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The Influence of Food Presentation on Customers' Dining Experience: A Study of Zaatar Arabian Mandis

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ABSTRACT :

Food presentation has become part of what restaurants sell, yet very little research has examined it in Arabian and Mandi restaurants in India. This study asked whether customers' perceptions of food presentation and quality influence their dining experience at Zaatar Arabian Mandi in Vijayawada. A descriptive, quantitative design was used. Sixty customers, selected through convenience sampling, completed a structured questionnaire rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). The data were analysed with descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, chi-square tests of independence, one-way ANOVA, and simple and multiple linear regression. Perceived presentation was strongly associated with dining experience, $\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 28.86, p < .001, V = .69$, and mean dining experience differed across the low, moderate, and high presentation groups, $F (2, 57) = 30.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .52$. Presentation alone explained 61.1% of the variance in dining experience ($\beta = .78, p < .001$), although its unique effect weakened once other experience factors were added. Dining experience did not differ by gender or age group. The findings suggest that restaurant managers can treat plating and visual presentation as a practical way to build customer satisfaction and repeat visits.

Keywords: food presentation, dining experience, customer satisfaction, Mandi restaurant, Likert scale, Vijayawada

Introduction

People begin judging a meal well before they taste it. The colour of the rice, the way meat is arranged on a platter, and the manner in which a dish is brought to the table all shape what customers expect and how much they enjoy the food afterward (Spence et al., 2016). For this reason, presentation is usually treated as one part of the wider dining experience, which also includes food quality, service, and the physical setting (Kotler, 1973; Ryu et al., 2012).

In India, Arabian and Mandi-style restaurants have multiplied quickly in cities such as Vijayawada. The format is unusual. Food arrives on large shared platters, so the look of the rice, the cut and placement of the meat, and the way the platter is served carry much of the visual appeal. Most of what is known about presentation, however, comes from laboratory experiments or Western restaurants, and it is not clear how well those findings apply to this kind of dining.

The experimental evidence is fairly consistent. Zellner et al. (2011) found that neatly plated food was liked more than the same food plated untidily, and Michel et al. (2014) reported that an artistically arranged salad was rated as tastier and more valuable than the same ingredients served in a conventional way. Studies in restaurant settings point the same way, linking food quality, of which presentation is one element, to satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Namkung & Jang, 2007).

The present study looks at one restaurant, Zaatar Arabian Mandi in Vijayawada, and asks whether the way customers perceive its food presentation is related to how they rate their overall dining experience. The paper first reviews the relevant literature and sets out the conceptual framework, objectives, and hypotheses. It then describes the method, reports the results, and discusses what they mean for restaurant managers and for future research.

Review of Literature

Dining Experience and the Experience Economy

Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that businesses now compete by staging memorable experiences rather than by selling goods and services alone. Restaurants fit this idea well, because a meal is made up of the food, the service, and the setting, all taken in together. The importance of physical surroundings had been recognized earlier in retailing. Kotler (1973) introduced atmospherics as a marketing tool, and Bitner (1992) later described the servicescape, the built environment that shapes how customers perceive and respond to a service. Ryu et al. (2012) carried this thinking into restaurants and found that the quality of the physical environment, food, and service together influenced restaurant image, perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioural intentions. Seen this way, food presentation is one visible part of a broader evaluation, not the whole of it.

Food Presentation and Visual Perception

Vision is the first sense to engage when a dish reaches the table, and it sets up expectations about flavour before anything is tasted (Delwiche, 2012; Spence et al., 2016). Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman (2014) reviewed how colour, shape, plating, and tableware influence perceived taste and enjoyment. Experimental work supports this. Zellner et al. (2011) showed that identical food was liked more when it was plated neatly, and Michel et al. (2014) found that an artistically arranged salad was rated tastier and worth more than the same ingredients arranged conventionally. These studies do have limits. They relied mainly on controlled laboratory or online settings, largely with Western participants and single dishes, so they say little about everyday dining in culturally specific formats such as shared-platter Arabian cuisine.

Food Quality, Satisfaction, and Behavioural Intentions

Satisfaction is often explained through expectation–confirmation theory, which holds that customers compare what they perceive with what they expected beforehand (Oliver, 1980). Presentation matters here because it shapes expectations before the first bite and so colours how the meal is judged later. Namkung and Jang (2007) linked food quality attributes, presentation among them, to satisfaction and behavioural intentions in restaurants. Jang and Namkung (2009) approached the question through the Mehrabian and Russell (1974) stimulus–organism–response model and found that perceived quality triggers emotions, which in turn drive behavioural intentions. Ha and Jang (2010) studied ethnic restaurants and treated food and service quality as drivers of satisfaction, with atmospherics acting as a moderator. Taken together, these studies place food quality, and presentation within it, as a stimulus that shapes the whole dining experience and later loyalty.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Three points emerge from the literature. Dining experience is not one-dimensional, visual presentation affects liking and perceived value, and food quality predicts satisfaction and the intention to return. There are also clear gaps. First, presentation is often studied inside experiments or folded into broader food-quality scales, which makes its separate contribution hard to isolate. Second, there is little evidence from Arabian or Mandi restaurants in India, where shared platters change how presentation is judged. Third, studies of mid-sized cities such as Vijayawada are scarce. This study addresses these gaps by measuring presentation-related perceptions and the overall dining experience among customers of a single Mandi restaurant.

Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Perspectives

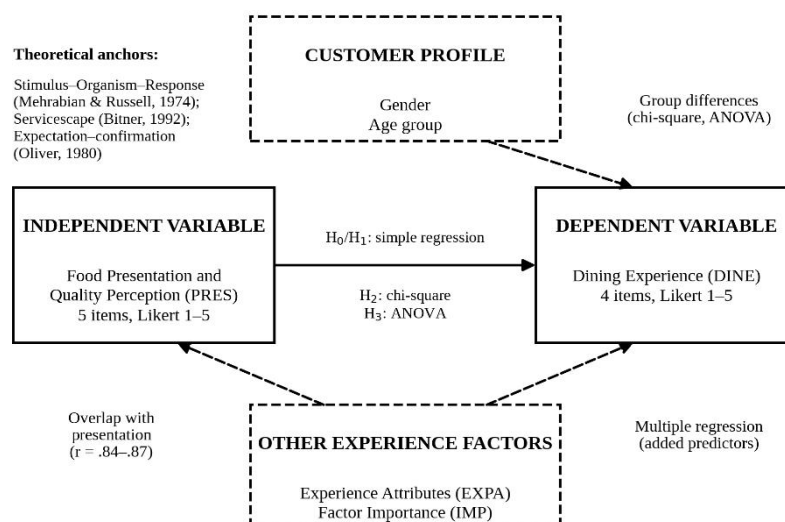
Four theoretical ideas support the study. The first is the stimulus–organism–response model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which suggests that environmental cues act as stimuli that shape internal evaluations, and these in turn drive behaviour. In this study, presentation is the stimulus and the dining experience is the response. The second is Bitner's (1992) servicescape concept, which explains why tangible, visible cues matter so much when customers judge a service encounter. The third is expectation–confirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), according to which an appealing dish sets positive expectations, and a meal that delivers on that promise is judged more favourably. The fourth is the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), which frames the meal as a staged event in which sensory detail matters as much as the food itself.

Model of the Study

The framework, shown in Figure 1, draws on these perspectives. The independent variable is perceived food presentation and quality (PRES), which serves as the environmental stimulus. The dependent variable is dining experience (DINE), defined as overall satisfaction, perceived quality, likelihood of recommending the restaurant, and likelihood of returning. It represents the customer's evaluative response. Two further variables, experience attributes (EXPA) and factor importance (IMP), overlap with presentation and are added in the multiple regression. Gender and age group are customer-profile variables used to check whether the experience differs between groups.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Note. Solid lines show the primary relationship under investigation; dashed lines show secondary relationships. PRES = food presentation and quality perception; DINE = dining experience; EXPA = experience attributes; IMP = factor importance.

Objectives and Hypotheses

Objectives of the Study

1. 1.To describe customers' perceptions of food presentation and dining experience at Zaatar Arabian Mandis
2. 2. To test whether mean dining experience differs across low, moderate, and high presentation groups.
3. 3.To measure the extent to which food presentation predicts dining experience.
4. 4.To examine whether dining experience differs by gender and age group.

Hypotheses

The central hypotheses concern the influence of presentation on dining experience:

- H₀: Food presentation has no significant influence on customers' dining experience at Zaatar Arabian Mandi, Vijayawada.
 - H₁: Food presentation has a significant influence on customers' dining experience at Zaatar Arabian Mandi, Vijayawada.
- Two supporting hypotheses were tested.
- H₂ states that presentation level and dining experience level are associated (chi-square test), and
 - H₃ states that mean dining experience differs across presentation levels (one-way ANOVA). Differences by gender and age group were examined as exploratory analyses.

Method

Research Design

A descriptive, quantitative design was used. Primary data were collected with a structured questionnaire, and every response was recorded on a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932).

Participants and Sampling

The population was made up of customers who had dined at Zaatar Arabian Mandi in Vijayawada. Using convenience sampling, 60 customers who had eaten at the restaurant at least once were surveyed. Most respondents were aged 18–24 years (76.7%), and slightly more than half were male (55.0%), as shown in Table 1.

Instrument and Measures

The questionnaire asked for age group and gender and contained 33 rating items scored from 1 (lowest, for example very dissatisfied, very poor, strongly disagree, not important, or very unlikely) to 5 (highest). Four composite variables were calculated as the mean of their items.

Food Presentation and Quality Perception (PRES), the independent variable, was the mean of five items on ease of use, speed of service, communication quality, staff professionalism, and overall value. Dining Experience (DINE), the dependent variable, was the mean of overall satisfaction, overall quality, likelihood of recommending, and likelihood of using the restaurant again. Experience Attributes (EXPA) was the mean of five agreement statements on clarity, expectations, trust, and convenience, and Factor Importance (IMP) was the mean of five importance ratings.

For the categorical analyses, composite scores were classified as low (< 3.50), moderate ($3.50\text{--}4.49$), or high (≥ 4.50). Internal consistency was acceptable to good for all composites (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$ for PRES, $.84$ for EXPA, $.83$ for IMP, and $.79$ for DINE), above the $.70$ benchmark (Cronbach, 1951; Hair et al., 2019).

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Respondents completed the questionnaire after dining. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and respondents were assured of anonymity. Names and phone numbers were left out of the analysis file.

Data Analysis

The data were coded and analysed with statistical software. Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's alpha were computed first. Pearson's chi-square tests of independence, with Cramér's V as the effect size, were used to test associations. A one-way ANOVA with Tukey's HSD post hoc test and η^2 compared dining experience across groups, and simple and multiple linear regression tested how well presentation and the other variables predicted dining experience. The significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$, and effect sizes were interpreted against Cohen's (1988) benchmarks.

Results

Sample Profile

Table 1 summarizes the sample. Respondents were mostly young adults, and slightly more than half were male. Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 60)

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Age group</i>		
Under 18	1	1.7
18–24	46	76.7
25–34	10	16.7
35–44	2	3.3
65 and above	1	1.7
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	33	55.0
Female	27	45.0

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Respondents rated their experience highly. Mean scores were above 4.25 on every composite, with presentation and quality perception highest ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.67$) and dining experience close behind ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.70$). Overall satisfaction averaged 4.27 and likelihood of recommending averaged 4.33. Half of the respondents (50.0%) were very satisfied and 56.7% were very likely to recommend the restaurant. Among the presentation-related items, overall value received the highest rating ($M = 4.48$). The composites were strongly and positively correlated, as Table 2 shows.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability, and Correlations of Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	1	2	3	4
1. Presentation (PRES)	4.40	0.67	.85	—			
2. Dining experience (DINE)	4.33	0.70	.79	.78	—		
3. Experience attributes (EXPA)	4.26	0.68	.84	.84	.84	—	
4. Factor importance (IMP)	4.33	0.66	.83	.87	.83	.86	—

Note. $N = 60$. All correlations are significant at $p < .001$. Scores range from 1 to 5.

Chi-Square Test of Independence

Chi-square tests were run on 2×2 tables, with dining experience divided into high (≥ 4.50) and low or moderate. No expected cell count fell below 5; the smallest was 10.8, for presentation. Dining experience level was not associated with gender, $\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 0.43$, $p = .511$, $V = .08$, or with age group (24 and below versus 25 and above), $\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 0.81$, $p = .368$, $V = .12$. Presentation level, in contrast, was strongly associated with dining experience level, $\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 28.86$, $p < .001$, $V = .69$, which is a large effect. Of the 34 respondents who gave high presentation ratings, 30 (88.2%) reported a high dining experience, compared with 5 of 26 (19.2%) among those with low or moderate presentation ratings (Table 3). H_2 is therefore supported.

Table 3

Chi-Square Tests of Independence with Dining Experience Level

Cross-tabulation	High DINE <i>n</i> (%)	Low/Mod. DINE <i>n</i> (%)	$\chi^2 (1)$	<i>p</i>	<i>V</i>
Gender: Male ($n = 33$)	18 (54.5)	15 (45.5)	0.43	.511	.08
Gender: Female ($n = 27$)	17 (63.0)	10 (37.0)			
Age: ≤ 24 ($n = 47$)	26 (55.3)	21 (44.7)	0.81	.368	.12
Age: ≥ 25 ($n = 13$)	9 (69.2)	4 (30.8)			
Presentation: High ($n = 34$)	30 (88.2)	4 (11.8)	28.86	< .001	.69
Presentation: Low/Mod. ($n = 26$)	5 (19.2)	21 (80.8)			

Note. DINE = dining experience. Pearson's chi-square without continuity correction; Fisher's exact tests led to the same conclusions. Age " ≥ 25 "

combines the 25–34, 35–44, and 65 and above groups.

One-Way ANOVA

A one-way ANOVA compared mean dining experience across the low ($n = 8$), moderate ($n = 18$), and high ($n = 34$) presentation groups. Levene's test indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met ($p = .223$). Presentation level had a significant and large effect, $F(2, 57) = 30.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .52$. Tukey's HSD showed that all three groups differed from one another (all $p < .01$). The high group ($M = 4.72$) scored above the moderate group ($M = 4.04$), which in turn scored above the low group ($M = 3.31$). Dining experience did not differ by age band (24 and below, 25–34, and 35 and above), $F(2, 57) = 0.18, p = .833, \eta^2 = .006$, or by gender, $F(1, 58) = 0.02, p = .887$. H_3 is supported (Table 4).

Table 4

Dining Experience by Presentation Level: Descriptives and One-Way ANOVA

Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Low presentation	8	3.31	0.66
Moderate presentation	18	4.04	0.58
High presentation	34	4.72	0.40

Note. ANOVA: $F(2, 57) = 30.53, p < .001, \eta^2 = .52$. Between-groups $SS = 14.97$, within-groups $SS = 13.97$, MS between = 7.48, MS within = 0.25. Tukey's HSD: High > Moderate > Low, all $p < .01$.

Linear Regression

A simple linear regression was used to test H_1 . Presentation significantly predicted dining experience, $F(1, 58) = 90.97, p < .001, R^2 = .611$, adjusted $R^2 = .604$. Each one-point rise in perceived presentation went with a 0.82-point rise in dining experience ($B = 0.82, SE = 0.09, \beta = .78, t = 9.54, p < .001$). The null hypothesis (H_0) is therefore rejected and H_1 is accepted (Table 5).

Table 5

Simple Linear Regression Predicting Dining Experience from Food Presentation

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Constant	0.71	0.38		1.86	.068	[-0.05, 1.48]
Presentation (PRES)	0.82	0.09	.78	9.54	< .001	[0.65, 0.99]

Note. $R^2 = .611$, adjusted $R^2 = .604, F(1, 58) = 90.97, p < .001$. Dependent variable: dining experience.

A multiple regression then added experience attributes and factor importance as predictors. The model explained 75.6% of the variance in dining experience, $F(3, 56) = 57.90, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .743$. Experience attributes ($\beta = .46, p = .002$) and factor importance ($\beta = .38, p = .017$) were significant predictors, but presentation was not once these were controlled ($\beta = .07, p = .617$). Variance inflation factors ranged from 4.43 to 5.45. These are below the usual cut-off of 10 but still show considerable overlap among the predictors, which helps explain why the unique contribution of presentation shrank (Table 6).

Table 6

Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Dining Experience

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	VIF
Constant	0.27	0.32		0.85	.400	
Presentation (PRES)	0.07	0.15	.07	0.50	.617	4.61
Experience attributes (EXPA)	0.47	0.14	.46	3.28	.002	4.43
Factor importance (IMP)	0.40	0.16	.38	2.47	.017	5.45

Note. $R^2 = .756$, adjusted $R^2 = .743, F(3, 56) = 57.90, p < .001$. VIF = variance inflation factor.

Discussion

The results support the main proposition that perceived food presentation is positively related to customers' dining experience at Zaatara Arabian Mandi. Presentation alone accounted for about 61% of the variance in dining experience. Customers who rated presentation highly were far more likely to report a high overall experience (88.2% compared with 19.2%), and mean dining experience rose steadily from the low group to the high group. This agrees with experimental work showing that plating and visual arrangement increase liking and perceived value (Michel et al., 2014; Zellner et al., 2011), and with restaurant studies that connect food quality to satisfaction and behavioural intentions (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Ryu et al., 2012).

Dining experience did not differ by gender or age group. One reading is that good presentation matters to many kinds of customers. That conclusion needs care, though, because the sample was dominated by 18–24-year-olds and the non-significant results may simply reflect low statistical power. The multiple regression adds a further point. Presentation overlaps strongly with other parts of the experience, such as clarity, trust, and convenience, and its unique effect largely disappeared once they were included. Customers seem to form an overall impression of a meal in which presentation is one visible element, not an isolated cause. This fits the stimulus–organism–response logic of the framework, in which several cues together shape the response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

Managerial Implications

Managers of Mandi restaurants should pay close attention to how food looks when it reaches the table. Plating and platter styling should be kept consistent, serving steps should follow the same routine, and staff should be trained so that every dish is presented in a similar way. Clear photographs of well-presented dishes can also be used on menus and social media pages. Because presentation costs less than changing the menu or the premises, it offers a workable route to higher satisfaction, more word of mouth, and more repeat visits.

Limitations

Sampling and Generalizability

The study relied on a small convenience sample ($N = 60$) from one restaurant in one city, so the results should not be treated as representative of other Mandi restaurants or of diners in general. The sample leaned heavily toward respondents aged 18–24 (76.7%), and some groups were very small, including one respondent under 18, one aged 65 or above, and eight respondents in the low presentation group. Uneven group sizes make tests less able to detect real differences and make comparisons across age and gender less stable. Merging age into two bands for the chi-square test lost further detail. Because one respondent was under 18, any replication should also document how consent was obtained for minors.

Measurement and Construct Validity

The main weakness lies in how presentation was measured. The PRES composite was built from items on ease of use, speed of service, communication quality, staff professionalism, and overall value. These reflect service and value perceptions more than plating, colour, layout, or the visual look of the food, so “food presentation” here is best read as an approximation, not a direct measure. The DINE composite also includes overall quality and satisfaction, which overlap in meaning with several PRES items, and this may have made the link between the two look stronger than it would with fully separate measures. The composites were highly correlated ($r = .78$ to $.87$), which may signal weak discriminant validity. Reliability for DINE ($\alpha = .79$) rested on only four items, and no factor analysis was run to confirm that the scales matched the intended constructs.

Research Design

A cross-sectional, self-report design cannot establish cause and effect, and the relationship may also run the other way: a satisfied customer may rate presentation and everything else more generously. All measures came from the same people at the same time, which raises the risk of common-method bias. Average scores on every composite were above 4.25 on a five-point scale, which suggests ceiling effects and possible social-desirability bias, leaving little room for scores to vary. Respondents answered right after eating, so their ratings may reflect their mood at that moment. Taste, price, portion size, hygiene, waiting time, and the setting were not controlled, and Zaatar was not compared with other restaurants.

Statistical Analysis

The cut-offs of 3.50 and 4.50 used to form low, moderate, and high groups were not justified empirically, and converting scores into categories discards information, so other cut-offs could give different results. Likert composites were treated as interval data even though the residuals departed from normality, which means non-parametric or ordinal methods should be used to check the findings. Variance inflation factors reached 5.45, which makes it harder to claim an independent effect for presentation. Finally, several tests were run on a small sample without adjustment for multiple comparisons.

Future Research

Future studies should use larger probability samples and add items that measure presentation directly, such as plating, colour, food layout, portion appearance, and platter styling. Comparing several Mandi restaurants in more than one city, with age groups that are better balanced, would reduce sampling bias. Experiments or mixed-methods designs would also help. For example, different plating styles could be tested against each other and short customer interviews added. Structural equation modelling could separate presentation from related constructs and test whether satisfaction and perceived value mediate the link between presentation and outcomes such as loyalty.

Conclusion

Food presentation has a significant and positive influence on how customers experience their meal at Zaatar Arabian Mandi in Vijayawada, and the null hypothesis was rejected. Restaurants that serve visually appealing food tend to earn higher ratings, which matters for customer satisfaction and for bringing guests back. Given the small convenience sample and the measurement limits described above, these results are best treated as early findings that should be checked with larger and more varied groups.

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