

## Chapter 9

# Exploring the Meal Experience: Customer Perceptions of Dark-Dining

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### ABSTRACT

*This research considers the meal experience literature and explores consumer's motivations in the dark-dining setting. The notions of discussion relate to experience economy and consumptionscape theories highlighting that sensory-cues in the meal experience constrain each other. The sense of touch, although scientifically explored, is yet being further explored in the dark-dining meal experience and reflects dominance in the dark-dining meal experience. Conclusively, despite the effects of the meal experience in a light restaurant, customers re-discover their senses in a dark restaurant. In conclusion, it remains questionable whether repeat business will occur due to post-experienced, preserved and prolonged perceptions.*

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

The meal experience is a sensory complexity that is reminded by Solomon (2011) as a perception of sensation and a response from our sensory receptors. These are our five senses, sight, hear, smell, taste, and touch called stimuli. Food and beverage choice is an unconscious decision making process affected by colours, smells, lighting, plate sizes and multicultural avenues (Stroebele & De Castro, 2004; Macht 2008). Consequently, Robbins (2003) states that it is how the sensory impressions of the ME are organised. The senses become our “guide” and our mediator-variables however would require investigation into the scope of how such sensory activities affect the ME in dark-dining. Arguably, the senses would influence each other in different environmental situations. Schiffman (2001) argues it is those sensory-perceptions that cannot be de-constructed as sensory variables and proposed that perceptions are “Gestalts”. Nevertheless, individual parts should be discussed to understand the contributions as singular cues towards holistic comprehension. Bitner (1992) introduced the servicescape that proposed the holistic model and perception of colour, light, space, personnel, layout, and design that affected consumer perceptions in environments. One can be argumentative to state that the ME is extremely sensitive to the setting and

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situation. Notwithstanding, the operation itself is a fundamental part of the ME planning process. Within reason, visual sensory experiences create mental images that prompt cognitive processes (Lin, 2004). Bitner (1992) states, consumers are firstly affected by images and colours before consuming products/services. One would need to consider other operational components e.g. service, quality and ambience. As of this, product and service variability is complex due to the ever-evolving external environment. The restaurateur, although a professional, may seek challenging times as customer's expectations change simultaneously and thus making the dining-experience an unpredictable one (Pantelidis & Maree, 2009; Stierand & Wood, 2010; Hemmington 2007; Timothy 2006). This piece of research is only an insight into how the ever-evolving ME can be manipulated under different meal settings.

## **1.1 Sensory Cues of the Meal Experience**

Music influences consumer's choices (Alpert and Alpert, 1986) it also positions arousals through emotion (Areni and Kim, 1993). Music can manipulate consumers to do something and often functions as a mediator. Areni and Kim (1993) researched that music in retail outlets can influence consumer behaviour. Thus by playing different at times at different tempos encouraged profitability and re-purchases. In contrast, noises can be irritating and thus volume/s of music can be perceived stimulating. Sound/s can be unexpected and may come across as undesirable (Kryter, 1985). Overstimulated (high volume) also decreases human concentration that may increase activity (Kryter, 1985). Reversibly, a permanent sound or total quietness can also be perceived irritable. According to Rosenbaum et al (2007) aroma and smell is a powerful sense and creates a mood that helps to promote memories (Hirsch & Trannel, 1991). Scents are used in sensorial marketing strategies to attract and extend purchases that have shown increases of sales of up to 300% (Hirsch, 1991). Research has shown that 75% of consumer's arousals are perceived by their noses (Bell, 2007). Hvastja and Zanuttinit (1991) state that olfactory cues attract attention to existing agents in the air that control quality and guide behaviour from previous experiences. Mood behaviours can also be controlled as a mediator of individual perception. While smell can be seen as the strongest sense it should be evaluated with other environmental cues as Zemke & Shoemaker (2007) stated the scent contributes to servicescape. Touch, which is one of the basic senses that are learnt before vision and smell (Rosenbaum et al 2007) are tactile sensations and can be designed to alter or enhance the dining experience (Harrison, 2001). Examples include chair positioning (Anderson & Mossberg, 2004) starched tablecloths (Krishna & Morrin, 2008) dining temperatures (Brobeck, 1948) and ceramic tables that are heated and vibrate (Jakubik, 2012). Briggs (2013) found that the weight and colour of cutlery impacts taste and thus haptic senses affect product experience and judgment. Although one could say that this is common sense what would happen when the weight differed? Smith, Clance and imes (1998:05) developed a taxonomy which critically evaluates touch in seven form/s: "Sexual touch, aggressive/hostile touch, inadvertent touch, conversational markers, socially stereotyped touch, touch as an expression of the therapeutic relationship and technical touch". Touch can also have cultural implications, for example, eating with hands in India or food textures that can be managed to inspire. Thus, substantial research highlights that touch is unique as a symbol of communication however also a contribution to arousal and emotion. The sense of touch may vary person to person, consciously or unconsciously which perhaps entertains and builds experience.

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