

**A CUSTOMER PERCEPTION AND SATISFACTION SURVEY FOR A
CHINESE BUFFET**

by

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ABSTRACT

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<p style="text-align: center;">A customer perception and satisfaction survey for a Chinese buffet</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Title)</p>			
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This research aims to better understand customer need, and enable the “All-You-Can-Eat Chinese Buffet” operators to respond to customer’s desires. The research objectives were:

1. To determine a demographic profile of the selected Chinese buffet customers in the city in western Wisconsin.
2. To identify perceptions among customers toward the selected Chinese buffet.
3. To determine factors that influence repeat customers.

The data for this research was collected through the use of a questionnaire which was conducted between January 20, 2003 and January 25, 2003. The sample size of 150

was set for the survey. Data was entered and analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), with the exception of open-ended question. Basic descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviations) and frequency distribution were computed for each variable. In this research, t-test analysis and F-ratio were also employed by the author.

The outcome of the study revealed significant factors regarding the demographic nature of the target market as well as their perceived perceptions toward the selected Chinese buffet. The results of the study also showed that three factors, “Price/Value” (110 respondents, 24.9%), “Quality of food” (98 respondents, 22.2%), and “Variety of food selection” (78 respondents, 17.7%) were significantly related to the customer’s intention of coming back again.

The study itself functions as a valuable managerial and operation development tool, affording operators the opportunity to improve their competitiveness and service quality.

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Wei-Chia B.Tung

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Lifestyle Trends

The structure and dynamics of households and families in the United States have significantly changed during the past two decades. These changes ultimately affect overall restaurant behavior related to the following factors: 1) The number of households made up of singles and unrelated roommates grew nearly three times faster than family households between 1980 and 1990. The upsurge in singles should prove to be good news for the restaurant industry, since singles dine out more frequently and spend more per person on food away from home than most other household types. 2) Census data from 1990 indicate that nearly five million adults between the ages of 25 and 34 lived with their parents. These adults would be likely to have lower expenditure. More available disposable income often translates into greater spending on restaurant dining. 3) Married couples without children spent the most annually per person on food away from home. 4) A trend developing steadily over the past 10 years that is expected to continue is an increase in single-parent households. 5) Greater emphasis on leisure time (NRA, 1992).

Restaurant Business Today

“Phyllis Richman, Washington Post food critic, says, restaurant are one of the

primary ways we fill our bodies, occupy our social lives, spend our money, learn about the world and conduct our business” (Walker & Lundberg, 2001, p. 4). According to the National Restaurant Association, there are over 858,000 restaurant locations in the United States, with sales projected to reach \$408 billion in 2000. The restaurant industry remains a very competitive environment, and it is this relentless competition which keeps the industry creative, flexible, and responsive. George (2001) stated that:

As the competition increases in terms of diversity and number of establishments, customers have more options from which to choose. It becomes increasingly important that restaurants become more aware of these change in customer attitudes and behavior, not only to gain new customers, but also to retain their present customers. (p. 68)

Ethnic Cuisine

The immense popularity of dining out for the American consumer continues to grow (Vlisides, Chiang, & Pan, 2000). Increased discretionary income, smaller families, and changing lifestyles are commonly cited for America’s increased demand for food service (Dittmer & Griffin, 1997). The increased ethnic population not only leads the United States toward a new multiculturalism age, but also has had a positive impact on the restaurant industry. It has become a new trend to dine out and to eat a variety of foods,

combining American and ethnic food in the United States (Tian, 2001).

The operation of the restaurant industry is not in a vacuum. Industry trends are a direct reflection of changes in the society in which the business operates (Mill, 1998). An ethnic food service operation is one that specializes in foods associated with a particular culture. Driven by consumers who are eager for new experiences and by new immigrants to the United States, the market for ethnic restaurants and cuisines grew a great deal in the 1990s. According to the National Restaurant Association's latest consumer study, Ethnic Cuisines II (2000), the market for ethnic food has grown to such an extent that Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisines are the best known and most popular. The diverse nature of the food service industry reflects the lifestyle and changing needs of society (Brymer, 2002). Some components of culture, such as food consumption habits, patterns, and so on make an important contribution to the food decisions consumers make and therefore play an important role in the study of customer behavior (Tian, 2001).

Customer

With today's financial pressures, loyal and satisfied customers are essential to the success of a restaurant business. Operations have to recognize and understand the needs of the customers in order to survive (Almanza, Jaffe, & Lin, 1994). Customers face a vast array of product and brand choices, prices, and suppliers today. In making product and

service decisions, a very complex decision-making process takes place (Berkman, Lindquist, & Sirgy, 1996). According to Reid (1983), there are two major components of the food service decision-making process: 1) extrinsic influence includes culture, socioeconomic, reference group, and household, and 2) intrinsic influence covers needs, experience, personality and self-image, and perceptions and attitudes. Within the bounds of search costs and limited knowledge, mobility, and income, they form an expectation of value and act on it. Whether or not the offer lives up to the value expectation affects both satisfaction and repurchase probability because customers are values-maximizers (Kotler, 2001).

Need for the Study

As lifestyles change and dining out increases, people begin to have more experiences in dining. There are two consequences of this: 1) customers have different feelings about restaurants, and 2) customers develop higher expectations for their dining experience (George, 2001). It is crucial for operators to acquire knowledge of customer expectations and dining satisfaction. This research aims to better understand customer need, and enable the “All-You-Can-Eat Chinese Buffet” operators to respond to customer’s desires.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study is to identify the demographic profile of customers for an “All-You-Can-Eat” Chinese buffet in a city in western Wisconsin. In addition, to further identify consumers’ perceptions toward “All-You-Can-Eat” Chinese Buffet. Moreover, to identify the most important factors influence repeat customers. Data was collected through the use of a survey in January 2003.

Research Objectives

In conducting this research, the researcher had the follow objectives:

1. To determine a demographic profile of the selected Chinese buffet customers in the city in western Wisconsin.
2. To identify perceptions among customers toward the selected Chinese buffet.
3. To determine factors that influence repeat customers.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms have been defined to better understand literature and content of the study.

Buffet - Dittmer and Griffin (1997) stated the definition as follow:

A buffet is a type of service characterized by a long table or counter on which a selection of varied foods are attractively displayed on platters, in bowls, and in

other suitable vessels. Typically, each diner carries a plate, determines selections, places desired quantities of selected foods on the plate, then takes the plate to a table. A set price is usually charged for each person, regardless of particular foods or quantities selected, and diners are commonly permitted unlimited access to the buffet. This is to encourage diners to take smaller portions and revisit the buffet as desired. (p. 149)

NRA - National Restaurant Association.

Assumptions of This Study

Assumptions of this research were as follows:

1. It is assumed that all customers may honestly complete the questionnaires.
2. The result could be used by “Chinese All-You-Can-Eat Buffet” as a reference for future operating and marketing strategies.

Limitations of This Study

The following are the limitations which have been identified with reference to this study:

1. A limitation to this study would be that the customers may complete the questionnaires as they think the researcher wants them to answer.
2. The questionnaires were administered to customers in a selected

“All-You-Can-Eat Chinese Buffet”. The result of the study might only be generated to those who dine in the restaurant.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

In the chapter, foodservice trends, and several topics in regards to conduct customer behavior analysis for this study were reviewed as follows:

Food

Food has had special meaning and significance for human beings throughout history. Foods meet physiological needs for human beings in order to survive. Defined by Chesser:

Foods are primarily a combination of protein, carbohydrates and lipids. The failure to supply the body with sufficient quantities of food or types of food can result in disease and death. The need for food in human development is not restricted to survival. The role of food in religions around the world indicates its importance as a factor in cultural development (cited in Jafari, 2000, p. 232).

Foodservice Industry

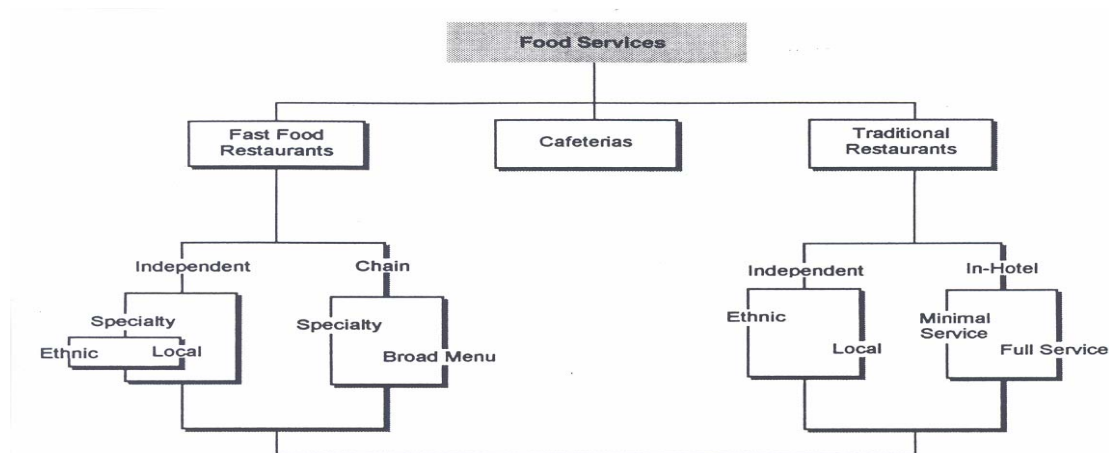
Foodservice can be defined as providing fully prepared foods for immediate consumption on or off premises. The foodservice industry is perhaps the most competitive industry in the American economy, and the enterprises range from full-service restaurants to self-service buffets, from fine restaurants to takeout operations,

and from company cafeterias to hamburger stands. The foodservice operation may be commercial or non-commercial that provides food and beverage in business, pleasure, and institutional settings (Dittmer & Griffin, 1997). With close to 850,000 different locations, foodservice is the most diverse and expansive sector within the hospitality industry (Brymer, 2002). See Figure 1 for the structure of the foodservice industry.

According to the National Restaurant Association (NRA), the foodservice industry sales are responsible for approximately four percent of the gross domestic product of the United States economy (Angelo & Vladimir, 2001).

Figure 1:

Foodservice Structure



Source: *Tourism: Principles, practices, philosophies* (8th Edition). (2000). p. 179

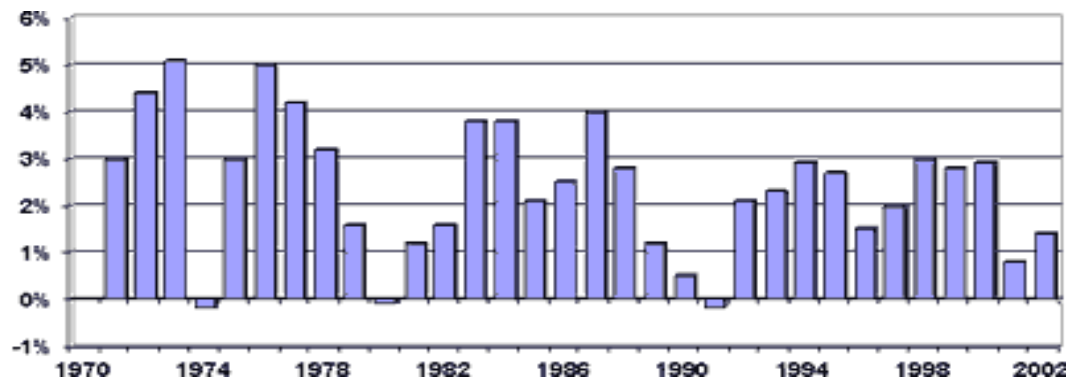
Foodservice is the largest single segment in the hospitality industry, employing over ten million people and serving approximately 54 billion meals in the United States each

year (Brymer, 2002). According to the forecast by the National Restaurant Association (2002), foodservice sales will be \$407.8 billion and the industry will employ 11.6 million people in 2002, making it the nation's largest private sector employer. The industry provides work for almost nine percent of those employed in the United States and is a ladder to management opportunities. By 2010, restaurant industry employment will reach 13 million. The National Restaurant Association (2002, n. p.) also mentioned that:

The 1.4 percent real gain for 2002 in restaurant-industry sales is higher than the 0.8 percent real advance posted in the recessionary environment of 2001, reflected anticipated improvements in the nation's economy (Figure 2). Dining out will remain an essential and important component of contemporary lifestyles that consumers are less willing to sacrifice now than in prior periods of economic slowdown.

Figure 2:

Restaurant Industry Real Sales Growth, 1971 - 2002



Source: National Restaurant Association. (2002). n. p.

Several reasons are commonly cited for America's increased demand for foodservice:

1) Increased discretionary income: The average American has more discretionary income than ever before. They have more money to spend as they choose, and growing numbers are spending a substantial amount of it in food service establishments, 2) Smaller families: The decrease in the size of the family is another reason result in Americans patronize foodservice operations more frequently. More women are in the workforce and choosing to postpone having children. In two-earner households, dining out has become an acceptable alternative to preparing the meal at home. Also, it is probably easier and certainly more affordable to go out to dinner with a small family than with a large one, and 3) Changing Lifestyles: The daily routines of families are considerably different from before. American consumers continue to have an appetite for portable foods that suit their busy, mobile lifestyles. At the same time, each individual in today's family has a greater degree of independence than in the past. Each makes more personal decisions about his / her life than before (Dittmer & Griffin, 1997).

Restaurant Industry in the United States

According to Jones, a restaurant can be defined as a property where refreshments and meals are served to customers. The restaurant industry includes many different types, depending on the market served (mass, family, up-scale and so on), concept or theme

(such as ethnic or dinner house), product range (type of menu and number of items), service style (quick service or full service), and price (cited in Jafari, 2000).

Restaurant food consumption is one of the most important food intake formats for Americans today. The average American eats out about four times a week. Dining out will remain an essential and important component of contemporary lifestyles that consumers are less willing to sacrifice now than in prior periods of economic slowdown (Tian, 2001). Food can be considered as a global language. Chesser mentioned food consumption from one region to another can broaden our dining experiences and provide a glimpse into various cultures (cited in Jafari, 2000). Eating out at a variety of restaurants, American and ethnic, has become a new trend in the United States and therefore makes it a popular cultural phenomenon (Tian, 2001).

Multiculturalism and Ethnic Cuisine

Tian (2001) stated that “The increased ethnic population not only makes the national population more diversified but also contributes to diversity of the national cultures and leads the United States in coming to a new multiculturalism age from its tradition of the melting-pot” (p. 113). Multiculturalism requires both ethnic groups and mainstream society to mutually respect and adapt their cultural values. It is suggested that the best way to understand cultures is to look at what types of foods people consume and how

they consume (Tian, 2001). Tian (2001) also mentioned that “In marketing implementation, the multiculturalism makes it increasingly necessary to understanding customer behavior through a cross-cultural perspective in the United States” (p. 113).

In the past decade, ethnic foods have become widely available and increasingly popular in United States. Chinese, Italian, and Mexican are the most popular ethnic cuisine in the restaurant industry. Those three cuisines have become so ingrained in American culture that they are no longer considered ethnic (NRA, 2000). Chinese cuisine has shown an incredible power to penetrate the United States foodservice market.

Chinese cuisine accounted for one-third of all the ethnic cuisine in the United States, and it has been estimated that there are over thirty thousand (30,000) Chinese restaurants in the United States (George, 2001). The increase of Chinese immigrants results in the formation of more and more Chinese restaurants. Since the United States Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the discriminatory national origin’s quota system, immigration to the United States has risen sharply (Au, Garey, Bermas, & Chan, 1998).

Tian (2001) mentioned that “According to the US Census, the total population of the nation has increased 10.34% from 248,791,000 in 1990 to 274,520,000 in 2000. It is suggested that one-third of the growth is coming from increased immigration and thus makes the general population more diversified ethnically than ever before” (p. 112). The

U.S. Bureau Census stated that Chinese immigrants are not only one of the largest immigrant groups in the United States, but also the largest detailed Asian group in the United States (2002, n. p.). Wherever they went, most Chinese settle in Chinatowns within major United States cities. There are a number of factors resulting in the formation and growth of Chinatowns. Au, Garey, Bermas, and Chan (1998) stated the formation of Chinatown:

These included a lack of marketable work skills, low proficiency in the English language, preference for occupational status associated with proprietorship, continued influx of poorly educated Chinese and, through kinship assistance, the integration of new Chinese immigrants into established Chinatown business. (p. 14)

Chinese immigrants who had a very limited knowledge of the English language and /or were afraid to compete in the American job market clustered in the restaurant business, since it required only minimal understanding of the English language. Chinese restaurants are the second most important economic activity for the Chinese (Au, Garey, Bermas, & Chan, 1998).

All You Can Eat Chinese Buffets

The immense popularity of eating out for the American consumer continues to grow. Variety of menu offerings, food quality, ambience, menu prices, and service are all of

prime concern to the dining public (Dittmer & Griffin, 1997).

The Chinese buffets are a specific cultural entity producing and servicing a needed product in a multi-cultural society. Their acceptance into the mainstream population is apparent because the majority of consumers eating in these establishments are not Asian. It is apparent that the American public enjoys the variety of Chinese food because of its flavor and presentation. They perceive that the value of product and the service is excellent (Vlisides, Chiang, & Pan, 2000).

The Chinese buffet offer the possibility of self indulgence, the customer does not need to plan on what to eat but knows there will be a good selection available. Customers enjoy the flexibility of food variety and quality. In other words, meat and vegetarians lovers can all find something appropriate on the buffet table. People have different religious beliefs can eat together without being offensive to one another. Various ethnic group can maintain their own identify by eating at a Chinese “All-You- Can-Eat” Buffet (Vlisides, Chiang, & Pan, 2000).

Vlisides, Chiang, and Pan (2000) also mentioned that:

Food is important not only for its nutritional value, but other value dimensions. Food is considered as an expression of friendship, symbolic of family traditions, related to prestige/ status and religious observance. The “All-You-Can-Eat” establishment

should keep in mind that all these variables affect the customer's decision to partake of not only the food and environment, but these additional factors. (p. 3)

Dining Decision

When customers make decisions concerning the purchase of goods and services, a very complex decision-making process takes place. Numerous variables influence this decision making process (Berkman, Lindquist, & Sirgy, 1996). Various internal and external factors combine to influence how customers choose where, when, how, and why to eat out. The NRA study divided all dinner decisions into five basic scenarios (Mill, 1998):

1. Fun time. This related to an upbeat mood and a sense of anticipation of fun; the decision tends to be made well in advance.
2. Nice meal out. The desire is to enjoy the satisfaction or enjoyment of eating out, being served, and getting good food, lots of it, at a reasonable price.
3. Craving. This refers to a desire for particular type of food; seeing or smelling this type of food can set off the craving.
4. Making sure that everyone is getting something to eat. This motivation comes from the hectic pace of everyday life, attempting to balance a variety of work and family schedules.

5. Easiest thing available. This is an impulse decision by someone who is tired and pushed for time. (p. 39)

Customer

Driven by customers who are eager for new experiences, the market for ethnic cuisines grew a great deal in 1990s. No matter how exotic or familiar the cuisine, today's consumer desires a good overall restaurant experience. Attentive service, friendly, flavorful food, and a good atmosphere are just as critical to the success of an ethnic restaurant as they are to any establishment (Mills, 2000).

Customers today have more expectations when they are dining outside the home. Customers are better educated, earn more money, and are more confident when dining outside the home (Reid, 1983). NRA's 1975 customer attitude survey indicated some of the reasons for dining outside the home:

(1) Nobody has to cook or clean up, (2) For a change of pace, (3) For a treat, (4) Good way to celebrate special occasions, (5) It's convenient, (6) Going out is a special occasion, (7) For food not usually available at home, (8) It's a good way to relax, and (9) The whole family enjoys themselves..... (Reid, 1983, p. 133).

Customer Behavior

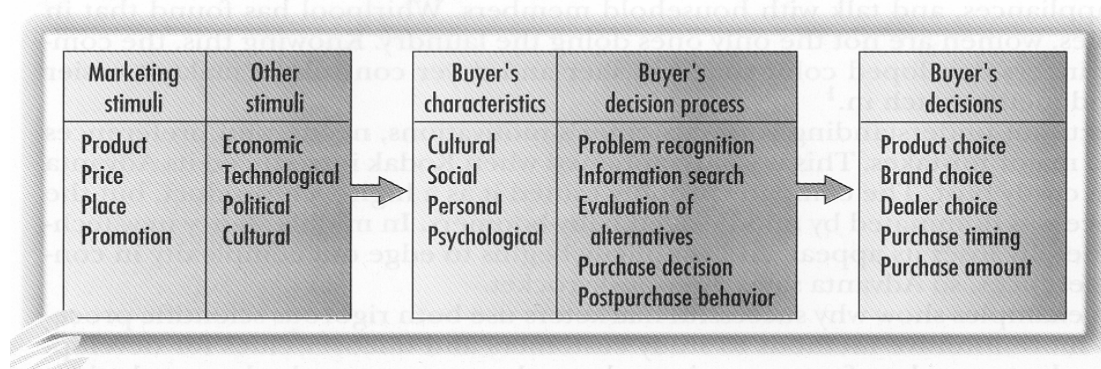
Chambers, Chacko, and Lewis have summarized the basic beliefs about customer

behavior into five premises: “Premise 1: Customer behavior is purposeful and goal oriented, Premise 2: The customer has free choice, Premise 3: Customer behavior is a process, Premise 4: Customer behavior can be influenced, and Premise 5: There is a need for customer education” (cited in Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999, p. 179).

Today’s market place has become very competitive. It is necessary for a company really to understand the relationship between marketing stimuli and consumer respond (Figure 3). The marketing stimuli consist of the four P’s. Other stimuli include major forces and events in the buyer’s environment. All theses stimuli enter the buyer’s black box, where they are turned into the set of observable buyer responds. Marketer must understand how the stimuli are changed into responses inside the customer’s black box (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999).

Figure 3

Model of Consumer Buyer Behavior



Source: *A framework for marketing management*. (2001). p. 88

Extrinsic Factors Influencing Customer Behavior

Culture is the most basic determinant of a person's wants and behavior. It comprises the basic values, perceptions, wants, and behaviors that a person learns continuously in a society. Each culture contains smaller subculture, groups of people with shared value systems based on common experiences and situation (Kotler, 2001).

Socioeconomic level is large influence in customer decision making. Marketers are interested in socioeconomic level because people within a given level tend to present the similar behavior, including buying behavior (Kotler, 2001).

Reference groups are another influence on customer behavior. These groups serve as a direct (face to face) or indirect influence on a person's attitude and behavior. Marketers try to identify the reference groups because they influence the person's behavior, attitude, self-concept, and they create pressures to conform that may affect the person's choices (Kotler, 2001).

Personal factors such as age and life-cycle stage, occupation, economic situation, lifestyle, and personality influence customers buying decisions. The types of goods and services people buy change during their lifetime. The makeup of the family also affects the buying behavior. A person's occupation and economic situation greatly affect the product choice and the decision to purchase a particular product. Lifestyles concept can

help marketer understand changing customer values and how they affect buying behavior.

Lastly, each person's personality affects his or her buying behavior. Personality refers to the distinguishing psychological characteristics that lead to relatively consistent and enduring responses to environment (Kotler, 2001). Whenever a choice among the food service operations is made, directly or indirectly, conscious or unconscious, all the extrinsic influences affect the decision making process of a customer (Reid, 1983).

Intrinsic Factors Influencing Customer Behavior

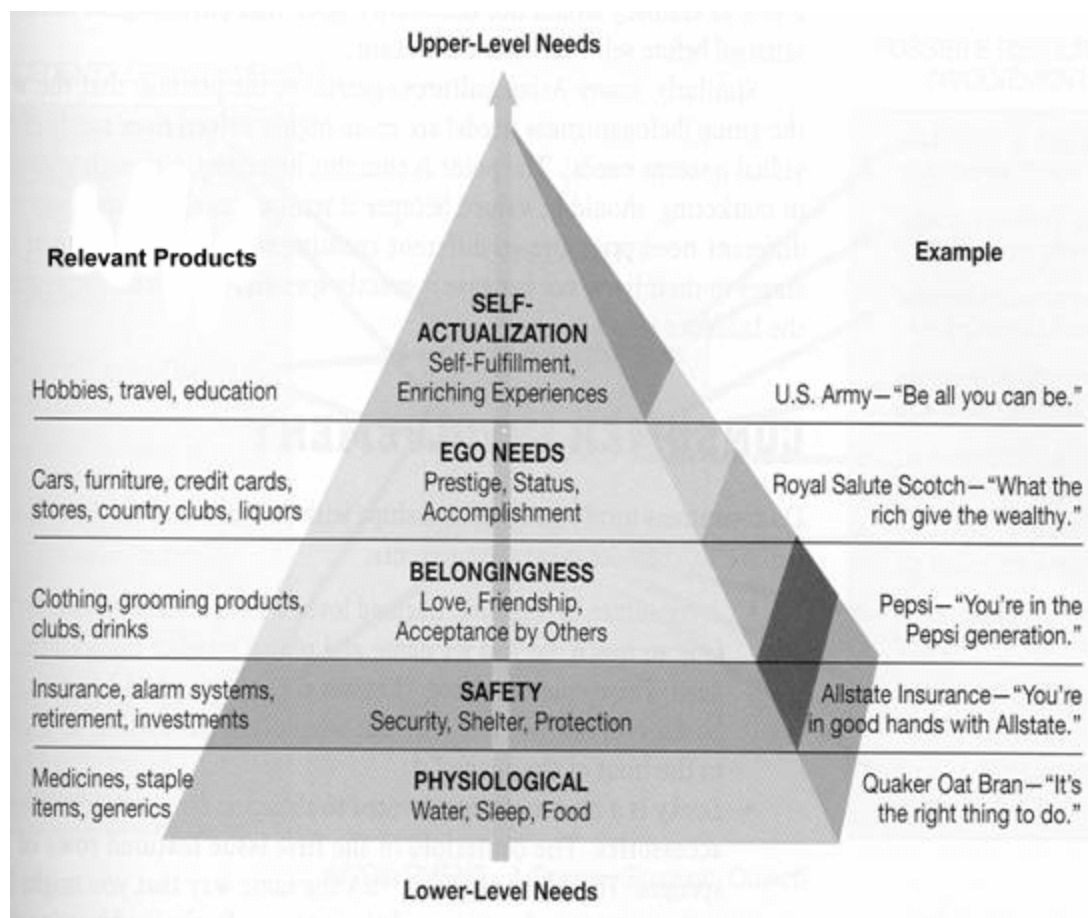
In general, customers' buying choices are influenced by the psychological factors of motivation, perception, learning, beliefs and attitudes (Kotler, 2001). It is important to understand the relevance of human needs to buyer behavior. When a need is aroused to a sufficient level of intensity, it becomes a motive. Once a need has been activated, a state of tension exists that drives the customer to attempt to reduce or eliminate the need.

Psychologists have developed theories of human motivation, one of which is Maslow's theory of motivation. Psychologist Abraham Maslow described motivation as a means of satisfying human needs. Maslow explained personal growth through the identification and satisfaction of a hierarchy of human needs, from the basics of food and shelter to sophisticated psychological desires (Figure 4). Once the lower-order needs (physiological needs and safety) are met, the tension is gone and the need is no longer felt. As a result

the individual moves up the hierarchy while attempting to satisfy unmet needs at a higher level (Solomon, 2002).

Figure 4

Levels of Needs in the Maslow Hierarchy



Source: *Consumer behavior: Buying, having, and being.* (2002). p. 109

A customer will try to satisfy the important need first; when that need is satisfied, the person will try to satisfy the next most pressing need. Table 1 suggests that people go to restaurants to satisfy not only the basic physiological needs but needs relating to the

prestige, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment (Lundberg & Walker, 1993). In other words, when marketing a foodservice operation, efforts should be made to aim promotional efforts at several levels of need (Reid, 1983).

Table 1

Restaurant Service, Price, and Menu Related to Needs

Luxury price; full menu	Four Seasons Le Cirque The Pump Room	Self-fulfillment
High price dinner houses	Charthouse	Esteem and status
Medium price family restaurants	Red Lobster Olive Garden	Belonging and social needs
Low price; limited service; fast food	Pizza Hut KFC Taco Bell McDonald's	Safety and security
Very low price service; vending	Any vending service	Basic physiological needs

Source: *The restaurant from concept to operation*. (1993). p. 245

Perception is defined as the process by which an individual selects, organizes, and interprets information inputs to create a meaningful picture of the world (Kotler, 2001). Each customer perceives the world differently, and perceptions are manifested as attitude. For instance, customers may perceive the Chinese food as flavorful when they consume. One's attitude may feel the foods delicious, while another person may view the foods

unhealthy. Their perceptions may or may not be valid, but it is important to remember that perceptions are the way an individual sees the world (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999).

Learning involves changes in individual's behavior that arise from experience.

When consumers experience a product, they will integrate their perceptions into an experience framework that influences their future decisions (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999). Through learning people acquire beliefs and attitudes which, in turn, affect buying behavior. A belief is a descriptive thought that a person holds about something. Beliefs make up product or brand images, and people act on their images. An attitude describes a person's relatively consistent evaluations, emotional feelings, and tendencies toward some object or idea. Attitudes cause people either to like or dislike an object, and move toward or away from it (Kotler, 2001).

The aim of marketing is to meet and satisfy target customers' needs and wants.

Understanding the customer behavior is never simple. The customer behavior is a complex interaction among various factors, yet understanding it is an essential task for marketing management.

Customer Expectations and Satisfaction

According to the NRA news release (2002, n. p.), Customers continue to hold value and service in high regard. Nearly all consumers report being value-conscious and

full-service restaurants will maintain value expectations to attract customers.

Additionally, competitive pricing is especially important during slower economic times when hard decisions must be made in terms of resource allocation. Customers rising expectations manifest themselves in a desire for a better price / value relationship.

Customer satisfaction is a result of what customers think will happen (expectations), interacting with what customer think did happen (perceptions). If the product's performance falls short of the customers' expectations, the buyer is dissatisfied. If performance matches expectations, the buyer is satisfied. If performance exceeds expectations, the buyer is delight. Smart food service operators aim to delight customer by delivering service and value more than they promise (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999).

Chinese buffets operators are facing increasingly sophisticated American Consumers, intense competition among themselves, and competition from other ethnic restaurant. A deeper understanding of the market segment, consumers' perceptions, and choice exceed intention will provide Chinese buffets operators with valuable information to meet or the target consumers' expectations (Qu, 1997).

Summary

The review of literature has shown that despite the recessionary environment of

2001 and the challenges to the nation and the restaurant industry since September 11, Americans are frequently dining out and continue to visit their favorite restaurants. This phenomenon has resulted in restaurant industry becoming a cornerstone of the nation's economy, rewarding careers, employment opportunities, and communities.

Since the last decade, the population in the United States has kept growing and become even more diversified. Driven by and by new immigrants to the United States and consumers who are eager for new experiences, the market for ethnic restaurants and cuisines grew a great deal in the 1990s.

An ethnic foodservice operation is one that specializes in foods associated with a particular culture. Variety of menu offering, ambience, sanitation, perceived value, and server attitudes are evident in the Chinese Buffet segment of the restaurant industry. All You Can Eat Chinese Buffets attract lots of the dining out customers. It is hoped that the study will reveal significant customers' concerns when they make the dining decision.

To meet and satisfy target consumers' needs and wants is essential task for marketing management. Understanding the numerous variables in customers' decisions making process will help the foodservice operators to better respond to customers' needs.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter presents the method and procedure utilized in this study, as follows: 1) sample selection, 2) survey instrument and pilot test, 3) data collection, 4) data analysis, and 5) limitations.

Subject Selection

The population in this study was patrons of a Chinese buffet in a city in western Wisconsin. The sample size of 150 was set for the survey. The researcher visited the specific Chinese buffet in a city in western Wisconsin and spoke to the owner, to present a proposal and obtain consent to administer the survey on January 17, 2003. The survey was conducted between January 20, 2003 and January 25, 2003.

Instrumentation and Pilot Test

To test the objectives of the study, a survey was used to collect data for the study. A self-administrated survey was used on a sample of Chinese buffet consumers in a city in western Wisconsin. The survey was comprised of three sections:

1. The first section included general information such as gender, age, education level, and motivation for dining out (six multiple choice questions).

2. The second section was titled “Perceptions toward Chinese buffet”. This part was designed to understand participants’ perceptions toward the specific Chinese buffet. There were twenty-two Likert-scale questions and one open-ended question for participants to identify their perceptions toward the Chinese buffet.

3. The third part generally identified the important consumer concerns at the specific Chinese buffet and whether they will return to dine at the same establishment (ten multiple choice questions).

To increase the reliability and validity of this study, a pilot test was conducted with five patrons at a restaurant on Saturday, January 18, 2003. In addition, a professor from the hospitality and tourism department was asked to review the survey design and content.

Data Collection

Survey was distributed between Monday January 20, 2003 and Saturday January 25, 2003. Time schedule was listed as table one in the following page. To not affect the business of the restaurant, the researcher placed several surveys and pencils inside a container on every dining table. A participation consent form was attached to each survey to explain the purpose of the study, that their participation in this research was voluntary and anonymous, and that there was no risk and harm to completing a survey. To increase

the return rate of the survey, the researcher attached a note on the wall of each table, which led “please complete a customer satisfaction survey for us and we will award you a one-dollar coupon for your next purchase.” These notes also indicated that each person is allowed to participate in the research only once to avoid duplicate samples. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, and more than 98% (147) returned within six days after the last day of the study. Table 2 below indicated the survey time schedule:

Table 2

Survey Time Schedule

Date Time	1/20 (Mon)	1/21 (Tue)	1/22 (Wed)	1/23 (Thu)	1/24 (Fri)	1/25 (Sat)
Lunch 11:00 A.M.-16:00 P.M.				X	X	X
Dinner 16:00 P.M.- 21:00 P.M.	X	X	X	X	X	X

“X” indicated survey was conducted

Data Analysis

Data was entered and analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social

Sciences (SPSS). With the SPSS program, the frequencies of respondents to numerous questionnaire items were tabulated for a large number of respondents. Basic descriptive statistics (Mean, Standard Deviations) and frequency distribution were computed for each variable. In this research, t-test analysis and F-ratio were also employed by the author.

Limitations

The following limitations were noted by this study:

1. The sample was selected from only a single Chinese buffet; the results cannot be representation of the whole population.
2. A random sample will not be used in this study; the results may be influenced by the sampling method used.

CHAPTER IV

Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter was devoted to analysis of the data collected by the method described in the previous Chapter. The objectives of the study were to conduct a comparative analysis of customer profiles, perceptions among customers toward the selected Chinese buffet and determining the most important factors that influence repeat customers. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. Findings were analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and discussed individually in the following order:

1. Demographic profile of respondents
2. The perceptions of the patrons toward the selected Chinese buffet
 - 2-1 The perceptions among respondents toward the Chinese buffet
 - 2-2 To determine whether significant differences existed between respondents' perceptions and demographic factors.
 - 2-3 Summarized patrons' additional perceptions toward the Chinese Buffet
3. The three most important factors that influence repeat customers

Demographic Profile

Demographic data was generated from Section I of the research instrument. The

questions in Section I generate demographic profiles relating to gender (Q1), age (Q2), education (Q3), income (Q4), time of visit (Q5), and main dining reason (Q6).

Gender

There were 57 male (38.8%), and 90 female (61.2%) patrons participating in this study, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic Profile of Respondents by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	57	38.8
Female	90	61.2

n=147

Age

From 147 respondents, age of respondents as per the seven age groups is presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Demographic Profile of Respondents by Age

Age Categories	Frequency	Percentage
18 - 24	44	29.9
25 - 31	14	9.5

n=147

(table continues)

Table 4 (continued)

Age Categories	Frequency	Percentage
32 - 38	21	14.3
39 - 45	24	16.3
46 - 52	18	12.2
53 - 59	13	8.8
60 or older	13	8.8

n=147

Level of Education

From a total of 146 respondents, 22.6 percent (33 respondents) were bachelor's degree holders, with 14.4 percent (21 respondents) having master's degree or higher, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5

Demographic Profile of Respondents by Level of Education

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Up to high school	68	46.6
Associate degree	24	16.4
Bachelor's degree	33	22.6
Master's degree or higher	21	14.4

n=146

Total Annual Household Income

From a total of 145 respondents, 29.0 percent (42 respondents) reported a \$0 to \$19,999 average annual household income while only 4.1 percent (6 respondents) reported annual household income in excess of \$100,000 a year. The tabulation of annual household income is presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Demographic Profile of Respondents by Annual Household Income

Total Annual Household Income	Frequency	Percentage
0 to 19,999	42	29.0
20,000 to 49,999	53	36.6
50,000 to 99,999	44	30.3
100,000 or higher	6	4.1

n=145

Time of Visit

From a total of 147 respondents, 58.5 percent (86 respondents) have visited this establishment in the range of 16 times or more, 18.4 percent of respondents have visited the establishment in the range of 6 – 10 times, and only 4.8 percent of the respondents were first time visitors. Please see Table 7.

Table 7

Demographic Profile of Respondents by Time of Visit

Time of Visit	Frequency	Percentage
First time	7	4.8
Below 5 times	8	5.4
6 - 10 times	27	18.4
11 - 15 times	19	12.9
16 times or more	86	58.5

n=147

Dining Chinese Buffet

The survey participants were asked to indicate their main reason for selecting the Chinese buffet from a list of seven and an “other” category. It is interesting to note that “like the taste of the food” received the highest number of marks. Nineteen participants (12.9%) checked “other”. These write-in responses includes: Ten respondents wrote “because friends/girlfriend want to eat Chinese” and four indicated “hungry, variety of food choices”. Additional reasons given in this category are: “friendly people”, “best choice of Chinese food in town”, “do not want to stay home”, “Had an appointment”, “Have not eaten here over six months”. Table 8 reflects the respondent choices.

Table 8

Demographic Profile of Respondents by Main Dining Reason

Main reason for today's dining	Frequency	Percentage
Special occasion	13	8.8
No time to cook	12	8.2
Close to your residence	9	6.1
Value for money spent	16	10.9
Change of taste	10	6.8
Like the taste of the food	68	46.3
Others	19	12.9

n=147

Summary

The following summary of frequency analysis of customer demographic information indicates that the major attributes of the selected Chinese buffet customers include:

1. female (61.2%)
2. age group of 18 – 24 (29.9%)
3. level of education in the category of up to high school (46.6%)
4. annual household income in the range of 20,000 to 49,999 (36.6%)
5. time of visit in the range of 16 times or more (58.5%)

6. main dining reason: “like the taste of the food” (46.3%)

The Perceptions of the Patrons toward the Selected Chinese Buffet

Section II of the questionnaire contained 22 closed questions in total. Respondents were required to check the appropriate level of satisfaction as follow:

1 = Very Poor; 2 = Poor; 3 = Average; 4 = Good; 5 = Very Good

The first eight questions addressed the respondent’s perceptions regarding food product in the selected Chinese buffet. Those eight perceptions were:

7. Variety of menu choices
8. Variety of healthy menu choices
9. Variety of vegetarian menu choices
10. Appropriate temperature of the food
11. Pleasing appearance of the food
12. Freshness of the food
13. Flavorful food
14. Available of new items

Flavorful of the food has a mean value of 4.42 suggesting that it was extremely satisfying to most respondents. Variety of vegetarian menu was ranked the least satisfaction with a mean of 3.65, which is closer to Good on the given Likery-scale than

Average. The various perceptions are listed in Table 9 in the order of most satisfaction to the least satisfaction.

Table 9

Mean Score of Perceptions of Food Product in the Selected Chinese Buffet

Perception of Food Product	Mean of Total Sample	S.D.
Flavorful food	4.42	.71
Variety of menu choices	4.27	.78
Pleasing appearance of the food	4.21	.72
Freshness of the food	4.09	.78
Appropriate temperature of the food	3.89	.99
Variety of healthy menu choices	3.85	.85
Available of new items	3.69	.94
Variety of vegetarian menu	3.65	.88

The latter four questions of Section II addressed the respondents' perceptions of service in the selected Chinese buffet. Those four service perceptions were as follows:

15. Efficiency of service
16. Friendliness of staff
17. Helpfulness of staff
18. Hours of operation

Friendliness of staff is the most satisfaction in general, with a mean of 4.67. This indicates that it was extremely satisfactory to most respondents. The various perceptions are listed in Table 10 in the order of most satisfaction to the least satisfaction.

Table 10

Mean Score of Perceptions of Service in the Selected Chinese Buffet

Perception of Service	Mean of Total Sample	S.D.
Friendliness of staff	4.67	.55
Efficiency of service	4.61	.62
Helpfulness of staff	4.59	.62
Hours of operation	4.55	.59

The next four questions in the section II addressed the respondents' perceptions of cleanliness in the selected Chinese buffet. Those four service perceptions were as follows:

19. Counter areas
20. Eating areas (tables, chairs, etc.)
21. Restroom
22. Food replenish process

Counter areas showed a mean of 4.43, signifying that respondents were very satisfied

with it. Restroom was ranked the least satisfaction with a mean of 3.99, which is closer to Good on the given Liker scale than Average. The various perceptions are listed in Table 11 in the order of most satisfaction to the least satisfaction.

Table 11

Mean Score of Perceptions of Cleanliness in the Selected Chinese Buffet

Perception of Cleanliness	Mean of Total Sample	S.D.
Counter areas	4.43	.68
Eating areas (tables, chairs, etc.)	4.41	.71
Food replenish process	4.11	.83
Restroom	3.99	.86

The final six questions of section II addressed the respondents' perceptions of dining environment in the selected Chinese buffet. Those six dining environment perceptions were as follows:

23. Location
24. Layout of the facility
25. Appearance of staff
26. Relaxed atmosphere or ambience
27. Comfort

28. Good for eating with children

Relaxed atmosphere or ambience had a mean value of 4.39 suggesting that it was extremely satisfaction to most respondents. Layout of the facility and good for eating with children was the least satisfaction with a mean of 4.25, which translates to a level marginally higher than Good. The various perceptions are listed in Table 12 in the order of most satisfaction to the least satisfaction.

Table 12

Mean Score of Perceptions of Dining Environment in the Selected Chinese Buffet

Perception of Dining Environment	Mean of Total Sample	S.D.
Relaxed atmosphere or ambience	4.39	.71
Appearance of staff	4.37	.73
Location	4.32	.68
Comfort	4.30	.71
Layout of the facility	4.25	.73
Good for eating with children	4.25	.78

Summary

By combining the results of Table 9, 10, 11, and 12, the perceptions among the respondents toward the selected Chinese buffet in each category that are generally most satisfaction to respondents are 1) Flavorful food, 2) Friendliness of staff, 3) Counter

areas, and 4) Relaxed atmosphere or ambience; the least satisfaction are 1) Variety of vegetarian menu, 2) Hours of operation, 3) Restroom, and 4) Layout of the facility and good for eating with children.

To Test whether Significant Differences Existed between Respondents' Perceptions and Demographic Factors

Gender

Mean and standard deviation were computed on each of the perception items for gender, male and female. When examined using the t-test for significance, the two groups were found to statistically differ on 2 of the 22 items examined. The level of significance was assigned as $\alpha = 0.05$. Please see Table 13.

Table 13

The Statistically Significant Difference between Respondents' Perceptions and Gender

Perception Items	Male		Female		Sig.
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	
Variety of menu choices	4.11	.86	4.37	.71	.047*
Variety of healthy menu choices	3.89	.94	3.82	.80	.618
Variety of vegetarian menu	3.68	.96	3.63	.84	.740
Appropriate temperature of the food	3.91	.91	3.88	1.04	.837
Pleasing appearance of the food	4.19	.77	4.22	.70	.812

(table continues)

Table 13 (continued)

Perception Items	Male		Female		Sig.
	M	S.D.	M	S.D.	
Freshness of the food	4.11	.77	4.08	.80	.837
Flavorful food choices	4.32	.81	4.49	.64	.173
Available of new items	3.51	1.00	3.81	.88	.059
Efficiency of service	4.56	.66	4.64	.61	.434
Friendliness of staff	4.65	.58	4.68	.54	.761
Helpfulness of staff	4.53	.68	4.62	.57	.361
Hours of operation	4.49	.68	4.59	.52	.358
Counter areas	4.40	.73	4.44	.66	.724
Eating areas (tables, chairs, etc.)	4.42	.78	4.40	.67	.862
Restroom	3.89	.92	4.05	.82	.294
Food replenish process	3.96	.91	4.20	.77	.093
Location	4.14	.74	4.43	.62	.011*
Layout of the facility	4.14	.79	4.32	.68	.141
Appearance of staff	4.32	.76	4.41	.72	.444
Relaxed atmosphere or ambience	4.29	.71	4.46	.71	.149
Comfort	4.18	.73	4.38	.68	.091
Good for eating with children	4.18	.77	4.30	.79	.389

* = significance $p < .05$ level

The result showed that Female satisfaction was greater than male with “Variety of

menu choices” ($t = -2.002, p < .05$), and “location” ($t = -2.586, p < .05$). Therefore, respondent’s perceptions toward those items “Variety of menu choices” and “location” indicates a statistically significant difference between males and females at the selected Chinese buffet.

Age

A comparison of respondents’ perceptions and age using F ratio statistically significant differences were found between and within group variances. Table 14 lists that “Age” is statistically significant difference when $p < .05$ for all of the following perceptions: “Variety of menu choices”, “Variety of healthy menu choices”, “Efficiency of services”, “Friendliness of staff”, and “Appearance of staff”.

Table 14

The Statistically Significant Difference between Respondents’ Perceptions and Age

Perception Items	Age	M	S.D.	Sig.
Variety of menu choices	18-24	4.32	.89	.023
	25-31	3.64	.63	
	32-38	4.48	.60	
	39-45	4.17	.92	
	46-52	4.56	.51	
	53-59	4.31	.63	
	60 or older	4.46	.66	

(table continues)

Table 14 (continued)

Perception Items	Age	M	S.D.	Sig.
Variety of healthy menu choices	18-24	3.57	.90	.027
	25-31	3.57	1.16	
	32-38	4.19	.60	
	39-45	3.79	.83	
	46-52	4.17	.79	
	53-59	4.15	.69	
	60 or older	3.92	.64	
Efficiency of service	18-24	4.55	.59	.019
	25-31	4.07	1.00	
	32-38	4.71	.56	
	39-45	4.71	.55	
	46-52	4.72	.46	
	53-59	4.85	.38	
	60 or older	4.69	.63	
Friendliness of staff	18-24	4.73	.45	.002
	25-31	4.07	.73	
	32-38	4.71	.56	
	39-45	4.75	.44	
	46-52	4.83	.38	
	53-59	4.54	.66	
	60 or older	4.77	.60	
Appearance of staff	18-24	4.27	.82	.040
	25-31	3.86	.77	
	32-38	4.38	.74	
	39-45	4.50	.66	
	46-52	4.72	.46	
	53-59	4.46	.52	
	60 or older	4.46	.78	

Level of Education

A comparison of respondents' perceptions and level of education using F ratio statistically significant differences were found between and within group variances. Table 15 lists that "Level of Education" is statistically significant difference when $p < .05$ for all of the following perceptions: "Appropriate temperature of the food", and "Restroom".

Table 15

The Statistically Significant Difference between Respondents' Perceptions and Level of Education

Perception Items	Level of Education	M	S.D.	Sig.
Appropriate temperature of the food	Up to high school	4.32	.89	.023
	Associate degree	3.64	.63	
	Bachelor's	4.48	.60	
	Master's degree or higher	4.17	.92	
Restroom	Up to high school	4.01	.83	.044
	Associate degree	4.26	.62	
	Bachelor's	4.03	.96	
	Master's degree or higher	3.53	.90	

Time of Visit

A comparison of respondents' perceptions and time of visit using F ratio statistically significant differences were found between and within group variances. Table 16 lists that

“Time of Visit” is statistically significant difference when $p < .05$ for all of the following perceptions: “Variety of menu choices”, “Variety of healthy menu choices”, “Variety of vegetarian menu choices”, “Flavorful food”, “Efficiency of service”, “Helpfulness of staff”, “Hours of operation”, “Restroom”, and “Food replenish process”.

Table 16

The Statistically Significant Difference between Respondents’ Perceptions and Time of Visit

Perception Items	Level of Education	M	S.D.	Sig.
Variety of menu choices	First time	3.14	1.07	.001
	Below 5 times	4.00	1.07	
	6-10 times	4.15	.77	
	11-15 times	4.37	.76	
	16 times or more	4.40	.66	
Variety of healthy menu choices	First time	3.00	1.15	.031
	Below 5 times	3.63	.74	
	6-10 times	3.81	.74	
	11-15 times	3.68	.95	
	16 times or more	3.99	.82	
Variety of vegetarian menu choices	First time	2.71	1.38	.001
	Below 5 times	3.38	.92	
	6-10 times	3.28	.68	
	11-15 times	3.68	.82	
	16 times or more	3.86	.83	

(table continues)

Table 16 (continued)

Perception Items	Level of Education	M	S.D.	Sig.
Flavorful food	First time	4.00	.82	.007
	Below 5 times	3.88	.99	
	6-10 times	4.19	.83	
	11-15 times	4.58	.51	
	16 times or more	3.55	.63	
Efficiency of service	First time	3.71	.76	.000
	Below 5 times	4.25	.89	
	6-10 times	4.67	.62	
	11-15 times	4.42	.84	
	16 times or more	4.74	.44	
Helpfulness of staff	First time	4.14	.69	.010
	Below 5 times	4.13	.99	
	6-10 times	4.56	.70	
	11-15 times	4.42	.69	
	16 times or more	4.71	.48	
Hours of operation	First time	3.86	.90	.001
	Below 5 times	4.38	.52	
	6-10 times	4.44	.70	
	11-15 times	4.47	.51	
	16 times or more	4.67	.50	
Restroom	First time	2.83	.82	.003
	Below 5 times	3.75	.99	
	6-10 times	4.16	.83	
	11-15 times	4.11	.51	
	16 times or more	4.01	.63	

(table continues)

Table 16 (continued)

Perception Items	Level of Education	M	S.D.	Sig.
Food replenish process	First time	3.29	1.38	.044
	Below 5 times	3.75	1.16	
	6-10 times	4.19	.79	
	11-15 times	4.05	.78	
	16 times or more	4.20	.74	

Summarized of Open-ended Question

The respondents were asked one open-ended question which allows the respondents to express their opinion without encumbrance regarding the perception toward the Chinese buffet. The question was “Please list your additional perceptions toward this Chinese buffet”.

Seventy-five of the respondents provided open-ended responses to the question are summarized below:

Eighteen respondents indicated that service was caring and friendly, while one respondent felt in the opposite way. Fifteen people indicated that they liked the food items and the taste of food. However, eleven respondents had a negative perception of appropriate temperature of the food and twelve respondents suggested that there should be more variety of food selection. Six respondents indicated that they really like the

restaurant. Five respondents indicated they like the relaxed atmosphere or ambience of the Chinese buffet, while two respondents disliked the music. One respondent felt the price is reasonable, but the other one felt too expensive. Additional responses given in this question were: “customers are seated too compactly”, “sitting near the door is cold”, and “please change the water at the ice cream”.

The Three most Important Factors that Influence Repeat Customers

From a list of nine factors and an “other” category, the survey participants were asked to choose three most important factors that will make them return to dine at the restaurant. The nine characteristics were as follow: Price/Value, Service, Variety of food selection, Quality of food, cleanliness, Exotic quality of restaurant atmosphere, Comfort, Convenience location, Hours of operation. They are presented in Table 17 and summarized as shown follows:

The top three factors influencing the decision to return the establishment for the sample were:

1. Price/Value (110 respondents, 24.9%)
2. Quality of food (98 respondents, 22.2%)
3. Variety of food selection (78 respondents, 17.7%)

Eleven participants (2.5%) checked “other”. These write-in responses includes: Six

respondents wrote “food items and taste” and three indicated “friendly staff”. Two respondents wrote “immediate dining when you arrive”. Table 17 below indicates frequencies of each returning factor checked by respondents.

Table 17

Top Three Factors that Influence Repeat Customers

Factors	Checked Frequency	Percentage
Price/Value	110	24.9
Service	66	15.0
Variety of food selection	78	17.7
Quality of food	98	22.2
Cleanliness	28	6.4
Exotic quality of restaurant atmosphere	1	0.2
Comfort	12	2.7
Convenience	30	6.8
Hours of operation	7	1.6
Other	11	2.5

n=147

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher's survey instrument and statistically based results were analyzed, identify and discuss separately without conclusion. The following chapter will focus upon research item analysis, summarize the result highlights, and interpret the results derived from the individual research items.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The chapter summarized the research objectives and, the significant findings and conclusions of the study. Recommendations related to this study and future research regarding the issue were addressed as well.

Re-statement of Research Objectives

The purpose of the study is to identify the demographic profile of customers for an “All-You-Can-Eat” Chinese buffet in a city in western Wisconsin. In addition, to further identify consumers’ perceptions toward “All-You-Can-Eat” Chinese Buffet. Moreover, to identify the most important factors influencing repeat customers.

Discussion of Significant Findings

There was a total of 147 useable questionnaires, although some participants did not respond to all the questions. Hence, some of the data have varying total numbers of respondents. The major findings were discussed as follow:

Demographic Profiles of Respondents

Sixty-one percent of the respondents identified themselves as female and 38.8 percent as male. The largest single grouping was that of the 18-24 age group, which

represented 29.9% of the respondents and followed by 39-45(16.3%). Grindy (1999) stated that “Complete-meal and all-you-can-eat specials remain more popular among younger consumers than among older consumers” (p. 42). The most frequently selected annual household income by respondents was in the range of US \$20,000 to 49,999 (36.3%), with 50,000 to 99,999 (30.3%), 0 to19,999 (29%), and 100,000 or higher (4.1%). Many respondents had up to high school degree (46%), with associate degree (16.4%), bachelor’s degree (22.6%), and master’s degree or higher (14.4%). 58.5 percent (86 respondents) have visited this establishment in the range of 16 times or more. Most respondents visited the establishment because like the taste of the food (46.3%).

According to the NRA (2001, n. p.) reported on restaurant spending:

In 1999, the typical American household spent an average of \$2,116 on food away from home. Not surprisingly, household income is one of the most influential characteristics when it comes to restaurant spending. Age is also an important factor affecting restaurant spending. Households headed by people in their peak earning years (35-54) posted the highest average household expenditures on food away from home. And while households headed by persons under age 25 spent a higher percentage of their food dollar on food away from home (45.5%, higher than any other age group), their total spending was lower than their older counterparts

because their earnings tend to be lower, on average.

The results of the Chinese buffet customers' demographic profiles generally agree with the lifestyle trends: Two-income families and single-parent households as increasing women traveling and dining out; Generations X and Y are far more likely to frequent various, more unique ethnic food restaurants compared to older consumers; Customers are better educated; Consumers dine out no longer for special occasions anymore, but are integrating restaurants into their daily lives. They are increasingly looking for ways to add to their restaurant experience, and are finding that trying new and exotic dishes at ethnic restaurants is a great way of doing that (NRA, 2000).

The Perceptions of the Patrons toward the Selected Chinese Buffet

In order of satisfaction, flavorful food, friendliness of staff, cleanliness of the counter areas, and relaxed atmosphere or ambience were at the top of the list of most satisfaction in each category. The result generally agree with National Restaurant Association's latest consumer study, *Ethnic Cuisines II* (2000), consumers who visit ethnic restaurants want a good overall experience: friendly, flavorful food and a good atmosphere are cited as important. It is, however, important to note least satisfaction ranking in all perceptions. Table 18 indicated the top four least satisfaction perceptions in

all categories (food product, service, cleanliness, and dining environment) among the respondents.

Table 18

Top Four Least Satisfaction in All Perceptions

Rank	Perceptions	Summary
No. 1	Variety of vegetarian menu	Most annoying to 25 to 31 age group (mean=3.64)
No. 2	Available of new items	Most annoying to 25 to 31 age group (mean=3.36)
No. 3	Variety of healthy menu	Most annoying to 18 to 24 and 25 to 31 age group (mean=3.57)
No. 4	Appropriate temperature of the food choices	Most annoying to 18 to 24 age group (mean=3.77)

Reid (1983) mentioned that “Foodservice consumers today are demanding more sophisticated dining experiences. An increase in the concern about nutrition has partially sparked the growth of natural and healthy foods” (p. 143). The results suggest that

Chinese buffet operators should pay attention to keep food quality and selection.

According to a survey carried out by Restaurants and Institutions magazine (Dulen, 1999) supports the ideas that restaurants must be able to compete on the basis of food quality alone, given its position at the top of customer priorities. As competition continues to intensify, successful restaurant operators will be challenged to maintain and enhance levels of food quality.

Gender differences were found for perceptions of variety of food menu choices and location. Male rated variety of food menu choices and location significantly lower than female. This indicated male perceived variety of food menu choices and restaurant location less positively than female did.

Chinese-restaurant executives ordinarily define site or location criteria carefully based on experience. The good location for a restaurant depends on the clientele to which it appeals (Walker & Lundberg, 2001). This suggests the food operators should find a location easily accessible for their target customers in order to increase the target patrons to their establishment. Menu is one of the essential qualities of a successful restaurant to which food operators should pay attention. Reid (1983) mentioned that, "The menu is of critical importance in the marketing efforts of a foodservice manager. It communicates, sells, creates the mood, and establishes the tone" (p. 199).

Age groups differences were found for perceptions of variety of menu choices, variety of healthy menu choices, efficiency of services, friendliness of staff, and appearance of staff. Age group of 25-31 had least satisfaction with all perceptions above and male perceived less positively than female except variety of healthy menu choices.

The results have been obtained by merging the results presented in Table 13 and 14.

According to National Restaurant Association report (Ebbin, 2000), “age is a major factor influencing eating behavior. Males between the ages of 25 and 34 eat commercially prepared meals most frequently — an average of six times per week” (p. 39). This suggests that to succeed or simply to survive, the restaurant operators must be customer centered; they must deliver superior value to their target customers. The research also found the customers who visited the establishment first time perceive least satisfaction in nineteen characteristics than other customers.

Customer satisfaction with a purchase depends on the product’s performance relative to a buyer’s expectation. Expectations are based on the customer’s past buying experience, and competitor information and promises (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 1999).

The results indicated Chinese buffet are facing increasingly sophisticated customers, intense competition among themselves, and competition from other ethnic restaurants. A deeper understanding its consumers’ perceptions and choice intention will help the

Chinese restaurant attract more new customers and remain the old ones.

The Three most Important Factors that Influence Repeat Customers

Three most important factors were selected from 10 intention attributes for customers to render a return decision. The results of the study showed that three factors, “Price/Value” (110 respondents, 24.9%), “Quality of food” (98 respondents, 22.2%), and “Variety of food selection” (78 respondents, 17.7%) were significantly related to the customer’s intention of coming back again.

In today's competitive marketplace, one of the biggest concerns of restaurant operators is winning customer loyalty. Grindy (1998, n. p.) stated that:

Recognizing that repeat customers are a major source of revenue, restaurant operators are trying to make those repeat visits as simple and satisfying as possible. One way to keep customers coming back is to maximize the value they receive for the price they pay. Consequently, restaurant operators are placing great emphasis on delivering more value for the dollar.

Again, quality of food is a major concern for customers in deciding whether to return to the establishment. According to Dulen (1999), the standards vary from food to food, and it’s very difficult to define because quality is so subjective. Customers judge food quality based on the following criteria: prepared as ordered, taste/ flavor,

temperature, and freshness. It was clear that a restaurant manager's emphasis on only one criterion to improve food quality might not be effective.

The research found variety of vegetarian menu choices, available of new items, and variety of healthy menu choices perceived less positive satisfaction than other characteristics in the selected Chinese buffet (Table 18). From the customers' perception, All- You- Can- Eat establishments should allow for a greater variety of food selection, and vegetarians and meat lovers can all find something appropriate on the buffet table (Vlisides, Chiang, & Pan, 2000). The result of the study suggested that customers will keep raising their expectations of this dining segment in the future.

Conclusions

The literature review indicates that there is evidence that All-You-Can-Eat Chinese buffets are popular and an important segment of the commercial foodservice industry. The study revealed the differences in respondents' perceptions for dining at the selected Chinese buffet. According to the survey, most respondents dine at the selected buffet because of like the taste of food. The respondents perceived positive dining experience (ranked higher than good), of service (efficiency of service, friendliness of staff, helpfulness of staff, and hours of operation), cleanliness (counter areas, eating areas, and food replenish process), and dining environment (location, layout of the

facility, appearance of staff, relaxed atmosphere or ambience, comfort, and good for eating with children), while they had less satisfaction (ranked below good) with food product (variety of vegetarian menu choices, available of new items, variety of healthy menu choices, and appropriate temperature of the food). The results have been obtained by merging the results presented in Table 9 to 12. The results of the study showed that three factors “Price/Value”, “Quality of food”, and “Variety of food selection” were significantly related to the customer’s intention of coming back again. Clearly the implications of the findings have a direct relevance to the management of the selected Chinese buffet. The study itself functions as a valuable managerial and operation development tool, affording operators the opportunity to improve their competitiveness and service quality.

Recommendations for Chinese Buffet Operators

Demographic Profiles Issues

Customers with different age, education, and income may have different needs when they choose to dine at this type of eatery. Therefore, marketing and promotion should focus upon target market segments.

Food Product Issues

Consistently control quality of food, control food and serving temperatures, and add more food items in order to provide a variety of food selection (especially for vegetarian and nutritional concerns).

Pricing and Value Issues

Setting reasonable prices, pleasant of dining environment and service standards are essential.

Recommendations for Further Study

As data analysis and the review of literature, the researcher has the following suggestions for further study.

1. This research focused on the general scope of customers' perceptions toward the selected Chinese buffet and the factors influence repeat customers. Additional probing questions on about the relationship between satisfactions and dining choices will be more beneficial for the operators.
2. A random sampling would possible a better approach for this study which can reduce research bias and result in an even distribution of samples' demographic data.
3. This study was conducted at only one Chinese buffet and the results can only be specific to that establishment. It should be broadened to include variety ethnic cuisines and a larger sample.

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APPENDIX A
SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Spring, 2003

Dear Participants:

As a graduate student at the department of Hospitality and Tourism of University of Wisconsin-Stout, I have the opportunity of research a topic of interest to me and important to you. I am studying customers' perception and motivation of dining at Chinese buffet. I would like your help with this study. **Please note if you are less than 18 years old, do not continue on this survey and return it to the researcher!!**

Please read the entire page and complete the attached questionnaire if you would like to participate in this study. Please do remember, this study is **anonymous**. Your name will not be required.

The results from this survey will be used to identify important consumer concerns in the foodservice industry especially in Chinese buffet segment.

Thank you very much for your help!

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Thesis Advisor
(715)232-2542

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I understand that by returning the questionnaire, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this research. I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand the benefits that might be realized from this study. I am aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed and so that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realized that I have to right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study.

Note: Questions or concerns about participation in the study should be addressed first to the researcher or research advisor and second to Sue Foxwell, Human Protections Administrator, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the protection of Human Subjects in Research, 11 Harvey Hall, Menomonie, WI, 54751, phone (715) 232-1126

PLEASE START THE SURVEY ON THE REVERSE SIDE

Section I: Demographic data

Before proceeding, please provide the following background information. Place an "X" in the box that most closely describes you.

1. Your gender:

Male Female

2. Your age:

18-24 25-31 32-38 39-45

46-52 53-59 60 or older

3. Your level of education:

Up to high school Associate degree Bachelor's degree

Master's degree or higher

4. Total annual household income (\$):

0 to 19,999 20,000 to 49,999 50,000 to 99,999 100,000 or higher

5. How many times have you visited this establishment?

First time Below 5 times 6-10 times

11-15 times 16 times or more

6. Main reason for today's dining? (check only one)

Special occasion No time to cook Close to your residence

Value for money spent Change of taste Like the taste of the food

Others _____

Section II : Perceptions toward Chinese Buffet

Place an “X” in the box that most closely describes your dining experience at the Chinese buffet.

The rank scores as follow:

1	2	3	4	5
Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good

A: Food Product	1	2	3	4	5
1. Variety of menu choices					
2. Variety of healthy menu choices					
3. Variety of vegetarian menu choice					
4. Appropriate temperature of the food					
5. Pleasing appearance of the food					
6. Freshness of the food					
7. Flavorful food					
8. Availability of new items					

B. Service	1	2	3	4	5
1. Efficiency of service					
2. Friendliness of staff					
3. Helpfulness of staff					
4. Hours of operation					

C. Cleanliness	1	2	3	4	5
1. Counter Areas					
2. Eating Areas (tables, chairs, etc.)					
3. Restroom					
4. Food replenish process					

D. Dining Environment	1	2	3	4	5
1. Location					
2. Layout of the facility					
3. Appearance of staff					
4. Relaxed atmosphere or ambience					
5. Comfort					
6. Good for eating with children					

PLEASE CONTINUE ON THE REVERSE SIDE

E. Please list your additional perceptions toward this Chinese buffet.

Section III: Factors influence customer return

Please choose three most important factors that will make you return to dine at the restaurant by placing an “X” in front of each factor.

- 1. Price / Value
- 2. Service
- 3. Variety of food selection
- 4. Quality of food
- 5. Cleanliness
- 6. Exotic quality of restaurant atmosphere
- 7. Comfort
- 8. Convenience location
- 9. Hours of operation
- 10. Other _____

Thank for your time and cooperation!

APPENDIX B
SUMMARY OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTION

E. Please list your additional perceptions toward this Chinese buffet

Survey No.	Comment
2	Very nice dining establishment.
3	Very good restaurant, friendly staff.
6	Friendly staff, cleanliness, and excellent food.
8	A very nice place that my family enjoys to eat at.
10	There is nothing I don't like.
11	Food should be warmer.
15	Most of the food items are always the same every time.
18	Great service.
20	Sometimes temperature or freshness of food isn't as good as usual.
26	Enjoy the music.
28	Please get a new selection of music.
29	New music would be good.
32	We love this restaurant. My husband and I enjoy dining here. The service is excellent.
33	It's a very nice place to dine. Good service.
35	Great buttered mushrooms and donuts.
36	I like crab, Rangoon, shrimp.
38	I like the food but price sometimes stops me from coming.
39	It's a wonderful establishment and has great service.
40	I like the restaurant. Staff is very friendly and my whole family can find something good to eat.
44	A few more American food so people would come with us who not a lover of Chinese.
48	I like crab legs.
50	Would like low fat foods designated because I have to watch my cholesterol.
53	Please add lower calorie dishes.
55	Excellent music in the restaurant.
56	Wish food was hotter.
58	Excellent tasteful food.
66	A few items were empty and temperature of the food was low.

- 67 Some staff should improve English. Service is also shuttling with the shoes which are distracting.
- 68 The service is excellent.
- 71 Nice atmosphere.
- 73 I like the establishment. Best in 30 miles.
- 78 I enjoy eating here.
- 80 Chinese style music playing to enhance the dining experience of eating in a Chinese restaurant.
- 81 I think the service is good and the food is great.
- 82 I like the doughnuts.
- 84 I loved the ice cream.
- 85 Price is good.
- 87 Enjoyed the meal.
- 89 A good taste of food.
- 91 Bring back garlic bread.
- 92 Would like to see sushi available sometimes.
- 94 Would like to see sushi on the menu.
- 95 I like the food items.
- 97 Tasteful food. Can always count on a good meal.
- 99 Delicious food.
- 101 We like the staff and food items.
- 103 Please offer more vegetarian foods on your buffet.
- 105 Food is always warm and cooked properly.
- 106 Best host available (hours and price) Chinese buffet in town. Good service.
- 107 Could change some of the dinner items.
- 109 I understand business was slow, but some items were cold. Could replenish or ask if we cared for anyone item.
- 111 Sitting near the door is cold.
- 113 Very friendly and helpful staff.
- 115 I love coming to this buffet because the people are so nice and friendly.
- 116 It would be nice to offer more vegetarian options.
- 119 Hard-working staff and helpful.
- 120 We love the food and friendly staff- we always come here if we are dining Chinese.

- 123 The crab legs are the best.
- 124 I like to come here. Please change the water at the ice cream more often.
- 126 Like the addition of sushi.
- 127 We very much enjoy eating here and like the staff very much.
- 128 Customers are seated too compactly.
- 130 I like chicken rice.
- 131 Food is good.
- 132 I like the restaurant.
- 133 The people are friendly, very good with children and cleanliness.
- 135 Temperature of food could be higher.
- 137 Pleasing place to eat, relaxed.
- 138 Food is not checked for freshness often. Most was cold when I dined here.
- 139 The food items I tried were cold or not fresh.
- 140 Friendly staff, good food.
- 141 Mushroom should be kept warm.
- 142 Some of food could be warmer.
- 146 Maybe more variety of food selection.
- 147 The food could be warmer. Wet naps for crab legs.