

Chef image's influence on tourists' dining experiences

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this research note is to examine how restaurant chefs affect tourists' dining experiences. In restaurants such as *teppanyaki* restaurants (Appendix 1) and sushi bars, chefs must interact with diners directly by taking orders from diners, preparing food in front of diners, and serving dishes to diners (Fang, Peng, & Pan, 2013; Kuroshima, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2006). Interaction with chefs can be a unique selling point for these restaurants. These restaurants offer unique dining experiences to tourists and are popular in Taiwan, France, Japan, and the US (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2006).

Kuroshima (2010), Pratten (2003a; 2003b), and Zopiatis (2010) suggest that chefs' technical skills and abilities to communicate with other staff (e.g., management, service staff, and other chefs) are crucial to restaurants' performances. However, studies have not explored how chefs can influence diners directly, which is the case for restaurants such as *teppanyaki* restaurants. Tourism and hospitality scholars have been interested in tourists' dining experiences because food is an important medium in understanding a culture or society. Nevertheless, the question of how chefs affect diners has not yet been fully examined (e.g., Batra, 2008; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2010; Law, To, & Goh, 2008; Min & Lee, 2014; Nam & Lee, 2011).

To augment the literature on tourists' dining experiences, this research examines how *teppanyaki* chefs can influence Taiwanese tourists' dining experiences. In addition, it investigates how diners' experiences can be affected by *teppanyaki* restaurants' other diners and service staff. Fang et al. (2013) and Lin and Lin (2006) note that *teppanyaki* restaurants have a significant role in Taiwan's culinary culture and appeal to tourists.

2. Research Framework and Hypotheses

This research incorporates "chef image" into Wu and Liang's (2009) framework

on diners' experiential value (Figure 1). Experiential value has been suggested by tourism scholars to be a crucial factor when examining tourists' experiences. It can even influence how tourists experience a destination (e.g., Chang et al., 2010; Kivela & Crofts, 2006; Li, Lai, Harrill, Kline, & Wang, 2011; Mok & Iverson 2000; Teng, 2011).

The first hypothesis that will be examined is the chef image's influence on diners' experiential value. In this research, diners' experience is determined based on how a chef evokes fantasies, feelings, and fun by being unique, stunning, and rare (Chen & Peng, 2014). Chef image refers to customers' overall perceptions of a chef's interpersonal skills, technical skills, and creativity (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010; Lin & Lin, 2006; Zopiatis, 2010).

Previous literature has suggested that chefs can influence diners' experiences by being knowledgeable about the food, conducting appropriate conversation, and making delicious dishes (Lin & Lin, 2006). In *teppanyaki* restaurants, chefs prepare the dishes as the customers make their orders. In addition, chefs engage in conversation with diners to understand their preferences. Their responsibility to make all the dishes in front of diners while displaying a certain professional image separates them from other service staff (Lin & Lin, 2006). If diners perceive their chef as having a positive image (e.g., good interpersonal skills, superior technical skills, and creative), they are more likely to have a positive dining experience. This current research examines the following hypothesis:

H1: A chef's image has a positive influence on diners' experiential value.

The second hypothesis investigates the influence of other customers on diners' experiential value. At *teppanyaki* restaurants, each chef serves multiple diners and diners sitting next to one another in front of their chef; therefore, a good interaction with other diners can be expected to contribute to customers' experiential value when

dining at *teppanyaki* restaurants. The works of Peng, Chen, and Hung (2015) and Wu and Liang (2009) are among the few studies that have explored and confirmed the importance of other diners' manner and behavior. Additional research on the effect of other customers will benefit the existing hospitality management literature.

H2: Interaction with other customers has a positive influence on diners' experiential value.

The third hypothesis examines the influence of service staff on diners' experiential value. To examine the interaction between service staff and diners, this study focuses on service staff quality. This factor includes customers' overall perceptions of the relative inferiority or superiority of a service staff (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). The literature has confirmed that the staff's knowledge of the restaurant, their level of helpfulness, and their reliability affects diners (e.g., Jang & Namkung, 2009; Wu & Liang, 2009). This factor's influence can benefit from reexamination, as *teppanyaki* restaurant chefs have performed some duties that are traditionally performed by service staff, such as introducing the menu and answering customers' questions about the food (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010). Based on the above discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed: (Fang et al., 2013; Kuroshima, 2010).

H3: The service quality of service staff has a positive influence on diners' experiential value.

3. Method

This research used trained interviewers to collect data from Taiwanese tourists near Taipei, Taichung, and Kaohsiung's four and five-star hotels that have *teppanyaki* restaurants. These hotels' restaurants are subject to stringent inspection; therefore, the quality of the restaurants used in this study can be consistent (Wu & Liang, 2009). To qualify for the interview, potential participants had to 1) be above the age of 18, 2)

have dined at *teppanyaki* restaurants before, and 3) be a resident of Taiwan but live outside of the city which the interview took place.

After one month of data collection, 202 returned questionnaires were deemed effective, resulting in a valid return rate of 60.4%. The demographic breakdowns of the sample set can be found in Table 1. The participants completed a survey that evaluated experiential value (Chen & Peng, 2014), service staff's quality (Wu & Liang, 2009), interaction with other customers (Peng et al., 2015), and chef's image (Lin & Lin, 2006) by asking them to rate their answers on a seven-point Likert-type scale (Table 2).

*Table 1

*Table 2

4. Data Analysis

SPSS AMOS 20 was used to analyze the data. Following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach, a measurement model was first estimated using confirmatory factor analysis. The high factor loadings, composite reliability, and average variances extracted (AVE) for each construct were used together to confirm the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the instrument. Bootstrapping was used for robustness check. The results gathered after using structural equation modeling showed a good fit between the data and the main model ($\chi^2/df=2.69$, $p<0.001$, RMSEA=0.08, CFI=0.929, NFI=0.90). On the basis of the statistical results, H1 is supported. The structural estimate is .452 ($t=2.793$, $p<0.01$). A chef's image affects diners' experiential value positively. H2 is supported. The structural estimate is .632 ($t=3.468$, $p<0.001$). Interaction with other customers affects diners' experiential value positively. H3 is supported. The structural estimate is .317 ($t=2.058$, $p<0.05$). The service quality of service staff affects diners' experiential

value positively.

*Figure 1

5. Discussion and Implications

This research note extends existing literature by confirming that chefs can evoke diners' fantasies and feelings through their interpersonal skills, creativity, and technical skills. For practitioners, the findings of this study provide additional insight into the roles of chefs. First, in addition to being knowledgeable about the food, *teppanyaki* chefs need to be proficient in interpersonal skills to engage in conversations with customers, such as making appropriate remarks and explaining the uniqueness of each dish. Second, a good chef needs to be innovative and have a good aesthetic sense because they must display each dish in front of diners without assistance from other staff. Encouraging chefs to participate in different cultural activities, such as learning how to paint, may allow chefs to be more creative and aesthetically oriented when serving customers. Chefs become an ambassador for this type of dining culture.

In *teppanyaki* restaurants, diners sit next to one another and share a table with several other customers. Among the three independent variables, interaction with other diners has the most significant impact on tourists' experiences. Diners may expect top hotels' *teppanyaki* restaurants to have quality staff and good chefs; however, good interaction with other diners is a factor that can really add value to diners' experiences. Experienced managers can influence customers' interactions through seating arrangements, for instance, by seating diners who seek serenity with one another. In restaurants that do take reservations, service staff can attempt to obtain more information about the purposes of customers' visit and the composition of their party prior to their visit. Finally, managers should not overlook the importance of

service staff despite the overlap between *teppanyaki* restaurants chefs' responsibilities and service staff duties. In *teppanyaki* restaurants, diners still expect service staff to be reliable and professional.

6. Conclusion

This research note confirms tourists' dining experiences can be influenced by *teppanyaki* chefs, service staff, and other diners. Although this study contributes to the tourism and hospitality literature, it does have limitations. This research could have made a greater contribution if it had been further grounded in existing theories. Future scholars should examine how interaction affects dining experiences by adopting the symbolic interaction theory.

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Table 1- Characteristics of the participants (N=202)

	Demographic traits	%
Gender	Male	46
	Female	54
Marital status	Married	57.4
	Unmarried	42.6
Age	18-30	30.2
	31-40	17.8
	41-50	13.9
	51-60	30.2
	61 and above	7.9

Table 2 Descriptive analysis of the measures

Variable	Measurement items	Mean	SD	α	AVE	CR
Experiential value (Chen & Peng, 2014)	Compared to other restaurants,...			0.81	.80	.92
	1. <i>teppanyaki</i> restaurants are rare.	5.10	1.23			
	2. <i>teppanyaki</i> restaurants are unique.	5.19	1.20			
	3. <i>teppanyaki</i> restaurants are stunning.	5.61	0.97			
Interaction with other customers (Peng et al., 2015)	1: Other customers are elegant.	5.45	1.13	0.81	.59	.81
	2: Other customers have good manners.	5.33	1.15			
	3: It is pleasant to interact with other customers.	5.36	1.17			
Chef image (Lin & Lin, 2006)	The chef...			0.94	.64	.94
	1. makes delicious dishes.	5.47	1.15			
	2. is professional at preparing the dishes.	5.40	1.05			
	3. is innovative.	5.53	1.02			
	4. has good aesthetics sense.	5.37	1.11			
	5. has good interpersonal skills.	5.33	1.04			
	6. has good communication skills.	5.24	1.07			
	7. has the ability to answer diners' questions about the dishes.	5.23	1.15			
	8. can speak different languages.	5.19	1.11			
	9. explains his / her food preparation method and the uniqueness of each dish.	4.77	1.17			
Service staff's quality (Peng et al., 2015)	1: The staffs provide a thorough and satisfactory service.	5.84	1.02	0.76	.53	.77
	2: The staffs are reliable.	5.46	1.02			
	3: The staffs are professional.	5.42	1.00			

Figure 1. Research Framework- Main Model (N=202)



Appendix 1- *Teppanyaki* restaurants

Teppanyaki restaurants- *Teppanyaki* provides a unique on-the-spot dining experience as diners sit around an iron plate while the chef prepares the dishes as the customers make their orders. Diners can watch chef prepares food and demonstrates his / her cooking skills; moreover, they can also interact with the chef, such as having a conversation (Fang et al., 2013).