Research Article

# How sensory marketing elements attract customer to return to theme restaurant

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## Abstract

Foodservice consumers in Malaysia continued to record powerful performance in 2018 as Malaysians continued to boost their appetite in eating away from home. Foodservice industry copes with the opportunity to manage customers and making sure all their needs and preferences are fulfilled. Sensory marketing has been recognized as one of the factors that could attract customers. The elements of sensory marketing such as visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile and gustative might be useful for every food service industry especially for customers in a theme restaurant to become fully immersed with sensory experiences. However, could sensory experiences attract them to return? This conceptual paper seeks to understand the sensory elements of sensory marketing that could have been adopted or adapted in theme restaurant to engage customers to return. This area of study is rarely discussed in Malaysia although it could be proven beneficial to boost restaurant industry generally.

# **Keywords:**

Sensory Marketing, Sensory Elements, Theme Restaurant, Customer Return

## 1 Introduction

The foodservice industry in Malaysia is growing like mushrooms after the rain and this influences Malaysia's foodservice sales (Euromonitor, 2010). As Malaysia's economy continues to grow, the foodservice industry is also expanding rapidly (Naveed & Ali, 2009). The growth of foodservice consumers is tied closely to the growth of Malaysia's economy as consumers are expected to spend more on food as their disposable incomes increase over the forecast period (Euromonitor, 2010). Department of Statistics Malaysia showed that there were 167,490 food and beverage establishments in 2015 and the number is increasing each year.

Malaysia is globally renowned for its dynamic and diverse food and beverage establishments. This ranges from franchise restaurants to family restaurants, ethnic restaurants, fine-dining restaurants, theme restaurants, hawker stalls and many other types of food establishments (Camillo, Connolly & Kim, 2008). According to Nawawi, Kamarudin, Ghani and Adnan (2018), a theme restaurant is a type of restaurant that uses a theme to attract diners by creating a memorable experience. Theme restaurants have a unifying or dominant subject or concept, and utilize architecture, decor, special effects, and other techniques, often to create exotic environments that are not normally associated with dining because they are inaccessible, no longer exist, fictional or supernatural, or a taboo. The theme may be further extended through the naming and choices of food, though food is usually secondary to entertaining guests (Mak, Lumbers, Eves & Chang 2017).

In the foodservice industry, there are various types of promotions need to be carried out on a regular basis to retain the respective clienteles. Restaurant chains have been constantly adding new tools in their marketing strategies, in order to grab competitive advantage over their competitors. Krishna (2012) contended that restaurants are using sensory marketing to win and retain customer. Sensory marketing involves the use visual marketing (sight), olfactory marketing (smell), auditory marketing (sound), tactile marketing (touch) and gustative marketing (taste) in its application to win customers. Additionally, Krishna (2012) defined sensory marketing as a way to communicate with consumers through sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste senses. Furthermore, addressing consumers' senses is one of the ways in reaching out to them and offering them an experience. Thus, this conceptual paper seeks to discuss the elements of sensory marketing, how it is important in theme restaurants and how it could potentially be used to influence customers to return to a theme restaurant.

## 2 Literature Review

## 2.1 Theme restaurants

Theme based restaurants have become a common strategy used by the service industry, especially individuals in hospitality and tourism industries (Munoz & Wood, 2009). According to Nawawi, Kamarudin, Ghani and Adnan (2018), a theme restaurant

is a type of restaurant that uses a theme to attract diners by creating a memorable experience. However, consumers are attracted to theme restaurants due to a variety of reasons.

In this era of globalization, higher standards of living and dynamic development in the food and beverage industry drive consumers to pay attention towards the environment, atmosphere and personalization apart from satisfying themselves with physical products. Today's consumers are excited in purchasing products and to consume products that bring them enjoyment and fulfil their experience.

There are many types of theme restaurants which focus on nations or regions like Italian, Japanese, Korean or Mexican as well as using different concepts of theme to enrich the food styles and features. In addition, theme restaurants are also taking music, history, sports or even gaming as their themes, as it can give various consuming experiences to the consumers.

However, the development of theme restaurants creates a lot of competitions in the restaurant industry, many of the theme restaurants are facing low profit or even negative rates. In order to turn this situation around and solve the problems, theme restaurants begin to attract customers one by one. Krishna (2012) contended that restaurants are using sensory marketing to win and retain customers. Sensory marketing involves the use of visual marketing (sight), olfactory marketing (smell), auditory marketing (sound), tactile marketing (touch) and gustative marketing (taste) in its application to win customers.

## 2.2 Five senses of sensory marketing in the marketing world

Krishna (2012), explained sensory marketing as a marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their behaviours. Sensory marketing is based on the concept that we are most likely to form, memorize, and discover the mind when all five senses are involved. The five senses include sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell (Krishna, 2012). Stimulants produced by sensory marketing are initially received by the sensory organs and perceptions are achieved by interpreting these sensations. A sensation occurs when stimuli are impinged upon the receptor cells of a sensory organ, it is biochemical and neurological while perceptions refer to the awareness or understanding of sensory information (Krishna, 2012).

All kinds of physical stimuli are received by the senses before the perception process occurs. The types, amount and the way of these stimuli could affect the perception process of an individual (Matthews, 2011) which have a great importance for an individual's different purchase experiences and consumption processes. By the help of the senses, individuals become conscious of and perceive firms, products, and brands. Basically, the senses are the starting point of perception and retailers have understood the importance of store environment in using these stimuli to affect the perception of customers. According to Tek and Engin (2008), addressing the senses of consumers is

one of the ways in reaching out to them and offering an experience. Past researchers had examined the main effects of these stimuli on consumers' behaviours. These stimuli such as music, scent, atmosphere, tactile and taste have been found to influence consumers' perception and purchase behaviour (Krishna & Schwarz 2014).

#### 2.3 Visual

A very popular adage says that the eyes will feast before the mouth. The sight will perceive before any other thought formation is made. Colors and shapes are the first aspects of differentiation and identification of a product made before it is consumed. Visual is powerful as it creates attention, awareness, and image (Chan, Boksem & Smidts 2018). According to Randhir, Roopchund, Latasha, Tooraiven and Monishan (2016), a visual stimulus builds strong store brands. Furthermore, visual sense has been shown to be of a great significance when verbal material is absent, creating a perception of quality which has a direct impact on the building of a strong brand. Besides the purpose of receiving attention, visual can elicit an emotional response towards a product and other things. Different colors say different things about a product.

Sight is the most used sense in marketing, as it is the most stimulated by the environment (Chakravarty, 2017). Marketers understand the range of colours and forms in the conception of a product, and the layout at a point of sale, thus realization of the advertising campaign is key factors for success (or failure). Colours and shapes are the first way of identification and differentiation (Pinna & Deiana 2018). Many brands are associated with a specific colour, which later is memorized more easily by customers; for example, Pepsi is blue, Kodak is yellow, and KFC is red and white. The company can be identified even though the customers do not see the name. According to memory retention studies (Yilmaz, Dyer, Rossler & Spaethe 2017), up to 78% of consumers are more likely to remember a message printed in colour than that in black and white. In the food and beverage industry, the impact of colours is obvious and sharply defined. Thus, it is important to have an appropriate colour that could drive customers to a restaurant and make them comfortable with the experience and thus return for more.

## 2.4 Olfactory (smells)

Studies on olfactory showed that odours can be used as an asset to change consumers' mood, making them feel more comfortable and relaxed during the stay at a restaurant (Chakravarty, 2017). Morrison, Gan, Dubelaar and Oppewal (2011) confirmed that the use of scents can have a positive direct effect on time and money spent. Additional studies had discovered that the use of odours in marketing makes it possible to evoke cravings for a specific brand, provided that the company behind the brand has succeeded in teaching people to associate the specific scent with its brand (Chakravarty, 2017).

Odours can derive from diverse sources in the dining environment, so once again it is necessary to take a universal view. Restaurants have great opportunities in taking advantage of the fact that odours increase the wellbeing of customers and contribute to a good ambiance in the dining environment (Randhir, Roopchund, Latasha, Tooraiven

& Monishan, 2016). Thus, synergically having one signature odour from a signature dish, the stewards and the ambiance could automatically make consumers recognize, memorize, and eventually link the smell with the restaurants that they frequently visit. All the scents are supposed to have a similar expression, meaning that they support each other, and thereby harmoniously stimulate the sense of smell.

Smells trigger certain parts of the brain responsible for creating emotions and memories (Chackravarty, 2017). The human nose can identify and remember as many as 10,000 scent and as much as 75% of human emotions are generated by smell. Out of all the senses, smell is the only one with a direct link to the brain. As Medina (2014) explained in her bestseller book Brain Rules, the most famous technique of olfactory marketing in the food industry is the use of artificial smells to appeal to customers. For example, Starbucks Coffee has started roasting coffee beans within the stores instead of outsourcing the process. This spreads the odour of beans in the environment thereby giving richer sensory experience for their customers.

## 2.5 Auditory

It is well documented that music instantly calms consumers down (Hultén, Broweus, & Dijk, 2009). In fact, it is actually possible to make them stay longer at a restaurant and spend more money just by playing a slow-tempo background music (Kim & Zauberman, 2019). According to Chackravarty (2017), the placement of the kitchen has a great influence on the ambiance in the restaurant, as the sounds from the cooking intensify the dining experience. It would, therefore, be unfortunate if the kitchen and the dining room are separated. Lastly, it would be a good idea if restaurateurs spend some time designing a music-list in which its genre, artists, and release year match the identity of their restaurants.

Sound has the power to influence human mood and sway their buying habits (Chik, Zulkepeley, Tarmizi & Bachok, 2019). The use of sounds is known in advertising, it associates music to a message in a good way to make consumers remember. However, music is also important for sensory marketing users, since researches underlined the impact of music on behaviour (Singhal & Khare 2015), in a point of sale for instance. The effectiveness of a selling environment depends on its capacity to manage the subjectivity of the potential customers (Randhir, Roopchund, Latasha, Tooraiven & Monishan, 2016). When sound is directly linked to the product itself, consumers may interpret it as a sign of quality or familiarity.

# 2.6 Tactile (touch)

Touch in marketing will give consumers satisfaction with a product because once a consumer is induced to touch, consideration turns to how human interprets the haptic stimuli (Haugtvedt, Herr, & Kardes, 2018). Psychology research has shown that after consumers have felt a product, they experience a small sense of ownership, making them more likely to buy it (De Mooij, 2018). In another experiment, it is shown that if an employee, touches a consumer during the stay, the consumer will unconsciously

perceive the staff as being more present, and friendly (Hultén, Broweus, & Dijk, 2009). This study had been done in the hotel and restaurant industries.

The proven fact that tactile experience is among the first emotions consumers recall when thinking of brands, should be a great motivation for restaurateurs to ensure that everything that consumers have physical contact with is reflecting the restaurants overall identity. It would be highly inappropriate to use metals and glass, as these are commonly perceived as cold and hard materials. Heavy objects are normally associated with high quality, but also the form and colour of the dining equipment, including the plates, are important influencers on how the quality of food is perceived. When deciding on which dining equipment to choose, it would, therefore, be relevant to make some internal experiments each time a new dish is added to the menu. Moreover, it is important that the room temperature is perceived as pleasant at all times, since a cold or hot dining environment is distressing basic human needs, making it difficult to concentrate on sensing other stimuli. A way to make consumers feel welcome, restaurateurs need to provide a more personal and passionate dining experience. It would be a nice move if the waiters and/or the chefs touch the consumers, for example by giving a handshake, at some time during their stay. This will increase the chances for impulse buying, unplanned purchases, and the chances for the consumers to become regulars.

# 2.7 Gustative (taste)

The quality of the food served has a significant role when consumers evaluate full-service restaurants (Park, Almanza, Miao & Jang 2016). Moreover, this study uncovers that there is a direct connection between perceived food quality and consumers' intentions on becoming regulars. Furthermore, it is important that restaurants clearly understand consumers' expectation. Because if consumers have different dining motivations, it is most likely that they evaluate the experience differently, hence this will finally lead to dissatisfaction and hereafter bad words-of-mouth (WOM) (Park, Almanza, Miao & Jang 2016). Another study explained that all consumers have specific favourite meals and that they tend to link them with good memories from the past, meaning that if restaurants start serving these dishes, they automatically become a part of these personal nostalgic memories (Nyman, 2017).

The characteristic of flavours is undoubtedly the most important differentiation factor for restaurants. Restaurants need to be very focused on creating innovative signature dishes and house-made specialties, in a way to build up a unique expression that is impossible for competitors to simulate (Hulten & Dijk, 2009). Some of the dishes could be designed from the basis of traditional beloved dishes, and hereby invoke childhood memories in consumers' minds. The servings could be followed by unique from-farm-to-fork stories, including the origin of the ingredients, and preparation methods, to increase credibility and authenticity. Therefore, these satisfied consumers will leave the restaurant with the knowledge that whenever they crave this type of food in the future, they will only go the same place. Competitors may try to copy some of the

ideas, but the restaurant will always have the first-mover position, and the added meanings ensure that they cannot duplicate the experience.

In addition, a human can sense five basic tastes: bitter, sour, savoury, salty, and sweet. For all the other aroma tastes, gratitude must be shown to our sense of smell, for that is the one that gives flavour to our food. We can say that taste is the sense that merges all different senses together to create a complete brand experience but it is also related to the emotional condition, so it can change mood and brand perception too. Recent studies aimed to understand better about the mechanism of taste and explore the existing relations between, for instance, taste and colours (Chackravarty, 2017). Thus, scientists now know that the four basic gustative sensations, sweet, sour, bitter, and salty, are respectively linked by consumers to red, green, blue, and yellow colours (Randhir et al., 2016). This might be important in the packaging design process of a product for instance. In a promotional way, companies often use gustative marketing to convince customers, by making blind-tests (through comparatives advertisements) or directly with sampling or free-tasting promotional operations. According to Hulten and Dijk (2009), such operations can be a determinant in the food industry, as customers are more disposed to purchase a product that they already tasted and liked.

#### 2.8 Revisit intention

All the sensory elements factors will be deemed useless should it not be used to make customers return. However, the customer notion of intention or intending is basically a subjective matter. It is a fore judgment on how a customer will behave or act in the future. According to Soderlund and Ohman, (2003) revisit intention serves as a dependent variable in a service-related research and satisfaction models. Revisit intention is the emotion when customers feel that they want to experience the same service that they had encountered during past visits on certain places.

When customers are satisfied and delighted with the service that they have consumed, there is always an idea that pops up in their mind that says they want to repeat that experience by revisiting the place. Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (2000) prepared a very brief model for the satisfaction of dining and the revisiting customers in the study stated that the return probability of customers depends on whether they are satisfied or not. Ng's (2005) empirical results indicated that customer satisfaction is influenced by the theme restaurant's attributes, food quality, and atmosphere, and will determine the customer return intention. Yet, if customers want to revisit a restaurant, they must have their own reasons (Soriano, 2002). It may be the pressure of work, family issues, lifestyles, and monetary condition, either way, it is still unpredictable. Thus, customers that have positive and memorable experiences from a restaurant are most likely to revisit the same restaurant.

Some guest revisit intentions exist majorly by the efforts of promotions in order to recall their memories and new attractions from the disseminated information (Um, Chon, & Ro, 2006). In the restaurant industry, it is important to understand the attributes which influence customers' decisions to return to a restaurant for another

meal (Soriano, 2002). Other than food quality, the restaurant's physical environment also affects customer revisit intention (Ng, 2005). Additionally, Chow, Dickson, Tham, and Wong (2013) stated that restaurant operators should have their main focus on the effects of the attributes that may influence restaurant customers and their revisit guests for the sake of maximizing the needs and wants of the customers. Apparently, customers' effective response may be influenced by the restaurant's environment and entertainment and hence influence revisit intention (Kim & Moon, 2009). Proofs from Chaudhry (2007) had proven that revisit customers produce more than twice gross income than newcomers. Despite the positive statistic, to receive new customers, it will require efforts almost seven times more just to retain customers (Conklin, 2006).

# 3 Methodology

As this study seeks to identify customers' perception on sensory elements towards customer revisit intention in theme restaurants, a descriptive research design using a quantitative study through cross sectional approach will be used for data collections as it is able to explain the relevant attributes (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). The quantitative approach is quick and has the ability to reach more respondents compared to the qualitative approach (Walle, 1997). From the following notion, the use of quantitative research in this study is acceptable as the researcher aims to gain more information about customers' perception on sensory marketing elements such as visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile, and gustative. The unit of analysis for this study therefore will be an individual who has experienced dining at theme restaurants in Klang Valley.

## 4 Conclusion

The significance of this study will definitely contribute to two perspectives; from an academic perspective, this study contributes to other body of knowledge about sensations in sensory marketing elements which influence customers to revisit theme restaurants. It is also useful to determine the scope of the research. As it is defined in terms of the area which impacts customers and predicts factors in sensory marketing which influence customers to revisit the theme restaurants.

From a practical perspective, and in an increasingly competitive environment, these could impel companies to search for various marketing methods besides the traditional ones. Sensory marketing is one of the comprising methods that aims to seduce consumers by using senses to influence feelings and behaviours. In sensory marketing, with various stimuli that are sent to five senses, consumers' emotional and behavioural orientations are studied. Additionally, sensory marketing is a useful marketing application which gives companies a real opportunity to maximize product profitability. The use of five senses in the marketing field helps to arouse customers' emotions and it is fundamental for a company to differentiate itself from its competitors.

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