

Cultural Districts Shape Dining Experience: Evidence from 600,000 NYC Restaurant Reviews

Inna Nikitina¹, Ivan Burkov²

^{1,2} ITMO University, University of Milano-Bicocca

Abstract

Urban restaurant reviews often reflect not only the quality of the food but also the broader atmosphere and neighbourhood context of the dining experience. This study examines how the cultural character of city districts shapes what customers emphasise in their reviews, using New York City as a representative case of a culturally diverse urban market. Cultural districts are identified through spatial analysis of arts, culture, and entertainment venues (including museums, theatres, galleries, and music venues), normalised by local population and area to capture neighbourhood cultural specialisations. Restaurants located within these districts are then linked to their local context. A corpus of over 600,000 Google Maps reviews of these restaurants across NYC neighbourhoods is analysed using a machine-learning topic model (BERTopic) to uncover recurring themes in diners' comments and to quantify how strongly each theme is represented across different cultural contexts. Findings are summarised as district-level experience profiles that reveal systematic shifts in what patrons foreground, showing how cultural infrastructure acts as a place-based cue that reframes expectations, attention, and perceived value in dining encounters. These profiles advance place-based perspectives on consumer behaviour by operationalising neighbourhood cultural context at scale using digital traces, and by providing a replicable template for combining spatial analytics with text mining. Practically, the results support neighbourhood-aligned positioning and geo-segmentation: managers can tailor concept fit, service elements, and marketing messages to local cultural themes, coordinate offers around event-driven demand, and identify partnership opportunities with nearby cultural venues. By transforming unstructured reviews into actionable insights about context-specific experience salience, the study enables hospitality firms to differentiate themselves in competitive urban markets and make more informed decisions about location strategy, communications, and service design.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, customer experience, natural language processing, place-based marketing, urban hospitality