



Chain vs Independent Asian Restaurants in Toronto & Vancouver

Melissa Akgez

Abstract:

In this brief, we look at the previous research that has been in sociology when it comes to Asian cuisine and apply it to our research when conducting an analysis on a spatial and coding perspective. We noticed that majority of our restaurants are clustered in the downtown cores in Toronto and Vancouver, and clustered in popular areas with respective to their cultural towns. We also put our two hypotheses to the test and found that independent restaurants tend to receive higher ratings and more reviews, compared to chain restaurants, in both the cities, which proved our hypothesis to be incorrect. We also noticed key concepts seen amongst the menu, such as language, naming and description of the menu.

Key words: *Sociology, Food, Culture, Yelp Reviews, Toronto, Vancouver, Restaurants, Asian Cuisine, Chain, Independent, Analysis, Spatial, Coding*

Introduction

Canada is a country filled with multi-cultural aspects, which is what contributes to Canada being so diverse. Toronto and Vancouver are two of the most populous cities in the country. With this being, the array of diverse options of food can be found in these cities, and our group selected Asian cuisine to focus on. After selecting a total of eighty restaurants between the two cities, we then decided to classify the restaurants as “independent” and “chain” among the eighty. We defined “independent” as a restaurant with only location of its kind, and “chain” as a franchise of restaurants that are found in multiple locations. In this research brief, I discuss the academic research that we found and used to apply to our research to understand what has been done in the academic world. From here, our first step was to put our selected locations on a map to create a visual spatial analysis. Next in our methodology we took our research and conducted a coding analysis to retrieve emerging themes we noticed. Throughout the whole process, we kept the “creative class” theory in mind, by Richard Florida, to follow the premise of this fourth-year level seminar.

Background

Our group conducted some background research to understand the previous research done regarding our selected topic. The first article we found “Food Studies and Sociology: A Review Focusing on Japan” focused on the interdisciplinary sociological standpoint with Japanese cuisine, focusing on food, culture and globalization. The author focused on how all three of these connect with another with her selected restaurants, finding how consumers engage with restaurants. Another article for our background research, “Restaurant Organizational Forms and Community in the US.” This study uses the sociological theory of the cultural diamond and applies it to the success of a restaurant and its consumers based on location, as well as looking common demographics of the consumers. Another article for our background research is “Characterizing non-chain restaurants’ Yelp star ratings: Generalizable findings from a representative sample of Yelp reviews.” We used to this to look at one of our hypotheses to examine common themes that emerge from chain and independent restaurants to help us predict an informed hypothesis whether or not if independent restaurants tend to receive a lower or higher rating on Yelp.

Methods

The spatial analysis consisted of selecting 80 restaurants total, in downtown Toronto and Vancouver, of chain and independent restaurants, then using MapAnalyzer to place our selected restaurants on a map to indicate the location of our restaurants. For our background research, this step consisted of looking for academic articles to dive deep in a literature review pertaining to our topic. We thought of three hypotheses after upon our research, the first one thinking about how restaurant location is influenced by the racialized neighbourhood it is located, the second hypothesis was about the possibility of independent restaurants getting lower ratings compared to its similar chain restaurant, and our third one investigated the layout, names and description of the menu of the restaurants. For our coding analysis, we took



the information that was found from the previous blog posts and categorized our findings into variables on a spreadsheet, then from there put it in a visual table/graph to indicate our findings for our hypotheses. We narrowed our hypotheses down to our last two options.

Findings

In our first analysis, we focused on the spatial aspect of our restaurants. In our spatial analysis, we noticed that majority of the restaurants that were selected were in the downtown core, and from there we focused on this aspect to see what could be drawn from this fact. From this we also found that since our restaurants were Asian cuisine were in their respective cultural district, for example Chinatown, Koreatown, etc. In our coding analysis, we narrowed down our hypotheses to two and discovered the following, one proved to be correct and the other proved to be incorrect. Our correct hypothesis was more to be an investigative topic that we were able to look into and learn more about, comparing the restaurant names, descriptions and price when it comes both Asian chain and independent restaurants' menu. From what we found, we noticed that there were common themes throughout them. We first found the language on the menus were primarily written in English, to attract those of all types of customers, but some menus, from independent restaurants, had written their plates also in their native language, which is something independent restaurants use to attract customers of similar ethnicity. Another common theme emerged from the menus was the naming of the dish plates. The names of the dish were always straightforward of what it was, and in some cases, it came with a mini description consisting of what is in the meal. The dish size was also a standard size, but chain restaurants offer the option to mix an entrée with a side dish, and the option to mixture two entrees and two sides, for example. Chain restaurants also have generic terminology in their restaurant naming, such as "Asian" and "Express." Our second hypothesis proved to be wrong, which was an interesting learning discovery. This hypothesis was how independent restaurants tend to receive lower ratings on Yelp, especially compared to its respective similar chain restaurant. We found that independent restaurants received a higher rating on Yelp

and that they received more reviews than chain restaurants. Using this finding, we can predict that people have an expectation when going to eat at a chain restaurant, whereas a customer going into an independent restaurant, they go in with a blank slate, and their expectations are more likely to be exceeded. The average amount of stars for chain restaurants in Toronto and Vancouver were a low 3-star rating, whereas independent restaurants had a high 3-star rating, almost 4-star. There was a significantly higher total quantity of reviews for independent restaurants, especially in Vancouver, with almost 7000 reviews, Toronto totaling almost 6000 reviews. Chain restaurants had a very low quantity in Toronto, with about 1500 reviews, and in Vancouver it had a much higher total, with almost 4000 reviews for chain restaurants.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conducting these analyses in both Toronto and Vancouver allows us to understand that both cities operate very similarly in a sociological way. We also defined "chain" and "independent" for our analyses. From the spatial analysis, we determined how the restaurants are clustered similarly in the downtown core of both cities, and that a good amount of our restaurants are found in their respective ethnic town, such as a Korean restaurant being found in Koreatown. In our coding analysis, narrowing it down to two topics, finding emerging and common concepts from the menu's labelling and description in their dish size and presentation, and our hypothesis of chain restaurants receiving higher reviews on Yelp proving to be false with the result being that independent restaurants receive a higher rating and receive more reviews on Yelp for both cities. A limitation that occurred during our research is that we were not able to visit each of these restaurants, so the reviews were subjective based off other people's experiences, based on service, food and other factors. A recommendation for someone to continue this research is to compare this with a city perhaps in another country and see how it differs. Some other things to consider would be why restaurants receive a high vs a low rating and what impacts this, such as poor/excellent service or quality of food. There are many possibilities to consider when doing a study like this, as this will be a never-ending study.

