

EXAMINING THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE, GENDER AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN CUSTOMERS

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ABSTRACT: This study examines preference differences of Millennial students, born 1981 – 2000 (within and between) two cultures (Rozin, 2003) and to test the finding that perceptions about dining are culture and gender-specific (Bryant & Dundes, 2008). 799 Polish and American students were surveyed. Significant differences were revealed in five of seven construct measures. The series of one-way ANOVAs show that frequency of going to restaurants and place of dining out play an important role in shaping preferences toward casual dining. Differences between Polish males and females are large and significant in all seven constructs, while for the Americans there are no gender differences in perceptions. This study confirms that perceptions are culture specific and vary between two cultures. However, the most important distinction seems to be differences among customers in preferences that are individualistic, rather than explained by culture or gender based. **Keywords:** Food Preferences, Casual Dining, Cross-Cultural, Gender Based

RESUMEN: Este estudio analiza las diferencias en las preferencias de los estudiantes del Milenio (nacidos entre 1981 y 2000), entre dos culturas y en el seno de su cultura (Rozin, 2003), de modo a que se pueda poner a prueba la idea de que las percepciones de las personas en lo que respecta a la restauración son específicas a una cultura y a un **género** (Bryant & Dundes, 2008). 799 estudiantes polacos y estadounidenses fueron cuestionados. Se encontraron diferencias significativas en cinco de las siete medidas de constructos. Los testes estadísticos con *one-way ANOVA* muestran que la frecuencia de las idas a restaurantes juega un papel importante en la constitución de preferencias en lo que respecta a restaurantes informales. Las diferencias encontradas entre las preferencias de las mujeres y de los varones polacos son bastante significativas en la totalidad de los siete constructos, mientras que en el caso de los estadounidenses no existen diferencias de género en las percepciones. Este estudio confirma que las percepciones son específicas a una cultura y varían entre dos culturas. Sin embargo, la discrepancia más importante parece ser que las diferencias entre clientes en sus preferencias son individuales, y no son explicadas con base en cuestiones culturales o de género. **Palabras clave:** preferencias alimentares, restaurantes informales, intercultural, deferencias de género.

RESUMO: Este estudo analisa as diferenças nas preferências dos estudantes do Milénio (nascidos entre 1981 e 2000), entre duas culturas e no seio da sua cultura (Rozin, 2003), por

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forma a pôr à prova a ideia de que as percepções das pessoas no que diz respeito à restauração são específicas a uma cultura e a um género (Bryant & Dundes, 2008). 799 estudantes Polacos e Americanos foram questionados. Encontraram-se diferenças significativas em cinco das sete medidas de constructos. As análises efetuadas com o método one-way ANOVA mostram que a frequência das idas a restaurantes desempenha um papel importante na constituição de preferências em relação a restaurantes informais. As diferenças encontradas entre as preferências das mulheres e dos homens Polacos são bastante significativas na totalidade dos sete constructos, enquanto que no caso dos Americanos não existem diferenças de género nas percepções. Este estudo confirma que as percepções são específicas a uma cultura e variam entre duas culturas. No entanto, a discrepância mais importante parece ser a de que as diferenças entre clientes nas suas preferências são individuais, ao invés de serem explicadas com base em questões culturais ou de género. **Palavras-chave:** preferências alimentícias, restaurantes informais, intercultural, diferenças de género.

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality and tourism businesses work hard to understand their customers. Literature is replete with studies of segmentation, motivation, satisfaction, and intentions to return. In this increasingly globalized environment, international tourism is expected to grow. The hospitality sector is confronted with cultural diversity and its accompanying heterogeneity (Becker, Murrmann, Murrmann & Cheung, 1999). Thus it is increasingly important to understand the extent to which customer differences may be cultural, gender and individual specific.

A number of studies have examined cross-cultural issues within the restaurant setting. For example, in comparing restaurant perceptions of American and Spanish students, Bryant & Dundes (2008) determined that perceptions about fast food are culture and gender-specific. In their study, more American college males (61%) considered value (amount of food for the money) to be a priority than did other respondents (35%), and relatively few American college males (29%) cited nutritional status as important (versus 60% of other college respondents). They also found that convenience of fast food is more important to Americans (69%) than Spaniards (48%), while more Spanish college students (49%) than Americans (18%) objected to the proliferation of fast food establishments in their own countries. Murase & Bojanic (2004) examined university students' differences in restaurant brand personality across cultures. Unlike Bryant & Dundes (2008), they found little cultural differences in the perception of brand personalities. The current study further examines these issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tastes of consumers can be thought of as an expression of attitudes and preferences (Bagozzi, Wong, Abe & Bergami, 2000). Baek,

Ham & Yang (2000) investigated college students' perceptions of fast food restaurant selection by having them rate attributes in terms of importance. They found that both Koreans and Filipinos viewed menu price as the most important attribute. While brand, food-related factors and service were ranked high by the Koreans, the Filipinos did not regard brand as a very important factor. The relationship between cultural norms and customers' expectations in the restaurant industry was investigated by Becker et al. (1999). In that study, they examined six dimensions of service expectations for casual and full-service restaurants as evaluated by both American and Chinese cultures, finding that customer's expectations for service differ as a function of cultural background. Ruetzler, Hertzman & Taylor (2009) examined cross-cultural service quality perceptions and found significant differences in two of six factors. However, they also found that broad assumptions of cultural preferences across several universities could not be confirmed. Witkowski, Ma & Zheng (2003) compared the brand identity of Kentucky Fried Chicken in China and the United States. In almost all cases, the Chinese had a more positive brand impression of KFC than did the Americans. They found that brand identity impressions were correlated with satisfaction and patronage intentions, but more so for the Americans. In a casual dining study of American and Japanese consumers, Winsted (1997) also found cross-cultural differences in quality dimensions. Verma, Pullman & Gddale (1999) found that English, Japanese and Spanish-speaking consumers at an international airport food court evaluated menu and brand attributes differently. Rood & Dziadkowiec (2010) trained university students to conduct mystery shopping in casual dining restaurants in their two native countries. That study found that American and Polish students have different expectations regarding certain aspects of services provided by casual dining restaurants. In particular, the Polish students appear to have a preference for independent restaurants rather than chain restaurants, compared to the American students who had no preference.

Gender and preference differences between cultures

Studies have been conducted on the effects of customer preferences for restaurant dining (June & Smith, 1987; Knutson, 2000; Bernstein, Ottenfeld, & Witte, 2003; Bryant & Dundes, 2008; Carbonell et al., 2008; Kim & Park, 2008; Kim, Hertzman & Hwang, 2010). There is an important connection between culture and cuisine as food is an important element in constructing a regional identity. One such example is the phenomenon of culinary tourism (Smith & Xiao, 2008). Contemporary tourists are more open to trying indigenous and locally produced food (Torres, 2002). The tastes and preferences of tourists drive demand and can create linkages to local production.

Culture is important because it helps define psychological differences (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Rozin (2003) examined five principles for understanding cultural differences in relation to individual differences, suggesting that there are real human predispositions of various sorts and that culture is a powerful force, and why it is surprisingly easy for us to understand the viewpoint of people from other cultures. That study suggests there are psychological differences between two cultures with respect to differing individual preferences for the same attribute or situation. This may be because, "cultures induce preferences for thinking, feeling, or acting in particular ways" (Rozin, 2003: 277). Individual differences may also vary in their endorsement of rejection of a culture's ideals (Leung & Cohen, 2011). For example, in a study of Indian students, Rozin (2003) found differences between cultures will generally be larger in older generations and suggested that the current world-wide generation of undergraduate students is substantially different from all other older generations in terms of values. Leung & Cohen (2011: 1) made two important findings: "a) there can be wide differences in behavior between people of cultures, and b) within any given culture individuals can vary widely from each other." Church (2001) states that for psychologists, a cross-cultural approach is characterized by a focus on individual differences including values, whereas contemporary cross-cultural research examining the hospitality and tourism industry is presently limited to examining consumer behaviors or perceptions on the products and services the industry provides (Baek, Ham & Yang, 2000).

Poria (2008) notes that gender is a commonly asked question in hospitality research, but there are conflicting opinions on its predictive effect. According to Russo, Pirlott & Choen (2012), gender is a dynamic system including interpersonal and psychological and may "change and evolve within and across cultures and over time" (p. 159). In a study by Harrington, Ottenbacher & Kendall (2011), they found that the importance level of fine-dining restaurant attributes varied by gender. In a Turkish study, females preferred to consume fruits and vegetables, whereas males preferred more meat and bread (Ozilgen, 2011). In a study of students in Spain and the United States, Bryant & Dundes (2008) found that perceptions and preferences about fast food are both culture and gender-specific, finding significant differences regarding taste/flavor, food value and nutritional value. It is a prevailing opinion today that customer preferences regarding food choices are a critical marketing issue (Baek, Ham & Yang, 2000; June & Smith, 1987). Moreover, preferences drive market forces (Rozen, 2003). However, "while there are discernible differences in food consumption and preferences by tourist nationality, and type of tourist, they are not as great as the literature would suggest" (Torres, 2002, p. 282). In summation, the literature is mixed with respect to these issues.

PURPOSE, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current empirical study is to examine differences of Millennial students, born 1981 – 2000 (Rood, 2010), *within and between* two cultures (Rozin, 2003), and to test the finding that perceptions about dining are culture and gender-specific (Bryant & Dundes, 2008). One strategy in cross-cultural research is to make the sample narrow so that similar sub-cultures are drawn, but in different countries (Baek, Ham & Yang, 2000). That approach was employed in the current study. Seven constructs measures were adapted from a study of full service restaurants, Food Related Lifestyle questions, and a chain versus independent restaurants survey. The construct measures and component survey questions were previously verified by Dziadkowiec & Rood (2015, in press). Characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. A unified demographic segment was selected from American hospitality / tourism management students and Polish hospitality / tourism management and quality management students. Reliability scores for the 43 item survey are .80 for the Polish subset and .71 for the American subset. The survey was completed by 799 students: 313 American (39.2%) and 486 Polish (61.1%). Almost two-thirds of the respondents fell into the ages of 21-25 and nearly three-quarters of the participants were female (both figures approximating their percentage in their respective programs of study).

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Variable	N	Frequency (%)
Culture (N=799)		
American	313	39.2%
Polish	486	61.1%
Gender (N=799)		
Male	204	25.5%
Female	589	73.7%
No response	6	0.8%
Age (N=799)		
through age 20	256	32.0%
21-25	517	64.7%
26-30	15	1.9%
more than 30	5	0.9%
No response	6	0.8%

The seven constructs used in the study are:

1. Branded versus independent

2. Attitudes towards advertising
3. Brands and brand heterogeneity
4. Quality aspects of food perception
5. Dining out
6. Procedural costs
7. Social event and relationship

Do males and females have different responses to the survey questions? In order to examine the primary null hypothesis that there are no differences within and between two populations, responses to each of the seven constructs are individually examined. A series of one-way ANOVAs were applied to test gender specific differences within and between cultures. For the purpose of the current study, *within cultures* means that data from one culture is examined to determine if there is a gender difference in each of the seven constructs. *Between cultures* means that data from one segment, such as females is examined to determine if there are differences between cultures with regard to that segment. *Combined country* means that all data is examined (n=799) for preference differences that can be explained by gender.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Polish and American gender preference differences were identified via ANOVAs (Table 2). Statistically significant differences between men and women were found in two of the seven construct measures: "Attitudes towards Advertising" and "Social Event and Relationship." Thus, as a combined group (n=799) the Millennial students are a rather homogeneous group. Further analysis was applied to examine gender differences between and within cultures.

Table 2. Gender differences within, between and combined cultures (ANOVA significance)

	Within cultures		Between cultures		Combined Country
	Poland	USA	Female	Male	
Branded/chain vs. independent	0.658	0.327	0.000*	0.000*	0.111
Attitudes towards advertising	0.012	0.077	0.000*	0.056	0.000*
Brands and brand heterogeneity	0.001	0.434	0.000*	0.000*	0.003
Quality aspects of food perception	0.006	0.644	0.000*	0.119	0.034
Dining out	0.124	0.343	0.000*	0.000*	0.583
Procedural costs	0.002	0.147	0.000*	0.000*	0.035
Social event and relationship	0.000*	0.101	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*

*($p < 0.001$)

Analysis within cultures shows that there are no statistically significant differences between American men and women, and differences between Polish men and women were identified in only one construct: "Social Event and Relationship." Dziadkowiec & Rood (2015, in press) observed that American students are a more homogeneous group than Polish students in terms of their casual dining preferences. The current study confirms that observation while also suggesting factors related to "Social Event and Relationship" is one difference between Poles and Americans.

Analysis between cultures shows highly significant differences are observed in all seven constructs. This indicates that Polish and American female students have very different casual dining preferences. For men, highly significant differences are observed in five of the seven constructs, with "Attitudes towards Advertising" and "Quality Aspects of Food Perception" not being significant. This suggests that while Polish and American males share some preferences, there are more differences than similarities.

The next series of analysis details additional differences between food preferences by gender.

Differences "within culture" – Poland

Gender differences in "Social Event and Relationship"

There are statistically significant differences in two of the seven construct questions ($p < 0.000$): "I enjoy going to restaurants with my family and friends" ($F = 1.16$, Female $\mu = 4.10$, Male $\mu = 3.65$, $t = 5.50$, $p < 0.000$), and "When I serve dinner to friends, the most important thing is that we are together" ($F = 1.16$, Female $\mu = 4.10$, Male $\mu = 3.65$, $t = 5.50$, $p < 0.000$). A number of restaurant studies in Poland have found that Poles prefer homemade food and go to restaurants to meet friends rather than just to eat (Levytska & Kowrygo, 2007; Dabrowska et al., 2010; Kowalczyk, 2012; Dziadkowiec, 2014). The results of the current study confirm that in Poland dining out is an important part of one's social life. It also appears that social aspects associated with dining out are more important for women than for men.

Differences "within culture" – USA

An examination of Table 2 indicates that there are no significant differences between American men and women. Contrary to the findings of Bryant & Dundes (2008), preferences towards casual dining restaurants were not found to be gender-specific.

A number of restaurant studies have found that customer perceptions are culture specific (Bryant & Dundes, 2008; Baek, Ham & Yang,

2000; Becker et al., 1999; Ruetzler, Hertzman & Taylor, 2009; Witkowski, Ma & Zheng, 2003; Winsted 1997; Verma, Pullman & Goodale, 1999; Rood & Dziadkowiec, 2010). In the current study, differences between Polish males and females are large and significant in only one of seven constructs, while for the Americans there are no gender differences in perceptions. Only one culture showed gender differences, somewhat different from the findings of Bryant & Dundes (2008). This confirms that perceptions are culture specific and vary between two cultures.

Differences between individuals toward casual dining

Additional statistical analysis of the data identified further differences between individuals. Differences between customers may reflect various factors. Three of the measures: Attitudes to advertising, branded or independent restaurants preferences and the role of casual dining in everyday life prompt three supplemental research questions that were analyzed.

RQ1: Do positive or negative attitudes towards advertising influences individual preferences towards casual dining?

As shown in Table 3, over 40% of respondents have more confidence in food products that they have seen advertised than in unadvertised products, while about 20% had the opposite opinions. More females (46.2%) than males (35.8%) have positive attitudes to advertising. Advertising plays a less important role in the Polish culture (34.8%) than in the American culture (56.2%).

Table 3. Attitudes to Advertising

Variable	Frequency (%)	
Positive attitudes to advertising (N=345)	42.2%	
Culture		
American (313)	176	56.2%
Polish (486)	169	34.8%
Gender		
Male (284)	73	35.8%
Female (589)	272	46.2%
Negative attitudes to advertising (N=175)	21.9%	
Culture		
American (313)	47	15.0%
Polish (486)	188	38.7%
Gender		
Male (284)	74	26.1%
Female (589)	161	27.3%

To find out if attitudes to advertising have an influence on casual dining preferences, a series of one-way ANOVAs were employed. The results show that significant differences were identified in five of seven constructs (Table 6) suggesting that casual dining preferences are influenced by positive or negative attitudes to advertising. Only preferences towards branded/independent restaurants and perceptions of procedural costs do not depend on attitudes to advertising. It can be concluded that preferences toward casual dining are determined by individual attitudes to advertising rather than by gender. Two constructs: "Attitudes towards advertising" and "Social event and relationship" are determined both by gender and individual attitudes to advertising, but three constructs: "Brands and brand heterogeneity," "Quality aspects of food perception" and "Dining out" are determined only by individual preferences. They depend on individual attitudes to advertising and do not depend on gender. "Branded/Chain vs. Independent" and "Procedural costs" are not related to either gender or attitudes to advertising.

Analyzing cross-cultural differences reveals that attitudes to advertising are culture specific (Dziadkowiec & Rood, 2015), but only partially gender specific (current study, Table 2). There are important differences between males and females (combined country), but there are no differences between males from both countries (between countries) and between males and females in the United States. Thus, while culture and gender seems to explain some differences, the more important distinction seems to be differences among customers in preferences that are individualistic. For example, individuals present different attitudes to advertising and these attitudes are reflective of personal preferences. This finding is consistent with other studies (for example: Knutson, 2000; Krishna, 2012; Kim, Hertzman & Hwang, 2010; Harrington, Ottenbacher & Kendall, 2011; Babicz-Zielinska, 1999; June & Smith, 1987; Torres, 2002).

RQ2: Are there differences towards casual dining between the respondents who prefer chain / branded or independent restaurants?

That question was prompted by a recent study (Dziadkowiec & Rood, 2015) which revealed that there are important differences between two cultures with respect to preferences toward branded and independent restaurants. As shown in Table 4, a similar number of respondents fell into each of three groups: about 33.7% respondents prefer branded restaurants, 29.3% independent restaurants and 36% have no restaurant preference type. The current study confirms cultural differences toward restaurant type. Nearly half of Americans prefer chain restaurants (46%), while only 25.6% of Poles have similar preferences. In the case of independent restaurants, the situation is reversed, with 37% of Poles, and only 17.3 % of Americans have preferences for non-branded (independent) restaurants.

Table 4. Branded/chain vs. Independent restaurants

Variable	Frequency	(%)
Favor branded/chain restaurants	269	33.7%
Favor independent restaurants	234	29.3%
No preference toward branded/independent restaurants	288	36.0%
Favor branded/chain restaurants		
Culture		
American (313)	144	46.0%
Polish (486)	125	25.7%
Gender		
Male (284)	67	23.6%
Female (589)	202	34.3%
Favor independent restaurants		
Culture		
American (313)	54	17.3%
Polish (486)	180	37.0%
Gender		
Male (284)	66	23.2%
Female (589)	186	31.6%

A series of ANOVAs revealed no significant differences for any of the seven construct measures between those who favor independent, or those who prefer branded/chain restaurants (Table 6). It may be that preference for either restaurant type is more related to individual experiences with those two types of restaurants.

RQ3: Are there differences between "frequent" and "occasional" customers?

In the current study, *frequent customers* are the respondents who agreed to at least one of two statements: "Going out for dinner is a regular part of our eating habits," or "I like to go out for dinner as part of my routine." *Occasional customers* are respondents who do not agree with either of the above statements or chose "neither agree nor disagree." The results (see Table 5) indicate that 63.3% go to restaurants occasionally and dining out is not a part of their routines. The share of women and men in the frequent customer and occasional customer segments are similar. The analysis also shows different culture-based behavior toward casual dining. The majority of American students (57.8%) are frequent customers, but only 21.4% of the Poles.

Table 5. Frequent vs. Occasional Customers

Variable	Frequency	(%)
Frequent customers	285	35.7%
Occasional customers	506	63.3%
No answer	8	1.0%
Frequent customers (285)		
Culture		
American (313)	181	57.8%
Polish (486)	104	21.4%
Gender		
Male (284)	107	37.7%
Female (589)	213	36,2%
Occasional customers (506)		
Culture		
American (313)	131	41.9%
Polish (486)	375	77.2%
Gender		
Male (284)	177	62.3%
Female (589)	374	63.5%

A number of studies have identified that customer needs and preferences are driven by past experiences leading to various intentions to return (e.g.: Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Chen & Gursoy, 2001; Severt, Tesone & Murrmann, 2005; Ting-Yueh & Shun-Ching, 2010; Susskind & Viccari, 2011; DiPietro, Coa & Partlow, 2013). In the current study, the frequency of casual dining out is included in the construct "Social event and relationship," indicating that this construct is generally gender specific, although there are no differences between American males and females (Table 2). To further investigate differences between frequent customers and occasional customers, a series of one-way ANOVA analysis were employed. The results show significant differences were identified in five of seven constructs (Table 6) suggesting that casual dining preferences are influenced by frequency of going out to dine. Only attitudes towards advertising and perceptions of quality aspects are not influenced by this factor. It can be concluded that preferences toward casual dining are strongly determined both by gender and by individual habits reflected in frequency of dining out.

Table 6. Individual differences (ANOVA significance)

	Branded Vs.Ind	Attitude Adverts	Brands Heterogeneity	Quality Aspect	Dining out	Procedure Costs	Social Event
**Combined country	0.111	0.000*	0.003	0.034	0.035	0.035	0.000*
Positive vs. Negative attitudes to advertising	0.116	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*	0.078	0.000*
Favor Branded vs. Independent Restaurants	0.001	0.074	0.027	0.068	0.002	0.005	0.003
Frequent vs. Occasional Customers	0.000*	0.049	0.000*	0.062	0.000*	0.000*	0.000*

P<0.001; ** *N*=799

CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies found that gender is an important factor influencing preferences. However, the current study did not support that finding. There are no differences between American men and women in any of the seven construct measures, and only one significant construct, "Social event and relationship", identified for Polish students. Thus, differences within cultures are associated with factors other than gender. However, significant differences between Polish and American females in all seven construct measures were found, indicating casual dining preferences are culture specific. This finding is supported by significant differences identified between Polish and American men in five of the seven constructs.

The series of one-way ANOVAs analysis show that frequency of going to restaurants and place of dining out and in everyday life plays an important role in shaping preferences toward casual dining out. The significant differences were revealed in five of seven construct measures (Table 6). The most detailed analysis shows that the preferences in only one construct, "Social event and relationship", are determined both by gender and the role of dining out in everyday life. The preferences in constructs: "Branded/Chain vs. Independent", "Brands and brand heterogeneity", "Dining out" and "Procedural costs" are determined by individual preferences; they depend on individual habits in dining out and do not depend on gender. The preferences in the construct "Quality aspects of food perception" are not related to gender or frequency of dining out.

One implication of this study is that restaurant businesses can succeed by adapting their menu offers to different cultural preferences. This may not be easy to accomplish in destinations popular with foreign tourists where offers might be more "international" and focused more on similarities between cultures rather than differences. In the combined country analysis, this study found that two factors were critical in cross-gender comparison: "Attitudes to advertising" and "Social event and relationship." It might be wise for restaurant owner/managers to focus first on these construct dimensions.

Significance and contribution to the area of study

Dziadkowiec & Rood (2015) developed a new tool to survey casual dining preferences, which was shown to be useful in cross-cultural comparisons. In the current study, representative samples of respondents from two cultures were carefully surveyed. This tool was also shown useful in gender comparisons (between, within and combined cultures). The construct measures were also used to analyze individual customer preference differences.

Study limitations

Only two cultures were surveyed. It would be interesting to replicate this study in other cultures. Only undergraduate students were surveyed. It would be beneficial to have future studies involving other demographic groups. In the current study, preference differences between branded/chain versus independent restaurants were identified, but these differences remain unexplained. While cross-cultural, gender and individual differences in casual dining preferences have been identified, clearly preferences are influenced by other factors that could be further investigated in future research. Finally, with verification of the research tool, future analysis could focus on respondent segmentation and additional refinements.

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