

Restaurant Marketing for Special Occasions: A Psychological Perspective

*Lim, W.M., Ting, D.H.

Monash University, Malaysia, Monash University, Jalan Lagoon Selatan, 46150, Bandar Sunway, Selangor, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: lim.weng.marc@monash.edu

Abstract: *As the proliferation of the foodservice industry continues to grow, consumers are now faced with a bewildering array of dining choices. Existing foodservice and hospitality literature have provided some understanding on the rational qualities that can be capitalise upon by restaurant managers and marketers to attract diners, such as price, food quality and service quality. However, there is only a certain extent for restaurants to perk up on these rational qualities to gain a competitive advantage over its competitors. Notably, price reductions and discount tactics may have reached saturation in the present time. Similarly, food quality and service quality of a restaurant can only be improved to a certain extent. Building on previous research, this study incorporates the theory of reasoned action to comprehend the deeper rationales of consumers' evaluations to dine at restaurants during special occasions. Findings from the study suggest that consumers' intention to dine out at restaurants during special occasions is determined by their attitude towards restaurant dining during these occasions and subjective norms. The results highlighted the importance of understanding and facilitating product and service offerings that is aligned to consumers' culture, values, self-enhancement and gratification in creating favourable attitudes toward the idea of restaurant dining during special occasions. Implications for theory and practice are articulated, research limitations are identified, and avenues for future research are presented.*

Keywords: *Restaurant Marketing, Special Occasion, Consumer Behaviour*

1. INTRODUCTION

Research shows that special occasions have a significant contribution towards consumption patterns (Crompton and McKay, 1997). While there are many studies investigating the influence of special occasions on various areas of consumer behaviour, such studies are often carried out in the retail environment, leaving those concentrating in the area of foodservice in scarcity. As the proliferation of the foodservice industry continues to grow, consumers are now faced with a bewildering array of dining choices (Roest and Rindfleisch, 2010). Existing foodservice and hospitality literature have provided some understanding on the rational qualities that can be capitalise upon by restaurant managers and marketers to attract diners, such as price, food quality and service quality (Barber et al., 2011). However, there is only a certain extent for restaurants to perk up on these rational qualities to gain a competitive advantage over its competitors. Marshall and Leng (2002) echoed this notion as price reductions and discount tactics have reached saturation in the present time. Similarly, food quality and service quality of a restaurant can only be improved to a certain extent.

While existing studies in the scholarship have looked into the rational constructs influencing consumers' dining attitudes and intentions, this study attempts to investigate constructs from the psychological perspective. Culture, values, self-enhancement, gratification and subjective norms are widely recognised as psychological constructs and further investigation of its relative importance and effects in consumer behaviour contexts have been strongly encouraged. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of these constructs on consumer attitudes and restaurant dining intentions during special occasions. Insights from this research will add weight to presentations and marketing materials to help convince customers why restaurateurs adopting proposed strategies from this research should be the recipient of those dollars from consumers during special occasions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA)

TRA posits that the decision to perform a specific behaviour is solely determined by the intention to perform the behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Behavioural intention depends upon the cognitive evaluations towards behaviour (i.e. attitude) and perceptions of social pressure (i.e. subjective norms). Accordingly, this study posits the constructs of culture, value, self-enhancement and gratification as beliefs that have a direct influence on attitude while the intention is influence by attitude and subjective norms.

2.2 Psychological Attributes of Consumer Evaluations

2.2.1 Culture

Culture can be defined as a shared set of characteristics, attitudes and behaviours that help groups of individuals decide what to do and how to go about it (Damen, 1987). This guidance designates the socially standardised activities of people, including dining decisions (Mak et al., 2012). Research showed that consumers make purchases with purposes in mind that extend beyond the value of utility, which includes the consumption of cultural meanings (Axelson, 1986). Beardsworth and Keil (1997) echoed this notion as consumer 'foodways' goes beyond the food itself – it also concerns the consumption of meanings and symbols of different cultures respectively. Jones (2007) stated that dining out together in groups during special occasions portrays the importance of celebrations in a cultural community where a meaningful experience is obtained. Close and Zinkhan (2006) added that eating collectively during a special occasion was found to be symbolic as it brings about a significant connotation that is highly regarded in one's culture. Notably, restaurants provide an empirically rich point of entry for interpersonal exchanges as part and parcel of the creation, enactment and reproduction of culturally symbolic meanings (Gaytan, 2008). As such, culture provide consumers a *raison d'être* to patronise restaurants during special occasions. Thus:

H1. Culture positively influence attitude toward restaurant dining on special occasions.

2.2.2 Value

Value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct (Defever et al., 2011). Research has shown that values are significantly related to consumer attitudes (Lee et al., 2010). To most consumers, special occasions are often believed to be memorable events due to the significance that is associated with the occasion (Woike, 1995). Consumers recognise the importance of dining out during special occasions as they believe that they deserve to treat themselves, and significant others to get away from the usual mundane routine of preparing and eating meals at home (Pillsbury, 2002). Han and Ryu (2009) adds support as special occasions are often believed to be embraced due to associated significances and the servicescape of restaurants are often arranged into a mood that allows consumers to be immersed into the occasion. The work of Allen et al. (2002) further found that consumers associate dining out during special occasions as a means to cultivate terminal value of true relationships with significant others. Notably, consumers will have a favourable evaluation towards a given behaviour if they hold beliefs that performing the behaviour will lead to desired consequences (Becker et al., 1995), whereby in this case, values such as memories, love and friendship can be earned. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2. Value positively influence attitude toward restaurant dining on special occasions.

2.2.3 Self-enhancement

Self-enhancement refers to the motivation for an individual to enhance their sense of self and personal worth in order to feel good about the self (Sedikides and Strube, 1995). Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) argued that the use of symbols build and maintain a complete self-definition as part of a commitment to a self-defined goal, whereby such forms of consumption occur typically during special occasions (Shukla, 2010). Consumers are motivated to dine out during special occasions as restaurants facilitate public self-enhancement which allows the self to be presented in a positive light (Kremarik, 2008). Since special occasions allow marketers to commercialise their offerings, consumers who dine out will feel better about themselves since they believe and lead others to believe that they can afford to do so (Kerstin, 2007). This is supported by Anderson et al. (2008) as engaging in actions of self-enhancement provides social benefits, leading others to believe the individual's status claim and accordingly, to grant the individual a higher status level. Moreover, Bloch et al. (2004) acknowledge that special occasion celebrations are intended to be conspicuous. Thus, consumption and possession of materials that facilitates a greater augmentation of self-enhancement becomes apparent (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Hence:

H3. Self-enhancement positively influence attitude toward restaurant dining on special occasions.

2.2.4 Gratification

Warde and Martens (1998) identified gratification as a source of pleasure which contributes to personal senses of happiness and contentment. Clarke (2006) noted that it has become possible to secularly consume intangible attractions of special occasions, and that such consumption incorporates the gratification of self and sensory pleasures of the material world. McIntyre and Schwanke (2010) acknowledges that restaurant dining during special occasions represent periods of experiential difference, pleasure and happiness, in which momentary escapism could be achieved through such pleasure. Warde and Martens (2000) adds that dining out during special occasions provides optimal gratification as pleasure was paramount when associated to celebrations and breaks from ordinary routines. Further, Brown (2003) found that consumers hold positive evaluations and often patronise restaurants during special occasions to reward themselves, satisfy psychological needs and make themselves feel good. This is supported by Noone and Mattila (2010) as restaurants were argued to be a service which facilitates gratifying dining experiences, particularly during special occasions, and the mood created (i.e. through the servicescape and social surrounding) contributed to such a gratifying experience Thus:

H4. Gratification positively influence attitude toward restaurant dining on special occasions.

2.3 Consumer Attitudes, Subjective Norms and Behavioural Intention

2.3.1 Consumer Attitudes

Attitudes are generally defined as summative evaluations of a product, service or brand (Ajzen, 2001). Previous research has shown strong support that consumer attitudes are related to consumer behavioural intentions (Shih and Fang, 2004). Park and Kim (2007) support this notion as attitude was found to be an immediate determinant of intention to perform behaviour. Intentions, on the other hand, reflect how much effort an individual is planning to exert to perform a specific behaviour (Pomery et al., 2009). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) add that consumers will have a strong likelihood to perform the behaviour when the right attitude is formed. Hence:

H5. Attitudes positively influence intention toward restaurant dining on special occasions.

2.3.2 Subjective Norms

Subjective norms refers to the influence exerted by a social groups (e.g. family, friends, peers and reference groups) in encouraging an individual to change his or her attitude, values, or behaviour in order to conform to group norms (Jere, 1983), and is a key element in influencing consumers' choice of restaurant to dine during special occasion (Shock et al., 2004). As set by social groups, many consumers conform to the trend of patronising restaurants during special occasions (Miller, 2011). Consumers essentially want to be on equal footing with the vast majority of social groups in order to feel accepted as being part of the group (Avery, 2000). In circumstances where social groups are seen carrying out a common activity (e.g. celebrating special occasions at restaurants), consumers often feel pressured to follow the suit in order to fit in (Clase, 1992). Moreover, Banerjee and Dittmar (2007) argued that consumers often try to avoid losing the sense of belonging in social groups that they belong to during special occasions and hence, they strive to avoid being alone during the occasion. Through social influences, the presence of others and their perception or preferences has the ability to change one's behaviour (Sheperd et al., 2011), in this case, consumers may be pressurised by social groups to dine in restaurants during special occasions. Thus:

H6. Peer pressure positively influence attitude toward restaurant dining on special occasions.

3. METHODOLOGY

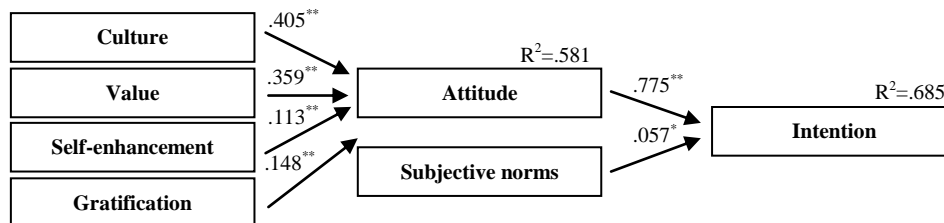
The study collects quantitative data using a survey research. A sample size of approximately 300-450 respondents in a study of this nature is considered a suitable sample of the population that promotes good reliability and validity (Clarke and Dunlap, 2008). Data are collected using a mall-intercept survey method through a set of questionnaires (5 demographics questions, 35 7-point Likert scale items measuring research constructs). Simple random sampling was used to select a sample of shopping malls for questionnaire distribution from a list of shopping malls in Klang valley, Malaysia. Klang Valley is chosen as Euromonitor (2011) has identified this area as a satellite town of the Malaysian capital that comprises of both and suburban community, and having the highest concentration of restaurants in the country (Talib et al., 2009), thus making it the most strategic location for data collection among the 14 states in Malaysia. Systematic sampling was employed to select respondents for the current study, in which every k th person that passes the entrance of the mall was selected. A total of 416 consumers participated and submitted the questionnaires, but only 400 questionnaires were usable responses.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

First, factor analysis and reliability testing were carried out to ensure that all research constructs are valid and reliable. Factor analysis reduces the complexity of research constructs to ensure that minimal latent constructs were employed to explain the shared variance of measured constructs used in a questionnaire (Henson and Roberts, 2006), whereby a cut-off point of 0.5 for factor loadings hold a good measurement of the research construct (Kline, 1998). Cronbach's alpha was computed to ensure consistency of the survey data. An alpha of > 0.5 is an indication of good internal consistency (Bowling, 1997). The results of the factor analysis showed that each measurement used in this study has a single dimension, in which all factor loadings were more than 0.5. The Cronbach's Alpha indicated that all constructs had good internal consistency (i.e. $\alpha > 0.5$). Second, correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between all research constructs. Results support the non-existence of multi-collinearity as all correlation values are below 0.7. Third, multiple regression analyses are performed to examine the relationship between the whole set of independent variables and dependent variables. Outliers were removed and Figure 1 represents the direction and strength of each independent variable to the dependent variable. The findings indicate that culture, value, self-enhancement and gratification are all positively related to attitude at $p < 0.01$ while attitude and subjective norms are positively related to intention at $p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$ respectively. Fourth, normality tests were performed based upon the saved unstandardised residuals from the multiple regression analyses. The One-Sample Kolmogorov Smirnov Test for normal distribution showed $p = 0.224$ and $p = 0.311$, all which are greater than

$p > 0.05$, and hence, a normal distribution can be assumed. Fifth, hypothesis testing is performed to determine whether proposed hypotheses are supported or not supported. All six proposed hypotheses (i.e. H1-H6) that emerged from the literature review are supported based on the results from the multiple regression analyses.

Figure 1 Research framework representing coefficients of each research construct



5. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First, cultural practices that subside within a community are imperative in predicting consumers' attitude towards restaurant dining during special occasions (H1 - culture). The study's contention is that consumers would develop favourable attitudes toward restaurant dining during special occasions if restaurateurs are able to reinforce cultural identities. To consumers, culture has a significant positive impact on their food consumption decisions. Notably, celebration of special occasions is a ritual in communities that often involve the consumption of symbolic meanings, in which these occasions are usually celebrated collectively (i.e. in a group). Thus, such celebrations are deemed to be a form of social integration that reinforces cultural identities. Second, the positive attitude towards restaurant dining during special occasions is due to personal values held by consumers - reasons that consumers believed that special occasions are memorable days which should be celebrated, embraced and immerse into (H2 - value). To consumers, the degree to which restaurateurs are able to provide a memorable experience during these occasions strongly influences their attitude. If restaurateurs are able to align their product and service offerings that match the values held by consumers, then consumers form positive attitudes and strong intentions to dine at restaurants during special occasions. They find it desirable and appreciate restaurants which allow them to embrace the occasion and be immersed into the festive mood while allowing them to strengthen ties with loved ones. Third, where consumers dine during special occasions is an important reflection of their own identity (H3 - self-enhancement). To consumers, it is important that the place they dine during special occasions give others a good impression of them. If restaurants are able to contribute towards consumer image enhancement and make consumers feel better in comparison to other individuals in the society, then positive attitudes toward dining out at restaurants during special occasions are formed. This is typically so as restaurant dining during special occasions indicates that the consumer is doing as well, if not better, than other individuals in the society. Fourth, the ability to satisfy consumers' need for gratification by restaurateurs during special occasions is essential in predicting consumer attitudes toward restaurant dining on special occasions (H4 - gratification). The study's contention is that consumers would develop positive attitudes toward restaurant dining during special occasion if restaurateurs are able to provide enjoyable and pleasurable experiences to its diners. To consumers, dining out during special occasions represents an act of self-gifting. Notably, consumers enjoy the feeling of being made to feel special and being pampered during special occasions. Fifth, this study contends that consumers who have positive attitudes will have a strong likelihood to dine out at restaurants during special occasions. To consumers, dining out during special occasions is an idea that they like, prefer and is favourable to them. Additionally, dining out during special occasions is an activity that they really feel happy about and look forward to. As such, restaurant dining during special occasions is an experience that consumers will not hesitate on and will be willing to try. Thus, the significant role of attitudes in shaping behavioural intention has been visible when a relationship between attitude and behavioural intention is studied. Sixth, an understanding on the influence of subjective norms is vital in predicting consumer intentions to dine out at restaurants during special occasions. The study's contention is that consumers will be likely to dine out at restaurants during special occasions if they believe restaurant dining during special occasions is approved by social groups that they associate with. To consumers, they feel that they have to conform to the trend of dining out during special occasions as set by social groups. They often listen to the opinions from social groups on places to dine during special occasions and dislike feeling different from these groups. As such, they tend to avoid actions that are disapproved by social groups.

6. CONCLUSION

Findings from the current study provide a significant contribution in understanding the influence of psychological structures on consumer behaviour towards restaurant dining during special occasions. Thoughts on the antecedents identified should propel increase patronage and attractiveness of restaurant dining during special occasions. The results from the study suggest consumers need to be provided with a dining experience that facilitates and strengthens cultural identities, held values, self-enhancement and gratification. Future research can further evaluate and analyse consumer hospitality and tourism consumption behaviour from a larger perspective by examining the proposed framework from different hospitality

and tourism industries, investigating for further significant latent constructs, and the legitimacy of proposed relationships across different cultures.

REFERENCES

- Ajzen, I. (2001), "Nature and operation of attitudes", *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol. 52 No. 1, pp. 27-58.
- Allen, M.W., Ng, S.H. and Wilson, M. (2002), "A functional approach to instrumental and terminal values and the value-attitude-behaviour system of consumer choice", *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 36 No. 1/2, pp. 111-135.
- Anderson, C., Ames, D.R. and Gosling, S.D. (2008), "Punishing hubris: the perils of overestimating one's status in a group", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 90-101.
- Avery, A.L. (2000), "Adolescent clothing: the influence of priorities on poverty", *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 191-199.
- Axelsson, M.L. (1986), "The impact of culture on food related behaviour", *Annual Review of Nutrition*, Vol. 6, pp. 345-363.
- Barber, N., Goodman, R.J. and Goh, B.K. (2011), "Restaurant consumers repeat patronage: a service quality concern", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 329-336.
- Banerjee, R. and Dittmar, H. (2007), "Individual differences in children's materialism: the role of peer relations", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 17-31.
- Beardsworth, A. and Keil, T. (1997), *Sociology on the Menu: an invitation to the study of food and society*, Routledge, London.
- Becker, T.E., Randall, D.M. and Riegel, C.D. (1995), "The multidimensional view of commitment and the theory of reasoned action: a comparative evaluation", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 21 No. 4, pp. 617-638.
- Bloch, F., Rao, V. and Desai, S. (2004), "Wedding celebrations as conspicuous consumption signalling social status in rural India", *Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 34 No. 3, pp. 675-695.
- Bowling, A. (1997), *Research methods in health*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Brown, D.B. (2003), *The restaurant manager's handbook*, Atlantic Publishing, United States of America.
- Clarke, P. (2006), "Christmas gift giving involvement", *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, Vol. 23 No. 5, pp. 283-291.
- Clarke, S. and Dunlap, G. (2008), "A descriptive analysis of intervention research published in the Journal of Positive Behaviour Interventions: 1999 through 2005", *Journal of Positive Behaviour Interventions*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 67-71.
- Clase, D.R. (1992), "Changing peer stereotypes of high-achieving adolescents", *NASSP Bulletin*, Vol. 76 No. 543, pp. 95-102.
- Close, A. and Zinkhan, G.M. (2006), "A holiday loved and loathed: a consumer perspective of Valentine's day", *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 33 No. 1, pp. 356-365.
- Crompton, J.L. and McKay, S.L. (1997), "Motives of visitors attending festival events", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 425-439.
- Damen, L. (1987), *Culture learning: the fifth dimension on the language classroom*, Addison-Wesley, Reading.
- Defever, C., Pandelaere, M. and Roe, K. (2011), "Inducing value-congruent behaviour through advertising and the moderating role of attitudes toward advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 25-37.
- Euromonitor. (2011), *Consumer lifestyles in Malaysia*, Euromonitor International database.
- Fishbein, M. and Ajzen, I. (1975), *Belief, attitude, intention and behaviour: an introduction to theory and research*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.
- Gaytan, M.S. (2008), "From sombreros to sincronizadas: authenticity, ethnicity and the Mexican industry", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Vol. 37 No. 3, pp. 314-341.
- Han, H.S. and Ryu, K.S. (2009), "The roles of the physical environment, price perception and customer satisfaction in determining customer loyalty in the restaurant industry", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 33 No. 4, pp. 487-510.
- Henson, R.K. and Roberts, J.K. (2006), "Use of exploratory factor analysis in published Research", *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, Vol. 66 No. 3, pp. 393-416.
- Jere, C. (1983), "Peer influence on college aspirations with initial aspirations controlled", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 48 No. 5, pp. 728-734.
- Jones, M. (2007), *Feast: why humans share food*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Kerstin, K. (2007), "Chefs hit back at rip-off report", *Caterer and Hotelkeeper*, Vol. 197 No. 48, pp. 45.
- Kline, R.B. (1998), *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling*, The Guilford Press, New York.
- Kremerik, G. (2008), *Impression management*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.
- Leary, M.R. and Kowalski, R.M. (1990), "Impression management: a literature review and two component model", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 107, pp. 34-47.
- Lee, J., Soutar, G.N. and Sneddon, J. (2010), "Personal values and social marketing: some research suggestions", *Journal of Research for Consumers*, Vol. 18, pp. 1-7.

- Mak, A.H.N., Lumbers, M., Eves, A. and Chang, R.C.Y. (2012), "Factors influencing tourist food consumption", *International Journal of Hospitality Management* (in press, accepted 25 October 2011).
- Marshall, R. and Leng, S.B. (2002), "Price threshold and discount saturation point in Singapore", *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 147-159.
- McIntyre, C. and Schwanke, B. (2010), "Biscuit (cookie) consumption: cognitive suspension to experience moments of perfection in another world than this!", *British Food Journal*, Vol. 112 No. 8, pp. 853-870.
- Miller, R.K. (2011), *Restaurant, food and beverage market research handbook*, RKM and Associates, United States of America.
- Noone, B.M. and Mattila, A.S. (2010), "Consumer goals and the service encounter: evaluating goal importance and the moderating effect of goal progress on satisfaction formation", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 247-268.
- Pillsbury, R. (2002), "Thoroughly modern dining: a look at America's changing celebration dinner", *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, Vol. 82 No. 3, p. 24.
- Roest, H. and Rindfleisch, A. (2010), "The influence of quality cues and typically cues on restaurant purchase intention", *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 10-18.
- Sedikides, C. and Strube, M.J. (1995), "The multiply motivated self", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 21 No. 12, pp. 1330-1335.
- Sheperd, J.L., Lane, D.J., Tapscott, R.L. and Gentile, D.A. (2011), "Susceptible to social influence: risky driving in response to peer pressure", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 41 No. 4, pp. 773-797.
- Shih, Y. and Fang, K. (2004), "The use of a decomposed theory of planned behaviour to study Internet banking in Taiwan", *Internet Research*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 213-223.
- Shock, P.J., Bowen, J.T. and Stefanelli, J.M. (2004), *Restaurant marketing for owners and managers*, John Wiley and Sons, New Jersey.
- Shukla, P. (2010), "Status consumption in cross-national context socio-psychological, brand and situational antecedents", *International Marketing Review*, Vol. 27 No. 1, pp. 108-129.
- Talib, S.A., Hashim, R. and Chinna, K. (2009), "Consumers' purchasing orientation: an alternative method in segmenting the Malaysian fine dining restaurant market", *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality and Culinary Arts*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 123-142.
- Warde, A. and Martens, L. (1998), "Eating out and the commercialisation of metal life", *British Food Journal*, Vol. 100 No. 3, pp. 147-153.
- Warde, A. and Martens, L. (2000), *Eating out*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Wicklund, R.A. and Gollwitzer, P.M. (1982), *Symbolic self completion*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, New Jersey.
- Woike, B.A. (1995), "Most-memorable experiences: evidence for a link between implicit and explicit motives and social cognitive process in everyday life", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 68 No. 6, pp. 1081-1091.