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Influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences in formal full-service restaurants in Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to determine the influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences in formal full-service restaurants in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The questionnaires were distributed at selected formal full-service restaurants, and a total of 400 questionnaires were included in the statistical analysis. The data analysis consisted of the experiences of respondents with different demographic variables, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and t-tests. The results indicated that on a 5 point Likert scale, respondents' mean experience scores varied between 3.84 and 4.53. Customers of different genders rated experiences of service significantly differently ($p < 0.05$). Customers from different age groups rated their experiences of food and beverage, service and overall experiences significantly differently ($p < 0.05$). Customers from different monthly income groups rated their experiences of food and beverage, service and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). Customers with different levels of education rated their experiences for food and beverage, service and overall experiences significantly different ($p < 0.05$). Consequently, the experiences of customers for food and beverages and service were influenced by their gender, age, monthly income and level of education. Formal full-service restaurateurs should therefore focus on customers' gender, age, monthly income and level of education in order to improve customer experiences and gain a competitive advantage over other restaurant categories.

Key words: customers; demographic variables; experiences; formal full-service restaurants; South Africa.

Introduction

The restaurant experience refers to a series of tangible and intangible events a customer experiences when eating out (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008). It represents a moment in the everyday life of human beings (Makela, 2000) and individuals will have their own experiences of meals – whether they eat at home or in a restaurant (Warde & Martens, 2000). Any feelings customers may have when they arrive at the restaurant, and when they leave, should be taken into account and included as part of the total restaurant experience (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008).

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Although it is difficult to define exactly where the restaurant experience actually starts, and indeed ends, it is usually assumed that the main part of the experience begins when customers enter a restaurant and ends when they leave (Liu & Yang, 2009). Consequently, all events and activities before and after dining can generate total experience for customers (Jin, Lee & Huffman, 2010). Thus, the experience includes much more than simply eating (Kotschevar & Withrow, 2008).

The restaurant experience results from a confluence of several attributes (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 1999a). Knowing that one attribute is more important than another explains little of how purchase and repeat-purchase decisions are made, because these attributes interact (Dube, Renaghan & Miller, 1994). These attributes collectively give the restaurant its particular identity and character which directly or indirectly intervene in the act of dining and post-purchase behaviour (Kivela *et al.*, 1999a). Nonetheless, one must keep in mind that these attributes are so interdependent and intertwined that restaurants do not normally have the luxury of dealing with them one at a time in their quest to satisfy their customers (Kasapila, 2006).

However, despite the increasing popularity of eating out (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006) formal full-service restaurants in South Africa have shown a negative growth rate, with statistics showing a decline of 5.3% in total income in 2012 compared to 2011, as customers tighten their purse strings (Datamonitor, 2013). Researchers such as Soriano (2002), Chi and Gursoy (2009) identify restaurateurs' inability to determine the influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences as one of the main reasons for low customer turnout. Despite lowering their prices and spending marketing funds on promotions, restaurants seem to be finding great difficulty in meeting customers' experiences (Rosslee, 2009) as customers seek more for their money when spending at restaurants (Oh & Jeong, 2000; Thornton, 2009). Given the demands of formal full-service restaurant customers, research within this context was necessary.

In spite of the growing international interest on the influence of demographic variables on customer behaviour in restaurants, limited research has been completed on this topic in South Africa. International studies on the influence of demographic variables on customer experiences in restaurants might not be applicable to the South African restaurant subsector, since researchers (Lim, Bennett & Dagger, 2008; Haddad, Al-Dmour & Al-Zu'bi, 2012) emphasise that demographic variables and customer experiences should be interpreted in the light of their cultural context and should not be generalised to other cultures.

In plight of the above research gaps, a study to determine the influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences in formal full-service restaurants has been conducted. In order to achieve this goal, the article arrangement is thus: the introduction is followed by a review of the related literature and research objectives, after which an explanation of the research methodology is presented, followed by a discussion of the results. Finally, conclusions are presented discussing recommendations, limitations and implications for future research.

Demographic variables and restaurant experiences: A literature review

Demographic variables play a decisive role in influencing customers' dining experience, such as the way customers evaluate a food item for quality, the friendliness and politeness of staff and the attractiveness of interior décor (Geissler & Rucks, 2011). They provide a powerful determinant of consumer behaviour which affects the meal experience in a restaurant (Chung & Kim, 2011). In restaurant literature, demographic variables are one of the major factors determining consumer experiences and subsequent behaviours (Tinne, 2012). Consequently, demographic variables significantly determine the level of restaurant experiences (Gareth, 2011).

Restaurateurs tend to emphasise the influence of food on restaurant experiences (Mhlanga, Hattingh & Moolman, 2013). Besides food, the restaurant experience also tends to be influenced by demographic variables (Shaw, 2012). Though important, food is only a part of the total dining experience (Gareth, 2011). Therefore, the restaurant experience is not only influenced by food but by demographic variables such as age, income, educational level, marital status, ethnicity and gender (Lee, 2011).

However, researchers have been reporting contradictory findings on the influence of demographic variables on restaurant experiences (Tinne, 2012). For example, Lee (2011) studied the influence of demographic variables on restaurant experiences. He argues that experiences of customers are influenced by their age groups and income levels. He found ambience factor as an important determining choice variable for 25-34 year olds. Ozimek and Zakowska-Biemans (2011) opine that this might be because 25-34 year age groups tend to look for ambience type restaurants because they provide a more suitable social environment for them.

Rahman (2012) concurs that experiences of customers for food are influenced by their age groups. Rahman (2012) avers that older restaurant customers are more concerned about their health and the quality of food is identified as important. Kaura (2011) found that food quality does not stand out as the most important reason for young restaurant customers; however, customers over 60 years of age indicate food quality as the most important attribute determining their experience. Therefore, customers with different demographic characteristics tend to have different restaurant experiences (Rahman, 2012).

However, a better understanding of the dining attributes affecting the restaurant experience will provide important practical implications for formal full-service restaurant operators (Liu & Jang, 2009). For the purpose of this study, these attributes will be discussed under food, service and ambience since they all contribute to overall satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the restaurant experience (Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

Food

Food is the tangible or touchable component of the restaurant experience (Payne-Palacio & Theis, 2005) and is the central function of the meal (Andersson & Mossberg, 2005; Soriano 2002; Sulek & Hensley, 2004). Hyun (2010) reaffirms that in the restaurant industry, food is the most critical factor influencing customers' behaviour. As the core product of a restaurant, food plays a pivotal role in the restaurant experience (Liu & Jang, 2009). Thus, if this attribute is not well prepared, the product cannot perform its basic function (Jaafar, Lumbers & Eves, 2010). This can be summarised by a classic phrase "get the food right if you want to see us again" (Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

However, there is no consensus about the individual attributes that constitute food quality, as customers evaluate multiple attributes when judging the quality of food (Sulek & Hensley, 2004) whilst many researchers focus on presentation, healthy meal options, taste, freshness and temperature (Namkung & Jang, 2008). In this study, food was measured based on four dimensions spelled out by Spears and Gregoire (2004). These dimensions include the presentation and sensory characteristics of the food and beverages, the variety of menu items and value for money.

Service

The term service is defined differently in literature on service quality. Du Plessis and Rousseau (2003) define service as separately identifiable and essentially intangible activities which provide want-satisfaction and which are not necessarily tied to the sale of a product or another service. The American Marketing Association in Du Plessis and Rousseau (2003) defines service as activities, benefits or satisfactions which are offered for sale or are provided in connection with the sale of goods. However, in a restaurant context, Payne-Palacio and Theis (2005) define service as the intangible (untouchable or inconsumable) aspect of the dining out experience. A cursory glance at these and other definitions reveals that the nature of service centres on the characteristics of intangibility and that it is this feature which predominantly distinguishes services from goods (Du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003).

As much as the definitions of service attempt to distinguish services from goods, one must remember that goods (food and beverages) and services are inseparable in the restaurant industry. To illustrate this point, a hamburger cannot be presented to a customer without the component of service – the preparation, cooking and delivery of the hamburger to the customer. This prompts Powers and Barrows (2003) to suggest that service is particularly a pivotal or fundamental element in the restaurant sector, bearing in mind that dining in restaurants is predominantly a social event. To elaborate on the importance of service, Kharasch (1999) explains that great service can make up for a bad meal and can take a great meal and make it an experience so incredible that customers cannot wait to come back.

Ambience

Ambient conditions refer to the intangible background characteristics of the environment, such as lighting, temperature, music and scent (Liu & Jang, 2009). To gain a competitive advantage in today's market, restaurants have to offer meals that offer good value in a favourable ambience (Soriano, 2002). Research has shown that a satisfying ambience attracts customers' willingness to stay in the restaurant as long as possible and that the longer they stay in the restaurant, the more money they are likely to spend (Yuksel & Yuksel, 2002a). Formal full-service restaurants strive towards creating a relaxing and enjoyable ambience for customers.

Ambience partly aims at pleasing customers enough to make them want to return to the establishment repeatedly. As such, it is important to remember that different customers will perceive the ambience of a particular restaurant different based on their expectations, purposes and moods. A restaurant's ambience should, therefore, be interestingly designed to match the characteristics of its clientele. Thus, common personality characteristics may cause certain groups of customers to respond to the restaurant ambience in a similar way (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2001).

The primary objective of this study was to determine the influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences in formal full-service restaurants. In order to achieve the primary objective and in light of the preceding discussion the following secondary objectives were formulated:

To determine the experiences of respondents with different demographic variables in formal full-service restaurants in Port Elizabeth.

To determine the significant differences in the means calculated for experiences of respondents with different demographic variables in formal full-service restaurants in Port Elizabeth.

Research methods

In accordance with the objectives of this study survey design was used. The survey was administered to customers in formal full-service restaurants. A formal full-service restaurant refers to an up market restaurant that offers table service with complete, varied menus and multiple entrees for each meal period which may include soups, salads and/or desserts (SSA, 2014). Most formal full-service restaurants provide customer seating with gastronomy, sophisticated service, elegant ambience and liquor service (Mhlanga *et al.*, 2013). Usually, these restaurants will not permit casual wear (Feinstein & Stefanelli, 2008). A list of local registered formal full-service restaurants was obtained from the Nelson Mandela metropolitan municipality and also from the Restaurant Directory of South Africa (2014). Only 10 formal full-service restaurants complied with the criteria, of which two were used for the pilot study. The remaining eight restaurants were included in the main study. These restaurants complied with the criteria set by Statistics South Africa (2014) for classification as a formal full-service restaurant.

A questionnaire was developed bearing in mind the research objectives of the study. The questionnaire consisted mainly of closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions were used mainly because data obtained from the administration of closed questions are easier to analyse since they guarantee uniform responses whilst open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to give their views and opinions about the dining experience (Creswell, Ebersohn, Eloff, Ferreira, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Pietersen, Clark & Van der Westhuizen, 2007).

The questionnaire was based on the DINESERV model (developed by Stevens, Knutson & Patton, 1995) which has been applied in previous restaurant research. The DINESERV model was deemed suitable since it is restaurant specific (Kivela *et al.*, 1999a ; O'Neil & Palmer, 2001; Sulek & Hensley, 2004) and also measures the essential components of the restaurant experience namely; the quality of food, service and ambience (Namkung & Jang, 2008) which were all used in this study. Restaurant customers were requested to rate their experience with the following dining attributes: food quality, service quality and ambience. These descriptors were selected since various scholars (Susskind, 2002; Soriano, 2002; Sulek & Hensley, 2004) identify these factors as the most essential components of the restaurant experience.

To be able to measure experiences, a 5-point Likert-type scale drawn from DeVellis (1991) was employed in the questionnaire to illustrate the degree of experiences. The scale ranged from "very low experiences – (1)", "low experiences – (2)", "indifferent – (3)", "high experiences – (4)", to "very high

experiences – (5)”. Several authors (MacLaurin & MacLaurin, 2000; Choi & Chu, 2001; Park, 2004) find a Likert-type scale to be a useful tool in measuring customer experiences in a restaurant.

The questionnaire items were phrased in English, not only because the majority of restaurant customers were expected to be quite conversant in English, but also because it is one of the main languages spoken in Port Elizabeth, South Africa apart from IsiXhosa and Afrikaans. Therefore, all respondents were able to respond in English. Struwig and Stead (2001) point out that a questionnaire should be phrased in the language that the respondents will easily understand and should be precise to maintain interest and to ensure reliability of the responses.

The research sample included in the study entailed relevant data that were collected from 400 customers of the eight selected formal full-service restaurants in Port Elizabeth. A sample of 400 was adequate (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010), since the total population of formal full-service restaurant customers in Port Elizabeth exceeds 5,000 customers. A descriptive quantitative study design (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006) was followed. Probability sampling was used since it is based on the principles of randomness and the probability theory, to accurately generalise to the population (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

In order to guarantee equal representation of each of the restaurants, proportional stratified random sampling was used to find the sample size for a particular restaurant taking into account the restaurant's seating capacity (Cooper & Schindler, 2003; Durbin, 2004). A proportional sample of 22.5% of the total seating capacity per restaurant enabled the researcher to obtain at least 400 completed questionnaires.

Systematic sampling, which is a probability sampling method, was then used to select respondents by systematically moving through the sample frame and selecting every *k*th element. This method is useful in situations where the population members arrive at a certain location over time (Maree, 2005). As such, respondents were selected by systematically targeting every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant until the sample size for a particular restaurant was reached.

A decision to target every fourth customer was made based in order to be discreet and avoid annoying other customers who were not participating in the survey, as advised by Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece (1999b). The restaurant manager from each participating restaurant was approached for permission to conduct the study. Data were collected in November and December 2012 during weekdays, weekends and across these two months during lunch and dinner as recommended by various researchers (Akinyele, 2010; Kivela *et al.*, 1999b; Sulek & Hensley, 2004). This is done to maximise chances of eliciting information from customers of different lifestyles, occupation, income, age and gender (Kivela *et al.*, 1999b).

The following procedures were used for collect data. The researcher systematically approached every fourth customer who walked into the restaurant after they were seated in the restaurant or as they were scanning/perusing the menu. The researcher explained the aim of the study to the customers and asked them to participate. It was emphasised that the researcher would treat the information provided as confidential and anonymous.

Customers who were willing to participate in the study received a questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were collected, checked and discussed with the respondents in case of any queries. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences which is a statistical analysis software programme (SPSS 22, 2013).

Results and discussion

Table 1 reflects the experiences of respondents with different demographic variables. The table also reflects the means and standard deviations for respondents with different demographic variables.

Table 1
Experiences of respondents by different demographic variables

Demographic variables	n	%	Experiences	
			Mean	SD
Gender				
Male	183	45.75	4.41	0.56
Female	217	54.25	4.33	0.69
Age				
≤24	10	2.50	4.33	0.63
25-34	27	6.75	4.26	0.76
35-44	63	15.75	4.37	0.62
45-54	201	50.25	4.41	0.57
55-64	86	21.50	4.53	0.51
≥65	13	3.25	4.17	0.44
Monthly income				
≤R6,000	59	14.75	4.01	0.64
R6,001-R11,999	221	55.25	4.19	0.63
≥R12,000	120	30.00	4.25	0.68
Education				
No schooling	10	2.50	4.28	0.62
Primary school	7	1.75	4.04	0.76
High school	93	23.25	4.39	0.45
Tertiary Diploma	171	42.75	4.21	0.53
Tertiary Degree	96	24.00	4.39	0.67
Other	23	5.75	4.45	0.51
Home language				
Afrikaans	27	6.75	4.08	0.65
English	221	55.25	4.26	0.66
IsiXhosa	121	30.25	3.84	0.72
IsiZulu	8	2.00	4.18	0.59
Other	23	5.75	3.91	0.49
All	400	100.00	4.24	0.61

**very low experiences – (1)”, “low experiences – (2)”, “indifferent – (3)”,
“high experiences – (4)”, to “very high experiences – (5)”.

In this study, of the 400 respondents, 45.75% (n=183) were male whilst 50.25% were in the age group 45 to 54 years (see Table 1). A total of 55.25% of the respondents used English as home language whilst 30.25% used IsiXhosa. Of the respondents, 42.75% had a tertiary diploma whilst 55.25% earned a monthly income in the R6 001 to R11 999 range.

Table 1 further depicts the variable mean scores and standard deviations for the demographic sample. An initial glance at the data reveals that respondents’ mean experience scores varied between 3.84 (customers who spoke IsiXhosa) and 4.53 (customers in the age group 55 to 64 years). Respondents in

the age group 55 to 64 years recorded the highest mean experience score (4.53) whilst those who spoke IsiXhosa recorded the lowest mean experience score (3.84). Respondents with a high school qualification and those with a tertiary degree reported the same mean experience score (4.39). The findings regarding respondents in the age group 55 to 64 years recording the highest mean experience score well syncs with the findings by Siegel (2002) who found that respondents in the age group 55 to 64 years recorded the highest experience score. Mehta and Maniam (2002) assert that tertiary educated people are much more likely to patronise restaurants than their less educated counterparts. Hence, 42.75% of the respondents had a tertiary diploma in this study (see Table 1). Consequently, determinants in restaurant selection vary across the level of education of the consumer (Spielberg, 2005).

Furthermore, the fact that half of the customers in this study fell in the age groups 45 to 54 years and 55 to 64 years, respectively means that they were born between 1959 and 1968 which is part of Generation X. In a study by Siegel (2002) most of the customers were part of Generation X and the author posits that this age group (Generation X) tends to be married couples. Generation X has a high propensity to dine out (Siegel 2002) and tend to prefer dining at full-service restaurants (Noble & Schewe, 2003). Consequently, Generation X tends to spend more money than younger and older adults when dining out leading to higher experiences (Siegel, 2002).

On the other hand, Generation Y, or those born after 1978, tends to eat more often at quick-service and pizza restaurants (Schewe & Noble, 2000; Noble & Schewe, 2003). The low number of customers (15.75%) in the 35 to 44 and 65 years and older category (3.25%) could possibly be explained by the “life cycle” model. The “life cycle” model postulates that 35 to 44 year-olds are likely to have a heavy financial burden rearing their school children; hence they have less disposable income for eating out (Kivela, Inbakaran & Reece, 2000).

Furthermore, retired people (aged 65 years and older) have lost their regular incomes and often find it necessary to budget their expenditure, resulting in fewer dining-out and return activities (Kivela *et al.*, 2000). Hence, it is not surprising that there were only 3.25% of the respondents who were over 65 years of age in this study. As such, together with common life experiences, an individual frame of mind and aims in life, customers from different age groups may express different intentions and behaviour according to their desires, favours and influencing factors (Schewe & Noble, 2000).

Consequently, because of its importance to various restaurant attributes such as food, service and ambience, age is a frequently used variable in marketing research and is commonly included in questionnaires concerning restaurant selection or satisfaction (Harrington, Ottenbacher & Way, 2010). Hence, its significance to customers’ experiences cannot be overemphasised (Zheng, 2010).

In order to determine whether the differences in demographic variables were significant in food and beverage choice, service, ambience levels and overall experiences in formal full-service restaurants, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for gender and t-tests for age, monthly income, education and home language were calculated. Table 2 reflects the t-tests and one-way ANOVA performed to determine whether there were any significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in food and beverage, service, ambience levels and overall experiences reported by the different demographic categories.

Table 2

The significance of the difference in the means of different demographic groups

Demographic variables	Experiences						Overall experiences
	Food and beverage		Service		Ambience		
	Mean	p-values	Mean	p-values	Mean	p-values	
Gender	4.37	0.1271	4.49	0.0292*	4.31	0.1836	0.5164
Age	4.35	0.0120*	4.47	0.0441*	4.29	0.2150	0.0123
Monthly income	4.15	0.0288*	4.27	0.0374*	4.09	0.3210	0.0324*
Education	4.26	0.0310*	4.37	0.0101*	4.19	0.2499	0.0406*
Home language	4.05	0.1946	4.17	0.5536	4.01	0.4837	0.5772

*Indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

Gender

It is clear from Table 2 that customers of different genders rated experiences ($p=0.0292$) of service significantly differently ($p < 0.05$). The results vindicate the findings of Mohsin (2005) and Kotler and Keller (2006) who found that customers of different genders rated their experiences of service significantly differently ($p < 0.05$). The reason for the significant differences might be attributed to the fact that some personality specialties combined with masculinity and femininity account for the diversification among the behaviour of male and female customers (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2001).

Kivela *et al.* (2000) also found a significant difference in experiences of the level of service calculated for customers of different genders in Hong Kong in which females were more cautious about spending money on dining out. Females were the keepers of the family's expenditure and were consequently conditioned to be prudent with their money when dining out hence they were more concerned with budgeting and frugality which tend to affect their experiences of the level of service (Kotler & Keller, 2006). As such, customers' experiences of the level of service vary according to gender (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

However, there were no significant differences in the mean experiences of food and beverage ($p=0.1271$), ambience ($p=0.1836$) and overall experiences ($p=0.5164$) calculated for customers of different genders. The results tone with the findings of Kivela *et al.* (2000), Soriano (2002) and Upadhyay, Singh and Thomas (2007), who found no significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in the mean experiences of food and beverage, ambience and overall experiences calculated for customers of different genders.

Age

Table 2 further shows that customers from different age groups rated their experiences of food and beverage ($p=0.0120$), service ($p=0.0441$) and overall experiences ($p=0.0123$) significantly differently ($p < 0.05$). The results are similar to the studies by several authors (Auty, 1992; Kivela 1997; Meredith, Schewe & Karlovich, 2002; Folkman & Bellenger, 2003; Mohsin, 2005) who found significant differences in the mean experiences of food and beverage and service ($p < 0.05$) calculated for customers from different age groups.

The significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in the mean experiences of food and beverage and service calculated for customers from different age groups may be attributed to the fact that customers in the 45 to 54 age group (Generation X) tend to have more disposable income than other age groups and therefore tend to have higher expectations (Meredith *et al.*, 2002; Folkman & Bellenger, 2003; Mohsin, 2005). As these customers spend more money they tend to expect more value for money leading to a significant difference in the means for food and beverage, level of service and overall experience (Kivela, 1997; Meredith *et al.*, 2002; Folkman & Bellenger, 2003; Mohsin, 2005). Consequently, determinants in food and beverage, service, overall experiences vary across age groups (Siegel, 2002).

Monthly income

Customers from different monthly income groups rated their experiences of food and beverage ($p = 0.0288$), service ($p = 0.0374$) and overall experiences ($p = 0.0324$) significantly different ($p < 0.05$). The results are in line with previous studies that found experiences of food and beverage, service and overall experiences to vary according to income (Auty, 1992; Yüksel & Yüksel, 2002b). Turgeon and Pastinelli (2002) also noted that customers from different monthly income groups rated their overall experiences significantly different in formal full-service restaurants.

In their study on formal full-service restaurants, Liu and Jang (2009) and Bowie and Buttle (2006) found a significant difference in overall experiences of customers from different monthly income groups. Customers with high levels of income tend to expect high levels of quality, comfort, prestige and personalised service, hence there tends to be a significant difference in overall experiences of customers from different monthly income groups (Liu & Jang, 2009).

Kivela *et al.* (1999b) assert that high income groups are more inclined to dine out because of quality, comfort, prestige and personalised service perceived in full-service restaurants. High income groups have more disposable income and, presumably, some of the greater disposable income is spent on pleasure-seeking activities such as fine dining restaurants (Liu & Jang, 2009). Consequently, determinants in customers' experiences of food and beverage, service and overall experiences vary across income levels (Kivela *et al.*, 1999b).

Education

Table 2 further shows that customers with different levels of education rated their experiences of food and beverage ($p = 0.0310$), level of service ($p = 0.0101$) and overall experiences ($p = 0.0406$) significantly different ($p < 0.05$). The results are in line with studies by Zheng (2010) and Bowie and Buttle (2006) who found significant differences in experiences of food and beverage, service and overall experiences of customers with different levels of education.

Spielberg (2005) posits that education influences people's experiences and shapes their values, beliefs, attitudes, interests, activities and lifestyle. As customers get more educated they develop analytical and intellectual competencies and learn a wide range of transferable skills, and they study restaurant etiquette and concepts in greater detail (Bowie & Buttle, 2006).

The preceding points show that as people's level of education increases so do their experiences of food and beverage and level of restaurant service (Turgeon & Pastinelli, 2002). Consequently, determinants

in customers' experiences of food and beverage, service, overall experiences vary according to customers' level of education (Spielberg, 2005).

Language

It is clear from Table 2 that there were no significant differences in the means ($p < 0.05$) calculated for customers who made use of different languages. The results are similar to the studies by Bowie and Buttle (2006) and Spielberg (2005) who assert that home language has no significant influence on customers' experiences. As such, customers' experiences do not vary with customers' home language (Spielberg, 2005).

Table 3 provides a summary of the influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences.

Table 3
Influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences

Demographic variables	Significant differences in means			
	Experiences			Overall experiences
	Food and beverage	Service	Ambi-ence	
Gender	√	√	X	X
Age	√	√	X	X
Monthly income	√	√	X	√
Education	√	√	X	√
Home language	X	X	X	X

√ Indicates a significant difference.

X Indicates a non-significant difference.

It is evident from Table 3 that the experiences of customers for food and beverages and service were influenced by their gender, age, monthly income and level of education. However, these demographic variables did not have an influence on the ambience experiences of customers. The only demographic variable that did not influence customers' experiences was home language. None of the demographic variables had an influence on the ambience experiences of customers.

Conclusions

This article offers the South African restaurant subsector increased insight into the influence of demographic variables on customers' experiences in formal full-service restaurants. It provides a clear understanding that customer experiences for food and beverages and service are influenced by their gender, age, monthly income and level of education. Therefore, restaurateurs must not only measure customer experiences, but also the influence of customer's gender, age, monthly income and level of education on customers' experiences because these demographic variables play a substantial role in predicting customers' behaviour as well.

To improve restaurant experience, restaurant managers can find directions from the research for the improvement of their service quality and strategic plan of marketing. Due to restaurant density in the Port Elizabeth, formal full-service restaurateurs should therefore focus on customers' gender, age, monthly income and level of education in order to gain and sustain a competitive advantage over other restaurant categories and improve customer experience.

The significant differences in the means calculated for experiences of respondents with different demographic variables enables restaurateurs to identify areas of improvement. It also informs restaurateurs not to underestimate the influence of customer's gender, age, monthly income and level of education on customers' experiences in order to gain and sustain a competitive advantage over other restaurants.

Based on the results presented above, since customers' experiences of the level of service vary according to gender some scholars (Homburg & Giering, 2001; Shaw, 2012) argue that men and women tend to have different attitudinal and behavioural orientations in their buying behaviour. Consequently, restaurants could segment their level of service on the basis of customers' gender and metro sexuality by using gender segmentation, differentiation and positioning strategies to target a specific gender.

Furthermore, since customers from different age groups rated their experiences of food and beverage, experiences of service and overall experiences significantly different (see Table 2) participating restaurants may find it useful to tailor their offerings based on the age groups of customers. Restaurant managers could therefore use different market segmentation strategies for different age groups. When a restaurant targets a specific group of customers differently it is likely to exceed their expectations and ensure customer satisfaction in an accumulating manner (Shaw, 2012).

In the same vein of thought, since customers in the 55 to 64 age group had higher experiences than customers in other age groups (see Table 1) the researchers recommend that restaurant managers consider attracting more customers in the 55 to 64 age group since they are easier to satisfy compared to other age groups. From the preceding points, restaurateurs can treat this age group as one market segment and develop a unified market strategy to attract more customers of this age group.

In another vein, since customers who spent more than R399 had higher experiences than customers who spent less than R399, restaurants could carefully consider their pricing structures. The researchers recommend that restaurant managers consider attracting more customers who spend more than R399 since they are easier to satisfy compared to customers who spend less than R399. Restaurants could implement a "premium pricing" strategy by targeting high income customers and having high-priced menu items that are related to the value expectation of customers. Sulek and Hensley (2004) posit that customers already expect formal full-service restaurants to have high-priced menu items.

In a "premium pricing" strategy a high price is used as a defining criterion (Burke & Resnick, 2001). Such pricing strategies work in segments and industries where a strong competitive advantage exists for the company, for example upmarket restaurants. By implementing a "premium pricing" strategy restaurants will concentrate on value/quality and not volume/quantity of customers (Jordaan, 2012). Therefore, restaurants could charge high prices while offering varied menus and multiple entrees with unique gastronomy, sophisticated service and elegant ambience to distinguish formal full-service restaurants from other restaurant categories, while meeting/exceeding customers' experiences.

To further increase the restaurant experience of customers, restaurateurs could introduce an up-selling concept to customers who spend more than R399 whereby more expensive items are offered than the ones the customer originally ordered to boost restaurant profits. This will ensure that customers spend more than R399 and hence increase their restaurant experience since the study showed that customers who spent more than R399 had higher restaurant experiences.

To attract customers who spend less than R399 the researchers recommend restaurateurs to implement a down-selling concept. Down-selling is a concept of offering customers low-end products in a restaurant so that such customers are kept in formal full-service restaurants instead of going to budget restaurants (Kimes & Wirtz, 2003). With time, these customers may upgrade or expand their average amount spent to become a more valuable and lucrative customer (Noone, Kimes, Mattila & Wirtz, 2007).

The researchers recommend that restaurants introduce revenue management strategies such as early bird specials to influence demand. The goal of revenue management is to maximise revenue by means of variable pricing and duration controls (Noone *et al.*, 2007). Revenue management is the application of information systems and pricing strategies to allocate the right capacity to the right diner at the right price at the right time (Kimes & Wirtz, 2003). The determination of “right” entails achieving both the most contribution possible for the restaurant, while also delivering the greatest value or utility to the customer (Burke & Resnick, 2001).

Therefore, restaurants could set prices according to predicted demand levels so that price-sensitive customers who are willing to purchase at off-peak times can do so at favourable prices, whereas price-insensitive customers who want to consume at peak times will be able to do so (Kimes & Wirtz, 2003). The use of demand-based pricing implies that higher prices should be charged during high-demand periods (Burke & Resnick, 2001). Based on this principle, restaurants could charge more for weekend customers (when there is typically higher demand) than for weekday customers.

Although the researchers took effort to enhance the trustworthiness and the validity and reliability of the research processes, as with any study, there remained certain limitations. Firstly, obtaining permission from the restaurants was time consuming and some customers refused to participate in this study. The viewpoints of customers who refused to participate in the study are lacking. Secondly, the sample was drawn from formal full-service restaurants only probably at the expense of customers from other restaurant categories. Consequently, the findings of this study represent only the influence of demographic variables on customers’ experiences in formal full-service restaurants. Caution is therefore required when generalising the findings of this study to other segments of the restaurant industry in other geographic areas, since a replication of this study in other types of restaurants or other geographic areas might reveal different results. Thirdly, a study investigating the influence of socio-demographic variables is not able to provide a rationale for differences across socio-demographic characteristics. Lastly, the influence of demographic variables on customers’ experiences can only be estimated through indicators and cannot be measured as clearly and precisely as profits (Vilares & Coelho, 2003).

The research could be expanded to formal full-service restaurants situated in other cities of South Africa and the findings could be compared with the current research to determine whether the influence of demographic variables on customers’ experiences in restaurants are similar no matter their location in South Africa. Triangulation requirements could be considered by applying multiple methods (for

example, individual interviews and focus group discussions) and multiple data and data sources (for example, data obtained from mystery customers, waiters and restaurant management) in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011).

Furthermore, future research in restaurants could attempt to increase participation of male customers. In this study, females were more willing to participate than males. To improve the response rate in future studies, incentives could be offered to respondents and restaurants. Future research could focus on one aspect of the restaurant experience at a time not only to shorten the length of the questionnaire, but also to get maximum enthusiasm from the customers in completing the questionnaires and to yield more comprehensive insights. Substantial focus could be paid to the ambience and food quality as the contemporary studies in customer experiences have mainly explored service quality.

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