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CHILD FRIENDLINESS OF RESTAURANTS: A PILOT STUDY

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Science
in the Department of Nutrition and Hospitality Management
The University of Mississippi

by

AMY MCCLUSKEY BARDWELL

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to develop an instrument to measure the child friendliness of restaurants using a combination of previous literature and focus groups. The pilot study consisted of a thirty-six item survey instrument that was distributed to forty individuals. Among the forty individuals who received the survey instrument, thirty-three of them completed the survey. A panel of experts reviewed the survey results using cognitive factor analysis. The experts were asked to place each item of the survey instrument into categories. From this, five factors emerged. These included: facilities, service, atmosphere, activities, and menu. Six items from the survey instrument were deemed unnecessary and did not easily factor into any of the five categories. These items were eliminated from the survey. As a unitary scale, measuring overall kid friendliness, the Cronbach's alpha = 0.937. Future research can expand on this survey instrument to include more participants testing for reliability and validity per Churchill's (1979) Instrument Development Steps.

DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to everyone who encouraged me to keep moving forward when I was ready to give up. I particularly would like to thank my advising committee: Dr. Tanya Ruetzler, Dr. Anne Bomba, and Dr. Jim Taylor. Additionally I would like to thank my family. Without each of you I would never have been able to finish.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my deepest appreciation to my advisors and committee members for helping me along the way and pushing me to succeed.

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INTRODUCTION

When considering a restaurant to take the family, many parents allow their young children to choose the restaurant or at least have considerable input. According to a survey by Mesalic (2010), kids choose where to dine out about 34% of the time, while adults consult their children 91% of the time. Only 18% of parents in the study found eating out with their children an enjoyable experience. Lawrence (2004) addressed the idea of child input in decision making and discussed how there is a type of “family democracy”. Children have a real influence in decision making and family enjoyment is optimized to its fullest if children are happy as well (Lawrence, 2004).

A parent’s previous restaurant choice can also affect a child’s choice. According to Foodservice and Hospitality (2004), many of the families that frequent local restaurants are encouraged to do so by their children, thus perpetuating the development of higher quality children’s menus. The average sales on a typical day in the restaurant industry in 2011 was \$1.7 billion (Pocket Factbook, 2011), and approximately \$1.8 billion in 2013 (Pocket Factbook, 2013). The average household expenditure on food away from the home was \$2,619 in 2009 (Pocket Factbook, 2011) and \$2,620 in 2013 (Pocket Factbook, 2013). It is important for the restaurant industry that parents in the current economic climate have an enjoyable experience when dining out to ensure repeat business. To attract families during the economic downfall, many

restaurants have focused their efforts on catering to children realizing that children are an important influence drawing families into the restaurant (Ruggless, 2009). Meals consumed by children accounted for 1.3 billion visits and \$5.6 billion in sales in 2008 (Ruggless, 2009). The average check at a restaurant for those with children present was more than twice as much as those who dined without children (Killian, 2009). Children younger than six years of age have accounted for 64% of traffic losses at full-service restaurants and children six to twelve years of age have accounted for 36% of traffic losses (Ruggless, 2009). While the exact reasons for the loss in traffic is uncertain, restaurants are trying to avoid such situations through special promotions and marketing directly to families with young children (Ruggless, 2009).

To appeal to families with young children, many restaurants have improved their menu selections, children's activities, and promote specials. The Chef Survey: What's Hot in 2010 conducted by the National Restaurant Association, children's menu items accounted for two of the top twenty and four of the top fifty most popular trends for 2010. In 2013, these numbers increased to five in the top twenty and seven in the top fifty (Chef Survey, 2013). Promotions by these restaurants had a wide range of interesting activities for children. One example of a unique promotion in restaurants was instituted by Roy Yamaguchi of Roy's Restaurants. He incorporated the use of DVD players with Disney DVDs available to children so that parents can enjoy their meal, while the children have a memorable experience (Ruggless, 2009).

Childhood obesity levels increased to 10.4% in children ages 2-5 between 1976-1980 and 2007-2008 (CDC, 2010). With childhood obesity becoming more and more prominent, restaurants are under scrutiny for children's menu choices which in turn affects the way parents choose where to eat out. Due to the increasing obesity levels, and the increase in food consumption away from home, it is important for restaurants to incorporate healthier options for

children. Many restaurants are taking on this task by offering healthier sides for children and smaller portion sizes (Bertagnoli, 1999; Duerksen, Elder, Arredondo, Ayala, Slymen, Campbell, & Baquero, 2007; Jennings, 2009; Kummert, 2003). The National Restaurant Association also predicted children's nutrition as a top ten trend for 2011. In 2013, "healthful kids meals" was ranked number three and "children's nutrition" was the number five trend overall (Chef Survey, 2013).

Considering the influence children have on family dining decisions, it would seem wise for restaurant operators to evaluate how well they are meeting the needs of families and their children in terms of child friendliness. Restaurants viewed as child friendly could, quintessentially, attract more families and repeat business. Currently there is a lack of research on the child friendliness of restaurants. Therefore the primary objectives of this pilot study was to determine which factors are important to parents when considering restaurant choices for children ages six and under and use this information to develop an instrument that measures the child friendliness of restaurants.

LITERATURE

When considering how children impact casual dining, family-style sit down restaurants, a few factors continuously present themselves: promotions/marketing, nutrition/menu choices, and activities/atmosphere. Children are a significant target for restaurant marketing and an important consideration when trying to encourage families to take time to enjoy a sit down restaurant. It is therefore imperative to discuss some of these aspects to provide an overall view of how children affect restaurant selection and how key certain aspects of the dining experience are to parents.

Promotions/Marketing

Promotions and marketing at restaurants are popular tools to encourage families to eat out. They include adding special value to children's meal so that parents feel they are getting the most for their money. Many restaurants are promoting toward children by having "kids eat free" nights (McDowell, 1994; Killian, 2009). The promotion entices parents to dine and increases increase traffic for the restaurants. Other promotional tools used by child-friendly restaurants include babysitting services ("Guide to Being Child Friendly", 2006; McDowell, 1994), giving children restaurant tours (Glazer, 2009; McDowell, 1994; Mariani, 2001; Ruggless, 2009), and contests (McDowell, 1994). Traditional methods of targeting children, including crayons, activity sheets, books, and toys, are still used, however Glazer (2009) found that

children are less interested in toys than they once were. While Chick-fil-A promotes its children's meals with toys, they have a policy that all toys that are given out must be educational ("Guide to Being Child Friendly", 2006).

Value added is a common thread in all marketing promotions. The thought of "adding value" to a product that someone may purchase is an important marketing and promotional tool. Adding value to menu choices, especially for children's dishes, can expand business and increase restaurant traffic. Value is also a key factor when most parents choose a restaurant, whether it be a quick service or a sit down restaurant (Jennings, 2009). The value of a kid's menu is considered a core element that affects the dining experience of families (Mesalic, 2010). HealthFocus International's 2012 survey of over 1800 adults in the United States found that one of the factors parents looked at when choosing a restaurant was reasonable prices (Parents More Aware, 2013). While kid's menus don't tend to yield large profits, children usually bring multiple adults with them, making the check in its entirety increase (Cooper, 2004), so the perceived value for the money on a kid's dish is important to help ensure customers are satisfied and will return. Friendly Ice Cream Corporation, the 1998's Best Kids Menu in America contest winner, explored the idea of adding value by putting some of the regular menu choices on the kid's menu. They did this by creating smaller portions and lowering the price ("Family Friendly", 1998).

Nutrition

Nutritional content of the food that children consume has become a hot topic in today's ever changing world of dining out. Children are a nutritionally vulnerable population (Rice, McAllister, & Dhurandhar, 2007) and the choices they make need to be guided at a young age to

encourage healthy choices throughout life. Restaurant food, especially food from quick service restaurants, contains more calories than food prepared away from home and less fiber (Duersken, Elder, Arrendondo, et al, 2007). Many restaurants are currently reconfiguring their children's menus to be ahead of nutritional trends and promote a healthier lifestyle for children. According to the National Restaurant Association (2013), children's nutrition accounts for two of the top five culinary themes. In 2010, overall nutrition/health was a culinary theme, but children were not mentioned (Chef Survey, 2010). Many restaurants are increasing their menu offerings to accommodate the changing tastes of young children (Bertagnoli, 1999; Jennings, 2009; Krummert, 2003; Ruggless, 2009). Nutritionally balanced children's dishes, fruit/vegetable children's side items, and "mini meals" were among the top twenty-five hottest trends for restaurants in 2011 (Chef Survey, 2011). In 2013, healthful kids menus, children's nutrition, whole grain kids meals, fruit/vegetable children's side items and half portions for a smaller price were all in the top twenty (Chef Survey, 2013). Children's nutrition, which was a new addition to the What's Hot in 2011, appeared at number six out of two hundred and twenty-six culinary trends (Chef Survey, 2011) and in 2013, it appeared at number five while healthful kids menus appeared at number three out of one hundred and ninety-eight culinary trends (Chef Survey, 2013).

Children are steering away from chicken nuggets and burgers (Cooper, 2004; Ruggless, 2009) with the most popular children's dish being pasta (Glazer, 2009). According to a survey done by a brand marketing research agency, C3 and Technomics Incorporated (2009), approximately 80% of the children surveyed have tried to eat more fruits in the six months prior to being given the survey, and approximately 77% said they have tried to eat more vegetables (Jennings, 2009). While children are becoming savvier about nutrition, parents still hold the

ultimate decision. Mothers tend to choose fast-food restaurants when dining out with children due to convenience and efficiency. Regardless of the restaurant type, availability of food that children enjoy is one of the top factors when choosing a restaurant (Ruggless, 2009). A survey completed in 2012 found that 63% of consumers with children were aware of everything that their children consumed away from home. Additionally, it was found that having healthy choices for both the parent and the child are leading factors when choosing a restaurant (Parents More Aware, 2013).

One way restaurants are changing the look and taste of children's menus is by adding smaller portions to the regular menu items (Cooper, 2004; Ruggless, 2009). Children's tastes are changing, and so are the ways they perceive food (Lawrence, 2004). Children are more exposed today than ever before to an array of foods from all over the world. In response to the growing knowledge and enhanced taste buds of these children, they want to order off of the adult menu (Cooper, 2004), and they are more likely to try new foods (Krummert, 2003). Restaurants need to adapt to these changes to accommodate families and help children to have an enjoyable experience (Jennings, 2009).

Atmosphere/ Activities

While a children's menu can influence parents' choice of restaurants, fun activities generally keep parents and children coming back (Glazer, 2009; Sullivan, 2004). According to Mesalic (2010), studies have shown that parents are 72% more likely to return to a restaurant if activities are provided. Some restaurants have simple activities such as books, toys, and crayons ("Guide to Being Child Friendly", 2006), while other restaurants take a more extreme approach such as cooking classes (Glazer, 2009; Mariani, 2001), free dessert (Mariani, 2001), and a

creative atmosphere with fun named menu items (Cooper, 2004). Carrabba's Italian Grill allows children to build their own pizza which can then be cooked in the kitchen for the child's dinner (Ruggless, 2009). The Fairmont Hotel's Fountain Restaurant held a competition for students at local elementary schools to design a children's menu, the winners received \$500.00 for the school and the menu was used for six months in the restaurant (McDowell, 1994). While the Fountain Restaurant used a contest to encourage children to dine in, Friendly's developed a menu to encourage kids to order for themselves, no matter the age, by having a menu designed with pictures ("Family Friendly", 1998). As discussed earlier, a study conducted by Mesalic (2010) found that 72% of parents will return to a restaurant more often if activities are provided for their children. Restaurants can facilitate activities between the parent and child, such as crossword puzzles, games, and reading. This increases the parent and child satisfaction (Mesalic, 2010). When children are entertained, parents are happier since they can enjoy their meal and the company of other adults in their party (Mesalic, 2010).

Atmosphere is another major component to consider when parents and children decide on restaurants. A fun, inviting, and safe atmosphere are all important components that create a family friendly restaurant environment. Some restaurants, such as Jungle Jim's and Chuck-E-Cheese's, have themes to engage children (Cooper, 2004; Perlik, 2010; Sullivan, 2004). Parents feel that cleanliness (Field, 2007; Jennings, 2009; Sullivan, 2004), clean diaper changing areas, breast feeding areas (Perlik, 2010), and consistency (Jennings, 2009) are all important factors when considering restaurant choices. Parents are also more likely to choose a restaurant with a good atmosphere for kids, if other families are at the establishment, and if it is conveniently located (Parents More Aware, 2013). Another important aspect of the atmosphere are the children themselves. For parents to enjoy their food and experience, children must be happy. To

do this, many restaurants encourage servers to bring out the children's food first, even if the parents' food is not ready ("Guide to Being Child Friendly", 2006; Jennings, 2009; Sullivan, 2004). However, even if restaurants have an inviting atmosphere physically, it is always important to remember to welcome children and parents with young children and not treat them as an annoyance (Bertagnoli, 1999). Thus, the restaurant employees' attitudes are critical encouraging business and happy families.

METHODS

Currently there is little research concerning restaurants and child-friendliness. Additionally, there are not any published research instruments that determine the child-friendliness of a restaurant. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to develop an instrument using Churchill's (1979) Instrument Development Steps:

1. To identify service quality attributes through focus group sessions
2. To compile items and design initial questionnaire draft based on the results from the focus groups and literature review;
3. Have a panel of experts examine the draft;
4. Refine the instrument;
5. Pilot test the instrument with a group of parents;
6. Refine the instrument;
7. Assess the validity of the instrument; and
8. Assess the reliability of the instrument.

For this project, steps one through five were completed in the pilot study. Cognitive factor analysis was used to examine how survey items would cluster into themes. Steps six through eight will be targeted in future research.

Instrument Development

The first step of the instrument development process was to identify the attributes of the restaurant industry in relation to family-friendliness or child-friendliness. The attributes of the restaurant industry were determined through two methods. The first method was through researching previous literature on child-friendliness or family-friendliness. The second method of gathering information for the development of the instrument was through focus groups with parents of children ages six and under and living in Lafayette County, Mississippi. The purpose of using a focus group in the development of the instrument was due to a lack of research on the subject. Focus groups provide an important insight into the foundation of a topic (Kreuger, 1998).

Focus Group Participants

Two focus groups were held consisting of a total of nine participants. The criteria for inclusion was that only one parent per household may participate, and each parent participating in the focus groups must have at least one child six years of age or younger. The United States Census Bureau classifies children as birth to eighteen years of age. The classification of a child has three subcategories: less than 6 years; 6 to 11 years; and 12 to 17 years. The age category “less than 6 years” was determined to be the age group most dependent upon parents and also the age group in which most parents still make the final decision about dining out. Thus this age group was used when identifying participants for the focus groups.

Recruiting participants for the focus groups was done through an informative letter which was placed in children’s cubbies at a local daycare facility.

Focus Group Procedures

The focus groups were randomly assigned participants gathered from the informative letters. The meetings included a facilitator and a note taker. The facilitator guided the group discussions based on broad questions from previous literature on the subject. The questions were designed to start the discussion in a general format then get more specific with each question. A total of six guiding questions were used depending on the direction of the focus group:

1. How often do you take your child out to eat with you?
2. When taking your child to eat at a restaurant, what are some things you consider before choosing?
3. If dining at a restaurant you have never been to before with your child, what are some things you look at as a positive to your dining experience?
4. If dining at a restaurant you have never been to before with your child, what are some things you look at as a negative to your dining experience?
5. When dining at a sit down restaurant that you frequent with your child, what makes the experience a positive experience and make you want to return to the establishment?
6. When dining at a sit down restaurant that you frequent with your child, what makes the experience a negative experience and make you not want to return to the establishment?

Panel of Experts

The next step in the instrument development process was to compile the information gained from the focus groups and the literature into a comprehensive questionnaire draft. The questionnaire consisted of thirty-six items. This draft was then given to a panel of experts to examine it more thoroughly for content validity as recommended by Cooper and Emory (1995).

An important aspect of determining content validity is ensuring that the factors used in the survey satisfactorily address the research objective presented (Cooper & Emory, 1995). The panel of experts was comprised of three individuals. The reviewers consisted of three individuals from the University of Mississippi including an expert in child development, and two experts in restaurants and hospitality. The panel reviewed the questionnaire for grammatical errors, consistency, and ease of understanding.

Pilot Test Instrument

Once the instrument had been reviewed by the panel of experts, it was refined and then distributed to forty more parents with children ages six and under as a pilot test. These participants were recruited through a separate set of daycare letters. Of the forty individuals that received the survey instrument, thirty-three individuals completed it. The pilot test helped to further determine that there were no major concerns with content validity.

The goal of the pilot test was to assess content validity by determining if there were any detectable problems with the instrument such as, confusion and misunderstanding of instructions, questions, and response formats.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Focus Groups

Qualitative methods as outlined by Kreuger (1998) were used to analyze the focus group data. Of the nine focus group participants, all were Caucasian females with children six years old or younger. Two participants had a child that was under one year, one participant had a child aged two, two participants had children three years old; two participants had children four years old, and three participants had children five years old. Only one participant had multiple children under the age of six. From the written transcripts of the focus groups' responses, major themes were determined and categorized accordingly. From the major themes outlined by the focus groups, a survey instrument was developed that included thirty-six items.

Instrument Development

Pilot test results were then analyzed for inter-item correlations and internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. This step was used to detect poorly operating questions and to determine the validity of the survey instrument. As a unitary scale, measuring overall kid friendliness, Cronbach's alpha = 0.937. Between the thirty-three pilot test participants they had a total of fifty children ranging between newborn and six years. The distribution of children's ages can be seen in Table 1.¹ Additionally, 94% of the individuals that participated in the pilot test were female. The majority of participants were between the ages of 28-32 (42%), while 36% of

1. All tables can be viewed in the Appendix

participants were between the ages of 23-27, 15% of participants were between the ages of 33-37 and only 6% of the participants were 43 or older. Ninety-four percent of participants were married, 3% were divorced and 3% were single. Table 2 presents the distribution of annual household income among participants of the pilot instrument, and table 3 shows the distribution of education levels.

The panel was then asked to individually review the questionnaire and place each of the questions into categories using cognitive factor analysis. These categories were then compared with one another by a fourth individual to reconcile the differences. After collecting results from the panel, five factors emerged. Table 4 presents the results of the categories and the factors that lie within each. Of the thirty-six items, thirty were unanimously placed into one of the five factors. Six of the items, however, had conflicting opinions. The six items that did not neatly fit into one of the categories were:

1. My child/children can run around;
2. The high chairs are clean;
3. The server brings snacks to the table for my child/children;
4. The restaurant accommodates room for baby carriers;
5. There is music playing; and
6. There are pictures on the menus.

Based on the cognitive factor analysis, each of the experts had placed “my child/children can run around” into three different categories. This was determined to be an outlier and the question was eliminated from the survey instrument. Two of the three individuals reviewing the survey instrument had a sanitation factor included with their categories in which they placed “the high chairs are clean” while another individual placed it in atmosphere. After examining the

instrument's Cronbach's alpha, when this item was eliminated, the score increased to 0.938. Each of the other factors listed were not considered vital to the survey instrument and did not factor easily into one of the five categories determined by the panel of experts, therefore they were removed from the survey instrument.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to develop an instrument to measure the child friendliness of restaurants. Since there are limited resources and research completed on the child friendliness of restaurants, focus groups were held to develop a survey instrument to measure the child friendliness of restaurants. With the information gathered both from previous research and the focus groups, a thirty-six item survey instrument was developed. The instrument was distributed to forty individuals, thirty-three of them responded to the survey. After reviewing the instrument using cognitive factor analysis, six items were deleted from the survey instrument. A total of five factors emerged: facilities, service, atmosphere, activities, and menu.

Many restaurants have some of the attributes of each of these factors. If restaurants were to use these factors to determine their child friendliness, then they can improve in areas that may be lacking. The results of the initial pilot test indicate that parents have different needs and expectations depending on the age of their child. What is important to a parent of an infant may not be as important to a parent with a five-year-old child. Due to the vast differences in both motor and cognitive skills between each year in this age category, restaurateurs can use the information gained from this pilot study to increase the child and family friendliness of the restaurant industry for all young children.

Limitations and Future Research

This research addresses a topic that has little literature currently available. Due to the lack of literature this research has limitations that can be improved on in future research. With additional resources the research can be expanded to include multiple focus groups with a more diverse demographic population. The survey instrument should also be distributed to aim for a minimum participation level of three hundred individuals in order to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument using factor analysis.

There are many opportunities for future research from this pilot study. Such research includes, but is not limited to, expanding the research to include a larger demographic population, focusing on certain cities, and hospitality professionals, regional differences, and/or cultural differences.

As restaurants reach out to families more and more encouraging people to bring their children to dine out, future research opportunities represent studies that can be done to improve the overall quality of dining out with children. The more familiar restaurants are with parents' and children's needs, the more likely families are to frequent that location.

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Appendix

Table 1

Distribution of Children's Ages

Age Group	Number of Children
Under 2	18
2 years	9
3 years	8
4 years	6
5 years	6
6 years	3

Table 2

Annual Household Income

Income Level	Number of Participants in each category	Percentage
Less than \$35,000	2	6%
\$35,000 to \$50,000	8	24%
\$50,001 to \$65,000	9	27%
\$65,001 to \$80,000	3	9%
\$80,001 to \$95,000	4	12%
More than \$95,000	7	21%

Table 3

Level of Education

Level of Education	Number of Participants in each category	Percentage
Some High School	0	0%
High School	1	3%
Some College	8	24%
College Graduate	13	39%
Post Graduate	10	30%
Other (Please Explain) - student	1	3%

Table 4

Detailed Factors of Child Friendliness of Restaurants Based on Cognitive Factor Analysis

Major Category	Individual Items
Facilities	Restrooms have changing tables There is an outside patio There are high chairs The men's restroom has a changing table There are booth seats
Service	The server is tolerant of children The server engages my child/children The server brings the child's food first The server makes the experience fun for the children
Atmosphere	The atmosphere is busy There is visual "entertainment" (flames at hibachi/fish tanks etc.) Atmosphere is laid back (not strict or "stuffy") There is visual "appeal" (art/fun décor/props/ lights) There is natural lighting Smoking is prohibited The tables are kept clean
Activities	Crayons are available The children's menu has games/coloring on it There is entertainment like balloons or games (not related to children's menu) There are toy "levels" for different age groups of children
Menu	Milk is available There are children's portions of adult entrees available There are cups with lids and straws for drinks The cups sizes are smaller for children There is juice available There are healthy foods for children (low-fat/ vegetables, etc.) Portions for children are small "Typical" child food items (macaroni and cheese/chicken tenders etc.) are available There is a large variety of children's meals available There is a wide variety of juices

VITA

Amy McCluskey Bardwell

Education

Bachelor of Science in Family and Consumer Sciences

The University of Mississippi August 2004 – December 2008

Work Experience

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