Food and Feedback:

How customers of Japanese restaurants in Berlin perceive authenticity

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Inhalt

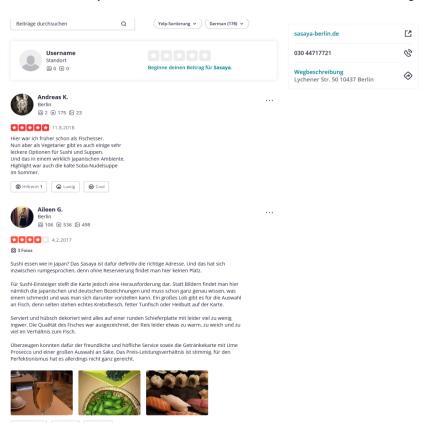
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Introduction

Berlin can certainly be viewed as a thriving hub for various food cultures, given how many different cuisines exist in this one place and can be explored here. Especially Asian restaurants stand out as one of the major branches when examining the gastronomy of the German capital. Trying to differentiate between the different strands of Asian cuisine can be difficult, as restaurants often advertise themselves as being a "real" Chinese/Japanese/Korean/etc. place, while in reality offering some sort of fusion kitchen. However, what makes a restaurant "real" or authentic in the first place? It could depend on the kind of food served there, the quality of the ingredients, the ethnicity of the staff and much more. It therefore is no easy task to decide on a set of criteria in order to get a clear answer.

Focusing on Japanese restaurants - or at the very least the ones that brand their businesses as such – we attempt a different approach and try to explain how *the customers* themselves define authentic Japanese restaurants in Berlin by using online reviews from "Yelp", a website used for rating restaurants, so that other users can see what kind of standing a given place has in the community. We believe the internet serves as an excellent place for data collection on this



topic because even though there are little to no possibilities of contacting the users themselves, the internet as a space provides a certain level of anonymity for customers to express their honest opinion without feeling concerned about social judgement by others.

An example of user reviews on "Yelp"

We will first discuss the concept of authenticity itself and how it can be broken down into tangible parts that can later be used as categories for a qualitative content analysis. Following this chapter is an overview of the methodology in this research project. This includes not only a rundown of all the programs and tools used as well as giving an overview of our collected data but also focuses on the method of qualitative content analysis itself. Finally, we will look at the results in order to answer our research question: How do customers define authentic Japanese Restaurants in Berlin by using Yelp to give online feedback? In this paper, we will show pictures of the restaurants and screenshots of our data to document the research process.

Theory: Authenticity

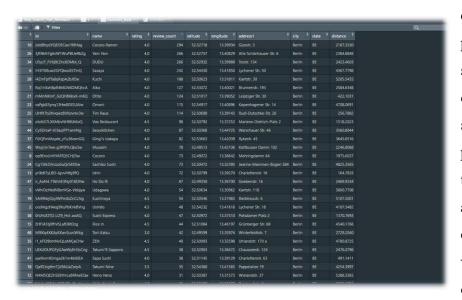
The first question that we have to ask ourselves is what authenticity actually means. While scholars agree on the importance of authenticity as a concept, no clear definition has been provided so far (Becker et al. 2019: 25). Nunes et al. (2021: 1) explain the lack of a common definition with the context-based understanding of the concept of authenticity. Consumers evaluate the authenticity of an experience on an either indexical or iconic base, while the former implies that an object is original, whereas the latter merely resembles the original and may be constructed (Becker et al. 2019: 25). In the case of our own project, authenticity relies on an iconic base as Japanese restaurants in Germany are constructing a Japanese atmosphere and cannot be "original" due to geographical circumstances. The food may be considered as original if it is imported from Japan.

In the context of gastronomy, the term authenticity sometimes serves as a label to justify higher prices as can be observed with sushi culture in Singapore where high-end sushi restaurants aim for 100% Japanese-ness regarding food, interior, management, staff, etc. (Ng 2001: 7-8). Byun and Reiher (2015: 276) consider authenticity a "sales strategy" and "mechanism for differentiation". In their study about Korean cuisine in Berlin, they divide Korean restaurants into first and second generation, whereas the first generation refers to restaurants that developed between 1980 and 2005 and second generation to restaurants that developed after 2005. It is shown that especially restaurants of the first generation value tradition and authenticity (Byun and Reiher 2015). They use authenticity to differentiate themselves from restaurants of the second generation which significantly adapt to local customers and which are often owned by non-Koreans. Restaurants of the second generation put authenticity in the background and rather focus on satisfied customers by localizing their food.

The significant influence of localization processes on authenticity is also shown in Ng's research about sushi culture in Singapore (Ng 2001). He describes the rising global popularity of cultural goods as a result of adapting to local customers which often reduces authenticity (Ng 2001: 1). He defines localization processes in three aspects, i.e. the forms of eating, content and taste and finally the management of a restaurant (Ng 2001: 12-16). "Forms of eating" refers to the authenticity of the menu as a whole and way of eating, e.g. offering other dishes along with sushi even though sushi restaurants in Japan typically only serve sushi. The second aspect, "content and taste" takes into account the ingredients for example. The third aspect "management" considers the ethnicity and background of the restaurant managers. We used similar categories as a basis for our own project as they can be used to assess authenticity and may be the aspects that customers pay attention to when rating a restaurant. Our selection of categories will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

Methodology: Qualitative Content Analysis

When discussing methods, there are three different aspects that need to be mentioned. Firstly, the data set, secondly, the method of data collection and lastly, the type of analysis performed on the collected data. We will be going through each of them one by one while also



commenting the on programs used at every stage. Having decided on online reviews, the first step to be taken was picking out restaurants that would help answer research our question and provide us with a relevant number of reviews. We achieved

Our list of results in Rstudio

this by writing a script in R¹, a programming language frequently used by data scientists that provides an excellent basis for statistical analysis. This script would allow us to see all the restaurants tagged as Japanese on Yelp. It does so by communicating with the API (application programming interface) of the website and then setting certain parameters (city, radius, genre) and outputting a list of all relevant search hits as a result.

All of the coding was performed in the environment RStudio, a tool that helped us visualize the results as a table later on. 50 restaurants were shown, however, we planned on making an important distinction from the very start, therefore we picked several restaurants out by hand. We wanted to make sure we both analyze the reviews of restaurants owned by Japanese as well as people of other nationalities in order to see if the management would play a role at all. Additionally, we filtered the list by number of reviews to increase sample size for possible hits. We also made sure to include restaurants of different price categories in order to incorporate a variety of businesses. As a result, we ended up with the following ten restaurants: A) (owned by Japanese) Zenkichi, Udagawa, Sasaya, Kame Bakery, Heno Heno, Takumi Nine, Momiji. B) (owned by non-Japanese): Cocolo Ramen, Kuchi, Iro Izakaya. The script technically also allowed us to gather all the relevant reviews in one place automatically, however there are limitations regarding the number of reviews, so we had to collect the reviews manually. Overall, we collected 933 reviews this way².

Analan S.

Klenes Saparisches Restaurant, mit sehr leckeren Essen und ein sehr sehr freundliches Personal

Roshan G.

Excelent. Japanese traditional ktichen with a dedicated chef running the whole scene. Beware , it takes a while so plan accordingly.

Thai H.

Thou H.

Thou M.

Thou H.

Thou M.

Thou H.

To Boo Do Brinns

I liver Takoyakis. When I am in Japan I always get them hot and fresh that you always burn your mouth but at the same time they are so delicious. Takoyaki is a specialty in this restaurant and as simple as that I obviously had to get them.

So far these were the best Takoyakis I had in Germany but they are a rare species to begin with. Unfortunately I have one major complaint. The Takoyakis were not fresh and hot. They came out very fast which is surprising considering how long it usually takes to make them. I can only assume they were pre-prepared and finished to order. You could argue that I took pictures but I only needed about 5 minutes for that and all the Takoyakis I had in Japan still burned my mouth even after that time. These here were warm and could be eaten as a whole which I would never do in Japan?

SERVICE

Lovel service. The staff also explained the different Takoyaki variants on your pite: at the table.

ATMOSPHERE

Small and simple restaurant. I decided to sit at a table outside because I fet it was nothing special.

RATINO

If my Takoyakis were hot and "fresh" it would have taken me back to Japan instantly. I think when you put an term on the front of your menu, you should give it your best even if the customer has to wat. I will gladly wat thirty minutes or longer for hot and fresh Takoyakis. They still get my recommendation.

Eveton R.

Amazing Food, reasonably prices; great chef and staff - all Japanese, so very authentic. Will definitely be back on my next top to Berlin. Thanks guystill!!

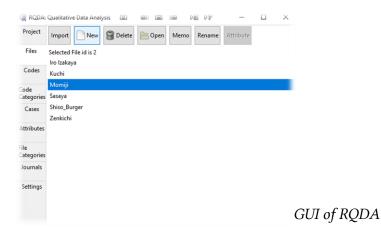
Melna Y.

examples of our .txt files

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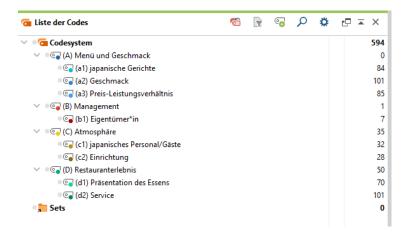
¹ Done via a tutorial found on rpubs.com by User Fitzpatrick, see: https://rpubs.com/fitzpatrickm8/yelpapi

² We started with about 1500 reviews, however, about 600 of these proved to be irrelevant due to the characteristics of the restaurants themselves and where thus excluded beforehand



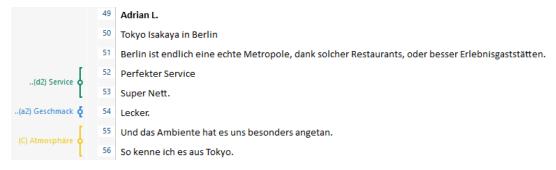
In order to skip through those reviews that wouldn't help us to answer our research question, we decided to filter them via keywords that we set up beforehand (see Appendix 1). Here, we used a program called RQDA, which allows for qualitative analysis of .txt files. We would enter the keyword for each restaurant separately, as there unfortunately did not exist an easier method of doing so inside the program. In total, we created a list of 105 keywords. When deciding which keywords to use, we followed the categories we found in the literature (see theory chapter) and thought about what customers could potentially say or which words they would include in their reviews when talking about authentic Japanese cuisine. The large amount mostly results out of the challenge that for filtering via keywords, we had to account for both German and English as the program would not translate the search hits. By trimming down irrelevant reviews, we ended up with 425 reviews.

These reviews were then exported from .txt files to .docx files so they could be analyzed with MAXQDA. MAXQDA is a software used for qualitative analysis such as coding and is therefore perfectly able to assist when conducting a qualitative content analysis. Once we had our dataset in place, we started creating a category system. Here, we first decided on the following general categories, based on our literature review: (A) Menu and taste, (B) Management, (C) Atmosphere and (D) Restaurant experience. We then divided them further into sub-categories so we could properly capture the customer's statements. This resulted in the following category system: (A) Menu and Taste // (a1) Japanese dishes // (a2) Taste // (a3) Price-performance ratio, (B) Management // (b1) Owner (C) Atmosphere // (c1) Japanese staff/customers // (c2) Interior, (D) Restaurant experience // (d1) Presentation of food // (d2) Service. We used these categories to perform a qualitative content analysis on the reviews we collected and imported to MAXQDA.



Our category system in MAXQDA

Our group had different ideas about how to evaluate certain codes, therefore we divided the restaurants into groups of five and attempted to analyze in two different ways. For set 1, a code was only marked when the corresponding content had a direct relation to authenticity in the sentence. However, for set 2, all mentions of any of the categories were counted as a code. The assumption here is based on the idea that a restaurant could be considered authentic (from a customer's perspective) if one simply mentions something positive about it (since the categories are already derived from theoretical notions of authenticity). Therefore, if a customer – for example – complimented the staff and service, we would consider these remarks a hit. Another part of qualitative content analyses that can be considered problematic is the mentioning of a negative of any given category. If a customer complained about the service mentioned above, it quickly becomes difficult to decide whether to count these remarks as a code or not. In our case, we agreed on counting negative remarks in both set 1 and 2. This can be considered controversial, however, we still moved forward with this decision since it is certainly important to define what is not authentic in order to separate it from what is.



A sample review (coded) inside MAXQDA

Results: Dimensions of Authenticity

Set 1 includes the following five restaurants: Udagawa (31 Reviews), Takumi Nine (10 Reviews), Kame Japanese Bakery (11 Reviews), Heno Heno (18 Reviews) and Cocolo Ramen (120 Reviews) with a total of 248 codes. For set 1, codes were only counted if they were directly related to authenticity. Most codes were found in category (A) [Taste and menu] with 115 codes, followed by (C) [Atmosphere] with 90 codes. (D) [Restaurant experience] accounts for 39 codes and with only 4 (B) [Management] consists out of the least amount of codes. These results imply that customers consider the food and the atmosphere of a restaurant as the most important criteria for authenticity. There are only a few codes for the management category, but it does seem to play a role for certain customers, nonetheless.







Front view of Japanese restaurants Kuchi, Heno Heno and Momiji (from left to right)

Looking at category A in detail, we find that the attitude towards prices vary. Some customers think the prices in the ramen restaurants Takumi Nine and Cocolo are too high and compare it to cheaper noodle soups in other Asian cuisines, whereas some people regard the prices as fair, being aware of the complicated cooking procedures involved when creating a ramen dish. People who have been to Japan also appreciate the authentic taste and are therefore willing to pay a higher price. In terms of taste, criticism often appears from either people who have been to Japan or who are Japanese and claim that the taste is not authentic, which is the case for Udagawa. One person criticized that the beer might be from a Japanese brand but gets

produced in Europe and therefore tastes differently. We also noticed that self-proclaimed "Japan experts" appreciate Japanese specialties such as onsen tamago at Heno Heno and the soft drink Calpico.

Category B include lot of codes, but whenever the owner is mentioned in a review it is closely related to the image of authentic Japanese cuisine. In some cases, Japanese management is the crucial reason for a customer to give the restaurant a try, as to be seen in reviews of Kame, Heno Heno and Udagawa.

For category C, we found that Japanese (sometimes Asian) guests are considered a clear sign for authenticity and were frequently mentioned in reviews of Heno Heno, Kame and especially Cocolo. Japanese staff also plays an important role for authenticity and one of the reviews even said they value this aspect a lot as Japanese have a different cultural attitude towards food. Some reviews consisted out of complaints regarding the non-Japanese ethnicity of the staff at Udagawa. The second aspect of category C, interior/exterior, scores a lot of codes as well and is either based on clichés and typical images of Japan or experience the customer made in Japan. The atmosphere sometimes gets called "Asian" but in most cases customers define it as authentic Japanese. Especially at Cocolo, the interior contributes significantly to an authentic experience for the customer. The corresponding code makes up about 30% of all codes in total for the restaurant and is also the highest compared to the other restaurants in this category.

Finally, for category D, it is often clichés which make the service feel authentic for customers. For Heno Heno and Kame some reviews said that the service was "typical Japanese" as the staff was very friendly and bowing. Some appreciate that they were served free water like in Japan or that they did not have self-service ginger on their table like in Japan. Portion was also compared to it's Japanese counterpart.

Set 2 consists out of the following five restaurants: Iro Izakaya (5 Reviews), Kuchi (58 Reviews), Momiji (12 Reviews), Sasaya, (135 Reviews) and lastly Zenkichi (13 Reviews). In total, 594 codes were found here, a much larger number than in set 1. This was, however, by and large expected due to the different method of evaluating codes. Looking at the general Categories, (A) [Taste and menu] as well as (D) [Restaurant experience] are the two most popular categories with 270 and 221 codes, respectively. After that, the number of codes starts to drop drastically, with (C) [Atmosphere] and (B) [Management] including 95 and only 8 codes. This would suggest that customers of these restaurants mostly focused on the food itself and the processes surrounding its creation and delivery inside the restaurant, while not paying a lot

of attention to the management of the restaurant or its interior. When dividing the results into their subcategories, the same structure holds true. Only (d2) [Service] manages to pull ahead of (a3) [Price-performance ratio], otherwise the subcategories rank down along the lines of their general categories.

These results suggest that while people do look out for Japanese cuisine and price-performance ratio and the other categories, the most important aspects seem to be the taste of the meal itself as well as the service of the restaurant (or their absence). Oftentimes, users would also positively comment on the service while seeing it as a Japanese characteristic. Additionally, what stands out is that customers did not seem to focus a lot on the interior of a restaurant. At Sasaya for example, even though a rather simple interior was mentioned frequently, users seemed to view this as one part of authentic Japanese design and it did not appear to influence the overall experience by a large amount. At Zenkichi, customers would mention the delicately designed interior but would still focus mainly on the food itself. Often, if the dish was not perceived as delicious or rated highly enough for its price, users would still express their dissatisfaction. Overall, very few people noticed if the restaurant was owned by Japanese, but commented on whether the staff looked Asian or not. Frequently, users would notice Japanese (looking) customers and perceive their presence as positive in terms of authenticity.

Conclusion

Concluding from our results, nearly all the categories defined beforehand seem to play a role for customers in terms of authenticity. While (B) [Management] had the least impact in terms of statistics, category (A) [Taste and menu] made up most of the codes in Set 1 as well as in Set 2. One exception was Cocolo in Set 1 where (C) [Atmosphere] and especially the subcategory interior served as the most important aspect of authenticity for customers. Overall, category (C) [Atmosphere] was the second most relevant aspect for Set 1 but rather unimportant for Set 2. The same phenomenon can be observed with regards to category (D) [Restaurant experience] which proved to be greatly relevant for Set 2 but seems to be less important for Set 1. This might be influenced by the different strategies of the restaurants as high-class restaurants such as Zenkichi from Set 2 are likely to set a focus on great service and extraordinary food quality. On the contrary, restaurants on the cheaper side such as Cocolo Ramen in Set 1 may rather set their focus on traditional Japanese interior as the vibe and atmosphere in ramen shops in Japan differs from those in other restaurants. A second reason for the different results might simply be the two different approaches we have used to code our samples.

Finally, we have noticed that customer evaluate authenticity based on clichés and images of Japan, comparison with other Japanese or Asian restaurants, experience in Japan (travel, living, etc.) or what they may have heard from Japanese acquaintances. In all categories but especially in the categories (A) and (C) customers rely on their experiences in Japan to evaluate authenticity. For category (A) especially Japanese customers complimented (or criticized) the food for not being real Japanese. Regarding (C), customers also perceive a restaurant as authentic based on their image of Japan and sometimes Asia in general. D is also based on clichés and experience customers have made in Japan.

There are different dimensions of authenticity based on which customers evaluate the authenticity of Japanese restaurants in Berlin. Depending on the restaurant the relevance of the categories we have analyzed differ, but clearly menu and taste are the most important for customers of all restaurants. What is perceived as authentic seems to differ according to individual customers and their background, experience in and expectations towards Japan. Overall, Japanese restaurants in Berlin, those with a Japanese owner as well as those with a non-Japanese owner, are considered as authentic by most customers. It is only a handful of native Japanese or people who appear to have deeper knowledge about Japan and its cuisine who criticize some aspects such as different taste or non-Japanese staff. In order to confirm

our results, it would be interesting to conduct further research, for example in the form of interviews with restaurant owners and customers.



Yelp website entry of Cocolo Ramen

^{**}All of the images shown belong to Giulia Noll and Tony Pravemann**

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Appendix

List of Keywords

Category	Keywords
Essen	hochwertige Zutaten
	hochwertig
	high quality ingredients
	high quality
	wie in Japan
	like in Japan
	Japan
	Japanese
	wie in Tokyo (Tokio), like in Tokyo
	traditionell
	traditional
	echt japanisch
	real Japanese
	typisch japanisch
	typical Japanese
	selbstgemacht
	self-made
	Qualität
	quality
	authentischer Geschmack
	authentisch
	echter Geschmack
	authentic taste
	authentic
	fader Geschmack
	dull taste

zu lasch

zu scharf

too spicy

bester Laden in

beste Ramen in

beste Sushi in

best restaurant in

best ramen in

best sushi in

bestes japanisches Restaurant in

bester japanischer Laden in

best Japanese restaurant in

Essweise

Stäbchen

chopsticks

Besteck

Messer

Gabel

knife

fork

Beilage

authentische Beilage

side dish

authentic side dish

kleine Portionen

Portionen zu klein

große Portionen

small dishes

dishes are too small

large sized portion

small sized portion

portions are too small

portions are too large

large portion

small portion

Management

japanischer Kellner

japanische Kellnerin

Japanese waiter

Japanese waitress

japanischer Inhaber

japanische Inhaberin

Japanese owner

japanische Mitarbeiter

Japanese staff

auf Japanisch

in Japanese

nette Bedienung

sympathische Bedienung

great service

Essen braucht lange

Essen hat lange gebraucht

food needs a long time

food needed a long time

hilfsbereit

helpful

unhöflich

rude

teuer

zu teuer

günstig

sehr günstig

expensive

too expensive

cheap

very cheap

für den Preis

for that price

e japanische Einrichtung

japanisches Ambiente

Japanese atmosphere

Atmosph"are

authentische Einrichtung
authentic interior
gemütlich
comfy
tolle Einrichtung
sauber
dreckig
great interior
clean

dirty