Sustainable practices in restaurants: customers’ perceptions of Brazil and other countries

Práticas sustentáveis em restaurantes: percepções dos clientes do Brasil e de outros países

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ABSTRACT
This study aimed at comparing and contrasting consumers’ perceptions of sustainable practices in restaurants in Brazil and other countries. The data presented here was gathered through a questionnaire applied to restaurants’ consumers who lived in Brazil and in other 36 countries, by using a snowball technique. The findings show that consumers from around the world have similar perceptions regarding sustainable practices in the context of restaurants, as the most observed sustainable practices implemented in the restaurants they visit were identified as follows: implementing health
protocols for customers, having open spaces for customer service, serving local/regional fruit juices, using dual flush toilet valve and using natural ventilation, while the main factors for choosing a restaurant were: service, comfort, waiting time, ambience, location, menu variety, price and local/regional cuisine. In addition, the findings expose that sustainable practices are not one of the top factors for choosing a restaurant.

**Keywords:** hospitality, sustainability, sustainable practices, restaurants, customers’ perceptions.

**RESUMO**
Este estudo teve como objetivo comparar e contrastar as percepções dos consumidores sobre práticas sustentáveis em restaurantes no Brasil e em outros países. Os dados apresentados aqui foram coletados por meio de um questionário aplicado a consumidores de restaurantes que moravam no Brasil e em outros 36 países, usando a técnica de bola de neve. Os resultados mostram que os consumidores de todo o mundo têm percepções semelhantes em relação às práticas sustentáveis no contexto dos restaurantes, já que as práticas sustentáveis mais observadas implementadas nos restaurantes que eles visitam foram identificadas da seguinte forma: implementação de protocolos de saúde para os clientes, espaços abertos para atendimento ao cliente, servir sucos de frutas locais/regiônais, usar válvula de descarga dupla no banheiro e usar ventilação natural, enquanto os principais fatores para a escolha de um restaurante foram: atendimento, conforto, tempo de espera, ambiente, localização, variedade do cardápio, preço e culinária local/regional. Além disso, os resultados revelam que as práticas sustentáveis não são um dos principais fatores para a escolha de um restaurante.

**Palavras-chave:** hospitalidade, sustentabilidade, práticas sustentáveis, restaurantes, percepções dos clientes.

**1 INTRODUCTION**

Tourism is a large industry which comprises a significant number of products and services. Its economic relevance is internationally well-known in terms of employment, revenue, expenditures, as seen in tourism statistics compiled by the World Tourism Organization – e.g. loss of US$ 1.0 trillion in total export revenues from international tourism in 2021 due to COVID-19 (UNWTO, 2022). To achieve a more sustainable tourism, however, other aspects such as socio-cultural and environmental ones need also to inform any planning and decision-making processes of tourism development, so tourism can be able to provide a more effective contribution to sustainable development. Remarkably in relation to sustainability, holistically speaking, there is still room for
advancement both in theory and practice as current literature has demonstrated that studies on the intersection between the tourism and hospitality industries (food and beverage, accommodation, transportation, recreation and animation, travel services) and sustainability have received limited attention from tourism and hospitality researchers, suggesting that this line of research deserves additional efforts.

Despite this gap, there seems to be an increasingly demand by customers for sustainable travel and hospitality products (Kwok et al., 2016), such as environmentally friendly hotels, restaurants, airlines, cruises, which shows that responsible consumption and sustainable product development are becoming key elements for the present tourism industry (Han, 2021). In line with these ideas, precisely the restaurant sector has placed sustainability as a new tendency in business, as customers’ environmental awareness is rising (Cho & Yoo, 2021), meaning they are more interested in sustainable practices and responsible behaviors (Tommassetti et al., 2018; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008), as well as more demanding about their food choices at restaurants they have meals (Trafialek et al., 2020; Filimonau; Krivcova, 2017; DiPietro et al., 2013a).

Nevertheless, some scholars argue that the literature exploring the relationships between sustainability and restaurants is still at initial stage (Tommassetti et al., 2018) and often emphasizing the environmental dimension rather than the social and economic aspects of sustainability, which compromises its holist approach (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). In addition, one of the focus of current research is on consumers and their perceptions of green attributes, intentions and choices in restaurants (Shishan et al., 2022; Han et al., 2020; Nicolau et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2018; Filimonau et al., 2018; Kwok et al., 2016; DiPietro & Gregory, 2013; Dewald et al., 2013; Hu et al., 2010; Schubert et al., 2010; Dutta et al., 2008).

Furthermore, in terms of cultural and national contexts, the studies have concentrated on the following countries: USA (DiPietro & Gregory, 2013; DiPietro et al., 2013a; DiPietro et al., 2013b; Dewald et al., 2013; Schubert et al., 2010), South Korea (Han et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019), China (Yu et al., 2018), Taiwan (Hu et al., 2010), Greece (Karagiannis & Andrinos, 2021), UK (Shishan et al., 2022), Poland (Filimonau et al., 2018), Italy (Tommassetti et al., 2018). Few comparative and cross-national studies have
been found as the ones analyzing India and the USA (Dutta et al., 2008) and Poland and Lithuania (Trafialek et al., 2020), supporting the call by some authors for further research in other countries and cultural contexts (Kim et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2010), as well as comparative and cross-national studies (T.M. et al., 2021).

Therefore, the current research attempts to extend previous studies by providing a comparison among Brazil and other countries regarding consumers’ perceptions of sustainable practices in restaurants. The Brazilian literature in Portuguese found on the subject also reveals a scarcity of studies on sustainability indicators in restaurants (Antoniazzi et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2020), particularly in the field of tourism and hospitality in the country. Research on the sustainability indicators implemented in tourism services is still scarce in the Brazilian postgraduate degrees in tourism (De Conto et al., 2021). In response, this study aims at comparing and contrasting consumers’ perceptions of sustainable practices in restaurants in Brazil and other countries. The intention is that the results can be translated into principles capable of informing both the planning and implementation processes of sustainable management systems in the restaurant sector, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the principles of sustainable tourism.

In order to achieve the aim, the paper starts by presenting a review of green practices in restaurants in terms of concepts of sustainability, green practices, green restaurants and a research framework to understand the factors that influence consumers to choose green restaurants. Next, the methods for data collection and data analysis are explained. Subsequently, the key findings and discussion are provided. Finally, conclusions are drawn, limitations of the study are discussed and future research is proposed.

2 GREEN PRACTICES IN RESTAURANTS

Sustainability can be defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (The United Nations Brundtland Commission, 1987, p. 16) and it intends to balance economic development
along with environmental concerns and social progress. In practice, it is a complex concept and very challenging for society as a whole to achieve its goals.

As for the concept of green practices, including hospitality as well as other sectors, it is generally defined “as business activities aimed at reducing negative impacts on the environment” (Kim et al., 2017, p. 235). However, Kim et al. (2017, p. 236), based on their analysis of the literature on this field, argue this definition along with others found in the literature remains broad (largely underlined by their ideal inspiration of environmental protection), and propose a more pragmatic one of green practices that better encapsulates the current state in the hospitality industry: “a green practice is a value-added business strategy that benefits a hospitality operation that engages in environmental protection initiatives”.

It is important to notice that there is a shift from the focus on the environment towards the business. In other words, “green practices are implemented because they are perceived as benefitting business, not because they benefit the environment”, as Kim et al. (2017, p. 237) reveal from the analysis of the literature on hospitality. This claim is supported by other authors that suppose the main interest in adopting green practices is reducing operational costs (Gonçalves et al., 2018; Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017), therefore, primarily benefitting financially the business. Yet, regardless of motivation, green practices are likely expected to have positive impacts on the environment.

Turning the attention to restaurants, based on previous research, green practices in restaurants are those usually related to water conservation, energy efficiency, solid waste reduction, sustainable foods, and green architecture (Trafialek et al., 2020). According to existing literature, these main dimensions can be converted into the following actions: using water and energy saving equipment, using alternative energy sources, reusing and recycling, avoiding or minimizing wastes, reusing cutlery and crockery, disposing of cooking oil, composting, using green materials from green suppliers, designing eco-friendly buildings, having locally-grown and organic food, offering healthy menus and fresh food, adjusting portion size, among others (Kwok et al., 2016; Teng et al., 2014; ABNT, 2014; Krause & Bahls, 2013; Shubert et al., 2010).
In line with green practices are the green restaurants which have the environmental principle underpinning their business (Lorenzini, 1994). In other words, green restaurants carry out green practices (Jang et al., 2011 apud Kwok et al., 2016). One of the reasons why they are becoming popular is in response to the growing environmental concern in the restaurant sector and the wider foodservice industry as consumers, employees and producer are becoming more aware of the environmental impacts of food production on climate change (Nicolau et al., 2020).

Several research has addressed consumer behavior and green practices in restaurants aiming at understanding why consumers choose green restaurants and the factors that influence such a choice. Based on the review and analysis of current literature on consumer adoption of green restaurants, T. M. et al. (2021, p. 9) propose the “green restaurant adoption research framework”, which is composed of three main elements: 1) antecedents, 2) behaviors and behavioral intention and 3) contextual factors. Firstly, antecedents consist of internal (attitudes, values, motives, personality, etc.) and external (media, restaurant green practices, restaurant performance, etc.) to consumers. Secondly, behaviors and behavioral intention include behavioral intentions (willingness to pay more, patronage intention, willingness to wait, willingness to travel further, etc.) and actual behavior (actually paying premium, visit pattern, loyalty, etc.). Thirdly, contextual factors comprise customer demographics (age, gender, income, education), culture (individualistic/collectivist, masculine/feminine, etc.) and restaurant type (casual, fast food, etc.). According to this framework, all components are interconnected where antecedents influence behavior intention and actual behavior while all of them are affected by contextual factors (T. M. et al., 2021).

Different studies have investigated external antecedents in terms of consumers’ perceived importance of restaurant green initiatives when selecting a restaurant. Trafialek et al. (2020) showed that Polish and Lithuanian consumers perceive positively the use of reusable cutlery and plates in restaurants, which avoids plastic utensils; interestingly in the case of Lithuania it was the most important factor of choosing a restaurant, what acknowledges a high level of environmental awareness of those consumers at least regarding this issue, as on the other hand they did not take into consideration other practices
such as the use of eco-friendly energy sources, reducing waste and minimizing food losses.

Baltescu (2017) demonstrated that the three most important green practices for consumers to choose a restaurant were offering traditional recipes made with local ingredients, careful selection of ingredients and having dishes which do not involve frying. In contrast, the three most irrelevant attributes were reduced portions in order to reduce food consumption, choosing dishes mainly based on their nutritional value and the preference for salads instead of cooked dishes. According to Kwok and Huang (2019), the two most valued attributes mentioned by consumers were minimizing harmful waste and participating in recycling programs. DiPietro et al. (2013) showed that recycling and the use of local products in restaurants are important factors for customers. Filimonau et al. (2018) indicate that health implications of restaurant food choice are relevant, particularly among younger consumers, which are even interested to check out nutritional information and calories of food displayed on menus.

Regarding behavioral intentions, willingness to pay more, wait more and travel further are issues commonly explored in the context of green restaurants with the purpose to understand the level of consumers’ commitment to green restaurants. DiPietro et al. (2013) highlight a positive relationship between green practices at home and customers’ willingness to pay more for green restaurants. Kwok et al. (2016) reveal that younger consumers are more willing to pay more, wait longer, and/or travel farther to dine at a green restaurant. However, it is important to bear in mind that a behavior intention not always turns into an actual behavior (Sheeran, 2002 apud T. M. et al., 2021). According to Kwok and Huang (2019) compared to consumers, owners and managers are more positive about consumers’ willingness to make further efforts to commit and patronize a green restaurant. In addition, Cho and Yoo (2021) emphasize that at the end food quality, price, location and online reviews are still the main factors of restaurant selection, which is partially in line with Fabrim and De Conto (2020), whose study showed that price, comfort, menu variety and location are more important than green practices for choosing a restaurant.
By systematically reviewing tourism and hospitality literature on sustainability in the restaurant sector, Higgins-Desbiolles et al. (2017) found that the majority of the studies address only parts of the sustainability, specifically ecological, rather than sustainability as a whole (holistic). The examples of green practices research listed above support this as they also concentrate on the environmental dimension of sustainability, the motive why they are called green. That is one of the reasons why both terminologies of green practices and green restaurants are used here in this section, instead of sustainable practices and sustainable restaurants, which are the focus of the current study. Besides, the term green is more used both by researchers and the tourism and hospitality industry. Here it is also important to mention that green and sustainability are often used as synonymous in the hospitality literature, sustainability meaning environmental concerns (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). However, this narrow understanding of sustainability based on the environmental dimension reveals a serious limitation for the restaurant sector to achieve more sustainable operations as social and economic aspects tend to be neglected (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). Hence, it is crucial for the sector to incorporate sustainability as a whole so restaurants can more successfully play their role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which this service has strong links with, and the principles of sustainable tourism.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

As this study aims at comparing and contrasting consumers’ perceptions of sustainable practices in restaurants in Brazil and other countries, a questionnaire was designed for data collection with the intention to achieve more easily and rapidly a larger number of participants in Brazil as well as in other countries. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, which is a free online tool from Google that allows users to create forms, surveys, etc. and share them with other people. It was written first in Portuguese to be applied in Brazil and then it was translated into English to be subsequently applied abroad. Pilot test was undertaken for both versions with restaurants’ costumers, in Brazil and abroad, who were not part of the sampling and a few minor adjustments were made.
The questionnaire was partially based on the Brazilian Regulatory Norms 15401 and 16534, from the Brazilian National Standards Organization (ABNT, 2014, 2016), which sets out indicators for sustainability management system in the hotel sector, in line with the environmental, social and economic dimensions. Despite the fact that the Norms are focused on the hotel management, their core principles can easily be translated into the restaurant segment since there has not been any specific norm for this particular sector.

The questionnaire was then divided into four main sections: 1) sustainable practices in restaurants (e.g. using water and energy saving equipment, using alternative energy sources, adjusting portion size, training employees and suppliers regarding sustainability, raising consumers’ awareness about sustainable issues, applying customer satisfaction surveys, etc.); 2) consumers’ habits when eating out (e.g. preference for fresh and organic food, use of the sustainability criteria for choosing a restaurant, recommendation of restaurants that engage in sustainable practices to friends and family, etc.); 3) degrees of importance of criteria for restaurant selection (e.g. price, waiting time, location, comfort, ambience, sustainable practices, restaurant service, etc.); and 4) participant demographics (e.g. age, education, country, etc.).

The online questionnaire was applied by employing a snowball technique which aims at finding research participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). The idea is that initial participants recruit subsequent individuals to take part in the study. It is a non-probability sampling method used particularly to gain access to participants who might otherwise be hard to reach (Vinuto, 2014).

Thereby, the online questionnaire was shared with participants who were restaurant customers through WhatsApp message and other social networks, such as Facebook and Instagram, and participants on their turn were also asked to forward the form to their social media contact list and so on, aiming at achieving as many respondents as possible in an easy and fast manner. Important to mention that the survey was anonymous, so there was no personal information that could identify respondents later on. The two main criteria for taking part in this research were that participants had to be restaurant customers and, in the case of the international survey that they did not live in Brazil. This last criterion was needed as the online questionnaire was shared via social
networks with people living abroad directly and Brazilians who had contacts abroad, which were invited to participate, acting as mediators. For this reason, it was important to emphasize for these mediators that whoever they sent the online questionnaire to, they had to live abroad in order not to overlap with the Brazilian data set.

The data collection was carried out first in Brazil from November 2021 to March 2022 and then conducted abroad from May to June 2022. In total, 440 responses were gathered, of which 293 were from Brazil and 147 from consumers abroad. The methods used for data analysis were content analysis for the open-ended questions and SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) for the closed-ended ones. It is important to point out that the closed-ended questions on sustainable practices that consumers observe in restaurants and consumers’ habits when eating out allowed participants to choose more than one alternative, while the closed-ended question on degrees of importance of criteria for restaurant selection used a five-point Likert scale.

4 SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN RESTAURANTS: COMPARING AND CONTRASTING BRAZIL AND OTHER COUNTRIES

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the research. It is divided into four main parts: 1) demographic information of participants; 2) sustainable practices in restaurants; 3) consumers’ habits when eating out; and 4) degrees of importance of criteria for restaurant selection.

4.1 DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS

Regarding the demographic profile of the participants, most respondents are in the following age group: 31-40 (25,9% in Brazil and 32,7% in other countries). The age groups with the lowest number of participants were 18-20 (2.0% in Brazil and 2.7% in other countries) and 71+ (1,4% in Brazil and 2,0% in other countries) (Figure 1).
In terms of education, most participants have a high level of educational attainment as 22.87% in Brazil and 23.8% in other countries have a bachelor’s degree. In addition, a significant number of participants have a master’s and a doctorate degree (23.21% and 16.38% in Brazil and 36.7% and 27.9% in other countries, respectively). Here it is important to highlight that the online questionnaires were sent, through the snowball technique, to both academics and non-academics contacts who were restaurants’ consumers.

With respect to the countries where participants live, besides Brazil, they are as follows (in alphabetical order): 1) Argentina (1.4%), 2) Australia (4.8%), 3) Austria (3.4%), 4) Canada (4.8%), 5) China (0.7%), 6) Colombia (0.7%), 7) Costa Rica (0.7%), 8) Cyprus (0.7%), 9) Ecuador (0.7%), 10) France (1.4%), 11) Germany (8.2%), 12) India (0.7%), 13) Ireland (6.8%), 14) Italy (1.4%), 15) Japan (0.7%), 16) Lithuania (0.7%), 17) Maldives (1.4%), 18) Mexico (4.8%), 19) Mozambique (0.7%), 20) New Zealand (0.7%), 21) Portugal (13.6%), 22) Romania (0.7%), 23) Russia (0.7%), 24) Saudi Arabia (0.7%), 25) South Africa (0.7%), 26) Spain (2.0%), 27) Sweden (3.4%), 28) Switzerland (2.0%).
29) Taiwan (0.7%), 30) Thailand (0.7%), 31) The Netherlands (2.0%), 32) Turkey (0.7%), 33) UK (13.6%), 34) Ukraine (0.7%), 35) USA (10.2%) and 36) Vietnam (2.7%) (Figure 3). From this list, comprising 37 countries, apart from Brazil, Portugal (13.6%), UK (12.9%) and USA (10.2%) are the ones with more participants in the study. Importantly, participants are spread across the globe as there are individuals from Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania, as shown in Figure 2. Particularly, in terms of Brazil, given its large scale, it is also worth mentioning that there are participants from all the five regions of the country: South, Southeast, Central-West, Northeast and North.

Figure 2: Map of countries where participants live: Brazil in green and other countries in blue.

4.2 SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN RESTAURANTS

The sustainable practices that participants mostly observe in the restaurants they visit in Brazil and other countries (Figure 3) are the implementation of health protocols for customers, such as social distancing, personal hygiene, use of masks, use of gloves, use of alcohol gel, hand washing (8.7% and 7.8%, respectively). The restaurant sector has been severely affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic in terms of profitability,
efficiency and indebtedness (Gomes et al., 2022). Besides, the sector coped with the imposed restrictions by establishing specific health protocols in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus disease. According to this context, such a finding might still be a consequence of the Pandemic and its required health protocols, which means participants might have expressed their concerns regarding the issue in this particular answer.

In terms of Brazil, the following sustainable practices were mostly indicated by participants: having open spaces for customer service (6.5%), serving local/regional fruit juices (6.1%), using dual flush toilet valve (5.8%), using natural ventilation (5.5%) and using occupancy sensors (5.1%). As for other countries, participants pointed out: using dual flush toilet valve (5.9%), serving local/regional fruit juices (4.8%), having open spaces for customer service (4.7%), using natural ventilation (4.6%) and encouraging recycling and organic waste collection (4.3%).

By comparing Brazil and other countries, it is possible to say that consumers observe the sustainable practices implemented in the restaurants they visit in a similar way, as implementing health protocols for customers, having open spaces for customer service, serving local/regional fruit juices, using dual flush toilet valve and using natural ventilation were the practices mentioned the most by both groups of respondents. Once again it is important to point out that the findings regarding health protocols, open spaces and natural ventilation might be linked to the measures imposed by the COVID-19, although the last two can be considered environmental initiatives that save energy.

Using occupancy sensors, for instance, is more observed in Brazil while encouraging recycling and organic waste collection are in other countries. The results regarding recycling are in line with Kwok and Huang (2019) and DiPietro et al. (2013), whose studies showed that recycling is an important factor for consumers. In addition, serving local/regional fruit juices is also aligned with DiPietro et al. (2013), whose study also demonstrated that the use of local products in restaurants is a valued attribute for customers.

On the other hand, informing about training carried out with suppliers is the less observed sustainable practice in restaurants in Brazil and other countries (0.4% for both
groups). Interestingly, the alternative “I do not observe the practices listed above” was an option that received few answers in both groups (0.8% in Brazil and 0.6% in other countries), which endorses the argument that consumers are becoming more demanding in terms of sustainable hospitality products (Kwok et al., 2016), such as restaurants (Han, 2021) and their food choices at restaurants they have meals (Trafialek et al., 2020; Filimonau; Krivcova, 2017; DiPietro et al., 2013a), as consumers are more interest in sustainable practices and responsible behaviors (Tommasetti et al., 2018; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). Another issue which received little attention from participants in Brazil and other countries was informing about training carried out with employees (0.7% and 1.0%, respectively).
Figure 3: Sustainable practices observed by participants in restaurants.

Source: The authors (2022).
The findings on training with supplier and employees being the less observed sustainable practices by participants may suggest participants tend to focus on practices easily seen or identifiable in restaurants such as those related to food and the building itself, disregarding the sustainability chain that includes other key actors as employees and suppliers. On the other hand, it might be the case that restaurants are not used to communicate with consumers the training carried out with employees and suppliers.
According to DiPietro and Gregory (2013), communicating with guests about green practices is one of the struggles that restaurants face, particularly considering that most of them take place out of customers’ sight.

For this reason, restaurants should work on strategies to better communicate their sustainable practices and engage with consumers, as “customers look for business that interact with stakeholders, the local community and society” (Cho & Yoo, 2021, p. 4518). A useful strategy could be sharing this information online on the restaurant’s social networks and website as a way not only to engage but also to raise awareness regarding sustainability among customers, employees, suppliers and the wider public. However, this needs to be done differently in terms of catching consumers’ attention as the alternative “promoting sustainability practices on their social media” was one of the less observed practices by consumers in the restaurants they visit (2.3% in Brazil and 2.1% in other countries).

In terms of restaurants providing portion size according to customer request (3.3% in Brazil and 1.5% in other countries), it is important to emphasize that food offer should be compatible with customers’ demand in order to avoid food waste, that is, enabling customers to define the amount of food they would like to have. The research conducted by De Conto in a Brazilian restaurant (2018 to 2022) revealed food waste, through the weighing of waste from post-consumption dishes of à la carte service, possibly as a result of the food offer being higher than the demand. In line with that, Zaro (2022) presents important contributions about the factors that determine food waste and one of those is exactly the portion size provided to consumers. Previous studies have also addressed the issue of inadequate portion size such as the ones conducted by Pistorello et al. (2015), Filimonau et al. (2019), Vizzoto et al. (2020), Coşkun et al. (2020) and Wu et al. (2021).

Based on the findings, it is worth pointing out that the sanitation/environmental dimension is the most noticed by participants despite the extensive list of attributes provided. Besides implementing health protocols, having open spaces for customer, using dual flush toilet valve and using natural ventilation, which are already among the main sustainable practices observed, using occupancy sensors, encouraging recycling and organic waste collection and using water-saving faucets in restrooms were also indicated
by participants. Tourism and hospitality literature on sustainability in the restaurant sector reveals that the majority of the studies address only parts of the sustainability, specifically environmental, rather than sustainability as a whole (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017). Interestingly, the findings of the current study suggest that even consumers seem to focus on the environmental dimension when observing sustainable practices in the restaurants they visit, according to Figure 3.

4.3 CONSUMERS’ HABITS WHEN EATING OUT

Regarding consumers’ habits when eating out (Figure 4), the preference for fresh products in the meals was the most mentioned habit by participants in Brazil and other countries (23.1% and 28.8%, respectively). In Brazil, customer satisfaction survey is a relevant issue, as participants emphasized that the restaurants they visit do not have this survey available (17.0%), although they answer it when available (15.9%). On the other hand, it is important to highlight that the satisfaction survey (3.4%) is not among the most observed sustainable practices in restaurants, according to Figure 3.

Customer satisfaction surveys are important tools for restaurant management as they can help to improve the operation as a whole based on customer feedback. In addition, customer satisfaction is one of the indicators of the economic dimension that integrates the Brazilian Regulatory Norm 16534 (indicators for sustainability management system in the hotel sector), which emphasizes the relevance of those surveys for service quality and customer loyalty (ABNT, 2016). For this reason, it is important that managers, particularly in the case of Brazil, pay more attention to customer satisfaction survey in order to incorporate it into the restaurant management.

In other countries, habits such as selecting restaurants that include food and drinks from local/regional cuisine, respecting the seasonal availability of ingredients (17.5%) and preference for organic products in the meals (13.9%) were the most mentioned ones by participants. The use of the sustainability criteria for choosing a restaurant is not a habit for consumers neither in Brazil nor in other countries as it was less mentioned by participants (5.4% and 4.4%, respectively).
Participants from Brazil provided other answers in relation to their habits when eating out, which include sugar-free desserts and low-carb foods, places without too much noise, vegetarian and vegan options, gluten and lactose-free options, cleanliness, places that do not allow pets, dishes that serve two people at the same time, places with an open area and few people. Respondents from other countries indicated food quality, online menu, gluten-free and meat-reduced options and good architecture and technical solutions in the buildings.

**Figure 4: Participants’ habits when eating out.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Brazil (%)</th>
<th>Other countries (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I prefer fresh products in my meals</td>
<td>23.10%</td>
<td>28.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I preferably use organic products in my meals</td>
<td>13.90%</td>
<td>17.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I select restaurants that include food and drinks from local/regional cuisine, respecting the seasonal availability of ingredients</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17.50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I recommend to friends/family the restaurants that implement sustainable practices</td>
<td>11.60%</td>
<td>11.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The restaurants I visit do not conduct costumer satisfaction surveys</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>11.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I answer the customer satisfaction surveys available in the restaurants I visit</td>
<td>15.90%</td>
<td>9.80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use the sustainability criteria for choosing a restaurant</td>
<td>5.50%</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The authors (2022).
4.4 CRITERIA FOR RESTAURANT SELECTION

Based on the criteria used by customers to choose a restaurant (Figure 5), the means indicate that service is the most important attribute for participants from Brazil (4.61) and other countries (4.53). The other attributes considered important by participants in Brazil are as follows: comfort (4.35), waiting time (4.31), menu variety (4.11), location (4.05), price (4.02), ambience (3.92), sustainable practices (3.70) and local/regional cuisine (3.61), while for participants of other countries are: comfort (4.27), waiting time (4.17), ambience (4.13), location (3.93), menu variety (3.63), price (3.56), local organic products (3.27), local/regional cuisine (3.27) and type of service: à la carte (3.27). The results demonstrate that consumers tend to value attributes similarly for restaurant selection in Brazil and other countries, as service, comfort, waiting time and ambience are the top four criteria for both groups. In addition, location, menu variety, price and local/regional cuisine are also relevant attributes for customers when comparing Brazil and other countries. In contrast, the type of service: all you can eat buffet and pay by weight buffet are the less important attributes to participants in Brazil (3.13 and 3.36, respectively) and other countries (2.45 and 2.43, respectively). However, it is interesting to point out that “all you can eat” and “pay by weight” are more valued by participants in Brazil than in other countries, which might be due to the popularity of these buffets in the country. Besides, the issues of sustainable practices and price are more important to participants in Brazil.

Participants from Brazil also provided other attributes which they thought to be important when choosing a restaurant, such as food taste, vegetarian and vegan meals, online reviews, cleanliness, less processed food, residents recommendations, parking, payment types, playground, noise, dietary restrictions, food quality, friends recommendations, local musicians, the slow food movement, the locavore movement, local workers, fair price and mixed vegetables dishes. Respondents from other countries highlighted food quality, cleanliness, online reviews, taste, parking and friends’ recommendations as important criteria for restaurant selection.

By comparing both groups, it is possible to verify similarities in terms of other attributes that consumers also take into consideration when selecting a restaurant, which
are: food taste, food quality, cleanliness, parking, friends’ recommendations and online reviews. It is important to mention that the findings regarding vegetarian/vegan meals, less processed food, mixed vegetables dishes, the locavore movement and the slow food movement, combined with the key findings related to local/regional fruit juices (sustainable practices), fresh products (habits), food and drinks from local/regional cuisine (habits), organic products (habits) and local/regional cuisine (criteria), may suggest, according to Nicolau et al. (2020), that consumers are becoming more aligned with the principles of sustainability and more aware of the environmental impacts of food production on climate change. Besides, these findings (including dietary restrictions) may also indicate customers’ concerns regarding the health implications of restaurant food choice, particularly among younger consumers (Filimonau et al., 2018).

![Figure 5: Criteria for restaurant selection.](source: The authors (2022).)
In sum, according to the key findings, service, comfort, waiting time, ambience, location, menu variety, price and local/regional cuisine are the main criteria of restaurant selection for customers in Brazil and other countries. Nevertheless, food taste, food quality, cleanliness, parking, friends’ recommendations and online reviews are also relevant factors which are taken into consideration. Therefore, the results support previous studies such as the ones by Cho and Yoo (2021), whose findings indicated that food quality, price, location and online reviews are the main factors of restaurant selection, and Fabrim and De Conto (2020), whose study showed that price, comfort, menu variety and location are the most important criteria for customers. It is also in line with Baltescu (2017) that demonstrated that the most important green practice for consumers to choose a restaurant was offering traditional recipes made with local ingredients. According to Yu et al. (2018), by improving the attributes related to food, service and ambience, which are endorsed by the current study as the key factors for restaurant selection, restaurants that implement green practices can increase customers’ patronage intentions.

In contrast, sustainable practices are not one of the top four factors for choosing a restaurant, according to consumers in Brazil and other countries. Likewise, the use of the sustainability criteria for choosing a restaurant is not a habit for consumers neither in Brazil nor in other countries. However, interestingly, consumers seem to observe the sustainable practices implemented in the restaurants they visit. This suggests that they observe those practices but do not necessarily turn them into neither a habit nor a top factor for choosing a restaurant, which indicates that there are other issues at play. Tommassetti et al. (2018) demonstrated that consumers who choose a restaurant that implements sustainable practices are driven by variables such as attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, perceived usefulness and curiosity, which influence their behavioral intention towards sustainable restaurants. Despite this, the fact customers notice sustainable practices implemented in the restaurants is already an important step that validates their interest in such practices, but it is crucial that the intention becomes actual responsible behavior towards sustainability.
5 CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at comparing and contrasting consumers’ perceptions of sustainable practices in restaurants in Brazil and other countries, as an attempt to extend previous studies by providing a cross-national comparison. The findings show that consumers from around the world have similar perceptions regarding sustainable practices in the context of restaurants, as they observe nearly the same sustainable practices and use almost the same attributes for restaurant selection.

The most observed sustainable practices implemented in the restaurants they visit were identified as follows: implementing health protocols for customers, having open spaces for customer service, serving local/regional fruit juices, using dual flush toilet valve and using natural ventilation, while the main factors for choosing a restaurant were: service, comfort, waiting time, ambience, location, menu variety, price and local/regional cuisine. In addition, the environmental dimension of sustainability was the most noticed which suggests that even consumers seem to focus on the environmental dimension when observing sustainable practices in the restaurants they visit.

The findings expose that sustainable practices are not one of the top factors for choosing a restaurant according to consumers. Likewise, the use of the sustainability criteria for choosing a restaurant is not a habit for consumers either. However, interestingly, consumers seem to observe the sustainable practices implemented in the restaurants they visit. So, it is crucial that the intention becomes actual responsible behavior towards sustainability.

In terms of limitations, it is important to mention that in the context of this study, particularly regarding participants’ demographic backgrounds, relevant issues such as gender, income and family structure were not addressed, which could have contributed to the current debate on their influence on choosing a sustainable restaurant (Kwok et al., 2016). Another limitation still about demographics is related to education as most participants have a high level of educational attainment, including master’s and doctorate degrees, which is not the reality at least of Brazil, where the majority of the population age 25 + (32.2%) has not even completed elementary school (IBGE, 2019). This might be linked to the snowball technique used, which might have unintentionally centered
around people from academia (although the questionnaire was sent to both academics and non-academics participants who were restaurants’ consumers), corroborating one of its disadvantages that is bias in recruiting participants. The questionnaire itself presents limitations as it does not allow to gather in-depth information from respondents, which could provide insights and a better understanding of consumers’ perceptions about sustainable practices in restaurants.

For this reason, interviews are suggested for future research in order to expand studies on sustainable restaurants towards qualitative approaches. Future research is also suggested to explore: i) social and economic dimensions of sustainability, which are usually neglected in the scope of restaurants (Higgins-Desbiolles et al., 2017), although they have been addressed in the current study; ii) health-related attributes and their influence on sustainable restaurants choice, which have previously been identified as a gap in the green restaurant literature (T.M. et al., 2021); iii) communication strategies, including social media, and their effect on customer behavior (Kim et al., 2017), particularly in relation to restaurants; and iv) environmental education for customers and employees.

Considering the relevance of the subject presented here for the professional qualification, further research on the proposition and implementation of sustainability indicators (social, environmental and economic) in restaurants and how these indicators are incorporated into the curriculum of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the field of tourism, hospitality, gastronomy and nutrition is also suggested. Additionally, taking into consideration the principles of preventing the generation of food waste and water and energy consumption, it is important and necessary to undertake research on the relationships that are established among portion size, water and energy consumption and number of customers in different menu options in restaurants. Research of this nature is relevant when associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contributing to the gastronomy sector in defining goals to meet the 2030 Agenda.
REFERENCES


