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Flavors that connect: sensory marketing and customer loyalty in themed restaurants

Sabores que conectan: marketing sensorial y fidelización de clientes en restaurantes temáticos

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to determine the relationship between sensory marketing and customer loyalty in themed restaurants, considering sensory experiences as a key factor in consumer perception and connection with the brand. A quantitative, correlational, non-experimental, cross-sectional methodology was used, applying a structured questionnaire to a sample of 327 consumers from a representative restaurant in the Huánuco region. The results show a direct and significant relationship ($r = 0.936$, $p = 0.000$) between sensory marketing and customer loyalty, demonstrating that sensory stimuli, such as aroma, music, ambiance, and visual presentation, influence customer satisfaction and loyalty to the establishment. Therefore, it is concluded that strategically integrating the five senses into gastronomic spaces represents a sustainable competitive advantage, especially in contexts where experience is the main differentiating factor.

Keywords: Sensory marketing, customer loyalty, customer experience

Resumen

El presente artículo tuvo como propósito determinar la relación entre el marketing sensorial y la fidelización de clientes en restaurantes temáticos, considerando las experiencias sensoriales como un factor clave en la percepción y vínculo del consumidor con la marca. Se empleó una metodología con enfoque cuantitativo, nivel correlacional, diseño no experimental y de tipo transversal, mediante la aplicación de un cuestionario estructurado a una muestra de 327 consumidores de un restaurante representativo de la región Huánuco. Los resultados

muestran una relación directa y significativa (r = 0,936, p = 0,000) entre el marketing sensorial y la fidelización del cliente, evidenciando que los estímulos sensoriales, como el aroma, la música, la ambientación y la presentación visual, influyen en la satisfacción del cliente y su lealtad hacia el establecimiento. Por lo tanto, se concluye que integrar estratégicamente los cinco sentidos dentro de los espacios gastronómicos representa una ventaja competitiva sostenible, especialmente en contextos donde la experiencia constituye el principal factor diferenciador.

Palabras clave: Marketing sensorial, fidelización, experiencia del cliente

Introduction

In recent decades, consumer behavior has evolved toward the pursuit of comprehensive experiences that surpass mere product or service quality. This shift arises from the fact that brands no longer compete solely on functionality or cost, but also on their ability to forge emotional and memorable connections with consumers (Cai, 2024). Sensory marketing emerges in response to this change, utilizing sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste to intentionally influence consumers' perceptions, emotions, and behaviors (Krishna, 2014).

Despite the growing academic and commercial interest in sensory marketing as a means to enhance consumer experience, its strategic application and true impact on customer loyalty remain unclear across various contexts (Akram & Imran, 2024; Dwiputri, 2024; Kazem & Ahmed, 2022; Shahid et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the increasing importance attributed to sensory marketing as a tool for improving consumer experience, particularly in gastronomic contexts in intermediate regions, is still underexplored in the specialized literature (Shahid et al., 2022).

In numerous businesses, sensory decisions are made based on intuition or imitation, without empirical evidence to support their effectiveness (Wörfel et al., 2022). This constitutes a critical weakness for industries where experiential elements are integral to the product, such as themed dining, where sensory stimuli are a key component of the value proposition (Roy et al., 2021). Failure to understand the true impact of these stimuli on consumer perception and behavior limits businesses' ability to cultivate customer loyalty, differentiate themselves competitively, and establish enduring relationships with consumers (Wolter et al., 2022).

Thus, sensory marketing is defined as a strategic method for creating a transcendent environment in physical or digital commerce, aimed at promoting purchases and strengthening customer loyalty (Jiménez-Marín et al., 2019). Consequently, sensory marketing incorporates systematic stimuli from the five senses—sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch—that influence, to varying degrees, the regulation of user emotions and feelings, as well as decision-making processes (Krishna, 2012). In themed gastronomy, where experience is part of the product, sensory marketing is crucial; it applies not only to taste but also to smell, the sounds of the environment, and the ambiance, all of which shape service perception, as each interconnected component affects the overall perception (Santos et al., 2025).

Sensory marketing is applied through simple techniques in gastronomy, particularly in themed restaurants, where the experience transcends culinary aspects to become a multisensory journey. Sayed (2023) and Utama (2022) argue that the strategy employs stimuli across the five senses to evoke intense emotional reactions that alter consumer perception and behavior during the purchasing process. From this perspective, the five senses serve as strategic tools that, when synergistically combined, underpin a comprehensive and immersive experience. Regarding vision, the perception of color, shape, lighting, and spatial design correlates with environmental elements and helps define the theme (Chang & Cheng, 2023).

Sensory marketing seeks to generate responses through visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile stimuli, creating a more valuable and memorable experience (Petit et al., 2022). Specifically, this method operates through five strategic directions: sight is linked to lighting, colors, shapes, and environmental design (Liu et al., 2024); hearing, through music and environmental sounds, influences the emotional state of the customer, altering their mood and length of stay (Tarlao et al., 2021); smell creates a unique atmosphere that evokes feelings or memories (Green et al., 2023); taste, in addition to providing flavor, can incorporate unique components according to the restaurant's culture or theme (Kuo & Helm, 2024); and touch relates to the materials of furniture, utensils, or the arrangement of dishes (Wang et al., 2025).

The coordinated implementation of these stimuli not only enhances service perception but also aids in creating a unique identity in an intensely competitive environment (Abdolmohamad Sagha et al., 2022; Chowdhury et al., 2025; Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017). In particular, Safeer et al. (2021) emphasize that integrated sensory stimulation directly influences consumer behavior and loyalty. Gao and Shen (2024) note that brands that activate more senses forge longer-lasting connections, as customers seek a unique experience that links them to a story, a special culture, or an aesthetic. For this reason, when a coordinated and appropriate experience is achieved,

loyalty arises naturally as a consequence of the perceived value, rather than merely as a response to commercial stimuli (Srivastava & Kaul, 2016).

Loyalty represents a deep commitment to purchase or preference for a brand, even when competitive options or circumstantial obstacles exist. This definition implies that loyalty transcends temporary satisfaction and strengthens as a lasting relationship (Cardoso et al., 2022). Customer loyalty in the culinary realm not only entails repeat visits but also the creation of an emotional bond with the dining establishment (Singh et al., 2021). Loyalty is a fundamental pillar for business sustainability, as loyal customers represent a constant source of revenue and indirect promotion (Pan et al., 2012).

Customer service, auditory ambiance, overall design, olfactory perceptions, and their association with the service create an integrated experience that fosters customer willingness toward loyalty (Ing et al., 2020) and is still strongly influenced by the overall experience, beyond the product or service purchased. Huang (2017) and Liu et al. (2020) highlight that perception, bodily engagement, and emotions are associated with the brand; however, in restaurants, emotional and sensory aspects contribute to building customer loyalty. Additionally, each positive interaction represents an opportunity to develop trust, which is increasingly critical in themed restaurants, as customers expect more unusual and exceptional experiences (Chauhan, 2023).

In this context, loyalty in gastronomy is often approached superficially, without a thorough understanding or analysis of the mechanisms that genuinely drive it (Padillo et al., 2021). It is therefore pertinent to address the ethics of gastronomy, the emotions, and the culture that generate meaning and value for the ongoing acquisition of services. Moreover, consumer loyalty is no longer based solely on product quality; companies must also create holistic emotional and sensory experiences. In the Huánuco region, themed restaurants face the challenge of differentiating themselves in an increasingly crowded market, where high-quality food alone does not guarantee customer retention or repeat visits. The region's rich cultural heritage, abundant in gastronomic, aesthetic, and symbolic expressions, presents a strategic opportunity to develop value propositions grounded in sensory stimuli.

This gastronomic opportunity and advantage have not been fully capitalized upon, as there is no strategy defining the stimulation mechanisms that maximally articulate consumer expectations and desires. A good strategy must be precise and empirical, identifying which sensory stimuli are most effective in influencing customer perception and promoting loyalty. The lack of evidence limits businesses' ability to create experiences that align with consumer expectations and resonate with the cultural identity of the area.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to determine the relationship between sensory marketing and customer loyalty in the gastronomic sector of Huánuco, recognizing the stimuli that have the greatest effect on customer perception and their intent to return.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a quantitative methodology, employing a non-experimental design of a correlational and cross-sectional nature (Park et al., 2018). The selection of this method was based on the need to examine links between variables without altering them (Riza & Wijayanti, 2018), allowing for the determination of the degree of relationship between sensory marketing and customer loyalty at a specific point in time. The population consisted of 2,200 customers from a representative restaurant in the Huánuco region, Peru.

Participants were selected using probabilistic sampling, specifically simple random sampling, with inclusion criteria set for individuals who had visited the restaurant at least once. The sample size was determined using a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and an estimated proportion (p=0.5 and q=1-p), resulting in a total of 327 participants. To describe the participants in the survey, three sociodemographic factors were considered: age, gender, and marital status.

Table 1

Description of demographic variables

Variable	levels	r	%
Age	20-30	60	18.3%
	31-40	101	30.9%
	41-50	82	25.1%
	51-60	69	21.1%
	61-70	15	4.6%
Gender	Male	143	43.7%

	Female	184	56.3%
Marital status	Single	98	30.0%
	Married	210	64.2%
	Widowed	2	0.6%
	Divorced	17	5.2%

The instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale, where 5 represents "strongly agree," 4 "agree," 3 "neither agree nor disagree," 2 "disagree," and 1 "strongly disagree." This scale facilitated the organized collection of participant perspectives. The questionnaire was validated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, yielding a value of 0.775 for the sensory marketing variable and 0.725 for the customer loyalty variable, indicating an acceptable level of reliability for both constructs (Satti et al., 2022). The data were structured and analyzed using SPSS v.25 and Microsoft Excel 2016 to describe the survey participants and determine response rates. Subsequently, the Spearman correlation coefficient was employed to establish relationships.

Results and discussion

To examine the study hypothesis, it was necessary to verify whether the obtained data met the basic assumptions for determining the statistical test (parametric or non-parametric).

Table 2

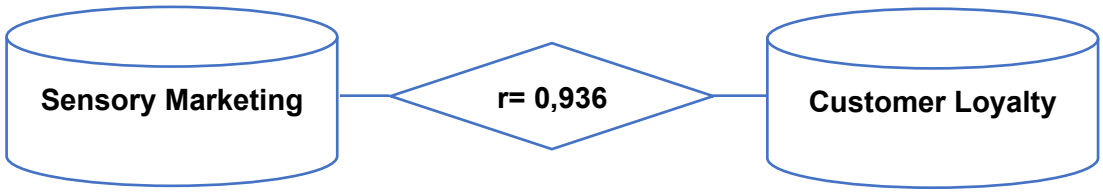
Normality test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]		
	Statistic	**df**	**sig.**
Sensory Marketing	,091	327	,000
Customer Loyalty	,091	327	,000

The results obtained through the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicate that the examined variables, sensory marketing and customer loyalty, do not correspond to a normal distribution, as the significance values do not reach the critical level of 0.05. Therefore, the normality test is not satisfied, leading to the decision to utilize non-parametric statistical tests, particularly those suited for data that do not fit a normal distribution, such as Spearman's rho correlation coefficient (Figure 1).

Figure 1

General hypothesis results



The findings corroborate the main hypothesis of the study by demonstrating a significant positive correlation between sensory marketing and customer loyalty. These results support the hypothesis that sensory tactics applied in themed restaurants directly contribute to strengthening the relationship between the customer and the establishment. Regarding the specific hypotheses, it was confirmed that all sensory dimensions maintain a significant relationship with customer loyalty. This suggests that visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile stimuli consistently employ strategies that create an unforgettable experience motivating return visits, recommendations, and emotional connections with consumers.

Table 3

Hypothesis results

Direct Relationships via SPSS V.25	**Spearman's Rho Correlation Coefficient**	**p-value**	**Acceptance**
Sensory Marketing -> Customer Loyalty	0,936	0.000	Yes
Visual Stimulus -> Customer Loyalty	0,466	0,000	Yes
Auditory Stimulus ->	0,447	0,000	Yes

Customer Loyalty Olfactory Stimulus -> Customer Loyalty	0,396	0,000	Yes
Gustatory Stimulus -> Customer Loyalty	0,477	0,000	Yes
Tactile Stimulus -> Customer Loyalty	0,368	0,000	Yes

The findings of this research align with the strong relationship between sensory marketing and customer loyalty, suggesting that the integration of multiple senses becomes a central component in loyalty processes. This finding is consistent with studies related to food chains that demonstrate that multisensory stimulation within the environment positively aids customer relationships, particularly focusing on olfactory and gustatory stimuli as central factors (Hussain, 2018).

The findings regarding taste, along with visual stimuli, highlight their significant impact on service perception, emphasizing the importance of these two senses in the gastronomic experience and helping to understand the profound reasons behind the positive associations that customers develop toward physically desirable and tangible stimuli. The notable approval of diners is attributable to thematic decoration, where coherent aesthetics and served flavors are designed to complement each other, strengthening participants' memory and emotional satisfaction. These discoveries corroborate what Herrera (2025) proposed, highlighting that both the aesthetics of the space and the quality of flavor serve as drivers of the emotional bond with the brand.

Although auditory, tactile, and olfactory stimuli demonstrated a lesser impact compared to visual and gustatory stimuli, their contribution to the development of a comprehensive sensory experience cannot be minimized. These findings indicate that the ambient sound, the textures of furniture and utensils, along with the aromas present in the environment, play an additional role that enhances the atmosphere of the place. This aligns with the arguments presented by Mostafa and Kasamani (2020), who assert that these stimuli, despite being subtle, significantly impact the emotional dimension of the customer, fostering immersion and solidifying the emotional connection with the space. In themed gastronomic settings, particularly in areas with a strong cultural identity, these senses enable the restaurant's story to extend beyond the dish, transforming it into a narrative that transcends the plate.

The findings confirm that a strategic and consistent application of sensory stimuli not only influences the customer's immediate perception but also serves as an essential distinguishing element in highly competitive sectors. A sensory experience, beyond being a purely aesthetic resource, establishes a symbolic value that positions the establishment beyond the product provided. This result is consistent with the propositions of Zomerdijk and Voss (2009), who argue that multisensory environments can transform into settings for lasting loyalty, provided they are designed with a coherent narrative and meticulous execution. Thus, it is demonstrated that when sensory experiences are combined with authenticity and purpose, they can yield favorable outcomes for this sector in a highly competitive market.

Conclusions

The vital relevance of sensory marketing as a definitive strategy in the thematic gastronomic field demonstrates that the complete stimulation of the senses directly impacts customer loyalty. Simple experiences based on tasting, manipulation, vision, hearing, and smell definitively strengthen the emotional bond between the customer and the establishment. For the customer, this goes beyond merely meeting their needs, as it transforms the place into a memorable venue, which in turn generates the desire to return and recommend it.

Furthermore, it is evident that customer loyalty is not solely based on product excellence but is determined by the set of sensory perceptions that constitute the service environment. This multisensory bond enhances the perceived value for the consumer, becoming a key tool for remaining competitive in a saturated market. In this context, each positive interaction presents an opportunity to build trust, which is increasingly critical in themed restaurants, as customers expect more unusual and exceptional experiences.

Finally, the strategic management of sensory experiences allows local companies to incorporate cultural, symbolic, and emotional elements that align with contemporary consumer needs. This not only fosters brand identification but also strengthens loyalty through harmony between identity, environment, and gastronomic offerings. The findings provide valuable empirical evidence for creating more meaningful gastronomic environments, where sensory experiences not only enrich the moment but also contribute to authentic and lasting relationships with customers. This study invites further exploration, from diverse perspectives and realities, into

how the senses can bridge emotion and loyalty, driving new forms of connection between brands and individuals in other sectors.

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