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Awareness and perceptions of ethnic restaurant managers towards authenticity and sensory strategies – A case study of Persian ethnic restaurants in London

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to critically investigate the perceptions of Persian ethnic restaurateurs towards authenticity and to appraise their opinions and awareness towards the application of sensory strategies within their businesses. Semi-structured interviews were used to form rich data through an in-depth exploration of the research topic. The findings of the study highlight the vagueness of authenticity for service providers and their limited awareness towards its significance in their ethnic restaurants. Additionally, the paper unfolds the active influence of cultural beliefs on the decision-making process of the service providers and the insignificance of designing and applying informed standards and strategies regarding authenticity and sensory elements. It also appears that there is a disconnect between what is reported in the literature regarding customers' perceptions and expectations and what is believed and executed by the service providers.

1. Introduction

Ethnic food refers to the food that represents the culture of a specific group who are not from the home market (Kim and Jang, 2019) and ethnic restaurants are the establishments that offer the cuisine in that market. The existence of ethnic restaurants is closely linked with the history of people's travel and immigration, and it is believed that the first-ever restaurant in history was an 'ethnic restaurant' around 1100 A. D (Rawson and Shore, 2019). The story of ethnic food may have been started a long time ago, however, it was only in the recent decade that the concept of ethnic restaurants has grown in popularity and turned into a speciality in the restaurant industry (Tey et al., 2018). Some of the main reasons that individuals visit an ethnic restaurant are known to be their willingness to explore the particular ethnic culture and to expand their knowledge of the referent country (Lego et al., 2002; Molz, 1998; Ebster and Guist, 2005; Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007; Kim et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2021).

One of the ways to explore the 'other' culture and to learn about it, is through having an authentic dining experience. Authenticity, the state of being genuine and true to the represented ethnicity and culture, is one of the most prominent qualities in ethnic restaurants which has a significant impact on customers' overall experience and satisfaction

(Sukalakamala and Boyce, 2007). Scholars have identified three different perspectives of authenticity: objective, post-modern and constructive. The objective perspective considers authenticity as an objective and measurable concept that can be tested with a positivist approach and validate or reject the claim of authenticity (Jones, 2010), an example can be testing the authenticity of a piece in a museum. The next perspective is the postmodern or existentialist approach, where it is believed that authenticity is a self-centred concept and one can experience authenticity without the presence of an authentic "other" (Cohen, 2007). The third perspective is the constructive approach which is the focus of this study. The constructivist perspective towards authenticity states that there is no absolute and objective definition for authenticity and, instead, it is constructed socially or personally based on an individual's experiences, perceptions, or interpretation (Ebster and Guist, 2005; Belhassen et al., 2008; Jang and Kim, 2015) and therefore can be perceived differently from person to person (Robinson and Clifford, 2012; Youn and Kim, 2017).

In the Farsi language, authentic is translated to words like معتبر (MO'TABAR) and اصیل (ASEEL) which are synonymous with genuine, original, and true. However, in the everyday Farsi language sometimes traditional (سنتی - SONNATI) elements are also referred to as اصیل (ASEEL). The link can become clearer by first addressing the translation

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of the word اصیل (ASEEL) in the Dehkhoda dictionary (Dehkhoda, 1931), where one of the meanings refers to someone who is from a specific family heritage and background. Secondly, by pointing out the interchangeable use of the words ASEEL and SONNATI when talking about classic Persian music (Sepanta, 2003).

While the term restaurant is closely linked with food, the literature suggests that besides food, other elements such as the geographical distance from the host country (Wood and Muñoz, 2007), previous experience of the customers (Ebster and Guist, 2005), ethnic music and dining companions (Wen et al., 2020) are also linked to the perceived authenticity in a restaurant. Sukalakamala and Boyce (2007) claim that while several factors affect the perceived authenticity, it is communicated more through the food attributes than the atmospheric elements. While it is apparent that the combination of both food elements and non-food elements would form the customers' experience in a restaurant, there are still contradictions about the elements which are more dominant in the perception of authenticity.

Some of the elements mentioned above (e.g., food, ethnic music, atmospheric elements) are linked with the human five senses and are a part of the sensory experience that the customer would have while dining at the restaurant. Sensory experience is defined as "an individual's perception of goods or services or other elements in a service process as an image that challenges the human mind and senses" (Hultén, 2011, p.258). The tangible and/or intangible elements that satisfy senses and can convey the desired message (in this case authenticity) to guests in ethnic restaurants are sensory strategies – the strategies which are directly linked with the human five senses of vision, audition, gustation, olfaction, and touch, and are designed to communicate the desired outcomes to the recipient.

The existing literature regarding authenticity within dining settings is highly dominated by the consumer's perspective and perceptions, while the opinions of service providers (restaurateurs) as the creators of the dining experience are usually not addressed (Le et al., 2019). The same applies to the literature on sensory strategies within dining settings, where again the focus is on customers' experience (e.g. music: Milliman, 1986; signage: Magnini et al., 2011; noise: Raab et al., 2013; multi-sensory: Lee et al., 2016; physical environment and food: Han and Hyun, 2017; service providers' facial hair: Kim et al., 2018; bill folder and tablecloth: Lee et al., 2018; menu typeface: Liu et al., 2019; background music: Wen et al., 2020). Only in a few cases the opinions, perceptions, experiences, and awareness of the service providers as the creators of the experiences are explored via a single sensory analysis (e.g., Areni, 2003; Shields, 2006; Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017), and not in a holistic and multi-sensory way that the current study is addressing.

The current paper is part of a larger research project, which aims to critically evaluate the opinions, experiences, and perceptions of restaurant managers and diners towards sensory strategies in regard to

authenticity, in Persian restaurants. The objectives of the preliminary study presented in this paper are to critically investigate the perceptions of Persian ethnic restaurant managers towards authenticity and to explore and appraise their awareness and opinions toward the application of sensory strategies within their businesses.

2. Materials and methods

This research is underpinned by the interpretivist paradigm, which aims to investigate the world through participants' experiences and cultures (Collins, 2010; Altinay et al., 2015). Interpretivist approach is associated with qualitative research methods, where the reality is explored and assessed rather than being objectively measured (Saunders et al., 2019). It attempts to look at the social world, through the relationship between the phenomena and the experiences of the participants (Ograjenšek, 2016).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to explore the perception, experiences, and awareness of the participants. Convenience sampling was used to select the participants (n = 3). The demographics of the interviewees and some details about the restaurants can be found in Table 1.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews have been used due to their high level of detail and depth, and probing questions were used where necessary. The interview questions were developed and later the themes and subthemes were identified based on the findings of a systematic literature review which is not a part of this study and will be presented in a following publication. Each interview was divided into several topics; starting with the *background questions*, where participants briefly introduced themselves, talked about their journey in the food industry and mentioned how they landed the position that they currently have. Then *perceptual questions* regarding the interviewees' definition of authenticity and their perception towards the significance of authenticity within their businesses were asked. The reason for introducing authenticity early in the interviews was to invite the participants to start thinking about the notion of authenticity, on which they would be able to develop and/or build up their other points later. Finally, a number of procedural questions, organized around the senses that they were addressing (i.e., vision, audition, gustation, olfaction) and the different elements of the restaurant that they were related to, were asked to understand how sensory strategies were applied within the restaurants and what were the experiences of the interviewees about them. Interview questions were carefully designed based on the measures linked to the human five senses. Food quality measures (presentation, portion, taste) were adapted from Jang and Namkung (2009) and the measures related to the tangible interior and exterior elements were based on Bitner's Servicescape model (Bitner, 1992).

The sensory elements of each restaurant such as the different

Table 1
Demographics of the participants and details of the restaurants.

Participant	Position	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Professional Background	Restaurant
RA	Owner	Persian	53	Male	Started working in a Persian restaurant for the first time when he moved to the UK and later opened his own restaurant.	The restaurant is situated close to the high street alongside other Persian restaurants and other Persian-owned businesses. They have customers of different backgrounds and ethnicities due to their location. (Price range: ££-£££)
RB1	Owner & executive chef	Persian	65	Male	Comes from generations of restaurant owners and chefs in Iran and has been working in the industry from a young age. He is continuing his family business in the UK for more than 30 years.	The restaurant is situated in a quiet street, within a distance from the high street. They serve a group of loyal and established customers rather than having new customers every day. (Price range: ££-£££)
RB2	Floor Manager	Persian	55	Female	Comes from generations of restaurant owners and chefs in Iran. Entered the industry by starting to manage the front-of-house of their family business in the UK.	

Table 2

The six-step thematic analysis process adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Phase	Process
Familiarization	Transcription of source data. Repeated reading of data. Note initial thoughts and ideas.
Initial coding	Apply codes systematically to items of interest across the data set. Write a description of the code
Identifying themes	Identify preliminary themes and collate codes relevant to each theme.
Reviewing themes	Level 1 analysis: check themes work in relation to the coded extracts. Level 2 analysis: generate a thematic map to show analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Further analysis and refinement of each theme. Create clear and unambiguous definitions for each theme. Develop the overall story told by the analysis.
Reporting	Selection of extracts that illustrate the story and relate clearly to the analysis, research question and literature.

elements of the restaurant exterior (e.g., signage, colour pallet), restaurant interior (e.g., decorations, lighting, tableware), background music, uniforms of the staff, different elements of the menu and food presentation and portion were observed and recorded (audio and video) prior to each interview to provide the researchers with a clear picture of the available sensory strategies and to assist the interview process as well as the data analysis.

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the restaurants where the interviewees were working, as the researcher responsible for conducting the interviews is Persian and a native Farsi speaker who is also fluent in English. The interviews were all conducted in the Farsi language for the convenience of the participants. It also helped the researcher to identify where the participants used some specific terms (like authentic and traditional) interchangeably and assisted with the depth and rigour of the data analysis. The interviews were transcribed, translated, and then thematic analysis was undertaken following the six-step thematic analysis process (see Table 2) introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006), using the NVIVO 12 software programme.

The research has been reviewed by the ethics committee of the University of West London and has been approved with the unique reference number: UWL/REC/SHT-01053.

3. Results and discussion

The following sections present the results obtained from the interviews with the owners and managers. A number of themes and sub-themes are identified and discussed, and relevant quotes from the interviews are presented to emphasise the points analysed.

Table 3 depicts the identified themes and subthemes as well as the key quotes which will be discussed.

Table 3

Identified themes, subthemes, and the key quotes from the interviews with the restaurateurs.

Theme	Subtheme(s)
Authenticity	Authenticity
Visual elements and strategies	Exterior and Interior design and decoration Food presentation and portion Staff ethnicity Menu language Food items
Auditory elements and strategies	Language spoken Music
Olfactory elements and strategies	Food smell Infused scents
Gustatory elements and strategies	Food taste

3.1. Theme 1 - authenticity

Authenticity as a quality in the business seemed to be a new concept and something that restaurateurs did not seem to have thought about before the interview, therefore defining it was challenging for them. As an example, the owner and head chef of restaurant B (RB1), did not provide any definition or perception on the subject, and the owner of Restaurant A (RA) gave a very general definition of authenticity, although being asked to define it regarding their own business:

RA: “authenticity is to adhere to the background of humanity”

Lego Muñoz and Wood, 2009 state that customers' perception of authenticity varies depending on their geographical location and their closeness to the authentic source. The service providers interviewed in the current study believed that maintaining authenticity also becomes more challenging for the restaurateurs when the restaurant is located far from the referent country (in this case Iran). This point has been recognised by the interviewees who were talking about some of the elements of their restaurants like having all Persian staff or using Persian tableware, and they expressed that due to the lack of access to the ideal resources it would be challenging to do so.

RB1: “Authenticity is a bit different here [in the UK] because you cannot maintain that authenticity”

Ethnicity and whether an individual belongs to the culture that the ethnic restaurant is addressing can play an important role in the perception of authenticity and attraction to a restaurant (Kim and Baker, 2017). In this case, the restaurateurs believe that one of the reasons that Persian people would be attracted to Persian restaurants is the fact that it would remind them of their origins and culture.

RA: “One would inevitably be attracted to the side that their culture, style and authentic (self) is”.

3.2. Theme 2 – Visual elements and strategies

The following section elaborates on the identified subthemes related to Theme 2, Visual elements, and strategies.

3.2.1. Subtheme – exterior and interior design and decoration

The following section would discuss the perceptions and opinions of the restaurateurs towards the restaurant signage, interior design, visible cooking styles and tableware.

The findings of the current literature on the role of signage in dining settings are limited to the opinions of customers (Magnini et al., 2010; Voon, 2012; Campbell and DiPietro, 2014; Lee et al., 2016; Song and Yang, 2023). Restaurateurs' thoughts regarding the restaurant signage are still unclear. The current study has found that restaurateurs have contrasting opinions about having the signage printed in the Farsi language. One of the restaurant owners believed that it is a way of showcasing their culture as the very first point of contact with their customers and that seeing a Farsi signage would bring a sense of relief and security to their Persian customers, and a sense of curiosity for their non-Persian customers.

RA:

“I should be first a representative of a Persian restaurant from my signage”

“When you see ‘Restooran e Irani’ ... it feels like coming out of sea (sense of relief) and makes you feel good”.

“The customer may come in because of that one word that they don't have an idea about, they come in because they find that out”

Another interviewee expressed that since the restaurant has regular Persian customers, they do not need to have Farsi signage. This can

mean that some of the service providers only look at the basic purpose of the sensory elements – in this case, signage to only show the name of the restaurant - and are not aware of the extended role of sensory elements as strategies that can be utilised for specific purposes.

RB1: “We don’t need it. Because Persians know our restaurant”

The opinions and perceptions of the service providers within dining settings towards the role of interior design have been explored previously. Shields (2006), for example, explores the opinions of full-service restaurant owners and managers towards the impact of the atmospherics on the generation of revenue within their business. Alonso and Ogle (2008) look at the role of design in small hospitality and tourism operations by interviewing business owners. Kukanja, 2017 compares the perceptions of the guests and the restaurant managers about different elements of a dining experience including the design. However, none of these studies has investigated the restaurant’s interior design and decoration in relation to authenticity, which is another important aspect to consider when discussing the role of authenticity in the overall dining experience.

When it comes to the interior design and the use of Persian elements in the decoration, the interviewees believe that these are only important for non-Persian customers and are not a priority for Persian customers as they are familiar with these elements, and nothing is interesting to be attracted to.

RA: “it’s more non-Persians, Persian customers are familiar with it”

They also believe that the visible positioning of Persian elements can be a strategy to showcase the ethnic culture to those who are not familiar with it and thus attract them to the restaurant.

RA: “This is exactly (showing) the Persian culture, so people know how we make bread in our country”

While some of the service providers seemed to believe in a direct link between having authentic Persian tableware and the customer experience, others were solely focused on the aesthetic effects.

RA: “If it is clay, the customer would have a different feeling “

RB2: “they are more beautiful and look better”

The interviewees were asked if they think authentic tableware is only those which are bought in Iran or if the items which are designed and manufactured out of Iran (in this case the UK) can also be counted as authentic. One of the interviewees expressed that since the tableware has not been purchased from Iran, they are not authentic. This mindset can be linked to the concept of objective authenticity (Jones, 2010) in which authenticity can be measured and evaluated by set criteria.

RA: “The plates are not Persian. The plates and the tableware were all bought here (in the UK)”

3.2.2. Subtheme - food presentation and portion

Food presentation and portion are two of the determinants of food quality within dining settings (Sulek and Hensley, 2004; Namkung and Jang, 2007). Besides food quality, they can also be linked to the customer’s perceived service quality (Lee et al., 2016; Josiam et al., 2017; Lu and Chi, 2018), as well as the overall satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Ryu et al., 2012). None of these studies, however, have explored the opinions of the restaurateurs towards the presentation and/or the portion of the food that they serve in their restaurants.

The current research has found that authentic Persian food presentation seemed to be an important factor for the interviewees. The owner of restaurant A stated that they always emphasise on a completely authentic food presentation and went into detail by describing the presentation of several of their menu items to the researcher.

RA: “the way we serve our food is 100% Persian”

To obtain further information regarding food presentation, an example of a newly introduced way to serve rice in Persian restaurants (moulding the rice in different shapes) was given to the interviewees and they were asked to share their thoughts regarding such practices. The interviewees were adamant towards it and one of the most common reasons given was that this kind of practice does not happen in the original (traditional) Persian culinary culture. This can once again emphasise the dual meaning of the term authenticity in the Farsi language to the participants, and the fact that in their perceptions ‘originality’ (ESAALAT - اصالت) is always tied closely to ‘tradition’ (SONNAT - سنت).

Serving big portions of food is a sign of the host’s EHTERAM (respect - احترام) and AHAMMIAT (care - اهمیت) for the guest (Zubaida and Tapper, 2000) and, when it comes to restaurants and food businesses, KEYFIAT (quality - کیفیت) and ARZESH (worth - ارزش) would be the other two qualities that are evaluated by the portion size. Therefore, it looks like a big portion size would be an indication of having an authentic experience in Persian restaurants. All the interviewees seemed to be fully aware of these factors and, in some cases, they were even proud of the fact that their food portions are too big that the customers would not be able to finish them. Based on the experiences of one of the authors who is a native Persian, this is a typical practice in Persian hospitality culture, where ‘More is More!’. Serving generous portions that the guest cannot finish is a sign of respect and the food is sometimes perceived as high quality only because of the portion size (very similar to the value for money).

RA: “you would not be able to finish one portion of it.”

To avoid food waste, some business owners had employed a quite different strategy. For instance, they would serve a standard portion of rice but would ask the kitchen to send a bigger portion for the customers that they know would like a bigger portion (e.g., Persians, regulars), they would also ask their customers to let them know if they would need more rice at no extra cost.

RB2: “We tell them to let us know if they want more rice and then would ask them again in middle of their meal”

3.2.3. Subtheme – staff ethnicity

Appearance and the way that individuals look are some of the elements that are used to classify people (Lee et al., 2012), and restaurant customers perceive their dining experience as more authentic when they are served by the people of the referent culture (Lu and Fine, 1995; Kim and Jang, 2016; Kim and Baker, 2017). However, in the opinion of the interviewed restaurateurs, staff ethnicity (the visual element) and customers’ perception of authenticity did not seem to have a link with each other and the only reason that they would prefer having Persian staff is that people from the referent culture and/or ethnicity would facilitate the ordering process.

RA: “... it is much better to explain everything to the customer”

The restaurateurs believed that members of the kitchen (chefs) should be Persian, and a good quality authentic Persian dish can be only prepared by a Persian chef, as non-Persian chefs would need too much training which is costly to the business.

RB1: “The kitchen staff have to be Persian”

3.2.4. Subtheme - menu language

Besides having the menu in the English language, some of the Persian restaurants in London offer their menus in other languages such as Farsi and Arabic. The reasons for doing so are the convenience of the customers or, in the cases that the Arabic menu is also available, it is to make the process of ordering the meal more efficient for both the diners and the front-of-house staff. Interestingly, Farsi menus do not seem to be a necessity or something they have thought about for the restaurants

which are established businesses with regular customers, as all their customers (Persian or non-Persian) can read and understand the English menu without any problem and such action could only be “interesting” for new customers.

RB2:

“Persians have been coming here for years ... they know English.”

“Maybe it can be interesting for new customers ... honestly, I don’t really know”

While the existing literature provides some evidence of the impact of the menu language on customers’ perception of food authenticity (Kim and Baker, 2017), restaurateurs usually view the menu as something which has the basic purpose of demonstrating a list of the available foods and their prices, and very rarely they have linked any specific strategies to their menu or have addressed the impacts that the menu can have on the customers’ dining experience. And when they do, it is only about the Persian customers who can read the Farsi language.

RB2: “I think if the customer is Persian, yes, [by having a Farsi menu] they would feel it [authenticity] more.”

3.2.5. Subtheme - food items

When it comes to the food items which are available to order on the menu, service providers’ focus shifts from offering authentic Persian food items only to the popularity and demand of the food. Since Persian food shares a noticeable number of similarities with food from countries around the Persian Gulf or Turkish food, the majority of the restaurants have decided to include non-Persian items like Hummus or Tabbouleh which are popular in Middle Eastern cuisine and customers would like to see them in the menu.

RA: “We have lots of non-Persian customers ... and it (hummus) matches well with the starters that we serve. We have to do a favour for our customers in this international country.”

Adding or omitting one or several ingredients in the food recipe to match the taste of the customers in the UK, is another explanation for serving non-authentic (perceived) dishes in the restaurants. An example given by one of the interviewees is that they (Persians) would not add red pepper to the Gheimh stew when they make it at home, but since their customers like it, they have decided to add red pepper to their recipe at the restaurant.

RB2: “But it is very popular here [in the UK] for its flavour.”

3.3. Theme 3 – auditory elements and strategies

The identified subthemes related to Theme 3, auditory elements and strategies are discussed in the following sections.

3.3.1. Subtheme - language spoken

The language used as the means of communication with guests can impact the customers’ dining experiences in various ways, such as having an authentic experience (Kraak and Holmqvist, 2017), and an increase in the amount of the tip when the servers speak the language of the guest (Van Vaerenbergh and Holmqvist, 2013; Baker and Kim et al., 2018). All the studies mentioned above identify a relationship between the language used by the service providers and the customers’ dining experience. However, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no study has investigated the concern of restaurateurs in managerial positions with the language used at their restaurants and if this would have any impact on their recruitment choices.

In the interviews, there were examples of the restaurateurs’ negative experiences with Persian customers who have been served by a non-Persian member of the staff, and they have been frustrated when the server was not able to communicate with them in the Farsi language.

The restaurateurs do not necessarily agree with the reaction of their customers and believe that ethnic Persian restaurants are not different from other restaurants that individuals visit, therefore as long as their service is impeccable such expectations should not be there.

RB2: “When living here [in the UK], we have to consider that they also go to other restaurants and this [staff ethnicity] is not an important thing in having a good service”.

3.3.2. Subtheme - music

Music is one of the most significant determinants of restaurants in general, and its role has been investigated on different factors such as length of stay and expenditure (Jacob, 2006), purchase intention and choice (Wilson, 2003), positive or negative emotion (Jang et al., 2011), customer behaviours (Milliman, 1986), menu item selection (Feinstein et al., 2002), perceived authenticity (Wen et al., 2020), and healthy food sales (Biswas et al., 2019).

Playing Persian music is one of the elements that Persian restaurants in London do not seem to be very strict about. The traits of the Persian hospitality culture and the fact that the host should do anything to make the guest happy are quite obvious when it comes to the choice of the music that is played in the restaurants. Usually, restaurateurs who demonstrate a stronger belief in authentic Persian hospitality are more open to accommodating the requests of their customers, no matter if the requests are in line with their business or not.

RA: “if someone asks us to play Arabic music for them, we will not ignore their request. We give them the favour and would play it for them for at least half an hour”

Some of the restaurateurs believe that the only aspects to consider when choosing the music are the music being relaxing and the volume being at a reasonable level, so it does not disturb the dining experience. There was no further evidence of service providers using music as a strategy in their business or being aware of the extended impacts that music can have on the dining experience of their guests.

RB2: “It can be anything”

While the findings regarding the music genre and the volume can support the research by Areni (2003); the findings about the influence of the specific hospitality culture of the service provider (Persian in this case) on their strategies towards the choice of the music unfold new perspectives towards the use of music in ethnic restaurants.

3.4. Theme 4 - olfactory elements and strategies

The following sections discuss the restaurateurs’ perceptions and awareness towards food smell and the infused scent as the subthemes of theme 4, olfactory elements and strategies.

3.4.1. Subtheme - food smell

While smelling freshly baked bread or char-grilled kabab might seem tempting to some, not all ethnic Persian restaurants would agree with this. To some with more traditional views towards dining out, being able to smell any traces of the food in the restaurant is a negative element and would be an indication of the restaurant not being professional or not caring enough about their customers.

RB1:

“it is too bad that there is food smell in the restaurant!”

“the worst thing is that the customers visit and their clothes smell like food!”

The current literature highlights how food smell is associated with elements such as the restaurant image (Ryu et al., 2012), or the memorability of the dining experience (Cao et al., 2019). The findings of the current research take a step further and emphasise the fact that

sometimes service providers judge the application of different elements and strategies (in this case, food smell), based on personal or cultural experiences and beliefs.

3.4.2. Subtheme - infused scent

Infused scent can be any kind of natural or artificial scent that can be added to the air by spraying, boiling, burning or other techniques. Some of the most famous Persian scents are Rose (GOLAB - گلاب), Saffron (ZA'FERAN - زعفران), Cardamom (HEL - هل) and Wild rue (ESPAND - اسپند). Burning Espand (which is also an old practice by the older generations to repel the evil eye) only looks like a superstitious belief to the Persian restaurateurs, and they strongly rejected the idea of using the scent to enhance the sense of 'Persianness' in their restaurants.

Owner – RA: “but I am not a superstitious person...”

Another interesting belief is that since the customers do not have any clue about Espand (or other exotic things), there is no point to try it in the restaurant. It is worth mentioning that here the term ‘customer’ only refers to non-Persian customers and does not include the Persian customers of the restaurants.

Owner – RB: “they [non-Persian customers] do not know what it is”

The impact of scent as an intangible sensory element on customers is believed to be relevantly subconscious (Baker, 1986; De Luca and Botelho, 2021). While the world of modernist cuisine has started to use “scene-setting scents and mood-inducing aromas” to deliver unique dining experiences for their guests (Spence, 2017, p24), the interviewees do not seem to believe in the power of the olfactory elements in their businesses.

3.5. Theme 5 - gustatory elements and strategies

The significance of food taste as one of the determinants of food quality within dining settings (Namkung and Jang, 2007) is well-investigated from several aspects such as memorability of the experience (Cao et al., 2019), perceived quality (Mathur and Gupta, 2019), repeat purchase and loyalty (Richardson et al., 2019), and word of mouth (Jalilvand et al., 2017).

Persians are usually so sensitive about their cuisine that a significant modification in one of their dishes would be counted as crossing a red line to them. When one of the ethnic Persian restaurant owners was asked if they would be willing to add parsley (which is a straight no) to their Koobideh kabab (mince lamb skewer), the interviewee was suddenly shocked and then firmly reminded the researcher that such practices are unacceptable, and such food cannot be called ‘Persian’ anymore.

RA: “no, no, never!”

4. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

Despite our best effort, the study has some limitations. The findings are based on a preliminary study (n = 3), however in the larger study following the development of the data collection, this limitation will be mitigated, and triangulation will be considered as part of the data analysis and synthesis. The authors are also aware of the risk of subjectivity and bias in qualitative research and since the current research addresses cultural elements linked to a specific ethnicity, additional actions were taken to minimise the risk of bias. In particular, the risk of reflexivity bias and the bias in the analysis (Malterud, 2001) were managed by following a clear and systematic interview guide when collecting the data and sharing the analytical duties among the team to supplement each other's analysis and views.

It is suggested to consult the diners' views for future research, to make sure that their perceptions and expectations are considered as well. Another point is that the study is only focused on Persian

restaurants in London and similar studies on Persian restaurants in other parts of the world or other ethnic restaurants are suggested to help with the generalisability of the findings.

5. Conclusion

The current study investigated the perceptions, experiences, and awareness of ethnic restaurant managers towards authenticity and its connection to sensory elements and strategies within their business. The research provides several contributions to the literature in the field of food business and hospitality. The most significant finding is the discrepancy between the perceptions and opinions of the service providers and the existing literature on customers' opinions and perceptions. This means that service providers and customers -as the co-creators of the dining experience-do not necessarily share the same opinions, highlighting the importance of considering both perspectives to create a pleasant dining experience.

Additionally, the research also addresses a lack of set standards and criteria for authenticity and sensory strategies in the studied restaurants. Meaning the observed elements and strategies were mainly limited to individual experiences and cultural beliefs rather than informed choices and purposeful actions. This can lead to a trial-and-error approach, which can have negative consequences for the business in the highly competitive food business industry.

It is crucial for ethnic restaurateurs to consider both tangible (e.g., visual) and intangible (e.g., olfactory) sensory elements when designing, delivering, and reviewing their business strategies. This approach would enable them to fully leverage the benefits of a multi-sensory dining experience.

Author statement

Neda Sattarzadeh: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing and editing, visualization. **Amalia Tsiami:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, reviewing and editing, supervision. **Cristina Maxim:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, reviewing and editing, supervision. **Elitza Iordanova:** Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, reviewing and editing, supervision.

Implications for gastronomy

Ethnic restaurants are moving towards being one of the most popular branches of the food industry, with great potential to grow. And it is necessary to explore the thoughts and opinions of their service providers in regard to various elements and strategies, in order to evaluate their awareness, identify the business strategies and, more importantly, to minimise the need for trial and error in the current competitive market. This research looks at the perceptions and awareness of the service providers towards authenticity and the application of sensory strategies in Persian ethnic restaurants in London.

The results of this study provide novel insight into ethnic restaurants, by emphasising the importance of service providers' experiences of different sensory elements that contribute to an authentic experience, and by exploring whether what is being offered by the restaurateurs would match with the ‘authentic experience’ that customers are looking for.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix. Example of having the menu in Farsi and Arabic language



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