Awareness and perceptions of ethnic restaurant managers towards authenticity and sensory strategies – A case study of Persian ethnic restaurants in London

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1 Presenter

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**Introduction**

The presence of ethnic restaurants is closely linked with the history of people’s travel and immigration, and it is believed that the first-ever restaurant in history was an ‘ethnic restaurant’ around 1100 A.D. The story of ethnic food may have been started a long time ago, however, it was only in the recent decade that the concept of ethnic restaurants has grown in popularity and turned into a speciality in the restaurant industry (Tey et al., 2008).

Some of the main reasons that individuals visit an ethnic restaurant are known to be their willingness to explore the particular ethnic culture and to expand their knowledge (Lego et al., 2002; Molz, 2004; Ebster and Guist, 2005; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007). Authenticity, the state of being genuine and true to the represented ethnicity and culture, is one of the most prominent qualities in ethnic restaurants which has a significant impact on customers’ overall experience and satisfaction (Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007).

Scholars identified three different perspectives of authenticity: objective, constructive and post-modern. This study focuses on the constructive perspective of authenticity believing that, there is no absolute and objective definition for authenticity (Bruner, 1994) and instead, it is constructed socially or personally (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Kim and Jang, 2016) based on individual’s experiences, perceptions or interpretation and therefore can be perceived differently from person to person (Robinson and Clifford, 2012; Youn and Kim, 2017).

Elements that satisfy senses and can convey authenticity to guests in ethnic restaurants are sensory strategies – the strategies which are directly linked with human five senses of vision, audition, gustation, olfaction and touch and are designed to communicate the desired outcomes to the recipient-.

The existing literature regarding authenticity within dining settings is highly dominated by the consumer’s perspective and only a few studies look at the supplier’s (service provider) perspective (Le et al., 2019). Based on the findings of a systematic review (see poster presentation Sattarzadeh et al., 2022), the same applies to the literature on sensory strategies within dining settings, and once more the focus is on customers’ experience, and the opinions, perceptions, experiences and awareness of the service providers as the creators of the experiences are not explored in depth.

The aim of this paper is to critically investigate the perceptions of Persian ethnic restaurant managers towards authenticity, and to explore and appraise their awareness and opinions toward the application of sensory strategies in regard to authenticity within their businesses.

**Method & Design**

The research is based on interpretivist philosophy and inductive reasoning and uses qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, to collect the in-depth opinions and perceptions of a sample of Persian ethnic restaurant owners and/or managers in London, UK in a naturalistic approach. The semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to guarantee the collection of the relevant and necessary information by having predetermined questions but at the same time would give the interviewee the freedom to express any additional ideas or opinions out of the designed format (Altinay et al., 2016).

The research employed convenience sampling technique, the interviews took place at the sampled restaurants as it was more convenient for the interviewees and enabled the researcher to address tangible examples from the restaurants during the interview. The researcher faced a few challenges in convincing people to agree to participate in the study due to specific cultural beliefs and biases of some of the potential interviewees.

As the researcher is a native Farsi speaker who is also fluent in English, the interviewees were given the choice of having the interview in either language. The interviews which were conducted in Farsi language were translated into English. The data was analysed by manually coding each interview and identifying the emergent themes. Themes were initially divided into two groups of authenticity and sensory strategies and later subthemes were identified to break the themes further (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Identified themes and subthemes from the interviews with the Persian ethnic restaurant managers

**Findings**

The first section of the findings concerns the restaurateurs’ definition of authenticity in regard to their ethnic restaurants. The following section outlines restaurateurs’ opinions, perceptions and experiences regarding different sensory elements and strategies. The findings are from the themes and subthemes which were identified in the interviews and are based on preliminary results from the early number of the interviews with the restaurateurs. It is expected that further interviews will take place that will enrich the findings.

**Authenticity**

The definition and perception of authenticity vary between the restauranteurs, with some linking the authenticity concept with the origins and the culture of the human beings, while others judging it in a more objective manner and solely emphasising elements such as authentic food items and authentic food preparation methods.

Despite providing different definitions, the majority of the restaurateurs perceive authenticity as synonymous with quality. Here it is necessary to address the translation of the term authenticity in Farsi language, and the fact that in those cases when *authentic* means *original* (اصیل – Aseel) it is usually perceived as *traditional* (سنتی – Sonnati) in everyday Farsi language. Therefore, restaurateurs with a more modern business model, believe that being *too authentic* (in this case traditional) will interfere with having a modern and *unique* establishment.

Another important point to address is the belief that being an ethnic restaurant far from the referent country, would make it challenging and sometimes impossible to maintain the authenticity as there is limited access to the *ideal* sources (e.g., ingredients, tableware, etc.). This once more highlights the partially objective perspectives of the restaurateurs towards authenticity.

**Sensory elements and strategies**

*Visual elements and strategies:* There are contrasting ideas regarding visual elements like restaurant signage. Some restaurateurs believe that having the signage in the ethnic language would bring a sense of familiarity and comfort for their Persian customers and make their non-Persian customers curious and interested. Others, on the other hand, believe that there is no need to write anything in the ethnic language (e.g., signage, menu, etc) when you are an established business with regular customers, and you are located in an English-speaking country.

While discussing the staff nationality and whether the interviewees believed that the front of house staff, which are in direct contact with the guests, should be Persian or not, interviewees shifted their focus from visual elements and focused either on non-sensory elements like the quality of hospitality in general or communication challenges. One of the interviewees expressed that their front of house staff should be Persian to be able to deliver a fine experience of the Persian hospitality when serving the guests. Some of the other interviewees shared several examples of negative experiences that the Persian customers were dissatisfied when being served by a non-Persian member of staff, as they could not communicate in Farsi language. Despite the negative feedback, they still believed that just like Persian guests do not expect other restaurants in the UK to be able to speak the Farsi language, they should not expect it from their restaurant as well.

Based on the experience of the managers, interior design and decoration are believed to be the elements that attract the interest of the non-Persian customers more as Persian customers are already familiar with the elements due to their background. Regarding other visual elements such as staff uniforms, restaurateurs were only concerned with hygiene and cleanliness of the uniforms and expressed that they have not thought of having specific uniforms designed for them.

As expected, elements which are related to food such as food presentation, food portion, food names on the menu were very important elements to the restaurateurs. They emphasised the importance of serving authentic dishes but, at the same time, they opted for also including a few food items which are not Persian (e.g., Hummus, Baba Ghanoush, etc.) but are generally in high demand in Middle Eastern restaurants.

*Auditory elements and strategies:* The interviewees did not seem to have strict rules about only playing Persian music in their restaurants and were either flexible to accommodate the requests of their guests or were only concerned about a specific genre of music (e.g., classical music, soft jazz, etc.) regardless of the origin.

*Gustatory elements and strategies*:Like other food-related elements mentioned earlier, food taste was also a significantly important element for the restaurateurs, and they took pride in serving dishes with an authentic taste with some modification to the recipes to match the taste of their guests.

*Olfactory elements and strategies:* Scent and smell were the elements that the interviewees seemed to have not considered at all. One interviewee believed that being able to smell the food in the restaurant is actually a negative point and infusing specific Persian scents in the air would be pointless by completely ignoring the Persian guest and saying that non-Persian customers would not know what it is.

**Conclusions:**

Authenticity seems to be a new phenomenon to the managers of Persian ethnic restaurants and not something that is included in their definition of quality, and it is challenging for them to link authenticity to their businesses.

As expected, and also evident in the existing literature, among all the sensory elements restaurateurs are mainly concerned with and aware of visual elements, and have not explored the potential possibility of using other sensory elements. Even the visual and the other few elements which are applied are mainly present to serve their basic and original purpose and have not been thought through as business strategies, which in this case can have an impact on customers’ perceived authenticity.

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