers (>70%) assessed the overall meal as good. About fifty percent indicating that security at the restaurants were not good. Most restaurants were seen without security personnel, fire extinguishers and mosquito/fly killer, which bothers on the safety of customers dining in restaurants. Exactly a quarter of the respondents were first-time whilst three quarters were repeat visitors. There was however no significant difference in the assessment of meal experience by first-time and repeat visitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Restaurant operators should ensure that dishes on their menu are available throughout the day and served at the required temperature.

Secondly, restaurants should be located at convenient places to ensure easy access for customers. Restaurants need to be established close to offices, factories, schools, transport stations, shopping centres and above all near business centres.

Thirdly, restaurant operators should solicit ideas from customers, especially on how to enhance or maintain customers' meal experience among the components of each determinant. This can be done by the use of a suggestion box or through the distribution of a questionnaire in order to gather information on customer's meal experience and expectations.

Finally, management should organise periodic in-service training for their staff and ensure that good staff-customer relationship is maintained. Employees should always be decently dressed and make it a point to welcome customers cheerfully and promptly as soon as they enter the restaurant. In the end resource persons can be occasionally invited during monthly meetings to enlighten restaurant managers on contemporary trends, customer and staff expectations and other challenging issues.

REFERENCES

- Akyeampong, O. A. (2007). *Tourism in Ghana: The Accommodation sub-sector*. Accra: Janel Publications Limited.
- Andaleeb, S., & Caskey, A. (2007). Satisfaction with food services: insights from a college cafeteria. *Journal of Foodservice Business Research*, 10(2), 51-65.
- Andersson, T. D., & Mossberg, L. (2004). The dining experience: Do restaurants satisfy customer needs?, *Food Service Technology*, 4(4), 171 - 177.
- Auty, S. (1992). Consumer choice and segmentation in the restaurant industry. *The Service Industries Journal*, 12(3), 324-39.
- Bell, R., & Meiselman, H. L. (1995). The role of eating environments on determining food choice. In D. W. Marshall, (Ed), *Food choice and the consumer*. London, Glasgow: Blackie Academic and Professional, 292-310.
- Bitner, M. J., Booms, B. H., & Tetreaut, M. S. (1990). The service encounter: Diagnosing favourable and unfavourable incidents. *Journal of Marketing*, 1(54), 71-84.
- Bruwer, J. (2004). The love affair of Generation-X consumers with the winery tasting room. *The Australian & New Zealand Grapegrower & Winemaker*, 491, 19-24.
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social research methods*, (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell-Smith, G. (1967). *The marketing of the meal experience*, Guildford, Surrey: University of Surrey Press.
- Canny, I. B. (2014). Measuring the mediating role of dining experience attributes on customer satisfaction and its impact on behavioural intentions of casual dining restaurant in Jakarta. *International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology*, 5(1), 25-29.

- Chi, C. G. (2012). An examination of destination loyalty: differences between first-time and repeat visitors. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 36(1), 3-24.
- Clark, M. A., & Wood, R. C. (1999). Consumer loyalty in the restaurant industry: A preliminary exploration of the issues. *British Food Journal*, 101(4), 317-327.
- Cohen, E., & Avieli, N. (2004). Food in tourism: attraction and impediment. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 31(4), 755-778.
- Cousins, J., Foskett, D., & Gillespie, C. (2002). *Food and beverage management*, (2nd ed.). Harlow, Prentice - Hall.
- Davis, B., Lockwood, A., Alcott, P., & Pantelidis, L. (2012). *Food and beverage management*, (5th ed). London: Routledge.
- Driscoll, D. L. (2011). Introduction to primary research observation, surveys and interviews. *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, 2(1), 154-174.
- Economic Research Service of US Department of Agriculture (2012). Food expenditures Online, retrieved from www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-expenditures.aspx
- Edwards, J. (2000). *Food services/catering restaurant and institutional perspectives of the meal*. In H. Meiselmann (Ed.). *Dimensions of the meal, The Science, Culture, Business and Art of eating*, 223-244. Aspen: Aspen Publishers.
- Galliers, R. D. (1991). *Choosing appropriate systems approaches: A revised taxonomy*. Amsterdam, North Holland: Elsevier Science Publishers.
- Geissler, G. L., & Rucks, C. T. (2011). The critical influence of customer food perceptions on overall theme park evaluations. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research* 8, 6 - 8.
- Ghana Statistical service. (2012). *Population and housing census, 2010*. Retrieved from www.statsghana.gov.gh on 15th July 2013.

- Ghana Tourism Authority. (2013). *List of registered restaurants in Sekondi Takoradi*. Retrieved from www.ghana.travel/ghana_tourist_board/ on 16th August, 2013
- Gregoire, M. B. (2013). *Foodservice organizations: A managerial and systems approach*, (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River: Pearson Educational Inc.
- Gustafsson, I. B., Ostrom, A., Johansson, J., & Mossberg, L. (2006). The five aspects meal model: A tool for developing meal services in restaurants. *Journal of Foodservice*, 17, 84-93.
- Hansen, K., Jensen, Ø., & Gustafsson, I. B. (2005). The meal experiences of a la carte restaurant customers. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 5(2), 135-151.
- Hartwell, H., Edwards, J. S. A., & Beavis, J. (2007b). Plate versus bulk trolley food service in a hospital: comparison of patients' satisfaction. *Nutrition*, 23, 211-218.
- Heide, M. & Grønhaug, K. (2006). Atmosphere: Conceptual issues and implications for hospitality management. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 6, 271-286
- Hemmington, N. (2007). From service to experience; understanding and defining the hospitality business. *The Service Industries Journal*, 27(6), 1-19.
- Hong, J. S., Chou, S. F., Liu, C. H., & Tsai, C. Y. (2013). Creativity, aesthetics and eco-friendliness: A physical dining environment design synthetic assessment model of innovative restaurants. *Tourism Management*, 36, 15-25.
- Hu, Y. & Ritchie, J. R. B. (1999). Measuring destination attractiveness: a contextual approach. *Journal of Travel Research*, 6(4), 237-249.
- Ismail, S. (2012). *Customer satisfaction in Malaysian Malay restaurants dining experience*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth

- Kivela, J., Inbakaran, R., & Reece, J. (1999). Consumer research in the restaurant environment: A conceptual model of dining satisfaction and return patronage, *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 11(5), 205-222.
- Kleynhans, H. C. (2003). *Leisure tourists' satisfaction regarding their meal experience at Lesedi cultural village*. Unpublished M Con Sc thesis, University of Pretoria, Pretoria.
- Kotschevar, L.H. & Withrow, D. (2008). *Management by Menu*. 4th Edition. United States of America: John Wiley & Sons
- Kumar, A., & Lim, H. (2008). Age differences in mobile service perceptions: Comparison of Generation Y and Baby Boomers. *Journal of services marketing*, 22(7), 568-577.
- Lewis, R. (1981). Restaurant advertising: appeals and consumers' intentions. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 21(5), 69-74.
- Marone, M (2011). Optimizing the restaurant experience by identifying guest's key decision drivers. Retrieved from www.customerinput.com > Customer Input Journal on 26th December, 2014
- Mensah, I. (2009). *Management of Tourism and Hospitality Services*. Accra: Woeli Publishing Services.
- Meyer, C. & Schwager, A. (2007). Understanding customer experience. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(2), 116-126.
- Namasivayam, K. (2004). Action control, proxy control, and consumers' evaluations of the service exchange. *Psychology and Marketing*, 21(6), 463-480.
- Namkung, Y., & Jang, S. (2007). Does food quality really matter in restaurant? Its impact on customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, 31(3), 387- 409.

- Niles, R. (2009). *How theme parks can increase guest spending: Improving food service throughout the day*. Retrieved from <http://themeparkinsider.com> 20th December, 2013
- Noone, B. M., Kimes, S. E., Mattila, A. S. & Wirtz, J. (2007). *The effect of meal pace on customer satisfaction*. Cornell University: DOI:10.1177/0010880407304020. 48(3), 231-245
- Oliver, R. L. (2010) *Satisfaction: A behavioural perspective on the consumer*, (2nd ed.). Armonk, NY: M. E. Shape.
- Ozdemir, B., & Caliskan, O. (2014). A review of literature on restaurant menus: Specifying the managerial issues. *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, 2(1), 3-13.
- Pantelidis, I. S., & Marée, G. (2009). *Imagineering the meal experience*. EuroChrie Conference, Helsinki, 22-24 October, 2009. Retrieved from www.eurochrie.org/.../EuroCHRIE2009_PROCEEDINGS-final.pdf on 4th January, 2014.
- Petrick, J. F. (2002). An examination of golf vacationers' novelty. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 2(2), 384-400.
- Pizam, A., & Ellis, T. (1999). Customer satisfaction and its measurement in hospitality enterprises. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 7(11), 326-342.
- Qin, H., & Prybutok, V. R. (2009). Service quality, customer satisfaction, and behavioural intentions in fast-food restaurants. *International Journal of Quality and Service Science*, 1(1), 78-95.
- Reynolds, J. S., & Hwang, J. (2006). Influence of age on customer dining experience factors at U.S. Japanese restaurant. *Journal of Tourism*, 1(2), 29-43.

- Ryu, K., & Han, H. (2010). Influence of the quality of food, service and physical environment on consumer satisfaction and behavioural intention in quick-casual restaurants: Moderating role of perceived price. *Journal of Hospitality Research*, 34(3), 310-329.
- Saad, G., & Gill, T. (2000). Applications of evolutionary psychology in marketing. *Psychology & Marketing*, 17(12), 1005-34.
- Sarantakos, S. (2005). *Social research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shahin, A., & Samea, M. (2010). Developing the models of service quality gaps: A critical discussion. *Business Management and Strategy*, 1(1), 1-11.
- Som, A. P. M., & Badarneh, M. B. (2011). Tourist satisfaction and repeat visit; towards a new comprehensive model. *International Journal of Human and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 38-45.
- Tsai, W. C. (2001). Determinant and consequences of employee displayed positive emotions. *Journal of Management* 27(4), 497-512.
- Verhoef, P. C., Lemon, K. N., Parasuraman, A., Roggeveen, A., Tsiros, M., & Schlesinger, L. A. (2009). Customer experience creation: Determinants, dynamics and management strategies. *Journal of retailing*, 85(1), 31-41.
- Walsh, H. (2000). A service conundrum. *Cornell hotel and restaurant administration quarterly*, 5(41), 40-50.
- Warde, A., & Martens, L. (2000). *Eating out: Social differentiation, consumption and pleasure*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press