

HOW WOULD CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AFFECT CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN CHINESE RESTAURANTS IN FINLAND?

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Abstract

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Title of publication Title How would cultural differences affect customer experience in Chinese restaurants in Finland?		
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Abstract <p>In recent years, customer experience has become crucial to business, especially in the restaurant industry. Therefore, understanding the nature of customer experience is vital for such service providers to gain valuable experience through their customer experience management practices. These include the customers' perceptions and values are culturally affect the cultural difference.</p> <p>According to literature and practices, this study empirically explores the cultural dimension of customer experience to determine the extent to which cultural difference would affect customer experience in the restaurant industry and how these impacts of cultural difference are reflected in service delivery processes. By adopting a case study structure and creating two reference groups (a Chinese group and a Finnish group), this research examined the main factors of customer experience, revealed how the two groups vary on the perceptions of customer experience, and finally formulated a conceptual framework to understand the role of cultural difference. 20 interviews (10 of the Chinese and 10 of Finns) were conducted to collect the primary data and thematic analysis methods were used.</p> <p>The findings show that there are six main determinants of customer experience based on the answers from the respondents, namely, physical environment, service staff, food quality, value-for-money, authenticity and other clients. Besides this, Finns hold different perceptions of customer experience with the Chinese, where Finns focus more on physical environment and food quality to evaluate customer experience while the Chinese focus on service staff, value-for-money and other customers. Meanwhile, both Finns and the Chinese put great emphasis on the level of authenticity in assessing their overall customer experience. Finally, cultural differences also determine how the customer perceives the quality of customer experience through the presence-of experience cues.</p>		
Keywords customer experience, cultural dimension, factors		

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1. Introduction

1.1 Thesis background

In the modern business world, customer experience is becoming more and more important in determining today's business success, especially in service-centric industries (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel 2002, 85; Berry, Wall & Carbone 2006, 1-13). Entering the era of the Experience Economy, service providers are competing for distinctive customer experience offerings instead of goods or services, which are becoming rather commoditized. In the experience economy blueprint, Pine and Gilmore (1998, 97-105) depicted the progression of economic values evolving from commodities (extract), goods (make), services (deliver) and experiences (stage). Experiences are where the next competitive battlegrounds lie in. Similarly, Berry et al. (2002, 2006) concluded the evolution of competitive differentiators from tangible features, service benefits, customer relationships and experiential values.

This transition is ubiquitous in service-centric industries and it is exceptionally true in restaurant sectors, where delivering a good customer experience means high quality, great value and excellent satisfaction to save costs of finding new customers and, instead, to rely on repeat customers (Oh 2000, 58; Babin, Lee & Griffin 2005, 133-139). For example, some restaurants (e.g. Japanese Steakhouse: Benihana's) switch their backstage/kitchen to the front/table side, emphasizing affective qualities by adding entertaining components or personal interactions between the cook and diners (Kisang Ryu and Heesup Han 2011, 599-611).

However, what does really drive the restaurateurs to center on customer experience? This question runs through the whole book: DNA of customer experience by Juhl H. J. (2009) and the final answer given by Juhl is the customer value. Intrinsically, values are embedded throughout the customer experience delivery process (Hollebeek L. D 2013, 17-24) and the perceived value is a measurement of gain or loss as a result of comparing the supposed quality to the sacrifice, such as costs of the service, time spent on queuing or extra driving hours (Oh H. 2000). To create values behind customer experience, service providers are trying to get customers more engaged in an interactive, value-generating co-creation process because higher customer engagement normally contributes to generating more customer values (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004, 5-14). In support of the customer value proposition argument, Oh's study found that the customers' perceptions of value directly influence their intentions to return or patronage over time and that customer value creation is a central concept for explaining customer behaviors and customer decision-making processes. Finally, some marketing scholars supported that value is closely

related to customer experience. For instance, Holbrook (2000,178-192). defined customer value as an “interactive, relativistic preference and experience”, while Lusch, Vargo and Wessels (2008, 5-14) argued, in the same vein, that a customer is “idiosyncratic, experiential, contextual, and meaning-laden”, “a memorable event” (Pine and Gilmore 1998, 97-105).

However, research by Ruijgrok (2006, 206-213) revealed that values or perceptions are culturally determined and often associated with a cultural identity. Specifically, culture plays a significant role in determining the customers’ choices and perceptions of the food and services (Counihan & Van, 2012). Besides, cultural differences are an essential element in determining one’s cognitive response to the physical environment, which would simultaneously influence one’s emotional and physiological responses (Wakefield & Blodgett 1994, 66-76) the above considerations, there can be a possibility that culture may have an impact on the customer experience through value propositions or perceptions, or even that customer experience is culturally determined, just the same as values or perceptions. Notably, customer experience involves an important element, that is, interactions between the customers and the service staff, which are highly connected to culture (Hofstede, 1980). Besides, social interaction, as a cultural-bonded phenomenon, is another important factor for customers to decide which restaurant to choose. Both of them provide shreds of evidence to support the potential effect of cultural differences on customer experience, thus bringing out the need for the current study.

1.2 Thesis objectives, research questions and limitations

The purpose of this study was to explore the cultural dimension of customer experience, to address how Finns (standing for Western culture) and Chinese (standing for Eastern culture) hold varied perceptions of customer experience as a result of cultural differences, and to examine the effect of cultural differences on customer experience as well as how this effect is reflected on the service delivery process in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland.

Finland is an open, dynamic, equal, and attractive country to immigrants and multiculturalism is an intrinsic element of the nation. Notably, figures show that the Chinese are the largest group in the non-Western countries and quite many of them are working in Chinese restaurants. Typically, one of the most important components of ethnicity is expressed by serving the foods in ethnic restaurants, among which the Chinese restaurants are top representatives.

The history of Chinese restaurants in Finland could be dated back to post-World War II. The menus are changing all the time based on the conditions of Finland.

When I was having a meal with my friends at Huangchao and Basilika (Chinese restaurants in Helsinki), I discovered that Finns had a different perception of foods or services in Chinese restaurants. Surprised by these facts, some questions intrigued my mind: what makes Finns to have a different perception? Do they pay attention to things as I do as an indigenous Chinese? Do Chinese restaurateurs (most of them without business education) run the business merely based on what they perceive as a good dining experience? Bearing these in mind, I set out this study in order to reveal the answer to these questions and, in a broader sense, to provide ethnic restaurants, especially Chinese restaurants, possible improvements on how to understand the cultural dimension of customer experience issues before managing customer experience successfully.

Based on the arguments above, I set out this study to explore the cultural dimension of customer experience- to what extent would cultural differences affect the customer experience in restaurants. To reach the research goal, understanding the main determinants of customer experience is primary and fundamental to narrow down the examined scope as the first step. Equipped with the prescribed scope, I start to explore how the Finns' perceptions of customer experience differ from Chinese, which reveals the characteristics of each ethnic group. Finally, the role of cultural differences in affecting customer experience is examined and reflected in the service delivery process.

Based on the logic above, the research question is outlined as follows:

- What are the main determinants of customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland?
- How are the Finns' perceptions of customer experience different from those of the Chinese in the Chinese restaurants in Finland?
- To what extent do cultural differences play a significant role in affecting customer experience in context of Chinese restaurants in Finland?

Other Questions to be answered in this study are the following:

- How can the concepts of customer experience and cultural differences be defined?
- How are cultural differences related to other elements, e.g. perceived service quality?

This study has a number of limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, the total number of the samples used for data analysis in this study is still too small to carry out a reliable result. Secondly, even though face-to-face interview is conducted, there are still many questions not mentioned. Thirdly, due to the limitation of time and resources, this research adopted only in-depth interviews as the qualitative method to collect data, which is not as

profound as longitudinal studies such as an ethnographic study. Finally, there are some deviations in the interpretation of the interview transcripts.

1.3 Research methodology and data collection

Subjectivism is the ontology of research and social constructivism is the epistemology, which forms the philosophical basis of the research. Since this study aims at exploring the cultural dimension of customer experience by investigating the extent to which cultural differences would play a significant role in affecting customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland, subjective opinions and interpretations held by individuals need to be understood. Furthermore, social constructivism can help researchers better understand people's real reaction by placing them into a social context and grasp the subjective meaning of social behaviors (Bryman & Cramer, 2012). Therefore, it is suitable to adopt subjectivism and social constructivism into this study.

Accordingly, qualitative methodology, or field research, would be appropriate for this study as the qualitative method is known for "capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday from their own perspectives" (Walkerdine, Lucy & Melody, 2002). Different from quantitative research methods (e.g. questionnaires), qualitative research methods can grasp the holistic views of the individual under the contextual conditions and make it easy to reflect the contents as well as to take all pieces of messages into account such as emotional expressions originated from body language. Furthermore, in-depth interview methods were selected because this would provide subtle nuances in attitudes and behaviors for further analysis. With in-depth interview methods, this research can take an adequate look into each random sample instead of using a focus group, which neglects one or another. At the same time, it could be an occasion for developing new theories or novel ideas during the study, which functions as another motivation for adopting this particular method.

After selecting the right methods for the study, the data process starts. In this research, the primary data is collected from face-to-face interviews and the second data is based on literature, that is internet-based sources. Data was gathered from the primary and secondary data.

1.4 Thesis structure

This study has both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study fills gaps in examining the effects of cultural differences on customer experience in restaurants. Practically, this research demonstrates whether cultural differences affect the overall customer experience in a restaurant. Also, viable recommendations are given to help

restaurant managers adjust their marketing and branding strategies to manage customer experience from different cultural perspectives, thus enhancing the market performance of the restaurant.

The thesis contains four sections. Firstly, this study sets off by reviewing the latest literature on the key concepts, including cultural differences, customer experience and other related concepts. Secondly, an introduction of the research methodology and the data analysis procedures is elaborated in detail. Then, analysis of the data, together with a discussion on the following research questions were presented respectively: a) What are the main determinants of customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland? b) How are the Finns' perceptions of customer experience different from those of the Chinese in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland? c) To what extent do cultural differences play a significant role in affecting customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland? After this follows a conclusion in terms of each research question. Finally, this paper makes conclusions from the results of study.

2. Cultural differences

2.1 Concept of culture

The concept of culture has been defined thousands of times, and although no definition has achieved universal acceptance, it was first brought up by Taylor in 1991, "Culture is something that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capacities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".

Starting from 1950, many elements were added to the definition as mentioned above to enrich the concept of culture. These new definitions, integrated with new elements, changed over the time due to the revolution of the society (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 242-255). However, Schein (2004,12) pointed out that the majority of those definitions lacked in a concise definition of the concept, thus receiving some criticism. Bearing this in mind, Schein modified the old definition and aggregated altogether: "Culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems" (Schein 2004,17). From this definition, two points are emphasized, that is, for one thing, culture is a result of learning within a group of people with similarities and it is shared as a common understanding in many aspects; for another, culture influences how people perceive, think and feel (un)consciously in response to external objects. In the same vein, Geertz (1973) stated that culture is a system of shared values that form a framework guiding the behaviors of the members of society. In summary, culture is an important determinant of what we perceive, choose and act (Atkins & Bowler, 2001).

In the next section, this study introduces dimensions of cultural difference studies and other related theories or arguments, followed by an examination of one of the most important cross-cultural theories in detail, namely Hofstede's cultural dimension theory.

2.2 Dimensions of Cultural Difference

Cultural differences represent variation in the beliefs, traditions, laws, norms, and habits between different countries, religions, societies or peoples (Ferraro & Brody, 2015). Because of this variation, or so-called cultural diversity, people with different cultural backgrounds have varied expectations, norms, and values, which, for a stable period of time, would have a great impact on their judgments and decisions as well as on the subsequent behaviors (Liu & Jang 2009, 338-348). One typical example of cultural difference phenomenon are the table manners all over the world. For instance, finishing the food to bottom-

up would be appreciated in one culture while being rude in another. In some situations, a cultural difference can have a decisive effect on the decision-making process when it comes to really culturally determined issues. For instance, the internal organs of animals are enticing for Asians, however disgusting for Westerners. To summarize, food and eating habits are dominantly influenced by the culture which is rooted in mind and the culture as a whole symbolizes their identities and traditions.

Many scholars have studied the construct of culture difference and one relevant research by Pothos, Perry, Corr, Matthew & Busemeyer (2011, 210-215) found that cultural difference, or cultural variance, developed as a result of values, beliefs, and philosophies, can be categorized into two major factors, that is, the cultural heritage hypothesis and the social orientation hypothesis. In the cultural heritage hypothesis dimension, it clarified the difference between Occidental and Oriental philosophies. Occidental philosophies incorporate an extensive amount of analytical thinking – a methodical approach to solving complex problems by breaking them into their constituent parts and identifying the cause and effect patterns of the constituent parts. In comparison, Oriental philosophies are well-known for their emphasis on holism – the idea that the properties of the system cannot be decided or explained by its component parts alone, but the system as a whole determines how the parts behave. In the social orientation hypothesis, people of different cultures tend to have varied views of the self, which is reflected in the social interaction context that influences cognition, goals in social interaction, and behaviors.

In line with this, Nisbett & Miyamoto (2005, 467-473) have found that perceptual processes are influenced greatly by culture; for example, people in the Western culture tend to organize objects by emphasizing rules and focus on salient objects independently from the context, whereas people in the Eastern culture are inclined to look at the context as well as the relationship between the objects and the context. More specifically, Winsted (1997, 337-360) examined the cultural difference between Japan and America, and found that there remained fundamental cultural differences between the Oriental cultural heritage (e.g. Japan, China) and the Occidental one (e.g. America, Finland). Furthermore, values behind the high context culture of Japan seemed to be surprisingly stable over time. All findings indicated that there are significant cultural differences between China and Finland, which would hence affect emotional feelings, value perception and behaviors.

2.3 Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

To understand how culture functions in intercultural communication, Hofstede & Minkov (1991) described culture through an onion metaphor. In his onion model of culture, there are three layers (from the inner part to the outside part: rituals, heroes, symbols) of culture

together with a core. The core stands for the values of the culture, is stable and remains almost the same. Next to the core is the first layer described as rituals, which are changing at a slow rate. The second layer next to rituals is “heroes”, which represent fictive persons but have an influence on the culture. The third layer is about symbols, which are physical objects, but convey a certain message on people’s recognition. Finally, this model has one common premise that all the three layers can be trained and learned through practice, except the core (values), which revealed the inner nature of the culture.

Based on the study of IBM, Hofstede formulated a framework for cross-cultural communication, describing the effect of the society’s culture on the values of its members, as well as how these values relate to human behaviors and perceptions. According to Hofstede (1980), there are five components of culture, namely, power distance, level of individualism, level of masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and time orientation. The meaning of each component is summarized below and elaboration on each component in the case of Finland and China is carried out in the following.

Power Distance

Power Distance refers to the degree of less powerful individuals accepting and expecting the unequal distribution of power in society (Hofstede, 1980). According to Hofstede, power distance is presented and expressed by social status, prestige, power, and wealth. In cultures with high power distance, respect is shown in the relationship with a distinct hierarchy concerning age, professionalism or position, whereas, in cultures with low power distance, everyone is regarded as equal regardless of other factors. Based on the data from the Hofstede Center (See Figure 1), China (scoring 80) has a very high-power distance compared with Finland (scoring 33), which indicated that the Chinese had a definite hierarchy in the society and accepted inequalities, whereas Finns were relatively equal and comparatively flat in hierarchy as a whole.

Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism means the extent to which ties of individuals within a group are loose or cohesive; if they are cohesive, the result is collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). The fundamental issue addressed by individualism or collectivism is the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members and it has to do with whether people’s self-image is defined as “I” or “We”. Based on the data extracted from the Hofstede Center (see Figure 1), Finland (scoring 63) is a highly individualistic society, while China (scoring 20) is viewed as a highly collectivistic society, indicating that the Chinese act in the interests of the in-

groups and are hostile to the out-groups, whereas Finns are blurred in the boundary of the group but focus on individuals.

Masculinity and Femininity

A masculine society indicates that the society is driven by competition, achievement, and success, while a feminine society means that the prominent values in society are caring for others and the quality of life (Hofstede, 1980). The fundamental distinction between masculine and feminine lies in what motivates people, either striving to be the best (masculine) or enjoying what they do (feminine). According to the data from the Hofstede Center (see Figure 1), Finland (scoring 26) is considered as a feminine society while China (scoring 66) is considered as a masculine society, which indicated that Chinese are more success-driven, whereas Finns are flexible and concentrated on the quality of life.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty refers to the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede, 1980). Different cultures have different ways of confronting this anxiety caused by the unpredictability or uncertainty of the future. According to the data from the Hofstede Center (see Figure 1), the Finnish culture and Chinese culture have similar preferences for uncertainty avoidance, which indicated that both cultures are comfortable with uncertainty and hold the attitude of letting the future happen in a natural way.

Long-term and Short-term Orientation

Long-term orientation can be interpreted as dealing with a society's search for virtue, the extent to which a society shows a pragmatic future-oriented perspective rather than a conventional historical short-term point of view (Hofstede, 1980). According to the data from the Hofstede Center (see Figure 1), China (118) has a higher score than Finland (41), which indicated that Chinese takes a more pragmatic approach to preparing and investing for future and that the Chinese are more adaptable than the Finns.

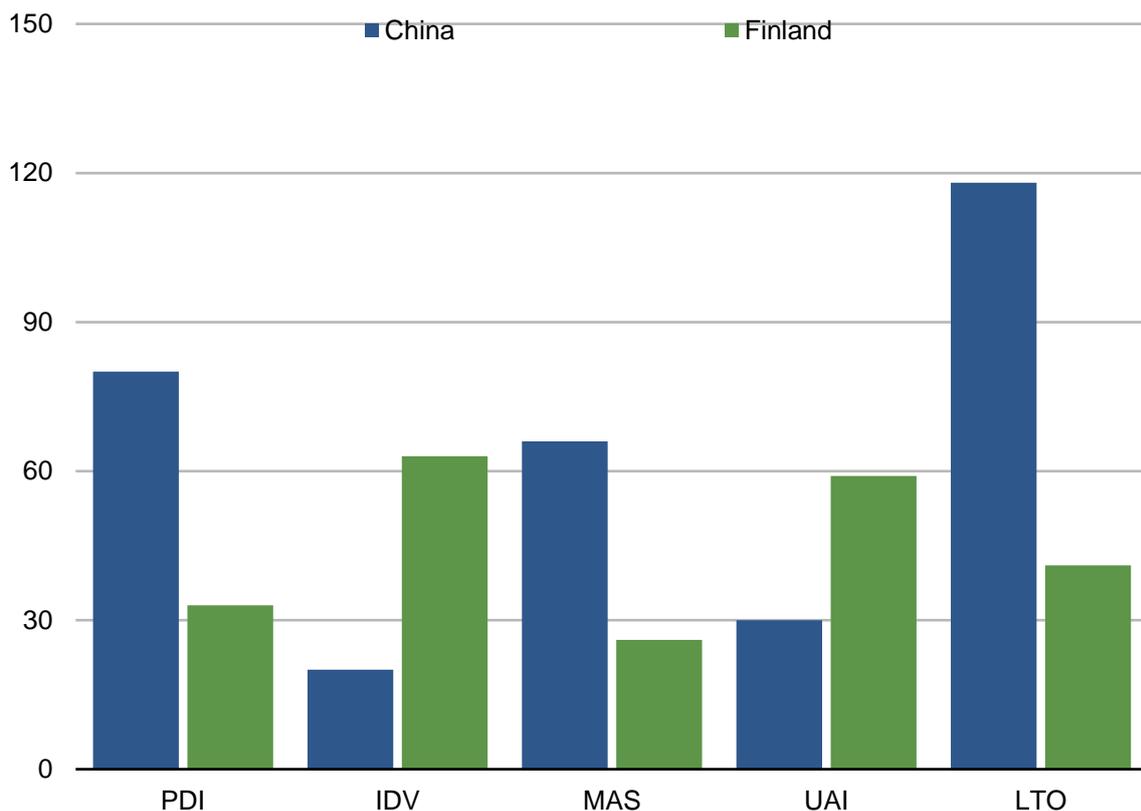


Figure 1 Comparison of China and Finland on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede 2013) (PDI = Power Distance, IDV = Individualism and Collectivism, MAS = Masculinity and Femininity, UAI = Uncertainty Avoidance, LTO = Long-term and Short-term Orientation)

Although Hofstede's cultural dimension theory has gained widespread recognition in the cross-culture study, it has received some critique from other cultural study scholars.

Typically, McSweeney (2002, 89-118) has pointed out that Hofstede had several faulty assumptions. To name one of them, the respondent-group was declared to be nationally represented and the data collected was applied to all situations, while, in fact, it was only restricted to the workplace.

3. Customer experience

3.1 Concept of experience

According to consumer marketing research, experience is defined as “a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are products or services consumed” (Holdbrook and Hirschman 1982, 132-140). In a psychology study, psychologists defined that experience was a mental state, presenting a sense of consciousness and often resulting in earning or a sense of achievement. In common, both definitions have acknowledged that experience is personal, subjective, conscious and emotional in nature. Here, emotional experience refers to human emotions elicited from a performance or event.

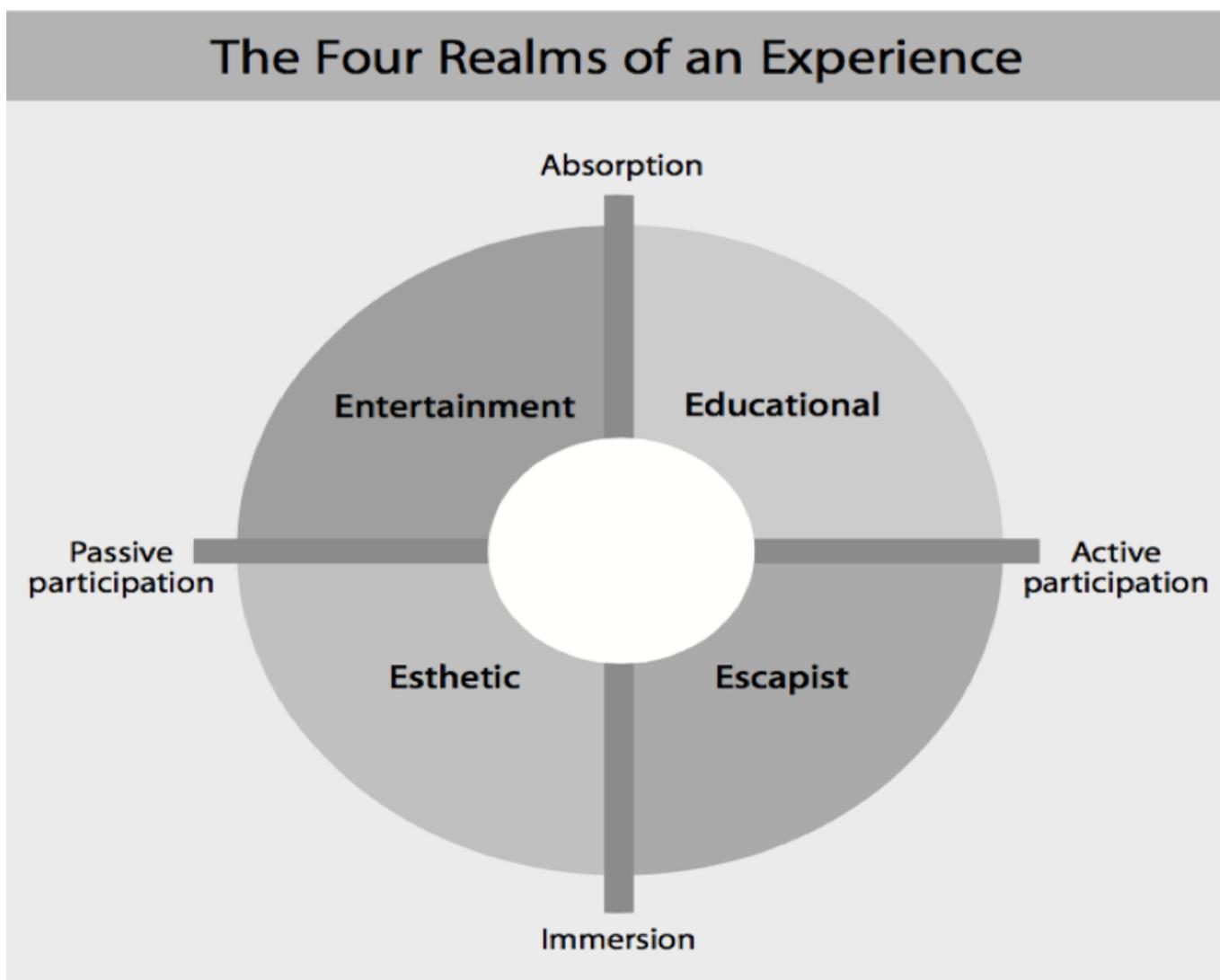


Figure 2 The four realms of an experience (Pine & Gilmore 1998)

To capture the construct of experience, Pine and Gilmore (1998) categorized experiences into four broad dimensions: entertainment experience, education experience, escapist experience and esthetic experience. This model is based on two characteristics of experience, namely customer participation (level of customer engagement) and environmental relationship (connection between customer and event). This categorization emphasized the importance of emotional experience on how different levels of emotions result in varied experience perceptions. However, strong in evoking emotions, this model lacked strength in covering the impact of rational experience. Besides, it failed to explain some of the experiences (e.g. the Disney World), which did not-fall into just one single category. Overall, the importance of emotional experience might be, to some extent, overrated.

As an insight of the deficiency, Carù & Cova (2007) consider the complementary experience as a rational experience, which is driven by utility and reflects the functional usefulness of an experience. In comparison, emotional experience is subjective and emotional, while rational experience is relatively objective and logical. To examine the relationship between emotional experience and rational experience, LindgrEEn, VAnhAmmE and Beverland (2009, 253-266) formulated the Memorable Experience Model (see Figure 3) to explain the interplay. This model emphasized three principles: 1) focus initially on the rational experience and then on the emotional experience; 2) engage the customer in the experience; and 3) balance the emotional and rational experience in harmony. In conclusion, although the emotional experience is vital to one's experience, it is hard to evoke and make desirable memorable emotions if the rational part of an experience does not work.

		Rational Experience	
		Performance Hindered	Performance Enabled
Emotional Experience	Desired Emotion	Dysfunctional	Delighted
	Undesired Emotion	Dissatisfied	Directed

Figure 3 Memorable Experience Model (LindgrEEn et al. 2009)

Finally, consumer marketing scholars presented an objective view of experience, where service providers could create an unforgettable experience with multiple touch points of the interaction (Carù & Cova, 2007). This type of experience is often coined as the extraordinary experience, which generates positive emotions in both rational experience and emotional experience. Arnold and Price (1993, 24-45) defined extraordinary experience as an experience characterized by the sense of newness of perception and procedure, triggered by unusual events and high levels of emotional intensity and processes. This definition is based on the premise that customers are not able to predict the outcome of an experience due to many unpredictable variables such as dynamic interactions, changes of the context, and so on. Given the above considerations, it is important to look upon both rational experience and emotional experience as the holistic experience to carry out the extraordinary experience or memorable experience.

3.2 Service experience cues

Experience cues or clues are referring to anything in the service experience that the customer perceived by its presence, for instance, it could be sensory perceptions from a customer by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting or smelling (the five basic senses of a person), interactions with service staff or the presence of the other customers (Brocato, Voorhees and Baker 2012, 384-398). These cues are accumulated by customers consciously or unconsciously and categorized into a set of impressions, which would affect the final assessment of one's experience – the total customer experience (Leonard, Eileen and Lewis 2006, 43-57). Taking the case of restaurants as an example, a pleasant scent or a tidy floor, a good welcome from the service staff or a good outlook from other customers each function as a cue, which can be put together to capture an experience.

In nature, a cue carries a message, which suggests something (can be either bad or good) to the customer, and the composite of all cues makes up the total customer experience. In practice, experience cues can signal whether the service is exceptional and, in many occasions, it is just the small cues that impact the customer's whole perception of experience (Haeckel, Carbone & Berry 2003, 18-23). Further, behavioral science found that experience cues function as a non-verbal communication process and can affect the customers' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. To summarize, experience cues can be concluded to function as the tangible presence of customer experience, affecting human emotions and behaviors.

To understand how experience cues vary from one to another and play different roles in shaping customer experience, Leonard et al. (2006) categorized experience cues into

three main catalogues: function cues, mechanic cues and humanic cues. Based on his article, I summarized the definition and listed a typical example in order to give vertical comparisons (see Figure 4). Firstly, this categorization is based on a premise that the customers' emotional feelings (moods) have an impact on how they think and behave in service encounters; this idea also reminded the service providers of seeking to manage experience cues in a way that promotes the customers' positive emotions. Secondly, an experience may include two types of cues, which means an experience is not necessarily falling into one single category. Finally, the outcome of an experience can be a result of all the three experiences disproportionately.

Experience Cues Type	Definition	Example
Function Cues	Functional cues refer to the technical quality of the offering, revealing the reliability and competence of the service; function cues can support the core of any service as well as meet customer expectations.	Restaurants make up for the loss when customers encounter service failure.
Mechanic Cues	Mechanic cues originate from actual objects or environments and include sights, facility design, equipment, furnishings, layout, signs, lighting, smells, sounds, tastes and textures, concerning the sensory presentation of the service; mechanic cues greatly impact customers' first impressions, expectations, and value creation.	Customers peep into the window to see the layout before selecting where to eat.
Humanic Cues	Humanic cues emerge from behaviors and interactions of service providers, in terms of choice of words, tone of voice, level of enthusiasm, body language, tidiness and outlook; humanic cues reflect the customer-provider interaction and offer the chance to cultivate emotional connectivity that can extend respect and esteem to customers and, exceed their expectations, strengthen their trust, and deepen their loyalty.	Customers come back to dinners because of the good waitresses.

Figure 4 Summary of experience cues types (Leonard et al, 2006)

Furthermore, to elaborate the interplays of functional, mechanic, and humanic cues, Leonard et al. (2006) created the illustration in Figure 5, linking three cue categories related to customer perceptions. Notably, it is important to emphasize the sequential importance of three experience cue categories in affecting the customers' perception. That is, functional cues primarily affect the customers' cognitive or calculative perceptions of service quality, while mechanic and humanic cues come afterwards mainly affecting the customers' emotional perceptions of the service quality. This sequential importance of emphasizing functional cues over emotional cues just coincided with the former section (3.1 Concept of Ex-

perience) of the conclusion that the rational experience goes beyond emotional experience, and emotional experience is strong in evoking emotions to affect the total customer experience afterwards.

Clue Influences on Customer Perceptions

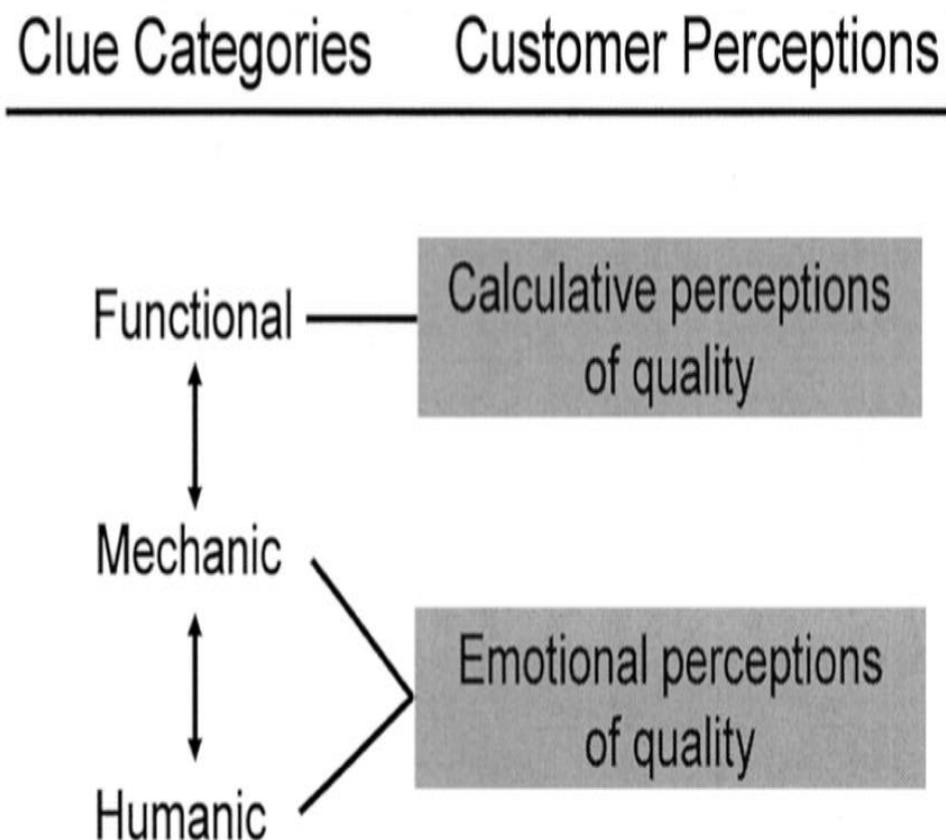


Figure 5 Cue influences on customer perceptions (Leonard et al, 2006)

The understanding of how to manage experience cues has a special meaning to the success of managing customer experience. For example, Berry et al. (2002, 2006) stated that a company's first step towards customer experience management is to recognize the cues it is conveying to the customers and that competing for customer experience means orchestrating all the cues that the customers pick up during the service delivery process. In line with this thinking, frontline personnel can be trained to create positive service experience cues because whether they are cue conscious or have good cue management skills directly affects the total customer experience. For example, the design of the physical environment (e.g. décor and artifacts, ambient conditions) can be embedded with various experience cues for the customers to enhance customer experience (Kisang Tyu et al.,

2011). Finally, experience cues provide the practitioners in the service industry a realistic solution for designing a memorable experience to the customers.

3.3 Dimensions of customer experience

One of the recent customer experience definitions, brought up by Gentile et al. (2007, 395-410), concluded that “the customer experience originates from a set of interactions between a customer and a product, a company, or part of its organization, which provoke a reaction. This experience is strictly personal and implies the customer’s involvement at different levels (rational, emotional, sensorial, physical, and spiritual)”. This definition has touched upon the concept of customer experience in a broad context. First, the definition conceptualizes that customer experience has multi-dimensional layers including sensory, cognitive, affective, tangible, intangible, and relational components (Gentile et al., 2007). Subordinately, it recognizes the significance of both emotional and rational cues, which is in line with the conclusions made in previous sections. Finally, this definition has emphasized the importance of interactions or involvement (engagement), which is another crucial feature of customer experience.

Despite the comprehensive elaborations of customer experience described above, the context of customer experience remains implicit. Pullman & Gross (2004, 551-578) emphasized that “an experience occurs when a customer has any sensation or knowledge acquisition resulting from some level of interaction with different elements of a context created by a service provider”. The context here is regarded as the physical and relational settings, where the customers interpret and make sense of the physical environment and interactions with the service facilitators or other customers in the service delivery process. In conclusion, understanding the context of customer experience is needed before designing and managing the customer experience.

Findings from many marketing scholars indicated that the physical environment has a great impact on the customer’s perception of the experience. To illustrate, Ryu and Jang (2007, 56-72) proposed a model to categorize the physical environment into six main functions such as table settings and service staff, and each of these six functions played significant roles in affecting the customers’ perception of the experience; notably, facility aesthetics, lighting, and service staff are important predictors of the customers’ perceived disconfirmation (Kisang & Heesung 2011, 599-611). Other research examined the effects of specific ambient factors such as music, lighting or scents. For instance, Milliman (1982, 1986) found that the volume and tempo in the restaurant influence the amount of time each customer spends as well as the amount of money each spends correspondingly.

Some other scholars (e.g. Turley & Chebat 2002, 125-144) claimed that, under the customer-environment interaction context, positive and negative emotions can be evoked by environmental characteristics iteratively, which supported previous statements.

Apart from marketing research, the influence of physical environment (atmospherics) on customer experience is also confirmed by environmental psychology from the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) paradigm. Kotler (1973, 48-64) stressed that in certain conditions, the atmosphere of a place can be as important as the product/service itself for purchasing or decision making. One typical example is that the majority of people prefer dining in a restaurant, which has an intimate and romantic atmosphere when proposing instead of eating at home.

3.4 Customer experience management (CEM)

Customer experience management is the practice of understanding customer feedback to improve customer experience. Studies of the Aberdeen Group's online survey (2008) show that good customer experiences help retain customer loyalty and satisfaction and boost sales in the long run, while a single bad customer experience makes the customers reduce 39% of their spending (17% of them even stopped spending) and, even worse, 53% of them have bad word-of-mouth effects on their friend circle, as well as 45% of them spread their anger through social media such as Facebook, review websites, and Twitter. Therefore, understanding the consequences of customer experience and learning how to manage them in a proper way are of top priority to any service provider.

However, customer experience is not easy to manage since every experience is distinctive, which arises from the combination of human interactions and the ever-changing service scape. In other words, each experience is co-created by the customers and the service staff at a particular point of time and location, and it differs subjectively from customer to customer even towards the same service provision (Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004, 5-14). Furthermore, the background of the customers can strongly influence what they perceive as a good experience (e.g. business traveler and pleasure traveler). In the same vein, the customers' different cultural backgrounds can determine what they perceive as a good experience according to their values ((Yüksel 2003, 52-68). In this regard, it is difficult for the service providers to produce or manufacture the experience, but rather to customize the experience from person to person in reality.

Scholars have explored many different approaches to managing customer experience, one of which is Schmitt's (2003, 176, 364) suggestion of strategically managing the customer's entire experience by integrating various elements of the customer's experiences

across multiple touch points. However, this approach does not consider enough the management of emotional and rational cues/experience into the CEM framework. Inspired by Haeckel, Carbone & Berry (2003), Shaw (2005) integrated the concept of value and cues into this approach and argued that managing customer experience is an integrated approach to creating distinctive customer values through the systematic design and implementation of various cues in the service context. Taking the advantages of both, customer experience management can be utilized as a strategic approach for creating a source of sustainable competitive advantages by integrating both emotional and rational cues into the service design process (Teixeira, Patricio, Nunes, Nóbrega, Fisk & Constantine 2012, 362-376), as well as controlling the touch points in a proper way. Last but not least, Sandström, Edvardsson, Kristensson & Magnusson. (2008, 112-126) emphasized that customer experience management is a cultural-bonded issue, and not just a function of infrastructure or research but rather the co-creation of a value with the customer.

Finally, putting all together, the tenet of customer experience is always “to think in customers’ shoes, that is, to see what customers see, to hear what customers hear, to touch what customers touch, to smell what customers smell and, above all, to feel what customers feel”.

3.5 Authenticity of Customer Experience

Authenticity, by definition, connotes traditional culture and a sense of genuineness (Sharpley, 1994), which means the aggregation of experiences delivered or enacted by indigenous inhabitants according to their traditions. In this vein, today many people choose to dine at ethnic-themed restaurants rather than generic ones, largely because they have a desire to experience a “real” life and “authentic” experience that manifests the target culture.

Current researchers have recognized three main approaches to the concept of authenticity, that is, an objectivist approach, a constructivist approach, and a postmodernist approach. First, the objectivist approach suggests that authenticity is objective and denotes a sense of genuineness, reality or uniqueness (Sharpley, 1994). Secondly, the constructivist approach is relative, negotiably dependent on the context, as well as ideological, and it denotes what is believed or accepted to be genuine or real (Taylor, 1991). Finally, the postmodernist approach is an aggregate of diverse postmodern views and justifies copies, imitation, and inauthenticity. This study adopted the concept of authenticity based mainly on the constructivist approach because it has a relatively realistic reflection of the customer’s holistic understanding of authenticity in the context of ethnic restaurants.

In reality, ethnic restaurants not only serve as offering ethnic foods, but also function as “cultural ambassadors” that communicate culture to the local customers (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 242-255), because, for the majority of local inhabitants, ethnic restaurants may serve as the only way (sometimes the first time) to contact with this specific foreign culture. So, their existing pre-dining knowledge of the ethnicity food or culture, which constitutes their expectations, is becoming crucial when they evaluate the authenticity of an experience in these particular ethnic restaurants.

Many scholars have found that authenticity serves as an important attribute in ethnic restaurants (e.g. Bell & Meiselman 1994, 11-24 Wood). For example, Wood and Munoz (2007) investigated the customers’ perceived importance of authenticity in Chinese restaurants, where they found that customers favored the restaurant to be somewhat authentic in its appearance in general and that the atmosphere was outstanding related to authenticity (decoration being No. 1) in Chinese restaurants. In other research, Bell and Meiselman (1994, 11-24) discovered that adding an ethnic theme to the dining experience would affect the customers’ perceived food authenticity, acceptability, and the selection of foods in ethnic restaurants.

All and above, authenticity is an important attribute and feature in evaluating customer experience, typically at an ethnic restaurant, and the degree of authenticity is primarily affected by the customers’ pre-dining experience, thus affecting the overall perception of customer experience. Finally, authenticity is embedded in the culture.

4. Methodology

Considering the actual need and aim of this research, I decided to adopt qualitative methods, specifically in-depth semi-structured interview methods as the main research method.

On top of this, a case study was selected for examining two groups. As Yin (2013) argued, “a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are clearly evident”. There are four reasons for choosing this specific method. A case study is a preferred strategy when answering “what” and “how” questions (Yin 2004, 2013). Second, the study takes place in a rich context where there are many factors to consider and it needs to be traced over time rather than merely grasp the frequencies or incidences. Thus, surveys are not suitable for this research. Third, as a field less explored, the research questions need to be systematically and deeply explored, which requires adequate data to support, and using a case study can explore a set of events deeply as well as helping to understand the complex processes profoundly (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 25). Fourth, this study involves two reference groups for analysis in the holistic design so as to investigate the variances of the reference groups, which adds significant opportunities for extensive analysis and comparison, thus enriching the insights of the study (Yin, 2013). Therefore, a case study with two reference groups is the most appropriate research strategy for this study.

4.1 Research questions

To reach the research goal, understanding the main determinants of customer experience is primary and fundamental for narrowing down the examined scope as the first step. Equipped with the prescribed scope, I started to explore how the Finns’ perceptions of customer experience differ from those of the Chinese, which reveals the characteristics of each ethnic group. Finally, the role of cultural difference in affecting customer experience is examined and reflected in the service delivery process.

The flow of the research questions is outlined as follows:

What are the main determinants of customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland?



How are the Finns’ perceptions of customer experience different from those of the Chinese in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland?



To what extent do cultural differences play a significant role in affecting customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland?

The Great Wall Kiinalainen Ravintola in Brief

The Great Wall Kiinalainen Ravintola has a typical Chinese name. Outside, there are traditional Chinese decorations around the wall and Chinese landscape paintings inside, offering Chinese-characterized tableware and lighting.

As a typical Chinese restaurant run for about 20 years in Lahti, Finland, the Great Wall Kiinalainen Ravintola has a number of regular customers, the majority of which are Finns and Chinese. According to the restaurant owner, almost 80% of the restaurant customers are Finns. The restaurant is open from 11:00 to 20:00 from Monday to Saturday, and on Sunday from 12:00 to 20:00, offering mainly a buffet and meat dishes. On average, every day approximately 40 customers visit and eat there daily.

The main reason for choosing this particular restaurant is that my dining experiences there can also function as a confirmation for this study and my access to the former owner of the restaurant (sold in June 2018 to a Chinese lady) can help gain more useful data for further analysis in this study as well as enhance the validity and reliability of the research.

4.2 Data collection

Pilot Interview

In order to test the reliability of the interview questions, two pilot semi-structured interviews were conducted at Great Wall Kiinalainen Ravintola after gaining permissions from the restaurant owner, and all interview questions were designed beforehand, targeted for the formulated research questions.

First, I selected 10 Chinese and 10 Finnish interviewees respectively, among which were Chinese students in Finland and Finnish regular customers on the restaurant's contact lists. Secondly, I briefly introduced the purpose of the study as a start and notified them that all information would be kept confidential and anonymous, only used for the research purpose, before starting with the modified interview questions. Third, the interviews were undertaken with one Chinese interviewee for 15 minutes and one Finnish interviewee for 20 minutes respectively after they finished their meals. Simple notes were written during the interviews.

4.3 Data Analysis

For data analysis, I selected thematic analysis methods to analyze the data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis is an essential and flexible method that can be minimally used to organize the realities and experiences of the participants. In thematic analysis, the data is “subjected to qualitative analysis for commonly recurring themes” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 77-101) within a social constructionist epistemology. Under the guidance of a five-phased cycle of qualitative data analysis process proposed by Yin (2011) and a six-step model of the thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2006,77-101), this research analyzed the data with regard to the following procedures: food Quality, Value-for-Money. Authenticity and Other Clients (see Appendix 1).

4.4 Answers to the research questions

Research Question One (RQ 1)

According to the results shown in Appendix 1 there are six main determinants affecting customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland, that is, physical environment, service staff, food quality, value-for-money, authenticity and other clients. The detailed discussions and findings are listed as follows.

- Physical Environment

As a crucial factor of the consumer psychology and behaviors, physical environment affects the customers’ experience unconsciously and iteratively, by exposing customers to the servicescape (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994, 66-76; Ryu & Jang 2007, 56-72). In this study, based on the answers from the respondents, the findings reveal that the physical environment influences customer experience by indulging the customers in the context of ambience, spatial layout, facility aesthetics, lighting, and table settings. These make up the five most important components of the physical environment associated with service experience cues to become part of the evidence for evaluating customer experience.

In detail, ambience conditions are intangible background features (e.g. scent, background music, atmosphere, temperature, humidity), engaging non-visual senses to affect the customer experience by creating a subconscious feeling inside the human brain. Spatial layout concerns how physical objects (e.g. furnishings, equipment, machinery) are arranged according to the environment, eliciting the customers’ feelings of freedom and boundary to enjoy the experience. Facility aesthetics engages in the attractiveness of the interior architectural design, which is a significant antecedent of the customers’ pleasure, arousal, and behavioral preference, thus consciously or unconsciously affecting the customers’ emo-

tions of the experience. Lighting represents the brightness of the environment, which stimulates the level of comfort and affects the customers' cognitive response, hence influencing the customer experience. Table settings concern how the table is set with the decorations, which affects the customers' cognitive responses and human behaviors, thus affecting customer experience.

These dimensions of the physical environment (i.e. interior conditions, spatial layout, facility aesthetics, lighting and table settings) are interconnected with one another, disproportionately affecting customer experience, depending on individual preferences. Notably, if one of those dimensions is perceived terrible, it might ruin many other good elements. Sometimes, they make up for each other's loss or strengthen each other's function. For example, good ambience conditions may make the customer ignore the narrow space, and bad facility aesthetics may ruin a beautiful lighting.

- Service Staff

Service staff refers to the frontline personnel in the servicescape and it includes the nationality of the employee, appearance of the employees, as well as the gender of the employee (Ryu & Jang 2007, 56-72). The service staff is in a direct contact with the customer, which determines the customer's emotions such as arousals. Based on the answers from the respondents, the findings reveal that the service staff influences customer experience mainly in two ways, namely through service encounter and the speed of service.

Service encounter concerns the interactive touch points of the service to a customer, which involves direct contacts by serving the customer to elicit the customers' emotional feelings on the experience (Breffni, Sheryl, Anna & Jochen 2009, 380-403). The speed of service, or speed of response, examines how fast the service staff reacts to the service requested by the customers, which may incur disconfirmation between the actual service response time and the customer expected service time to determine the customer's overall satisfaction with the experience.

In these two dimensions of service staff (i.e. service encounter and the speed of service), small things can matter because human emotions are easy to be provoked by the behavior of other people. Besides, in the meanwhile, the service staff acts an important role when the service failures or errors occur during the service delivery process; whether the service staff can understand the consequences of failures and react acutely to provide an effective recovery (e.g. refunds, discounts, apologies) is essential to affect the customer's emotional feelings and hence the satisfaction with the entire experience.

- Food Quality

Food quality or the quality of the food, as the core of a restaurant, is arguably far more important than all the other attributes, the primary indicator to describe an experience at a restaurant (Counihan & Van, 2012). Based on the answers from the respondents, the findings reveal that food quality influences customer experience directly from three dimensions, namely food variety, food layout, and the healthiness of the food.

Food variety refers to the variety of food for the customers to select from and shows the availability of food, which affects the customer's experiences, depending on whether the food meets the customer's needs or not. Food layout refers to the presentation of the food to the customers and forms an image in the customers' mind; this affects the customers' perception and hence their experience. The healthiness of the food pertains to the level of healthiness to the customer, which can affect the customers' intentions for a repeat purchase.

These three dimensions of food quality (i.e. food variety, food layout and the healthiness of the food) are important parts of assessing the overall customer satisfaction. In most of the cases, when asked to evaluate the customer experience, the customers often referred to food as the primary indicator for customer experience, which means that the quality of the food affects the customer's post-dining intentions and satisfaction with the experience.

- Value-for-Money

Value-for-Money refers to the utility of money spent compared with the service or food received and concerns whether customers see the price as fair, reasonable or acceptable (Ryu & Jang 2007, 56-72). Based on the answers of the respondents, value-for-money can affect the customer's satisfaction with the experience by examining the gap between the customer reference price and the actual price. Value-for-money, as a subjective evaluation of the economic utility of the food and service, affects one's attitudinal and behavior responses such as satisfaction or complaining, which directly determine the customer experience.

- Authenticity

Authenticity concerns whether the food and atmospherics can reflect the genuine or real taste of the culture from an ethnic origin (Sharpley, 1994). Based on the answers from the respondents, the findings reveal that authenticity affects the customer experience perception from two dimensions, namely the levels of genuineness and ethnic elements.

The level of genuineness relates to what extent the experience is genuine compared with the ethnic origin, which affects the customer's overall perception of the experience. Ethnic elements pertain to all the elements that related to the ethnic group or represented the culture of that ethnic origin (Jang & Namkung 2011, 662-680). Often, the number of ethnic elements directly influences the level of authenticity and hence affect the customer's overall perception of the experience (Jang, Ha & Park 2012, 990-1003).

These two dimensions of authenticity (i.e. level of genuineness and ethnic elements) can determine the customer's overall perception of the experiences and decide whether the experience is worthwhile or not. The number of ethnic elements can strengthen the customer's feelings of the authenticity, and small things, such as chopsticks, can matter as a representation of whether the experience is authentic or not.

- Other Clients

Other clients represent all the other clients in the service settings, and these clients are affecting each other through (in)direct contact in the restaurant. Based on the answers from the respondents, I found out that the other clients affect one's experience from two dimensions, namely the outlook of other clients and their friendliness.

The outlook of other clients contains the physical and spiritual outlooks from the other clients, which can affect the clients' decision-making process, as well as their satisfaction with the experience. The friendliness of other clients concerns whether the other clients act in a friendly way during the service delivery, which can elicit the client's emotional feelings, thus impacting the client's experience directly.

These two dimensions of other clients (i.e. the outlook and friendliness of other clients) can provoke the clients' emotional feelings, which directly affect their satisfaction with the experience. Notably, the outlook from the other clients can signal the level that the restaurant belongs to and this can affect the customer's decision to purchase at the pre-dining stage. Besides, other clients are affecting customer experience by functioning as a component of each other's servicescape.

In conclusion, there are a great number of factors that influence one's overall perception of the customer experience. The findings reveal that there are six main determinants of customer experience based on the answers from the respondents, namely physical environment, service staff, food quality, value-formoney, authenticity and other clients.

Research Question Two (RQ 2)

In the dimension of service staff, findings of RQ 2 reveal that the Chinese put more emphasis on the service staff than the Finns, in particular on the speed of the service response. The occurrence of this difference can be explained by the power distance of the cultural dimension theory (Hofstede, 1980). In detail, the Chinese regard money as a possession of power and Chinese customers think they are superior to the service staff (in China, “customers are gods”) because they pay for the service with their money, which equals to the use of power. That is why the Chinese have a higher request for service staff, while Finns are relatively equal to the service staff.

In the dimension of food quality, physical environment, and value-for-money, the findings of RQ 2 reveal that Finns focus on food quality and physical environment, while the Chinese concern about value-for-money. The occurrence of these differences can be explained by the masculinity or femininity of the cultural dimension theory (Hofstede, 1980). In detail, Finns belong to a feminine society, which means they focus more on the quality of life (e.g. food quality, healthiness of food, atmospherics). In comparison, the Chinese belong to a masculine society, which indicates that they focus more on successful and interests (value-for-money). That is why Finns focus on food quality and physical environment, while the Chinese are more concerned about value-for-money.

In the dimension of other clients, the findings of RQ 2 reveal that the Chinese focus more on other clients to evaluate the customer experience than Finns. The occurrence of this difference can be explained by the individualism or collectivism of the cultural dimension theory (Hofstede, 1980). More in detail, the Chinese belong to a collectivistic society, which means the Chinese act largely according to the group (e.g. other clients) and often associate personal affairs with the group interests. That is why the Chinese focus on other clients while the Finns care about themselves as individuals.

Research Question Three (RQ 3)

The customers perceived an experience as a reflection of different experience cues aggregated altogether and these experience cues embody the total customer experience in one’s memory. In the first stage, when the customers categorize an experience into multiple experience cues, sensory feelings (e.g. sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste) become decisive on how the customers capture and perceive the experience. For example, in the case of one Finn, it is evident that the customer integrated sensory feelings into categorizing the experience into experience cues, such as hearing and smell: *“generally speaking, I love the background music in the Chinese restaurant because it is not too loud but at a volume, which can still be heard. Before the food is ready, I can already smell the food from other tables and this would definitely make you feel even more hungry”*. In the same

vein, in a quotation from one Chinese customer, sensory feelings (e.g. sight) were integrated to describe the customer experience: *“when choosing restaurants, I will look into the restaurant to see how atmosphere feels like and whether diners have a decent look or feel happy or satisfied on the face together with foods on the table”*.

In the following stage, each experience cue delivers the perceived service quality and all experience cues add up to the accumulated perceived service quality. In this process, the perceived service quality pertained to the quality of service and perceived by human brain and culture is integrated in the human brain. This means that the perceived service quality is culturally determined and cultural differences determine how the customers of different cultures vary from each group in perceiving the levels of service quality from the experience cues. This can be supported by Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory explained earlier in the literature review. All these revealed that cultural differences are the determinant for how the customers perceived the service quality from the experience cues.

In the final stage, customers automatically make a comparison between the perceived service quality and the expected service quality, which therefore determines the customer’s satisfaction with the experience as a whole. The expected service quality means that the customers would have expectations of the service prior to consumption, and it is adjusted over the time based on experiences and knowledge. When the perceived service quality is higher than the expected service quality, positive confirmation occurs, ending up the satisfactory customer experience. On the contrary, if the perceived service quality does not match the expectations, there incurs negative disconfirmation, leading to dissatisfaction with the customer experience. However, the gap between the perceived service quality and the expected service quality can be bridged or mitigated by customer experience management (Luk & Layton 2002, 109-128; Schmitt 2003, 176, 364), for instance, managing the experience cues (Berry et al., 2006) or integrating more authentic elements (Bell & Meiselman, 1994).

4.5 Validity and Reliability

As a research design is supposed to represent a logical set of statements, Yin (2014) argued that researchers should judge the quality of any given design according to logical tests. In a case study, four most widely used tests are construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability.

In general, this study has a high quality of validity and reliability based on several tactics applied in this thesis. Firstly, by reviewing previous relevant literature to direct the empirical research, which has provided a solid construct validity. Secondly, choosing two refer-

ence groups in the case study shows the adequate data in order to examine the similarities as well as differences, which would eventually improve both the internal and external validity. Thirdly, by conducting interviews through the video calls instead of audio calls, which helped me capture the implicit messages from the interviewees such as their facial expressions and gestures, which to some extent improved the construct validity. Fourthly, I conducted two pilot interviews before the formal interviews, which enhanced the construct validity. Last but not least, I sent all the respondents the interview transcripts to confirm the validity of the contents before creating the final database, which enhanced the reliability of the study (Yin, 2014).

5. Conclusion

This study explored the cultural dimension of customer experience: to what extent cultural differences play a significant role in affecting customer experience in the context of Chinese restaurants in Finland. This was done by studying the main determinants of customer experience, examining the different perceptions of customer experience between the Finns and the Chinese, and finally proposing a conceptual framework to explain the role of cultural differences in affecting the customer experience.

The findings of the present study reveal that there are six main determinants of customer experience based on the answers of the respondents, namely physical environment, service staff, food quality, value-for-money, authenticity and other clients. Besides, Finns hold different perceptions of customer experience with the Chinese, where Finns focus more on the physical environment and food quality to evaluate customer experience, while the Chinese focus more on the service staff, value-for-money, and the other clients. In the meanwhile, both Finns and the Chinese put great emphasis on the level of authenticity in assessing their customer experience. Finally, cultural differences determined how the customers perceived the quality of customer experience through the presence of experience cues.

5.1 Suggestions for further research

There are some implications for further research. To begin with, as it is uncertain that the current research findings can be applied to other ethnic restaurants in other countries, similar studies within this area are expected to be conducted in different restaurant contexts in other countries. Although this study is based on a rigorous and profound research design, an additional quantitative study is suggested to be conducted as a supplement. For example, questionnaires on the objective perceptions of customer experience can be conducted with an even larger number of respondents for a further study. Finally, whether the customers' previous knowledge of the food or ethnic culture would affect their perceptions of customer experience should be examined in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Typical Quotations from Interviewees (Including Chinese and Finns)

Physical environment (ambience conditions): Generally speaking, I love the Chinese music that plays in the restaurant which makes me feel ethics. (Finn)

Facility aesthetics: I really enjoyed my time there with my colleagues in general, the interior design of the restaurant was really Chinese and even a lot of staff were oriental, which was nice. (Finn)

Lighting: The light in the restaurant was a little bit too dark for me and I would prefer to have dinners where is much brighter. For me, I like it that the light coordinates with the general color scheme of the restaurant. (Chinese)

Table settings: Besides, what I really love about Chinese food is that Asian cuisine such as dumplings is always eaten with chopsticks, it makes me feel a little exciting to try something different in my life, I guess. (Finn)

Food quality (food variety): I would like to go to the Great Wall Kiinalainen Ravintola because they offer a variety of choices: salad, Chinese dishes, fast foods, sushi, drinks with a reasonable price. (Finn)

Food tastes; I don't like the buffet. The foods served in the restaurant is localized, different from Chinese foods served in China. (Chinese)

Value for money: In general, I would like to come here because they offer a variety of choices but at a reasonable price, which is good for a student. It costs 10 euros in week days and we had pretty much for everything. (Finn)

Authenticity (the level of genuineness): It is nice when the music, interior design, food, atmosphere and mood matches that of the nationality it represents, and it's all worth it. (Finn)

Ethnic elements: For me, ethnic elements are appreciated because I think most customers are not only coming for the foods, learning the cultural as a departure of food as well, which is much more important than food itself. (Finn)

Other clients (the outlook of other clients): When choosing restaurants, I will look into the restaurant to see how atmosphere feels like and whether diners have a decent look or feel happy or satisfied on the face together with foods on the table. (Chinese)

Friendliness: We can easily make friends with Chinese owners and staff and order original Chinese dishes that not written in the menu. (Chinese)