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# Consumer behaviour in the food service industry: a review

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## Abstract

This article reviews the literature relating to consumer studies in foodservice, an under-represented area in terms of review papers. It is organised into four sections, discussing survey work, experimental studies, and investigations relating to economics and geography, and sociological and anthropological research. Many of these articles have been published outside the usual hospitality management journals. The review examines the scope of this research, identifying areas of commonality within it, as well as gaps and weaknesses in the body of knowledge on consumer behaviour in the food service industry. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

The study of consumer behaviour potentially deals with all of the ways people may act in their role as consumers (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1991), but in practice tends to focus upon behaviours related to searching, buying and using products and services. Consumers may be treated as groups, typically market segments, identified by geo-demographic characteristics and assumed to have common attitudes and behaviour. Alternatively individual, subjective perspectives may provide an insight into behaviour patterns.

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Food service marketing (and hence consumer behaviour) is often subsumed into that of generalised “hospitality” (e.g. Wearne and Morrison, 1996) and in some texts is amalgamated with a still more amorphous “tourism” (e.g. Kotler and Bowen, 1996). Both of these groupings tend to favour the hotel industry. There are no books dedicated to consumer research in the foodservice industry. Yet food service is an important industry in its own right, not least in terms of financial turnover, and although it contributes in part to both hotels and tourism, it has its own separate characteristics. Restaurants (including those in chains and those that are part of hotels), take-aways, and even contract catering, are more volatile, changeable and fashion-prone than hotels or tourist attractions. Thus in principle food service presents a particularly interesting area for studying consumer behaviour.

The food service industry has features which set it apart from other areas of the service sector such as financial and professional services (Johns, 1999a). It is closely concerned with food choice and quality, but at the same time has long been considered to offer a rich meal experience to which many other factors contribute (Campbell-Smith, 1967). The food service industry exemplifies two aspects of postmodern consumer culture. As Peacock (1992) notes, it is flexible, artisan-focused and context-dependent enough to offer a high degree of customisation. Thus it can provide an ultimately short-lived fashion product in a highly simulated environment: typical criteria of postmodernism (Jameson, 1984). At the same time, this is the industry that has seen the most blatant operationalisation of service, Ritzer’s (1996) phenomenon of McDonaldisation, which he claims to be the other face of postmodern consumer society.

This article reviews the extensive, multidisciplinary body of literature relating to consumer studies in foodservice. It draws upon this diversity of research to show the scope of this fascinating area and to identify areas of commonality within and between different schools of research, as well as gaps and weaknesses in the body of knowledge. The review is organised into four sections, representing different research approaches. “Survey research” includes studies of consumers as groups, while the work reviewed under “experimental research” involves test situations in which different factors have been manipulated. Studies under “economics and geography” represent alternative quantitative approaches to consumer research. Under “sociological and anthropological research” is included a range of qualitative research which provides complementary insights into the restaurant experience.

## **2. Review**

### *2.1. Survey research*

The objectives of survey studies generally fit into a three-stage schema of segmentation (finding out who will come to dine) targeting (identifying what particular groups of consumers want) and positioning (identifying what a particular restaurant style offers the market). Bowen (1998) reviews segmentation in the hospitality industry, pointing out that the geodemographic characteristics often used

to mark segments are only secondary indicators of how consumer groups are likely to behave. Thus researchers commonly refine geodemographic segments using psychographic measures such as attitude scales, or indicators of intended behaviour, and there is a resultant blurring of the segmentation, targeting and positioning functions.

The food service literature contains numerous examples of segmentation surveys. For example Nayga and Capps (1994) relate demand for different types of restaurant to different socio-economic segments, while Binkley (1998) shows that demographic and income differences have less effect upon demand for fast food than the population density of metropolitan areas. Shoemaker (1998) identifies groups of university canteen customers with different needs, using his findings to demonstrate how segmentation should drive service strategy. An interesting group of studies are aimed at specific niche segments. For instance Becker-Suttle et al. (1994) and Williams et al. (1997), respectively, identify the dining preferences of older customers, and the factors that inhibit this group from using full service restaurants. Reynolds et al. (1998) note that among older customers, males were more likely to frequent fast food restaurants than females. McClain et al. (1993) examine the ways in which US restaurants cater for customers in wheelchairs, finding problems with about 50% of all restaurants. An interview survey of the problems and anxieties of overweight women customers found that they felt “on display” or guilty at being “caught out” eating, rather than dieting (Zdorowski, 1996). It is interesting that although both this and the wheelchair study relate to substantial market segments, neither was carried out from an industry perspective or published in the hospitality management literature.

Since the 1970s a coherent theoretical structure has emerged to underpin consumer research. Although there are still many sub-theories and areas of minor disagreement (see e.g. Kassarian and Robertson, 1991) the picture can broadly be summarised as follows. Consumers are believed to view a service such as a restaurant meal in terms of a set of attributes: i.e. characteristics that make it desirable, ascribing different levels of importance to each attribute. For example, one market segment may be attracted by a restaurant’s low price, another by its food quality, another by its convenient location, and so on. Consumers weigh up the overall value of an offering in terms of the degree to which each attribute is present and the importance they see the attribute as having (attribute-value theory).

This overall evaluation produces an attitude towards a restaurant, which may be one of two types: a pre-experience attitude (expectation), or a post-experience performance evaluation. A further theoretical refinement considers that consumers gauge their experience according to how well actual performance confirms or disconfirms their expectations (expectancy disconfirmation theory). Thus in principle consumer attitudes towards a meal experience can be measured by subtracting expectation scores from the scores of actual performance. A favourable overall attitude to a restaurant is believed to result in repeat business.

Much food service consumer research reflects this broad theoretical structure. Thus a number of authors have studied restaurant attributes, finding the principal ones to be the choice and quality of food and drink, the price or value, service,

atmosphere, location and convenience (see e.g. Auty, 1992; Gregoire et al., 1995). Kim (1996) uses multidimensional scaling of these attributes to position food and beverage offerings in Korean hotels. Some authors disagree about the relative importance of attributes, especially the food and drink. Pettijohn et al. (1997) found that quality, cleanliness and value to be the three most important attributes in fast food restaurants, while atmosphere and menu variety were relatively unimportant. Clark and Wood (1998) comment that the available evidence suggests food quality and value to be the most significant restaurant attributes, and question the assumption of classic texts such as that of Campbell-Smith (1967) that the total package of attributes making up the “meal experience” determines consumer behaviour. Clark and Wood (1998) report that the order of attribute importance is somewhat different in different styles of restaurant, and Auty (1992) notes that the relative importance of attributes changes with the type of dining occasion.

The role of attribute measures in segmentation is demonstrated by Oh and Jeong (1996) who segment the fast food market on the basis of customers’ expectations of food, service, environment and convenience. Kara et al. (1995), show that demographically similar groups of US and Canadian fast food customers had different expectations of the type of food served, the location of restaurants and the cost of the meal. Some authors have concentrated upon a subset of restaurant attributes, for instance Tefft (1995) reports that Canadian customers were motivated by the taste of food, rather than its nutritional properties.

During the 1980s, Parasuraman et al. (1986) made a major contribution to consumer research in service industries with the SERVQUAL instrument. This uses 26 standardised questions to measure generalised service attributes that are considered relevant to all service industries. Parasuraman et al. (1986) demonstrated that their 26 items could be consistently reduced into five service dimensions: *reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles*. They calculated service quality by separately scaling consumers’ expectations and perceptions of service performance and subtracting the latter from the former. Thus SERVQUAL conformed to the body of knowledge about consumer behaviour and at the same time provided a generalisable set of service attributes. The applicability of SERVQUAL in the food service has been demonstrated by Bojanic and Rosen (1994) and Lee and Hing (1995), while Stevens et al. (1995) have developed a slightly modified instrument that they call DINESERVE. A number of other authors have used the instrument in attitude surveys of restaurant customers (Richard et al., 1994; Clow et al., 1998; Johnson and Mathews, 1997).

Although SERVQUAL summarises service attributes in a theoretically satisfying way, it takes little account of other empirical attributes of the restaurant experience, most notably food quality. Johns and Tyas (1996) amended the SERVQUAL scale by including food-related items, but were unable to obtain clear factor patterns corresponding to those of Parasuraman and his colleagues. Johns et al. (1995) employed multivariate statistics to relate SERVQUAL scores to empirically determined attributes of the meal experience, finding a clear differentiation between food and service. Many empirical studies by other authors reconfirm the importance of food quality, and also show that customers see service as just one of several

factors affecting the quality of restaurant offerings. Consumer satisfaction is a more pragmatic way of conceptualising measures of restaurant performance, because it can be based upon a totality of attributes, including both food and service. Most of the articles discussed above that empirically identify restaurant quality attributes are essentially concerned with assessing customer satisfaction. Pizam and Ellis (1999) review the theory basis underpinning consumer satisfaction.

Consumer satisfaction is concerned not only with attribute values, but also with broader value systems. For example, Sun (1995) identifies consumer involvement (i.e. the importance of the choice to the individual at the time of purchase) as a significant factor affecting restaurant customers' satisfaction. Through values, consumer satisfaction is also related to culture. Hsu et al. (1997) report that Korean college students evaluated restaurants in the order fine dining > quick service > family style, but their pattern of use showed the opposite order of preference. However, it is not clear whether this demonstrates cultural preference for restaurant styles or a culturally determined tendency to give the "right" response. Becker et al. (1999) found that US and Hong Kong students had very different expectations of restaurant service. The Asians valued respect, unobtrusive helpfulness and personal cleanliness, while US students required eye contact, personalisation and product knowledge. Goll (1994) discusses ways in which company values (i.e. corporate culture) influence customer satisfaction.

Several authors have studied the relationship between customer satisfaction and repurchase. Clark and Wood (1998) report that tangible aspects like the quality and variety of food are the key determinants in consumer loyalty, but note that the concept of food quality may be interpreted in very different, subjective ways. Pettijohn et al. (1997) measured customer satisfaction using empirical attributes, finding that satisfied customers had a significantly higher intention of returning. A much more detailed study of the satisfaction-repurchase relationship is that of Kivela et al. (1999a, b, 2000). These authors use a stepwise theoretical model that defines satisfaction in terms of expectations and performance using empirical attributes. Satisfaction is in turn related to return behaviour through a logistic regression expression. The model also includes customer characteristics and situational factors such as the dining occasion, the customer's involvement and the time and money available, and hence it achieves a credible assessment of likelihood of return. Kivela et al. (2000, p. 28) conclude that service quality is not the key attribute for generating repeat business and suggest "that other restaurant attributes, together with relationship marketing strategies have greater impact".

Research into consumer behaviour typically deals with antecedents such as product/service attitudes or consumers' stated intentions to repurchase. However, the correlation between intention and action may be quite small, and generally includes other factors (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). However, some researchers have addressed behaviour directly. For instance Lyons (1996) identifies factors underlying complaining behaviour from focus group and interview data. She found that levels of customer involvement and dissatisfaction made complaints more likely, but personal and situational factors also played a part. She notes that restaurant complaints were more concerned intangible and social issues than those encountered in other service

industries. Huang and Smith (1996) studied consumer responses to unsatisfactory restaurant experiences, concluding that restaurants should always explain the reasons for unsatisfactory service and also offer compensation.

Lynn and Graves (1996) discuss tipping behaviour, though mainly in terms of its motivation value for service employees. A more consumer-oriented study by Rogelberg et al. (1999) uses a policy capturing technique to evaluate the way individuals judged tipping in hypothetical restaurant situations. Most respondents judged the tip from the cost of the meal, but the quality of the food and service and the friendliness of staff also had an effect. Rogelberg's team found no clear relationship between tipping and consumer satisfaction. Two surveys have examined the consequences of coupon use behaviour in relation to pizza restaurants. Wilbourn et al. (1997) distinguished three market segments on the basis of pizza value perceptions and coupon-proneness. Garretson and Chow (1997) report that coupons increased purchase intentions and reduced perceived purchase risk, but also caused service quality expectations to fall.

In summary, food service survey research is broadly concerned with identifying market segments, targeting markets and positioning offerings relative to them. Surveys typically achieve this using geodemographic data supplemented by attitude measures. Consumers are considered to assess restaurants through sets of attributes, and various theories (see Pizam and Ellis, 1999, p. 327) link consumers' attitudes to attribute sets. The principal one of these is expectancy disconfirmation theory.

Empirically determined attributes of restaurants tend to prioritise food quality and value. Service, atmosphere and convenience also frequently appear, though varying in importance between different outlets and dining occasions. This makes it difficult to generalise survey findings between restaurants. Service quality measurement with the SERVQUAL instrument makes generalisation possible, not only between restaurants, but even between different industries within the service sector. However, this instrument ignores food quality, and consumer satisfaction, which can encompass the totality of foodservice attributes, seems a more appropriate output measure. Various studies have demonstrated a link between customer satisfaction and repurchase, and a model has been developed to predict repurchase from geodemographic and attitudinal variables. Other consumer behaviours that have been studied in relation to market segmentation are tipping and the use of promotional coupons.

## *2.2. Experimental research*

The experimental research tradition regards eating out as a function of the food itself and the situation in which it is eaten. Surprisingly, the physical surroundings in which food is eaten have comparatively little attention, despite offering very attractive targets for experiment. The effects of image (Singson, 1975) colour (Stephenson, 1969) and music (see review by Bruner, 1990) were extensively investigated in retail settings in the 1960s and 1970s. It is claimed that McDonald's use of colour and image to manage the behaviour of their patrons (Love, 1995) and Robson (1999) weighs up alternative design strategies for fast food restaurants.

Milliman (1986) reports that slow sentimental music caused people to linger longer over their meal, and in the process to spend more at the bar. However, a more recent study by Herrington and Capella (1996) claims that musical preference and familiarity are the key factors, while tempo and volume have little effect upon consumers' enjoyment or behaviour.

Birch et al. (1984) conclude from taste experiments that the time of day, and also the speed of a meal affect taste perceptions. In the food service industry, consumption times are largely culturally pre-determined and one might expect appropriateness, i.e. of the style of food and service to the meal occasion (see below) to be of more importance. However, there is a trend away from culturally "appropriate" consumption towards snacking, all-day breakfasts and so on, which may indicate scope for a research approach based upon physiologically rather than socially determined eating times.

A study of food ethnicity by Meiselman and Bell (1992) found that adding standard food components such as cheese to pasta made it seem more British to consumers, but a product that was given an Italian name was perceived as more ethnic. Bell and Meiselman (1995) note that sauces made foods seem "ethnic". Temporarily adding an Italian theme to menus and decor not only increased consumers' perceptions of restaurant ethnicity, but also raised overall perceptions of food quality and the meal experience (Bell et al., 1994). The more familiar consumers were with a style the less variety they perceived it to offer, but a brief period of Italian (i.e. familiar) theming nonetheless raised perceptions of overall menu variety for several months, even after the theme was withdrawn (Bell and Meiselman, 1995).

Social context experiments reveal that the amount people eat increases with the size of the group (de Castro and de Castro, 1989). Individuals are also more prone to try new foods if they first see others eating and enjoying them (Pliner and Hobden, 1994). Bell and Meiselman (1995) report that individuals' rates of drinking are to some extent determined by the consumption rate of the person they are with.

Schutz (1988) reports that measures of appropriateness (i.e. the perceived suitability of a given food to the time and place of consumption) outperform preference scales. Thus appropriateness scales would seem to have considerable scope for studying eating conventions and situational factors, and it appears that context influences food choice even more than hedonic factors (Marshall, 1993). Cardello et al. (1996) studied consumers' expectations of various institutional foods. Subjects consistently rated military food as poor in quality, even though most of them had never tried it, and they expected to like institutional and airline foods less than equivalent dishes bought in a restaurant. Collison and Turner (1988) used a hedonic scale and multiple regression to compare two types of meal experience. They report that tangible food was the dominant factor in the quality of everyday meal experiences, but for "special" meals, such as Christmas dinner, environment and atmosphere were more important.

Compared to survey studies, the experimental approach has been employed by relatively few researchers, although it offers considerable scope. Many hospitality academics have the facilities to experimentally manipulate eating environments, in

student and staff canteens and student-run public restaurants, and this approach offers a tried and tested methodology, which can be applied widely to food service situations. Appropriateness scaling appears to have considerable application, as do issues of timing, ethnicity, the physical environment and the social context of dining. The work of Collison and Turner (1988) adds further support to the findings of attribute studies discussed in the previous section.

### *2.3. Economics and geography*

Economic reports of the restaurant business appear frequently in the trade periodicals, but are generally limited in scope, descriptive rather than analytical, and quickly become outdated. National statistics are offered by Government publications in many countries and occasionally, deeper analyses of national data find their way into the more permanent literature. For example, Holm et al. (1995) present a detailed analysis of retailing (including foodservice) in Scandinavia, considering general trends in population, households and employment. Nayga and Wanzala (1996) offer a county level analysis of customer spend and price distribution in the USA. No serious attention seems to have been paid to forecasting, or to assessing the contribution of the restaurant business to local or national economies. However, Carmin and Norkus (1990) studied the elasticity of demand for menu items, reporting that a 1% change in price had a pronounced effect upon consumer purchasing behaviour.

The geography of eating out similarly seems to be a neglected area of research, although an important one. Smith (1983, p. 545) notes that the location models used by large restaurant chains are confidential and calls for “publicly available guidelines for restaurant location and success”. An early paper by Arbel and Pizam (1977) identifies relationships between tourist preferences and hotel distribution patterns, but no comparable work has been done on restaurants. However, two papers by Smith (1983, 1985) analyse restaurant location patterns in relation to geographical issues, such as the distribution of populations and industries (including competitors). The earlier of these articles (Smith, 1983) deals mainly with methodology, which is applied to nationwide secondary data from Canada. This paper interprets the locations of different restaurant types in terms of marketing strategies, and discusses the implications for restaurant siting. Although it makes a considerable contribution to knowledge in the field, the paper has been criticised for over-selectivity about sectors and for providing insufficient detail. (Haywood, 1985).

A later article by the same author (Smith, 1985) applies a similar research strategy to eight cities in Ontario, providing a more detailed analysis of the agglomeration and deglomeration of different types of restaurants. This article also examines spatial correlations with other land uses (i.e. residential, business and leisure building) as well as with traffic levels and population distributions. This study was somewhat idiosyncratic, since it included fast food, doughnut and ice cream shops, but made little attempt to differentiate other restaurant categories. There is clearly scope for using Smith’s approach to shed light on the siting of restaurant units and the



development of chains, especially as more sophisticated economic–geography models, e.g. of monocentric urban areas are becoming available (see Turnbull, 1995).

#### 2.4. *Sociology and anthropology*

Wood (1992, 1996) claims that despite its economic and social importance, eating out has been largely neglected by sociologists. Mennell et al. (1992) comment that much less study has been devoted to the sociology of consumption than to that of employment, for which they cite works by Mars and Nicod (1984), Whyte (1949) and others. Warde and Martens (1998) also regret a perceived sociological neglect of eating out and its role in modern consumption. They claim that eating out is significant because it increases the penetration of commodification and consumer culture into everyday life. Jamal (1996) presents an interesting study of acculturation of the British public through the availability of Indian foods.

Riley (1994) and Warde et al. (1999) make more detailed comments about cultural changes in consumption. Riley (1994, p. 15) claims that eating out in Britain has no “cultural or psychological anchor” and because there is “no social consensus of what is good” consumers tend to evaluate their meal experience on its instant subjective impact and value for money. He also claims (Riley, 1994, p. 16) that although there is a general marketing assumption that food quality and variety are the key factors in consumer experience, “it is the holistic and the intangible that really matter”. He recommends (Riley, 1994, p. 16) that restaurants strive for an “authentic” environment, which he defines as one which makes an unambiguous statement, with no conflicting messages. Warde et al. (1999) also argue that contemporary Western populations lack a fixed cultural system, and this drives individuals to seek an increasingly wide variety of aesthetically equivalent cultural genres. Reynolds (1993) regrets that food available to tourists on Bali is losing its authenticity through a reverse of this process:

Food therefore is one of the last areas of authenticity that is affordable on a regular basis by the tourist. Yet because it cannot be transported, preserved or put in a galley [sic, means gallery] to be revered it is the easiest to copy and degrade (Reynolds, 1993, p. 49)

Poor copies of all art forms, such as carvings and artefacts and ersatz Western food are being offered as real ‘cultural’ experiences....The view of traditional culture as seen by the tourist to Bali is being eroded. (Reynolds, 1993, p. 53)

These comments reflect the postmodern character of modern consumption, which is claimed to lack any sense of “historicity” or geography and which deals in signs and simulacra rather than meanings and authenticity (Jameson, 1984). In principle, any imaginable juxtaposition of signs and simulacra, invoking any cocktail of different ethnicities, historical periods or tastes is acceptable. In this light Riley’s (1994) idea of “authentic environments”, situations characterised by a superabundance of homologous signs, are more akin to hyperreality than to true authenticity (e.g. Eco, 1986). In this context should also be mentioned Peacock’s

(1992) “new consumer”, who likewise seeks novel signs to add to the collage in which s/he lives, and Jamal’s (1996, p. 23) examples of “Indian” dishes unknown in that subcontinent. The restaurant industry’s volatility and fashion-proneness make it a particularly interesting potential subject for postmodern analysis. In this respect it is also worth mentioning Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) claim that the Western economy is changing from a service base to an “experience” base, just as in the recent past manufacturing gave way to services. The foodservice industry is likely to be at the forefront of such a change and postmodernist thinking may well form the basis for understanding and predicting developments here (Johns, 1999b).

Ritzer’s (1996) comments about McDonald’s are also relevant in this context. He argues (Ritzer’s, 1996, pp. 145–146) that consumers are increasingly coming to value “efficiency, calculability, predictability and control”, due to changes in lifestyle, demographic factors and technology. Various authorities consider McDonald’s a postmodern phenomenon (Ritzer quotes Lyotard as one) but the rationalisation of fast food service contradicts postmodernist claims of increasing irrationality through the proliferation of signs, simulacra and pseudo-objects. Ritzer resolves this dilemma by concluding (Ritzer’s, 1996, p. 146) that “less radical postmodern orientation allow us to see phenomena like McDonald’s as having *both* modern and postmodern characteristics”. However, consumers seek efficiency, calculability, predictability and control in an illogical way, for instance dining at McDonald’s when they could eat more cheaply and efficiently at home (Ritzer, 1996, p. 147). Elsewhere (Ritzer, 1996, p. 154) he notes that “McDonald’s [has] succeeded in automating the customer-...they enter a kind of automated system through which they are impelled and from which they are ultimately ejected when they are ‘refuelled’.” Thus perhaps the “rationality” that Ritzer sees is not located (as he assumes) in production, but in service, where it is needed to support the “consumption line” (Baudrillard, 1988, pp. 48–49) that essentially defines postmodernity.

An interesting approach to the sociology of eating out is that of Finkelstein (1989), for whom food is a subordinate aspect of the meal experience:

The event comes to be enjoyed as a form of entertainment and a part of a modern spectacle in which social relations are mediated through visual images and imagined atmosphere. This is a far remove from the sensations of ingestion. (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 2)

This perspective allows Finkelstein to sum up the experience of eating out in a way that is both rich and intuitively accurate. She emphasises the experiential value of eating out to the full:

In our society, much of dining out has to do with self-presentation, through images of what is currently valued, accepted and fashionable. The restaurant is ... a place where we experience excitement, pleasure and a sense of personal well-being ... The images of wealth, happiness, luxury and pleasant social relations ... are iconically represented through its ambience, decor, furnishings, lighting, tableware and so on. These are in turn dominated by fashion [and] distinct waves of style. (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 3)

Finkelstein's main concern is with interpersonal power relations, considering dining out as a form of "uncivilised sociality" (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 5) in which power-plays are masked by manners. Her book seems to seek a return to an idealised world in which "individuals are equally self-conscious and attentive to one another ... avoid power differentials and ... do not mediate their exchanges through signatory examples of status and prestige". (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 8). Not only is it arguable that negotiating such situations is an essential part of human social experience and development, but she could have set her argument at almost any social gathering, since power plays are by no means exclusive to restaurants. Power relations are a prominent theme in sociology and their role in eating out is also mentioned by Mennell et al. (1992).

Finkelstein (1989, p. 20) writes that she virtually ignored the data she gathered, because they were "consistently and overwhelmingly naïve" and the activity of dining out "somehow thwarted scrutiny". She compares them (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 21) with a study by Law (1985) in which respondents cited convenience, value, quality, cleanliness and service as the reasons they ate at McDonald's. These attributes are very similar to those reported by the empirical survey studies discussed in an earlier section of this article, and in this sense the similarity between this research and the quantitative studies discussed earlier is striking. Both seek to get beneath the face value comments of diners toward more generalisable truths. However, simply discarding the face value data in order to embrace an established theoretical area such as power relationships seems unsatisfactory. An alternative theoretical structure is needed, which can coherently accommodate consumers' discourse and observed behaviour.

A possible way forward may be through some form of structural analysis of interview data. Levy (1981) makes an early attempt at this, when he analyses consumer myths of food and family using a structuralist framework derived from Lévi-Strauss. Unfortunately he restricts his data to denotative, rather than connotative meanings, and this potentially exciting approach yields relatively little new consumer information. However, Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) apply semiotic analysis to McDonald's fast food outlets. They make a detailed and informative analysis of the menu and its presentation and extract subtle overtones of meaning within the dining scenario. It is possible that semiotics may ultimately provide a route to the so far uncharted territory of diners' perception.

In summary, sociological and anthropological views of eating out bring a fresh set of assumptions about the act and role of consumption. Individual rationality, intent, preference and satisfaction, the cornerstones of marketing psychology, are here replaced by societal pressures of fashion, power relationships, rationalised service and signs. Researchers in this area face the same overarching problem as all who seek to understand the meal experience, that the complexity of consumers' behaviour seems to belie the simple terms in which they describe the experience. A possible way forward may be to look beyond consumers' denotative discourse to the level of connotative meaning, which might perhaps be accomplished through the semiotic analysis of linguistic structures.

### 3. Conclusions

A summary of the areas covered in this review is shown in Table 1. Most quantitative studies in food service consumer research are concerned with some aspect of segmentation, i.e. characterising segments, identifying needs or positioning specific offerings relative to specific segments. A large amount of work in this field has established a coherent theoretical structure linking restaurant attributes to repeat custom. Many studies use expectancy–disconfirmation theory and the relationship between the quality of the offering and likelihood of repeat custom has been demonstrated using sophisticated multivariate techniques.

A significant problem is that attributes of restaurant experience vary between different outlets and dining occasions. Some researchers have therefore conceptualised restaurant outcomes as service quality, for which a generalisable set of attributes exists. However this is unsatisfactory because service quality attributes alone do not describe the restaurant experience as fully as attribute sets derived empirically from consumer data. A potential way forward is through experimental studies, which have been relatively little used in food service contexts and offer opportunities to hold groups of variables constant while others are changed. This may provide a way to clarify perceived attributes under different conditions.

Table 1  
Summary of the four areas of Food Service Consumer Research

| Area                       | Practical focus                    | Methods used                                       | Theoretical focus                 | Prominent authors                                                   |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Survey research            | Segmentation                       | Geodemographic, attitude & behaviour-based surveys | Attribute theory                  | e.g. Nayga, Oh, Knutson                                             |
|                            | Targeting                          | Modelling                                          | Expectancy-disconfirmation        | Reviews by Pizam and Ellis, Bowen                                   |
|                            | Positioning                        |                                                    | Repeat business                   | Kivela, Inkbaran and Reece                                          |
| Experimental research      | Customer preferences               | Control of specific variables.                     | Factors affecting food preference | Bell, Cardello <u>et al.</u> , De Castro, Meiselman, Schutz         |
| Economics and geography    | Spatial and socioeconomic location | Analysis of secondary data                         | Population flow and behaviour     | Holm <u>et al.</u> , Nayga and Wanzala, Smith                       |
| Sociology and anthropology | Individual experience              | Depth interview                                    | Power relations                   | Finkelstein, Mennel <u>et al.</u> , Ritzer, Warde and Martens, Wood |
|                            | Wider social context               | Observation                                        | Social impact                     |                                                                     |
|                            |                                    | Literature review                                  | Semiotics                         |                                                                     |

Location and economic factors seem to be at least as important as the attributes of food and service (see for instance Binkley, 1998) but have received relatively little research attention. Pioneering papers by Smith (1983, 1985) describe the application of an appropriate methodology and newer modelling techniques are also available.

Sociological and anthropological studies have the potential to enrich consumer research in the food service industry by casting light on the individual experience that underlies consumer responses. Most studies have been more concerned with the societal effects of the food service industry, but a few researchers have used semiotics and discourse analysis to access consumers' deeper meanings. This may represent a way toward understanding perceptions of restaurant experiences. In general, there seems to be a need for studies to seek new techniques and to exchange ideas and perspectives between disciplines. By its eclectic approach this review hopes to have contributed in some small measure to this process.

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