EXTENDED ABSTRACT

CUSTOMER LOYALTY ACCORDING TO MAÎTRES IN THE CATERING: SOCIOLOGICAL ANALISYS OF THE DINESCAPE EXPERIENCE BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

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1. INTRODUCTION

The gastronomic experience is one of the most successful trends in experiential tourism, after the visit to the tourist destination, and the contemplation and entertainment of urban, natural and cultural landscapes, and the enjoyment of leisure. The attention of the dinescape (perception and global value of the experience) and customer loyalty in restaurants, from the discourse of the maîtres, is a perspective studied in gastronomic and experiential tourism to understand, among others, the motivations of the gastronomic tourist and those of the residential diner, and the socio-demographic and psychographic variables that explain their behaviour. Considering, in addition, an environmental variable such as the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has radically influenced the behaviour of tourists and diners.

Although this type of tourism has been affected by the crisis, it is nevertheless observed that its recovery is immediate as soon as the health restrictions are lifted. This is because the sector is innovative *per se* (Hjalager, 2010) and, on the other hand, it is so powerful in itself that it does not have to reinvent itself but evolves in line with social trends, as it has done up to the present.

Gastronomic tourism comprises a series of tourist trips that are wholly or partly motivated by a particular interest in food-oriented consumption. Hall and Sharples (2003) have studied in gourmet tourism people who have a deep interest in gastronomy, such as food professionals and followers of high-end Michelin restaurants. There is a subgroup

of gourmet tourists called foodies, amateur gourmets, who frequent street markets, tapas, socialising or bar culture, local cuisine and ecology, fairs, farms, etc. They are few in number, but they spend significant amounts of money and their interest is predominantly hedonistic.

This tourism includes wine tourism or restaurant tourism, and has implicit leisure motivations with a cultural interest that forms part of cultural tourism (Medina and Tresserras, 2007). It is a complex, dynamic and interdisciplinary activity, and its multidimensional concept has very diverse approaches ranging from marketing, social psychology, anthropology, human ethology, geography, economics, ecology, political science, sociology, to chemistry, literature, biology, geology, history, agronomy, music, medicine, nutrition, pedagogy and philosophy (Kivela and Crotts, 2006; Ansón, 2016). The purchasing, cultural and educational level of gastronomic tourists is above average, they are involved in gastronomy, seeking socialisation or affective social ties. The sources of information they rely on most are word of mouth and the internet. They want holidays spread out over the year, good emotional stimuli and mainly like to buy emotions and not products (Opaschowski, 2001).

Experiential or emotional tourism arises as a consequence of the process of evolution of tourism in the post-Fordist and post-modern phase, a stage after mass tourism. It is centred on the terminology of experience, and has become transversal throughout the tourism sector. It emphasises emotions, feelings, details and unique experiences for tourists and travellers, who become the protagonists of the story they are learning about in the place they are visiting. It is linked to cultural tourism and, according to Martínez-Quintana, "it approaches the local communities, their way of life and wants to interact with the people of the area, get to know the heritage, the architecture, their identity, their gastronomy, etc. The main objective is to preserve the local authenticity of the communities, their traditions, their cultures, and to involve the traveller in them. Nowadays, it has become an indispensable way to build customer loyalty, as well as to attract customers" (2019:171).

Since people in the service context affect the physical environment, the extended definition of servicescape includes the social dimension. When talking about restaurants, the term dinescape is often used and also includes the overall perception of the customer, which encompasses the ambience or physical environment, the quality of service and the quality of the food. The concept and design principles related to the application of the gastronomic servicescape methodology propose a novel approach to the evaluation of gastronomic services that takes into account the complexity of the perception of the gastronomic experience by the potential customer, based on the weighted incorporation of the added value of both tangible and intangible aspects.

2. OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this research is to find out the factors by which a person/client accesses a restaurant and after this experience, the individual repeats the experience in the future, or recommends it to others. Our main hypothesis is that customer loyalty to a restaurant depends on intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the experience. Thus, the question we asked ourselves is: How do *maîtres* perceive diners' loyalty?

3. METHOD

As a research technique, the semi-structured interview was used. With a script adapted and simplified from the one that was designed in the first phase, considering that the time of the relevant informants was scarce and, furthermore, their personal circumstances made it necessary to reduce the time of their valuable participation. For the selection of informants, a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling was carried out. The total population was 1,270 restaurants of all categories in the province of Zaragoza and their respective headwaiters (maîtres). From this population, the maîtres of 68 restaurants included in all the officially recognised categories (number of forks) participated, as they were those whose managers were willing to give their time and effort to conduct the interview.

The interviews carried out saturated the variables under study. However, the informants who were previously observed to be able to contribute significant information to the research were: the maîtres, the customers themselves and the owners of the restaurants (who sometimes coincide with the figure of the maître). Following certain criteria, set out in table 1, the researchers adopted by consensus the idea of selecting them for this first study. This group fulfilled 100% of the selected criteria, as they have a more in-depth knowledge of diner behaviour than the owners themselves, from an objective perspective (they have years of experience and are capable of observing such behaviour), with a high degree of accessibility to participate in the interviews and a high degree of willingness to do so. In addition, they are a symbolic and historically recognised figure in the selected space-time, the restaurant. And finally, we consider that they have an authoritative role, mainly because of their expertise in the customer-service relationship in this space-time.

The fieldwork was carried out during January to April 2015 and subsequently validated during 2016 and 2017 through direct participant observation in the sampled restaurants, the authors of the research conducted lunches and dinners throughout the two years following the interviews.

4. RESULTS

The discourses obtained by the sample of relevant informants were studied through a content analysis of the texts from the transcription of the interviews carried out (coding, categorisation, thematisation); the interpretation of these narratives was of a hermeneutic nature oriented in an interpretative-comprehensive manner (Cárcamo, 2005); in this analysis, the researchers placed ourselves on a different plane to the social reality observed, taking into account the dynamics of meanings more or less hidden by the maîtres and their peculiarities collected by the observation itself when conducting the semi-structured interviews. In addition, a quantification of the repeated answers was carried out in order to verify certain tendencies in the maîtres' discourses. The importance of qualitative research in this study lies in the peculiarity and value of the informants' discourses, because it was a free and spontaneous manifestation of their opinions, based on their professional experience and which achieved a relevant theoretical induction of the investigated topic.

Precisely, in the analysis carried out, the characteristics of the restaurant were identified, the so-called factors which are determining the degree of customer loyalty. These

informants clearly indicated how, among the attributes of this product (the restaurant), differences emerged among those characteristics of the restaurant that can be associated with tangible aspects such as the food offered, the colour of the walls, etc., and other intangible ones relating to sensations perceived by the customers.

The *maître*, in general, considers that loyalty is the act of repeating a visit to the restaurant and also the behaviour involved in recommending it to others. Inductively, from the responses of the *maîtres*, the variables that are key to customer loyalty can be identified. When the diner enters a restaurant, he/she has a global perception that indicates whether he/she likes or dislikes it, and after his/her experience, he/she will have a favourable or unfavourable attitude towards his/her intention to return or not. They will then rationalise why (reduction of cognitive dissonance) and evaluate each of the restaurant's attributes and their overall perception, both sensory and emotional.

In the maîtres' discourse, a series of ideas emerged that can be identified with extrinsic factors present in the act of eating out; these are the so-called pull motivations, i.e. the attractions offered by the restaurant "pull" it, i.e. attract the diner to eat there.

Finally, the informants considered awards and certifications to be of little importance for customer loyalty, except in the case of prestigious private certifications such as those of the Michelin or Repsol guides. There is a concern for certification, i.e. they demand certifications that show the customer who does things well and who does not, such as certification of energy efficiency, ecology, real embers with fire, sourdough bread and not pre-baked bread, etc. without fraud or misleading advertising. But they are sceptical of the current certifications, which in their opinion lack control, are very expensive and not very useful.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The revaluation of the *maître* as a figure capable of building customer loyalty, both residential diners and gastronomic tourists, is confirmed in our study because they are able to perceive for themselves the reasons why a customer repeats or recommends the experience. These maîtres in a self-reflective way also become a loyalty factor. The opinions of the maîtres help to understand inductively what loyalty theories had already discovered. The antecedents of loyalty obtained inductively from the maîtres' discourse largely coincide with the existing literature review.

In hospitality, none of the main elements can fail in the overall perception of the dinescape, even if the average score is not very high. The diner will only focus on the attribute with the lowest rating and will not want to come back. Hence the importance of coherence and consistency in the quality of service. Thus, the overall perception that the customer has of the restaurant means that their experience may or may not be satisfactory, and they will also communicate this to others. Our initial hypothesis is confirmed: the loyalty of a restaurant's customers depends on intrinsic and extrinsic factors in the experience, which is based on the answer to the question of how the *maîtres* perceive the loyalty of the diners.