

Understanding the Dining Experience of Obese People

Abstract

To improve the dining experience of obese people, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted based on 36 in-depth interviews. The results reveal that participants' restaurant experiences are affected by constraints and difficulties arising from both the physical and social environments. Managerial implications which are easy to implement are suggested.

Study Background

Both academic literature and public health practitioners have paid close attention to the phenomenon of obesity in Western society. The alarming findings led to the adoption of extensive programs by the World Health Organization, governments and regional authorities in efforts to promote a healthy lifestyle leading to a reduction in obesity. Not surprisingly, these attempts are characterized by paternalism expressed in attempts to change the lifestyles of obese people. There are very few studies and programs aimed at improving the quality of life of obese people without trying to limit their liberty or autonomy to live their lives as they see fit.

This is also evident in the study fields of hospitality and tourism management, which has almost completely ignored the needs and wants of obese people, including identifying ways to improve their experience and satisfaction as legitimate welcomed consumers. It seems that despite the high rate of obese people in Western society, and although full and enjoyable participation in recreational activities has long been recognized as a natural right, the hospitality field of study has not focused on this important issue.

The Current Study

To better understand the experience of eating out in restaurants among obese people, and to offer guidance to restaurant managers on how to improve the service quality provided, this short report details an exploratory qualitative study conducted in the US among 36 obese people. The semi-structured in-depth interviews raise a wide range of experiences of obese people in restaurants, including challenges and obstacles that stand between them and full enjoyment of this popular leisure activity.

The physical environment

Due to their body size, the interviewees testified to significant obstacles in their interaction with the physical environment. For example, restaurant chairs are often too small and cannot accommodate their body size; armchairs, in particular, prevented them from sitting at all or sitting comfortably. Interviewees also noted the difficulty of squeezing into the gap between the chair and the table. This discomfort is expressed throughout the meal in the restaurant, especially when the obese patrons have to get up (e.g. to the bathroom) and then return to their chair. A deep disappointment was expressed about the general impression that restaurant managers do not take into consideration the needs of obese guests.

The social environment

The participants testified that obese people are very aware that other people stare at them in the public space, especially in restaurants, which adversely affects their dining experience. Specifically, interviewees felt that other patrons were looking at them with disdain and disrespect, as if they blamed obese people for their physical condition. The impression among the interviewees is that they are accused of being an economic burden on society, which makes them want to "hide" themselves from the views of those surrounding them. All of this significantly harms their dining experience and, consequently, their quality of life.

Improving the Dining Experience of Obese People

The managerial and practical implications for restaurants in relation to both the physical and social environments are as follows:

- Obese guests should be offered the opportunity to sit far away from the center of the restaurant (where they can have a sense of privacy) and not be seated automatically next to the first available table.
- Efforts should be made not to seat obese patrons next to a table fixed to the floor, at a seat-table single unit, or on bar stool chairs.
- Restaurants need to develop service techniques that will allow them to offer obese patrons different options (for example, offer to sit in a remote corner of a restaurant; offer waiter assistance in bringing food from the buffet), to help obese patrons avoiding exposure to other guests' gaze as much as possible, without insulting them and marking them as "different."
- Restaurant managers should be proactive and approach obese customers to learn about their dining experience.
- In a broader perspective, social organizations in society should work towards a more tolerant attitude toward obese people as well as to strengthen the self-confidence and social well-being of the latter.

Hopefully restaurants will implement the managerial implications suggested to improve the dining experience of obese people. Despite the financial costs involved, the investment is expected to pay off in light of the high and rising rate of obese people in Western society. It is also the right thing to do from a public and moral standpoint. Note also that based on previous studies implementing the implications concerning with the physical environment may improve other segments' dining experience (e.g. people using wheel chairs, crutches, etc.).