



Mechanism of customer value in restaurant consumption: Employee hospitality and entertainment cues as boundary conditions

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ABSTRACT

Food quality and employee task performance have been demonstrated to positively influence customer evaluations of restaurant dining experience. This study extends previous research by incorporating customer affective responses to examine the mediating processes underlying the relationships between customer perceptions of task performance/food quality and perceived value. The moderating influences of employee hospitality and entertainment cues on the relationships between customer perceptions of task performance/food quality and their affective responses were also examined. Results from surveying 308 customers of full-service restaurants showed that customer affective responses mediate the relationships between task performance/food quality and perceived value. The results also indicated that the relationship between food quality and affective responses increases with employee hospitability. However, employee hospitability negatively moderates the relationship between task performance and affective responses. Additionally, strong entertainment cues positively reinforce the relationship between task performance and affective responses, but do not significantly affect the relationship between food quality and affective responses.

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1. Introduction

In the restaurant business, customer perceived value is a key consideration for managers in increasing customer satisfaction and revisit intention (Yoon et al., 2007). Previous empirical evidence has indicated that several factors in food and beverage service process can enhance customer perceived value, including food quality and safety (Namkung and Jang, 2007; Knight et al., 2007), task performance of service staff (Kim and Cha, 2002; Zeithaml et al., 1996), physical environment (Ryu et al., 2008; Ryu and Jang, 2007, 2008), and customer positive emotions (Liu and Jang, 2009). For the majority of consumers, the key elements of restaurant foodservice are food quality (Sulek and Hensley, 2004) and employee task performance (Kim and Cha, 2002). These key elements can positively affect customer emotional state and further influence perceived value (Jang and Namkung, 2009; Pullman and Gross, 2004).

However, from the perspective of hospitality, customers require not only appropriate employee task performance and food quality, but also psychological bonds through emotional and social

interactions during their dining experience (Lashley, 2008; Levy, 2010). Prior studies have suggested that commercial hospitality providers can use various methods to create memorable hospitality experiences for customers, such as enhancing customer perceptions of employee hospitability, or using entertainment to reinforce customer positive affections and perceived value (Duman and Mattila, 2005; Hyun et al., 2011; Jensen and Hansen, 2007; Hemmington, 2007). By providing employee hospitability, restaurants can enhance customer physical and psychological comfort (Lashley et al., 2005), while entertainment can stimulate hedonic and enjoyable emotions (Sit et al., 2003). These factors can facilitate interpersonal interactions with host employees and other customers (Hemmington, 2007; Levy, 2010). The level of social and emotional benefits induced by employee hospitability and entertainment thus can help enhance the effects of perceived employee task performance and food quality on customer affective responses. Although previous studies have examined the impact of the food itself and employee task performance on restaurant customer affections, the potential moderating effects of employee hospitality and entertainment cues on the relationships between these variables remain unclear. Thus, researchers may not adequately understand the overall hospitality experience of restaurant patrons. Hospitality providers are also likely to ignore the significant impact of hospitability and entertainment functions on the effects of the key elements of foodservice on customer affective responses in increasing customer value and improving marketing strategies (Teng, 2011).

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To fully understand customer perceptions of hospitability during a dining experience, this study examines how employee task performance and food quality in restaurants influence customer perceived value via affective responses. Most importantly, this study explores the boundaries of the effects of task performance and food quality on perceived value by examining two moderators: employee hospitality and entertainment cues. This study thus has two objectives: (1) to investigate the relationships between customer affective responses derived from employee task performance and food quality, and customer perceptions of value in restaurant settings; (2) to examine the moderating effects of employee hospitality and entertainment cues on the relationships among task performance, food quality, and customer affective responses. This study highlights the importance of hospitality delivery which constitutes both tangible and intangible elements involved in restaurant foodservice provision. These elements can develop social and emotional benefits for customers through interpersonal interactions and enjoyable dining experience, thus enhancing the value customers perceive, and ultimately their behavioral intentions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Relationships among task performance, food quality, affective responses, and perceived value

2.1.1. Effects of task performance and food quality

In commercial business, consumers seek to solve problems by purchasing products to gain associated benefits, while enterprises strive to provide quality products and services to satisfy consumers (Armstrong and Kotler, 2007). Similarly, restaurant patrons often seek for quality food and service as key benefits while they are dining out in a restaurant (Ha and Jang, 2010b; Sulek and Hensley, 2004). For most foodservice providers, employees play an integral role in service delivery, and their task performance determines service quality and customer satisfaction. Kim and Cha (2002) indicated that service employees require three aspects of competence to assist them in task performance, including expertise, service experience, and appearance. During the restaurant service interaction, employees can increase customer perceived value and satisfaction only when they demonstrate professional competence of service tasks (Grandey et al., 2005). Accordingly, restaurant service employees who perform effectively in service tasks can positively affect customer perceptions of service quality, satisfaction, and perceived value (Wu and Liang, 2009).

On the other hand, food quality is one of the most important determinants of customer outcomes in the context of restaurant service. Food quality includes factors like presentation, tastiness, menu item variety, and temperature (Kivela et al., 1999). Namkung and Jang (2007) further incorporated attributes of healthiness and freshness into food quality. Previous studies noted that restaurant operators can ensure positive customer outcomes, including positive emotions, perceived value, satisfaction, and repurchase intention, by providing quality food attributes that satisfy customer requirements of restaurant service (Ha and Jang, 2010b; Namkung and Jang, 2007; Pullman and Gross, 2004; Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Consequently, it can be postulated that the provision of food quality and task performance that meet customers' needs and expectations in restaurants can enhance customer perceived value and positively influence their behavioral intentions.

2.1.2. Customer perceived value and affective responses

Despite dominating constructs of service quality and satisfaction, the construct of perceived value has been identified as one of the most important measures to better understand consumer

behavior for both marketing practitioners and researchers (Heskett et al., 1997; Holbrook, 1999). Previous studies demonstrated that perceived value is the most complete antecedent of satisfaction (Ha and Jang, 2010a; Oliver, 1997; Parasuraman, 1997; Woodruff, 1997), purchase decisions, and repurchase intention (Yoon et al., 2007). Gallarza and Saura (2006) reviewed the extensive literature of value and found a strong link between quality, value and satisfaction, indicating that quality is an input to value, with satisfaction and some form of loyalty as a final outcome. Especially in the restaurant service context, perceived value is at the heart of customers' service assessment of their dining experience.

The definition of perceived value proposed by Zeithaml (1988), in which conceptualized value as a trade-off between 'get' and 'give' elements, has been recognized as the most accepted definition of customer value (Gallarza and Saura, 2006). From the utilitarian perspective, customer value is linked to perceived prices through transaction value. Customer purchase decisions are determined by their perceived value for money of a product or service. Heskett et al. (1997) considered customer value to be a summative concept that incorporates customer-oriented quality, price, and cost of service acquisition (e.g., time and effort spent). While perceived quality becomes a significant cognitive response construct to assess and judge the goodness and badness of a product or service, customer value has also been considered as the key outcome measurement of service experience with both a cognitive and affective nature (Oliver, 1997; Jensen and Hansen, 2007). Several researchers have stressed that perceived value is not a simple cognitive measure and instead a complex affective state (Babin and Kim, 2001; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). For instance, Sheth et al. (1991) found that consumers purchase products to derive various benefits, including functional, emotional, social, epistemic, and conditional value. Babin and Kim (2001) adopt dimensions of hedonic and utilitarian value as multi-faceted measurement of perceived value. Sweeney and Soutar (2001) further identified four dimensions of perceived value, including emotional value, social value, and two types of functional value (i.e. value for money and performance/quality). Adopting an experiential approach, Holbrook's typology of consumer value incorporates eight categories of value (i.e. efficiency, excellence, play, aesthetics, esteem, status, ethics, and spirituality), based on a three-dimensional paradigm (extrinsic vs. intrinsic, active vs. reactive, and self-oriented vs. other-oriented) which has been broadly applied to analyze hospitality and tourism services and experiences (Gallarza and Saura, 2006; Murphy and Pritchard, 1997). The above examples imply that restaurant managers can increase customer perceived value not only by providing products and services that satisfy customer extrinsic/utilitarian value (e.g., ensuring efficiency and excellent quality), but also by enhancing intrinsic/hedonic value (e.g., creating fun, entertainment, and aesthetic surroundings).

Additionally, individual emotional states have been identified as the key factor influencing subsequent behavioral intention and responses (Donovan et al., 1994). In hospitality consumption experience, many studies focus on how customer emotions evoked influence perceived value, satisfaction and behavioral intention (Jang and Namkung, 2009; Ladhari, 2009; Ryu and Jang, 2008). Teng (2011) indicated that different positive emotions (e.g., safety, respect, joy, honor, excitement, surprise, and warmth) play a strong role in outcome assessments measures such as best experience, price-worthy, and revisit intention for both restaurant and lodging sectors. Lashley et al. (2005) also noted the importance of hospitality experience in affective dimensions, demonstrating that customers require not only professional service, but also sincerely affective encounters. The development of interpersonal relationships relies on affective responses incorporating mutual trust, familiarity, and sense of security to generate social bonds linking individual participants. These affective responses also reflect

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