

The Prioritized Traits of Brand Association Initiating Consumers' Preference on Fine Dining Selection

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고급 레스토랑 선택에 있어서 브랜드 연상 속성의 우선순위 연구

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Abstract

As consumers are more conscious about the preferred traits and branding in restaurant selection, restaurant practitioners are getting more interested in the traits which constitute and influence consumers' brand association. Dining selection is known to be a complicated psychological process that consumers undergo, incorporating social and cultural values, personal tastes, and other psychological factors. This study was designed to investigate the specific non-food traits perceived by consumers in fine restaurant selection. Also, it prioritized those examined traits. Building on exploratory qualitative research, results from 11 interviews through focus group sessions were utilized in data analysis. Content analysis of the interviews enabled categorization of the associations. The categorized variables were utilized for empirical data analysis of conjoint analysis. First, the results suggested five superior traits such as atmosphere, price, customer relations, employee competence, and convenience of systems in fine restaurant brand association. Second, they were prioritized in the order of atmosphere, price, consumer relations, employee competence, and convenience. Finally this study provided practical implications for fine restaurant professionals in linking consumers' psychologically networked traits to brand selection.

Key words: brand, brand association, fine dining, restaurant traits.

I. INTRODUCTION

To sustain the dining industry in declining stages of restaurant life cycles, branding orientation has become one of the most popular strategic options for restaurant managers. The popularity of this method has been effective enough to refer to the twentieth century as the century of brands and branding in marketing (Caldwell 2000). Managers

are applying this method in many different fields apart from marketing. It is utilized in the development of their corporate missions to reflect brand orientation rather than product orientation as they have done in the past (Muller 1998). Managers who understand brand associations are provided with customer based brand equity (Kim JK et al. 2000).

To explain the effect of brand orientation, Kapferer

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(1997) launched a study which suggested that product's brand leave an image in the consumer's memory which determines the success and failure of the product. If this suggestion is empirically proven to be a relevant statement, then the priority of all managers should be in developing and maintaining the quality of their brands (Aaker 1996).

In order for restaurant managers to develop and maintain their brands, it is important to first understand the consumer's perceptions of restaurant brands (Kim HS & Lee SM 2002). The kind of perception (either positive or negative) the consumer receives on a restaurant brand is based on past experiences with that particular brand (Supphellen 2000). This perception will ultimately determine whether the consumer will purchase the product or not (Supphellen 2000). To understand what type of perception consumers have, receiving feedback from the consumer on the purchased product or service provided will be critical (Krishnan & Hartline 2001).

De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo (1997) advanced a proposition which followed the ideas developed in previous studies. The proposition was that because brands hold meaning to consumers, the nature of a brand evolves in relation to consumer's changing needs. Brands function as a symbolic device as well as a "functional" device (Njite 2005). It is symbolic in ways that brands can project a self image (Njite 2005). Building a product image is the primary purpose of branding (Njite 2005). This is because the image will portray the worth and value of the product to the customer and if the worth and value of the product is favorable, the customer will be lead to brand loyalty (Njite 2005). When the customer is lead to brand loyalty, brand functions as a "functional" device because eventually over time as the experience with a product increases the awareness of the brand also increases. The

customers develop a "simplication process" in which they categorize certain products under certain specific brands (Njite 2005).

Some of the most well recognized and strongest brands are Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Hilton Hotels, and so on. Considering the success of these brands, the millions of dollars spent in creating and supporting their brand images has been worth every single cent. Following these examples, many theorists have predicted that developing, communicating, and maintaining a brand image is critical to a brand's long-term success (Hong JP 2008).

Branding research has received renewed scholarly attention in recent years (Van Osselaer & Alba 2000; Hong JP 2008; Park SH et al. 2005). The importance of branding and consumer perception of brands has been widely acknowledged. However, branding research has not yet been fully applied to marketing of restaurants nor has it been explored in detail (Krishnan & Hartline 2001). It has only been a recent trend to apply and study restaurant branding. A few scholars have launched studies to examine branding and its influences on consumption in relation to service-dominated products such as the products of restaurants (e.g., O'Cass & Grace 2003; Berry 2000). These studies are important because they address the challenges of branding service-dominated products which are products with unique characteristics. However, even the above-mentioned and existing studies do not satisfy the issues present in restaurant branding.

More studies need be launched to further answer questions involving issues of how consumers perceive restaurant brands and the relative weights of the various associations made during purchase decisions. The current study provides both theoretical and practical implications to answer these questions. Additionally, it includes a theoretically

and empirically based model of restaurant branding to both academic researchers and branding practitioners while discussing the phenomenon of restaurant branding from a consumer perspective. Because brand associations reflect the kind of brand perceived by the consumer (Berry 2000; Aaker 1991), examining brands may help future researchers and practitioners to understand how consumers determine brand meaning and brand preference.

The research objective of this study is to examine the predominant non-food dimensions of different brand associations in fine dining restaurants. Additionally, this study seeks to find the extent to which the identified dimensions of restaurant brands are prioritized in selection of fine dining restaurants.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Brand Associations

Jiang, Dev, and Rao (2002)'s study concluded that building and managing brands is the key to success in any hospitality industry. Despite these important claims, little attention has been given to restaurant branding. Therefore, further studies that explain how consumers perceive restaurant brands are needed (Njite 2005). Because consumers form relationships with brands and companies (de Chernatony 1999), it has been suggested in Berry's (2000) study that in order to develop and sustain customer loyalty, companies need to "pursue distinctiveness in performing and communicating service, connect emotionally with customers, and internalize the brand for the providers" (Njite 2005). These added values are created in consumers when managers understand what consumer's value is (Njite 2005).

According to Axelrod (1968)'s definition, brand association is brand switching that occurs in the mind of the consumer at purchase. Nedungadi and Hutchinson (1985) mentioned that brand association is found to be the first brand that comes to mind when looking for a particular product. Concurrently, brand association is defined as an underlying assumption that consumers associate (Njite 2005). These assumptions are built and stored in the memory as a network that can be stimulated with the provision of cues in selecting a product (Njite 2005). In this study, brand association is the psychologically prioritized awareness in selecting a categorized restaurant. This awareness excludes the trait of food quality and/or taste.

Brand associations provide value in that they (1) are a source of information processing or retrieval, (2) create a basis of differentiation, (3) generate a reason to buy, (4) create positive feelings toward the brand, and (5) provide a basis for brand extension of brand image (Njite 2005).

Furthermore, there are three categories in Keller's (1993) classification of brand associations. They are (1) attributes, (2) benefits, and (3) attitudes. Attributes are factors which concentrate on the descriptive features of a product or service. Benefits of brand associations are personal values the consumer assumes to be receiving from the product or service. Of the three classifications, 'attitudes' is more complicated than the first two categories. Keller (1993) argue that brand-attitude associations are related to the beliefs about certain product's attributes and functions through experiences received after using the product in the past.

Brand associations play a critical role in brand success, brand image, and brand knowledge (Farquhar & Herr 1992). This is because brand associations are able to reflect the attitude of the consumer

concerning a given brand (Aaker 1990). According to Keller (1993), it also relates to brand preference, choice, image, and equity. Consumers may connect brands and brand associations with "hard" (tangible, functional, specific) or "soft" (emotional, trust) attributes of the product (Biel 1991). Attributes which trigger these brand associations start from physical perceptions of people, places, and events (Henderson et al. 1998). Some brands which have strong connection with brand associations are McDonalds and Burgers; Starbucks and coffee and a cool place; Hyatt and high-end hotels; Motel-6 and roadside resting.

The most important value to a brand may perhaps be its set of associations. In other words, what the brand means to people and how it can influence the consumer's purchase decision making (Aaker 1991). There are several associations which each differ in ways they provide value. As previously mentioned, brand associations provide value in the ways that they (1) are a source of information processing or retrieval, (2) create a basis of differentiation, (3) generate a reason to buy, (4) create positive feelings, and (5) provide a basis for brand extension (Njite 2005).

2. Elements of Brand Association

Brand association is influenced by brand personality. Brand personality can mirror the emotions between the consumer and the brand. This occurs when consumers relate the brand personality of a particular restaurant with their own individual character. Therefore, consumers experience various emotions before and after consumption of the brand (Lee SB et al. 2008). That is, as brand personality is favorably established through self presentation, more positive emotions are created between the brand and the consumer. Also, Fournier

(1994) suggested that brand personality consist of "quality, passionate attachment, self-concept connection, nostalgic connection, intimacy, and personal commitment, and love". In addition, he stated that brand personality influenced brand loyalty and brand confidence.

On the other hand, according to Aaker (1997), the more customers favorably recognize the brand personality of a particular brand, the customer will also possess higher brand associations to that brand. That is, when more self presentation and attractive dimensions are present in brand personality, the customer is able to experience brand identification as well as possessing a high level of brand association to that particular brand (Kim JK et al. 2000).

Finally, the factors influencing brand personality consist of experienced service, atmosphere, interior design, theme, and so on (Lee SB et al. 2008). These factors have a significant impact on brand association.

3. Brand Association in Restaurant Industry

There have been several studies exploring brand associations in restaurant industry. Kim KH (1999) announced restaurant quality, brand association, brand cognition, and brand loyalty as the four constituent factors of brand equity in the dining industry. In particular, brand association is emphasized as an element which influences brand equity in the dinning industry (Kim KH 1999). Additionally, according to Lee JS and Kim EG (2003)'s study, the restaurant's image influences brand loyalty. Kim HB and Lee SM (2000)'s research supports this relationship and further states that brand association mediates the formation of restaurant images. In addition, Lee JH

& Lee JJ (2006) dissected that brand association significantly influences brand image, preference, and loyalty as well.

4. Definition of Fine Dining

The definition of fine dining is a full service restaurant (Njite 2005). According to Bowen's (1990) classification of services, fine dining restaurants are included in "Group-1" types of services. Services in this group is identified by its high customer contact, high customer employee interaction, service mainly directed at people, and high product customization. Expectations of these types of services are high leveled customization and expertise. Also, interaction between the service provider and the customer is expected for an extended period of time. Customers usually assume that they will fulfill their various needs when using fine dining facilities. They will also assume that their overall experience should be highly satisfactory with a pleasant atmosphere and an organized and efficient service. Therefore, providing the very best service is the foremost priority to those service providers in this sector.

Based on the characteristics of a fine dining restaurant, it is predicted that employee competence is an influential criterion of association in fine dining. Furthermore, according to Cho MN and Yang ES (2006) fine dining is determined by the following factors: 1) employees' courteous relationship with customers, 2) taste of the dish, 3) freshness of the dish, 4) consistency quantity of each dish, 5) external appearance of the restaurant, 6) diversity of the menu, 7) facilities, 8) background music, 9) lighting, 10) fragrance of the facility, 11) temperature, 12) arrangement of the tables/chairs and the use of space, and 13) cleanliness.

III. METHOD

This current study has separated its methodologies concerning the arguments on the scientific merits of qualitative and quantitative methodologies for the purpose of gathering data and information. However, it has blended two paradigms like other scholars have done (such as McDowell 2004). According to Gunter (2000), increasing numbers of researchers are seeking to develop scripts that infuse interpretive sensitivity with systematic coding (McDowell 2004). Therefore, many studies, including this current study, have adopted the use of two approaches as well as highlighting the advantages of both paradigms.

First of all, a qualitative approach is conducted through focus group sessions and the suitability of the focus group sessions is dictated by the research question: "What dimensions of fine-dining restaurant brand associations are identified by consumers?" A descriptive answer, not a quantitative study, is needed to answer this question.

The methods undertaken in focus group sessions are qualitatively and quantitatively designed to identify consumer's ideas on the associations they develop with restaurant brands through two procedures (free associations and interviews). It is useful to approach the study with a qualitative method because it permits new concepts to arise from open ended questioning (McDowell 2004). The results in focus group sessions provided the basis for the empirical testing of this research.

1. Instrumentation

1) Focus Group Sessions

Focus group sessions were held to examine the brand associations consumers develop towards

brands through a free-association test that utilizes the association network theoretical paradigm.

2) Study Participants

Using a purposeful sampling process, only individuals with fine restaurant experiences were chosen for the study. These individuals included business people who run their own business and those who were hired in management position. It was conducted on January 5th, 2009. Other participants included entrepreneurs and those with professional jobs. The participants included 4 females and 7 males, in-between an age range of 20 to over 45 years old. Altogether, there were eleven study participants involved and the testings were completed after three days. However, one interview result was disregarded because the participant was unable to clearly identify fine dining restaurants.

3) Procedure

Before the study was conducted, pretests were arranged to determine whether (1) the appropriate questions were being asked to receive the needed information, (2) if the contents or subject matter of each question was relevant, and (3) the wording and procedures were adequate for the study at hand.

This session utilized free association (free recall tests) and interview methods for data collection as advocated by Keller (2003), in order to investigate and identify restaurant brand associations as described by the consumers. First, five participants were asked to recommend a restaurant from the fine-dining segment in a given situation. Then five more participants were asked to name a restaurant which they would not recommend in the same situation. All the ten participants were asked to

answer questions like "What comes to your mind when you think about this restaurant or when this restaurant is mentioned?" or "What exactly do you NOT like/ like about this particular restaurant?"

Once the questions from this free-recall tests were answered, each participant was interviewed by the researcher. The reason for exercising the free-recall tests before the interview was to ensure that the respondent's answers were driven from an unaided brand recall (the ability to retrieve a brand when only given the product category) (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993).

By using five participants per test (recommend/not recommend) for the free-association test and interviews statistically acceptable results were obtainable (GAO/PEMD 2001). Also by allocating different participants for each scenario the Multiple Treatment Interference effect (the effect caused to later treatments due to the previous treatment) was reduced.

The questions that followed in the next scenario assessed the consumers' free association of restaurants. For fine dining scenarios, the questions asked the respondents to list a restaurant they would highly recommend. This was followed by asking the interviewees what comes to their mind when they think of this particular restaurant. They were asked to use statement, words, and expressions to illustrate what came to their mind anytime they thought about this restaurant. The exercise also asked the respondents to list what they liked about this restaurant, as well as what they did not like. The purpose of this question was two-fold: 1) to make consumers think and list more restaurant brand associations and 2) to collect the positive and negative associations from a consumer's point of view.

The last two questions of the test concerned the patronage (for those who have not been) and re-

patronage of the restaurants. Thus the respondents were asked to give the most important reason and least important reason they would consider when selecting a restaurant for this particular meal. The interviewees that responded to the "least recommended" restaurant also responded to similar questions but with an altered organization. There was no time restriction in collecting information.

After completing the free-recall test, interviews using the projective techniques, were carried out on a one-to-one basis, between the respondents and the researcher. Projective techniques allowed the researcher to investigate beyond the surface cognitions or rational explanations of the respondents for their attitudes or behavior (Dey 1993). This technique is also a method used to project the respondent's personality, attitude, opinions, and self-concept toward a given stimulus, object or situation. It is meant to uncover the innermost thoughts and feelings of a person (Kline 1983).

When applying projective techniques in consumer research, the use of structured (clear and definite) and unstructured (ambiguous) stimuli is involved. Some of the examples of projective techniques are drawing completion, word association, and sentence completion (Janda 1998). The current study used the sentence completion as its technique. Leading questions were asked during the interview and provided with sentences for completion and expression. The interview was based on the scenario exercise, reviewing the questions and answers on the free association procedures. All the final responses were analyzed according to content-analysis techniques.

2. Data Analysis: Focus Group Session

Qualitative analysis consists of three related processes which are (1) describing phenomena, (2) classifying it, and (3) seeing how the concepts are

interconnected. A circular diagram by Dey (1993) makes it easy to understand these processes.

The first process (describing phenomena) is to develop a thorough and comprehensive description of the particular phenomenon under study. After the description establishes the context of action, the intentions of the actor, and the process in which action is embedded (Njite 2005).

The second process in qualitative data analysis is classifying the phenomenon. Classification is necessary for the researcher to know what they are analyzing. Therefore, this step is essential (Njite 2005).

In order to classify, Ratcliff (2001)'s Content Analysis Method was employed for this study. Content analysis is a quantitative method for analyzing the communication of people and organizations. For the purpose of classification, summarization, and tabulation, this analysis is a procedure for the categorization of verbal or behavioral data (Weber 1990). It can be either descriptive or interpretive (Njite 2005).

The written responses (free recall tests) provided the needed data base for further research. Two raters (researcher and one participant - University student) were used during the coding process. The coding process required the two coders to review the material separately and think of words that formed the checklist. When this was completed, the two coders compared their list for common words. This continued and finally a common list of words that were coded independently was formed.

Classifying or categorizing the data collected was the first step taken. Associations that showed related thoughts were organized into categories of brand associations after repetition of data analysis. The data was classified through the question: "What dimensions of the restaurant brand are identified by consumer?" The superior dimensions in which

more than fifty percent of the interviewees responded to the free association activity mentioned were price value, customer relations, menu variety, convenience, employee competence, food quality, and atmosphere.

The categorization of the data was followed by the content analysis. There is ample extent literature on classifying and categorizing. Included in the literature are four models designed by various researchers to set guidelines for categorization in brand associations (Berry 2000; Franzen & Bowman 2001). Revising all four models, it can be noticed that except for Berry's (2000) model, the rest have been developed in relation to tangible goods. In the restaurant industry, the product is more than just the tangible goods; much of it is made up of service. This explains the miscalculation in these models' consumer-brand associations and the associations identified in this group session. The categories of consumers' restaurant brand associations listed below were developed following the categorization guidelines.

1) Brand Signs

The first factors under brand sign are symbols and colors (Njite 2005). The second factor is the atmosphere. The atmosphere relates to the facilities, lightening, the arrangement of furniture, noise levels, temperatures, and cleanliness. Atmosphere is included as a brand associate.

2) Product Related Associations

The menu of a restaurant and the variety of products are product related associations. According to Berry (2000), anything which the customer addresses issues on the product can be an associate.

3) Perceived Price

According to Frazen and Bouwman (2001) customers usually do not know the exact cost of the brands. But they do generalize the brands according to relative price expectations.

4) Provenance

Provenance is the image of the company which is created by the appearance of the employees (Parasuraman 1991).

5) Service Related Brand Association

Service Interaction/Service Related Brand Association is the service process based on the relationship between the service provider and the receiver and how well the provider provides the service. This group of association is mainly focused in fine dining sectors (Njite 2005).

6) Systems Organization

According to Njite (2005) and Berry (2000) system organization brand associations is another group of brand associations customers take under consideration. This group is divided into convenience and consistency. Convenience includes factors such as the location of the restaurant, speed of service, and the operational hours. Consistency, literally, points out the consistency of the food and service regardless of the situation the restaurant may be in.

This study was launched to conduct experiments on the prioritization of the different brand associations mentioned in group sessions and how they cause consumer preferences of one restaurant over another and if there are any traits that are more important in this. In order to examine this experiment, a conjoint study and a factorial fractional design was utilized within this study. This accorded the selected brand associations identified in the model their relative weights.

3. Development of Empirical Study

1) The Sample Frame

Empirical data was obtained through random survey of customers. Most of whom had experienced fine dining restaurants, and who had a solid knowledge of restaurant service in the Seoul Metropolitan Area. In the survey, fine dining is explained as "restaurants providing high quality service, atmosphere, facilities, fine cuisine and having unit prices of higher than 30,000 won". It was conducted from January 15th to February 20th, 2009. The sample was selected randomly. A total of 130 customers responded. After cases with missing value were subsequently dropped from the analysis, the 107 remaining 'faithful' cases were analyzed.

The sample consisted of 48(44.9%) male respondents and 59 (55.1%) female respondents. Of the respondents, those in the age group in their twenties was distributed as the largest portion with 67 respondents (62.6%) and the age group in their thirties next largest with 33 persons (30.8%). Lastly, the age group in their forties shows 7 persons (6.6%). In addition, the education levels were 3 people (2.8%), from two year colleges, 81 persons (75.7%) from 4-year colleges, 22 persons (20.6%) with master or higher degrees, and 1 person (0.9%) outside these educational levels.

Data on monthly expenditure was also collected and the expenditure ranged from less than 500,000 won (38 respondents or 35.5% of the sample), between 500,000 won to 100 million won (45 respondents (42.1%)), between 100 million to 200 million (14 respondents (13.1%)), and above 200 million (10 respondents (9.3%)). On the other hand, data on monthly costs for dining out ranged from less than 100,000 won (18 respondents (16.8%)), between 100,000 to 200,000 (49 respondents (45.8%)),

between 200,000 to 300,000 (26 respondents (24.3%)), and above 300,000 (14 respondents (13.1%)).

Finally, occupations ranged from manufacturing industry (4 respondents (3.7%)), professional jobs (18 respondents (16.8%)), hospitality industry (38 respondents (35.5%)), entrepreneur (7 respondents (6.5%)), and others (40 respondents (37.4%)).

2) Instrumentation

After reviewing the result from focus group sessions, it was found that consumers have different levels of perceived importance concerning brand associations. To different consumers, some brand associations are considered more important than others. Understanding this implication is essential for brand management in the restaurant industry. This study examines the extent to which the identified associations are prioritized by the consumers when selecting a restaurant.

"To what extent are the identified restaurant brand associations prioritized by the customers when selecting a restaurant from a fine dining segment?"

Categories of brand associations were developed from the group sessions. These same associations were included in the empirical study. The menu related brand associations were excluded from the study because this study is focused on investigating the level of importance of the service provided by the restaurant, the price, and system organizations. Additionally, food brand associations are fundamental elements in the restaurant itself, so it is obvious that food will be an important factor in referring to a restaurant. Thus, the model only consists of five predominant items which are hypothesized to have influence in the choice of restaurant; price, atmosphere, convenience, customer relations, and employee compe-

tence. this study then seeks to measure the order of importance of the five associations in the fine dining segment.

The data is focused on non-food attributes of the restaurants examined. The five attributes were examined according to the consumers' brand association.

The attributes are price, atmosphere, customer relations, employee competence, and convenience. The survey consisted of simple descriptions of the attributes to assist the respondents with better understanding of what each attribute entails. The respondents were asked to rate the attributes with the value of 0 or 1 which were assigned to identify the levels. This was done so as to allow the quantitative formation of restaurants with various combinations of attributes and to carry out a quantitative analysis of the data. The researcher designed only two levels of the associations to minimize the number of possible combinations, which makes the survey less stressful for the respondents as it was only meant for experimental purposes.

Additionally, by using only two levels, the description of data is more similar with the common form of consumer communication (bad, good, or excellent). It has also been suggested in previous studies that consumers do not remember correctly the actual price paid for items but will be able to state it by being high, moderate or low (Dickson & Sawyer 1990; Le Boutillier et al. 1994). The orthogonal arrays for practical and comparable product combinations generated twelve restaurant cases including four holdouts on a scale of 1 to 7. The value of 1 identified it to be the least preferred while 7 indicated it to be of the most preferred.

The attributes and values assigned to each level

were as follows:

- (1) Price (Acceptable =1 Unacceptable =0)
- (2) Atmosphere(Acceptable = 1 Unacceptable=0)
- (3) Customer relations (Good=1 Poor=0)
- (4) Employee competence(Good=1 Poor=0)
- (5) Systems efficiency(Good=1 Poor=0)

4. Data Analysis

As mentioned above, the data was analyzed using the conjoint methods. Conjoint analysis has been used in marketing and another fields to quantify how individuals confront trade-offs when choosing between multidimensional alternatives. The respondents are asked to pick their preferred product from a group of products which are all described under a range of hypothetical situations in terms of the features of the products. Features may include those that do not exist in the products. It is also possible for the hypothetical products to be very arbitrary. To determine the relative importance of the attributes of a product to consumers, using the conjoint procedure may be helpful. Therefore, it has been claimed by researchers (Lee HY 2008), that the conjoint analysis is a very useful tool for product development and repositioning.

Utilizing the conjoint methods in selecting a restaurant assumes that the features or attributes such as food, quality, menu, price, and employees' behavior are part of the restaurant brand. These features or attributes are defined in several levels. Therefore, the judged levels of these attributes may reflect the current or prospective products,

When conjoint analysis is made, purchasers are asked to examine several hypothetical products which have various different types of product attributes and to evaluate them in their order of purchase preference (Hair et al. 2006). Adding too

many attributes and increasing the range of scale in the levels may lead to possible combinations representing the product alternatives that are too complex for the evaluators. Therefore, the orthogonal array experimental design was used to reduce the number of relevant combinations without hindering the assumptions of conjoint analysis technique (Hair et al. 2006). Because this method selects the test combinations so that it balances the independent contributions of the selected attributes, each attribute's importance is retained. The reduced set of combinations are the hypothetical product alternatives which are given to the consumers participating in this research to evaluate. The results of the evaluations will be used to find the mean of the utility function through the conjoint analysis programs. The current study uses only two levels of each attributes.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Interpreting Utilities

The interpretation of outputs is one of the most essential dimensions of conjoint analysis. The interpretation and presentation of results was undertaken with the output of the fine dining survey. From the raw data of the scenario rating by the respondents, the conjoint analysis first calculated utility scores for each attribute level. Desirable levels of attributes yield positive utilities, and undesirable level yield negative utilities. As shown in the tabular data for the fine dining restaurants, poor atmosphere yielded an average utility of -0.78 while good atmosphere yielded a utility of 0.78 . the range of the utility score can then be calculated for each attribute. For example, the utility range for atmosphere is 1.56 (2×0.78). An attribute with a larger utility range is more important than an

attribute with a smaller range. Hence, this sample sees atmosphere as more important than other selected factors when considering fine restaurants. Lee HY (2006) provides the guideline for interpreting the outcome (see Table 1 and 2 for presentation).

The algorithm converged in the output indicating no problem with the iterations and that $R^2 = 0.98$ and adjusted R^2 of 0.89 . The table also displays the part-worth utilities. the part-worth utilities show the most and least preferred levels

<Table 1> Output for fine dining restaurant preference

Metric	conjoint analysis	dependent variable	identity
Class	Level	Information	
Price	2	Acceptable/unacceptable	
Atmosphere	2	Good/poor	
Customer relations	2	Excellent/gross	
Employee competence	2	Expert/low	
Systems organization	2	Well/disorganized	

<Table 2> Utilities table based on the usual degrees of freedom

Label	Utility	Utility range	Importance
Intercept	3.43		
Price acceptable	0.73	1.46	23.9
Price unacceptable	-0.73		
Atmosphere good	0.78	1.56	25.7
Atmosphere poor	-0.78		
Customer relations excellent	0.54	1.08	17.77
Customer relations poor	-0.54		
Employee competence high	0.54	1.08	17.37
Employee competence low	-0.54		
Systems organized well	0.46	0.92	15.26
Systems disorganized	-0.46		

Pearson's $R = 0.999$, Significance = 0.0000

Kendall's tau = 1.000, Significance = 0.0003

Kendall's tau = 1.000 for 4 holdouts,

Significance = 0.0208

of the attributes. Levels with the positive utility are preferred over those with negative utility.

Conjoint provides an approximate decomposition of the original ratings. The predicted utility for a given restaurant is the sum of the intercept and the part-worth utilities.

In this study, when added up, the attributes examined in the fine dining sector give the following <Table 3> utility values: ideally, the restaurant that provides the highest utility should be the most preferred restaurant. The results in <Table 3> indicates the possible importance of all of the attributes in fine dining restaurants. Take restaurant D, for example, the attributes of acceptable price, good atmosphere, good customer relations, highly competent employees, and efficient systems gives the utility value of 6.48 to the customer.

The predicted utilities are equivalent to regression-predicted value. The R^2 is represented by the squared correlation between the predicted utilities for each combination and the actual preference ratings.

The importance value is calculated by using the part-worth utility range for each factor (attribute). This was done by dividing each range by the sum of all the ranges and multiplying it by 100. The current study used the program output to obtain them. The most important determining preferences are recognized by the factors (attributes) with the highest utility ranges.

Atmosphere scored 25.70% in relative importance value, ranking it as the most important association, followed by price (23.90%), customer relations (17.77%), and employee competence (17.37%). Finally, systems scored 15.26%, ranking it as the least important. <Table 4> shows the order of importance for the observed brand associations. Further, this finding is consistent with a body of research that has found that there has been a relative weight among the variables of brand association (Njite 2005). At the same time, this finding corresponds with Park, YS & Chung YS's study (2004), that there are prioritized consumption patterns (i.e., convenience, variety, design, health and quality, etc) influencing restaurant preference.

<Table 3> Illustration of the utilities derived from fine dining restaurants with differing attributes

Restaurant	Intercept	Price	Atmosphere	Customer relations	Employee competence	Systems efficiency	Utilities
A	3.43	-0.73	-0.78	-0.54	-0.54	-0.46	0.38
B	3.43	0.73	0.78	-0.54	-0.54	-0.46	3.40
C	3.43	0.73	-0.78	-0.54	0.54	-0.46	2.92
D	3.43	0.73	0.78	0.54	0.54	0.46	6.48
E	3.43	-0.73	-0.78	0.54	0.54	-0.46	2.54
F	3.43	-0.73	0.78	-0.54	0.54	0.46	3.94
G	3.43	0.73	-0.78	0.54	-0.54	0.46	3.84
H	3.43	-0.73	0.78	0.54	-0.54	-0.46	3.02
I	3.43	0.73	-0.78	-0.54	-0.54	0.46	2.76
J	3.43	-0.73	0.78	0.54	-0.54	0.46	3.94
K	3.43	0.73	-0.78	-0.54	0.54	0.46	3.84
L	3.43	0.73	-0.78	0.54	0.54	0.46	4.92

Based on the attributes of the eight hypothetical restaurant brands and four hold outs of the study.

<Table 4> Table of observed importance

Observed order of importance	% Importance (Utility range)
1. Atmosphere	25.70
2. Price	23.90
3. Customer relations	17.77
4. Employee competence	17.37
5. Systems	15.26

V. CONCLUSIONS

1. Theoretical Implications

This is an empirical study on restaurant branding, basing its data from a consumer perspective with theoretical implications and contributions. The first contribution is its methods. Multi method has been chosen as the method of this study and has proved its effectiveness in studying and measuring associations that consumers develop during their contact with brands. Since multi methods have also been accepted as one of theoretical contributions, the methodological design of this current study is found to be reliable in producing the results. The methodology of this current study is quite unique in the essence that it uses this method in research on restaurant branding. Qualitative interviews and free associations have been useful to examine the consumer's mind. By examining the consumer's mind, the meaning consumers construct about restaurant brands can be clearly understood by researchers.

Since qualitative interviews and free associations gives more freedom to the respondent's answers, the respondents are enabled to express and construct the environments at hand. In other words, respondents are able to provide consumer images that reflect the choice behaviors. Another method used was triangulation which enhanced the

validity of the study.

The second contribution is the study's theoretical framework. The framework further enhances researchers ability to understand how consumers perceive restaurant brands. For either an academic research to understand consumer purchasing of brands and further research, or for practitioners to predict, brand meaning is an essential issue to comprehend. The current study assists such individuals by firstly, recognizing several new brand associations which have not been included in previous branding models. Secondly, the study addresses the evolving character of the concepts of brand and branding. Brand and branding has evolved from this simple concept of differentiation of products with same function to something more complex. It is defined, today, in terms of consumer memory. Thirdly, this study identifies brand categories that determine the way consumer perceive restaurant brands. This study works as an effective research tool for further studies.

Further, this study empirically provides answers as to which selected brand associations in study I have relative weight on fine restaurant selection.

2. Managerial Implications

This study's theoretical implications and information are useful for managers who are seeking to build and improve restaurant brands. As mentioned in the discussion above, the model of restaurant brand preference presented in this study can be used for examining, evaluation, and improving restaurant brands.

One explicit finding of this study is that, consumers do not consider all brand associations as equal when selecting a restaurant in the fine dining

sector. Some associations are considered to be more important than others. Another significance of this study is the source of information for the consumer. The idea that experience is the best source of information for certain products and/or service is supported in this study. Triggered by this, and taking the goods and manufacturing industries as an example, restaurant managers should find strategies to let potential consumers have a "taste" of the product on trial, provided in their restaurant. Although the exact strategies and techniques to facilitate product trials are not discussed in this study, it should be noted that experiences is the best source of information.

Futhermore, this study implies that the atmosphere of the restaurant is the most important brand association (25.70%). According to Chun BK & Choi SK(2002), atmosphere is the best way to express the restaurants concept and as well as to differentiate it with other competitors. Plus, if the consumers like the atmosphere, it may increase the possibilities of their revisit. Additionally Chun BK & Choi SK (2002) suggests the following techniques to develop the desired atmosphere. The first technique is to manipulate the visual aspects of the restaurant with colors, design, decorations, lightings, etc. Secondly, manipulating the auditory senses by using music is another important technique. Increasing and decreasing the loudness of the music is also important to create the desired atmosphere. Thirdly, the harmonious arrangement of the first and second technique is essential. Therefore, fine dining restaurant managers should always consider the balance between the atmosphere and the concept of their restaurant.

Additionally, the price in fine dining was ranked second (23.90%). This empirically shows that managers should focus on price value. Managing

price and being able to provide value is important when considering fine dining restaurants.

Another important managerial implication of this study is affiliated with service interaction association. Service interaction association is the interaction between consumer and employee during the process of service. Two major aspects are taken into consideration in this association. They are employee competence and customer relations. The results of this study suggest that managers should keenly focus on what characteristics of their restaurant influences the perceptions of the consumers on their service interaction. Focusing in fine dining restaurants, this study showed that service interaction association ranked with a total relative weight of 35.14%. A figure of this amount is a huge percentage for an association that has an influence on fine dining selection. Managers, therefore, must concentrate on the management of interaction during service. Some of the findings contradicted the results of a study launched in the USA which empirically stated that price association in fine dining was not of great importance when selecting an restaurant. They tend to put much more value on service (employee relationship and competence) regardless of higher unit price than competitors.

The importance of employees and their behavior during service in fine dining restaurants should not be undermined over the interactive simultaneous nature of the restaurant business. The current study emphasizes the importance of the role played by employees in order for a brand to succeed. Attitudes consumers perceive about employees is a critical element in the success of a brand. Knowing this fact, hiring and training well qualified employees that have a positive work attitude should be a major task for restaurant managers.

3. Limitations and Suggestions

There were four limitations in this study. The first is the categorization of the brand associations. Categorization of brand associations in this study is extremely flexible. However, the overview is undoubtedly sensible. It is possible to overlook other associations as long as it is to just simply remind us that research only exposes parts of these associations. Because the current study is aimed to only provide an insight and better understanding of the prominent associations' consumers develop, hold in memory, and the role these associations play in the development of the other components of the mental brand response and ultimate purchase, the categorization of brand associations are very flexible.

The second limitation of this study is the study sample. This study used a homogeneous sample, thus limiting the generalization of the results. Therefore, it is suggested for future researchers in similar studies to keep this under consideration.

The third limitation is the service brands (restaurants). The restaurants selected are high labor intensive and the product (food) is greatly focused. Since the current study aimed to focus on the service provision aspect, the characteristics of the selected restaurants may have influenced the results. It is therefore wise to consider the possibility that important associations may have a different relationship with service dominated brand preference.

The last limitation is that the study is concentrated only on fine dining restaurants. Future research may increase the research pool by exploring brand association preference factors in different restaurant sectors.

한글초록

소비자들은 레스토랑 선택에 있어서 선호되는

속성을 기억 속에서 연결함으로 해서 다양한 니즈를 만족시키고 자아를 표현할 수 있는 이미지의 브랜드에 충실하게 된다. 소비자가 레스토랑을 선택하는 과정은 사회적, 문화적 가치, 개인 성향 등을 포함하는 복잡한 심리적 과정이다. 따라서, 본 연구는 고급 레스토랑 중심으로, 레스토랑 음식 속성 이외의 레스토랑 선택 속성들을 알아보고 그들의 우선순위를 조사하고자 시행하였다. 연구방법으로 포커스 그룹 세션을 통해 브랜드 연상의 변수를 파악하고, 이를 통해 실증적 연구를 컨조인트 분석을 통해 실시하였다. 결과로서, 시스템 편리성, 분위기, 가격, 서비스 측면(고객과의 관계형성, 직원의 능력)이 주요 속성으로 인지되었다. 아울러 그러한 속성의 중요도 순서는 분위기가 첫 번째 순위로 나타났으며, 가격, 관계 형성, 직원의 능력, 시스템 편리성 순으로 나타났다. 본 연구는 브랜드 연상과 레스토랑 선호의 관련성을 설명하고 있으며, 브랜드 선호 속성에 관한 향후 연구의 발판이 된다.

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