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The Influence of Marital Status and Age on the Perception of Fast Food Consumer in an Emerging Market

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Abstract

Fast food restaurants, due to its fast and quality services, attract consumers. But do all consumers have similar perception on services and quality related variables? This study examines the influence of marital status and age on product, price, service quality, environment and satisfaction on consumers patronizing fast food restaurants. The result shows that there is a significant difference in the perception of service quality of fast food restaurant between single and married consumers. In addition to that, customers from different age group have a significant difference in perception of satisfaction and price of the food bought from the fast food restaurant.

Keywords Fast food restaurant, Satisfaction, Malaysia

Paper type: Empirical Paper

1. Introduction

The popularity of eating out among Malaysian consumers continues to grow in tandem with the fact that fast food is one of the world's fastest growing sectors (Goyal & Singh, 2007). Fast food restaurant is booming mainly due to the changes in consumer lifestyle and trend. Fast food is becoming popular due to changes in consumer life style. Besides that, it could also be due to consumer busy working life and fast food is considered as the solution for meal as it is cheap, convenient and fast. Quick meal is the solution for those consumer with busy lifestyle and dual-working families with children (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Schröder & McEachern, 2005). Consumer also feels that fast food is simple as it comes with complete set of meal with drinks and hassle free. Schröder and McEachern (2005) explained that fast food is perceived as convenient to consumer due to the way food are packed in a simple packaging concept.

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Besides that, demand of fast food is also high due to the price of the fast food. It's cheaper compare to preparing or cooking a meal at home. There's a variety of fast food meal available for consumer to enjoy. Furthermore, fast foods are cheaper and usually served quicker compare to other restaurants (Price, 1991). Since eating out at fast food restaurants has become a new trend in Malaysia, restaurant owners should understand how marital status and age influence satisfaction and its antecedents of their customer.

The need to understand the influence of marital status and age are due to the changes in the Malaysian demographics. Department of Statistics Malaysia (2010) on Population and Housing Census, Malaysia 2010 Census, reported that in 2010, Malaysian below the age of 15 years decreased to 27.6% while proportion of working age population (15 to 64 years) increased to 67.3%. Meanwhile proportion of population aged 65 years and over also increased to 5.1%. As for marital status, Malaysian aged 15 years and over who were never married were 35.1% while those who were married were 59.6 per cent. Since there are changes in the proportion of the population, the aim of this research is to measure the influence of marital status and age group on product, price, service quality, environment and satisfaction from patronizing fast food restaurant.

Satisfaction is very important and it is a key to survival and profit to a company performance. It is not an easy task to influence and to satisfy customer expectations. Product influences customer satisfaction. As for the fast food restaurant, product refers to types and variety of meal set or package. It is important to have variety of meal set so that customers are open to variety of choices from which they can choose. Restaurant owners need to offer reasonable and acceptable price to customer base on what the market expects to pay. Service quality is also an important factor as customers are more demanding nowadays. Service quality is based on each service encounter by customer that leads to customer satisfaction (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Service quality leads to customer satisfaction (Namkung & Jang, 2008). A good environment and atmosphere is also important to attract and increase the level of customer satisfaction. Well-designed environment is important to attract customer and will influence customer satisfaction (Sullivan, 2002).

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2. Customer satisfaction towards fast food restaurant

In today's ever increasingly competitive market, customer satisfaction is very important and crucial. Customer satisfaction depends on the quality of experiences that customer receive towards goods or services offered to them. Higher level of customer satisfaction will help to increase company performance and profit (Omachonu, Johnson, & Onyeaso, 2008; Qin & Prybutok, 2009). Besides that satisfaction helps firms increase their market success and profitability (McQuitty, Finn, & Wiley, 2000). Customer satisfaction is therefore the fundamental for a firm to survive in the highly competitive markets today (Iglesias & Guillén, 2004). Several dimensions influencing customer satisfaction are product, price, service quality and environment.

Product influences customer satisfaction. As for the fast food restaurant, product refers to types and variety of meal set or package. It is important to have variety of meal set so that customers have a choice to decide what they want to buy and eat. Since fast food industry is becoming more competitive, marketers and restaurant owners should increase product variety. Fast food industry should offer variety as it will offer a new experience to their customers (Herrmann, Xia, Monroe, & Huber, 2007; Stuart Price, 1997). This will help to retain existing customers and attract new customers as well. Furthermore, variety of product available will add value to their existing offering (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Since fast food is a solution for most Malaysians consumer today, marketers and restaurant owners should diversify and customize their product so that customer will have various options to choose and consume. Customers enjoy the flexibility of food variety and quality. People have different opinions, taste and desires. Variety of meal will affect and influence the customer's decision to eat at fast food restaurants. Soriano (2002) stated that customers enjoy the flexibility of food variety and quality because everybody has their own favorites.

Many research have been done on price and customer satisfaction (Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Herrmann et al., 2007; Matzler, Würtele, & Renzl, 2006). Consumers are more interested in higher quality food and taste, better eating environment and superior customer service. Price is also a factor that will influence customer satisfaction towards fast food restaurants in Malaysia. Not all customers are willing to pay a higher price. Price factor will influence the level of customer satisfaction and might influence customer decision whether to visit the restaurant or

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not. Furthermore, if the price is high, customers are expecting higher quality and if the price is low, customers may question the ability of the restaurant. Therefore marketers and restaurant owners need to offer reasonable and acceptable price to customer that accord with what the market expects to pay.

Service quality is also an important factor as customers are more demanding nowadays. Service quality is important to business success and survival in today's competitive market (Gilbert, Veloutsou, Goode, & Moutinho, 2004; Iglesias & Guillén, 2004). Service quality is also a key to long term business success that leads to greater customer loyalty. Research by (Gilbert et al., 2004; Qin & Prybutok, 2009) discovered that organizations that provide superior service quality have been found to be market leaders in terms of sales and long-term customer loyalty. Besides that, Zopiatis and Pribic (2007) found that customer satisfaction is used as an indicator whether customer will return to the restaurant or not. Gilbert and Veloutsou (2006) stated that more companies are improving their service quality to attract customers.

The market for fast food restaurant is growing tremendously as customers nowadays are eager for new experience and they prefer a good overall restaurant experience. Customers today have higher expectations when they are dining outside. Therefore, environment is also an important factor that will influence customer satisfaction. A good environment and atmosphere is also important to attract and increase the level of customer satisfaction. Sullivan (2002) also found that well designed environment is important to attract customer and will influence customer satisfaction. This includes restaurant cleanliness with appropriate music and lighting. Fast food restaurants usually have a theme and the decoration in the restaurant usually link with the restaurant theme. Soriano (2002) stated that restaurant owners need to update their restaurant concept to attract customers and to compete with other competitor.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

Sixty respondents completed the questionnaire for this research. The respondents consists mainly of females, 45 respondents (75%) and 15 males (25%). As for the marital status variable, it is almost equally balanced where 48.3% of the respondents are single and 51.7% married. 40% of the respondents came from the 21 – 30 years old age group while 38.3% and 21.7% were from

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the 31 – 40 years old and 41 – 50 years old age groups respectively. The profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Breakdown of the Sample

	Frequency	%
Gender		
Male	15	25
Female	45	75
Marital Status		
Single	29	48.3
Married	31	51.7
Age Group		
21 – 30 years	24	40.0
31 – 40 years	23	38.3
41 – 50 years	13	21.7

3.2 Measurement

Product was measured using 4 items adopted from Dawson, Bloch, and Ridgway (1990) and Maddox (1982). Example of question for this variable is "The menu had an excellent selection of items." Price was measured using 4 items adopted from Maddox (1982) and Arora (1982). Example of questions for this variable is "The food sold in the restaurant is a good buy." Service quality was measured using 7 items adopted from Arora (1982) and Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988). Example of questions for this variable is "The staff provides prompt service in taking order and payment." Environment was measured using 5 items adopted from Parasuraman et al. (1988), Baker, Levy, and Grewal (1992), and Arora (1982). Example of questions for this variable is "Restaurant atmosphere and décor are appealing." Customer satisfaction was measured using 4 items adopted from Maddox (1982) and Arora (1982). Example of questions for this variable is "You are satisfied with the price of the items you purchased." The scale for all variables starts with "Strongly Agree" (1) to "Strongly Disagree" (5).

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4. Result

4.1 Test of Differences

The result of the T-test shows that there is a significant difference in how single and married consumer perceived service quality of fast food restaurant. However both single and married consumers have a similar perception on product, price, environment and satisfaction. The result of the T-test for all the variables is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. T-Test: Comparison of Single and Married

Variable	Mean		t-value
	Single	Married	
Customer Satisfaction	1.4224	1.2742	1.160
Product	1.6638	1.7661	-.751
Price	1.6207	1.7419	-.773
Service Quality	1.4828	1.7419	-1.961*
Environment	1.4345	1.6387	-1.640

Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

The result of the one-way ANOVA shows that there is a significant difference in perception between the age groups on satisfaction and price. However, all age groups appear to have a similar perception on product, price, environment and satisfaction. The result of the one-way ANOVA test for all the variables is shown in Table 3.

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Table 3. Comparison of Age Group

Variable	Mean		t-value
	Single	Married	
Customer Satisfaction	1.4224	1.2742	1.160
Product	1.6638	1.7661	-.751
Price	1.6207	1.7419	-.773
Service Quality	1.4828	1.7419	-1.961*
Environment	1.4345	1.6387	-1.640

Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

5. Discussion

There are three significant findings in this study. First, there is a significant difference in how single and married customer perceived service quality. Therefore, product positioning towards a single consumers may require different attributes compared to those who are married or with family (Abdullah & Rozario, 2010). Restaurant owners must identify their target market group and provide the best service quality that meets their target market needs and expectations.

Second, there is a significant difference in how customers from different age group perceive price of fast foods. This could be due to consumers in the $21 - 30$ years old age group, mostly singles and working adults know what they want and they are less sensitive to prices. They are more willing to spend to get what they want or desire. And customers in the $31 - 50$ years old age group are mainly working and married with children. They are busy with their career and family, have limited time to cook and prepare meals. Therefore, they might prefer to eat meal that is easy to consume, fast, hassle free, convenient, cheap and affordable. Mainly, fast food price are more affordable and cheap compare to preparing and cooking at home.

Third, there is a significant difference in customer satisfaction towards fast food based on different age group. Each age group has their own expectation and requirement towards customer satisfaction. Therefore marketers and restaurants owners need to identify their target market age group so that necessaries planning and action can be done to meet their expectation and this will lead to higher level of customer satisfaction (Khatibi, Thiagarajan, & Ismail, 2003).

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6. Implication and Future Research

This study draws several implications for restaurant owners or managers from the result of this study. First, it is critical for the restaurant owners or managers to pay attention on marital status and age of their customers as these two factors significantly influence their satisfaction and perception on price. Second, this study indicates that single and married consumer perceived service quality of fast food restaurant differently. This study recommend fast food restaurant to ensure high service quality especially for restaurant patronized more by married consumers.

7. Limitation and Future Research

Despite the important contribution and implication of this study, it is essential to consider its limitations. First, this study was based on a small sample and single location. This study encourages researchers to be more rigorous in getting a much bigger sample and multiple locations. Second, this study assessed all variables at the individual level of analysis. Many researchers have been applying multilevel analysis. It is important for future research to examine at different level of analysis.

8. Conclusion

Having established, the importance of marital status and age on customer satisfaction of fast food restaurant consumer, this study hope to contribute to the knowledge on consumer satisfaction. Lastly, this study hopes to encourage more research on consumer satisfaction in the contact of fast food restaurants in the emerging market.

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