# Kocijan, Renato

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Do managers know it?: Service gaps in Dubrovnik casual dining

Renato Kocijan

Mentor prof. Domagoj Nikolić

RIT Croatia

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### ABSTRACT

The expectation-perception gap is present in all service industries and restaurants are especially affected. The gap can negatively impact their operations and discourage customers to return in the long-run. By using Kano Model, this paper researches expectations and perceptions of service quality of the local patrons and service providers in the context of Dubrovnik fast casual dining restaurants.

A questionnaire was distributed to 102 locals and 10 service providers in order to find out how they rate certain service quality aspects. The results have shown that gaps do exist, particularly between the one-dimensional and attractive attributes. Therefore, service providers should keep an eye on the trends and collect customers data in order to improve the service quality through personalization and keep customer returning in the long-term.

Key words: Expectation-perception, gap, Dubrovnik, restaurant, casual, dining

## INTRODUCTION

Many contemporary service companies struggle because they have a hard time assessing service quality they provide to their customers. In other words, the customer perception of service quality may be divorced from the company's. This is particularly evident in the restaurant industry. For example, during summer season many casual dining restaurants operate in Dubrovnik trying to satisfy local customers with mixed results in sales, which leads to the conclusion that customers' satisfaction with service quality varies from one restaurant to the other. Therefore, a large gap evidently exists between the customer expectations and perceptions of service quality, and it is not clear whether the struggling restaurateurs understand this situation of if they even care. From the solution point of view, it is important to understand the expectation-perception gap, identify how big in reality it is and how to minimize it, or even potentially eliminate it.

This paper will focus on fast-casual restaurants, which is a concept that lays between fast food and casual dining. As this concept is a fusion of the two previously mentioned concepts, it includes features from both by providing quick meals with a relaxing atmosphere. This type of dining is a bit more expensive than fast food but yet cheaper than casual dining. This concept is good pricewise, as it is affordable yet still provides quality service (Mealey, 2018). In a fast food restaurant, customer goes to the counter, orders his food and brings it to the table. Service-wise, a fast casual place is more like casual dining where you sit down and order food. This type of restaurant has a wider range of food than a standard fast food, but still includes lots of the same food types (i.e. pizza, hamburger, etc.), yet it offers additional items that can be found on the casual dining menus. The type of customers it attracts is both those that go to fast food and casual dining (What Is Fast-Casual Dining, n.d.). For this establishment, one of the most important things is location, as people do not plan ahead to go there but just drop by when they are hungry or want to have a quick sit down meal with someone.

Service quality is closely connected to the overall satisfaction that the customer experiences, which is in actuality defined by more attributes, such as food quality, price, accessibility, etc. In this work, we will focus on service quality rather than on the food quality, because the ambiance and service performance greatly influence the customers perception of quality (Saneva & Chortoseva, 2018).

There are different reasons why expectation – perception gap may occur. For example, the service may not have been performed as it has been advertised. The advert may have specified a certain criteria that should be fulfilled and therefore created an expectation with the customer, but, due to some reason, the service provider did not deliver. Therefore, company's marketing should be restructured to meet the true service quality. In addition to marketing, it is important that the restaurant markets itself to the right market segment. If it markets itself to customers who go to higher quality establishments, then their restaurant will not be able to meet their expectations. It is also possible that the customer had expectations which are unrealistic and that the service provider absolutely cannot meet. This would be an example of the customer wanting extraordinary approach to the service delivery, which the restaurant does not provide (Johnston, Clark, & Shulver, 2012).

In order to fulfill a certain criteria for service quality to be deemed as favorable, the primary focus should be the accommodation of the wishes and demands of both potential and present consumers. When a company is aware of its own market segment and the current trends, it knows ahead of time what the customer needs and wants are, and therefore it should be capable of establishing a long-term relationship and developing it accordingly. (Paraschivescu & Cotirlet,

2012) Repeat customers are therefore the main factor in having a long-term relationship with customers, especially if you are marketing yourself to the locals.

The way a customer perceives service quality is a crucial factor in the restaurant industry. Thus, in order to keep up with the continuous demand and trends of the consumers, it is essential for the restaurants to track customer satisfaction (Saneva & Chortoseva, 2018). Providing quality service is essential to differentiate a restaurant from its competition and can be crucial to its longterm success. However, service quality is difficult to measure because it depends on customers' expectations that are known to be very individual. Therefore, if a service provider is able to develop a method to measure and assess the degree of satisfaction of the consumer, they could determine whether they do or do not meet the customer requirements. (Douglas & Connor, 2003)

Service quality has many different definitions, depending on the views and perceptions of service providers and customers. One way of defining this term would be the customer benefit gained relative to their expectation compared with their perception of the service provided (Saneva & Chortoseva, 2018). Service quality is not determined only after the service was delivered, but also during the delivery process and thus all the actions from the service provider affect the customers' perception. Quality is part of every aspect of a restaurant and it creates and emotional experience. Customers want to have the impression that their decision to do something (visit a restaurant) was good and that the got the most out of it. (Goetsch & Davis, 1997)

Customer satisfaction is the outcome of the overall experience relative to their expectations. In the larger picture, if the service provider meets the expectations, then the customer will be delighted. If the customer's perception is beyond their expectations, then the service was outstanding. However, if the customer's perception is below their actual expectations, then the customer will feel dissatisfied. (Johnston, Clark, & Shulver, 2012)

Service providers have an important task to identify customer's expectations so that they can ensure quality of service delivery. The issue that most of them face is that they assume. Assumption is not bad by itself, but background research is necessary to back those assumptions with facts. If operations are based solely on assumptions, it very probable that the expectation-perception gap will occur and service quality will plunge. Additionally, some service providers may believe that they are experts in their field and think their assumptions are correct. This is a not a very useful approach because market demands and trends change with time and therefore service quality has to be continually adapted to meet the changing requirements.

It is of a significant importance to minimize the expectation-perception gap in order for the customer to view the service as a valuable experience. Accordingly, companies need to take notes of the satisfaction levels of their customers so that they can know where they stand and to forecast their future business growth (Matzler, Fuchs, & Schubert, 2004). Therefore, service quality experienced by the guests is crucial for both current and future operations.

There are 361 restaurants in Dubrovnik reviewed on TripAdvisor. If we also include the number of restaurants that are not present in this particular social network, we can realize that the competition is quite severe, regardless of whether the restaurant is fast food, casual dining, fine dining etc. Consequently, there is a constant threat that restaurants who compete for a similar type of customers may win them over, if they excel in providing service quality and value. Therefore, restaurants need to constantly develop their approach to providing service quality, depending on the consumer expectations and desires (Douglas & Connor, 2003).

As the demand is high and growing, customers are generally becoming fussier for better services and are less likely to tolerate mistakes (Douglas & Connor, 2003). In addition, consumers are also keener to complain to the service provider than ever before (Palmer, 1998).

Social media (such as TripAdvisor) has high influence on people's views on dining establishments. People use such applications to check the reviews so they know what to expect based on experiences of previous guests. Because of that, the person unconsciously adjusts their expectation (either higher or lower). If the person sees an excellent review, which says the service was customized to their particular liking, then the person reading it will want the same type of experience. The interpretation is that the restaurant is willing to go an extra mile. This is great in itself, but it is important to consider whether the restaurant can keep up with providing everyone with that kind of excellence. When it comes to negative reviews, the potential customer will lower their expectations of the establishment, which may be good for the service provider, because it sets a low standard, which the restaurant will likely surpass. However, there is a risk that, if a potential customer sees a negative review, they might disregard the restaurant all together, thinking that it is not worth their time and does not provide value to them.

Therefore, the customer has high power when it comes to forming other potential consumer expectations, being either positive or negative. They use social media as a platform to "create, sustain or destroy reputation" (Douglas & Connor, 2003). That is one of the reasons why a restaurant needs to sustain positive feedback in order to attract more potential customers who will potentially leave good feedback on social media which will attract even more customers.

Some customers do not know that they have the power to make the service quality better for themselves at the spot if some issue occurs. Disregarding the infamous tourist traps who only seek profit even at the expense of the customer, most service providers want to have a happy customer who will visit them again. The issue with some customers is that they complain after the service has been provided using social media platforms. In such case, the service provider has limited options as to how to solve the issue, sometimes being only able to apologize and not provide an adequate response. In contrast, the customers who believe that the service is not up to their expectations can inform the service provider on the spot and from a simple minor issue, the service provider can improve the service perception by for example offering up selling or cross selling, free of charge items, or provide something else that can please the customer.

Therefore, it is important that customers become empowered to act and become a part of the service delivery. Communication and interaction with the service provider is essential for the service experience quality to be improved (Douglas & Connor, 2003). Thus, the success of the service quality delivery depends on the ability of the service provider to determine customer expectations and their willingness/motivation to communicate a problem if it occurs. (Saleh & Ryan, 1991)

## Kano Model

Constantly developing and improving service quality is a crucial aspect of any service organization and should be measured based on the perception of the customer. Both strengths and weaknesses should be taken into account in order to develop a proper strategy. Kano created a model with the intention to find out how customers felt regarding a product or service, and with the focus on characteristics graded low by customers, which should be changed or removed. (Kano, Nobuhiku, & Shinichi, 1984)

The Kano Model effectively explains factors that are considered important and should therefore be a must in service delivery, and also factors that are unimportant and should be either changed or removed entirely in order to cut unnecessary cost. The classification includes five quality elements and each of them describes how a customer could feel about a certain aspect of a business operation: 1. The Must-Be Quality is a requirement that fulfills the underlying function of a product or service. For example, this includes greeting customers, providing clean space, etc. If this requirement is fulfilled, the customer will not consider it as a benefit, but will feel neutral about it. On the other side, if it is not done, the customer will feel displeased and will undervalue the service.

2. The main property of the One-Dimensional Quality is that, if you do it, the customer will feel highly satisfied, but also, if not fulfilled, the customer will feel high dissatisfaction. An example is when something happens and the service provider has two options, either solve the issue or ignore it. If the service provider solves the problem then the customer will feel highly delighted and will be satisfied, but, if nothing is done, the customer might feel highly dissatisfied.

3. The Attractive Quality provides satisfaction upon the delivery of something, but does not negatively affect the service provider, if they do not do it. This is considered an additional offer that the guests do not expect to have. In hotel industry, a hotel providing a free of charge bottle of water is definitely a plus, but, if they do not provide it, it will not lead to customer dissatisfaction.

4. The Indifferent Quality tells us what is actually relevant for the customer and what is not. This is something the customer does not consider important and therefore, if the service is provided no additional satisfaction will be produced and, there will be no dissatisfaction, if it is not provided. This category is quite important for the service provider as they can see what they could either remove or exchange with something else, thus they could reduce cost. One example of this in the restaurant industry is olive oil on the table. If the customers do not notice or even do not care what type of olive oil is served to them, it is just an unnecessary cost for the restaurant, therefore it would be beneficial to remove it, exchange it for a lower price alternative or possibly charge extra.

5. The Reverse Quality tell us that you cannot please everyone with the same product or service. This is important for the service provider when trying to figure out a style of design, service delivery, technology implemented, etc. If a restaurant implemented a lot of technology to meet market trends and a person comes who likes traditional style better, then that customer will not be satisfied while on the other hand a tech lover will be satisfied. (Hsin-Hung, Yung-Tai, & Jyh-Wei, 2010)

#### **METHOD**

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate and analyze the customers' perception of the importance of certain service aspects and to compare it with how the restaurant owners/managers see the same. The focus is on the Dubrovnik fast casual dining restaurants frequented mostly by the locals. This type of restaurant offers the convenience of fast food such as pizza, hamburgers and similar, although still offering the convenience of casual dining experience where a waiter serves your food. The research was done in order to identify the gap so that the owners/managers can understand which aspects of their services are important or unimportant in the eye of the customer.

This research was done using the Kano model to find different views on how the subjects perceive the importance of the service. The questionnaire was built by implementing the five categories of the Kano model: must-be, one-dimensional, attractive, reverse and indifferent.

The questionnaire was given to two groups, the locals and owners/managers, where the local age group primarily dominated the range from 19 to 26, while the owner's age is from 36 to 45.

The questionnaire did not take into consideration the frequency at which the customers visit these restaurants, rather just their expectations.

In total there were 16 questions constructed using the Dr. Kano two dimensional approach. This approach means that questions were asked two times, in a functional and in a dysfunctional way. For the aspects of the restaurant service, the questions were "how would you feel" if a certain service was present and also if a certain service was not present.

Questions in the questionnaire were introduced from the article "Expectations and Perceptions in Restaurant Services: Three Dimension Gap Analysis" (Ming-Chun & Chien-Lin, n.d.) and were adjusted to this research topic. Paper based questionnaires were given to both locals and owners.

#### RESULTS

The total of 112 participants took part in the questionnaire. Of the eight service factors compared in this research, the result show that in four factors exists a gap between the local patrons' and managements' perception, and in the remaining four case, results are the same.

Both questions and answers were evaluated based on the functional and dysfunctional method. The questionnaire answers were subsequently analyzed based on the Kano evaluation chart in order to determine under which requirement the result would fall under.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if you were greeted at the entrance?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if you were not greeted at the entrance?" the results have shown that there is a gap between the locals and owners, where locals prioritize the Attractive requirement (majority 37.3%) and the owners prioritize One-dimensional requirement (majority 50%). On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was

72, "I expect it" was 15, "Neutral" was 5, "I can tolerate it" was 10, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 0, "I expect it" was 0, "Neutral" was 17, "I can tolerate it" was 42 and "I dislike it" was 43. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 6, "I expect it" was 4, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0 and in the dysfunctional questions there was "I like it" 0, "Neutral" 1, "I can tolerate it" 0 and "I dislike it" 9.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if the design of the restaurant is appealing?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if the design of the restaurant is not appealing?" the results have shown that there is a gap between the locals and owners, where locals prioritize the Attractive requirement (majority 40.2%) and the owners prioritize One-dimensional requirement (majority 50%). On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 72, "I expect it" was 15, "Neutral" was 5, "I can tolerate it" was 10, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 43. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 9, "I expect it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 9, "I expect it" was 1, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0 and in the dysfunctional questions there was "I like it" 0, "I expect it" 0, "Neutral" 1, "I can tolerate it" 4 and "I dislike it" 5.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if the waiter had a lot of experience in serving customers?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if the waiter did not have a lot of experience in serving customers?" the results have shown that both the locals (majority 54.9%) and owners (majority 70%) have the same perception of the Attractive requirement. On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 12, "I expect it"

was 65, "Neutral" was 24, "I can tolerate it" was 0, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 0, "I expect it" was 0, "Neutral" was 18, "I can tolerate it" was 14 and "I dislike it" was 69. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 8, "I expect it" was 2, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0 and in the dysfunctional questions there was "I like it" 0, "I expect it" 0, "Neutral" 2, "I can tolerate it" 7 and "I dislike it" 1.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if the food portion you ordered is big?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if the portion your ordered is small?" the results have shown that both the locals (majority 46.1%) and owners (majority 40%) have the same perception of the One-dimensional requirement. On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 67, "I expect it" was 23, "Neutral" was 4, "I can tolerate it" was 8, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 1, "I expect it" was 39 and "I dislike it" was 57. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 6, "I expect it" was 4, "Neutral" was 6, "I expect it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 6, "I expect it" was 4, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 6, "I expect it" was 4, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" o, "Neutral" 0, "I can tolerate it" and "I dislike it" 4 and "I dislike it" 6.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if the atmosphere in the restaurant is good?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if the atmosphere in the restaurant is not good?" the results have shown that both the locals (majority 35.3%) and owners (100%) have the same perception of the One-dimensional requirement. On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 59, "I expect it" was 31, "Neutral" was 10, "I can tolerate it" was 0, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like

it" was 0, "I expect it" was 2, "Neutral" was 16, "I can tolerate it" was 21 and "I dislike it" was 61. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 10, "I expect it" was 0", "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0 and in the dysfunctional questions there was "I like it" 0, "I expect it" 0, "Neutral" 0, "I can tolerate it" 0 and "I dislike it" 10.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if the restaurant facilities are clean?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if the restaurant facilities are not clean?" the results have shown that there is a gap between the locals and owners where locals prioritize the Attractive requirement (majority 48%) and the owners prioritize One-dimensional requirement (majority 60%). On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 96, "I expect it" was 4, "Neutral" was 2, "I can tolerate it" was 0, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 51. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 6, "I expect it" was 4, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" o, "I can tolerate it" o, "I can tolerate it" o, "I can tolerate it" o and "I dislike it" 10.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if your order did not take long to be done?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if your order took long to be done?" the results have shown that both the locals (majority 40.2%) and owners (majority 70%) have the same perception of the One-dimensional requirement. On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 77, "I expect it" was 15, "Neutral" was 6, "I can tolerate it" was 0, and "I dislike it" was 3 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 0, "I expect it" was 33 and "I dislike it" was 56. On the

service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 9, "I expect it" was 1, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0 and in the dysfunctional questions there was "I like it" 1, "I expect it" 0, "Neutral" 0, "I can tolerate it" 1 and "I dislike it" 8.

On the functional question: "How would you feel if the restaurant provides extra amenities such as mayonnaise, ketchup, toppings, etc.?" and its counter, the dysfunctional part "How would you feel if the restaurant does not provides extra amenities such as mayonnaise, ketchup, toppings, etc.?"" the results have shown that there is a gap between the locals and owners, where locals prioritize the Indifferent requirement (majority 40.2%) and the owners prioritize One-dimensional requirement (majority 60%). On the local functional question, the total amount of "I like it" was 55, "I expect it" was 47, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0, and "I dislike it" was 0 while one the local dysfunctional question the "I like it" was 0, "I expect it" was 58 and "I dislike it" was 25. On the service provider side, in the functional questions the amount of "I like it" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 47. "Neutral" was 610 "I expect it" was 0, "Neutral" was 0, "I can tolerate it" was 0 and "I dislike it" was 0 and in the dysfunctional questions there was "I like it" 0, "I expect it" 0, "Neutral" 0, "I can tolerate it" 4 and "I dislike it" 6.

#### DISCUSSION

The Kano Model was previously tested in a research conducted on a Dubrovnik restaurant. The findings were successful and showed that using this method of analyzing different approaches to service quality is a useful tool (Franušić, 2015). Therefore, the application of this model on the local fast casual dining restaurants is a valid source of obtaining information that can be used by restaurant managers in order to improve service quality, cut unnecessary cost and relocate those savings into the factors that add on to the overall service quality.

Because of the gaps that occur in every industry, the fast casual restaurant industry is especially impacted as most of them relay on the return of guests. This is an important fact to consider because, if those guests do not feel the quality is up to their expectations, they might not return and also potentially discourage others to visit as well.

In this research, the participants were divided into two groups; local patrons and service providers. The results for locals show that the attractive quality was the most chosen requirement, as it was the majority answer in eight questions (four questions when analyzed through the Kano chart). This attractive requirement is described as good to have, because it provides satisfaction towards the customer, however it does not make the customer dissatisfied, if it is not present. The possible reason for this is that the customers could be well informed as to what to expect in this type of restaurant, as it is not a fine dining type of place where top quality is expected in all aspects of service delivery. However, how the attractive requirement affects their loyalty to the restaurant remains unanswered. In other words, it is not entirely clear what would happen, if these benefits would be moved from the service offer.

In fact, it is quite clear in certain instances where the results shown to have little deviation between the attractive and one-dimensional requirement. This happened in the question addressing the cleanliness of facilities where the difference between the attractive (higher) and one-dimensional (lower) was 1.9%. These two requirements are therefore closely connected and should be taken into consideration when planning on what actions to take in operations. If the service provider would discontinue a service attribute, the guests whose consider it "attractive" probably would not mind, but the guests with a "one-dimensional" mindset would almost surely be dissatisfied. Therefore, this is a double edged sword where service providers must be very careful in considering their options, so that all customers remain satisfied.

As for the owner/manager side of the questionnaires, the one-dimensional requirement was present in all questions, only not in one. This can be interpreted that the owners/managers are under the high influence of the one-dimensional mindset/ requirement which states that, if you do provide something, the customer will be satisfied, however if you do not provide it, the customer will be dissatisfied. The findings in this research are important for the owners of the restaurants because they could, if analyzed/researched more thoroughly, find out exactly what part of the service is not necessary and therefore improve the important parts. For example, in my observation, the Tutto Bene restaurant understands the idea behind this and they do not provide extra amenities (ketchup, etc.) as standard for certain menu items, however it can be ordered free of charge. As this cuts the cost, it results in substantial savings. These savings could be redirected towards other purposes, such as giving better training or benefits to the employees, which would probably result in greater customer satisfaction, greater customer loyalty and, consequently, better revenue. What is important for the service providers in the fast casual dining restaurants is to use this information in order to act proactively rather than reactively. This means they should not react only when something becomes a problem and the customers stop visiting, however they should implement changes needed now to satisfy the current trends in this industry (Salihefendic, 2015).

The ways to close the gap are possible in different ways, one of them being technology. By using technology, service providers could collect data about their customers and their preferences and thus know how to adjust service quality. If they would know, through collecting data, that person A loves something or that person B does not like something, then they could perform service personalization and thus substantially improve customer experience.

This research focused on the average results by taking into account several restaurants of this type. In order to implement these results and to have higher success rates, it is recommended to implement the Kano Model for individual restaurants so that the owner could get more specific results from their current guests. Therefore we recommend future research in order to shed more light into how individual restaurants cope with this challenge.

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# Appendices:

		Dysfunctional				
	Customer Requirement	Like	Expect it	Neutral	Tolerate it	Dislike
Functional	Like	R	А	А	А	0
	Expect it	R	I	I	I	М
	Neutral	R	I	I	I	М
	Tolerate it	R	I	I	I	М
	Dislike	Q	R	R	R	Q

- A-> Attractive requirement
- M-> Must-be requirement
- O-> One-dimensional requirement
- R-> Reverse requirement
- I-> Indifferent requirement
- Q-> Questionable requirement

Figure 1. Kano evaluation chart based on functional and dysfunctional questions

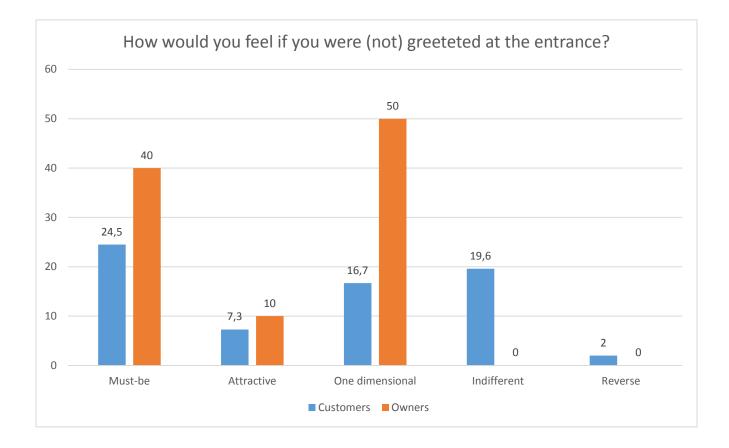


Figure 2. Question results shown in percentages

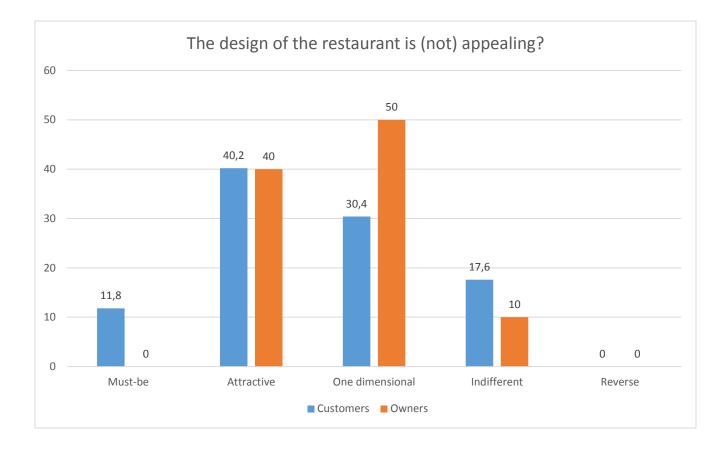


Figure 3. Question results shown in percentages

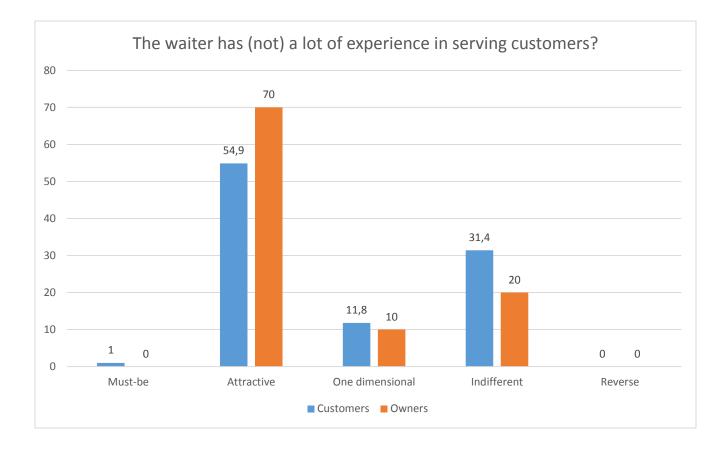


Figure 4. Question results shown in percentages

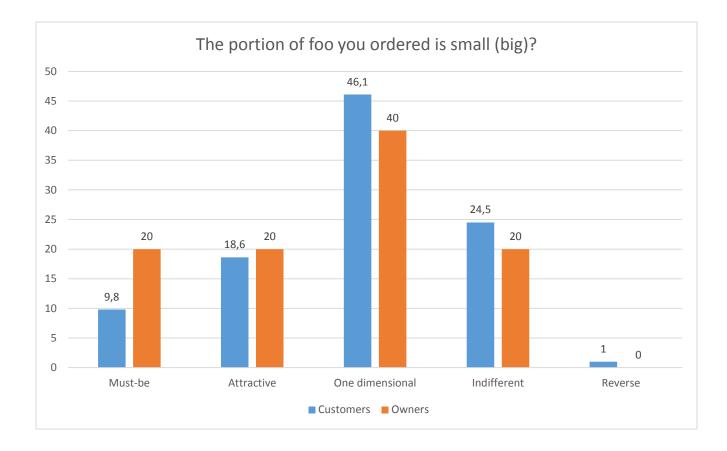


Figure 5. Question results shown in percentages

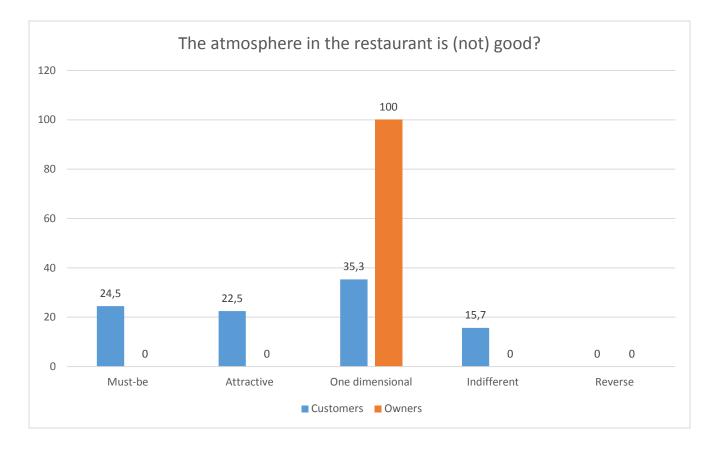


Figure 6. Question results shown in percentages



Figure 7. Question results shown in percentages



Figure 8. Question results shown in percentages

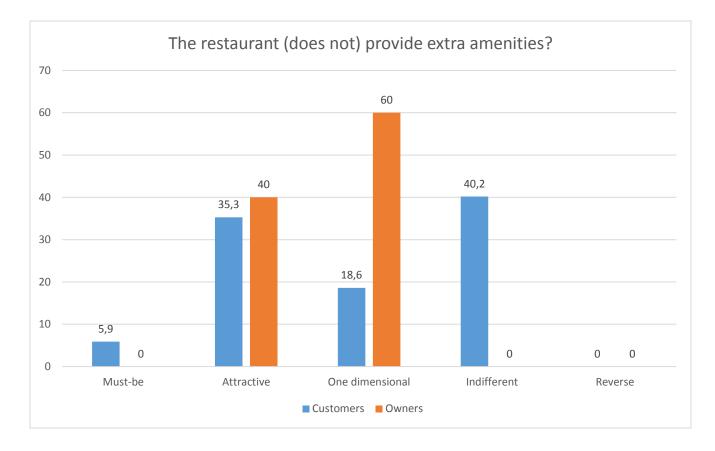


Figure 9. Question results shown in percentages