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# Experiencing 'Otherness' in Ethnic-Themed Restaurants

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## ABSTRACT

*Ethnic-themed restaurants are one of the most powerful influential socializing agents of foreign cultures. The most common reference point for those seeking enriching leisurely cultural experience is object authenticity. Yet little research has been done on authenticity in eatertainment experiences from both supply and demand perspectives. This paper attempts to fill the lacuna through exploring how ethnic-themed restaurant owners/managers use markers to create a genuine version of their food and cook in the virtual cyber world and how patrons project authenticity to their experiences on the blogosphere. The preliminary results indicate that patrons continue to place emphasis on experiencing the 'other' in an objectively authentic setting but in a negotiated manner so that it relates to their comfort and style. More effort is needed on the part of management to understand consumer demand and 'typify the market niche'.*

**Keywords:** *ethnic-themed restaurant, eatertainment, authenticity, otherness.*

## INTRODUCTION

As one of the most powerful influential socializing agents of foreign cultures, ethnic-themed restaurants can provide consumers a more detailed and accurate insight into a culture (Wood & Munoz, 2007), submerge consumers into various cultural, spiritual, and temporal 'places' (Sims, 2009), augment in-depth sensory experience, trigger experiences recollection in the future (Lupton, 1994), and entice future leisurely engagements or visits (Wood & Munoz, 2007). Also, extant literature discusses that consuming less-known 'Other' food stimulates an adventurous curiosity and a desire to consume contrast (Molz, 2007), accordingly, it becomes a way of underlining a 'symbolic distinction that raises the tourist's status back home' (Molz, 2007) and connecting to their own heritage (Negra, 2002).

The most common reference point for those seeking enriching leisurely cultural experience is object authenticity or the desire to experience the real, traditional and the genuine (Chhabra, Healy & Sills, 2003). Although some argue that authenticity is conceptually bunk in the context of food as it cannot anchor itself either temporally or spatially to the evolving phenomenon (Appaduria, 1981), others highlight the negotiated aspects of food and authenticity. Heldke (2003) identifies three key definitions of authenticity in food and the most common usage is simply *different*, *novel*, or '*Othered*', indicating an effort made by the cook to produce food as it is somewhere else, or sometime else. Using object authenticity (pure, localized, and based on a historical or endorsed criteria) as a reference point, this study attempts to analyze what epitomizes the Indian culture as the 'Other' in Indian eatertainment experiences.

To date, food assumes only peripheral importance in the literature (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), and studies on authenticity in eatertainment experiences have rarely merged supply and demand perspectives in relation to marketing and consumption (Mkono, 2012). To fill this lacuna, this study attempts to understand how ethnic-themed restaurant owners/managers promote markers to create a genuine version of their food and cook within the virtual cyber world and how patrons project authenticity to their eatertainment experiences on the blogosphere. More specifically, using a netnography approach, this paper proposes to examine online reviews of patrons to Indian restaurants in a metropolitan area of Arizona (United States) to see what narratives/themes are used to make the ethnic food 'Othered' by the restaurant patrons, whether the post-visit narratives of patrons on the blogosphere resonate with the authenticating markers and images conveyed/preferred by the restaurant owners/managers, and lastly, whether both supply and demand narratives and images satisfy the criteria of object authenticity.

## METHOD

This study is work in progress and employs a three-step process. First, the first-page online reviews at yelp.com of five popular Indian restaurants based in Phoenix, Tempe, and Scottsdale are analyzed. These restaurants are appropriately selected as they have well developed websites, received the highest number of online postings (Mkono, 2011), and are promoted by the local as well as statewide destination marketing organizations. Both ad hoc and priori content analysis techniques are used. A list of criteria, such as '*type of cultural markers being described and different versions of those description*' and '*what constitutes objective authenticity of leisure experience for them*', is generated from the literature review in addition to creating additional ones unidentified by previous research. Secondly, all themes are compared with the items identified by

Chhabra et al. (2013) from the signature websites of the selected restaurants to show dissonances between patron and supplier narratives, and from the object authenticity criteria (Robinson & Clifford, 2011). The scaled items include the following three dimensions: (1) existentialist authenticity, denoting a special state of Being in which one is true to oneself, such as enjoyment, exotic, and sense of connection with the other; (2) negotiated authenticity, referring to a compromise between commodification and object authenticity or relates to an existentialist experience in an objectively authentic setting (the later can also be termed as theoplacity), such as authenticity of the cook, Indian celebrity endorsement, and Indian icons; and (3) object authenticity, in terms of food, country and origin connection, gastronomic presentation and setting, and front stage costume/role playing .

## FINDINGS

This study is in progress. The preliminary results on data collected so far indicate that the most frequently discussed topics are centered around three themes: food, enjoyment, and service quality. With respect to food, most of the comments focused on palatable taste (98.3%) followed by traditional foodstuff (73.7%), traditional menu items (68.6%) and traditional terminology (66.1%). The later three fall within the ‘othered’ (objectively authentic) category. Also, content analysis of online review content suggests significance of service quality (in terms of empathy, reliability, assurance, communication and transaction, and overall quality of service) in the overall Indian restaurant experience. These results suggest demand for an existentialist (authenticity) experience. Very few reviewer comments focus on the cooking process (18.5% of the review comments) and authenticity of the cook (10.2%). Based on the priori scale (Chhabra et al. 2013), these belong to the negotiated authenticity category. No mention is noted of Indian celebrity endorsement and reference to Indian icons in the Indian restaurants. Both these belong to the constructivist authenticity category. Customer complaints are primarily about the items of food taste and service quality, consistent with the results of frequencies of the discussed themes. The results reveal that reviewers are more likely to talk about the things that they directly interact with, such as food taste, enjoyment feelings, menu, traditional terminology of food, and service quality. Less attention is noted towards the backstage activities (e.g. brands from India, ingredients brought from India, authenticity of the cook, staff place of origin, and cook process). Several of the predetermined objective authenticating markers (e.g. belonging to a certain historical era, objectively authentic décor, authentic showcase/displays) are not mentioned in the reviews. On the supply side, content analysis of the restaurant websites indicates that the restaurant owners also communicate theoplacity-negotiated narratives/visuals of otherness to instill meanings of object authenticity. This view is confirmed by Chhabra et al. (2013) in their nationwide study of Indian restaurants. Suppliers focus on offering front stage ethnic experiences by ascribing “object authenticity to food ingredients and their presentation, use of traditional garb/language, seating style and utensils so that patrons can have an ‘othered’ experience” (Chhabra et al. 2013, p. 495).

In summary, a mix of existentialist and objectively authentic experience is desired by the restaurant patrons. The results point to demand for theoplacity (the second negotiated version of authenticity) in assumed objectively authentic settings. From a supplier's perspective, the following authenticating markers are portrayed on the signature websites to promise an ‘othered’ experience: traditional food items, traditional menu items, traditional terminology, spices, utensils, clay oven, table cloth with traditional designs, Indian icons, and image of Indian chef and waiter/waitress.

## IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study make an important contribution to existing literature. As stated earlier, very few authors across the world have merged supply and demand perspectives from marketing and consumption perspectives. It is noted that consumers continue to place emphasis on experiencing the 'other' in an objectively authentic setting but in a negotiated manner so that it relates to their comfort and style. In other words, 'alternative hedonism' or 'eatertainment' is being sought in ethnic restaurant settings. The ethnic restaurants have appropriately noted this need which is evident in the manner the 'othered' experience is marketed online although the authenticating markers preferred for an 'othered' experience by patrons differ from the ones highlighted in the marketing content. More effort is needed on the part of management to understand consumer demand, offer desired settings/experiences and 'typify the market niche' (Lu & Fine 1995 p. 548). Clearly, there is much research still to do, but it is hoped that this study can be used as a starting platform for those interested in examining the degree to which 'othered' experiences are sought and the manner in which this demand is met.

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