

FACTORS INFLUENCING CUSTOMERS' PURCHASING DECISIONS IN THE FOODSERVICE MARKET, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE MODERATING EFFECT OF CUSTOMERS' GENDER

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Purpose: This study aims to determine the influence of selected attributes on customers' purchasing decisions in the food service market, considering the moderating effect of customers' gender.

Design/methodology/approach: The study was conducted in 2023 on a group of 262 economically active Generation Y people using catering establishments in one of the large cities of eastern Poland. The research tool was a survey questionnaire and the research method used was a diagnostic survey.

Findings: This study confirmed the moderating effect of gender on the frequency of attendance at different types of catering establishments, the identification of organoleptic characteristics that characterise a high-quality meal, the evaluation of the fulfilment of expectations regarding the food ordered, the perception of the manifestation of hygiene principles in the establishment, and the opinion that the maintenance of cleanliness in the establishment influences the quality of the meals offered.

Research limitations/implications: The survey was conducted among customers of catering establishments in only one major city in Poland. The respondents' characteristics included economically active people of Generation Y and their gender. Therefore, conducting similar research among people representing other generations, such as Generation Z or millennials, would be advisable. In addition, the scope of this research could be broadened to include issues related to the specific circumstances of eating in catering establishments, particular expectations regarding the organoleptic qualities of meals, and hygiene issues.

Practical implications: Investigating the key factors influencing customers' choice of catering establishments can help businesses understand customers' perceptions of key factors when choosing an establishment and create appropriate marketing strategies to attract existing and potential customers and outperform competition.

Social implications: Given the complex phenomenon of eating out, our study extends our understanding of the relative importance of criteria to customers when choosing a type of dining establishment.

Originality/value: The survey results are an important contribution to understanding the opinions of catering establishments and the purchasing behaviour of consumers using these establishments, particularly concerning perceptions of hygiene compliance and the quality of food served, the frequency and purpose of visits, and the type of catering establishments chosen.

Keywords: catering services, meal quality, hygiene, purchasing decisions, sex.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Gastronomy is considered to be one of the oldest and most widespread service activities worldwide (Świątkowska et al., 2017; Zanetta et al., 2024). Every year, an increasing number of people use catering services, not only because of the lack of time to prepare meals, but also because of the lack of skills to prepare them, the greater involvement of women in the workforce, and the increase in income (Czernyszewicz et al., 2023; Rutkowska, Czarniecka-Skubina, 2015). It is important to note that the growth rate in eating out varies, with the fastest being recorded in the Asia-Pacific region (Edwards, 2019; Chowdhury, 2021). According to the National Restaurant Association (State of the Restaurant Industry Report, 2023), for 84% of consumers, going to a restaurant with family and friends is better use of time than cooking or cleaning. In their opinion, the amount of money spent eating out is similar to that spent at home. In Poland, about 67% of consumers enjoy dining out, spending on average about 4.2% of their total expenditure, up from only 1.4% as of 2000 (PMR Report, 2023). It should be noted that customers now have an increasing choice of dining establishments, from fast food to fine-dining restaurants (Dziadkowie, 2018; Zanetta et al., 2024). Street food is important in many countries (Shi and Nuangjamnong 2023; Kaewmahaphinyo et al. 2020). Choosing an establishment depends on situational factors, that is, the dining occasion (celebrating special occasions, social gatherings, business meetings, quick meals, or leisure activities) (Kopacki, Bogacka, 2020; Gheribi, 2016).

Therefore, this study was undertaken to determine the influence of selected attributes on customers' purchasing decisions in the food service market, considering the moderating influence of customer gender. This research is an important contribution to understanding opinions about food service establishments and consumer purchasing behavior, particularly about perceptions of hygiene compliance and the quality of food served, as well as the type of food service establishments chosen, frequency and purpose of consumption.

2. Literature review

In addition to situational factors, many other factors related to menus, services, service conditions, and prices influence the choice of dining establishments. As indicated by many authors (Barrera-Barrera, 2023; Española, Janaban, 2024; Mathayomchan, Taecharungroj, 2020; Świętkowska et al., 2017; Zanetta et al., 2024), factors such as the quality of food (meals), quality of the service (e.g. empathy, professionalism, and responsiveness), service environment (e.g. décor, ambience), and value of money also influence the choice of a dining establishment. These factors are referred to as the 'big four attributes of a restaurant'. Other authors further point to menu variety, restaurant reputation, location, and promotion (Chua et al., 2020; Chiciudean et al., 2019; Medeiros, Salay, 2013). The relationship between these aspects is complex, as consumers make decisions based on trade-offs that balance costs and benefits, with attributes related to the quality of meals served and the quality of service being the most important in most studies (Mathayomchan, Taecharungroj, 2020; Majid et al., 2021). Customers perceive food quality to be at a high level when meals are made with fresh and good-quality ingredients, are tasty, and when there are a variety of menu items to choose from, and portions are large enough and aesthetically served. In turn, when assessing the quality of service, the key elements are the neat and clean appearance of the service staff, courtesy, attentiveness, product knowledge, accuracy, and speed of service. These attributes play a key role in shaping customer choices while influencing customer behaviour in different ways (Sari, Sunarti, 2023). Research has also pointed to other important factors affecting consumers' restaurant choices and experiences. For example, one can observe the role of 'healthy menus' (Jeong, Jang, 2015), plant-based menu options (Choi et al., 2022), environmentally conscious attitudes (Shin et al., 2018), the use of local products (Kim et al., 2020), and technological aspects (Teng, Chen, 2021). Factors influencing customers' restaurant choices vary depending on the occasion of eating out, as well as the type of dining establishments (Yrjölä et al., 2019). When planning special occasions (e.g. birthdays and anniversaries), restaurants are most often chosen, while other catering establishments are chosen to satisfy hunger. Consumer preferences when choosing a catering establishment should guide entrepreneurs in adapting to customer expectations. The customer evaluation of service quality is crucial for the survival and development of service businesses. With this in mind, the following research question was posed:

RQ1. What attributes influence customer purchasing decisions in the food service market?

Although many studies have been conducted on food service quality, few have addressed the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction (Omar et al., 2016; Gasiorowska et al., 2023; Wolf, Zhang, 2016). Women have higher levels of service satisfaction than men (Omar et al., 2016). Gender is also an important

determinant of food preference (Gasiorowska et al., 2023). Hence, the following research questions were posed.

RQ2. Does gender moderate the choice of food outlet?

RQ3. Does sex influence opinions about the characteristics of a quality meal?

RQ4. Does gender influence judgements about the hygiene compliance of catering establishments and does cleanliness of the establishment influence judgements about the quality of meals on offer?

The answers to the above research questions are important in terms of customers' perceptions of the key factors in choosing an establishment and in developing marketing strategies to help attract and attract existing and potential customers to catering establishments.

3. Methods

The study was conducted in 2023 in the period May-August on a group of 262 economically active Generation Y people using catering establishments in one of the large cities in eastern Poland. The choice of the research group was based on the fact that Generation Y dominates the contemporary labour market. Above all, they prioritise personal development and devote time to their passions. They value their free time and are more willing to use entertainment and services, including catering, than other groups (Muszyńska, 2021). The majority of the respondents were women (53.4 %), while men were 46.6%.

The research tool was a survey questionnaire and the research method used was a diagnostic survey. The survey questionnaire consisted of 10 questions concerning the choice and frequency of visiting catering establishments and the reasons respondents chose a catering establishment. In addition, respondents were asked whether they paid attention to the quality of the meals they received, the characteristics of high-quality meals, the fulfilment of their expectations from the dishes they order, how compliance with the principles of hygiene in the premises manifests itself, whether the maintenance of cleanliness in the premises influences the quality of the meals offered, and whether the maintenance of hygiene principles by the staff influences their feelings of safety in the premises. The form mainly contained closed single-choice questions and three multiple-choice questions.

This study complied with the ethical standards set for all studies involving human subjects. Prior to entering the study, the participants were informed about the entity conducting the study, the purpose of the study, and how the data obtained in the study would be used. The participants automatically consented to participate in the study and voluntarily completed the questionnaire. Each survey participant was allowed to refuse to answer a specific question and withdraw from the survey at any time without providing a reason. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

The results of the study were analysed using the statistical programme IBM SPSS Statistics 29. Descriptive statistics (% of indications) were used for data analysis, and correlations between variables were analysed using Pearson's r correlation coefficients.

4. Results and discussion

The survey shows that customers visit food establishments most often 'several times a month' (45% of indications) and one in five (21%) 'once a month'. Of the respondents, 14.5% visited them 'once a week' and 16% visited them 'several times a week'. No respondents visit them 'daily'. Perhaps because of this frequency of catering establishments, customers most often chose restaurants (41.2% of indications) and pizzerias (39.7% of indications). Slightly less frequently, they visited cafés (33.6%) and bistros (25.25). Customers most often visit catering establishments to celebrate social events (41.6% of indications), and slightly less often to organise business meetings (28.2%) or family gatherings (24.4%). These results provide an answer to RQ1. In a study by Cieřlik et al. (2010), out of 200 respondents only 29% declared that they visited catering establishments several times a month, while the answer 'once a month' was selected by 14% of respondents. The respondents most frequently visited bars and pizzerias. However, it should be noted that the period between Cieřlik et al. (2010) study and our study was more than 10 years. Thus, based on this research, it is possible to identify changes in the preferences and behaviours of contemporary consumers in the market. In another study on consumer preferences (Grębowiec, 2010), more than two-thirds of the respondents declared that they used food services at least once a week, choosing pizzerias and restaurants most often, similar to the author's own research. In the author's subsequent study (Grębowiec, 2018), restaurants were slightly less popular, ranking third among the most frequently chosen catering establishments, after pizzerias and fast-food establishments. This may be due to the fact that more than 55% of the total number of respondents were young people aged up to 25 years. Jaciow and Wolny (2018) evaluating the catering market in 7 European countries (Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary) found that the highest frequency of use of catering services was declared by Romanians, i.e. less than 62% of respondents used catering services several times a week. In Finland, this percentage is less than 5%, and in Poland, it is 7.7%. On average, one in three respondents from France, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary used catering services several times per month.

According to many authors (Mubarok et al., 2023; Ha, Jang, 2010; Alada, Castaño, 2020; Madjid et al., 2021; Zhong, Moon, 2020; Ebrahim et al., 2024; Grębowiec, 2018), the quality of a product is a factor that significantly influences customers' decisions to choose a catering establishment, which was also confirmed by our study's results. Of the respondents, 66% paid attention to the quality of the food they received and nearly 8% paid attention to it. According

to the respondents, a quality meal should be safe for health (43.5% of indications) and should also be characterised by an appropriate price (41.6% of indications) and organoleptic features (41.6% of indications). The nutritional value of the food consumed in catering establishments was less than one in three respondents (27.9%). Most respondents said that dishes were ordered rather than met their expectations in terms of freshness and preparation (47.7% and 11.8% of indications, respectively). According to Josiam and Monteiro (2004), the quality of the food served is influenced by seven quality attributes: taste, presentation of the dish, menu variety, wholesomeness, freshness, appropriate temperature, and safety. In a Polish study (Cieślik et al., 2014; Czernyszewicz, Wiśniewska, 2024; Grębowiec, 2018), respondents indicated that quality food is distinguished by adequate nutritional value, taste, freshness, as well as safety. In addition, despite cultural differences, consumers from Asian countries have similar attributes of quality, that is, the taste of the food, the variety of the menu, the aesthetics of presentation, and freshness (Carvache-Franco et al., 2021; Sari, Sunarti, 2024). Only serving quality products can satisfy customers and, consequently, be loyal (Mubarok et al., 2023; Alada, Castaño, 2020; Talukder, Kumar, 2024; Kaewmahaphinyo et al., 2020). A study of five fast-food restaurant customers in the Philippines (Alada, Castaño, 2020) found that food quality ($\beta = 0.145$, $p < 0.05$), food safety ($\beta = 0.125$, $p < 0.05$), and ambience ($\beta = 0.471$, $p < 0.05$) had a significant impact on customers' positive emotions, whereas only service quality ($\beta = -0.119$, $p < 0.05$) and ambience ($\beta = 0.141$, $p < 0.05$) had a significant impact on customers' negative emotions. In contrast, Majid et al. (2021) found that food quality ($r = .52$, $p < 0.001$), service quality ($r = .71$, $p < 0.001$), and price ($r = .60$, $p < 0.001$) were positively related to customer satisfaction. In several studies (Chua et al., 2020; Kwun, Oh, 2004; Cieślik et al., 2014; Majid et al., 2021), price was perceived as the most important criterion for customers to choose a food outlet. Chua et al. (2020) showed that the level of importance of price depended on the occasion of eating out (social gatherings, business meetings, celebrations, quick meals). Regardless of the type of establishment (full-service, quick-casual, and fast-food), price was most important when choosing an establishment for quick meal/convenience, as well as for socialising. The authors suggest that when there is a large choice of restaurant options with similar product or service offerings, customers tend to rely on price in their decision-making.

Hygiene is also an important criterion in the establishment of dining (Czernyszewicz et al., 2023; Alada, Castaño, 2020; Española, Janaban, 2024). In our study, respondents indicated that hygiene rules were rather or definitely observed in the premises where they were most frequent (40.1% and 26.7% of indications, respectively). According to the respondents, compliance with hygiene rules manifests itself primarily in the cleanliness of the premises (82.8% of indications) and in the cleanliness of the staff's clothes (32.1% of indications). One in five respondents indicated the cleanliness of tables (21%) and kitchenware (20.2%). Cleanliness outside of the premises was indicated by less than one in ten respondents (7.3%), and the hygienic state of the toilets was indicated by only 3.1%. Customers overwhelmingly associated the cleanliness of the premises with the quality of the meals on offer (43.9% rather yes and 33.6% definitely yes),

and the maintenance of hygiene rules by the staff with the feeling of safety in the premises (52.7% rather yes, 31.3% definitely yes). The results of a study conducted by Cieřlik et al. (2014) showed that 68% of the respondents believed that adherence to hygiene rules influenced the quality of food they received. Customers primarily paid attention to the cleanliness of the premises, personal hygiene, and presentation of the waiters. The cleanliness of restaurant interiors, utensils, and staff has been identified in many studies (Barber et al., 2011; Liu, Lee, 2018; Moreira Junior et al., 2019) as significant factors in consumers' choice of establishment. Barber et al. (2011) showed significant correlations between service quality attributes in the physical environment and returns to the premises. Liu and Lee (2018) found that restaurant cleanliness practices have a direct impact on customers' satisfaction, their experience of the restaurant, and consequently, their intention to visit again. According to Fiiwe et al. (2023), the focus should be on building lasting relationships with customers, because retaining existing customers is more profitable than attracting new ones.

The correlation analysis showed that the gender of the respondents was correlated with attendance at catering establishments, the indication of organoleptic characteristics that characterise a high-quality meal, the evaluation of the fulfilment of expectations regarding the ordered dishes, the perception of manifestations of hygiene principles in the establishment, in terms of the cleanliness of the tables, the cleanliness of the kitchenware, the cleanliness of the staff's clothes, and the opinion that maintenance of cleanliness in the establishment influences the quality of meals offered (Table 1). The significant correlations shown allow research questions RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 to be answered affirmatively.

Table 1.

Significant correlations between respondents' gender and surveyed issues regarding eating establishments based on Pearson's correlation coefficient (N = 262)

Question number	Pearson correlation coefficient
1 Attendance at eating establishments:	
Restaurant	-0.129*
Bistro	0.234**
Café	-0.534**
Pizzeria	0.494**
5 Characteristics of a quality meal:	
Organoleptic characteristics	-0.122*
6. Does the food ordered meet expectations?	0.173**
8. How is the hygiene of the catering establishment demonstrated:	
Cleanliness of tables	0.158*
Cleanliness of tableware	-0.165**
Cleanliness of staff attire	-0.248**
9. Does the cleanliness of the establishment affect the quality of the food offered?	0.153*

** Correlation significant at 0.01 level (two-sided).

* Correlation significant at 0.05 level (two-sided).

Source: Own study.

This study found that women were significantly more likely to visit restaurants and cafés, whereas men were more likely to visit pizzerias and bistros (Figure 1).

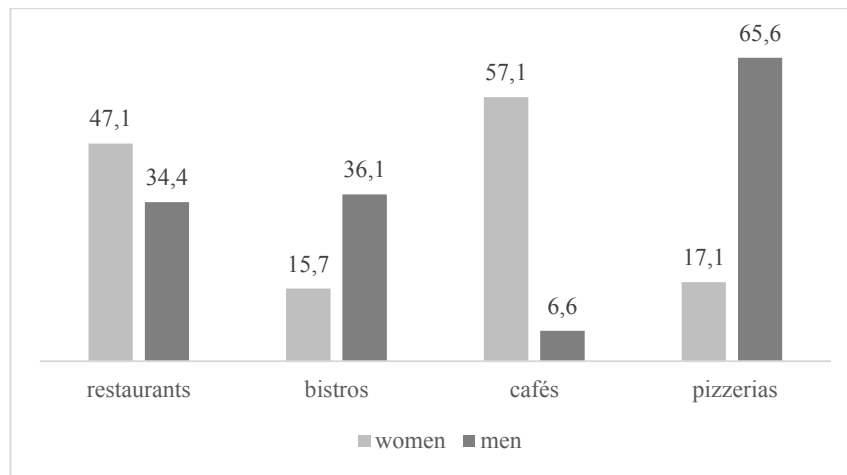


Figure 1. Attendance at catering establishments by gender-differentiated respondents (% of indications)
Source: Own study.

The gender of the respondents was significantly correlated with the indication of the organoleptic characteristics that characterise a quality meal (Figure 2). The other characteristics, despite different evaluations, were not significantly correlated with respondents' gender. The organoleptic features of meals as characteristics of a high-quality meal consumed in astronomical establishments were significantly more frequently indicated by women than by men. In contrast, when indicating the characteristics of a high-quality meal, men were more likely to indicate the nutritional value and price of the meal. These results allowed us to answer RQ3 affirmatively. Gender also had a moderating effect on the relationship between perceived food quality and price ($p < 0.05$) in a study of restaurant customers in China (Zhong, Moon, 2020). Female customers were less influenced by price than were male customers. Ma et al. (2014) found that female customers tended to have higher expectations for most food quality attributes than male customers, especially in terms of taste, presentation, and menu variety, whereas male customers placed more emphasis on portion size.

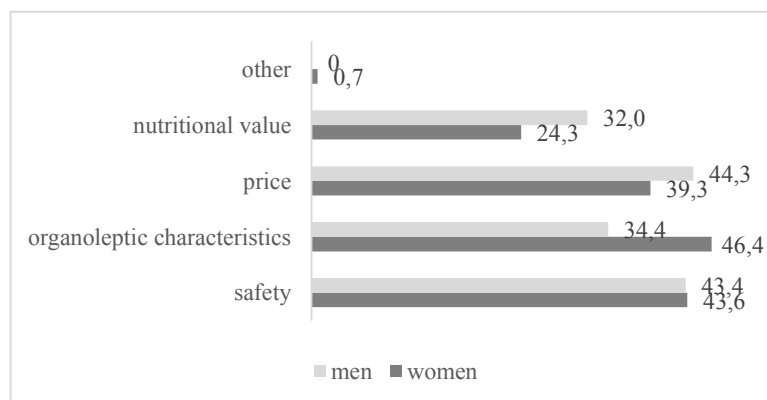


Figure 2. Women's and men's opinions on the characteristics of a quality meal (% indications).
Source: Own study.

The gender of the respondents was also significantly correlated with the evaluation of fulfilment of the expectations of the ordered dishes (Figure 3). Men were significantly more likely than women to state that the ordered dish definitely met their expectations, while women were more likely to indicate that it 'rather not' met their expectations. These results are consistent with those of Gasiorowska et al. (2023) and Wolf and Zhang (2016), regarding the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. In contrast, the view of Omar et al. (2016) is that women show higher levels of satisfaction with food services than men. Gender is also an important determinant of food preference (Gasiorowska et al., 2023). Women have been shown to have a greater preference for items perceived as feminine (e.g. salad, fruit, vegetables, and seafood), whereas men have a greater preference for masculine items (e.g. steak and burger).

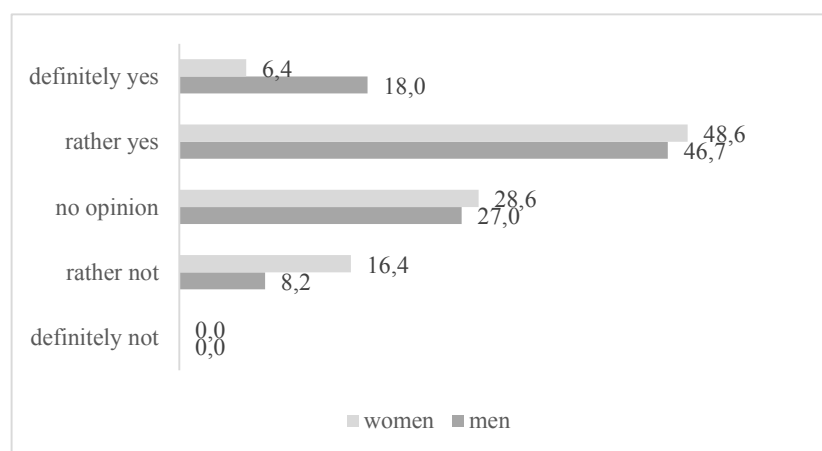


Figure 3. Opinions on the fulfilment of expectations from ordered dishes in catering establishments (% of indications).

Source: Own study.

The gender of the respondents was significantly correlated with their perception of the selected manifestations of hygiene in catering establishments (Figure 4). Women were significantly more likely to perceive the cleanliness of the kitchenware and staff clothing as manifestations of hygiene compliance, while men were more likely to perceive the cleanliness of the tables. In addition, men were more likely than women to consider the hygienic state of toilets and cleanliness inside the premises, which is consistent with other studies (Ma et al., 2014). In a study by Mason et al. (2018), the cleanliness of the establishment, along with price and portion size, was one of the most important criteria for both genders in choosing a fast-food restaurant. Food quality appears to be a more important restaurant selection criterion for men than women. Castillo and Del Río (2023) showed a stronger association between satisfaction with quality and revisiting a restaurant for women (0.599) compared to men (0.437).



Figure 4. Opinions on manifestations of hygiene compliance in catering establishments (% of indications).

Source: Own study.

The gender of the respondents was also correlated with the opinion that the maintenance of cleanliness in the establishment influences the quality of the meals offered (Figure 5). Men were significantly more likely to say that it 'definitely does', whereas women were significantly more likely to have no opinion on the subject. These results indicate a positive response to RQ4. The results obtained are consistent with the study by Chow et al. (2007), in which male customers tended to show higher expectations of service quality, including the cleanliness of the premises, compared to women. Zhong and Moon (2020) obtained similar relationships, with service quality having a stronger effect on male customers than on female customers ($p < 0.1$). Manal et al. (2024) obtained significant correlations ($r = 0.118$, $p = 0.001 < 0.05$), indicating that service quality influenced customers' satisfaction with food quality and restaurant service. In a study conducted in Pakistan's restaurant industry (Murad, Ali, 2015), respondents indicated that service had a definite impact on customer satisfaction. More than 41% of the respondents were not satisfied with the waiters, who felt too busy responding to customers' needs and desires.

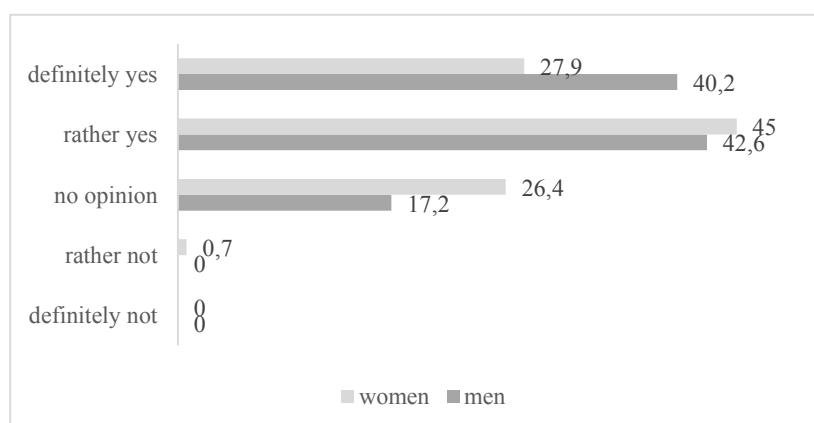


Figure 5. Opinions on the impact of keeping the premises clean on the quality of the meals offered (% of indications).

Source: Own study.

5. Conclusions

This study aims to determine the influence of selected attributes on customers' purchasing decisions in the catering market, considering the moderating influence of customers' gender. The results of the study confirmed the moderating influence of gender on the frequency of attendance at different types of catering establishments, identification of organoleptic attributes that characterise a quality meal, assessment of the fulfilment of expectations regarding the dishes ordered, perception of the manifestation of hygiene principles in the establishment, and opinion that the maintenance of cleanliness in the establishment influences the quality of the meals offered.

This study was conducted among customers of catering establishments in only one large city in Poland. The characteristics of the respondents included economically active people of Generation Y and their gender. Therefore, it would be advisable to conduct similar research among people representing other generations, such as Generation Z or Millennials. In addition, the scope of the research could be broadened to include issues related to the specific circumstances of eating out in catering establishments, detailed expectations regarding the organoleptic qualities of meals, and hygiene issues in the establishment.

Investigating the key factors influencing customers' choice of eating out establishments can not only help entrepreneurs understand customers' perceptions of the key factors in choosing an establishment but also create appropriate marketing strategies to attract existing and potential customers and to outperform the competition. Given the complex phenomenon of eating out, our study expands the understanding of the relative importance of customer criteria in choosing the type of dining establishment.

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