

INTERNATIONALISATION OF MENUS: THE CASE OF LEBANESE RESTAURANTS

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Abstract. *This study measures Lebanese consumer satisfaction and dining experiences at international restaurants or restaurants that offer international food items. Specifically, the study identifies which international food items are most popular in Lebanon. Results indicate that speed of service, portion size, food taste, and the inclusion of international food items on menus are important variables in predicting Lebanese consumer satisfaction. In fact, these variables account for ($R^2 = 77.1p < 0.001$) of variation in Lebanese consumer satisfaction.*

Key words: *Internationalization, menus, consumer satisfaction, Lebanon, restaurants.*

Introduction

This study investigates the transformation of Lebanese menus to resemble international ones. Specifically, the study: 1) measures Lebanese consumers satisfaction and dining experiences at restaurants that offer international foods, 2) identifies which international food items are most popular in Lebanon, and 3) examines the various forces that have influenced consumers' tastes and choices. A discussion about the effects of menu internationalization on the Lebanese food service industry is presented.

During the past decade ethnic restaurants, theme menus, and cross cultural cuisines have all gained international popularity. The growth and transformation of the restaurant industry was mainly due to advancements in technology, globalization trends, and decreasing costs of travel (Marsan, 2000). Individually or collectively, these forces were behind the development of a new kind of consumers who are savvier and more demanding. The inclusion of international food items on most menus has, therefore, become a necessity and a way to ensure restaurant survival, customer satisfaction and business continuity. It should come as no surprise to find, in small mom and pop restaurant in Beirut, items such as Philadelphia sandwiches, burgers, pizzas, fajitas, spring rolls, spinach quiche, pepper steak, and Sushi. Dishes or sandwiches from the United States, China, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Mexico have all gained presence on most menus in Lebanon.

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Fabricant (1988) suggested that what appeals to today's customer is not identical to what was desired earlier. Florence added that ethnic boundaries have blurred, and that eating styles have changed. Featherstone (1991) argued that food aesthetic considerations now heavily weigh on, tastes, preferences, and consumer choices. As early as 1994, Holland and Mc Cool reported about the emergence of cross-cultural cuisine in food service operations. Restaurants have also been quick to respond to changes in consumer needs by introducing food products that include items from all over the world.

American fast food concepts, which are heavily represented in the Lebanese market, have played a role in changing consumer tastes. International companies such as McDonald's, Hardee's, Baskin Robins, Burger King, Dominos, Pizza Hut and others, have multiple outlets through Lebanon. The strong hold of American fast food companies and the aggressive marketing strategies introduced to the marketplace pushed many of the Lebanese younger generation away from the consumption of traditional dishes. As a result, Lebanese restaurants are offering variety of sauces and condiments such as ketchup, mayonnaise, BBQ sauce, and honey mustard sauce. Lebanese have imported exotic salad items from various parts of the world and are now seasoning their salads with thousand island, blue cheese, French dressing and balsamic vinegar instead of the traditional lemon garlic dressing.

In all, the infusion and the acceptance of new food items are changing Lebanese menus. The change is so explicit to the extent that it has affected eating preferences at the household and commercial levels. Ketchup and salsa have replaced the traditional olive oil or lemon syrup dip. The introduction of new dishes, sauces and herb blends is fascinating Lebanese consumers and is creating an unprecedented wave of demand for new restaurants products.

Literature Review

Forces leading to the internationalization of Lebanese Menus

The American fast food industry is perceived as the agent that accelerated the spread of various food products like burgers, pizzas, hot dogs, apple pie, cinnamon roll, etc, to the world. This process started when Carl Karcher decided to launch his own business. He bought a cart and sold hotdogs to customers in their cars. Shortly, Carl was able to buy a second cart and before long he was opening a drive-in restaurant called Carl's Drive-In Barbeque (Anonymous, 2005). During that time the McDonald brothers set on to establish a drive in restaurant called the McDonald's Famous Hamburgers. The McDonald

restaurant required no glassware, silverware, dishes or table service staff. At McDonalds, service was quick and the produced hamburger had consistently the same taste, portions size, and ingredients. Subsequently other fast food concepts gained popularity and acceptance. Towards the early 1980's the fast food industry was well saturated in the United States and fast food companies started to search for growth opportunities in international markets (Reiter, 1996). Today, fast food outlets are represented in most cities around the world.

In order to be represented and welcomed in international markets, restaurants and food service companies have recognized the likes and dislikes of local communities. It is commonly known that any product that is accepted in one corner of the world may not be welcomed in another. When introducing new products into a country, food manufacturers and retailers have social and cultural responsibilities. Otherwise, the people of that country would perceive the product as offensive and violating cultural or religious norms. For example, serving non Halal meat product in the Middle East and other Islamic countries may be very offensive. According to American Heritage Dictionary (2000), Halal meat is a product that has been slaughtered in the manner prescribed by Islamic teaching. All international food serving companies operating in Lebanon are advertising in public media and on their menus, that their product is Halal. The public awareness campaign is designed to inform locals that though the product is international, it meets and respects local religious values, culture, and food preferences. Similarly, some Middle Eastern countries consider food items containing pork or it's by- products as unacceptable for religious reasons. Thus, ruling out the success of such items as bacon, sausage, ribs or ham.

American restaurant chains have made numerous adaptations when venturing into Middle Eastern markets. Cultural differences, religious practices and absence of certain food supplies have all come into play when designing international fast food menus. For example, McDonald's in Lebanon have made adjustments to its menu, by introducing new items such as The McArabia (pita bread, garlic sauce, two peaces of burger patties, lettuce,tomatoes), and the McKafta (pita bread, tehini sauce, onion, lettuce, tomatoes and two peaces of kafta patties which is made of burger patties mixed with shopped parsley and onion). Customizations of international menus to local needs, and the fusion of Lebanese menus by international dishes are some of the measures that are helping the food service industry position itself for the future.

Agents of change

Immigrant and Foreign Labor

Immigrant and foreign labor residing in Lebanon have contributed to the introduction of the new food items. Similarly, Lebanese citizens who have travelled to the United States, Asia, Africa, and Europe, brought back home new recipes, ingredients, and food preferences. Also, the generation that left Lebanon during war years (1975-1992), is coming back home with different cooking and eating habits acquired in Latin America, North America, Europe, Far East, or the Gulf Region in the Middle-East. All of the arrivals have contributed to the increase in the food variety and choices offered at Lebanese restaurants and later-on at supermarkets. The variety of international processed food items in the Lebanese marketplace is growing rapidly.

Repatriating Lebanese are asking food service providers and restaurants operators to include popular international ethnic dishes on their menus. Similarly, the same group is engaged in teaching families, friends and neighbours about new cooking methods and eating choices. Examples of newly introduced foods include fajitas, boritos, Philadelphia steaks, tuna subs and pizza. Moreover, some of the foreign labors have opened specialty ethnic restaurants that serve traditional cuisines from countries such as Thailand, China and India.

Changing taste buds

A Nestle (2002) report stated that food companies are the drivers of change in consumer eating preferences. Food companies are developing new mixes, blends, flavors and tastes in which their consumption is fashionable and faddish. Nestle believe that consumers would be inclined to experiment and eventually adopt these tastes. It is therefore, in the keen interest of the food industry in general to develop such tastes, since new products are the key to expanding sales.

Similarly, the rise of celebrity chefs, and the increasing popularity of TV cooking shows are playing a role in developing and changing consumer taste buds. Celebrity chefs, such as Alain Ducass and Paul have opened their restaurants in Beirut. Moreover, the increase in family disposable income along with the exposure to new and different foods has stimulated demand for variety when dining out. As income rises and consumption of any one good increase, the pleasure that the consumer derives from that good decrease – in economic terms this process is known as “diminishing marginal utility” (Hall and Lieberman, 2004). The enjoyment of eating the tenth “crispy on the outside, creamy on the inside” donut is not as big as when one is eating it for the first

time (Blisard, 2002). As a result of diminishing marginal utility, newly introduced products will be immediately sought-after by consumers. Thus, resulting in an increase in consumption. Having acquired the pleasure of flavored new food items and developed new taste buds to enjoy foreign food, restaurant operators are responding to consumer's needs by introducing more popular international food items on local menus.

Changing demographics

Social status, gender, sexuality, age and ethnic background have all influenced food presentation and selection. According to Freud (1900) "food is more about sexual anxiety and social respectability." In an attempt to feel socially accepted and respected, Lebanese consumers dine and experiment with food provided by various ethnic groups. The fast pace of life, coupled with changes in lifestyles have meant that more and more people have less time to cook food at home. Today's restaurants range from fast food to fine dining, provide a quick and convenient solution (Brookes, 2004).

The change in consumption is influenced not only by the economic and sociocultural forces but also by other factors including:

- Greater numbers of women employed outside the home.
- Higher incomes.
- Smaller Lebanese household sizes.
- Globalization and desire to belong to international community.
- Changes in dietary preferences.
- Convenience.
- Time Constraints.

Interestingly, it is the younger generation that is the most frequent consumers of international restaurants in Lebanon. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) world fact book (2005), approximately 50% of the population of Lebanon is under the age of 25. Additionally, the rising incomes and population growth are expected to continue to fuel the expansion of the market and food consumed away from home. This age group is characterized as, an embracer of food and innovations, very socially active, have attained financial independence and possess a strong global culture and outgoing personalities.

Consumer Dining Satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction in the restaurant industry plays a pivotal role in ensuring a restaurant's survival. Satisfied customers usually visit the same restaurant and develop a sense of loyalty to it. According to Johnston and Clark (2001) "satisfaction is the customer's assessment of a service based on a comparison of perception about service delivery with prior expectation."

Moreover, Oh (2000) stated “that the idea of success in the restaurant industry depends on the service quality, value, and satisfaction of customers.” Furthermore, Yuksel (2002) argued that customers go to a specific restaurant not only because it provides good food and service, but also because of the associated price-value relationship. In fact most, if not all, customers tend to frequent restaurants not only for the good food and quality of service environment, but also because of their perception of value for money. Zeithaml (1988) concluded that the derived value may mean different things to different individuals.

Research conducted by Oh (2000) suggests that perceived value, quality and dining satisfaction are positively correlated. These variables are also inter-correlated with each other, suggesting that when customers experience high service quality, they are likely to feel high levels of satisfaction. Sulek and Hensley (2004) also found food quality to play a major role in consumer dining satisfaction. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of two other variables in customer satisfaction, service and ambiance. Combined these variables contribute the most to overall satisfaction with the dining experience.

Finally, Gilbert *et al.* (2004) suggested that the combination of satisfaction and behavior is important for the success of businesses. Andersan and Sullivan’s (1993) findings corroborate the former proposition. They found that higher customer satisfaction leads to greater customer loyalty. Similarly, Anderson and Fornell (2000) stated “that businesses exist and compete to create satisfied customers.”

Methodology

Procedure

The first part of the study included menu collection and was conducted in Lebanon during the months of January and February 2006 by a group of MBA students at the Lebanese American University. The students collected 65 menus from various restaurants in the areas of Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The sample represented restaurants with different ethnic backgrounds, size, level of service, and location. Some restaurants were locally owned, while others were regional or international franchised units. A popularity index was then developed with the objective to identify the most popular ethnic food items in Lebanon. The second part of the study required participants to answer a survey instrument composed of 27 items. Participants represented graduate MBA student at the Lebanese American University. This part of the study took place in May 2006.

Hypothesis

Based on literature review, the following hypotheses were developed.

H1: There is a positive relationship between taste of food and overall satisfaction with the dining experience of customers who frequent international restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items.

H2: There is a positive relationship between cleanliness and overall satisfaction with the dining experience of customers who frequent international restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items.

H3: There is a positive relationship between speed of service and overall satisfaction with the dining experience of customers who frequent international restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items.

H4: There is a positive relationship between overall satisfactions with foods and overall satisfaction with the dining experience of customers who frequent international restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items.

H5: There is a positive relationship between menu prices and overall satisfaction with the dining experience of customers who frequent international restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items.

Sample

A convenient sample represented N=230 graduate M.B.A students at the Lebanese American University. Sampling is one of the most important criterions to be considered whilst performing a study as it directly affects the results, conclusion, or hypothesis. A non-probability sampling procedure was utilized in this study.

Instrument

After a thorough review of the literature, a 27-item questionnaire was developed. The instrument was designed to assess: 1) attitude toward ethnic food, 2) opinion of foreign countries who are export leaders of ethnic foods, 3) food preference and popularity, 4) satisfaction in ethnic foods, and 5) demographics. The questionnaire required respondents to rate their level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree) and (5 = strongly agree). The instrument included statements such as “My attitude toward ethnic foods is positive”, or “The impact of my attitude toward a foreign country affect my decision to consume ethnic food”. Preferences, on the other hand, were tested with statements such as “I have preference for one type of ethnic restaurant over others”, or “I prefer restaurants whose menu include international food”. Variables such as prices, availability of popular food, taste of food, portion sizes, cleanliness, interior design, and music were also tested.

Data Analysis

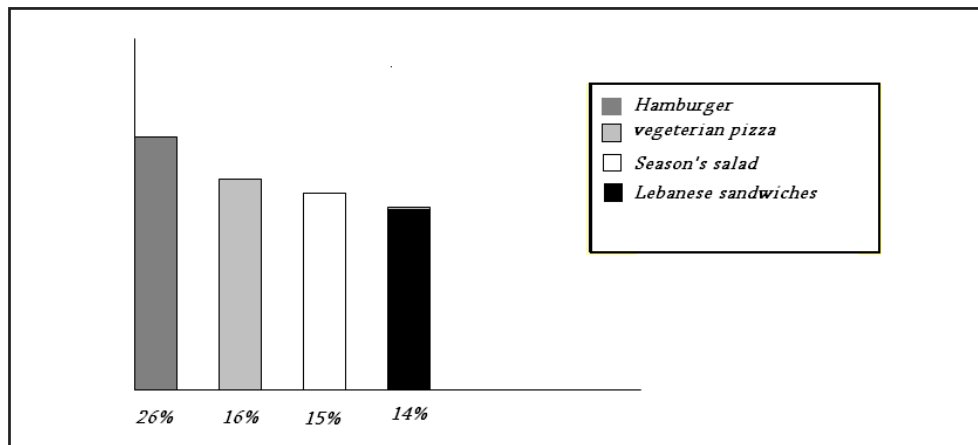
Two statistical techniques were utilized to analyze collected data: 1) descriptive statistics in the form of means and frequency distributions, and 2) inferential statistics that included simple regression and multiple regression analysis. The stepwise regression model was used and overall satisfaction with the dining experience, speed of service, and cleanliness were the dependent variables.

Results and Discussion

A total of 222 usable questionnaires were coded and analyzed. Female respondents represented 59% of the sample. Seventy three percent of respondents were in the 20- 25 years age bracket, while only nine percent were over 30 years old. In terms of education, 95% had completed or were completing their graduate studies.

Menu analysis revealed that American (63%), Italian (12%) and Lebanese (8%) items were the highest and most represented items on all surveyed menus. Across all surveyed menus, the most popular food item in its category was the hamburger (26%), followed by vegetarian pizza (16%), season's salad (15%) and Lebanese Sandwiches (14%).

Tab. 1. Popularity of international food items on Lebanese menus



Stepwise regression analysis revealed that the overall satisfaction with the dining experience is affected by speed of service, preference for restaurants with international food items on their menus, taste of food, and portion sizes. In fact, these variables explain $R^2 = 77.1\%$ of variance. It is evident that these

variables play an important role in ensuring customer satisfaction in Lebanese restaurants that serve international food items on its menus. Ensuring customer satisfaction is important to restaurants as it often translates to repeat customer visits. Data presented in table Two confirms Hypotheses 1 and 3. Both hypotheses indicate that overall satisfaction is affected by speed of service and taste of food. Moreover, the table indicates a positive relationship between preference for international food items and overall satisfaction with dining experience.

Tab. 2. Factors Affecting Overall Satisfaction with Dining Experience

Model	R	R Square	Standard Error of the Estimate	Significance
1	0.830a.	0.711	0.23	0.001
2	0.860b.	0.743	0.22	0.001
3	0.870c.	0.763	0.21	0.001
4	0.870d.	0.771	0.21	0.001

a. Predictors: (constants), speed of service

b. Predictors: (constants), speed of service, restaurants whose menus include international food

c. Predictors: (constants), speed of service, restaurants whose menus include international food, food taste

d. Predictors: (constants), speed of service, restaurants whose menus include international food, food taste, portion size

This finding confirms hypothesis 4, and helps explain why numerous restaurants around Beirut and Mount Lebanon are rushing to include more international food items on their menus. The quest for variety and ethnic food has become paradigm amongst Lebanese customers, and satisfying this requirement has become crucial to ensure restaurant survival and success. Further, consumers indicated that they are willing to return to restaurants if they are satisfied with the food and menu variety ($r = 0.696$, $p < 0.001$). This is a further confirmation of hypothesis 4. Therefore, it is believed that globalization has affected Lebanese customers. Lebanese customers are now more willing to experiment with different ethnic foods, and try new tastes and flavors. In effect, they are starting to seek greater variety when it comes to dining out. This trend is clearly reflected in the presented results, and helps understand why there has been a sudden surge in demand for restaurants who offer ethnic food items.

Tab. 3. Factors affecting restaurant selection and satisfaction with dining.

Model	R	R Square	Standard Error of the Estimate	Significance
1	0.849a	0.722	0.22	0.001
2	0.884b	0.781	0.19	0.001
3	0.892c	0.797	0.19	0.001

a. Predictors: (constants), Speed of service

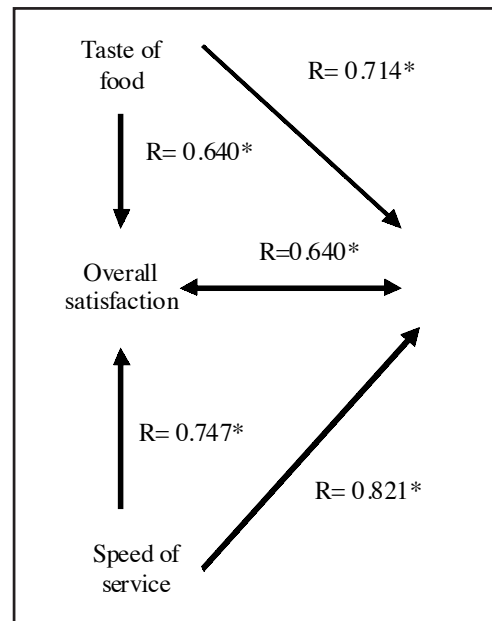
b. Predictors: (constants), Speed of service, Taste of food

c. Predictors: (constants), Speed of service, Taste of food, willingness to dine in restaurants recommended by friends

The second stepwise regression model found that restaurant selection is affected by taste of food, speed of service, and overall satisfaction with the dining experience ($R^2 = 89.2$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 3). This suggests taste of food and speeds of service contribute to the success or failure of International restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items. It can also be argued that International restaurants and other restaurants that try to emulate them are perceived by consumers to have higher sanitary conditions, which adds to their appeal. This supports Hypothesis 2, which links cleanliness to success of international restaurants or Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items. The model also suggests that cleanliness affects restaurant recommendation by friends. This indicates that customers perceive their friends as having similar sanitary standards, and hence trust their recommendations when it comes to restaurant selection.

Conversely, there was no significant relationship between menu prices and overall satisfaction with the dining experience. Price plays a secondary role in affecting customer choice. This may suggest that international restaurants and Lebanese restaurants that offer international food items on their menus have nearly the same prices, thus rendering this criterion insignificant. In any case, there was no evidence to support hypothesis 5.

The preceding diagram illustrates the relationships that exist between speed of service, cleanliness, overall satisfaction with dining experience, and taste of food. As demonstrated, speed of service highly correlates with overall satisfaction ($r = 0.747$, $p < 0.01$) and cleanliness. Speed of service was also found to be important in the two stepwise regression models discussed earlier.



* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Fig. 1. Relationship between taste of food, overall satisfaction, cleanliness, and speed of service

These findings suggest that the speed of service of restaurants plays a crucial role in contributing to consumer perception of cleanliness, and subsequently affecting consumers overall satisfaction with the dining experience. Taste of food is another important variable, as it contributes to overall satisfaction with dining experience, and relates to consumer perceptions of cleanliness of restaurants. Moreover, cleanliness itself is a contributing variable to overall satisfaction with dining experience.

Conclusions

The role of food in today's consumer driven society has also changed. Food is not only consumed for nutritional purposes, but also to satisfy social and cultural needs. Food is used to symbolize personal attributes and communicate cultural messages. Bell and Valentine (1997) stated "every mouthful, every meal, can tell us something about ourselves, and about our place in the world." According to Siemering (2004) "Globalization is the master trend that will drive the world of food in the years ahead. Consumers who are travelling the globe, both virtually and in reality, will be able to sweep up ingredients, packaged foods, recipes, and cooking techniques from every corner of the earth at an ever intensifying and accelerating pace. Formerly remote

ingredients and cooking styles are creating a whole new culinary mosaic as they are transplanted and reinterpreted all over the world.”

Results of this study concur with Siemerling (2004) findings. Internationalization of menus in Lebanon is strongly affected by globalization. This trend, which was initiated by the American fast food industry, continues to be heavily influenced by American inspired food items and concepts. As illustrated earlier, some of the most popular platters and sandwiches consumed are either American or American adaptations of existing platters or sandwiches. This preference can be attributed to a large extent to the globalization of American pop culture, and to the aggressive marketing strategies employed by American fast food outlets. The combined effect of these two “pull” factors has encouraged Lebanese consumers, in particular the younger generation, to frequent American or American inspired food outlets to experience that culture first hand.

Furthermore, the study identifies speed of service, taste of food, portion sizes, and the inclusion of international food items as important predictive variables of customer satisfaction. In turn, this suggests that the success of restaurants that offer international food items in Lebanon is attributable to, an extent, on the associated loyalty of satisfied customers. In fact, the literature supports the contention that customer satisfaction is vital to the survival and future of any organization. Although a lot of research has been conducted on this issue, the levels of customer satisfaction have not experienced a comparable rise. This is partly due to a rapidly changing society (Adebanjo, 2001). This is also true for the case of Lebanese society. Various forces, which were identified earlier, are behind these changes. Changing food preferences is just one manifestation of these changes.

As such, American food items are not the only food items consumed by the Lebanese. Other international cuisines such as Italian, French, Mexican, and Japanese are also popular. The popularity of these cuisines has been attributed to a large extent to the Lebanese Diaspora, who upon their return or visit to Lebanon, introduced Lebanese consumers to these different tastes. The exposure of Lebanese consumers to different tastes and cuisines has made them appreciate and seek food variety. Therefore it is very common, to find different ethnic restaurants located side by side in Beirut’s commercial and residential districts.

Moreover, the increasing popularity of American style casual diners such as Chili’s, TGI Fridays, and Hard Rock Café- has also played a role in

strengthening the preference for American inspired food items. Casual dining restaurants, which are gaining popularity among the younger generation, provide pleasant ambience, greater food variety, tasty food, and good value for money, factors that set them apart from other restaurants and make them popular hangouts. These factors help explain why American food items were ranked first amongst Lebanese consumers.

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