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## INFLUENCE OF AGE ON CUSTOMER DINING EXPERIENCE FACTORS AT U.S. JAPANESE RESTAURANTS

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*The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of age on customer dining experience levels at Japanese restaurants in the United States and to determine if there are differences in influential factors between customers of different ages when they eat at Japanese restaurants. To address the objectives of the study, customers who patronized Japanese restaurants were asked to rank the importance of 20 dining experience factors. Researchers give recommendations for restaurateurs to bridge the gap between customers of different age groups in order to gain a competitive edge in today's highly competitive restaurant market.*

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**Keywords:** *Japanese restaurants, ethnic cuisine, Asian foods, dining experiences, consumer, satisfaction*

### INTRODUCTION

The United States is continuing to become more culturally diverse. As a result of this increase in diversity, ethnic restaurants have become one of the hottest sectors of the food service industry over the past decade and Asian restaurants led the U.S. sales trends in 2003 (Cobe, 2004). Ethnic restaurants are increasing in popularity and these restaurants usually give customers their initial introduction to foods from different cultures. The recent immigration patterns in the U.S. can, to some extent, explain this sudden rise in the popularity of ethnic restaurants (Hensley, 2000a). Ethnic restaurants are so numerous, that the availability and increased familiarity with ethnic foods are making them become more main stream (Mills, 2000; Hensley, 2000c).

As many Americans are becoming concerned about their health and, as a result, are beginning to change their eating habits, they are

increasingly interested in trying new exotic types of foods (Josiam & Monteiro, 2004) such as Japanese cuisines, which consumers generally perceive as being healthy. Traditional Japanese foods capitalize on healthful foods and their food products are well received due to their wholesome and nutritious nature. Most are prepared from vegetable products with a low fat content (Kim, 1995). Cobe (2004) found that Asian restaurants can satisfy the top dining-out priorities of health, freshness, and excitement.

Today's younger restaurant customers are seeking bolder, more exotic tastes from a variety of cultures and these consumers are leading the revolution in ethnic cuisine dining. Generation X customers were born between 1965 and 1976 and are now between the ages of 29 and 40. Generation Y customers were born between 1977 and 1994 and are now between the ages of 11 and 28 (Amour, 2005; Hensley, 2000b; Wikipedia, 2005). Both Generation X and Y customers are adventurous and not intimidated to try something new and different while dining out and they tend to frequent a variety of restaurants on a regular basis. Their baby boomer parents exposed them to ethnic cuisines at an early age (Hensley, 2000b). These younger, upscale consumers seem to exhibit the most interest in Japanese cuisines such as sushi and hibachi, which are often difficult to prepare at home and require numerous, sometimes exotic ingredients.

Conversely, older singles and married seniors are not known for frequenting ethnic restaurants, in spite of typically being social diners who eat out quite often. Older consumers also tend to shy away from spicy or exotic foods, as well as newer food trends. Older consumers are often seen as having firmly entrenched dining-out patterns. The truth is that they have very distinctive preferences for both service and food. For example, it would appear that acquired tastes and dining habit patterns are carried forward as the customer ages. According to Knutson and Patton (1993), the two strongest motivators for older adults to eat out are convenience and companionship. At this stage in their lives, these consumers do not want to spend a large portion of their time in the kitchen, but they do not place importance on trying new cuisines (Hensley, 2000a). This market segment, particularly older females, indicates that an important reason for eating out is the escape from the hassle of creating a meal, from grocery shopping to cooking, to cleanup. Older diners also perceive going out to eat in a restaurant as an opportunity to socialize in a welcoming, comfortable atmosphere, and report that being with friends and family is another important factor in choosing to eat out (Knutson & Patton, 1993).

The diners at ethnic restaurants do not go there just for the food. They also hunger for an exotic dining experience. The patrons of ethnic restaurants are viewed as gastronomic tourists (Zeinsky, 1987). It is important for restaurant managers to know what their customers want and what makes them return to their restaurant. Susskind (2005) stated that customers evaluate the fairness of their dining experience at any time during the delivery of service. A customer who experiences slow service or a food order that is not quite right must then determine whether or not the overall dining experience was good, bad, and equitable.

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of age on customer dining experience factors at Japanese restaurants in the United States and to determine if there are differences in factors between customers of different ages when dining at Japanese restaurants. The objectives of the study were to:

- determine the demographic profile of Japanese restaurant customers in the United States;
- determine differences in dining experience factors between Japanese restaurant customers of different ages, and to
- provide recommendations for Japanese restaurateurs to understand the differences in dining experience factors between customers of different age groups in order to gain a competitive edge in today's highly competitive restaurant market.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study details the results of a survey of customers from eleven Asian restaurants located in a large metropolitan area in the southwestern region of the United States. These restaurants were selected because of their similarity in types of food served and price points (\$10 to \$20 per person per meal). The researchers developed a questionnaire for this study using guidelines from applied research in the areas of foodservice, tourism, and marketing (Robledo, 2001; Susskind and Chan, 2000; Soriano, 2002; Yuksel, 2002). The survey instrument was comprised of two sections. The first section asked for respondent demographic data. The second section of the survey asked customers to rank factors of their most recent dining experience at a Japanese restaurant using a five-point Likert scale (range: 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). The dining experience factors were categorized into five themes: service quality, food quality, menu quality, convenience/ambiance, price and value.

A cover letter guaranteed confidentiality of responses and all surveys were returned directly to the authors. The surveys were distributed in the restaurants by the researchers and assistants. The survey and subject selection were reviewed and approved for the testing of human participants by a university Institutional Review Board. Respondent participation in the study was strictly voluntary. The usable sample size was 369 restaurant customers. The sample was large enough to conduct one-way ANOVA and T-testing, while compensating for the convenience sampling utilized.

**RESULTS**

To address the objectives of the study, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 20 factors from their most recent dining experience at a Japanese restaurant, using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). An example item was, “The menu was explanatory and easy to understand.” As shown in Table 1, the gender composition of the participants was 181 females (49.3%) and 186 males (50.7%). The largest represented age group was respondents who were among the 21-30 year-old age group (42.7%). The ethnic breakdown of the participants was 214 Caucasian (62.4%), 111 Asian (32.4%), and 18 other (5.2%). The average respondent was male, 21-30 years old, Caucasian, single, and employed. The largest number of respondents in this study, 21, (62.8%) were unmarried and 244 of the respondents were employed (66.7%). Many of the respondents held a bachelor’s degree, 159 (43.3%), while 143 of the respondents (39%) had graduated from high school.

**Table 1.** Demographic profile of Japanese restaurant customers

Characteristics	Total	%
<b>Age</b>		
18 - 20	58	16
21 - 30	157	43
31 - 40	63	17
41 - 50	56	15
51 +	34	9
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	181	49
Male	186	51
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian	214	62
Asian	111	32
Other	18	5

Table 2 shows the mean scores of the 20 dining experience factors by age group. The following section details these findings.

**Table 2.** Analysis of variance of Japanese restaurant dining experience factors by age

FACTOR	Age					F
	18-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	Over 50	
<b>MEAN</b>						
<b>Service</b>						
Had neatly groomed, well-trained employees	4.42	4.40	4.38	4.58	4.50	0.489
Provided prompt and quick service	4.29	4.07	4.13	4.57	4.56	2.982*
Provided information about food	3.93	3.67	3.55	3.91	4.18	1.688
Served food exactly as ordered	4.56	4.33	4.27	4.50	4.61	1.391
<b>Food</b>						
Appearance of food was attractive	4.69	4.56	4.37	4.72	4.83	2.311
Taste of food was excellent	4.49	4.40	4.19	4.67	4.71	2.388
Quality of food was consistent each visit	4.42	4.31	4.06	4.46	4.76	2.747*
Quantity of food was sufficient	4.24	4.00	3.90	4.34	4.56	2.500*
<b>Menu</b>						
Menu had variety	4.67	4.39	4.23	4.47	4.58	2.109
Menu was explanatory and easy to understand	4.00	3.92	3.88	4.08	4.00	0.261
Menu had up-dated items	3.98	3.76	3.68	3.97	4.00	1.020
Menu had healthful items	4.39	4.11	3.88	4.20	4.47	2.243
<b>Ambience and Convenience</b>						
Easily accessible parking	4.18	4.19	3.98	4.19	4.05	0.559
Comfortable dining room	4.47	4.30	4.02	4.44	4.30	2.057
Clean restaurant and dining room	4.58	4.37	4.21	4.50	4.53	1.424
Nice atmosphere and ambience	4.60	4.34	4.10	4.40	4.53	2.262
<b>Price and Value</b>						
Prices of food were fair	3.76	3.47	3.29	4.03	4.05	3.625* *
Would recommend restaurant to others	4.44	4.29	3.96	4.60	4.47	3.171*
This is one of my favorite ethnic restaurants	4.19	4.17	3.76	4.32	4.21	1.739
Restaurant made me feel special	3.93	3.74	3.67	3.97	4.39	1.729
Note: F is significant if p < 0.05 (* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001)						

## Perceptions of service

In this study, respondents between the ages of 31 and 40 tended to have higher expectations about Japanese restaurants: (1) having neatly groomed, well-trained employees, (2) providing information about the food, and (3) serving the food exactly as it was ordered. The low mean scores, even though not significant, showed that these customers were not satisfied with these three dining experience factors. These customers expected employees to be well-groomed and trained. They anticipated that the servers would be knowledgeable about the menu and able to answer questions about the ingredients and cooking methods. The respondents also expected the food to be presented as ordered, without mistakes. Apparently, these customers were not pleased with the level of service they had received at Japanese restaurants.

Respondents who were in the 21-30 age range had significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) lower mean scores on the dining experience factor of providing prompt and quick service. And, customers in the 31-40 age range had the second lowest mean scores among the different age groups and a low satisfaction level on the factor of providing prompt and quick service. The respondents in these two age groups expected Japanese restaurants to consistently provide these dining experience factors and had higher expectation levels.

In previous times, customers were prepared to substitute less-than-excellent service and ambiance for the chance to try something new and exotic (Restaurant USA, August, 24, 2000). That is no longer the case. In the United States, there are too many restaurants and too many different types of restaurants available to consumers and they will not patronize a restaurant with poor service. A customer perceives quality only when the service exceeds his/her expectations (Soriano, 2002). Customers will try a restaurant once, evaluate their dining experience, and never return if their experience was unsatisfactory. Businesses succeed on having return customers, not simply with customers who only try a restaurant once. Collie et al., (2000) found that customers' desire to return to a restaurant after experiencing poor service is likely to be influenced if they feel they had been treated fairly in the service-recovery process. Additional research has also shown that there is a strong positive relationship between satisfaction with complaint remedies and customer re-patronage intentions (Conlon & Murray, 1996; Davidow, 2000).

In order to increase levels of service and maintain return customers, restaurant owners must regularly train, and retrain, their employees to deliver consistent, excellent service. Employees must also look clean and

well groomed at all times. They must thoroughly understand the menu and know what ingredients are used in each menu item. Training employees is the responsibility of the owner or manager and it must be an ongoing process.

The younger generation of customers wants to have quick and prompt service. They are often in a hurry and are very spontaneous. Restaurant managers will have to be well organized and service-oriented to meet the expectations of this particular group of consumers.

### **Perceptions of food**

It appears that respondents in the 31-40 age group tended to have higher expectations about (1) the appearance of the food, (2) taste of the food, (3) consistent quality of the food, and (4) the quantity of food based on their low mean scores. They were dissatisfied with these four dining experience factors.

The 31-40 year old respondents also had significantly ( $p < 0.05$ ) lower mean scores on the consistent quality of the food and the quantity of the food. These Japanese restaurant customers had higher expectations about the food they were being served and were dissatisfied with both the quality and quantity of the food they were served. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Soriano, who stated that food is more important in customer satisfaction than any other restaurant attribute (2002). The respondents in this study expected the food to be attractive in appearance, with a nice place presentation. They also wanted the food to be the same every time they frequented the restaurant. These customers were also disappointed with the quantity of food served to them.

The 21-30 year old respondents also significantly scored these two factors lower: the consistent quality of the food and the quantity of the food ( $p < 0.05$ ). This was consistent with Soriano's finding that food was more important than any other attribute among this age group (2002). Brumback (1998) found that customers return to a restaurant because of the quality of the food and fresh ingredients. Soriano found that the quality of food was the most important reason for customers to return to a restaurant (2002). For Japanese restaurateurs to increase their market share in the United States, they will need to focus on their restaurant's food quality and the quantity of food served. The respondents in this study did not feel that the quality or quantity of food served in Japanese restaurants met their expectations, especially among the 31-40 year old customers. In order to maintain this segment of the market, the customer perceptions of the food will need to be increased.

### **Perceptions of menu**

Respondents who were between the ages of 31 and 40 years of age had higher expectation levels and lower mean scores than other age groups on the dining experience factors of (1) menu had variety, (2) menu was explanatory and easy to understand, (3) menu had up-dated menu items, and (4) menu had healthful menu items. The age group which had the next lowest mean scores was the respondents who were between 21-30 years of age. This group was dissatisfied about all four factors related to the menu. They wanted to have more menu items to choose from and they were also dissatisfied with the menu itself; they found that the menu was not easy to understand, nor self-explanatory. Japanese restaurant managers could engage customers of differing ages to critique their menus and provide guidance on how their menus could be better designed and presented. They could also cater to the 31-40 year old customers by developing more up-dated, trendy menu items. This group of consumers tends to be more sophisticated and eager to try new things. None of the mean scores of the dining experience factors which were related to the perception of the menu were statistically significant among the different age groups.

### **Perceptions of ambience/convenience**

There was no significance found among the dining experience factors related to perceptions of ambience and convenience of Japanese restaurants. However, the 31-40 year old respondents had lower mean scores and higher expectation levels about the factors of (1) accessible parking, (2) a comfortable dining room, (3) a clean restaurant and dining room, and (4) nice atmosphere and ambience. This group of customers may want something more trendy, updated, and exciting. They may perceive Japanese restaurants to be repetitious and unexciting. Dulen (1998) reported that in today's constantly changing marketplace, restaurant concepts may need to be regularly updated in order to successfully compete with other restaurants. Customers insist on having a comfortable atmosphere and the 1998 study by Pillsbury found that the appearance and taste of foods have been replaced by the dining environment. Soriano found that the place/ambience of the restaurant is just as important as the cost and value of the meal (2002).

This study confirmed that 31-40 year olds want to have a more comfortable dining room, a clean restaurant, and accessible parking. This

is all part of having a nice atmosphere and ambiance, and this group of consumers will not patronize restaurants that do not satisfy these needs.

### **Perceptions of price and value**

Again, the respondents who were in the 31-40 age group had lower mean scores and lower satisfaction levels than the other age groups on the four dining experience factors of (1) prices of food were fair, (2) would recommend restaurant to others, (3) this is one of my favorite restaurants, and (4) the restaurant made me feel special. The dining experience factor, prices of food were fair, was highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) among the 31-40 year old respondents. It appears that these respondents had higher expectation levels and lower satisfaction levels about the prices at Japanese restaurants. In order to increase customer perceptions of their dining experience, Japanese restaurateurs may want to develop better cost control methods which could give them the ability to have competitive pricing with other Asian restaurants.

The dining experience factor, would recommend this restaurant to others, was highly significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) among all age groups, with mean scores ranging from 3.96 to 4.60. This indicated that the participants would indeed recommend this Japanese restaurant to others. The 31-40 year old respondents scored lowest on this factor (3.96). A customer who says they would recommend a restaurant to others is most likely to return to the restaurant themselves (Soriano, 2002), which indicates a high level of customer satisfaction.

As can be seen in Table 3, which is a summary table of the Japanese restaurant customer dining experience factors by age, there were significant differences between the age groups of participants regarding their dining experience factors of Japanese restaurants. Mean scores of respondents who fell in the 31-40 age group were significantly lower than those of all other age groups ( $p < 0.05$ ) in all but one of the dining experience factors. These respondents were not satisfied with these factors of their dining experience: consistency of food quality, sufficient quantity of food, prices of food were fair, and would recommend this restaurant to others. This same age group scored lowest (3.29) on the factor, prices of the food was fair ( $p < 0.01$ ). Respondents who were 21-30 years of age scored significantly lower on the dining experience factor of providing prompt and quick service, meaning that they were also not satisfied with the level of service at the Japanese restaurants ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 3.** Summary table of Japanese restaurant customer dining experience factors by age

Dining Experience Factor	Age					F
	18-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	Over 50	
	MEAN					
Provided prompt and quick service	4.29	4.07	4.13	4.57	4.56	2.982*
Quality of food was consistent each visit	4.42	4.31	4.06	4.46	4.76	2.747*
Quantity of food was sufficient	4.24	4.00	3.90	4.34	4.56	2.500*
Prices of food were fair	3.76	3.47	3.29	4.03	4.05	3.625**
Would recommend this restaurant to others	4.44	4.29	3.96	4.60	4.47	3.171*
Note: F is significant if p < 0.05 (* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001)						

Results indicated that consumers ages 21-40 had significantly lower dining experience rates than the older age group (41+). Specifically, the 21-30 age participants tended to have higher expectation levels about the level of prompt and quick service at Japanese restaurants ( $p < 0.05$ ). Participants who were ages 31-40 were significantly dissatisfied with the quality, quantity, price of food, and would not recommend the restaurant to others ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Conversely, respondents who were 40 and older had highly significantly dining experience factor rates in these areas: (1) prompt and quick service, (2) consistent quality of food, (3) quantity of food, (4) fair food prices, and (5) would recommend the restaurant to others. They were more satisfied with each of these dining experience factors than the younger customers (18-40 years).

### Rankings of dining experience factors by age

Table 4 depicts how the participants ranked the dining experience factors by age. As can be seen, the appearance of the food was ranked number 1 by all age groups except the 31-40 year olds, who ranked this factor as number 2. Respondents seemed to thoroughly enjoy the presentation of the food they were served at Japanese restaurants. The taste of the food was the next highest ranking dining experience factor, with the 41-50 year old respondents ranking this factor the highest at number 2. The 21-30 year olds and those over the age of 50 ranked this

factor as number 3, while the 18-20 and 31-40 year olds ranked this factor as number 6.

**Table 4.** Rankings of dining experience factors by age

	Age				
	18-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	Over 50
<b>1</b>	Appearance of food was attractive	Appearance of food was attractive	Had neatly groomed, well-trained employees	Appearance of food was attractive	Appearance of food was attractive
<b>2</b>	Menu had variety	Had neatly groomed, well-trained employees	Appearance of food was attractive	Taste of food was excellent	Quality of food was consistent each visit
<b>3</b>	Nice atmosphere and ambiance	Taste of food was excellent	Served food exactly as ordered	Would recommend restaurant to others	Taste of food was excellent
<b>4</b>	Clean restaurant and dining room	Menu had variety	Menu had variety	Had neatly groomed, well-trained employees	Served food exactly as ordered
<b>5</b>	Served food exactly as ordered	Clean restaurant and dining room	Clean restaurant and dining room	Provided prompt and quick service	Menu had variety
<b>6</b>	Taste of food was excellent	Nice atmosphere and ambiance	Taste of food was excellent	Clean restaurant and dining room	Provided prompt and quick service
<b>7</b>	Comfortable dining room	Served food exactly as ordered	Provided prompt and quick service	Served food exactly as ordered	Quantity of food was sufficient
<b>8</b>	Would recommend restaurant to others	Quality of food was consistent each visit	Nice atmosphere and ambiance	Menu had variety	Clean restaurant and dining room
<b>9</b>	Had neatly groomed, well-trained employees	Comfortable dining room	Quality of food was consistent each visit	Quality of food was consistent each visit	Nice atmosphere and ambiance
<b>10</b>	Quality of food was consistent each visit	Would recommend restaurant to others	Comfortable dining room	Comfortable dining room	Had neatly groomed, well-trained employees
<b>11</b>	Menu had healthful items	Easily accessible parking	Easily accessible parking	Nice atmosphere and ambiance	Menu had healthful items
<b>12</b>	Provided prompt and quick service	This is one of my favorite ethnic restaurants	Would recommend restaurant to others	Quantity of food was sufficient	Would recommend restaurant to others

13	Quantity of food was sufficient	Menu had healthful items	Quantity of food was sufficient	This is one of my favorite ethnic restaurants	Restaurant made me feel special
14	This is one of my favorite ethnic restaurants	Provided prompt and quick service	Menu was explanatory and easy to understand	Menu had healthful items	Comfortable dining room
15	Easily accessible parking	Quantity of food was sufficient	Menu had healthful items	Easily accessible parking	This is one of my favorite ethnic restaurants
16	Menu was explanatory and easy to understand	Menu was explanatory and easy to understand	This is one of my favorite ethnic restaurants	Menu was explanatory and easy to understand	Provided information about food
17	Menu had updated items	Menu had updated items	Menu had updated items	Prices of food were fair	Prices of food were fair
18	Provided information about food	Restaurant made me feel special	Restaurant made me feel special	Restaurant made me feel special	Easily accessible parking
19	Restaurant made me feel special	Provided information about food	Provided information about food	Menu had updated items	Menu had updated items
20	Prices of food were fair	Prices of food were fair	Prices of food were fair	Provided information about food	Menu was explanatory and easy to understand

The lowest overall ranking dining experience factor was, prices of the food were fair. The participants ages 18-40 ranked this factor as number 20, the lowest possible ranking. The 41+ participants ranked this factor as number 17. This clearly showed that customers perceive Japanese restaurants as being over-priced.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, the 31-40 year old Japanese restaurant customers were the most dissatisfied with their dining experiences at Japanese restaurants and seemed to be unhappy with all aspects of their dining experience. These respondents felt that the quantity of food was not large enough based on the price. They also indicated that Japanese food was too expensive. As a result, they did not perceive that they received value for their money spent. Japanese restaurateurs should consider monitoring their menu pricing and determine methods to control costs in order to reduce menu prices. This particular age group (31-40) eats out often and many times they take their families. Parents may feel that their children are not welcomed at Japanese restaurants, as there are often limited menu

items for children. These consumers may sense that Japanese restaurants are more formal and not casual enough for family dining. Increasing numbers of families have dual incomes and spend more money eating out than ever before. This sector of the dining population holds an important strategic position in the future of successful restaurants (Soriano, 2002).

Japanese restaurants must appeal to all generations in order to gain a larger market share. In the review of the literature, it was found that older generations of consumers tend to shy away from ethnic restaurants, but in this study, the older customers seemed to be satisfied with their experience when they dined at Japanese restaurants. The older respondents (41-50) in this study seemed to be very satisfied with their dining experiences at Japanese restaurants; however, they did feel that the food was too expensive. Japanese restaurateurs should develop and/or modify their menus and marketing pieces to appeal to a greater number of older customers who may enjoy eating at these restaurants once they experience this type of ethnic food.

Lago and Poffley (1993) discussed important methods to accommodate seniors in their study of the projected wants of this market segment through 2010:

1. Speed and quality of service will continue to be important features to these customers.
2. Nutrition and healthy cooking methods will be increasingly important to older consumers as they give attention to healthy eating habits.
3. Providing nutrition information on the menu will increase brand loyalty from this age group.

Younger customers believed that service at Japanese restaurants was too slow. They are used to a fast-paced, quick-service type of atmosphere. Japanese restaurateurs may want to include some quick menu items to encourage this group of spontaneous, on-the-run, younger customers. Because younger customers are Internet-savvy, the manager might consider creating a Web site where the restaurant and its products can be featured.

Repeat customers are the key to successful restaurants. It is not guaranteed that a satisfied customer will return to a restaurant, but it is almost certain that an unhappy customer will not return (Soriano, 2002). Since resources are usually limited, restaurateurs must determine which improvements among the 20 dining experience factors are most likely to encourage a customer's repeat purchase. They must also determine whether the time, financial investment, and effort needed to improve these factors will be worthwhile to increase repeat patronage.

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of age on customer dining experiences at Japanese restaurants in the United States and to determine if there were differences in influential factors between customers of different ages when they eat at Japanese restaurants. The study illustrated that there were, indeed, significant differences between dining experience levels of customers of different ages. Restaurant managers should ascertain which dining experience factors are most responsible for creating return business and seek ways for improvements.

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