Impact of Restaurant Online Ordering on Customer Service Quality

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Abstract

Covid-19 created a major shift in customer demand for the restaurant industry. One of the leading trends that increased drastically during the pandemic is online ordering, which required restaurants to adapt to online ordering services and acknowledge the value they need to transfer digitally to keep service quality and customer satisfaction in accordance with standards. This research was based on examining the impact of online ordering services in Dubrovnik's restaurants on customer service quality and satisfaction, and assessing whether this trend is becoming the norm for the future. An online questionnaire was completed by 52 college students, which measured their perception and satisfaction with online service options in Dubrovnik's restaurants and assessed their online ordering intentions and habits for the future. Results showed that online ordering option is closely connected to customer loyalty and that demand for digital ordering from restaurants is remaining the norm for the future of the industry.

Keywords: Restaurant industry, Customer service quality, Online ordering services, COVID-19, Customer satisfaction

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Influence of COVID-19 on the global restaurant industry

Coronavirus has rocked many industries and negatively impacted the global economy in recent years. The economic damage caused by COVID has been both short-term, such as fiscal shocks, and long-term, causing a serious decline in economic growth (Madhav et al., 2017, as cited in Norris, et al. 2020).

For the restaurant industry, the pandemic was the greatest challenge it has faced to date. The number of restaurants that had to cease operations has never been higher than during the COVID crisis. More than 110,000 Food & Beverage establishments in the United States closed in 2020, either permanently or temporarily (King, 2021). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Labor Data had shown that during 2021, the quit rate of foodservice workers increased from 4.8% to 6.9%, which is the highest increase among all sectors (Fantozzi, 2022). The restaurant industry around the world was shaken by the pandemic, which revealed its proficiency and likeliness to change permanently after the pandemic. Moreover, the crisis encouraged restaurants to innovate and adopt new, creative service methods to ensure their survival during and after the crisis. (Morgan, 2021).

Restaurants' key adaptations

The level and the type of adaptation implemented during COVID-19 varied from restaurant to restaurant, based on the type of service that was carried out before the pandemic. Some of the restaurants had to make more effort to adapt their business model to meet the needs of the current situation and the demand that it raised. One approach to selecting adaptations includes three groups: expansion of take-out operations, innovative practices, and community outreach (Norris, *et al.*, 2021)

Expansion of take-out operations
Online services

The pandemic raises a huge opportunity for online food service providers since the number of companies unleashing their mobile ordering functions has been growing exponentially from the beginning of the pandemic. Moreover, it led those restaurants that already had an online ordering

app to boost the existing one and encourage sales. Many large restaurant chains implemented digital orders much before the pandemic, but during the past few years, the sales obtained through online apps increased drastically. For example, Domino's online sales made up three-quarters of its overall sales in 2020 (Maze, 2020). This increase in online services led to the trend of "Dark/ Ghost Kitchens", which is the business model that fulfills only off-premise orders (Nielsen, 2020). Moreover, even many high end restaurants adopted this trend and started with take-away food trend (Spence, 2020). During the pandemic, online services that are easy to use, convenient and reliable became the norm for the restaurants' survival. 67% of U.S. residents preferred to use online delivery services during the pandemic since it offered them easy comparison among prices and menu items from different restaurants (Statista, 2020, as cited by Kyungyl, *et al.,* 2022).

Online services offered many benefits and solutions for the issues caused by pandemics, such as improved food safety, hygiene, and contactless delivery (Kyungyl, *et al.,* 2022). However, for restaurants to receive benefits from online service options, the reliability, accuracy, and credibility of product and service information have to be assured (such as working hours, delivery area, the timeframe of delivery, etc.). Moreover, the quality of both products and services has to be maintained to keep with the particular standards of each restaurant (Kyungyl, *et al.,* 2022).
During the pandemic, both customers and restaurants entered the phase of digital maturity, where the emphasis was on the increased digital engagement, such as digital loyalty programs, and robust CRM (Haas, *et al.* 2020).

Third-party delivery
The pandemic gave a boost to the development of online ordering and the implementation of third-party delivery in all types of restaurants. McDonald's expanded its third-party delivery, since delivery and online orders became the essence of the business and its survival (Luna, 2020f, as cited in Norris, *et al.,* 2021). On the contrary, there are issues and challenges connected to partnerships between restaurants and third-party delivery.

The core problem is the fact that third-party employees aren't direct employees of restaurants; hence the service quality is sometimes questioned. Third-party employees are bringing the risk of

lowering the brand image and reputation of the restaurants; they are not trained properly for food delivery and customer service, therefore standards of the restaurants that are using third-party delivery are in danger (Absher, 2020). The issues with the third-party delivery mentioned above forced some restaurants to implement direct delivery, after all. Third-party delivery brings convenience, but with the cost of maintaining standards of service and food quality.

Innovative Practices

Integrated Marketing Approach

COVID-19 increased awareness of the importance of effective communication with both customers and employees. Keeping all stakeholders up to date was crucial for successful business operation, where social media platforms played an important role. Restaurants used social media for daily updates about operations, as well as for special offers, and additional adjustments (Thorn, 2020, as cited in Norris, *et al.*, 2021).

Restaurants had to adjust and optimize social media platforms to increase sales and show engagement. The utilization of social media was not only crucial for customer communication and engagement but for managing competition, too. The content of restaurants' social media posts changed significantly during the pandemic, shifting emphasis on building trust with their customers. One of the trends among customers is to invest in those restaurants that put the well-being of the society above profit, and those which genuinely care about the world around them. (Jiampetro, 2021).

Delivering an Experience

Raising usage of online services forced restaurants to create apps that will deliver a seamless experience to their customers. Even the slightest hiccup in the app could lead to losing customers, given the competition where restaurants are mastering digital services (Burns, 2020). The shift of service traveling to the customer, rather than customer coming for service, requires that online services create a memorable experience for consumers, to gain sales and customer loyalty.

Many strategies across U.S. restaurants were implemented to provide customers with a positive online experience that will create trust and strong customer relationships. Developing an online

ordering and delivering app became even more complex during COVID-19 since demand and expectations were increasing rapidly, requiring restaurants to keep up with trends and customer needs. Online apps were turned into the experience: along with the selling items, there was a description and a photo, which not only are helpful in marketing efforts but are an important piece of product information for online customers (Burns, 2020). The norm became that the app must act like a server and a chef at the same time. For the same reason, some online apps suggest relevant up-sells and add-ons for purchases. Another important aspect that turns an online delivery into an experience is personalization. An app that suggests a meal based on data collected about a particular customer will help in relationship creation, leading to customer loyalty (Burns, 2020).

Menu Adjustments

One of the results of restaurants becoming more customer-oriented during COVID-19 is the adaptation and adjustment of regular menus. The first aspect of change was the adaptation of physical menus in dine-in restaurants. Some of the adjustments include disposable menus, which are recycled after each usage, so there is no point of contact between guests. However, single-use menus have their downsides: cost of printing, environmental cost, and quantity management (Plumlee, 2020).

 Some restaurants are implementing digital menus, that don't require any physical contact, but that type of investment is affordable mostly for larger restaurant chains (Plumlee, 2020). Regarding the menu content, many restaurants worldwide are creating a limited menu and cutting out the items that don't travel well, as well as those that are unpopular among customers. Instead, the trend of adding family meals has increased during pandemics (Pendrill, 2020).

Family meals during the quarantine were a great innovation that encouraged more people to order, given the convenience of ordering one meal for all families. It wasn't only convenient for customers, but also for restaurants, since it made it easier for them to prepare and package meals (Norris, *et al.*, 2021).

Additional Revenue Sources

Due to the enforcement of limited service, restaurants had to find new potential sources that will drive sales and increase revenue. One of the most common sources of additional revenue for many restaurants was the application of gift cards and online loyalty cards. Offering gift cards boosted sales for some restaurants, by drawing existing customers back and gaining new ones. The additional benefit that is coming from gift cards is increased cash flow, which is crucial for financing operations during a crisis (Madabushi, 2021). To generate more revenue, many bars and restaurants included to-go cocktails, beer, and wine in their offer. Takeout beverages became popular throughout all states in the U.S., and New York lawmakers are considering a bill to make this trend permanent (Murphy, 2021).

Community Outreach

Despite a series of challenges the restaurant industry faced during the pandemic, many restaurant businesses found a way to give back to the community and employees, using different methods. During the period of many restaurants being closed, a lot of them decided to take care of their employees, by giving food and supplies to them (Houck, 2020; McCarron, 2020, as cited by Kyungyul *et al.*, 2022). Restaurant owners were aware of the financial burden their employees had to deal with, so they were determined to help them and their families in this unpredictable situation. Some restaurants launched campaigns for helping medical workers, such as the "pay it forward" campaign, launched by Hopdaddy Burger Bar, where on each burger that was sold, one was donated to a medical worker in a local hospital (Alarcon, 2020, as cited from Kyungyul *et al.*, 2022).

The future of the global restaurant industry customer service after the pandemic

Value shift for restaurant consumers

The pandemic caused a shift in consumer behavior, which led restaurants to become more customer-centric and adapt to changing customer demands. Given the extent of the service innovation and changes implemented during COVID-19, it's not likely that pre-pandemic trends will be returned fully in the future (Hottovy, 2020). Moreover, for that reason, it's crucial to understand the shift in the value for restaurant consumers which will continue to shape new trends after the pandemic.

Value is what drives consumers' decisions, and during the pandemic, it is all about food quality, variety of choices and quality of delivery, and online options (Glazer, 2020). Three major trends that will continue reshaping the restaurant industry are heightened safety, ultimate convenience, and frictionless digital experiences (Chick, *et al*., 2021).

Safety and cleanliness were the crucial elements for customer satisfaction even before the pandemic. However, today heightened safety is appreciated more than ever, and customers are willing to pay more and repeat visits to a restaurant that adapts safety policies and displays them visibly and clearly (Chick, *et al*., 2021). Customers find it important to see that restaurants take customers' safety seriously and that those practices are maintained to a high standard.

Another trend that is likely to participate in reshaping the restaurant industry is the ultimate convenience. As already mentioned, food delivery is on the rise with altered standards. Traditional delivery methods could pass with food that is a bit cold, but today food quality is expected to be the same whether a meal is taken in a restaurant or being delivered (Chick, *et al*., 2021). Besides food quality, the speed of service is another element of convenience that has to be taken into consideration.

The third future trend is frictionless digital experiences- easy to access, understand and use (Chick, *et al*., 2021). To meet customer expectations and demands restaurants have to know them and implement new concepts accordingly. There is a hypothesis that those restaurants which manage how to adapt, implement new technologies, and enhance deeper customer communication will achieve benefits in service quality and customer satisfaction in the future (Elliott, 2020).

The balance between high-tech and high-touch has never been more important and relevant as today, during and after COVID-19. There is no "one size fits all" approach in adaptation to the "new normal", but these common restaurant innovations with a slight modification could be a way to go for Dubrovnik's restaurants, too.

Influence of COVID-19 on Croatia's and in particular Dubrovnik's restaurant industry and customer service

The restaurant industry was one of the most fragile ones during the pandemic and had dealt with numerous challenges, including a decrease in the number of employees and income on a global level, and Croatia wasn't an exception. Dubrovnik is a worldwide popular tourist destination that has a great number of restaurants in the Old Town and outside. The evidence of the extent of the restaurant industry in Dubrovnik is a formal ban on opening new restaurants that were implemented by Dubrovnik's major in 2019 (Travel News, 2019). This fact shows how the restaurant industry is one of the leading industries in Dubrovnik's area.

There are more than 115 restaurants in Dubrovnik, including Old Town and other neighborhoods inside Dubrovnik (Gastronaut. hr, 2017). The initial consequence of the pandemic was closing restaurants, which resulted in serious losses of employees and profit. However, after reopening, the restaurant industry in Dubrovnik had to adapt to customer needs by implementing different approaches to customer service. The tourism industry in Croatia anticipates four aspects of consumer changing perceptions in post-pandemic times and the restaurant industry can implement these aspects for its improvement. These include relation to space, relation to health security, relation to the environment, human relations, and technology relations (Telišman-Košuta, 2021).

Relation to space refers to intolerance of crowding, and redesign of space, including restaurant terraces and inner space (Telišman-Košuta, 2021, pg. 63). Health Security will remain an important component for dining in and food ordering, while awareness of a sustainable environment might encourage positive changes in the restaurant industry after we witnessed the so-called "detox of nature" during lockdowns (Telišman-Košuta, 2021, pg. 63-64).

 In terms of human relations, the pandemic encouraged mutual support, empathy, and solidarity, which translated to the restaurant industry, which means more demand for genuine service and added value through food quality (Telišman-Košuta, 2021, pg. 64). Relationship with technology

includes more usage of online communication, presentation, and interaction with potential consumers (Skryl, Gregorić,2022).

One of the approaches that became widely popular in Croatia, and in Dubrovnik as well, is third-party delivery (Dorić, 2020). The most popular third-party delivery companies that operate in this region are Pauza.hr, Wolt, Dobartek.hr and Tvornica zdrave hrane (Dorić, 2020). However, the ones that are available in the Dubrovnik area are Glovo and Dobartek. hr. Many restaurants saw this as an opportunity to make ordering more convenient for consumers, putting more emphasis on local guests.

To conclude, the restaurant industry in the Dubrovnik area faced similar demand for change as restaurants worldwide, with emphasis on increased demand for technological advancements and added value through customer service. This research aims to reach the consumers of Dubrovnik restaurants, their demands, perceptions, and satisfaction with customer service, and compare it with the offer made by respected restaurants. By taking these steps the gap between consumer satisfaction and restaurants' effort will be assessed, which will show the areas of improvement and highlight initiatives that are to become the norm for the future of the restaurant industry.

Method

This research investigated customer satisfaction with Dubrovnik restaurants' online services and delivery options as a crucial element of customer service during the pandemic. It examined the importance of online services and delivery for restaurant consumers in Dubrovnik, as well as its importance for restaurant owners and their perception of customer satisfaction. This research aimed to identify the gap between customer expectations and what they were provided with by restaurants and to identify whether online ordering services are going to diminish after the pandemic or they are here to stay as a norm for the future.

The research instrument chosen was an electronic survey that was distributed via email to 60 junior and senior students. The response rate was 86,7%, with 52 responses in total. 25 junior and 27 senior students (M=1.53, SD=0.50), 31 female and 21 male (M=1.59, SD=0.49) from a private

college took part in the study as restaurant customers and users of delivery and online service options. Students were chosen for this research because they are well-introduced to digital ordering and delivery. Freshmen and sophomore students were excluded from the study because of the assumption they are less familiar with the offer in Dubrovnik than students that live in the city for a longer period, such as juniors and seniors.

Target restaurants were in a medium-price and low-price range, including fast-food restaurants. Fine dining restaurants were excluded from the research due to the assumption they had different approaches to customer service than mid-range and fast-food restaurants.

The electronic survey that was chosen as the appropriate instrument for this study, consisted of 12 questions in total, 2 of them being demographic ones (gender and year of study). There were 7 Likert scale questions, 2 multiple choice questions, and one dichotomous question (yes/no question). Based on Ganapathi, Abu-Shanab (2019) and Vanamburg (2020), survey questions measured four components when using online ordering service: restaurant quality (RQ), service provider quality (SP), loyalty (LY), and customer satisfaction (CS). Questions regarding challenges when ordering online were selected based on Chowdhury (2021).

The types of analyses used for responses were descriptive analysis and correlation method. For each Likert-scale question, the mean and standard deviation were calculated, as an argument for the reliability of responses. Multiple-choice questions were analyzed in a way that responses for each choice were summed up to see which one was the most/the least common among respondents. The correlation method included variables of RQ, SP, LY, and CS. The survey was conducted in the English language, and information confidentiality and anonymity were assured during the data collection process.

Results

Usage of delivery services and online ordering services
The starting point of the primary research was to assess how often consumers use delivery services, and how often they use online ordering services. Results showed that 34.6% of participants use delivery services from Dubrovnik's restaurants once a month, 34.6% 2-5 times a

month, and 19.2% 6-10 times a month. 5.8% of participants reported using delivery more than 10 times a month, and another 5.8% never uses it.

Figure 1. shows the result for the frequency of using delivery services at casual and fast-food restaurants in Dubrovnik. Results were separated for junior and senior students to compare two groups of students (M=2.13, SD=1.14).

Results for frequency of using online ordering services showed that 44.2 % of participants use online services every time they order, followed by 30.8 % who sometimes use online delivery services. The percentage of ones who never use online ordering services is 25%.

Figure 2. shows the result for frequency of using online ordering services, where results were separated for junior and senior students as well as for frequency of delivery usage (M=1.81, SD=0.82).

Customer satisfaction with restaurant and service provider quality

Figure 3. shows Likert scale results regarding restaurant quality and service provider quality when it comes to ordering food online. Seven items were taken into consideration and we measured satisfaction with each element (accuracy of food order, food quality, variety of the menu, speed of delivery, functionality, payment options, and information quality). For each variable mean and standard deviation were calculated, to see whether a particular item is perceived as positive, negative, or neutral. These questions were ranked based on 5-points Likert scale questions, with a minimum being 1(strongly dissatisfied), and a maximum of 5 (strongly satisfied) points. The item that had the lowest results was food quality (M=1.81, SD=0.82), and the item that had the highest results for customer satisfaction was information quality (M=4, SD=0.95).

Identifying challenges regarding online ordering

Dichotomous (Yes/No) question was regarding whether consumers faced any kind of problem when ordering online. Results showed that out of 52 respondents, 35 (67.3%) have faced some sort of an issue when using online ordering services. Set of multiple-choice questions aimed to assess problems that customers face when ordering food online. Possible problems with online ordering were listed according to Chowdhury (2021), and they included: longer delivery time, poor service follow-up, site is not opening, and site is slow. For listing this type of results, all answers were summed so we can see what type of problem is the most common among

participants. Among 52 participants, longer delivery time was expressed as a problem for 9 senior and 13 junior students, poor service follow-up for 5 senior and 8 junior students. Problem where site is not opening had 1 senior and 4 junior students, and problem with slow site experienced 2 senior and 9 junior students. Figure 4. shows the types of challenges participants are facing the most, expressed in percentage.

Overall satisfaction and future of online ordering

In one of the Likert scale questions, participants were asked to state their overall level of satisfaction with online ordering in Dubrovnik's restaurants (M=3.21, SD=0.98). Figure 5. shows the level of customer satisfaction on a Likert 5-point scale (1- very dissatisfied, 5-very satisfied). Online ordering in the future (M=1.29, SD=0.50) resulted in the following answers:" my online ordering is going to stay the same (75%), "my online ordering is going to be less frequent" (23.1%), and "my online ordering is going to be more frequent" (1.9%). Figure 6. shows the chart of results based on year of study (junior, senior).

Correlation table

According to Pearson Correlation, with N=52, a p-value that is greater than 0.354 shows a strong correlation among variables, while a value between 0.273 and 0.354 shows a lower correlation. Figure 7. shows which variables of online food ordering have strong correlations, which have lower, and which have no correlation at all. The following are variables that have the strongest correlation according to p-value:

Food quality and accuracy of food order (p=0.426)

Variety of the menu and food quality (p=0.412)

Food quality and functionality (p=0.677)

Speed of delivery and functionality (p=0.533)

Payment options and information quality (p=0.646)

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess how online ordering services that were increasingly implemented during the pandemic in Dubrovnik's casual dining and fast-food restaurants affected customer service quality and customer satisfaction, and whether the importance of online

ordering in the restaurant industry in Dubrovnik is going to change now when the pandemic is over. The results of this research provide supporting evidence that online food ordering is present to the great extent and that this practice is becoming the norm for the future of the restaurant industry. These results are consistent with the claim that one of the main consumer values for the future of the restaurant industry is the frictionless digital experience (Chick, *et al.* 2021). Moreover, the pattern of results is consistent with Elliot's (2020) work, which emphasizes restaurants that manage how to adapt and implement new technologies through which they will enhance deeper customer communication will achieve benefits in service quality and customer satisfaction in the future. Results in this research are in accordance with Absher (2020), whose work deals with the risks associated with third-party delivery. According to Absher (2020), third-party delivery is bringing the risk of lowering food quality and customer service quality in restaurants, which showed to be a case for restaurants in Dubrovnik, too.

Our findings highlight that online ordering is highly present among customers in Dubrovnik, where more than 40% of research participants indicate they are using online delivery every time they order. Moreover, when it comes to customer satisfaction with different elements of online ordering services, results imply that the two elements that consumers are satisfied with the most are functionality and information quality of online ordering services. However, two elements that result in the greatest dissatisfaction among participants are food quality and speed of delivery when ordering online.

Another part of this research measured the challenges customers are facing when ordering food online, to assess the gap between what are consumer expectations and what is actually being provided by online services and restaurants. Results showed that the two most common problems that participants faced when ordering online are a long time of delivery and poor service follow-up. This indicates the room for improvement of online ordering services in terms of efficiency and speed of receiving and delivering an order. Poor service follow-up indicates there is still a demand for high tech-high touch, and in-person engagement remains crucial for maximum customer satisfaction and service quality. Digital engagement through online feedback can't be seen as the compensation for face-to-face interaction, therefore online ordering services can't be seen as customer-centric as service provided when dining in.

From this study, we got strong correlation between the added value online ordering services provide and loyalty to restaurants that are providing such service. This fact is supported with the

literature where it's stated that digital experience is a new value creator for customers (Burns, 2020).

Finally, the theory that online ordering services will remain the norm for the future of the restaurant industry was proven to be true based on the finding that 75% of consumers will continue using online ordering to the same extent now when the pandemic is over. This finding indicates that digital ordering services in Dubrovnik's restaurants need to be optimized, and tailored to add value to customer service quality and customer satisfaction.

Limitations

There are at least two possible limitations concerning the results of this research. The first limitation concerns the pool of participants. Students are chosen as a form of convenience sampling, and we are aware that they are not representatives of all consumers of Dubrovnik's restaurants. Another potential limitation is the sample size which might not be large enough to assess the most accurate results for this research. The present study represents the first attempt to address the subject of online food ordering in Dubrovnik, and we feel that further research should be more focused on a variety of participants to receive more accurate and reliable results on this topic.
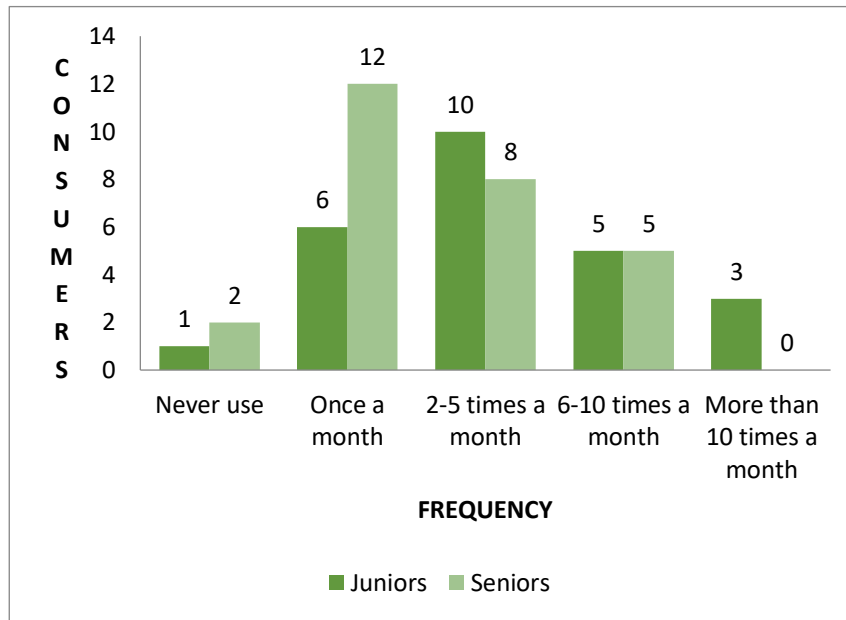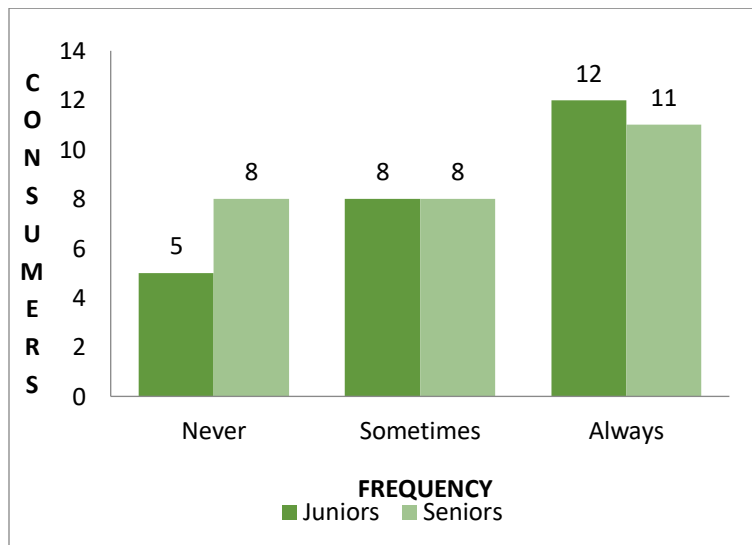
Appendix

Figure 1.- Frequency of using delivery

Figure 2.- Frequency of using online ordering service

ITEM DESCRIPTION	MIN	MAX	MEAN	SD
Accuracy of order	1	5	2.13	1.14
Food quality	1	5	1.81	0.82
Variety of the menu	1	5	3.88	0.94
Speed of delivery	1	5	3.29	0.91
Functionality	1	5	3.18	1.07
Payment options	1	5	3.04	1.08
Information quality	1	5	4	0.95

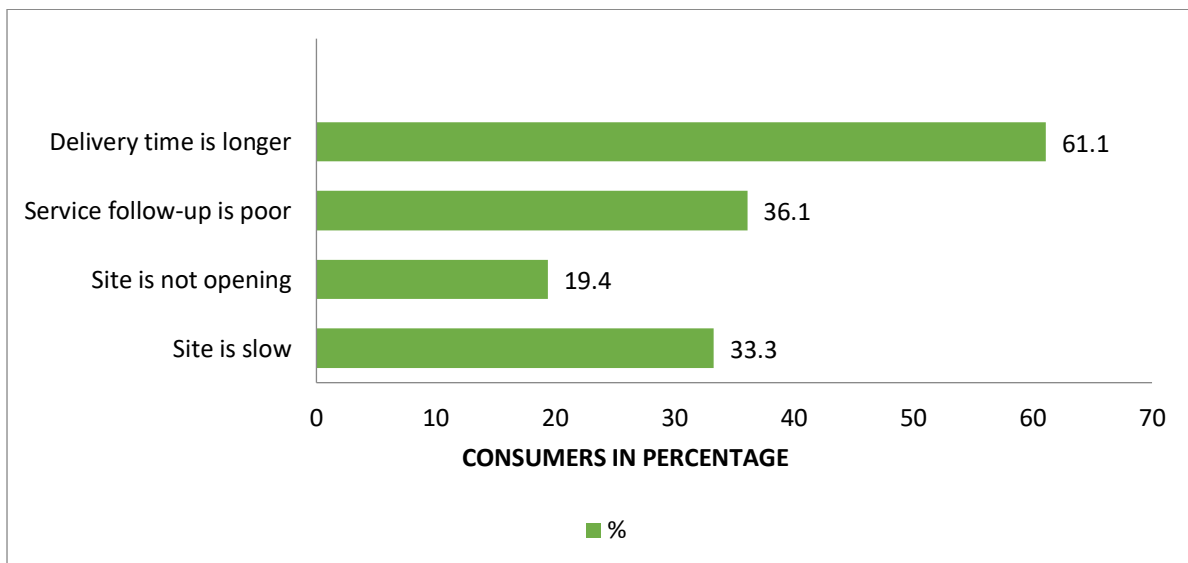**Figure 3**.- **Satisfaction with restaurant and service provider quality**

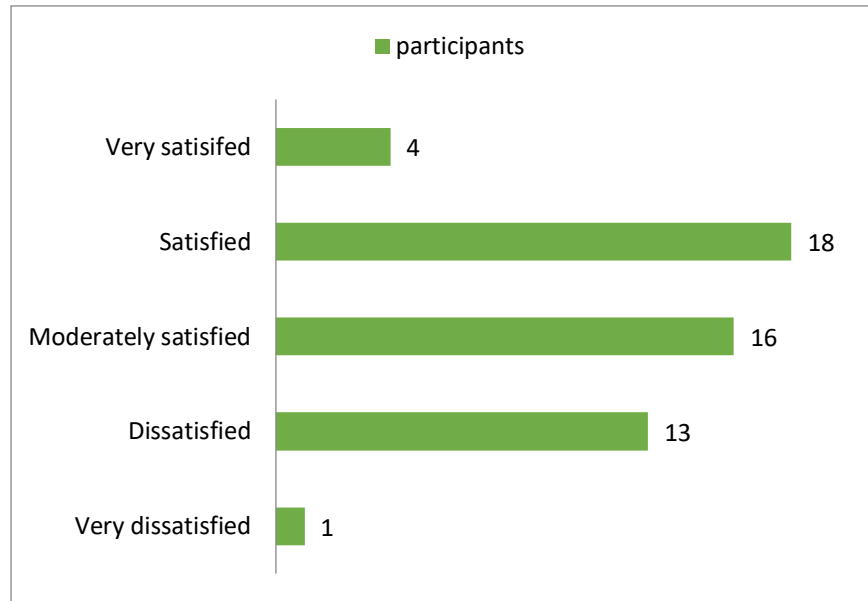**Figure 4.- Problems when ordering online**

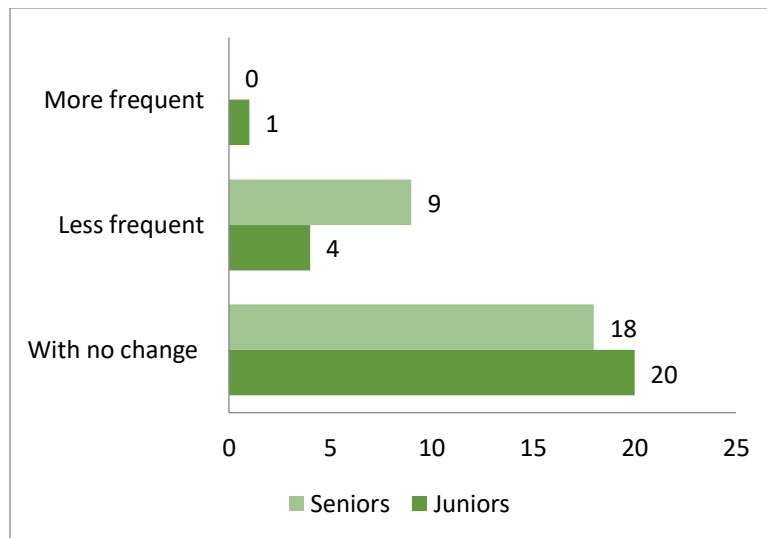**Figure 5.- Level of satisfaction with online services in Dubrovnik's restaurants**

Figure 6.- Online ordering in the future

	Usage of delivery	Usage of online aps	Accuracy of order	Food quality	Variety on the menu	Speed of delivery	Functionality	Payment options	Info quality	problems with ordering	Likelihood of changing to another option	Added value	Overall satisfaction	Ordering in the future
Usage of delivery	1													
Usage of online apps	0.134	1												
Accuracy of order	-0.15	-0.029	1											
Food quality	-0.151	-0.003	0.426**	1										
Variety on the menu	-0.001	0.04	0.136	0.412**	1									
Speed of delivery	-0.211	-0.124	0.369**	0.503**	0.375**	1								
Functionality	-0.236	0	0.57	0.677**	0.389**	0.533**	1							
Payment options	-0.217	0.057	0.527**	0.332**	0.175	0.43	0.63	1						
Info quality	-0.132	-0.158	0.359**	0.466**	0.25	0.398**	0.585**	0.646**	1					
problems with ordering	-0.01	0.216	-0.002	0.185	0.127	0.281*	0.218	0.152	0.221	1				
Likelihood of changing to another option	-0.116	-0.241	0.068	0.102	-0.109	0.072	0	-0.123	-0.065	0.137	1			
Added value	-0.078	-0.298*	0.164	0.242	0.017	0.306*	0.233	-0.056	0.182	0.093	0.384**	1		
Overall satisfaction	0.027	-0.046	-0.037	0.325*	0.233	0.14	0.106	-0.115	0.142	0.187	0.263*	0.249	1	
Ordering in the future	0.034	0.091	-0.095	-0.014	-0.024	-0.021	-0.041	0.076	0.064	-0.075	-0.239	-0.044	0.154	1

Figure 7.- Correlation table

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