Quick Service Restaurant Consumer Behaviors:

Moderating Effect of Gender

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ABSTRACT

The moderating effect of gender on quick service restaurant (QSR) consumer post-dining behaviors may be significant for a QSR’s success. This study investigates gender behavioral differences in QSR consumer behaviors. Specifically, structured survey of QSR consumers were used to examine gender differences in QSR choice criteria, food selection, post dining satisfaction levels, and dining loyalty. The results indicate that gender is a moderating factor on consumers' restaurant choice criteria, the healthiness of food choices, dining satisfaction levels and future restaurant loyalty intentions. Implications of the findings and QSR success strategies are discussed.

KEYWORDS

quick service restaurant, dining satisfaction, dining loyalty, gender food choices

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With annual revenues exceeding two trillion dollars, the quick service restaurant (QSR) industry, also known as the fast food industry, is a significant and vibrant component within the global economy (Dunn and Bradstreet Industry Profile, 2017). Just in the U.S., there are more than 250,000 QSRs with approximately $190 billion in combined annual sales. And, sales have grown steadily in recent years. For example, according to Schlosser (2001), Americans only spent about six billion on fast food in 1970; whereas in 2012, the amount surpassed $185 billion (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

While the macro QSR industry is thriving, individual restaurants or chains face tremendous competition from each other. Therefore, consumer loyalty is vital component to success in the QSR industry because it is estimated to cost three to five times as much to attract new consumers as it does to retain existing ones (Clark and Wood, 1998; Wallace, 1995). Furthermore, reducing consumer defection by five percent, can increase a QSR’s profits by twenty-five percent (Wallace, 1995). To achieve sustained success in the QSR industry, as with any industry, a business must implement strategies that produce consumer satisfaction and build marketing relationships (Bagozzi, 1995) that lead to loyal consumer behaviors such as repeat purchases and positive word-of-mouth to others (Shemwell et al., 1998).

Previous research has identified several factors that impact dining satisfaction levels and future loyalty intentions of QSR consumers. If the genders differ in their consumer behaviors, then a QSR’s success might be enhanced by developing strategies that build stronger marketing relationships with a given gender segment. The current exploratory research examines the moderating effect of gender on QSR consumer behaviors. More specifically, this study explores QSR gender behavioral differences in restaurant choice criteria, food selection choices, post-dining satisfaction levels, and dining loyalty intentions.

**Literature**

According to the theory of “reasoned action,” human behavior towards an object is a function of a person’s perceptional understandings about the characteristics of the object which lead to emotional associations (liking or disliking) towards the object (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1992). The theory further states that a person’s emotional associations with an object lead to behavioral intentions regarding the object, which influence future actions related to the object. Applying “reasoned action” to consumers’ relationships with QSRs would imply that a consumer’s perceptions about a QSR leads to emotional states (level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction) toward the QSR. Furthermore, a consumer’s positive/negative emotional state can lead to favorable/unfavorable behavioral intentions and ultimately favorable/unfavorable actions with respect to the QSR.

Several constructs have been shown to impact the degree to which consumers like or dislike their dining experiences. More specifically, dining satisfaction has been found to be directly related to consumers’ perceptions about the restaurant’s food quality, service quality, and physical surroundings (Chang, 2000; Chebat and Michon, 2003; Gronroos, 1982; 1984; Khan et al., 2012; Mason et al., 2016; Mattila, 2001; Ryu and Jang, 2008). Moreover, studies have also demonstrated that food quality, service quality, and physical surroundings are directly related antecedents to consumers’ loyalty towards a QSR (Gronroos, 1982; 1984; Keillor et al, 2004; Mason et al., 2016). For example, in an international study, Keillor et al. (2004) investigated QSR consumers in eight countries (Australia, China, Germany, India, Morocco, Netherlands, Sweden and the United States) and found food quality to be a significant antecedent to consumers’ loyalty intentions in six of the countries examined. Service quality was found to moderate loyalty intentions in five countries and physical surroundings had a significant effect in four countries. While the results varied for different countries, overall, food quality, service quality, and physical surroundings seem to explain loyalty intentions for most of the observed consumers. Therefore, the success of a QSR can be enhanced when the food quality, service quality and physical surroundings provided by the QSR meet or exceed consumer’s expectations.

Consumers’ perceptions of food quality can be compromised if they believe that the QSR improperly handles food items. For example, consumers are unlikely to be satisfied if a meal causes them to become sick or if they think the food may cause them to become ill. Therefore, QSR employees must practice sanitary procedures such as proper hand washing and implement proper temperature controls during food storage, or they may promote increases in bacteria and other pathogens that cause food-borne illness (Todd and Greig 2007).

Researchers have measured consumers’ perceptions of food quality in a variety of ways. For example, food quality has been examined based upon consumers’ perceptions about whether the food tasted right or whether the food was served at the appropriate temperature (Keillor et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2016). Food quality perceptions have also been measured based upon consumer perceptions of food portion size and whether consumers believe that fresh ingredients were used (Keillor et al., 2004; Mason et al., 2016; Richter, 2014; Sabir et al., 2014).

To build successful consumer relations, a QSR must provide desirable customer service (Pettijohn et al., 1997). Poor employee service harms customer relationships (Harris and Ogbonna, 2006). Therefore, QSRs must continuously measure and seek ways to improve the service quality they provide. Consumers’ perceptions of service quality have been measured using a variety of characteristics such as their perceptions of the service time, accuracy of filling a food order, and the friendliness of service workers (Brady and Cronin, 2001; Lee et al., 2000; Spreng and MacKoy, 1996; Ryu and Han, 2008; Sabir et al., 2014; Ting, 2004).

Several QSR characteristics have been found to impact consumer’s perceptions of a restaurant’s physical surroundings. Bitner (1990) identified the importance of cleanliness in building consumer relationships. Providing a clean dining environment improves a restaurant’s sanitation and good sanitation can enhance its consumers’ satisfaction which lead to greater consumer retention (Barber and Scarcelli, 2009; Min and Min, 2011). Also, positive aesthetics within the physical surroundings such as an attractive interior design, pleasing music, ambient odors, a spacious layout and appealing table settings, have been shown to directly impact consumers’ dining satisfaction levels (Hui et al., 1997; Milliman, 1986; Kotler, 1973; Robson, 1999; Ryu and Jang, 2008; Sabir et al., 2014).

Historically, QSRs have targeted the family unit as a primary target market. However, with a growing number of people putting off marriage until later in life (Brown, 2017), more consumers are making QSR choices at the individual level as opposed to the family unit level. So, QSR consumer research may need to increase focus on differences in individuals as they seek to build consumer relationships. One such individual difference to examine is whether QSR consumer behaviors may be moderated by gender differences. While a greater percent of males (53%) report that they eat at a QSR weekly, a significant percent of females (42%) also frequent a QSR weekly (Dugan, 2013). As such, the perceptions of both genders are significant to sustained QSR success. Yet, the behaviors of males and females may differ in many ways, including: how they choose a restaurant, what types of foods they select, how they define dining satisfaction and ultimately the degree to which they develop loyalty behaviors (i.e., QSR relationships).

We conducted a search of the literature for reported differences in males and females regarding their QSR food selections, post-dining satisfaction levels and future loyalty intentions. Some relevant findings were observed. Mills (2014) reports that consumers, particularly females, are becoming more health conscience in their food choices. Beardsworth et al. (2002) reports that females tend to have higher dietary health knowledge than males. In addition, females have been found to prefer healthier meals that consists of more vegetables and less red meat and fats as compared to males (Beardsworth et al., 2002; Fagerli and Wandel, 1999; Rappoport, 1993). These findings imply that females may make choices on which QSR to frequent and what foods to consume on different criteria than males.

Barber and Scarcelli (2010) observed that gender and education levels are significant factors impacting consumers’ perceptions of restaurant cleanliness. Ramanathan et al. (2016), found that gender moderates the effect of a restaurant’s physical surroundings [as measured by ambience] on consumers’ dining satisfaction levels. If males and females differ in their dining satisfaction levels, it is logical to assume that their future loyalty behaviors may also differ. To test the effect of gender on various consumer behaviors, we put forth the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Males and females differ on the importance of food quality**in their choice of a QSR.*

*Hypothesis 2: Males and females differ on the importance of service speed in their QSR choice.*

*Hypothesis 3: Males and females differ on the importance of cleanliness in their QSR choice.*

*Hypothesis 4: Males and females differ in their QSR dining satisfaction levels.*

*Hypothesis 5: Males and females differ in their QSR loyalty intentions*.

*Hypothesis 6: Females consume vegetables more frequently**than males during QSR dining.*

*Hypothesis 7: Females consume salads more frequently than males during QSR dining.*

*Hypothesis 8: Males consume hamburgers more frequently than females during QSR dining.*

*Hypothesis 9: Males consume deep fried foods more frequently than females during QSR dining.*

**Methods**

Students from a mid-size university served as subjects for our study. A total of 387 dining experiences were examined. Among the dining experiences, 208 were from females and 179 were from males. The participants provided general demographic information, their past QSR dining experiences, how important certain factors are in their selection of a QSR, and their post-dining satisfaction and loyalty intentions.

Demographic information provided by subjects included their gender. Information provided about past QSR dining experiences included how frequently they consumer certain types of food (e.g., beef, vegetables, salads, deserts, buffets) with responses ranging from 1 to five, where 1 indicates never to 5 indicating daily. From subjects’ responses we calculated an index of healthy food consumption (HFC) where healthier food choices (higher HFC) were based upon the subjects’ reporting higher mean frequencies of eating foods such as vegetables and salads. Less healthy food choices (lower HFC) were based upon higher reporting higher mean frequencies of consuming foods such as hamburgers and deep fried foods.

Subjects also rated how important certain criteria are in their choice of a QSR. The rated factors included; food quality (FQ), as measured by taste perceptions, service quality (SQ), measured as service speed perceptions, and the restaurant’s physical surrounding (PS), measured as perceptions of cleanliness. Also the subjects rated the importance of price, location, menu variety and portion size. Each of these factors were measured on five point scales where 1 equals the least important factor to 5 equals the most important factor.

Then, the subjects were asked to engage in a QSR dining experience at the restaurant of their choice. The only restriction was that the meal must include at least one entrée, one side item, and one beverage of their choosing. After their dining experience, subjects were asked to provide their dining satisfaction (DS) level and future loyalty intentions (LI). DS was measured along five dimensions: food satisfaction, service satisfaction, price satisfaction, value satisfaction and overall dining satisfaction. For each of these dimensions, subjects rated their QSR dining experience on 5-point semantic differential scales where responses could range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. More details on the post-dining experience DS survey instrument can be found in the Appendix.

LI was measured with two items. One LI item was the subjects’ self-reported likelihood of future repeat purchase intentions with the QSR. The second item used to create the LI construct was the subjects’ self-reported intention to make positive recommendations about the QSR to others. For each of these constructs, subjects responded to 5-point semantic differential scales where responses could range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. More details on the post-dining experience LI survey instrument can be found in the Appendix.

**Results**

Overall, males and female consumers were similar in their ratings of QSR choice criteria. However, some differences were observed. Table 1 presents the subjects’ rankings and means for QSR choice criteria. As shown in Table 1, QSR pricing, portion size and cleanliness (PS) were the top three criteria for both genders. However, FQ seems to be more important to males than females. More specifically, males ranked FQ as the fourth most important criteria whereas females ranked FQ lower in importance.

**Table 1** Quick Service Restaurant Choice Criteria Rankings

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Ranking of Criteria Importance  | Males Choice Criteria | Criteria Means for Males | Females Choice Criteria | Criteria Means for Females |
| 1 | Price | 3.06 | Portion Size | 2.72 |
| 2 | Portion Size | 2.73 | Price | 2.66 |
| 3 | Physical Surroundings Cleanliness | 1.59 | Physical Surroundings Cleanliness | 2.60 |
| 4 | Food Quality | 1.49 | Location | 1.55 |
| 5 | Service Speed | 1.45 | Service Speed | 1.42 |
| 6 | Location | 1.27 | Menu Variety | 1.02 |
| 7 | Menu Variety | 1.00 | Food Quality | 0.68 |

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test for gender effects on the dependent variables. More specifically, gender as defined as male and female served as the independent variable. The dependent variables included consumers’ ratings for the importance of various factors that impact their choice of a QSR; FQ, SQ and PS. ANOVA tests were also conducted to measure whether gender had an impact on consumers’ DS, LI and HFC.

Table 2 provides the ANOVA results for the impact of gender on which factors are important when consumers are choosing a QSR. The results indicate that male and females differ in terms of what how they determine a QSR dining experience. As predicted in H1 and H3, gender differences were observed regarding the importance of perceived food quality (FQ) and physical surrounding (PS) on their choice of a QSR. The perceived food quality of a QSR was more important for males than for females. And, the physical surroundings of a QSR was more important for females than for males. However, support for H2 was not observed. That is, males and females did not significantly differ in the importance they place on service quality in their choice of a QSR.

**Table 2** ANOVA: Restaurant Choice Criteria Importance

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Choice Criteria | Male Means | Female Means | F-value | P-value |
| Food Quality | 1.49 | 0.69 | *60.15* | ***< .01\**** |
| Service Quality | 1.45 | 1.42 | .594 | .441 |
| Physical Surroundings | 1.59 | 2.60 | *15.97* | ***< .01\**** |

*\*significant difference*

As shown in Table 3, females did rate their QSR dining experiences more favorably than males. While these results were consistent with the H4, the difference in means were not statistically significant. Table 3 also presents the loyalty intentions of our subjects and here a significant difference between males and females was observed. Females were found to have higher levels of loyalty (as measured by their reported future loyalty intentions) than males. Based upon these findings, H5 was supported.

**Table 3** ANOVA: Dining Satisfaction and Loyalty

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dining Outcomes | Male Means | Female Means | F-value | P-value |
| Dining Satisfaction | 4.11 | 4.23 | .82 | .135 |
| Loyalty Intentions | 3.92 | 4.10 | .03 | **.089^** |

*^marginally significant difference*

The results on healthier QSR food consumption choices by gender indicate that females make healthier food choices (higher HFC) during a QSR dining experience. As shown in Table 4, females reported higher mean frequency of consuming both salads and vegetables (higher HFC) at QSRs. Whereas, males reported higher mean frequencies of consuming QSR hamburgers and deep fried foods; or a greater mean frequency of less healthy foods (lower HFC). However, across these food selections, only the consumption of hamburgers statistically differed across the genders. Thus, while results were consistent with H6-H9, only H8 was statistically supported.

**Table 4** ANOVA: Healthiness of Food Choices

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Food Choices | Male Means | Female Means | F-value | P-value |
| Salads (Higher HFC) | 3.36 | 3.75 | 1.378 | .241 |
| Vegetables (Higher HFC) | 4.04 | 4.47 | 2.37 | .124 |
| Hamburgers (Lower HFC) | 3.73 | 3.34 | 25.66 | ***< .01\**** |
| Deep Fried Food (Lower HFC) | 3.51 | 3.38 | 2.02 | .155 |

*Note: HFC = Healthy Food Choice*

*\*significant difference*

**Discussion**

With a growing trend of people putting off marriage until later in life, QSR consumer behaviors are becoming more of an individual choice as opposed to a family unit choice. Findings indicate that individuals of a given gender differ in QSR consumer behaviors. The remainder of this section provides suggestions on ways a QSR can gain competitive advantage using tactics that can improve standing with a particular gender or that may apply to both genders.

Food quality was found to be a more significant QSR choice criteria for males than for females. It may be that food quality is very important to females in other restaurant venues, yet not as important when faced with a decision of dining at a QSR. It may also be that females have a basic understanding that the relative advantage of a QSR does not lie in its food quality. As such, the choice of dining at a QSR for women may not be based upon their perception of the food quality, rather, other factors may drive their choice selection.

However, food quality perceptions may play a greater role in a QSR’s competitive advantage for male consumers. To appeal to males, QSRs should consistently offer high-quality meals and promote this characteristic. More specifically, for males it may be more important that the QSR offer meals with quality ingredients and provides consistent delivery of food. Also, males may be more influenced by meal preparations that ensure that the food has consistent tastes, consistent portions, and is delivered at consistent temperatures. In addition, with consumers, especially females, becoming more health conscience, QSRs should offer a nutritious menu that includes fruits, fresh vegetables, whole grains, leaner meats and meats with less preservatives.

While, male and female consumers value dining experiences in restaurants that have desirable physical surroundings, the current findings indicate that restaurant cleanliness is an especially important aspect of the physical environment for females. To enhance dining satisfaction and restaurant loyalty among females, QSRs need an innovative interior design, pleasant décor, pleasing music, attractive color schemes, ambient odors, a spacious layout and appealing table settings. Consumers, especially females will perceive that an attractive and clean dining environment is more sanitary and aesthetically appealing, thus, enhancing their satisfaction levels.

It is the responsibility of restaurant owners and management to provide a safe and clean restaurant environment. Restaurant tables, counters, floors and bathrooms need to be cleaned regularly. Not only does a clean environment enhance the consumers’ physical atmosphere perceptions, but cleanliness can actually lead to healthier food. While important to all consumers, healthier food may be particularly desirable to females. Improper hand washing of a bacteria infected worker can cause food-borne illness, thus restaurant service workers must be required to keep their hands clean before handling food products. Proper food storage is also important. For example, maintaining stored foods at appropriate temperatures is necessary to control the growth of bacteria and other pathogens, thus, limiting food-borne illness. Also, food must be properly cooked. Undercooked meats, poultry, and eggs can harbor enough bacteria to sicken diners. While avoiding consumer illness from a meal does not necessarily translate into a satisfying customer experience, consumers who become sick from a dining experience will most certainly lead to an unsatisfactory dining experience and possibly lead consumers to have unfavorable loyalty intentions.

In the 1970s, the McDonald’s QSR franchise gained competitive advantage by highlighting the cleanliness of their restaurants. To promote this competitive advantage, McDonald’s created commercials that highlighted restaurant cleanliness and showcased how seriously they take the cleanliness of their restaurants. One such iconic commercial featured a McDonald’s crew singing and dancing while proclaiming “there is nothing so clean as my burger machine” [see the commercial at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNWNOEiCuz0>]. However, it has been several decades since any QSR chain has emphasized cleanliness as competitive advantage. It may once again be time for QSRs to not only provide a clean restaurant environment, but to also effectively communicating restaurant cleanliness in their promotional messaging.

Service speed was not found to be a compelling factor in the choice of QSR, nor did its importance significantly differ with respect to gender. However, we do recommend that QSRs strive to provide excellence in service. Effective training is imperative to reduce cost of operations and achieve operational efficiency. Efficient production processes minimize the time between when a customer places and receives their order and, thus, increases the likelihood that the consumer has a favorable service quality perception. Also, employees must be trained to be proficient because poorly managed employees can harm consumer relationships. To improve their service quality potential, employees should be trained and empowered to address and resolve customer problems.

Several strategies can decrease service time. For example, the use of technology to outsource the order-taking process to a call center, using technology to speed up the food preparation time, or finding ways to improve quick and accurate product delivery to consumers. Also, employees should be trained on the proper use of all equipment and all procedures on a regular basis. In addition, the restaurant should create a friendly, welcoming atmosphere by training employees to act in a polite, friendly and respectful manner.

**Limitations and future research**

Although this study makes meaningful contributions to the understanding of gender impacts on QSR choice and dining satisfaction levels, there are limitations to the findings. First, the data collected was based upon student QSR dining experiences. While students are QSR consumers, they may not fully represent all QSR consumers. To be more specific, there may be significant gender differences in consumer expectations and perceptions across consumers from more diversified age, income and lifestyle segments.

Additionally, the measurements of the current study could be improved. In this study, self-reported intentions of future loyalty were used as opposed to actual repeat purchase behaviors. It would be more useful to measure consumers’ actual repurchase or word of mouth behaviors rather than their intentions. Also, the current study measured the constructs of food quality, service quality and physical surrounding using limited dimensions of each. As reported in the literature review, each of these constructs have multiple layers and have been measured in a variety of ways. Perhaps future studies will develop widely accepted indices for each construct. If so, causal modeling techniques might be used to get a deeper understanding of how consumers’ perceptions of QSR food quality, service quality and physical surroundings are formed and how each impacts consumers’ dining satisfaction and loyalty levels.

Future studies should also consider the role of other moderating variables on the QSR consumer behaviors. For example, a consumer’s perception of price might moderate his/her food quality, service quality, and physical surroundings perceptions. As such, QSR consumers’ food price perceptions could increase or decrease the likelihood that males and/or females generate satisfying food quality, service quality, or physical surroundings perceptions. In addition, price perceptions may moderate consumers’ dining satisfaction levels and loyalty behaviors.

**Conclusions**

Considerable research has investigated ways for QSRs to achieve highly satisfied consumers and build consumer loyalty. QSRs have used research for decades to increase sales by improving product and promotion offerings targeting salient attributes. Although QSR consumers are primarily men, there are large numbers of female consumers as well. The current study examined whether males and females differ as consumers in their post-QSR dining behaviors.

This research makes meaningful contributions to the understanding of the role of gender on QSR choice and dining satisfaction levels. A total of 387 dining experiences were analyzed. The data gathered demonstrate that the genders differ in their respective QSR consumer behaviors. More specifically, males and females differ in terms of their restaurant choice criteria, healthy food choices and overall restaurant loyalty intentions. QSR management can utilize this research to offer better products and more effective promotions to their male and female consumers, respectively, and, thus, increase overall sales. Further research is needed for greater understanding of the moderating effect of on gender on QSR behaviors.

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APPENDIX

**(Items used to formulate the post-dining experience constructs)**

To provide perceptions about restaurant dining satisfaction and restaurant loyalty, subjects responded to statements using 5-point semantic differential scales where responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

**Dining Satisfaction (DS)** was computed by averaging responses to the following statements:

1. I am satisfied with the quality of the food I received (i.e., *food satisfaction*).
2. I am satisfied with the quality of the service I received (i.e., service *satisfaction*).
3. I am satisfied with the value I received for the price I paid (i.e., *value satisfaction*).
4. I feel that I got exactly what I paid for (i.e., *price satisfaction*).
5. Overall, I am satisfied with this dining experience (i.e., *overall satisfaction*).

**Restaurant Loyalty** **Intentions (LI)** was measured by averaging responses to the following statements:

1. I plan to visit this restaurant soon (i.e., *repeat purchase*).
2. I would recommend this dining experience to friends and family (i.e, *positive recommendations*).