Customer experiences and expectations of sit-down restaurants: An auto-ethnographic perspective on restaurant failure

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Abstract

It is noticeable that many restaurants in South Africa fail to keep their doors open – and this most often applies to non-franchised eateries. Small business entities may be deficient in market research, which could result in a mismatch between what is offered by them and what customers expect. The aim of this study was to analyse and present customer experiences and expectations of eateries in order to offer present and aspiring restaurateurs guidance on what may be required of them to succeed by retaining customers. An auto-ethnographic approach was followed, where customers (the participants) were required to document their experiences of eateries, focusing on what made them attractive and what they found repellent. Following the collection of the documents, the scripts were pooled and compared – to identify common themes, but also to identify idiosyncratic preferences. It was found that the food and drink offering played an important role in customer satisfaction, but that factors not directly related to the offering had a substantial impact on customers' willingness to return. A list of these factors is provided. The food selection and drink offering of a restaurant are important. However, it is insufficient to retain customers. This paper provides present and aspiring restaurateurs several propositions on what may be required to enhance customer satisfaction. This is presented in the auto-ethnographic style – which allows for easy access by non-academics. Most of the suggested interventions don't require a substantial financial input, and would thus be easy to implement and advance the sustainability of restaurant owners' businesses.

Keywords: Auto-ethnographic, customer, restaurant, sustainability, business failure

"Now, in the moment, she confronts the Mohave Desert, replicated in restaurants throughout the world, complete with cactus and rock". **-** Joan Hambidge, *Las Vegas, Nevada*

Introduction

Officer and Kearns (2017) describe the dining-out experience as a type of reward, in the sense that it represents an escape from domestic drudgery – an expectation to feel removed from having to deal with preparing the food, serving it, and then cleaning the eating area in the home. The aforementioned authors state that while restaurants may be considered public areas, they contain many of the dynamics of privacy with certain boundaries, where rules may be arbitrary or idiosyncratic, but instrumental to the experience associated with dining-out. Many of the experiences associated with restaurants relate to interaction with others (other

patrons, waiters, managers), which creates a degree of social uncertainty. Furthermore, intangible factors from the surroundings (sights, noises, and smells) enter the diners' consciousness. These experiences may very well lie at the heart of the success or failure of an enterprise. A patron may repeat the dining experience at a restaurant if the experience is positive. On the other hand, "feelings of frustration or anger that arise when there are [negative experiences] are likely to have the opposite effect" (Officer & Kearns, 2017: 99). It is these experiences, and the idiosyncratic nature of these experiences, which the collaborators of this article intend to analyse. It is foreseen that insights into these experiences may influence restaurateurs to adjust the nature and quality of their service, which attracts returning patrons, and in the process create a sustainable enterprise. As may be inferred, restaurant failure has major economic consequences.

In this article an auto-ethnographic approach to knowledge creation was followed. Most articles written from an auto-ethnographic perspective commence by defensively explaining the scientific merit of this approach. This article will be an exception. In this article the authors will merely situate autoethnography as a research method within the wider framework of qualitative methodology. They also indicate its development as a reaction to the master referent, i.e. quantitative methodology, with its prescriptive insistence on objective explication. With the iterative procedure followed, autoethnography reveals its parallels with Derridean philosophy as will be noted. The article commences by discussing restaurant failure, focusing on what seems to be the "empirical" reasons for their failure. Given this background, the methodology of this article will be presented. This will be followed by the findings of the study - an auto-ethnographic narrative on the reasons why customers avoid certain restaurants or revisit others. The article will conclude with recommendations to restaurateurs to improve their service as well as researchers intending to follow the auto-ethnographic route in doing research.

Autoethnography recapitulated

Definitions of auto-ethnographic as a research approach are plentiful and diverse. Before commencing with an analysis of these definitions, the word could be dissected. The word consists of three descriptive parts: auto meaning "self"; ethno meaning "culture", and graphic, from graphos, meaning "writing" (Denshire, 2013: 3). Thus writing about your culture or group, with yourself as reference.

Some definitions of auto-ethnographic research are consequently proposed. Officer and Kearns (2017: 100), for example, write that the "approach relies on data comprising a record of personal feelings, perceptions and experiences ... [and an analysis of this] … is an integral part of autoethnography and assist in its validation. In a similar vein Ellis (2016: 14) states that "As an autoethnographer, I tell a situated story, constructed from my current position, one that is always partial, incomplete, and full of silences, and told at a particular time, for a particular purpose, to a particular audience. I am well aware that all of us constantly reframe and restory our lives, attempting to arrive at a version that presents these lives as changing, yet continuous and coherent". Autoethnography is especially powerful by allowing reflection on personal experiences and is a valuable tool in social research (Hughes & Pennington, 2016; Wall, 2008). Warhurst and Black (2017) also comment on the reflexive nature of autoethnography as well as the necessity to engage in communication with peers. Frankhouser and Defenbaugh (2017: 544) remark on the revelatory potential of the method within the context of personal narrative: "Autoethnography has the potential to teach us about the power of personal narrative as a means to further understand topics of ... importance" and, as Officer and Kearns (2017: 99) put it, it "enables the understanding of experience through the analysis of field notes and reflective journaling". Maric (2011: 37) posits, complexly, that "...autoethnography could thus be understood as a praxis of deconstructing, dispersing, displacing and disassembling the self and its place under the sun to make more room for the

other" where the "other" is a reference to someone beyond one's immediate circle, or neighbour.

As implied from the above, autoethnography deals with a special type of communication. Ellis and Bochner (1996: 23) propose that as autoethnography "strikes a chord in readers, it may change them, and the direction of change can't be predicted. A lot depends on the reader's subjectivity and emotions" to which they add that autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000: 739). Le Roux (2017) writes that autoethnography shares features of deconstruction, viz. having the reader imposing his or her meaning on a given text or piece of research. Le Roux (2017: 198) states that "given the involvement of the reader in bringing meaning to the research, auto-ethnographic research is also acclaimed for its therapeutic value – both for the researcher and the reader of the research", invoking Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists.

As a methodology, auto-ethnographic research is more or less within the qualitative research domain, but also in opposition to it (Holt, 2003). This is substantiated by Denshire (2013: 1) who suggests that autoethnography is an unconventional writing process, "falling somewhere between anthropology and literary studies". Anderson (2006) suggests that autoethnography is a clear attempt at creating a new space within the so-called empirical research methodologies; in effect, it is post-structuralist as it subverts the quantitative and qualitative approaches to research methodology (Qutoshi, 2016; Guttorm, 2018; Azizah, Abraham & Dhowi, 2017) or even postmodernist to some (Le Roux, 2017). Its Derridean enterprise of postponing – the well-known différance/différer, i.e. difference and differal - the meaning of investigation or research is found in the accounts of various authors who advocate returning to their text and rewriting and re-covering meaning (Chang, 2016; Jones, 2018).

This in turn supports the contention by Simpson and Archer (2016) that knowledge and meaning are multi-layered and will change with each re-visiting of the recounting of an experience. As such, the reliability of auto-ethnographic research is often contested (Holt, 2003). It would, however, be difficult - nay, impossible - to contest the validity of personal experiences.

Given the definitions contained above, our own synthesised version of what auto-ethnographic entails is as follows: Autoethnography involves recording personal experiences, reflecting on these recordings, then re-writing the record, with the aim of (personal) analysis and effecting positive change (in self and others).

Literature Review on Restaurant Failure

Restaurant failures have serious consequences. The National Restaurant Association of US states the general norm of restaurant failure rate is approximately 30%. In addition, according to this association, there are nearly 1,000,000 restaurants in the US and the average growth rate for the industry is 2% to 4% per annum. This means that 30,000 new restaurants are added every year, which means that with a restaurant failure rate of 30% during the first year of operation, 9,000 restaurants fail every year. With average revenues of $580,000 per restaurant per year, this in fact signifies a potential loss of $5.20 billion in the form of lost restaurant revenues to the national economy. Restaurant failures also lead to the loss of nearly 40,000 jobs per year, plus the loss of invested capital of approximately $3.2 billion per year, which results in substantial financial distress to investors and their employees (Parsa, Gregory & Terry, 2011).

In the section which follows, the results of four investigations into the failure of restaurants will be presented. The section will be concluded by a critical analysis of these investigations and their findings.

Parsa, Self, Njite and King (2005) consider restaurant failure to be more than documenting quantifiable bankruptcy rates. Often, change of ownership is more descriptive of the real rates of restaurant failure. In their longitudinal study the contributing factors to ownership turnover rates were explored using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was found that a plethora of factors contributed to restaurant failure. It is apparent that these factors may be grouped into "themes."

- The first of these themes is embedded in the vision and mission statements of the business. Often restaurants do not have clear business goals or these are not followed coherently by management due to changes in management, lack of commitment in management or employee ranks, or a laissez-faire approach to management. Lack of a clear vision, or focusing on a single aspect of the business can be detrimental to the survival of the business.
- Another source for the demise of restaurants is poor communication. Too often this takes the form of oral or informal discussion. This relates to internal processes as well as communication with consumers. One restaurateur reported that he failed to communicate their major restaurant renovation and their timetable for re-opening. By the time the restaurant re-opened, the customers had found other establishments to patronise.
- As in many other enterprises, location plays an important part in the success or decline of a business. Not only may there be a poor choice of location, but there may be a lack of match between the restaurant's concept and location. For instance, respondents reported that a contemporary restaurant located near an established restaurant adjacent to a golf club failed when it could not entice the golfers from their usual hangout. The owners thought that their new restaurant would have no problem attracting the golfers. The authors recommend that restaurants should be true to their conceptual integrity, avoid becoming everything to everyone, allow differentiation and be sufficiently distinctive.
- The operational aspects of running a restaurant are fundamental to its success. To commence with, insufficient start-up and operational capital dooms an enterprise very early in its existence. In one instance, new owners did not know how to calculate food cost and relied on employees to maintain proper inventory controls. Furthermore, making poor appointments, the absence of an operational performance evaluation systems, or maintaining operational standards, such as sanitary standards, could be catastrophic to the sustainability of any enterprise. The lack of implementation contributes to an inability to maintain operational standards.

The authors also mention factors beyond the control of any owner, e.g. fires, changing demographic trends, legislation, economy, social and cultural changes. Interesting to note is that all these themes seem to be divorced from customer experiences.

In a follow-up article, Parsa, Gregory and Terry (2011) explored macro and micro factors in restaurant failure. The macro factors include the state of the economy, changing legislation, unforeseen natural events, regional and urban design changes, trends (including changing cultural factors) as well new competitors who enter the fray. More appropriate for this article are micro factors influencing the success of restaurants. Parsa *et al.* (2011) list ten:

- Access to capital: The lack of capital is one of the most cited factors contributing to restaurant failures. With low entrance and exit barriers, it frequently results in restaurateurs having just enough start-up capital, but not enough to support the business during the first few months when marketing is crucial in building a footprint in the market.
- Location: Not unexpectedly, location plays a pivotal role in the success of restaurants, including the demographics of the area. Any changes in the demographics of an area can have significant consequences on the patronage of a restaurant. As neighbourhoods decline, affluent people may move away, seeking other establishments. Also, changes in the surroundings that influence the visibility of the

restaurant and ease of access can also have a huge effect on the success of any restaurant.

- The demands of the job: The demands made on the proprietors may affect their quality of life and cause them to lose interest in the industry. Restaurateurs are known to work extended hours (weekends, evenings, holidays) sacrificing time with family and quality of life. These compromises commonly result in the closure of restaurants.
- Business skills: Many entrepreneurs enter the restaurant business with particular ideas, and technical skills that may be exceptional, but without the business skills to run a profitable enterprise. Managing, marketing, and accounting are crucial skills to keep a business afloat, and without this business acumen, many restaurants become part of the failure statistics.
- Experience in the industry: Together with the previous point, most successful restaurant owners have prior experience in the restaurant or food service industry. Experience can help avoid many pitfalls such as employee theft (which is one of the major causes why restaurants fail).
- Service orientation: A dedication to the service industry is definitely a means to ensure success in the restaurant business. Restaurateurs should continuously assess their product and service delivery to fortify client loyalty. A lack in this leadership is a recipe for failure.
- Branding: The ability to create or build the brand is another skill that should be part of a restaurant owner's toolkit. Inexperienced restaurant owners often lack the branding skills to set their business apart from the rest. The business owners who abide by the 12-P principals (Place, Product, Price, People, Promotion, Promise, Principles, Props, Production, Performance, Positioning and Press) will secure repeat customers and referrals.
- The name factor: An apparently innocuous factor is the name of a restaurant. In a study of successful restaurant names, it was found that the typical name has 13 letters with eight consonants and five vowels. The name should be unique, brief, descriptive, and easily stored in the short-term memory of patrons. Overly complicated and nondescript names are easily forgotten and difficult to locate on search engines.
- Ergonomics: The physical and architectural layout of a restaurant can be a major contributor to a restaurant's success or failure. Design flaws lead to operational challenges which can negatively influence a business. A lack of production and storage space is a common issue as is, obviously, a lack of adequate seating.
- Distinctiveness: One of the prime reasons for restaurant failure is the lack of a distinguishing concept. Fads and imitations are definite antecedents of failure. The core concept of a restaurant must be clearly defined to differentiate it from the competition. This matter was also prominent in the previous research discussed.
- Margins: It is estimated that the typical restaurant in the USA has a net profit of under 10%, meaning that 90% of the revenues are used to defer costs towards rent, paying of equipment, buying food and labour costs. The general rule for success in business is that prime costs should be less than 60%. This leaves restaurant owners at high risk should they not manage their businesses well.

Parsa *et al.* (2011) are also, as was the case in the first article, relatively silent on customer experience as a reason for the failure of restaurants.

A third article investigated the factors influencing word of mouth (WOM) in the restaurant industry (Jalilvand, Salimipour, Elyasi & Mohammadi, 2016). WOM is the informal communication between individuals who share their subjective evaluation on services and/or goods used, and twice as effective as radio advertisements, four times more than personal selling, and seven times more than printed advertisements (Jalilvand *et al.,* 2016). Since the restaurant industry is so highly competitive, owners should have a keen understanding of the customers' perceptions, needs and wants and the importance of WOM.

The study found the following factors influence positive WOM significantly:

- Perceived food quality which includes presentation, freshness, taste, and temperature are significant factors influencing customer satisfaction. Food quality is a tangible element, and is of great importance in gaining customer satisfaction.
- Physical environment such as attractive interior design and décor, comfortable seating, mood lighting, pleasant music, and cleanliness in both the restaurant and bathrooms, increase satisfaction levels.
- The personal interaction between the establishment and the customer is a core factor which, if positive, ideally could lead to customer trust, satisfaction and emotional commitment. The importance of friendly, timely and effective frontline service is key, and leads to an increase in positive WOM and repeat customers.
- Perceived value is a deciding factor that influences customer satisfaction, and influences WOM significantly. Customers who receive better service, with a corresponding quality product reported to have had a more enjoyable meal, and they are willing to pay more for perceived value.

This study reports on key drivers of positive WOM, and should restaurateurs underestimate the importance of it, it could contribute to the failure of a business.

In another article on the success of restaurants, building on the work of Parsa *et al*. (2005), Agarwal and Dahm (2015) initially consider how success is based on the business model of the enterprise. They infer from that study that the success or failure of an independent restaurant could be related directly to the owner's actions while with franchise restaurants it was the franchise methodology or other uncontrollable factors that resulted in the eventual outcome of either success or failure. Agarwal and Dahm (2015) also invoke the studies by other researchers such as Young, Clark and McIntyre (2007), who found that patrons enjoyed the "dining experience" as such at franchise restaurants because of standardization, and that they were more willing to accept delays in service at independent restaurants, on the other hand.

Agarwal and Dahm (2015) discuss several aspects critical to success in restaurants:

- They build on the work of Camillo, Connolly and Kim (2008), emphasising the importance of training. Proprietors with the requisite training were inclined to correctly price menu items and supervise their culinary staff properly. This is closely related to competent management, and is associated with a "combination of strong cost control, service quality and staff supervision" (2015: 29). They, however, also state that new restaurateurs gain industry experience (more so than formal training) in order to develop management skills.
- Agarwal and Dahm (2015) emphasise the importance of sanitation, food safety and preparation methods. This has obvious implications for the visiting patrons as well as the bodies that regulate restaurant operations.
- "Balance price, value, service and product; appropriate combinations of price/value, service, product quality" (Agarwal & Dahm, 2015) are also important. The perceived value of the product offered is considered by patrons as important, and they seem to enjoy generously sized portions.
- Dedication to the establishment by patrons was deemed important. After all, repeat and constant business is the aim to forming a solid foundation of regular paying customers who, in effect, serve as word of mouth marketers of the enterprise. Linked to this, the authors state that "pricing strategies [should be] more market-driven than cost driven" and restaurateurs should "charge only what one needs to charge" (Agarwal & Dahm, 2015: 29).
- The involvement of the owners in the running of the operation is also important and is associated with innovation (keeping creative emotions high). The operations also benefit from an owner's interaction with patrons and they should be the carrier of the establishment's vision and keep the operational staff focused.

From the aforementioned articles the factors determining restaurant success or failure are numerous; there are macro and micro factors within the business, as well as those that influence the customers' experience. Within the South African restaurant context there is little auto-ethnographic research on reasons why customers avoid certain restaurants or revisit them with the consequence that this article will contribute to a developing discussion.

Methodology

In this section the participants to the study, the procedure, and the scope of the study will be discussed.

Participants

The participants in the study comprised of the four collaborating authors of the article and one participant who only provided data for the study. Participants were selected based on their perceived willingness to contribute meaningfully to the study.

Procedure

The participants were briefed on the aim of the study and were asked to compile a list of factors which attracted them to restaurants – alternatively, to list factors which influenced them not to frequent a particular eatery.

The participants were not obligated to conduct any particular field research. Individual records were requested to be presented on paper. The participants were then requested, given this priming, to update and rework their lists after frequenting additional restaurants. The first outcome of the process was a list of experiences per participant.

Once these individual lists were compiled, copies were sent to all the participants, with the instruction to analyse the lists, identify central themes, as well as idiosyncratic elements. The original lists were, however, not rich enough in content for the fellow participants to analyse. The lists were, therefore, returned to all participants with the request to replace words with phrases – explaining their ideas in greater, albeit succinct, detail.

Following this step the participants were able to construct a comprehensive picture of the different perceptions. Given these individual analyses of all five scripts, the participants were asked to compile a short report on why they think restaurants fail. In this report they could include any information presented by the other participants. They were limited to short narratives (a maximum of 100 words) on why restaurants fail.

Armed with the aforementioned information, the participants set up a meeting on discussing why restaurants fail – and what general recommendations may be made to restaurateurs. The aim of this meeting was to reach consensus on five themes which drive restaurant failure as well as to compile a list of recommendations, also not exceeding five recommendations.

The last step, of this auto-ethnographic process, was to document the research process and to do a member check to ensure that opinions were appropriately communicated. Only after completing this last step was the article presented for review.

Scope

The restaurants considered were not designated by location or cuisine. All recallable experiences of restaurants visits were apt for documentation. The scope of restaurants visited was thus determined by the particular researcher's personal encounters with restaurants.

Findings

The results are presented in three ways. Firstly, the consolidated list of five reasons on why restaurants fail is presented under the heading "Themes". Next the five 100 word paragraphs each participant wrote on the reasons why they think restaurants fail are presented. Lastly,

and only in the recommendations section of the article, the recommendations to restaurateurs, as proposed by the authors, will be presented.

Themes

The aim was to identify five themes. However, this richness of the data obligated the participants to extend the list. Below are presented the 9 most common themes which emerged from the data:

- Poor service (Reponses = 33). Examples are: "Waiters that ask but do not listen (Ask for the sake of asking, but do what they want anyway)"; "An attitude by management/staff that they are doing you a favour"; "A server who does not make eye contact and who has to be hailed like a taxi – who then waits, impatiently, for a gratuity".
- Incompetence (Responses = 29). Examples are: "Staff do not have sufficient knowledge about the food; cannot make recommendations"; "French or Italian words not pronounced correctly or included pretentiously"; "Untrained staff".
- Poor hygiene (Responses = 19). Example are: "Dirty menus, Dirty cutlery, Dirty crockery"; "Dirty bathrooms"; "Dirty salt and pepper shakers or condiment containers (oily/sticky)".
- High noise levels (Responses =16). Examples are: "Noisy music, inappropriate music, loud ambiance"; "Loud music/noisy restaurants and surrounding areas (like inside a mall). The blender noise (smoothies, milkshakes, cake mixers should be operated for from patrons). You cannot hear a thing when these kitchen utensils are operating"; "Noise levels".
- Disrespect for patrons (Responses = 12). Examples are: "An attitude by management/staff that they are doing you a favour"; "Horseplay between wait staff"; "Disrespect for loyal patrons who are treated with some irritation as being difficult or full of rubbish".
- Improper operations/logistics (Responses = 12). Examples are: "Make the conventions or rules of the restaurant clear – order at the counter/tax excluded/tip included"; "Young children running around and generally causing a disturbance in a fine restaurant"; "Dishes are on the menu, but actually not available".
- Poor product quality and diversity (Responses = 11). Examples of these are: "Weak wine offering, Bad coffee"; "Warm wine or warm bear, Burnt food, Cold plate for warm food"; "Have a limited menu- this suggests the dishes are prepared fresh – not frozen/prepped".
- Inappropriate aesthetics (Responses= 11). Examples are: "Candles and flowers on the tables. Young, fresh, friendly staff – that attract patrons as myself. Clean air – no food smell – particularly no fish smell – any smell that gets into your clothes"; "Music selection that is suited to the venue and atmosphere"; "Staff not being attentive - generally, and Serving staff with unkempt or dirty clothes".
- Ergonomics (Responses = 10). Examples are: "Uncomfortable chairs (hard, flat, no back support)"; "Adjustable lighting/ music – or areas which has less light or music"; "Oversized decoration/centrepieces on tables (or cluttered table);
- Poor value for money (Responses = 6). Examples are: "Drinks prices are absurdly overinflated"; "Have cheap wine available – we can't all afford the expensive stuff. I am appalled by restaurants who have cheap food, with which they lure me, but then rip me off with unaffordable wine."
- Location (Responses = 6). Example are: "Limited parking, Parking area badly lit or unsafe"; "No bathroom available in the restaurant – you have to leave the restaurant to go to the toilet"; "Restaurant is difficult to find (entrances hidden or difficult to access), Limited and insecure parking, Car guards in the parking area instead of actual security guards".

The integration of these themes will be done in the discussion section of this paper.

Narratives

Below are presented the narratives which were compiled by the participants subsequent to their reading the lists of factors which influence restaurant success as presented by the other collaborators to the paper.

Participant 1

"At the top, occupying possibly the first FIVE positions on the list of things that irritate me at a restaurant must be the music played, especially the volume. Many people with whom I have raised this have agreed – yet restaurants seem to be hell-bent on driving customers away by continuing a raucous tradition. Another pet peeve of mine is poor service that takes a number of guises: over attentiveness; lack of attention; not bringing the bill in time. These factors are critical when I decide on patronising a particular establishment and, as an average consumer, I believe they may play a major role in the success or demise of a restaurant."

Participant 2

"I am an avid restaurant patron. I hardly ever make lunch or dinner at home. As an inveterate restaurant diner it gets my goat when the music is too loud. I am also affected – either positively or negatively – by the ambience of a restaurant. Of course, this may be an intangible quality that derives from the general appearance of a place and its staff. For example, faux decorations or dirty, worn crockery or menus and horse-playing, ill-mannered waitrons will soon have me headed for the exit. Conversely, knowledgeable sommeliers and chefs and staff members will ensure repeated visits from me – and the concomitant generous contribution from my purse!"

Participant 3

"I am a mother of two and at a point in my life where I have some money to spend on various things – including dining out. I would love to go to a restaurant that has exceptional food, service and ambiance, but it does not exist outside my own home. Eating out in our city is a painful experience most of the time, and when it is not, I am actually surprised. At the very top of my list of peeves is the noise in restaurants (particularly music and the screeching cacophony of celebrations). Then this is followed by poor value for money (lacklustre food), and uncomfortable seating (small tables, small hard chairs, and cold air conditioners) and unenthusiastic service."

Participant 4

"I am the type of person that returns to a restaurant that I enjoyed frequently, and equally will never frequent a place a second time if I have a bad experience. As a wine drinker, the wine offering is important. When a wine offering consists of only cheap (highly marked up) wines that are high in tannins I feel patronized. In a similar vein – serving bad coffee in any restaurant is a clear sign of lack of passion and dedication to a complete dining experience as well as expert knowledge thereof. All factors that contribute to a proper atmosphere are non-negotiable."

Participant 5

"Restaurant success depends on authenticity. Match the menu, music, interior, lighting. Communicate what you stand for, and make it clear to all, allowing us to make an informed decision. Make your patrons feel welcome through acknowledgment, enthusiasm about your job, and through providing continuous good service. Keep the menu simple – it reflects that meals are prepared onsite. Make sure the food looks good. Make sure a range of wines is available. Do not rip me off with disguised costs or extravagant pricing. Above all, make sure everything is clean and kept clean. Given the aforementioned, loyal patrons will follow."

Discussion

A literature study was done on the topic why restaurants fail, as well as a qualitative auto-ethnographic perspective on what irritates patrons at restaurants and how to redress that.

From the literature it was evident that the reasons for restaurant failure are multiple and often related to the absence of knowledge and experience in the industry, basic managerial skills, and not being driven by a passion for service delivery. The distinctiveness of the enterprise, the location, as well as the understanding and managing of basic operations of a restaurant was also highlighted in the literature. A customer orientation as a prerequisite to the success of the business was lacking in the first three studies quoted in the literature review. The last two articles, which form part of the literature review, place emphasis on these factors and were also primary in this study. It would be impossible to ignore the importance of the contributions made in the first three articles, as these are essential to the operations of a restaurant. These practices may lie at the very heart of restaurant success, enabling patrons to be satisfied and turning them into returning patrons, or disabling them and driving them away.

The selection of the participants in this study was clearly biased and no apology in this regard is offered. They represented themselves, and in no way should be deemed as representative of any specific group. However, it may be fair to state that they frequent restaurants or eateries more than the average person, often more than once per week, some even daily. Thus, though not representative, they have ample experience of dining out.

The final thematically listed reasons which influenced participants not to frequent a particular eatery, were: Poor service, Incompetence, Poor hygiene, High noise levels, Disrespect for patrons, Improper operations/logistics, Poor product quality and diversity, Inappropriate aesthetics, Ergonomics, Low value for money, and Location.

- The list of themes identified by the participants is quite similar to that identified in the literature review. High noise levels is, however, the exception. Nowhere in any of the literature perused are noise related factors that can drive customers away mentioned. The relative importance of this theme is also noteworthy, and all of the participants mentioned this as a problem when patronising restaurants with high noise levels, and loud or inappropriate music. This suggests that businesses should pay close attention to the ambient noise levels created by their operations, and volume levels of their music.
- Also interesting, and somehow deviating from the literature perused, was the matter of location. The literature, for example Parsa *et al.* (2011), refers to the appropriate location of the premises, as it relates to the macro factor of regional or urban planning, and the effect of changing demographics and surroundings that may impact the access to the establishment. The South African patrons also echo this by complaining that, when it was difficult to find parking, or limited parking is provided, they are less motivated to visit a particular restaurant. However, unique to the participants' concerns were matters of security of their person and their vehicles, and they expressed their wish to find a safe place to park when frequenting eateries.
- Poor service was the most prominent aspect listed by the participants, followed by competence. Though the attitudes of waiters or managers toward their jobs may play a role in poor service (as it seems from the perceptions of some of the participants), competence could be enhanced through training. Many aspects which annoyed the participates could be addressed through training. This includes the training of frontline management on general hospitality (greeting, welcoming, etiquette and general personal appearance), knowledge of the products served, and manager/server-patron interaction, time management, and general waiter competencies.
- Similarly, the studies examined during the literature review revealed the glaringly obvious correlation between the micro factors dealing with entrepreneurial incompetence, experience or leadership and the theme of training. Patrons soon sense

the chaos that erupts when incompetent managers are unable to take control of the operations of the establishment. This concurs with the findings by Jalilvand *et al.* (2016) and Agarwal and Dahm (2015). Given the aforementioned one may even be seduced into thinking that all the negative aspects of the restaurant industry may be addressed by training!

- Hygiene was, not surprisingly, a high priority to patrons, and when not adhered to, a definite factor why patrons would never return to an establishment. In their study, Agarwal and Dahm (2015) found a similar concern concerning ethnic restaurants patrons. Patrons put a high premium on the sanitary handling of their food, whether it is in the preparation or the presentation phases. Also linked to the matters of hygiene often mentioned by the patrons is access to clean bathrooms. As restrooms are often seen as an integral part of restaurants, neglecting hygiene in this area reflects directly on the establishment.

- The next matter prioritized by the participants to the study was respect towards, or acknowledgement of, patrons. This is clearly an attitudinal dimension, and difficult to address through training. However, it is easy to understand that loyal returning patrons want to be acknowledged for their patronage. Though only mentioned by Jalilvand *et al.* (2016), this interaction seems important amongst all who participated in the study. However, statements such as "service imbalance - service is either bad or too good" and "staff being too friendly, e.g. touching and making inappropriate remarks", should be considered within this context. This is essential, as Agarwal and Dahm (2015) consider repeat customers as fundamental to forming the base for the success of the restaurant.

- Improper operations/logistics here refers to disarray in the detailed organisation and implementation of practices within the business. Participants found it important to enjoy smooth interaction between the customer and business so that they did not have additional or unnecessary concerns. For instance, the general rules (table service or waiter service), Wi-Fi codes, conventions about tipping, layout of the restaurant (like bathroom indications and signage), and particularly the menu, should be very evident to all and should not leave patrons puzzled about the availability of services.

- Poor product quality and diversity was high on the priority list to patrons, but surprisingly not the number one priority. When people dine out, they want a certain quality and diversity of product, but that seems not to be the driving force behind creating return customers. As stated in the introduction to the article, patrons want to be freed from the daily chores of preparing food, and it seems that the relatively low listing of product quality and diversity affirms this. Closely linked with this need for escape and comfort are the aesthetics and ergonomics of the restaurant, also referred to in the literature review (Jalilvand *et al.*, 2016; Parsa *et al.*, 2011). Working through the list of complaints regarding eating out, it gradually dawned on the participants that having a pleasant experience was primary to customer satisfaction and revisiting a restaurant. The food and drink served was secondary.

- All that said, low value for money was also a concern to the participants and was mentioned frequently enough to be categorised as a theme. This may not relate to price per se, but rather the psychological contract between the patron and the restaurant: I will pay you for what you deliver, but you should deliver something worth paying for. Simple equity theory seems to be at play. All the participants mentioned the expectation of receiving a fair deal, linked to the experience they hoped for.

The list of misgivings reported by the participants largely correlates with the literature. Not that evident from the literature study or the evidence collected from the auto-ethnographic perspectives of the participants, is the matter of communication. Only Parsa *et al.* (2005) refer to communication and state that the lack of effective communication may well lead to a paucity in clientele. Like training, should communication between the restaurant and the patron be dealt with effectively, many of the problems listed above become manageable. This should start even before entering the premises, with proper branding, and at every point where a

service breakdown occurs. For example, changes in the menu, like a dish being bemoaned as having been removed from the menu, may have been effected because climate change or other natural events may have brought on a scarcity in the ingredients. If the patron is not made aware of the reason for change, then they may continue feeling disgruntled to the point of not returning to the establishment.

Considering the personal narratives, compelling similarities in the reasons for failure were evident. The elements of service quality and cleanliness, and appropriate ambiance were repeated in the narratives. This is to be understood, as the participants all read the different lists compiled as the first step of this research process. It is also not surprising that the macro factors, which were mentioned in the consulted empirical studies, are not cited, as the narratives were about personal preferences, viewing operations from a consumer perspective, rather than a commercially viability perspective. Not surprisingly the narratives reflect the personalities of the different participants well, and it would be easy to identify the authors should with little effort.

Managerial Recommendations

One of the objectives of the study was to present recommendations to owners or managers of restaurants on the sustainability of their enterprises, given the information generated through the process discussed. The participants were guided not to make recommendations on sustaining the businesses beyond what was produced through the research process.

From the above, it becomes obvious that patrons are irritated by myriad factors that impact on their decision to visit restaurants. These factors, however, could easily be considered as applicable to all types of restaurants. As seen from the above, factors such as service quality, cleanliness, and respect for the client could be common to securing return customers, irrespective of the establishment. The recommendations which follow below are thus addressed to all managers of restaurants, irrespective of their target market.

Presented below is an attempt to make the restaurant manager cognisant of general customer grievances and at least attempt to address the issues that may prevent the decline in the restaurant's popularity:

- Interpersonal relations seem central to securing return clients. Managers, front of house, and back of house, staff should be exposed to training programmes which reinforce client-oriented behaviour and appropriate relational contact. This should include general principles of interaction, which some may presume to be general knowledge, but they also deal with idiosyncratic preferences and difficult clients. Communicating on time and effectively goes a long way in satisfying patrons. As evident from the above, this includes acknowledging returning patrons.
- Linked to the aforementioned are the more formalised communication methods, such as branding and they include operational elements such as the menu design and presentation. Primarily from the business' perspective, the company vision should be delineated carefully, adhered to, and communicated. The business must be distinctive and the theme must be clearly pinned down. This allows patrons to identify with the chosen brand or franchise of restaurants. Not mentioned before, in addition, a proper online presence is essential to business success in this industry. This type of communication will allow patrons to consider visiting a particular restaurant. Also, if possible, promotional material and menus should be edited to ensure the correct grammar usage and avoidance of spelling errors; this was a source of great irritation to many of the participants.
- Additional pragmatic recommendations can also be made which includes simple changes to the surroundings, e.g. cleaning and sanitising and sprucing up the restaurant. Hygiene is of utmost importance, and can easily be addressed with rigorous attention to detail. It should be realised that hygiene and ambience are related to the

consideration mentioned. Patrons feel disrespected when they are confronted by dirty, chipped crockery and cutlery, or are have to visit dirty or smelly restrooms. Sustained general maintenance is thus important.

- Product matters may be addressed by training and re-training staff. While service quality was by far the most important priority to the participants of the study, they still expected to have a quality meal or good drink. Without appropriate culinary and sommelier-like wine training, the establishment will not be able to sustain returning customers. This training should be at a management (planning) level, as well as at an operational level, where chefs and serving staff know what is on offer. Only if training occurs at all levels, satisfaction of service and product quality will occur.

- There is an abundance of restaurants to choose from – not necessarily in the rural areas – and thus some form of distinctiveness is required. Though most patrons will be satisfied by good service and a clean establishment, a friendly, welcoming, organised service with small tokens such as free tap water on the table within 5 minutes of arrival, and a small ("free") hors d'oeuvre (bread and butter) as part of the value-added offering could ensure customers returning and encourage positive word-of-mouth.

- The aforementioned relates to value for money. Whilst patrons would like value for money, the restaurant selection is not predicated entirely on this matter. One is reminded of this by Warren Buffett's adage in his 2008 newsletter to shareholders: "Price is what you pay; value is what you get" (Buffett, 2009). It appears that the participating patrons feel comfortable when treated with consideration. Participants were appreciative of restaurants offering options for both the affluent client and your more fiscally conservative types. Patrons are informed and have experience when it comes to food and dining out, thus they want to express their preferences. Consequently, the restaurateurs are not doing themselves a favour by treating patrons as novices when it comes to the product offering or the pricing thereof.

- Most distinct about this research are noise levels or inappropriate ambiance. Managers should be aware of the irritation caused by being seated in the proximity of a large, loud group or having to contend with raucous music. Proactive management of this concern happens at the initial interior design of the restaurant-space. Proper consulting about favourable acoustic design could be a significant advantage in the longevity of the establishment. Complementing proper design, consciously maintaining a moderate ambient climate and quiet appropriate music, adds to patrons' comfort and desire to re-visit an establishment. Servers indulging in horseplay, or acting inconsiderately towards patrons, are factors that impact quite negatively, it appears.

Though the participants presented some idiosyncratic preferences, the nature of concerns expressed by participants eventually coalesced, as did the recommendations to improve restaurant experiences. It became evident that most anxieties of patrons may be managed by the establishment without requiring considerable expenditure, and effecting these should enrich the experiences of the patrons exponentially.

Apart from retro-fixing problems, restaurateurs could address these endemic problems proactively. Rather than training staff, or appointing unqualified family members, engaging in the initial proper selection of staff should be beneficial. Appointing staff with the necessary skills and a client-centred attitude could be a first step to business success. Also, restaurateurs consulting experts on the operational and aesthetic design of the restaurant, which includes its ergonomics, rather than trusting their instincts in this regard, should result in positive outcomes in the long run.

Conclusion

Following an auto-ethnographical approach to research was a new experience to all the participants. We were all energised and satisfied with a process which allowed for telling

(writing) our own stories in the way we wanted to. As participants, the researchers found being part of the entire research process a novel and positive experience. The process of compiling the thematic lists and eventually drafting the recommendations to managers was more challenging, as it was difficult to reach consensus on these matters. Nevertheless, the fact that member checking occurred, and all the participants were able work on the final product and sign off on it, was comforting.

In this paper, the authors drew a parallel between the seemingly non-empirical impressions of restaurant patrons and findings of articles relating to restaurant failure. It appears that the conclusions reached and the recommendations extrapolated may be similar. In other words, data gathered with the auto-ethnographical approach aligned with data gathered using other research techniques. This approach may thus be relevant within other settings, and the prospective researchers should consider extending research interests using this methodology.

Although most of the findings were similar to that found in the literature, in some ways validating the methodology, this research also identified additional elements not captured before. Most noticeable, in this regard, is the possible threat of noise to the enjoyment of dining out. This was not listed in any of the research mentioned, and seems to be a major concern. Also, the matter of being treated with dignity, and how that may be associated with hygiene and maintenance of the establishment, was presented. The theme of acknowledgement and respect seems to run through the whole article. These more nuanced analyses as well as the practical managerial recommendations are valuable additions to the present body of knowledge in the restaurant business.

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