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CURRY CUISINE: PERCEPTIONS OF INDIAN RESTAURANTS IN MALAYSIA

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Malaysia is an Asian country with a multi-ethnic population that includes native Malays, and people of Chinese and Indian ethnicity. Malaysia has identified tourism as a priority sector and is aggressively promoting the country. Consequently, restaurants in Malaysia operate with an increasingly more ethnically diverse customer base. Ethnic restaurants and differential perceptions of customers of varying ethnic backgrounds have not been studied in detail. This study examines the perceptions of South Asians, Caucasians, East Asians, and those of other ethnic origins in their perceptions of Indian restaurants in Malaysia. The findings suggest that there are universal likes/dislikes as well as differential perceptions between ethnic groups. Implications for restaurant operators and researchers are suggested.

Keywords: *ethnic marketing, Indian restaurants, spicy food, customer perceptions, Malaysia*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is an Asian country with a multi-ethnic population. The population includes native Malays, as well as people of Chinese and Indian ethnicity. In addition, the Malaysian government has identified tourism as a high priority growth sector and is aggressively promoting Malaysia worldwide (Saeed, Josiam & Ismail, 2000). As a result, restaurants in Malaysia operate with an increasingly more ethnically and culturally diverse customer base of locals and tourists. Consumer interest in, and acceptance of ethnic foods continues to expand worldwide. In the USA, it reflects the increasingly pluralistic composition of contemporary

American society (CREST, 1997). In the past decade, ethnic foods have become widely available and increasingly popular in western consumer food markets (Iqbal, 1996). By the 1980s itself, ethnic restaurants constituted 10% of all restaurants in the USA (Gabaccia, 1998).

With estimates of over 10,000 Indian restaurants in the United Kingdom, Indian cuisine is the most popular cuisine there (In the pink, 1999). While there are no statistics on Indian restaurants in Malaysia, there are many Indian restaurants there. With growing interest in ethnic and spicy foods worldwide, it appears that there is tremendous potential for Indian cuisine in Malaysia.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

The restaurant industry is highly competitive and to attract and retain customers, restaurant operators have to have a deep understanding of the wants, needs, and perceptions of customers who will be most likely to choose their establishment (Gregoire et al., 1995). The purpose of this study is to enable Indian restaurant operators in Malaysia to better understand consumer needs and attitudes towards Indian restaurants, so that they can be well positioned to take advantage of this growing worldwide trend towards eating ethnic foods, particularly Indian food. This study would also enable them to better understand the differing needs of their multi-ethnic customer base.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study researched the factors that influence the decision of patrons to dine at selected Indian restaurants in the Kuala Lumpur Metro area in Malaysia. The research objectives were:

1. To determine the demographic profile of patrons of Indian restaurants.
2. To identify factors influencing patrons to dine at Indian restaurants.
3. To determine differences in influential factors, between patrons of South Asian origin, and those of other ethnic origin, at Indian restaurants.
4. To identify the most important factors influencing all patrons.

5. To determine differences in the most important influential factors, between patrons of South Asian origin, and those of other ethnic origins.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaire

The data for this research was collected through the use of a survey questionnaire, which was given to patrons of five selected Indian restaurants in the Kuala Lumpur Metroplex in Malaysia. The questionnaire was developed based on the literature, issues identified in the National Restaurant Associations' "Customer Attitude Questionnaire" (Reid, 1983); a research study on perceptions of Chinese restaurants in the USA (Qu, 1997); a research study on perceptions of Indian restaurants in the USA (Montiero & Josiam, 2002); and the objectives of this study.

The questionnaire was developed for the purpose of collecting data on the factors that influence the decision of patrons to dine at selected Indian restaurants in the Twin Cities. The survey comprised five parts: (1) demographic data, (2) comparison of frequency of dining at other similar ethnic restaurants using a likert scale, (3) the importance of various factors when making a decision to dine out, using a 5-point Likert scale, (4) the factors that influence the decision to dine at an Indian restaurant, using a 5-point Likert scale, and (5) open-ended questions. The points on the Likert scale were: Unimportant = 1, Somewhat Important = 2, Important = 3, More/Very Important = 4, Extremely Important = 5.

Data Collection

The researcher conducted surveys at five Indian restaurants in the Klang Valley region of Malaysia. These restaurants were selected because of their urban and suburban locations, similar type of food served, and similar price range of RM10 to RM20 per person per meal (RM, Ringgit Malaysia, is the local currency, currently RM2.80 = US\$1). The operators consented to have the researcher conduct the survey on the premises during meal times.

It was decided to distribute 100 completed surveys from each restaurant. A total of 220 completed responses were obtained, giving a 28% completed responses, which is considered normal in surveys of this kind. Of the completed responses 22 of them were rendered unusable, due

to incomplete or insufficient responses. The usable responses of 198 are considered adequate for arriving at statistically significant results.

A pilot test was conducted to test for reliability and consumer acceptance at one of the five Indian restaurants. Upon completion of the pilot study, the survey was updated and improved.

The surveys were conducted during the lunch and dinner services, at the restaurants. Restaurant patrons were approached by the researcher, requested to complete the survey, and told that their individual responses were anonymous and confidential. No compensation was provided to the respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings are presented in Tables and discussed in the context of the literature in the same sub-section. Statistical findings are supported by discussions of the responses from open-ended questions on the survey. While not all respondents gave open-ended remarks, those that did apparently felt strongly enough about certain issues to supplement their responses to the closed ended questions.

Demographics

A total of 500 surveys were distributed, while 198 usable responses were obtained. Of these, 82 (41.4%), respondents were female while 116 (58.6%) were male. The average respondent was in the 25-34 age group, and of Malayan nationality (78.8%). Almost half the respondents (49%) were of Indian ethnicity. Over half of the respondents had bachelor's degrees (56.1%), while one eighth (12.6%) had graduate degrees.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents by Ethnic Origin

Ethnic Categories	N	%
South Asian	139	70
Other	59	30
Total	198	100

Since, many of the objectives of this study are focused on ethnic differences, respondents were asked to identify their ethnicity with sub-categories such as Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Malay, Sri Lankan, American, French, Australian, Bangladeshi, Greek, British, Nepali, and Thai. For purposes of meaningful statistical analysis, these sub-categories

were collapsed into two categories of South Asian, and Other Ethnic Origin. The results are provided in Table 1. Given that “South Asians” dominate the sample, it should be noted that averages would be skewed by their perceptions.

Customer Perceptions of Importance of Influential Factors

To address the second objective of the study, respondents were asked to score on the likert scale how important were each of the 15 given characteristics when deciding to dine at an Indian restaurant. The findings are presented below in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 shows the score on the importance of restaurant characteristics, while Table 3 focuses on importance of various influences on respondents.

Table 2. Means Of Importance Of Restaurant Characteristics To Respondents

Restaurant Characteristics	Mean for Total Sample
Quality of food	4.82
Cleanliness of restrooms	4.81
Hygiene and cleanliness	4.78
Atmosphere	4.57
Employee Friendliness	4.54
Efficient Service	4.49
Value for money	4.29
Authentic cuisine	4.24
Convenience of location	3.82
Portion size	3.75
Menu variety offered	3.69
Reputation/Word-of-mouth	3.67
Vegetarian choices	3.60
Availability of new items	3.40
Halaal Certification	3.09

Table 3. Mean Scores of Importance of Various Influences on Respondents

Food Attributes	Mean for Total Sample
Taste of the food	4.82
Price	4.39
Spicy food	4.20
Personal preference	4.16
Appearance of the food	4.11
Cultural familiarity	3.99
Aroma/smell	3.95

Taken together, Tables 2 and 3 show that the most important factors for the entire sample in terms of restaurant characteristics were quality of food, cleanliness of restrooms, general hygiene and cleanliness, and price/value for money in descending order of importance. In terms of food attributes, the most important attributes were taste of food, spicy food, and appearance of food, while availability of vegetarian choices, availability of new items, and halaal certification were the less important factors for the whole sample. These findings are consistent with national studies of restaurant patronage in the USA. “Food Quality” and “Cleanliness/Hygiene” are consistently rated among the most important factors in selecting restaurants (Reid, 1983; Dulen, 1999).

Ethnic Differences in Customer Perceptions and Influences

To address the objective of measuring differences of perceptions of ethnic groups, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The results are shown in Tables 4 and 5. Significant differences were found on several influential factors. South Asians had significant higher expectations on the following factors: authentic cuisine, menu variety, spicy food, availability of new items, and atmosphere. There was no item on which respondents of other ethnic origin had significantly higher expectations than South Asians.

Table 4. Analysis Of Variance Of Restaurant Characteristics By Ethnic Origin

Characteristic	South Asian	Other Ethnic	F
	Mean	Mean	
Authentic Cuisine	4.46	3.78	30.110
Menu Variety offered	3.79	3.40	8.796
Availability of new items	3.52	3.07	8.474
Atmosphere	4.68	4.32	10.846
<u>No Significant Differences</u>			
Efficient Service	4.53	4.42	1.215
Employee Friendliness	4.55	4.50	0.236
Hygiene and cleanliness	4.76	4.82	0.502
Cleanliness of restrooms	4.83	4.77	0.796
Quality of food	4.85	4.75	2.495
Vegetarian choices	3.70	3.37	2.758
Portion size	3.81	3.63	2.101
Value of money	4.35	4.17	1.972
Halaal Certification	3.15	2.90	1.124
Convenience of location	3.88	3.72	1.456
Reputation/Word-of-mouth	3.69	3.62	0.235

Note. F is significant if $p < .05$

Table 5. Analysis Of Variance Of Food Attributes By Ethnic Origin

Characteristic	South Asian	Other Ethnic	F
	Mean	Mean	
Spicy food	4.42	3.68	27.658
No Significant Differences			
Taste of the food	4.85	4.78	0.871
Appearance of the food	4.19	3.93	3.182
Aroma/smell	3.98	3.87	0.736
Cultural familiarity	4.04	3.88	1.166
Personal preference	4.14	4.22	0.361
Price	4.43	4.28	1.363

Note. F is significant if $p < .05$

Role of South Asians as Gatekeepers

To address the objective of measuring the role of South Asians as “Gatekeepers,” CROSSTABS analysis was conducted. The results are shown in Table 6. Significant differences were found (Chi-Sq. = 27.853, $p < .000$). Non-South Asians were very heavily influenced (90%) by South Asian friends and colleagues. Interestingly, even a large segment of South Asians (50.4%) were influenced by other South Asians. This shows the strong role of South Asians as gatekeepers for Indian restaurants, particularly for non-South Asians.

Table 6. Role of South Asians as Gatekeepers

	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
	YES		NO	
South Asia	68	50.4%	67	49.6%
Other Ethnic	54	90.0%	6	10.0%
Total	122		73	

Chi-Square = 27.853, $p < .000$

Perceptions of Hot and Spicy Food

South Asians tend to like hot food, and therefore their mean score for the importance of spicy food was higher than the mean rating by the ‘all other ethnic origin’ group. Moy and Witzel (1998) state that Indians embraced the chili pepper, although it was not a native Indian plant. South Asians and some other cultures have a higher tolerance for spicier food, since they are accustomed to it (Dulen, 1999).

Perceptions of Menu Choice

While the 'all other ethnic origin' group perceives that the items on the menu offer a lot of choice, South Asians probably make many of the items at home. Therefore, they seek new items, and/ or something different.

Perceptions of Atmosphere/Ambience

Atmosphere or ambience refers to the internal environment of a restaurant. It is a fairly important decision factor when people go out to restaurants. Sight, sound, smell, and touch all combine to create the stage setting for the dining experience (Marvin, 1992). For many South Asian respondents, atmosphere in an Indian restaurant is very important. It is likely that they see it as an extension of themselves, and as a showcase of their culture. They are generally knowledgeable about South Asian (i.e. their own) culture and are therefore better able to rate Indian restaurants, than those who are unfamiliar with the culture.

Role of South Asians as "Gatekeepers"

It appears that South Asians are more critical of the Indian restaurant experience across the board. Given their cultural and culinary familiarity, this is not surprising. While South Asians may be only a small segment of a given restaurants' patronage base, Indian restaurant owners should also be aware of the 'gatekeeper' power of their customers of South Asian origin. "Gatekeepers" are people who have the power to prevent sellers or information from reaching members of a buying center (Kotler et al, 1999). For example, often non-South Asians ask a South Asian to recommend a 'good Indian restaurant.'

Respondents were asked about the role of other South Asians in selecting this restaurant. All ethnic groups were significantly influenced by the recommendation of South Asians. Non-South Asians were predominantly influenced by their South Asian friends and colleagues (90%). Interestingly, even among South Asians, over half (50.4%) were influenced by other South Asians! Restaurant operators would do well to heed these results (Table 6).

Perceptions of Hygiene/Cleanliness

It would appear that restaurant patrons in Malaysia are more demanding customers when it comes to hygiene and cleanliness, independent of ethnicity. It seems that all patrons have a perception that Indian restaurants need to improve their standards of hygiene and cleanliness, and cleanliness of restaurant restrooms. They may be more critical of the hygiene and sanitation standards in Indian restaurants, than they are of those maintained in other restaurants. Independent of ethnicity, poor sanitary conditions were close to the top of the list of reasons for consumer dissatisfaction in an NRA consumer survey conducted in the USA (Reid, 1983). It was a greater source of annoyance as income increased.

Perceptions of Service Standards and Quality

South Asian respondents had higher mean scores on “Efficient Service”, and “Employee Friendliness.” In the familiar cultural setting of an Indian restaurant South Asians may indeed have a higher expectation for efficient service and friendliness of employees, than other ethnic groups. Given the role of South Asians as gatekeepers, restaurant operators need to pay particular attention to the service provided to them and not fall into the “familiarity breeds contempt;” trap, identified by Montiero & Josiam (2002) in their study of Indian restaurants in the USA.

Perceptions of Price and Value

South Asians attached greater importance to “value for money” and “price.” This suggests that South Asians are more price-sensitive, as a group (4.43, 4.35). Furthermore, other ethnic groups also had relatively high mean scores for this attribute (4.28, 4.17). In the original study conducted in the USA, (Montiero & Josiam, 2002) many of the open-ended responses from South Asians indicated that they felt that Indian restaurants were overcharging and serving small portions. A consumer’s relative perception of value must be considered when establishing menu prices (Reid, 1983). The concept of value for money is related to price. Although larger portions do not always equate better value in the minds of all consumers, larger portions do enhance perceived value for customers (Grindy, 1999). Operators of Indian restaurants need to be sensitive to price and value for money perceptions.

Perceptions of Taste of Food

The higher score for taste of the food by South Asians may well be because they are more familiar with Indian cuisine and make many of the restaurant items at home. It is not very exotic for them, in comparison to the view of the 'other ethnic origin' group. They may also feel that the taste may not be quite as they want it, or are accustomed to, but is an acceptable substitute. On the other hand, the 'other ethnic origin' group probably does not have any other yardstick by which to measure or compare the food.

Perceptions of Vegetarian Options

South Asians reported a higher mean for vegetarian choices. This is because Indians have a high percentage of the population that is vegetarian. Religion has affected the diets of Indians. Over 80% of Indians are Hindus. Vegetarianism is part of Hindu philosophy, although some Hindus do eat chicken, fish, goat, or lamb. Buddhists and Jains avoid meat altogether (Moy and Witzel, 1998).

Perceptions of Cultural Familiarity

It is only natural that there would be a difference on the mean scores of cultural familiarity. While respondents in the all other ethnic origin group go to an Indian restaurant for what they consider a cultural experience, (as stated by many in the open-ended questions in the Monteiro & Josiam, 2002 study), South Asians probably view the dining experience as an integral part of who they are. Their comments in the open-ended questions reflect this: "I really like the element of cultural familiarity in Indian restaurants;" "I really like the Indian atmosphere"; "Availability of food prepared in the style of my country"; "Nice people and feel at home," were some of the many comments. These reflect a cultural familiarity not only with reference to the food and its preparation, but also the atmosphere of the restaurant. The comments of respondents of "other" ethnic origin mentioned that "It is interesting to me since I am not a part of the culture"; and "How interested some people are in their culture."

CONCLUSIONS

Indian restaurants in Malaysia are serving a diverse clientele, with at least two distinct ethnic market segments of South Asians and others. Both ethnic groups are interested in high quality food and service. Despite the fact that South Asians are only one segment, they do play the role of both patrons and gatekeepers, hence their perceptions need to be addressed also.

Recommendations for Indian Restaurant Operators

This study provides information, which facilitates a better understanding of customers and their needs, and systems that can be implemented to improve customer satisfaction. The following recommendations can be made for Indian restaurateurs:

1. Improve hygienic practices in all restaurant areas, including the restrooms.
2. Staff should be properly trained to deliver quality service. Performance standards should be set and staff trained on the following dimensions:
 - Describing menu items
 - Delivering prompt and efficient service consistently
3. Improve restaurant ambience. Use the services of a professional interior designer.
4. Control quality of food. Train kitchen staff in the importance of standardization of each dish, and maintenance of quality control standards.
5. Set reasonable prices after researching price sensitivity of their customers.
6. Serve larger portions for the same price.

Recommendations for Researchers

The researchers have the following suggestions for future studies.

- Similar studies can be conducted with other ethnic restaurants.
- National and international research can be undertaken in countries with a large number of Indian restaurants and/or a large population of South Asians, such as Australia or UK.
- Where market segmentation exists among Indian restaurants, studies can be performed to identify similarities and differences between the various segments.

- In locations with large South Asian population, comparative studies can be undertaken between acculturated South Asian and recent immigrants.

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