Market Segmentation of Diet Nutrition Supply for the New Entrepreneurs: A Case Study in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Mohammed Ali Ahmed, Noor-us-Sabbah Khan

DOI: 10.47299/bsjmm.v1i1.27

Citation guide (APA7):

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Mohammed Ali Ahmed
Tishk International University, Sulaymaniyah Campus
Business and Management Department
muhammed.ali@std.tiu.edu.iq

Noor-us-Sabbah Khan
Tishk International University, Sulaymaniyah Campus
Business and Management Department
noorus.khan@tiu.edu.iq

Abstract

Despite the growing trend of healthy lifestyle and awareness about the importance of fitness among the urban population in the Kurdistan region, there is no specialized diet restaurant with high service quality in Sulaymaniyah, the second largest city of Kurdistan. This study investigates if establishing a diet food restaurant in Sulaymaniyah is a viable idea. This study also aims to identify the main segments of the market, factors affecting consumers’ opinion regarding the diet food, and their willingness to pay for diet meals. The data were collected through questionnaires from 1200 respondents. The collected data were tested for reliability and validity through Cronbach’s Alpha, exploratory factor analysis, and confirmatory factor analysis. Segment analysis was performed to test whether the need and demand for diet restaurant and willingness to pay differ across various segments based on gender, age, location, education levels, weight, body mass index, diabetics, profession, gym visitors, income level, and marital status. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) method and independent samples T test were used for this purpose. This study concludes that an untapped and potentially profitable market exists for diet food restaurants in Sulaymaniyah city; however, apart from affluent segment of the market, most consumers are price sensitive.

Keywords: Diet food, diet restaurant, segmentation, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, ANOVA, Cronbach’s alpha.

Introduction

The trend of switching to a healthy lifestyle, which is prevalent in first world countries, has now also swept into other parts of the world, as more and more athletes, actors, singers and social media influencers are promoting healthy diet and workout regimes. Work schedules are hectic in today’s world and most of urban population prefers eating out, collecting takeaway meals or ordering food, in order to strike a work-life balance. People who want to stay fit prefer healthier but quicker food options over traditional meals. Similarly, in recent times, with economic growth in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Budur & Demir, 2019a), people have been resorting to restaurants for dine-out, takeaway and food delivery option to save time or to satisfy their cravings. On average, in urban areas of Kurdistan, at least one member of the family frequently eats out.

Gyms and fitness centers are on the rise following the awareness in the new generation regarding personal health and fitness. This has also driven people of all ages and health statuses to pay more attention to the food they consume and the amount of time they spend focusing on their health.
Keeping both growing trends in mind, there is a potential opportunity for investors to establish a restaurant that serves healthy and diet food with nutrition values (Demir, Budur & Heshmati, 2021). Therefore, considering the points stated above, this business can be profitable due to the fact that it caters to the needs of a wide group of people, from athletes to people on diets and even regular people (Ozmen, Demir & Celepli, 2014). Thus, this concept can prove to be beneficial both financially to the investors and health-wise to the public and consumers of the products. This alternative will provide people with healthier food options, and the investors as well as entrepreneurs with revenue and profits. However, before venturing into any untapped market, proper market research including market surveys and segmentation are necessary. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the need and demand for a diet nutrition supply in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and to identify the most viable segments of the market for a diet food restaurant.

This research focuses on the possibility of establishing a restaurant that serves mainly diet and healthy food. This study will investigate about potential consumers’ opinions and willingness to pay for diet meals.

This research can prove beneficial in several ways. One of the ways it can provide benefit is that it will set out a trend of healthy restaurants that can attract more entrants in this untapped market and therefore improve the overall public health by promoting a healthy lifestyle. It can additionally provide more job opportunities, provide a market for local farmers to provide fresh produce, and educate people on healthy food choices while providing the food for people who want it but may not have the time or resources to cook it themselves. Therefore, once established, this business will not only prove to be beneficial for the establisher but for the people who will be attending the restaurant, the people working at the restaurant, as well as the people who will be providing for the restaurant. This research will additionally be able to provide information and spread awareness regarding the benefits of healthy a healthy diet in people’s lives.

**Literature Review**

Market segmentation refers to dividing the market into submarkets on the basis of similar characteristics (Demir, 2019a; Demir, 2019b). For instance, a market can be segmented based on demographic characteristics of the consumers such as age, gender, income level, occupation, etc. (Kavak & Gumusluoglu; 2007). Segmentation can also be based on socio-economic characteristics or lifestyle of consumers. Other segmentation bases include motivation, values, beliefs, personality, attitude, involvement and intention (Björnsson, 2015). Effective market segments should be identifiable, accessible, actionable, responsive, stable and substantial (Kotler, 1997; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000).

Over the past few years, it is reported that consumers worry more about the risks of food safety than they did before (World Health Organization, 2002). Food safety issues have been getting noticeably significant media coverage (Bruhn, 1997; Smith and Riethmuller, 2000). A survey conducted back in 2004 in the US, showed that 89 percent of the consumers are more concerned about their food safety rather than water safety, crime prevention, and environment preservation (Anon, 2004). Consumers also worried more about the bacterial contaminations in food than irradiated food or lead contaminations (Bruhn, 1997). The attitude differs across various segments of population when it comes to food safety (Frewer et al., 1994). Researchers such as Slovic et al. (2004) have given noticeably significant attention to how consumers go about and interpret the safety of their food and how to assist them in labeling the
risks that cause more significant challenges. Making consumers practice safety measures while handling food can reduce any disease outbreak from contaminated food. There are a lot of factors that play an essential role in driving consumer behavior, such as attitude (Kim & Hunter, 1993; Demir & Mukhliis, 2017). A study used exploratory factor analysis to identify specific consumer attitudes towards food safety to help segment US consumers according to those attitudes (Rimal & Real, 2003).

The famous Atkins diet trend led to changes and additions to menu options labeled as ‘low carb’ in 1970s and again in the first decade of the 21st century (Restaurant News, 2003). After many studies that have been conducted in the 1980s, menus in restaurants began adding healthy food to their menus and labeling them as either low-fat or fat-free; this was after research linked saturated fat and cholesterol to heart diseases (Astrup et al. 1997). Furthermore, the food industry wasted no time to respond to the trend and to meet consumer demands, while increasing or maintaining revenue (Budur, 2018; Maker 2004; Torlak et al., 2019).

It is assumed that consumers in today’s age of information already know about healthier eating options and take interest in healthier food; this means that their eating behavior changes because they have access to nutritional information. This is called as ‘cognitive’ approach (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). However, research shows that not everyone cares about the health aspects of the food they eat (Nowak 1998; Spear 2002; Jones et al. 2004). Another research shows that only 10% of people care about their calorie intake to manage their weight (Severson 2006). Multiple surveys show that 60% of college students do not care about the healthfulness of their food, while 40% show that they have no interest in eating a healthier meal (Levi et al. 2006). There is a big difference in food choices of those who are not interested in healthier food than those consumers who pay attention to nutritional values of food (Stepp 2007). It is not surprising to see how cognitive approach does not work on segments of consumers who are least interested in nutritional food as this approach is mainly targeted at consumers who are already concerned about nutritional values of their meals (Baltas, 2001).

The most important key to underline is the big difference between those who are highly interested (HI) and those who are least interested (LI). Research shows that being involved in food decisions is considered a highly feminine activity and many men avoid it (Courtenay, 2000). Both genders (up to 80%) highly believe that food and beverages come with different benefits. Still, women are considered more likely to consume specific food and beverages to find out the benefits, according to the International Food Information Council Foundation (2008). Therefore, most LI consumers are expected to be males, and HI females, making the gender-based segmentation inevitable. Most traditional men define attitudes and behaviors as a feminine act (Kimmel 1996; Fausto-Sterling 2000). Therefore, this also shows that females are more concerned about nutrition labels compared to their male counterparts (Rasberry et al. 2007), and reading the nutrition labels is not a common practice for men (Levi et al. 2006). Furthermore, men not only care less about what they eat and healthfulness of their food choices, but they also openly take pride in not being interested in the nutritional value of their food (Courtenay, 2000).

Age also plays a significant role when it comes to make healthy food choices. For instance, it is highly unlikely for kids to care about nutrition in their food. However, some studies show that as a part of involving children in the nutritional value of their food, changes their behavior to some extent (Mendoza, 2007).
Choosing healthy food options has become a lifestyle in today’s world. Lifestyle in terms of food choices can be termed as “a system of cognitive categories, scripts and associative networks relating a set of food-related behaviors to a set of values” (Brunsø, Scholderer & Grunert, 2004b, p. 196).

The strongest predictor of human behavior is individuals’ intentions or willingness to behave in a certain way (Ajzen, 1991; Mohammed et al., 2020). Researchers can effectively measure the behavioral intention (BI) of the respondents by specifying a specific behavior in a specific situation (Ajzen, 1991). BI has been used as a segmentation base as well as a dependent variable in order to identify importance of various motivational constructs in a specific context (Chen, 2003; Brown, Pope & Voges, 2003).

Segmentation is an iterative process, which needs constant improvement and information must be refined at each step. Therefore, it is better to at least point out the possible routes of segmentation in order to make the process as transparent as possible. Usually in the beginning of market segmentation process, the market researchers cannot predict the number or magnitude of segments or their relative size in advance (Green, 1977). Due to its iterative nature, the process of segmentation is difficult to specify with confidence in advance. However, as selecting a segmentation base is a subjective decision which is not always empirically verifiable (Alford, 1990 in Hoek et al., 1996), aim of the study drives the choice of a relevant segmentation base among the countless possible segmentation bases (van der Zanden et al., 2014). Moreover, market researcher should use multiple segmentation bases to increase the effectiveness of segmentation by bringing various characteristics of effective and viable segments to the table (Budur et al., 2019; Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). Demographic and socio-economic segmentation ensures the identifiability and accessibility of segments (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000), whereas as values, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyle bring the characteristics of responsiveness and actionability (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000; Demir, 2019b).

Therefore, bases of segmentation under review in this study are demographic, socio-economics, lifestyle and intention.

**Methodology and Data Analysis**

Questionnaire method has been used to collect primary data for this study, because it is the recommended method when conducting this kind of research (van der Zanden et al., 2014). The questionnaire was designed in order to divide the respondents into various segments. The purpose was to identify at least one segment that could be targeted as the most profitable or viable segment for diet food restaurant. Therefore, our questionnaire included questions on various aspects which predict diet food purchasing behavior. These are complicated variables and can be difficult to measure. Therefore, multiple scales were used to measure the extent to which respondents were aware of their needs, demands and wants regarding healthy diet food. All scales that were used in the segmentation were on a nine-point Likert scale, where 1 meant “completely disagree” and 9 equaled “completely agree”. The segmentation scales measured six variables, important to determine consumer’s needs, and demand regarding the diet food. Those aspects included needs for sports, health, diet control and taste. Further, questions were asked about what the population thinks about cost in order to understand the demand of the consumer for diet food, and taste of diet nutrition. Finally, the respondents were asked questions about the idea of a diet restaurant. Questionnaire was translated into Kurdish to make it easier for the respondents to understand it. Later on, the responses were translated back to English.
The data collected were tested for reliability and validity through Cronbach’s Alpha, exploratory factor analysis, and confirmatory factor analysis. Segment analysis was performed to test whether there are differences about ideas of need for diet restaurant and willingness to pay for it among various gender, age, location, education level, weight, body mass index, diabetics, profession, gym visitors, income level, and marital status. To do this, analysis of variance (ANOVA) method and Independent Samples t test were proposed.

Data Collection, Sampling and Demographic Distribution

The data have been collected from 1200 respondents, within the territory of Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq from the biggest malls of Sulaymaniyah (Majidi Mall, Family Mall, and City Center Mall), gyms, and private universities (TIU, KOMAR, CIHAN, UHD), various gated communities in order to collect data from the households. Unfortunately, 151 responses were incomplete and unusable. Therefore, they have been eliminated from further analysis and the data set and the analysis has been carried out with the remaining 1049 responses.

Among the participants, 45% were male while 55% were female. 57% of the participants were between 19-25 and 22% were between 26-35 years old. It shows that the main proportion of the participants were young generation. 76% of the participants had bachelor degree while 20% had less than high school degree. Only 4% of the participants had master’s or Ph.D degree. 45% of the participants were between 61-80 kg, while 2% were above 100 kg. 4% of the sampled population were diabetic. 53% of the participants have been going to the gym regularly. 73% of the sampled population had monthly income less than $1000, while 5% of the population had monthly income over $2000. Marital status of the participants shows that 71% of them have not been married yet, 26% have been married and 3 % were divorced. Further details are given below.

Figure 1

Weights of the respondents
Figure 2
Respondents’ gym participation rates

![Graph showing gym participation rates: 46.54% Yes, 53.46% No.]

Figure 3
Respondents’ gym participation periods

![Graph showing gym participation periods: 51.08% Less than a year, 24.46% 1-2 years, 11.87% 3-4 years, 7.37% 5-6 years, 5.22% 6+ years.]

Figure 4
Monthly income of the respondents

![Graph showing monthly income distribution: 72.54% Less than $1000, 14.59% $1001-$1500, 8.15% $1501-$2000, 1.84% $2001-$2500, 1.05% $2501-$3000, 1.18% $3000-$10000, 0.65% $10000+.]

Descriptive Statistics

Approximately 80% of the participants have affirmed that the idea of opening a diet restaurant would be good, however, only 55% showed the intention to visit such a restaurant. 56% of the participants showed intention to order food (home-delivery) from the restaurant.

Based on the results of cross tabulation, it has been observed that 212 of the participants wanted neither visiting the restaurant nor ordering home delivery. 482 of the participants would go for both the options. Besides, 66 of the participants who are willing to order home-delivery did not want to visit the restaurant, while 56 of the visiting customers did not want to order home-delivery.

Behavioral Intentions to Home-delivery or Visit

To understand which segments are more willing to purchase diet food, t-test and ANOVA were carried out. The results show that females are slightly more willing than males to order home delivery and visit the restaurant. However, the difference is not very prominent, therefore gender is not an important base for diet food purchasing segmentation.

The results for age show that people between 36 and 65 years, are more inclined to visit the diet food restaurant than other age categories; however, there is no big difference among ages when it comes to ordering home delivery.

Moreover, the households from the gated communities are more willing to purchase diet food with purchase intention above 6 than the participants from other parts of the city with purchase intention of 4. Therefore, location can play a significant role for the investor while making marketing strategies of diet food restaurant (Demir et al., 2019).

Educational background does not seem to affect the willingness to purchase diet food. It has been observed that willingness to make diet food home delivery is higher for overweight respondents. The results also reveal that diabetic respondents are more inclined towards home delivery than visiting a restaurant compared to non-diabetic ones. The difference between diabetics and non-diabetics is not very significant when it comes to visiting the restaurant.

Based on the results, it seems that gym-going participants show higher intention to visit the diet food restaurant as well as get diet food delivered compared with people who do not go to the gym. Willingness to purchase diet food is lower in people who have been going to the gym for years than newer gym members. This can be attributed to the fact that their lifestyle is healthy already, and they can prepare healthy meals at home. The marketing strategies must be arranged accordingly. Members of high-ended fitness centers and gyms are relatively more willing to visit diet restaurants than the rest.

It has also been observed that income level does not have any impact on willingness to visit diet restaurants or intention to order home delivery.

Pricing of Diet Meal

When it comes to pricing, 35% of the participants are willing to pay $1-$5 per diet meal and 32% of the participants are willing to pay $6-$10 per meal. Willingness to pay for diet meal is higher in women than men. However, both genders are not willing to pay for the diet more than $10.
Willing to pay in dollars term is also higher in older respondents compared to younger ones, but it does not exceed $10.

People who live in gated communities are willing to pay up to $10 a meal compared to the respondents from other parts of the city, who would not pay more than $5 per meal.

Willingness to pay for the diet food also varies with the weight of respondents. It has been observed from the results that until 110 kg, the willingness to pay increases from based on the increase in weight. People who are between 100-110 kilograms are willing to pay for diet food from 11$ to 15$. Besides, after 110 kg, the willingness decreases dramatically. Therefore, 110 kg can be seen as the psychological threshold.

The results reveal that diabetics are willing to pay more than non-diabetics, whereas the people who regularly go to the gym are willing to pay less than people who do not go to the gym. Willingness to pay per meal increases with monthly income of the participants. However, most respondents earn less than $1000; therefore, the prices of the products are better kept between $1-$10 per package. It is not a threshold but a psychological determinant.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study identifies a great business opportunity in a unique part of the hospitality sector. It is recommended that investors should invest in diet food restaurant industry and take first mover advantage, as currently, health and diet-conscious consumers do not have many healthy eating options in Sulaymaniyah.

As per findings of this study, gender and income does not have any significant effect on willingness to pay for diet food, but pricing, location (gated communities), lifestyle and health conditions do. A very important segment, identified in this research is people with health conditions such as diabetes. However, most of the respondents with health conditions are price sensitive. Therefore, if the target segment is the people with health condition, the restaurant should follow “focus” business strategy, offering differentiated production but keeping the costs and prices low. As people who go to gyms and fitness centers are more inclined to buy diet food, it is recommended that in the beginning, investors might make test experiment in those five gym centers and take their feedbacks for better marketing strategy. While they are showing the variety of the diet foods, the investors will have the opportunity to explain how the healthy food are prepared.

This study concludes that, price sensitivity of majority respondents, across all categories, is quite high; therefore, any investor who is willing to venture into this market, must maintain a good mix of cheap price and healthy diet food in order to be successful, because most of the consumers will not buy such an important product if the prices are too high. As 70% of the people are looking for cheap but quality diet food, the prices of diet foods must be within this range while providing a good quality product.

Last but not the least, this study also identifies the affluent segment of the society with income above $3000 as they show the highest willingness to purchase diet food. Future research should be carried out to get further information about viability of this segment. If the size, responsiveness and substantiality of this segment is high, differentiation business strategy and ‘premium pricing’ strategy are recommended to target this segment.
References


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Define 2006. Pro-environmental segmentation qualitative research findings. Define Research for Defra/COI, November 2006


Appendix 1

Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Options</th>
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<td>Gender:</td>
<td>Male          Female</td>
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<td>Age:</td>
<td>14-18         19-25         26-35         36-45         46-55         56-65         65+</td>
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<td>Education:</td>
<td>High School or Less Bachelor Degree Masters and/or Ph.D. Degree</td>
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<td>Weight:</td>
<td>41-60         61-80         81-100        91-100        101-110       111-120       120+</td>
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<td>Height:</td>
<td>155-165 cm    166-170 cm    171-175 cm    176-180 cm    181-185 cm    186-190 cm    190+ cm</td>
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<td>Diabetics:</td>
<td>Yes           No</td>
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<td>Profession:</td>
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<td>Going to a gym?:</td>
<td>Yes           No</td>
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<td>How long do you go to gym?:</td>
<td>Less than one year 1-2 Years 3-4 Years 5-6 Years 6+ years</td>
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<td>Which gym saloon do you prefer to go?:</td>
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<td>Monthly Income:</td>
<td>Less than 1000 $ 1000-1500 $ 1501-2000 $ 2000-2500 $ 2501-3000 $ 3000+ $ 10.000+ $</td>
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<td>Married:</td>
<td>Yes           No           Divorced</td>
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<td>Willingness to pay for a diet meal package per meal time:</td>
<td>1-5           6-10 $        11-15 $       16-20 $        21-25 $        26-30 $        30+ $         100+ $</td>
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<td>I like doing sports</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>Sport is a part of my life</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>I do sports everyday</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>I like sport but I don’t have time</td>
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<td>I don’t like sports</td>
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<td>I already do sports during my work so that I don’t need to go to GYM</td>
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<td>I care about my health</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>I care about what I eat</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>I don’t eat unhealthy food</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>I select especially healthy food when I do shopping</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>I really need a diet</td>
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<td>I tried diet but couldn’t continue</td>
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<td>I feel better when I do diet</td>
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<td>I would prefer ready-made diet foods than preparing them at home</td>
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<td>Diet costs expensive for me</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9</td>
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<td>Diet foods are expensive</td>
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<td>Diet foods are hard to find</td>
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<td>Diet foods are hard to prepare at home</td>
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<td>Diet foods taste bad</td>
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<td>Diet foods are delicious</td>
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<td>I don’t like doing diet foods</td>
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<td>I think diet restaurant is a good idea</td>
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<td>I would like to visit frequently if there is a good diet restaurant in Sulaymaniyah</td>
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<td>I would order home-delivery if there is a good diet restaurant in Sulaymaniyah</td>
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