

A Study on Determining the Factors That Influence the Customer Value in the Fast Casual Restaurants

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Abstract

New trends for customers are being developed today against the “fast food”. One of the new trends is the “fast casual” system. Fast casual restaurants offer a fast, healthy and quality eating experience to those with a busy schedule. The goal of this study is to determine the value customers perceive in practice for the fast casual restaurants. The study covered 247 participants and exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (DFA) have been performed. Four basic dimensions have been determined; product, support services, service and price, and also the customers have expressed that the atmosphere of the restaurant is important.

Keywords: Fast Casual Restaurant, Customer Value, Confirmatory Factor Analysis

JEL Classification: M31, L83, D47

Introduction

The food and beverage sector witnessed some significant changes in the late 20th century, which could be put down to the improvement in the economic and socio-cultural level, time constraints allocated to individual and daily needs and their reflection on the dining habits of the people, on the whole. What's more, the inclusion of the women in labour force as well as the increasing cost of home-made food paved the way for individuals to seek outing and dining more often. In this way, time spent to meet the need for daily food intake got less than before. However, especially in the last a few years, the movements of healthy- diet and anti-obesity as well as the rise in the life quality perception gave rise to a novel market to emerge. In the eye of proponents of the trend known as “fast-casual”, people are now in the pursuit of a quality and diligent alternatives with a possibility to offer different “fast-casual” alternatives, opposite to luxurious and classy ones.

The construct of “value” in the marketing literature may signify differing concepts from the perspective of customers. Customer value denotes the perceived value stemming from a perception of a performance rather than the performance delivered by a dealer (Woodruff, 1997: 141). The perceived quality holds a positive relation with value and satisfaction all together. The higher is the perception of goods or services, the higher the perception of value. All these together could be thought of as the goods and services performance of a given restaurant (Oh, 2000a: 59).

Keeping this in mind, the literature survey makes it clear that empirical studies on fast-casual restaurants along with the perception of value by the customers are scant and a study designed to reveal the perceived value of the fast-casual restaurants will shed new insights into the fields, which is the main objective of this study.

Fast Casual Restaurants

The concept of fast casual restaurant emerged in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. It should be noted that as a result of the market research conducted in the U.S.A, it was found out that such restaurants met the expectations of the American people utmost thanks to reasonable prices, neat atmosphere, and fast yet quality meals (not in the form of fast food). Known as the first examples of fast casual restaurants, Panera Bread offered a course of meal at around 6 or 7 dollars and the course included fresh sandwiches, soup and salad (Simon, 2006: 51).

Fast casual restaurants could be thought of as the combination of regular restaurants and fast food restaurants. Such restaurants offer not only a fast diner but also a rich menu. The foods to be offered are started to be prepared the moment the orders are taken. The feel of the atmosphere is superior to that of fast food restaurants'. As for the physical attribute different from the fast food restaurants, the tables are portable or moveable, unlike the fast food ones (Dinsmore, 2006: 213). Fast casual restaurants focus on the niche market between regular restaurants and fast food restaurants and they offer high quality meals and services covering a wide range of fresh and healthy food (Walker, 2008: 29). Besides, fast casual restaurants could be named as the hybrid ones combining fast food service with the menu and the decoration characteristics of regular restaurants (Birchfield, 2007: 5).

Customer Value

The construct of value holds its righteous place in marketing studies and strategies. In order to gain competitive edge, firms, in this case restaurants have to create more values towards their customers. Thus, value construct is of great importance from the point of competitive power of the firms (Woodruff, 1997: 141). Customer value is the gap between the perceived benefit and the cost (Mc Dougall, 2000: 394; Dumond, 2000: 1062) and it cover all the tangible and intangible elements of a product (Van Der Haar et al., 2001: 628).

Perceived value is a customer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perceptions of what is received and what is given (Zeithaml, 1988: 14). Customer value is Customer value is customer's perceived preference and evaluation of those product attributes, attribute performance, and consequences arising from use that facilitate the customer's goals and purposes (Woodruff, 1997: 142). From a general perspective, there exist five main characteristics of customer value (Ulaga, 2003: 678; Van der Haar et al., 2001: 628; Parasuraman and Grewal, 2000: 169):

- Customer value is subjective
- Customer value can be defined as the gap between what is gained and paid
- What is gained and paid could be multifaceted (such as quality, taste, socialization, money, time etc...)
- The perception of value is a concept related to competition
- Customer value has a dynamic structure due its mutable structure

The customer value is key to creating brand loyalty as well as to purchase decisions (Oh, 2000b: 136). Furthermore, the value created contributes to a high level of brand trust and to the development of brand loyalty (Chiang and Jang, 2006: 53). In a similar manner, Chen and Quester (2007: 782) pointed out that the way to have loyal customers is through creating customer value, hence it is important to grasp the value perception of the target population (Emir and Çelik, 2010: 71). Within this scope, it is of great importance that determining the value perception of customer in fast casual restaurants will not only give the opportunity to boost quality in services offered but help find out whether such restaurants are an alternative to other ones.

Eating out adds to an experiential value to people (Park, 2004: 88). People prefer restaurants considering such aspects as quality, taste and price. All these combine the concept of value emerges. Adding value to an offered product, and creating customer satisfaction, firms increase customer loyalty (Ravald and Grönroos, 1996: 19).

The Objective of the Study

Customer value is regarded as the first phase to achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, it is of immense importance to determine the perceived value by the customers.

Despite their popularity, fast food restaurants may sometimes have some drawbacks in offering healthy and quality service. The concept of fast casual has emerged in the last years in order to meet the expectations of healthy and quality service and it is thought that the customer value constructs in such restaurants may form the Fundamentals for the future studies. This study sets out to find out the perception of customer value in the newly-emerging fast casual restaurants.

Methodology

The research was done in a fast casual restaurant operating in Eskişehir. The data was collected via a questionnaire; the questionnaire includes 25 variables which were determined based on a review of literature on customer value and restaurants. While determining these 25 variables, which were grouped under 4 dimensions (factors), the researchers took several studies as references (Oh, 2000; Al Sabbahy, et al., 2004; Khalifa, 2004; Maviş et al., 2007).

On different days in January 2012, 300 randomly selected customers seated in the fast casual restaurant in Eskişehir were interviewed and survey data was collected through a questionnaire. Since some of the questionnaires turned out to be including false or mis-coded data, the analysis was done out of 247 questionnaires. The questionnaires, which were based on a 1 to 5 Likert scale, were analyzed using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Structural equation models are comprehensive statistical techniques which are used to test the causal relationships among observed and unobserved (latent) variables. It has been proven that these models are also useful in dealing with problems that might occur while formulating conceptual constructs (Reisinger and Turner, 1999; Yılmaz, 2004).

Findings

The data collected from the 247 customers who prefer fast casual restaurants were first analyzed using SPSS 17.0 statistical program and an explanatory factor analysis was done. Before reporting the results of this analysis, the study presents information about respondent profiles. As can be seen in Table 1, 60,7% of the respondents are female and 39,3% are male. Also, 70% of the respondents fall into 19-30 age group. The percentage for respondents in 32-40 age group is 13.8% and 12.1% of the respondents are below 18. These findings reveal that fast casual restaurants are mostly preferred by people under 40 years of age.

Table 1: Demographic Features of the Respondents

Sex	N	%
Female	150	60.7
Male	97	39.3
Age	N	%
18 and below	30	12.1
19-30	173	70
31-40	34	13.8
41-50	7	2.8
51 and above	1	0.4
Income	N	%
1-1000 TL	136	66
1001-2000TL	42	20.4
2001-3000 TL	13	6.3
3001-4000 TL	6	2.9
4000 TL and above	9	4.4

As far as the income levels (personal income) of the respondents are concerned, it is seen that most of them have incomes up to 1000 Turkish Lira (66%), 20% of the respondents reported that their income is between 1000 Turkish Lira and 2000 Turkish Lira, 13.6% of the respondents reported that they earn more than 2000 Turkish Lira Considering these results, we can conclude that fast casual restaurants generally serve customers from lower income level groups and are preferred by people with low income.

Table 2: The Frequency of Respondents' Eating Out

How often do you eat out?	n	%
At least once a week	178	72.1
Every fortnight	34	13.8
Once a month	15	6.1
Every two months	2	0.8
Rarely	18	7.3

As can be seen in Table 2, 72.1% of the people who prefer fast casual restaurants eat out at least once a week. However, only 8.1% reported that they prefer eating out every two months. These findings show that most of the people who prefer fast casual restaurants mostly prefer to eat out. In addition to this, when we take a look at the frequency of respondents' eating in the restaurant chosen for the study, we can clearly see that the percentage of people who come to the restaurant "at least once a week" is 27.9% (Table 3). The percentage for people who rarely come to the restaurant is 24.7%.

Table 3: The Frequency of Respondents' Eating in the Restaurant Chosen for the Study

How often do you eat in this restaurant?	n	%
This is my first time	14	5.7
At least once a week	69	27.9
At least once a fortnight	49	19.8
Once a month	45	18.2
Every two months	9	3.6
Rarely	61	24.7

An explanatory factor analysis was done on the data in order to determine the variables in the value scale for customer value in fast casual restaurants, which were determined in accordance with literature on customer value, and the factors under which the variables were grouped. All 25 statements (items) in the questionnaire were included in the factor analysis. The statements which were not among the factors determined as a result of the explanatory factor analysis and which had a factor loading value below 0.40 were excluded from the analysis (Hair et al., 1998: 111).

As a result of the explanatory factor analysis, grouped under 4 factors, namely, "Product", "Support Services", "Service" and "Price" 16 statements were determined. As can be seen in Table 4, Cronbach's Alpha value for reliability of the scale was found to be 0.782. It is important that this value be over 0.700 for the scale to be considered to be reliable. (Hair et al., 1998: 118). Moreover, KMO value, which indicates the sample's sensitivity to the application, was found to be 0.834. This result indicates that the sample size is sufficient for factor analysis.

Table 4: Factor Loadings of the Items

<i>Statements</i>	Product	Support Services	Service	Price
The ingredients used in the meals are of good quality. (U1)	0.714			
The dishes look attractive. (U2)	0.704			
Hygienic rules are taken seriously during the preparation of the food. (U3)	0.692			
There are menus with reasonable portions. (U4)	0.608			
The food is delicious. (U5)	0.506			
The eating area is comfortable. (U6)	0.492			
The restaurant has entertainment. (DH1)		0.750		
Car parking is not a problem. (DH2)		0.731		
They also offer culinary treats with your dish. (DH3)		0.636		
Attending this restaurant brings social prestige.(DH4)		0.573		
They offer high quality service. (S1)			0.781	
The waiters and waitresses are kind and friendly.(S2)			0.778	
Hygienic rules are taken seriously during the service.(S3)			0.652	
I get my money's worth. (F1)				0.710
The prices are reasonable.(F2)				0.637
The prices for the menus are reasonable. (F3)				0.576
<i>KMO</i> = 0.834 Barlett's Test of Sphericity 889.901 df: 120 p:000 <i>Cronbach's Alfa</i> = 0.782				

Listed under the "Product" factor, there are 6 statements, factor loadings of which range from 0.714 to 0.492. The statement "The ingredients used in the meals are of good quality" has the highest factor loading, 0.714. The statement "The eating area is comfortable" has the lowest factor loading, 0.492 and also included in the "Product" factor. As can be seen in Table 4, there are 4 statements listed under the "Support services" factor. Among these statements, the statement "The restaurant has entertainment" has the highest factor loading, 0.750, while the statement "Attending this restaurant brings social prestige" has the lowest factor loading, 0.573. Another factor is "Service". Under this factor, the statement "The service is of high quality" has the highest factor loading, 0.781. However, under the same factor, the statement "Hygienic rules are taken seriously during the service" has turned out to have the lowest factor loading value, 0.652. The last factor of the customer value scale consists of three variables listed under the title "Price". Under this factor, the statement with the highest factor loading, 0.710, is "I get my money's worth" and the statement with the lowest factor loading, 0.576, is "The prices for the menus are reasonable".

The results of the explanatory factor analysis were obtained as a result of a one-dimensional analysis of the obtained structure. The confirmatory factor analysis, which is done subsequent to the explanatory factor analysis, is used to test whether or not the scaling model for each variable is confirmed by the data (Şimşek 2007: 12). Confirmatory factor analysis is the model to estimate latent variables and all non-directional relationships (correlations) among variables and it is the starting point of the analysis for structural equation modeling (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). The scaling model correlates the observed indicators in each scale with the structure they denote, giving factor loadings for each observed indicator. Accordingly, the structure obtained as a result of the explanatory factor analysis was analyzed with the same structure in LISREL package program. After defining the relationships between the indicators and the latent variables, the program was run. The obtained structure was evaluated after applying the modification the program suggested.

While evaluating scaling models in structural equation modeling, more than one value has to be analyzed. The first of these values is χ^2 enables us to statistically test the model suggested in the explanatory factor analysis. But since χ^2 is highly sensitive to sample size, we check for its ratio with df (degrees of freedom). This ratio has to be between 0 – 3.

As is seen in Figure 1, $\chi^2=168.66$ and $df=97$. The ratio obtained as a result of this is 1.7 and it indicates that the suggested model is significant. Various studies in literature have suggested that χ^2/df ratio alone will not suffice to confirm the model due to its sensitivity to sample size. Therefore, goodness-of-fit tests were developed as an alternative.

Goodness-of-fit tests the suitability of the observed input matrix (covariance or correlation) estimated in the model in question or the model’s consistency with empirical data (Hair et al., 1998: 610-611). The values and standard values of goodness-of-fit indices obtained from the scaling model in this study are given in Table 5. According to Table 5, the RMSEA value (0.055) obtained from confirmatory factor analysis indicates a high concordance (fit) among the variables in the scaling model. Moreover, NNFI, CFI, GFI, AGFI fit indices, which take values between 0 and 1 and which indicate a perfect fit the closer it gets to 1, indicate goodness-of-fit if their values are 0.90 and above. The NNFI, CFI, GFI and AGFI values given in Table 5 mean that there is a good fit between the indicator and the latent variables given in the scaling model.

Figure 1: Standardized Values for the Scaling Model

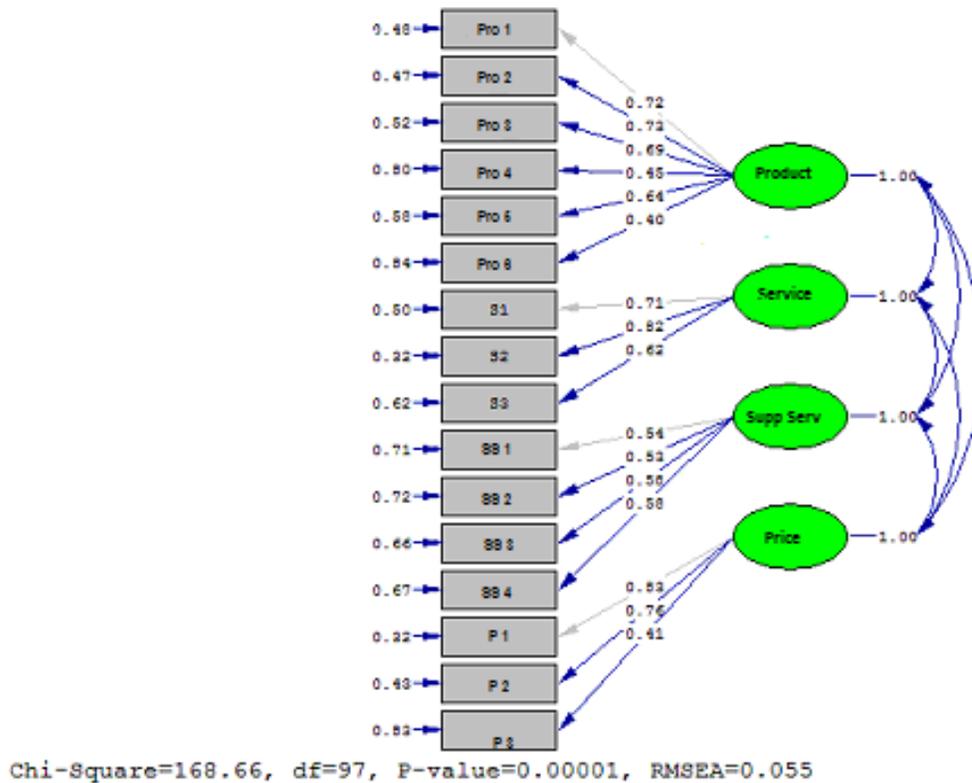


Table 5: Goodness-of-fit Indices for the Scaling Model

	Standard values	Values in this model
RMSEA (The root mean squared error approximation)	≤ 0.08 or 0.10	0.055
RMR (Root Mean Square Residual Index)	≤ 0.05	0.072
NNFI (Non-normed Fit Index)	≥ 0.90	0.91
IFI (incremental fit index)	≥ 0.90	0.93
CFI (comparative fit index)	≥ 0.90	0.93
GFI (Goodness-of-Fit Index)	≥ 0.90	0.92
AGFI (adjusted goodness-of-fit index)	≥ 0.85	0.89
PNFI (Parsimony Normed Fit Index)	≥ 0.50	0.69

Figure 1 shows the scaling model of the confirmatory factor analysis developed with the help of LISREL program. Also, standardized values for indicator variables are given in Figure 1. None of the standardized values for the scaling model should be more than 1 (Şimşek, 2007: 74). As can also be seen in the figure, among the indicator variables explaining the latent variables there is no variable with a value of more than 1. Table 6 shows composite reliability values and t values of the scaling model. Critical t-values must be at least 1.96 at a 0.05 significance level (Şimşek, 2007: 74). The test statistics, where none of the indicator variables took a value less than 1.96 and which were used to test the significance of correlation coefficients, are given in Table 6.

Table 6: Reliability Values for the Scaling Model

	t value	CR
PRODUCT		0.810
The ingredients used are of good quality.	11.85	
The dishes look attractive.	12.34	
Hygienic rules are taken seriously during the preparation of the food.	11.53	
There are menus with reasonable portions.	6.87	
The food is delicious.	10.15	
The eating area is comfortable.	5.99	
SUPPORT SERVICES		0.643
The restaurant has entertainment.	7.28	
Car parking is not a problem.	7.17	
They also offer culinary treats with your dish.	7.86	
Attending this restaurant brings social prestige.	7.79	
SERVICE		0.775
They offer high quality service.	11.46	
The waiters and waitresses are kind and friendly.	13.85	
Hygienic rules are taken seriously during the service.	9.72	
PRICE		0.527
I get my money's worth.	12.48	
The prices are reasonable.	11.46	
The prices for the menus are reasonable.	6.08	

If the study includes latent variables which have not been defined, then one should also check for composite reliability. One of the ways to analyze composite reliability is to determine Construct Reliability (CR). It has been noted that the coefficient obtained as a result of the estimation should be at least 0.50 (Şimşek, 2007: 18). Table 6 shows that the construct reliability for all latent variables and indicator variables is above 0.50. Based on this result, we can conclude that the suggested scaling model is reliable.

Conclusion

The changes in food and drinks industry and in customer expectations have brought along new concepts and new applications. One of these is the concept of fast casual service. Such a service, which combines the fast service in fast food restaurants and healthy and fresh food elements of quality restaurants, offers customers a wider range of menus, better quality and a more attractive atmosphere compared to regular fast food restaurants. This study, which is based on several disciplines such as customer behavior and marketing and travel and tourism, suggests a more comprehensive theoretical baseline to determine factors relating customer value. With this aim in mind, a field study on customers of a fast casual restaurant was conducted. The research was conducted while the customers of the restaurant were buying the service. The researchers developed a scale after a thorough review of literature on fast casual restaurants and value studies. Then, the scale was used to find out the perceived value dimensions of the customers.

The findings of the study showed that the fundamental factors were product, support services, service and price. When we consider the studies in the literature and the service attributes of fast casual restaurants, we can see that customers prioritize product features and price among other factors. In addition to these, customers also stated that the quality of service is important. Customers' expectations of fast casual restaurants and the findings of the study are in line with each other. What customers suggested about the importance of food served and how the food is prepared seems to be in accordance with the service policies of fast casual restaurants. Fast casual restaurants offer a combined service; the service is fast and the food is healthy, fresh and of good quality. Apart from these, customers also stated that the atmosphere in the restaurant is important and that they would like to eat in a comfortable restaurant. The results of this study would offer ideas to fast casual restaurant managers about the values they could create for their customers, although within certain limitations. The study attempted to determine customers' perceptions of the concept of value and the factors they prioritize. We believe that the factors which were identified in this study will give enterprises and managers a chance to improve the kind of service and experience they provide for their customers.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The present study was conducted on 247 people and therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized. Changes in food and drinks industry and in customer expectations bring about changes in the type of services given in restaurants. Therefore, in order to be able to keep track of these changes, the concept of customer value studied in this research should be combined with other factors such as repurchase behavior, customer loyalty and customer commitment and should be studied on different and more comprehensive scopes, which will ensure a better understanding of the subject in question. Another suggestion for future research would be a comparative study on fast casual restaurants, Ala'carte restaurants and fast food restaurants. As a conclusion, it can be said that the results of the present study will greatly contribute to enterprises in their efforts to create customer value, which first of all will ensure customer satisfaction through living up to their expectations and which will later on boost their success in the competitive market.

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