# Themed Restaurants and Hospitality: What do Young People Think?

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## Abstract

The paper examines the relationship between Z Generation consumers and themed restaurants, as well as their comprehension about hospitality. In order to achieve this purpose, a qualitative research was conducted with a semi-structured interview and on a focus group with ten consumers who attend two Geek themed restaurants in São Paulo. To analyze the collected data, the Content Analysis method was applied with software Atlas ti to identify categories related to hospitality and respondents' perception of the surveyed locations. Findings include Z generation perception about the importance of authenticity and hospitality in the servicescape as main reason for them to visit a themed restaurant.

**Keywords:** Hospitality, Themed Restaurant, Authenticity, Servicescape

## 1. Introduction (Section Heading)

The environment thematization, whether parks, cities or themed areas, is a growing subject, such as Las Vegas, one of the most well-known themed spaces, and the second most visited tourist destination in the world (forbestraveler.com/2018).

Themed restaurants offer their customers far beyond the meal, behind the theme there is always entertainment and interaction. After a rapid increase in popularity in the early and mid-1990s, themed restaurants began to lose market share, and many popular brands were forced to downsize their establishments (Weiss, Feinstein, & Dalbor, 2005). For Pine & Gilmore (1998), there is a growing number of customers that seek more experiential modes of consumption.

Themed restaurant customers, in general, spend more time on site enjoying the details of the facility and decoration, as well as the employees who perform the service. Food is in the background, behind the theme, which is the main reason for choosing the restaurant for customers, which these establishments use to attract their audience (Turley & Fugate, 1992).

Nevertheless, it is not enough to have an authentic decoration and an attractive menu if the service is not satisfactory. The reception and attention, dedicated to the public during the time they are in the place, that is, the

factors related to hospitality, are fundamental for the satisfaction of the consumer. In the case of themed restaurants, getting the customer in contact with the universe of the theme is another important aspect to be examined (Meng & Choi, 2017 and 2018; Kim & Moon 2009) Therefore, the attributes of servicescape in themed restaurants play a significant role in the perception and behavior, and consequently, customer satisfaction.

According to Guimarães and Camargo (2018) hospitality is relationship and has the welcome as a result. It is to accept or at least not reject the other. This other will be accepted if it is perceived as similar and not as strange and threatening. This evaluation is done in affective and cognitive processes, in empathic perception. The proposition is that empathy, and some behavioral characteristics associated with it, are related to one's being more or less hospitable.

In the provision of hospitality there is the involvement of tangible and intangible elements, which can be perceived as in the case of food, drink, accommodation and, the atmosphere that surrounds all services provision will contribute to the evaluation of the product or service offered (Marques, Yamashita & Stefanini, 2017). In this context Moretti (2015) contributes on consumer experience, especially in relation to services since the relationship between the client / guest holds all stages of the process, from the idealization of the service contracting service to its use. Hence, the author argues that the services encounter should not be analyzed only at the delivery stage itself, but throughout its *continuum*, since the perception about quality starts from the reservation by the site, eg. and, it extends until after the service has been experienced.

Even though there are several studies on customer perceptions and behaviors in restaurants, little research has focused on the area of themed restaurants and their relationship with hospitality and the young consumer as well. This study aims to understand the relationship between generation Z consumers and themed restaurants, in addition to understanding this public regarding hospitality.

In this context, this study extends the academic discussion about the emotional and experiential dimensions that lack as object of study and, in the case of the themed restaurants, it presents that the positive experience and authenticity are fundamental factors for the customer satisfaction and sustainability of the business. The purpose of this article is to understand the relationship between Z Generation consumers and themed restaurants, as well as their comprehension about hospitality.

In order to achieve this purpose, a qualitative research was conducted with a semi-structured interview and on a focus group with ten consumers who attend two Geek themed restaurants in São Paulo. To analyze the collected data, the Content Analysis method was applied with software Atlas ti to identify categories related to hospitality and respondents' perception of the surveyed locations.

## 2. Themed Restaurant and New Generation

Themed restaurants are part of the worldwide gastronomic itinerary. They are characterized by recovering and creating the local scene, offering specialized food consumption to the public. Not only is the food specialized, but also the entire space is decorated and features the characteristics of each location, the waiters are usually dressed accordingly, and elements refer to the proposed universe. Themed restaurants offer their customers meal and entertainment  (Weiss et al., 2005).

As for the field of tourism and hospitality, the consumption of experiences - such as theme parks and restaurants are developing rapidly (Dong & Siu; 2013). Some studies have already empirically demonstrated that

consumption in these service areas provides memorable experiences that play a critical role in producing benefits such as fantasies, pleasure and fun, which leads to the perception of well-being.

As the service is produced and consumed simultaneously, a customer must be on site to experience total service within the environment (Kim and Moon, 2009). To appreciate the theme, customers must spend a period of time in a restaurant to value the decor and service of the employees, which evoke a variety of meanings (Bitner, 1992; Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982). Due to the significant role in customer satisfaction, a restaurant with a service environment is widely used by these restaurants to attract customers. Thematization is actually used as an effective strategy to differentiate restaurants from other competitors (Dong and Siu, 2013; Tsai and Lu, 2012).

It is viable to say that young people are part of a new generation and consequently a new type of consumer behavior. This consumer profile is often unstable, because they are always looking for something new, for changes, for the realization of their personality and live the conflict of leaving their parents' dependence. The construction of personality runs through consumption, young people feel the need to be inserted in some social group. Thus, building thematic environments (for example, theme parks, theme hotels and theme restaurants) is being used a lot by hospitality professionals as a basis for marketing strategies that provide more experimental services (Wood and Muñoz, 2007). As the service is produced and consumed simultaneously, a customer must be on site to experience total service within the environment (Kim and Moon, 2009).

One way to map these society transformations and their lifestyles is through the study and analysis of generations. By looking at the consumption behavior of the major postwar generations (Baby Boomer, X, Y and nowadays Z), one can notice very particular characteristics regarding their lifestyles and their conception of consumption. The latter (Generation Z) is the one that presents the most considerable transformations, requiring greater attention from the market due to their potential and differentiation. It is possible to perceive the lifestyle of people through what they have and their opinions (da Silva Dias, Zuffo, & de Souza, 2018)buy, the activities they perform, the interests they

Generation Z young people are key players in the market and influence marketing strategies as they spend a lot of money; spend family money; influence what the family buys (suggesting favorite brands, giving opinions); set trends; influencing fads and fashion in many categories of different products, such as jeans and music; they are a growing market and; they are the future consumers (Ceretta & Froemming, 2011). Young people tend to be a type of "demanding consumer, living at a frantic pace, 'tuned in' to trends and concerned about group status." Thus, understanding young consumers becomes a huge competitive advantage.

## 2.1 Hospitality and Servicescape

Hospitality is strongly related to service delivery and it requires an intense relationship between hosts and guests. Hospitality studies in the commercial domain have advanced significantly, especially in the hospitality industry by researches that relates service concepts with consumer experience and the relationship with hospitality and its fundamentals (Moretti, 2015). It represents, as defined by relationship marketing, an attempt to build a long-term association through intentional cooperation and mutual dependence, as well as characterized by the development of social and structural ties. Therefore, the human component is one of the most important ingredients for the perception of a positive experience (Guimarães & Camargo, 2018).

Lashley & Morrison (2004) approach hospitality, placing at the center of the phenomenon the encounter between host and guest unfolding it in three interrelated domains of activity: private or domestic, social or cultural and, commercial, with the influence of each one in the others. The commercial domain represents

hospitality applied to business consequently. There are the other two domains connected to it, forming a triple intersection that expresses the influence it receives from the cultural and private tradition, that is, values, meanings and emotional dimensions.

Brotherton & Wood (2004) proposed that hospitality can be differentiated from other forms of human exchange such as the expression of the desire for mutual well-being between the parties, afterwards entertainment was added to the definition, to cover all of its current performance (Camargo, 2004; Hemmington, 2007; Lugosi, 2008). The consumption experience, especially in services, reinforces the important relationship that permeates all phases of the customer contact process. As for the contributions to an analysis model, the various phases in which the contact occurs, the search to offer a memorable consumption experience and the positive relationship with the client as an activity guide should be considered (Moretti, 2015).

The servicescape aspect has been studied by different researchers in different perspectives (Bitner, 1992); (Fredman, Wall-Reinius, & Grundén, 2012); (Bagozzi, 1975). For example, Bitner (1992) defines servicescape as the environment in which services are experienced. Fredman et al. (2012) argue that servicescape could be separated into categories such as nature and facilities. Bagozzi (1975) proposed that servicescape is the place where customers meet social and psychological needs. Although there are several definitions in the literature, tourism and hospitality scholars generally agree that the servicescape is different in its dimensions (Dong & Siu, 2013); (K. C. Chang, 2016). These differences are related from the functional and mechanical aspects regarding the physical creation of the service environment (Dong & Siu, 2013). Other physical elements of servicescape include layout of space (for example, layout of exit and entrance). Bitner (1992), arrangement of equipment (for example, machines, furniture) (Ryu & Han, 2011) facilities (for example, architectural design , color, external appearance and interior design) (Lucas, 2003), symbols and artifacts (for example, signage, decoration style) (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996), environment (for example, indoor climate, music, temperature and scent) (Bitner, 1992); (Ryu & Han, 2011) and dining equipment (for example, high-quality cutlery, crockery, glasses and bedding) (Ryu & Han, 2011). Other elements of servicescape include employee performance (for example, employee oriented for the client, competence and attention of employees, and willingness to help and interact with clients) (Harris & Ezeh, 2008); (Van Dolen, De Ruyter, & Lemmink, 2004) cultural aspects (K.-C. Chang, 2016); (Dong & Siu, 2013).

Based on the literature review, the dimensions of services as a factor external to the client and the perceptions of authenticity as an internal factor are critical to generating a gastronomic experience in a themed restaurant (Arnould et al., 1998; Chang, 2016; Jang et al., 2012; Wood and Muñoz, 2007). A themed restaurant is a place to eat decorated with various and distinctive symbols, largely unrelated to food itself (Beardsworth and Bryman, 1999). As such, a themed restaurant customer gastronomic experience is an experimental consumption obtained by the effects of the service environment of the restaurant and the evaluation of authentic customer experiences (Tsai & Lu, 2012).

As an example of servicescape, aspects such as decorations, music, clothes and service, interact between customers and employees, provide individual information about historical events and the lifestyle of a given theme (Bitner, 1992; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996). These experiences are unique, and when evaluated positively by customers, they contribute to customer satisfaction, increasing customers' intention to revisit and recommend the location. (Chang, 2016; Dong and Siu, 2013; Wood and Muñoz, 2007).

## 3. Methodology

In order to achieve the intended objective, a focus group was held with ten young people between 14 and 20 years old who visit two themed restaurants in the city of São Paulo. A semi-structured script was used with questions about the perception of young people in relation to hospitality and the reasons that lead them to attend these restaurants. The focus group is a research technique that collects data through group interactions when discussing a special topic suggested by the researcher. As a technique, it occupies an intermediate position between participant observation and in-depth interviews. It can also be characterized as a resource for understanding the process of building perceptions, attitudes and social representations of human groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). After the focus group, the transcripts of the responses obtained were performed and with the support of Atlas.ti software (Muhr, 1991), the categorization was performed according to the Content Analysis Bardin (2009) to identify categories related to hospitality and respondents' perception of the surveyed locations. Atlas.ti software is a suitable resource for the development of all stages of Content Analysis of (Bardin, 2009) facilitating the work of the analyst and contributing to the establishment of relationships that culminate in the treatment and inference of the results.

## 4. Results

The categories identified in the responses were divided into groups according to the keywords found in the literature review and grouped according to (Bardin, 2009).

**Table 1.** Categories and Intensity

| Category | Frequency |
|---|---|
| Food | 8 |
| Servicescape | 7 |
| Host | 3 |
| Attendance | 5 |
| Fun | 2 |
| Entertainment | 9 |
| Experience | 9 |
| Escape | 5 |
| Interest Groups | 10 |
| Hospitality | 5 |
| Identity | 9 |
| Communication | 7 |
| Interaction | 6 |
| Reward | 3 |

Source: Research Data

To analyze the co-occurrence table generated by the Atlas ti software, the value of the relationship between the categories was used: the larger and closer to 1 the stronger the relationship between them, thus, it is perceived that the more significant relationship is the category of hospitality with servicescape (0.20), which can be seen in the respondents' speech as "an environment that makes you want to stay there as long as possible", which is

in line with Moretti (2015) when the author states that the meeting between hospitality and service takes place in servicescape.

Following the relationship between the service and the host (0.14) and identity with experience (0.13), "For example, if you are in a medieval place, the host will treat you like a master. If it's Harry Potter's, the host will call you a wizard " As Arnould & Price (2000) state in the service context, the experience of authenticity intensifies the customer's joy and enthusiasm. Previous research supports the relationship of perceived authenticity and involvement (Dong and Siu, 2013; Chang, 2016; Campbell et al., 2014). So, in a restaurant, customers got involved because they could get pleasure from authentic elements. Also as defined for Lugosi (2008), hospitality is also a means of achieving social and political goals. The author innovates by bringing the concept of meta-hospitality, that is, a temporary state of mutuality that is different from the rational manifestations of hospitality.

Previous studies on themed restaurants have already demonstrated the role of authenticity in training positive emotions (Chang, 2016). For example, Chang (2016) also demonstrated that a servicescape helps to form positive emotions for customers. Based on those studies, authenticity hidden in a themed restaurant would evoke the positive emotions of customers, who finally form customer involvement.

The relationship reward with environment (0.11), experience with escape (0.08) "you're in your real world, then you open a door and that's it, you're in a totally different world" and interaction with food (0.08) , interaction with entertainment and interaction with experience, "immersion that this place provides, whenever you enter you feel that you are entering that world" interaction with identity and experience with environment (0.07) experience with entertainment, identity with entertainment and identity with interest groups (0.06).

**Table 2.** Co-occurrence Categories

| | Food | Servicescape | Host | Attendance | Communication | Fun | Entertainment | Experience | Escape | Interest Groups | Hospitality | Identity | Interaction | Reward |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Food | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,08 | 0 |
| Servicescape | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,07 | 0 | 0 | 0,20 | 0 | 0 | 0,11 |
| Host | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,14 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Attendance | 0 | 0 | 0,14 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Communication | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Fun | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Entertainment | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,06 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,06 | 0,07 | 0 |
| Experience | 0 | 0,07 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,06 | 0 | 0,08 | 0 | 0 | 0,13 | 0,07 | 0 |
| Escape | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,08 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Interest Groups | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,06 | 0 | 0 |
| Hospitality | 0 | 0,20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Identity | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,06 | 0,13 | 0 | 0,06 | 0 | 0 | 0,07 | 0 |
| Interaction | 0,08 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,07 | 0,07 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0,07 | 0 | 0 |
| Reward | 0 | 0,11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Source: Research Data

Servicescape has significant influences on the assessment of services at a theme park. Reimer and Kuehn (2005) also revealed that servicescape is a critical factor in consumer ratings on service experiences. As service areas

strongly affect the cognitive and affective responses of customers, their positive perceptions of the substantive dimension should correlate with attitudes towards visiting the restaurant again.

In a themed restaurant, customers who experience an authentic dining experience perceived as a value of pleasure, excitement or interest among themselves and a gastronomic activity are likely to be involved in that themed restaurant. The literature demonstrated that the perceived authenticity hidden in the service landscape in a restaurant theme can arouse emotions and provide a value of pleasure or excitement to customers (Chang, 2016).

## 5. Discussions

Previous evidence demonstrates that a higher level of performance services forms a higher assessment of the customer experience in certain locations, and this experience also leads to a positive assessment of revisiting that location (Dong and Siu, 2013; Reimer and Kuehn, 2005 ). Thus, a better perception of the servicescape contributes to the formation of a favorable attitude towards revisiting this restaurant. A favorable perception of an environment in terms of its spatial disposition, signs and symbols create feelings of fun and favorable memories and help to form positive opinions.

When focusing with the relationship between hospitality, servicescape and themed restaurant, the statement by one of the focus group participants portrays the interaction between the three categories "Especially on the waiter, the service of the waiter is the highlight, they make the difference, the immersion in the world of the theme, in addition to the appearance of the place and the waiter too. From the floor to the ceiling all the details count, here the waiter comes and complements the details, they enter the world of fantasy "In relation to the personal / cultural aspects), customers form experiences based on the evaluation of the performance of the employees and the services experienced ( Brannen, 1992).

Customers at a themed restaurant communicate with employees during service, so evaluating these employees is essential in assessing customers and perceived authenticity. Empirical studies have demonstrated the relationship (Dolen et al., 2004; Dong and Siu, 2013). For example, Dolen et al. (2004) found that the performance of service personnel significantly influenced customer meetings and relationship satisfaction. According to Tasci & Semrad (2016) hospitality can be defined as a construct to generate an emotional response in guests based on the traits of the host and their attitudes and behavior in dealing with guests. "The importance of identifying, recruiting, training and empowering individuals to be hospitable will be essential in establishing a consistent basis of loyal customers." (Lashley, 2004, p.20).

Overall, as an influential factor, authenticity plays an important role in the context of the themed restaurant. The results highlight the importance of the environmental dimension of servicescape to themed restaurants. The result is consistent with the work of Dong and Siu (2013) and Chang (2016) in similar contexts. Therefore, the relative importance of the physical aspect in the servicescape was identified in the context of a themed restaurant.

The result of this study appoints that authenticity can be understood as a variable that influences the intention to visit the restaurant in addition to having an impact on the customer's experience and satisfaction. As suggested by Wood and Muñoz (2007), during the gastronomic experience, a customer must be transported to another time, according to the respondents' remark. Another issue to be considered is the entertainment associated with

the gastronomic experience (Lugosi, 2009), since in themed restaurants, interaction and attractions are different factors.

## *5.1 Practical Implications*

Since servicescape is an extremely important factor proven in this research and in the literature, themed restaurant employees are also expected to play the temporal role of tourists guide or museum interpreter with knowledge related to the topic. They must be trained to be a thematic storyteller, explaining the symbols and meanings in the ambience of a restaurant and interactive communication with customers. Hospitality, in the sense of the relationship between people, in the case of this study, performed from the managers to the attendants makes a difference for the client of the themed restaurant, whether in cordial service or to reinforce the theme. This study help managers from themed restaurants to understand the importance of well-trained employees as well as the authenticity in the servicescape.

## *5.2 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations*

This study has some limitations, consumers from only two themed restaurants were interviewed , and future studies could increase the number of restaurants analyzed, adding other kind of thematic restaurantes such as etnic, as well as expanding the number of interviews and participant observations during these events to deepen our understanding. Despite these limitations, the present research provides relevant support for further exploration of both hospitality and the creative economy, as well as the  complex relationship between them.

## 6. Conclusions

When it comes to hospitality, it is about exceeding a point where quality means acting according to the behavioral referent, that is, to consider the individual as a human being who is subjective. This increases the possibility of exchanges and experiences. It can be understood that the hospitality changes with the lived context, then one sees the capacity of improvement and growth of it in a world in constant evolution, even if not expressed, there is the yearning for its accomplishment.

The memorable experiences of service encounters with hospitality are important for the perception of consumer satisfaction, which will tend to repeat positive experiences, as well as to recommend to colleagues and acquaintances the places where the experience occurred.

This study aimed to understand the relationship between generation Z consumers and themed restaurants, in addition to understanding this segment about hospitality. The responses obtained showed that involvement in a themed restaurant is positively related to the intention of revisiting a themed restaurant.

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Thus, the physical environment and the communicative process can activate authentic contexts, which further increases the involvement and behavioral intention.

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