The mediating role of consumption emotions

Jahyun Song⁎, Hailin Qu

School of Hotel and Restaurant Administration, Oklahoma State University, 365 Human Sciences, Stillwater, OK, 74078, USA

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A B S T R A C T

Although the importance of affective reactions has been emphasized in the service industry, there are still relatively few empirical studies which conclusively explain how consumption emotions induce in a consumption situation and how such emotions play a role in customers’ satisfaction judgments in the context of ethnic restaurants. Accordingly, this study aimed to examine how differently positive and negative emotions mediate the influence of two fundamental values of ethnic restaurant consumption on levels of customer satisfaction. Data obtained through an online survey was analyzed by means of structural equation modeling analysis. Results demonstrate that utilitarian value directly and indirectly affects consumption emotions and customer satisfaction, whereas hedonic value only indirectly affects customer satisfaction through positive emotions. The findings suggest that not every perceived hedonic value leads to customer satisfaction unless customer experience positive emotions from such a value. In that regard, this study holds significant implications to ethnic restaurant marketers.

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1. Introduction

The importance of both cognitive evaluation and affective reactions has been largely highlighted in the satisfaction literature (Mano and Oliver, 1993; Phillips and Baumgartner, 2002; Wirtz and Bateson, 1999). Researchers have noted that the role of consumption emotions is more important in the service industry where customers engage in consumption for hedonic purposes (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1999). Within the restaurant industry, as one of the representative service industries, hedonic purposes may be pursued more by ethnic restaurant patronage, because it could be argued that consumers seek not only the experience of enjoying tasty ethnic foods but also seek out an authentic cultural experience created more from hedonic related dining aspects, such as the interior, music, mood, and layout (Uncles et al., 2003). Thus, the hedonic nature of the dining service and experience may be more than or at least as important as its utilitarian feature for the customers who visit ethnic theme restaurants. Based on this rationale, diners’ emotional responses are presumed to play an integral role in enhancing their satisfaction along with both the hedonic and utilitarian benefits evaluated by ethnic restaurant customers. However, little research has sought to link the effects of these consumption emotions to perceived hedonic and utilitarian values, two core values of the restaurant experience, and only a few past research exercises have examined how these emotions influence customer satisfaction as applied to this restaurant sector (Jang, et al., 2012; Jang, et al., 2011).

The cognitive appraisal approach of emotions is widely accepted as a theoretical standpoint for understanding emotional reactions induced during the consumption context (Johnson and Stewart, 2005). This theory posits that individuals experience discrete emotions based on their cognitive appraisal of specific events and it guides a more complete explanation about consumers’ behavior (Lazarus, 1991). In other words, the experience itself does not elicit the emotions but the way customers evaluate the experience generates certain emotional states (Rio-Lanza et al., 2009). In a similar vein, Jang and Namkung (2009) proposed the extended Mehrabian-Russell (M-R) model to understand restaurant customers’ emotions and future behaviors in response to overall service stimuli (such as product quality, service quality, atmospherics). The authors stressed that each of these dining factors that form customers’ overall experiences may have important but different impacts on their emotions and future behaviors (Jang and Namkung, 2009). Furthermore, in their study of cognitive-affective-behavioral model, they found that positive emotions mediate the influences of such overall dining experiences on customers’ behavioral intentions. Drawing upon the cognitive appraisal theory and the extended M-R model from the hospitality literature, the current study aimed to examine the role of consumption emotions that account for variation in satisfaction formation, along with consumer service value.

Consumption emotions are believed to be crucial factors for a service firm’s long-term success, as these emotions can enhance
or diminish a customer’s satisfaction, which in turn, will determine their future decisions and the formation of their loyalty to the business (Han et al., 2009; Han and Jeong, 2013). In this regard, researchers in the hospitality field have paid attention to consumption emotions (Bigné et al., 2008; Han and Jeong, 2013; Lin and Mattila, 2010). However, to date, restaurant studies related to emotions tend to heavily focus on either hedonic-specific factors (e.g., restaurant atmospherics, ambient odors, and authenticity) or service-related factors or cases (e.g., service quality, service failure/recovery and service fairness) (Ha and Jang, 2012; Jang et al., 2011; Su and Hsu, 2013). Additionally, their main focus has been on the relative direct impacts of variables that are examined in the study; the mediating role of consumption emotions has only been discussed in passing, despite its significance. Furthermore, despite the critical role of negative emotions in customer satisfaction (Han et al., 2009), these issues have been comparatively neglected in the restaurant literature. By addressing these research gaps, there is a need to investigate the degree to which both positive and negative emotions mediate the impacts of consumer service values on levels of customer satisfaction in the context of ethnic theme restaurants. This study used Asian restaurants as case examples, because Asian cuisine is one of the top emerging food and restaurant trends in the U.S. and the largest examples of this restaurant segment (Statista, 2015).

Overall, the purpose of this study was not only to investigate the direct relationships among perceived value, consumption emotions, and levels of customer satisfaction, but more importantly, also to clarify the mediating function of consumption emotions between customers’ cognitive evaluation of dining experiences (perceived hedonic and utilitarian values) and their level of satisfaction in the ethnic restaurant context, where hedonism is a core value of the service. In addition, this study sought to provide insights allowing ethnic restaurateurs to better understand the formation process of customer satisfaction and develop more effective business strategies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceived value: hedonic and utilitarian value

Value as perceived by restaurant customers can be well conceptualized and operationalized by an approach that considers utilitarian and hedonic value (Nejati and Moghaddam, 2013; Ryu et al., 2010). According to Babin et al. (1994), utilitarian value represents a usefulness of consumption in instrumental, task-related, functional, cognitive, and is essentially a means to an end. On the other hand, hedonic value reflects the potential entertainment and emotional worth of a shopping experience. In short, utilitarian value is a necessity-oriented or practical trade-off between the benefits and costs whereas hedonic value is an pleasure-oriented or experiential trade-off of these elements (Babin et al., 1994; Ryu et al. 2010).

Some researchers have discussed diners’ behavior within this context of hedonic and utilitarian value. For example, Park (2004) classified customer values into both the hedonic and utilitarian in order to explore the relationship between the customer value of eating out and the importance of restaurant attributes. The results revealed that hedonic value affects buying frequency more than the utilitarian value does, indicating that the participants in his study chose fast food restaurants for more hedonic reasons than utilitarian reasons. On the other hand, Ryu et al. (2010) found not only that both hedonic and utilitarian values are significant values that affect customer satisfaction, but also that utilitarian value has a greater impact on both satisfaction and behavioral intention than hedonic value in the context of fast-casual restaurants. There are interesting results, providing valuable insights into customers’ perceptions of ethnic restaurants as well. The ethnic restaurant study performed by Ha and Jang (2010b) found that utilitarian value had a stronger impact on customer satisfaction and future behavioral intentions than did hedonic value among American customers. When considering the level of familiarity with the restaurants, however, hedonic value appeared to lead to more behavioral intentions amongst the low familiarity group.

The results of these studies suggested that utilitarian and hedonic values are clearly associated with customer satisfaction and/or behavioral intentions, and the values’ relative impacts vary depending on the restaurant context. In regards to this variation, the present study examined the relative effect of perceived value by adopting utilitarian and hedonic values as its major dimensions to verify customers’ cognitive evaluations in the ethnic theme restaurants.

2.2. Perceived value and customer satisfaction

The most widely accepted frameworks for understanding perceived value and satisfaction are derived from the Expectancy-Disconfirmation theory (Lewin, 1938; Ma et al., 2011). Customer satisfaction occurs in terms of expectancy disconfirmation, attribution, and inequity judgments (Mano and Oliver, 1993). In other words, customers are apparently satisfied when the services provided meet or exceed their expectations; when this does not occur, it leads to dissatisfaction. In this respect, perceived value is posited to be an immediate antecedent of customer satisfaction (Oh, 2000). The more the customer perceives the value of service, the higher the levels of customer satisfaction toward the service (Tam, 2004). Thus, hypothesis 1 is stated as follows.

H1a. Hedonic value has a direct and positive relationship to customer satisfaction.

H1b. Utilitarian value has a direct and positive relationship to customer satisfaction.

The importance of customer satisfaction has been widely acknowledged in terms of business performance, because customers are the primary source of most hospitality companies’ revenue (Tam, 2004). As aforementioned, customer satisfaction arises when a customer’s perception of the value obtained from his/her consumption at least equals the perceived service quality relative to costs (i.e., price, time, effort); but it merits note that these views consider only the cognitive aspects of satisfaction evaluation and do not consider the affective states that customers might feel during consumption experiences (Ha and Jang, 2010a). Based on a performance-based approach, many researchers have asserted that customer satisfaction evaluations should incorporate emotional reactions as well as cognitive evaluations (Kotler, 2000; Oliver, 2010; Rust and Oliver, 1994). For example, Oliver (2010, p. 23) insisted that consumer satisfaction is “the consumer’s fulfillment response, the degree to which the level of fulfillment is pleasant or unpleasant.” Kotler (2000) also mentioned that satisfaction is the affective state which individuals feel (i.e., pleasure or disappointment) resulting from the trade-off between perceived performance and their prior expectations. In line with this notion, this study considered both perceived value and consumption emotions as critical drivers of customer satisfaction.

2.3. Consumption emotions

According to Westbrook and Oliver (1991, p. 85), consumption emotions are a “set of emotional responses elicited specifically during product usage or consumption experiences.” Emotions and consumption emotions have basically the same characteristics of
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