

Cultivating loyalty in fast food through marketing cues

Cultivating
loyalty in
fast food

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Abstract

Purpose – Cultivating customer loyalty is extremely crucial for fast-food players to remain competitive in the industry. This research is discovering the path to cultivate customer loyalty through experience that is built based on auditory, gustatory, haptic, olfactory and visual cues.

Design/methodology/approach – Quantitative research has been conducted by distributing survey questionnaires to customers at selected fast-food restaurants in urban areas. The collected data has been analyzed by descriptive and structural equation modeling analysis.

Findings – The customers' loyalty to fast food can be cultivated through gustatory, haptic and olfactory cues. However, auditory and visual are not functioning as marketing cues to cultivate customer loyalty.

Practical implications – The fast-food players may emphasize gustatory, haptic and olfactory marketing cues to cultivate customer loyalty. These cues can be shared through experience.

Originality/value – This study has discovered the potential ways to cultivate customer loyalty in dining at fast-food restaurants within the Malaysian market.

Keywords Auditory, Gustatory, Haptic, Loyalty, Olfactory, Visual

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The foodie culture in Malaysia is extremely strong due to the combination of multicultural culinary that is available. This is further stimulated with the infusion of western food culture, especially fast food. As a developing country, Malaysia is always welcoming any international fast-food chains to enter the local market to stimulate a positive socio-economic momentum. There are also few local businesses that are also venturing into fast-food industry. McDonald, KFC, Pizza Hut, Dominos, Texas Chicken, A&W, US pizza, Burger King, Wendy's, Carl's Jr., Taco Bell and Subway are some of well-known western fast-food chain in Malaysia. While Marrybrown, 1901, Kyros Kebab and Ramly are some examples of local fast-food chain that sell western meals. Burger, sandwich, pizza and fried chicken are common meals at the fast-food restaurants. While the traditional culinary is mostly based on rice, noodles or flour-based food. Due to variety of food options, Malaysia can be considered as a hub for food business in the South East Asia region. With the high Muslim population, Malaysia is currently the hub for halal products (Ariffin *et al.*, 2021). In addition, a continuous effort has been exerted to develop the rural areas by emphasizing on tropical fruits plantation (Kamarubahrin *et al.*, 2019). This is consistent with the health-conscious trend among Malaysian (Durai, 2019).

There are plenty of factors that could stimulate the customers' satisfaction in dining experience such as the food itself, service, atmosphere, location, price and a variety of food (Javed *et al.*, 2021). The societies always perceived the western fast food as unhealthy meals more than any other traditional cuisine available in the market. This is because, fast food is always being portrayed as the cause of overweight and obesity (Hass, 2021). The continuous increasing number of fast-food restaurants may also increase the percentage of overweight and obesity (Hall *et al.*, 2021). Previous studies have determined that fast food is the main



cause of obesity and health inequalities. Fast food is also causing negative environmental impacts through its production and distribution (Burningham and Venn, 2021). The initiative to label the calorie of fast food is expected to assist in reducing the consumption (Marty *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, a majority of the population do not have sufficient knowledge in food literacy (Bazzani *et al.*, 2021) especially in calorie intake (Cheah *et al.*, 2023). Although a strong negative stereotype exists toward the western fast food, especially from the media, a continuously increasing number of fast-food restaurants still exist due to changes in modern lifestyles and dietary habits (Saxena and Taneja, 2020). Due to this contradictory perception and behavior, this research is looking into how the customer could be loyal toward fast-food restaurants based on the experience through auditory, gustatory, haptic, olfactory and visual marketing cues. This study focuses within the Malaysian market. It is expected that the discovery that could be obtained from this research can be used to enhance the theoretical understanding on why people stay loyal toward fast food, although a widespread of negative stereotypes exist on the meals.

Literature reviews

Customers' loyalty

Customers are loyal toward certain brand due to their love toward the brand (Khan *et al.*, 2020). Customer might revisit a particular fast-food restaurant due to the satisfaction that is obtained through food quality, service quality and physical environment quality (Rajput and Gahfoor, 2020). This has proven that the quality may influence loyalty (Carranza *et al.*, 2018). The customer loyalty in fast food is also determined by brand trust, brand image (Singh *et al.*, 2021) and customer satisfaction (Javed *et al.*, 2021; Huda *et al.*, 2021). While the satisfaction is emerged based on convenience and food quality (Lefrid, 2021). The food quality and physical environment quality is the main perceived value by customers. The positive perceived value will enhance the customer satisfaction. The positive satisfaction will further stimulate behavioral intention (Slack *et al.*, 2020). In the Malaysian market, the halal logo is extremely important to gain customer loyalty (Quoquab *et al.*, 2019) because the majority of Malaysians are Muslim. Parallely, the non-Muslim in Malaysia also does have intention to purchase halal-based food due to influence from attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (Lim *et al.*, 2020). For this study, the focus of customer loyalty toward a particular fast-food chain is discovered through cues that are experienced by the existing customers.

Customer experience

The customer's experience is not only focusing during consumption but all the way from searching for the product, purchasing and after consumption (Teichert *et al.*, 2020). To meet these stages, the modern fast-food dining experience should have technofence, staged eating and a sense of home away from home dining (Kellersohn, 2018). The food quality and physical environment are main valuable perception of customer while dining at the fast-food restaurant (Slack *et al.*, 2020). External ambience cues may enhance the sales for food and beverages (Peng-Li *et al.*, 2021). The fast-food dining experience might be based on the age of the customers. Most parents and caretaker emphasize on fast lanes, healthy food, easy order and sanitary standards while kids will always look for tasty food, entertainment and playfulness (Nindl and Cerha, 2019). Thus, the relationship between customer experience and behavioral intention is expected to become more intensified as the customers become older (Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). Because many factors exist that might influence the customer experience, this research is only focusing on five main marketing cues, which are auditory, gustatory, haptic, olfactory and visual cues while dining at fast-food restaurants.

Auditory cues

Auditory cues will provide hints on the expected experience to the customers (Arroyo and Arboleda, 2021). It is believed that the consumers will spend more if there are mixture of different genre music are being played such as pop and traditional rather than just one genre (Choo *et al.*, 2021). When it comes to dine-in at the restaurant, the type of music may influence consumers' visual attention toward food (Peng-Li *et al.*, 2020) and the food consumption (Padulo *et al.*, 2021). The auditory cues may not necessarily be music because it might be interrupted with ambient noise. For those who dine-in with huge family members, the sound environment is depending on number of children (Meng *et al.*, 2020). Normally, female, older people and those who sensitive with noise do not like to dine at noisy places (Alamir *et al.*, 2020). Due to this, there is possibility that the auditory cue is correlated with visual cue since those customers who do not like to dine at noisy place might stay away when this group of people see there are a lot of children in a particular restaurant. The relationship of the auditory cues and loyalty in this research is represented by hypothesis below:

- H1. A positive and significant relationship exists between auditory cues and loyalty in dining at fast-food restaurants.

Gustatory cues

Gustatory is the sense of the food and beverage taste (Li *et al.*, 2023) that is stimulated through experience (Kim *et al.*, 2021). It is found that there is a positive correlation between tasty and healthy food and beverage (Kunz *et al.*, 2020). In fact, majority of people purchase fast-food meal because of the taste (Banik *et al.*, 2020; Khongrangiem *et al.*, 2018). Due to the strong gustatory influence to attract more customers, it is very common for international fast-food chain to adapt local taste by infusing local menu with the original menu (Tien, 2019). However, the gustatory cue has lesser impact for the obese than normal weight individuals (Kalveram *et al.*, 2021). Due to the significance of gustatory cues, labeling food based on taste may always catch the potential customers' attention than those labeled based on health (Turnwald and Crum, 2019). This is the main reason why finding fast-food chains that advertise the food based on nutrients is difficult, although fast-food chains do have healthy meal options in the menu. The relationship of the gustatory cues and loyalty in this research is represented by hypothesis below:

- H2. A positive and significant relationship exists between gustatory cues and loyalty in dining at fast-food restaurants.

Haptic cues

Haptic is the sense of touch and feel through handling food (Woods and Donaldson, 2022). The haptic cue is obtained through experience (Spence, 2019). Touching food directly by hand may further enhance the sensory experience (Madzharov, 2019). It is also found that even children tend to concern on the food texture (Nederkoorn *et al.*, 2018). However, in fast-food, touching the food before the customer purchases it is impossible. Instead, the customer can only view the food through photographs. Although there is no pre-physical touch, the haptic perception of photographs can also be induced through visual cues (Decré and Cloonan, 2019). Due to this, haptic cue may enhance the experience of advertisement (Mulcahy and Riedel, 2020). The haptic cue may not necessarily just referring to the food and beverage but also including tableware, cutlery, containers, packaging and surroundings such as dining tables (Pramudya and Seo, 2019). For example, coffee that is served in heavy cups is always being perceived as more expensive than the same coffee that is served in paper cups (Sakarya and Dortyol, 2021). The relationship of the haptic cues and loyalty in this research is represented by hypothesis below:

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- H3. A positive and significant relationship exists between haptic cues and loyalty in dining at fast-food restaurants.

Olfactory cues

Olfactory is detection and identification through sense of smell (Mas *et al.*, 2021). The smell may influence the perception toward the food (Broge *et al.*, 2021a). The intention for a particular food is stimulated through smell before looking at the food (Janet *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, instead of being standalone, the olfactory can be further stimulated through visual cues, which will then enhance the taste perception, volume consumed, meal recommendation and choice (Biswas *et al.*, 2021). Humans are able to extract nutritional information through olfactory cues and this may trigger appetite and food choice. However, it may not necessarily influence the actual food intake (Boesveldt and Parma, 2021). The attraction of food through olfactory cues is extremely strong for the youngsters. However, the intensity toward sense of food smell will be declined as human aging (Broge *et al.*, 2021b). Nevertheless, it is found that there is no different in the preference of food for those who have loss the sense of smell. Those who have congenital smell prefer tasty food (Postma *et al.*, 2020). The relationship of the olfactory cues and loyalty in this research is represented by hypothesis below:

- H4. A positive and significant relationship exists between olfactory cues and loyalty in dining at fast-food restaurants.

Visual cues

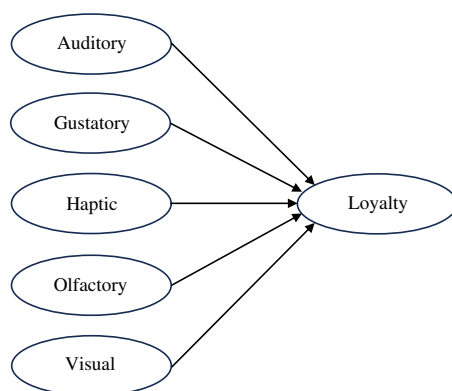
The visual presentation of the food is expected to affect the preference of customers to make purchase decisions. Even children tend to spend more time observing food than toys (Brand *et al.*, 2020). This is the reason why some fast-food chains emphasize on the visual presentation of the products. The positioning of the food picture may also influence the potential customers. The food picture that is placed at the lower part of packaging is enhancing the expectation of the food flavor, but may decrease the consumption quantity (Togawa *et al.*, 2019). Fast-food advertisements became ubiquitous through an interactive engagement in social media (Bragg *et al.*, 2020; Hanaysha, 2022). The fast-food visual through social media such as Facebook and Instagram may influence people to dine at fast-food restaurants (Abdul-Samad *et al.*, 2021). Normally, the visual marketing that is based on group dining is providing more favorable cues than those based on individual dining (Liu and Bailey, 2021) because more people are being portrayed to enjoy the food as a social norm. The relationship of the visual cues and loyalty in this research is represented by hypothesis below:

- H5. A positive and significant relationship exists between visual cues and loyalty in dining at fast-food restaurants.

Methodology

The auditory (Jiang and Yan, 2022), gustatory (Samuel, 2023), haptic (Rowley, 2000), olfactory (Beerli *et al.*, 2021) and visual (Jin *et al.*, 2019) cues may enhance loyalty. As an extension of previous findings, in this research, the experience in consuming fast-food is expected to be based on auditory, gustatory, haptic, olfactory and visual (Krishna and Elder, 2021). The positive cue in experience is expected to influence loyalty (Hussain, 2018). Thus, there are six constructs in this research framework as in Figure 1.

Each exogenous constructs are represented by five indicators while loyalty is represented with six indicators. The questionnaire for the constructs is based on five points Likert scales



Source(s): Author's own creation

Figure 1.
Research framework

which consists of strongly agree (5), agree (4), neither agree or disagree (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1) while the respondent's background questionnaire is based on categorical questions. Survey questionnaire has been distributed to the customers at selected fast-food restaurants especially in urban areas. An explanation was given in advance to all the potential respondents. All potential respondents have been encouraged to participate instead of being forced to ensure the sincerity of the given feedback. Each of the given feedback has been manually screened while the respondents returned the survey questionnaire to avoid major missing data. A total of 138 sample data have been used for analysis. This sample data fulfilled the minimum statistical requirement by [Green \(1991\)](#) with a formula of $50 + 8k$. Because there are six constructs in the research framework, only 98 data are required for analysis, where $50 + 8(6) = 98$. The additional data is expected to make the analysis findings to be more stable. All collected data have been analyzed by using descriptive analysis to discover the respondents' background and structure equation modeling to analyze the hypotheses relationships.

Analysis

Respondents' background

More females with 113 respondents (81.9%) participated in this survey questionnaire than males with only 25 respondents (18.1%). Most of the respondents are between the ages of 18 and 24 with 80 respondents (58.0%). There are approximately similar number of respondents between the age of 45 and 54 (19 respondents, 13.8%), 25 and 34 (17 respondents, 12.3%) and 35 and 44 (15 respondents, 10.9%). Only seven respondents (5.1%) who are 55 and above participated in the survey questionnaire. Since most of the respondents are youngsters, 79 of the respondents (57.2%) are earning RM1000 and below. 15 of the respondents (10.9%) are earning at least RM5001 per month. 14 of the respondents (10.1%) are earning between RM3001 and RM4000, 13 of the respondents (9.4%) are earning between RM1001 and RM2000, nine of the respondents (6.5%) are earning between RM2001 and RM3000 while only eight of the respondents (5.8%) are earning between RM4001 until RM5000. Regardless of income, the majority of the population in urban areas do dine-in at fast food restaurant. As for preference of fast-food chain, 107 of the respondents (77.5%) preferred to go to international fast-food chain instead of local fast-food chain with only 31 respondents (22.5%). The summary of the respondents' background is shown in [Table 1](#).

Background	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	25	18.1
	Female	113	81.9
Age	18–24	80	58.0
	25–34	17	12.3
	35–44	15	10.9
	45–54	19	13.8
	55 and above	7	5.1
Income	RM1000 and below	79	57.2
	RM1001–RM2000	13	9.4
	RM2001–RM3000	9	6.5
	RM3001–RM4000	14	10.1
	RM4001–RM5000	8	5.8
Preferred fast-food	RM5001 and above	15	10.9
	International	107	77.5
	Local	31	22.5

Source(s): Authors’ own creation

Table 1.
Respondents’
background

Measurement analysis

Convergent validity

The convergent validity analysis indicated that the lowest loading is 0.677 (O5) while the highest loading is 0.897 (L3). Thus, all items remained without any removal. The average variance extracted values are all above 0.50 where the lowest value is 0.535 for olfactory while the highest value is 0.674 for loyalty. These values are acceptable based on the statistical requirement (Byrne, 2016). All six constructs also fulfilled the composite reliability with the lowest value of 0.852 for olfactory, whilst the highest value is 0.925 for loyalty. The analysis findings for the loadings, average variance extracted and composite reliability is summarized in Table 2.

Discriminant validity

The discriminant validity based on Fornell–Larcker criterion indicated that the square root of average variance extracted values in diagonal is larger than the correlation between various constructs in off-diagonal. This indicated that the discriminant validity requirement is acceptable, as shown in Table 3.

As for cross-loading, all items have been highly loaded in the respected constructs instead of cross-loading to various constructs. This also indicated that the requirement of discriminant validity is fulfilled, as shown in Table 4.

There is no value of 1 in the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation (HTMT) as shown in Table 5. Due to this, it is proven that there is no issue on discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

Structural analysis

The lateral collinearity values for auditory (1.589), gustatory (2.309), haptic (2.598), olfactory (1.818) and visual (1.372) cues seem acceptable because all values are below 3.3 (Hair et al., 2017). These values are as shown in Table 6.

Hypothesis analysis

The *t*-value of three out of five hypotheses is more than 1.645 with a *p*-value of less than 0.05. This indicated that significantly positive relationships exist for gustatory (H2), haptic (H3)

Construct	Items	Loadings	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Composite reliability
Auditory	A1	0.804	0.602	0.883
	A2	0.826		
	A3	0.794		
	A4	0.729		
	A5	0.720		
Gustatory	G1	0.814	0.610	0.886
	G2	0.741		
	G3	0.826		
	G4	0.780		
	G5	0.739		
Haptic	H1	0.692	0.579	0.873
	H2	0.726		
	H3	0.786		
	H4	0.817		
	H5	0.778		
Loyalty	L1	0.708	0.674	0.925
	L2	0.831		
	L3	0.897		
	L4	0.829		
	L5	0.857		
	L6	0.790		
Olfactory	O1	0.757	0.535	0.852
	O2	0.777		
	O3	0.700		
	O4	0.741		
	O5	0.677		
Visual	V1	0.789	0.552	0.860
	V2	0.715		
	V3	0.776		
	V4	0.703		
	V5	0.726		

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2.
Convergent validity

	Auditory	Gustatory	Haptic	Loyalty	Olfactory	Visual
Auditory	0.776					
Gustatory	0.344	0.781				
Haptic	0.551	0.693	0.761			
Loyalty	0.449	0.660	0.620	0.821		
Olfactory	0.455	0.596	0.531	0.572	0.731	
Visual	0.398	0.315	0.461	0.284	0.408	0.743

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 3.
Fornell–Larcker
criterion

and olfactory (H4) cues with loyalty. Based on the three marketing cues, gustatory ($\beta = 0.362$) is the most important predictors toward influencing the customer loyalty. This is followed by haptic ($\beta = 0.213$) and olfactory ($\beta = 0.208$) which is explained in 53.3% of variance in loyalty. The R^2 value that is more than 0.26 indicated that this relationship is substantial (Cohen, 1988). Due to this, H2, H3 and H4 are supported. A medium effect size of gustatory cues toward loyalty exists as value of 0.122 is close to 0.15 (Cohen, 1988). The effect size of haptic and olfactory toward loyalty is considered as small since the value of 0.038 and 0.051 is

APJML	Items	Auditory	Gustatory	Haptic	Loyalty	Olfactory	Visual
	A1	0.804	0.249	0.410	0.399	0.356	0.252
	A2	0.826	0.255	0.472	0.377	0.305	0.217
	A3	0.794	0.324	0.376	0.328	0.341	0.285
	A4	0.729	0.271	0.464	0.308	0.409	0.372
	A5	0.720	0.247	0.423	0.317	0.369	0.460
	G1	0.226	0.814	0.565	0.634	0.564	0.238
	G2	0.307	0.741	0.594	0.398	0.424	0.260
	G3	0.326	0.826	0.563	0.453	0.527	0.267
	G4	0.252	0.780	0.504	0.574	0.365	0.168
	G5	0.265	0.739	0.494	0.450	0.440	0.327
	H1	0.343	0.512	0.692	0.398	0.379	0.321
	H2	0.439	0.515	0.726	0.477	0.378	0.356
	H3	0.441	0.567	0.786	0.526	0.369	0.302
	H4	0.469	0.509	0.817	0.466	0.458	0.394
	H5	0.396	0.531	0.778	0.478	0.441	0.386
	L1	0.363	0.470	0.440	0.708	0.484	0.342
	L2	0.311	0.575	0.563	0.831	0.461	0.254
	L3	0.426	0.572	0.488	0.897	0.494	0.160
	L4	0.380	0.551	0.486	0.829	0.433	0.205
	L5	0.382	0.564	0.554	0.857	0.529	0.227
	L6	0.350	0.510	0.515	0.790	0.416	0.227
	O1	0.456	0.489	0.418	0.450	0.757	0.371
	O2	0.376	0.515	0.428	0.479	0.777	0.252
	O3	0.233	0.419	0.309	0.393	0.700	0.184
	O4	0.274	0.390	0.368	0.349	0.741	0.343
	O5	0.295	0.345	0.408	0.401	0.677	0.347
	V1	0.332	0.241	0.359	0.211	0.323	0.789
	V2	0.240	0.241	0.314	0.166	0.175	0.715
	V3	0.344	0.273	0.435	0.249	0.372	0.776
	V4	0.210	0.260	0.336	0.217	0.357	0.703
	V5	0.341	0.145	0.242	0.196	0.245	0.726
Table 4. Cross-loading	Source(s): Authors' own creation						

HTMT	Auditory	Gustatory	Haptic	Loyalty	Olfactory	Visual
	Auditory					
	Gustatory	0.422				
	Haptic	0.667	0.839			
	Loyalty	0.515	0.736	0.718		
	Olfactory	0.559	0.721	0.661	0.675	
	Visual	0.497	0.39	0.564	0.335	0.502
Table 5. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlation	Source(s): Authors' own creation					

close to 0.02 (Cohen, 1988). The exogenous constructs have predictive relevance for endogenous constructs because the Stone-Geisser Q² predictive relevance value is larger than 0. A weak effect size of q² exists for gustatory (0.055), haptic (0.015) and olfactory (0.023) cues because the values are extremely close to 0.02 (Hair et al., 2017). The analysis findings for this research have discovered that auditory (H1) and visual (H5) does not have any significant relationship with the customer loyalty in consuming fast-food. The summary of the hypotheses analysis findings is shown in Table 7.

Discussion

An experience is expected to be stimulated by auditory, gustatory, haptic, olfactory and visual cues (Krishna and Elder, 2021). These elements somehow might be overlooked by some of the fast-food players due to its intangibility. Nevertheless, due to extreme competitiveness in the fast-food industry, diverting the marketing strategies based on these cues may assist the particular fast-food chain to stretch their positioning in the industry further by retaining the loyal customers. This research has been conducted to discover how the fast-food customers in Malaysia react toward the marketing cues. The findings for this research are expected to last because the majority of the respondents are youngsters who might be continuously purchasing fast-food meals for the next few years as modern lifestyles, especially for those career-oriented youngsters who are staying in urban and suburban areas. The background findings indicated that plenty of respondents preferred to go to international fast-food chains instead of the local fast-food chains. Thus, it would be even more beneficial if the local fast-food chains to be more alert on the local customers.

According to the analysis results, a need exists for the fast-food players to emphasize on gustatory, haptic and olfactory as marketing cues to retain the existing customers. The capability for those fast-food players to emphasize on these cues will ensure a long-term value since it will positively influence the customer loyalty toward a particular fast-food chain. The fast-food players should emphasize on the taste of their foods and beverages. The feedback from the customers on taste is very important to fulfill the minimum expectation. In addition, the texture and smell of the foods and beverages should also be emphasized. Although other research scholars believe that auditory and visual cues may also provide a significant influence, this research somehow determined that these two cues do not influence the customers to be loyal toward any particular fast-food chains.

Theoretical implication

There are plenty of customers in Malaysia who are loyal toward certain fast-food chains, although a negative stereotype exists that is continuously widespread on the Western fast-food chains. Based on five marketing cues, this research has found that the main reasons why customers loyal toward a particular fast-food chain is due to gustatory, haptic and olfactory.

VIF	Loyalty
Auditory	1.589
Gustatory	2.309
Haptic	2.598
Loyalty	
Olfactory	1.818
Visual	1.372

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 6.
Lateral collinearity

Hypothesis	Std. Beta	Std. Error	t-value	p-values	Decision	R ²	F ²	Q ²	q ²
H1: Auditory	0.140	0.085	1.642	0.051	Not supported	0.533	0.026	0.348	0.011
H2: Gustatory	0.362	0.113	3.211	0.001	Supported		0.122		0.055
H3: Haptic	0.213	0.115	1.858	0.032	Supported		0.038		0.015
H4: Olfactory	0.208	0.124	1.675	0.047	Supported		0.051		0.023
H5: Visual	-0.069	0.078	0.881	0.189	Not supported		0.007		0.002

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 7.
Hypotheses

The taste of fast-food meals that is slightly different from the local meals has encouraged people to explore the food and stay loyal due to the taste uniqueness. For most local people, preparing local meals at home are easier than western meals. In fact, for those who have huge family sizes, preparing home-cooked meals at home are cost-effective. When it comes to outdoor dining, it would be better to have Western meals. In addition, there is a slightly different sense of touch and feel on way the Western fast-food meals are handled. Most fast-food meals are easy to handle and can be consumed easily, especially when someone is on the rush. The local meals normally required a proper seat for the customers to dine. Thus, for those who rushing for work or public transport, it is more convenient to have burgers or sandwiches while walking.

The marketing cue through smell is also encouraging the existing customers to stay loyal toward a certain fast-food chain. Compared with most local food, Western fast food actually has a mild smell that might not be disturbing people nearby which may actually suitable for the people to have lunch before going to an important meeting at the workplace. The music that is being played in the fast-food restaurants does not really cause the customers to remain loyal because most other places are also playing approximately similar music. What the customers perceived visually may not necessarily attract the customers to stay loyal. This might be because the fast-food restaurant concept is not considered as trendy in Malaysia. There are plenty of other local restaurants which can offer a faster service system with better customized meals which is more competitive than the fast-food chain concept.

Managerial implication

The findings for this research are focusing on the marketing cues which may retain customers' loyalty. Customers in Malaysia may remain loyal toward certain fast-food chains due to gustatory, haptic and olfactory cues. Based on the findings, a need exists for the fast-food players to upgrade and introduce new meals continuously because the customers emphasize on the taste of food. Offering limited editions of meals within only a certain period of time is one of common strategies which is used by most fast-food players to catch the customers' attention. Each of the meals should have unique taste that is based on occasion. The variety of food shape may also attract customers to stay loyal because this may indirectly change the way customers holding the food. The open space restaurant concept without doors in shopping malls may attract more customers because there is a sense of smell that may pull customers toward the restaurant.

This study is focusing on the fast-food market in Malaysia, which comprises both international and local fast-food chains. It would be hugely beneficial if the local fast-food chain could streamline the business operation based on findings that was made in this industry. The local players should know and familiar with the preferred taste from the local customers. Localized the western food taste toward Malaysian spices may definitely boost the sales especially if the meal is sellable in limited edition as promotion in certain occasion. The main meals should not be restricted to burgers, pizza and chicken only. Instead, the varieties of localized meals such as rice and noodles may catch the attention of customers not only among the locals but also tourists who prefer to explore something new. The additional varieties of meals may actually pull more customers since different customers prefer to have different meals. Some might prefer Western meals while others might prefer localized meals. The localized meals with local spices will assist toward creating a better sense of smells as an attraction toward the restaurant.

Limitation and future research

The data collection for this research is focusing on urban areas only. The lifestyle of people who are living at urban areas might not be exactly the same as those who are living in rural

areas. For example, those who are staying in urban areas may have a higher tendency to purchase ready-to-eat meals rather than preparing home-cooked meals at home due to high work commitment. Those who are staying at rural areas are mostly senior generations where the majority of them have retired and have ample of time to prepare home cook meals at home. Nevertheless, consistent with the fourth industrial revolution, there might also be youngsters who are staying at rural areas and working from home instead of migrating to urban areas. This modern digital nomad lifestyle is not only from the locals but also nonlocals from other countries who are staying in Malaysia. Thus, discovering how the customers respond toward the marketing cues at rural areas would be interesting.

Recently, the youngsters seem not very interested to work within routine operations especially at the restaurants. Thus, there are plenty of local restaurants converting the operations from fully served to self-service that is approximately similar as the Western fast-food concept. Some of the local restaurants could offer faster service with more varieties of customized meals. This new trend somehow encouraged the customers to go for local restaurants that selling local meals. The new digitalized operation systems by the local restaurants have making the food and beverages industry to be highly competitive in Malaysia. There are some local restaurants that have wide restaurant chain by selling pure traditional meals. Thus, it would be interesting to conduct research on the preference of customers on which restaurant they would choose.

Consistent with the foodie culture among the locals, there is a continuous encouragement for the international food and beverages players to enter Malaysian market due to friendly economic policy (Ridzuan *et al.*, 2021). The companies may not necessarily come from the Western countries. Instead, there is a continuous investment that have been made by Asian countries. The availability of various restaurant concepts has made Malaysia as melting pot for food and beverages industry. Due to a strong and competitive market, some restaurants preferred to retain their existing operations as in the home country to be unique. There are also new comers that operating virtually without any restaurants by taking online order from the customers. Due to varieties of available restaurant concepts, conducting research on the preferable restaurant concepts within the Malaysian market would be valuable.

Conclusion

Cultivating loyalty through an appropriate marketing cue may assist the particular fast-food chains to expand the market share within an extreme competitive industry. The marketing cues can only be shared through the customers experience due to intangibility, especially with those who are dining at the restaurant. Gustatory, haptic and olfactory cues are three marketing cues which may positively influence the customers to be loyal toward a particular fast-food chain. The loyalty of the customers may not necessarily be influenced through auditory and visual cues.

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