

## IDENTIFYING PERCEIVED ATTRIBUTES OF JAPANESE RESTAURANTS

Keywords: *Japanese Restaurants, Perceived Attributes, Experiential Value, Food Quality, Service Excellence, Aesthetic Value, Playfulness, Consumer Segmentation*

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### **Introduction**

Growth in popularity of Japanese foods among Americans is confirmed by the increasing number of Japanese restaurants in the USA over the past decade (Imai, 2010). Since popularity and demand for Japanese cuisine continues to grow, operators of Japanese restaurants need to understand consumers' perceived attributes of Japanese restaurants.

### **Research objectives**

The purposes of this study are 1) to develop and test a valid and reliable measurement to assess the four dimensions (food quality, service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness) of perceived attributes of Japanese restaurants, and 2) to explore how these perceived attributes differently contribute to attitude, satisfaction and popularity of Japanese restaurants, depending on each customer segment. The outcome of this study is expected to help operators understand the specific perceived attributes of restaurants in different customer segments, so that specific marketing strategies can be developed for each customer segment.

### **Literature review**

Szczesniak (1970) was one of the earliest researchers to explore specific food attributes, i.e., flavor, temperature, and appearance. Jang, Ha, and Silkes (2009) examined and compared the attributes of six types of Asian foods, namely Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese for American customers. They found that taste, edibility, and quality are ranked as the top three among Asian food attributes overall, and that Japanese food was most highly rated among the six types of Asian foods. Food-related attributes have been known as critical factors influencing dining preferences, but other factors also should be identified in further examination of dining satisfaction.

In addition to food-related attributes (including presentation, taste, and freshness), Namkung and Jang (2008) identified two more that influence dining satisfaction. These two are atmosphere (spatial layout, interior design, and music) and services (promised service, willingness to help, and competency). In their studies, “appealing food presentation, tasty food, spatial seating arrangement, fascinating interior design, pleasing background music, reliable service, responsive service, and competent employees” were identified as important attributes in contributing to diners’ high satisfaction.

By incorporating perceived value - in particular, the concept of experiential value in studying the Japanese restaurants’ dining popularity and diners’ satisfaction - this particular study proposes to extend previous studies. Perceived value is as an important concept to understand customers’ satisfaction in the service industry, and significantly influences customers’ purchase decision-making (Ha & Jang, 2010; Zeithaml, 1988). This study adopts four dimensions of the experiential value, proposed and tested by other researchers (Keng, Huang, Zheng, & Hsu, 2007; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001) as main factors to influence dining satisfaction and preference at Japanese restaurants. These four are perceived food quality, service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness. In this study, food quality is defined as its own features distinguishable from other types of foods (e.g., tasty, healthy, fresh, exotic) (Jang et al., 2009). Perceived service excellence refers to generalized consumer appreciation of a service provider who has demonstrated expertise and provides a dependable service performance (e.g., willingness to help, promised service, competency) (Keng et al., 2007; Mathwick et al., 2001). Perceived aesthetics reflects a reaction to the harmony and unity of visual elements and display in restaurants (e.g., ambiance, architecture, interiors) (Keng et al., 2007). Perceived playfulness is clarified as an inner experience pursuing an intrinsic enjoyment to escape from routine by engaging activities (e.g., entertainment, escaping from routines, instant gratification) (Mathwick et al., 2001).

## **Methodology**

The target sample is general American diners. An intercept method will be utilized by conducting the survey in shopping malls. Four dimensions of attributes - food quality, service excellence, aesthetics, and playfulness - are developed, based on a review of previous literature (Jang et al., 2009; Namkung et al., 2008; McCann, 1974; Mathwick et al., 2001; Keng et al., 2007), then modified to reflect the context of Japanese restaurants.

Respondents will be asked to rate perceived attributes of Japanese restaurants via the four attribute dimensions mentioned immediately above. Examples of the attributes of Japanese restaurants under those four dimensions have been described thus: “Japanese foods are healthy (food quality).”; “Servers at Japanese restaurants are knowledgeable about foods (service excellence).”; “Interior design of Japanese restaurants is attractive to me (aesthetics).”; and “Watching chefs making foods at Japanese restaurant is fun to me (playfulness).”

The SPSS program will be used to obtain descriptive statistics to create profile respondents' demographic characteristics. Exploratory factor analysis will identify necessary dimensions of perceived attributes, as well as reduce the number of items; confirmatory factor analysis will test validities of the proposed scale; regression analysis will test effects of perceived experiential value on diners' satisfaction and preferences.

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