Fast-food restaurant customer satisfaction in Thailand: A structural equation model path analysis

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Abstract

This study explored the theoretical evidence and empirical data of factors influencing fast-food restaurant customer satisfaction (ST) in Thailand. The analysis was conducted on the six hypotheses relationships between ST, marketing communications (MC), brand value (BV), and brand quality (BQ). Initial analysis was conducted with use of confirmatory factor analysis [CFA], followed by a structural equation model [SEM] path analysis using LISREL 9.1 of the study's four latent variables. From the sample of 478 fast food restaurant patrons, the factors determined affecting ST were MC, BV, and BQ, which total effect [TE] values of 0.77, 0.39 and 0.27, respectively. The research also determined that further investigation needs to be undertaken to evaluate the influence of social media within the fast-food restaurant environment. This study is also original and timely as it identified the growing importance of social media tools in the fast-food marketing communications process in Thailand.

Keywords: Brand quality, brand value, marketing communications, SEM, Thailand.

Introduction

Thailand's 'street food' is world renowned for its profusion of exotic tastes and smells, making Thai food one of the most sought after of international cuisines (Sornsaruht & Sawmong, 2018). Globally, street food has become famous for its simplicity, popularity, and being at the forefront of food innovation (Pennell, 2018). Fast-food is transient in nature which helps it keep up with consumer's ever changing demands for tastes, textures, and delicious combinations. Furthermore, when CNN conducted a travel survey of 35,000 international restaurant diners in 2017, of the 50 world class dishes being rated, four Thai dishes soared into the top 10 ten (Cheung, 2017).

Another aspect of the dramatic increase of Thai fast-food popularity has been the explosion of tourists visiting Thailand. In 2019 Thai government officials are projecting nearly 40 million foreign tourists, making Thailand the 10th most popular tourist destination in the world

(Marukatat, 2018). These travellers will spend $69.35 billion, which represents approximately 10% of the gross domestic product [GDP] of Thailand (Reed, 2019). Additionally, the tourism sector accounts for 5.8 million workers or nearly 16% of the country's total work force (Stapornchai, 2018). Also, Thailand government's policy is to promote tourism which has been stated to be a national strategy priority, which allows the import of foreign currencies to stimulate Thailand's economy (Pranee et al., 2019). Thailand, therefore, has become a very attractive global tourism brand, while becoming a major tourist destination (Marukatat, 2018). Furthermore, in a report prepared for the United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], Sirikeratikul (2016) determined that Thailand has over 150,000 food service outlets, which has increased steadily over the years. A major segment of this growth has been attributed to the country's tourism industry, with the average tourist spending $150 per day; 19% of which is spent on food and drinks (Sirikeratikul, 2016). Finally, with Thailand's continued urbanization of the country's rural population, most are opting to eat out more regularly.

These facts have not been lost on multitudes of Thai fast food restaurant entrepreneurs who see opportunity from foreign tourists, local workers, and shoppers in their search for fast, affordable, and delicious Thai fast-food dishes. In every corner of Bangkok, from department store shops to large retail shopping malls, fast food shops are popping up. However, competition is fierce, the environment fast paced, and the work highly stressful.

Once again, according to Sirikeratikul (2016), Thailand's long-term outlook for the fast-food restaurant sector is bright due to higher consumer disposable incomes, increasing urbanization, and a eating out more frequently. Furthermore, various factors are also influencing young Thais and urbanites to move away from traditional open-air food stands to newer, air-conditioned retail mall restaurants. Therefore, the authors' set out to investigate how marketing communications (MC), brand value (BV), and brand quality (BQ) affect customer satisfaction (ST) on Thai fast-food restaurants. Second, the study also explores the interrelationships between the four latent variables, which will hopefully assist fast-food restaurant entrepreneurs in Thailand to enhance ST by meeting or exceeding their customers' expectations. It contributes to the literature on ST in a small area of research in Southeast Asia in the English language. Furthermore, the paper is divided into eight sections, including section two's literature review related to MC, BV, BQ, and a Thai fast-food restaurant's ST. Additionally, an investigation is undertaken to develop the underlying theory for the observed variables related to each latent variable. These hypotheses and the conceptual model are presented in section three. The methodology used by the study is outlined in section four, which entails the population and sample, the research tools, data collection, and data analysis. Furthermore, section five details the results, which is followed by their discussion in section six. Section seven is the conclusion and implications of the research. Section eight contains limitations and suggestions for future research.

Objectives

1. To study the determining factors influencing Thai fast-food customer satisfaction.
2. To use an initial CFA to analyse the aspects of the variables used in the subsequent SEM of the factors influencing Thai fast-food customer satisfaction.

Literature Review

Marketing Communications (MC)

The change in consumers' lifestyles and behaviours creates the need for entrepreneurial innovation within the restaurant business, which can include the opening of online sales and

marketing channels. Customer relationship management [CRM] technology can also be applied, to increase sales while bringing in new brands to give customers more choices (Sirikeratikul, 2016). Marketing communications also can include advertising, promotion and news, sales staff support, and public relations and direct marketing (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015).

Therefore, from the authors' literature review related to *marketing communications* (MC), the following five observed variables were determined. These included the restaurant's *advertising* (MC1), their *sales/wait staff* (MC2), *promotion* (MC3), *news, and public relations* (MC4), and *direct marketing* (MC5). Additionally, three hypotheses were conceptualized for the analysis which included:

> *H1: MC directly affects BV.*
> *H2: MC directly affects BQ.*
> *H3: MC directly affects ST.*

Brand Value (BV)

According to Park (2009), in order for restaurants to offer a clear BV, entrepreneurs must provide value, convenience, and healthier alternatives to their patrons. In a Forbes discussion concerning BV, David Brier said that BV to consumers is when a company offers a product or service that *not readily available* (Olenski, 2015)*.* Or put more bluntly, it's scarce or in short supply. Unfortunately, as things become more available, BV decreases, unless unique characteristics are not increased. However, strong branding is an essential objective of marketing, which should be a primary focus of restaurant managers (Keller, 1998; Park, 2009).

Therefore, from the authors' literature review related to *brand value* (BV), the following four observed variables were determined. These included *brand value* (BV1), *brand recognition* (BV2), *product benefits* (BV3), and the customer's *perception of value* (BV4). Additionally, two additional hypotheses were conceptualized for the analysis which included:

> *H4: BV directly affects BQ.*
> *H5: BV directly affects ST.*

Brand Quality (BQ)

Brand quality has been stated to be the customer's perception of quality received, with quality often defined as the meeting the customer's expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1991). Also, BQ has been associated with a brand's equity (Aaker, 2013). It can also be justification for a restaurant's higher prices. Therefore, from the authors' literature review related to *brand value* (BV), the following four observed variables were determined. These included *high quality* (BQ1), *uniform standards* (BQ2), *belief in quality* (BQ3), and *famous brand* (BQ4). Finally, one additional hypothesis was conceptualized for the analysis which included:

> *H6: BQ directly affects ST.*

Customer Satisfaction (ST)

Concerning ST, Angelova and Zekiri (2011) have reported that competitive growth companies rely on service quality and ST as essential elements to sustain a competitive

advantage. Therefore, ST is the foundation of any successful business which leads to repeat purchases, customer positive word of mouth, and eventually, brand loyalty. Furthermore, managing customer relationships is a business strategy in which more customers are created through an increase in ST (Seeman & O'Hara, 2006).

Similar research has also suggested that in fast-food restaurants, that restaurant image, perceived value, and ST are significant predictors of customers' behavioural intentions (Ryu, Han, & Kim, 2008). Ahn (2015) also related the importance in Korea of the food's quality in ST. Therefore, from the authors' literature review related to *customer satisfaction* (ST), the following four observed variables were determined (ST). These included the staff's *service quality* (ST1), the restaurant's *service value* (ST2), the restaurant's *atmosphere* (ST3), and its *cleanliness* (ST4).

Conceptual Model

The researchers, therefore, synthesized the review of the literature and determined that ST was influenced by a variety of variables including marketing communications (MC), brand value (BV), and brand quality (BQ). From this, the authors conceptualized the six hypotheses framework in Figure 1:
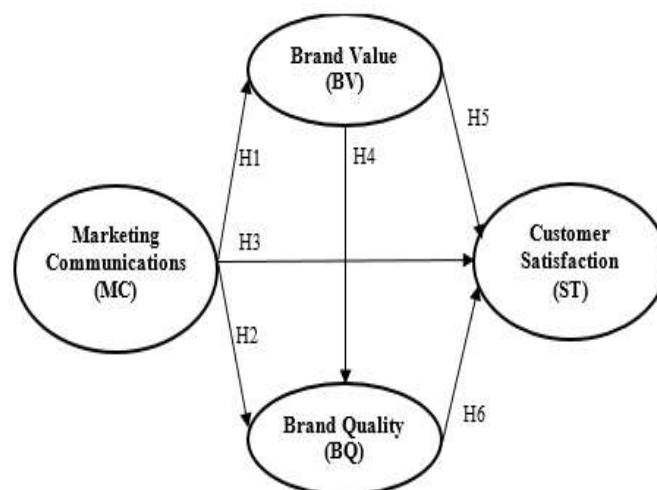

Figure 1. Conceptual Model (Source: Authors' own compilation)

Methodology

Population and Sample

The number of surveys targeted for collection and SEM analysis was based on statistical sample size theory, with a well-established criteria for CFA and SEM sample sizes using the number of measurement variables (questionnaire item statements) * 20 (Schumacker & Lomax, 2010). Therefore, as the study contained 21 observed variables, an initial target of 420 respondents was set.

Research Tools

The questionnaire consisted of seven parts, in which part 1 contained seven items about the dining patron's personal information, such as their sex, age, education level, profession, monthly income, and when and how often they were patrons of the restaurant. The survey

questionnaire from parts 2 through 7 made use of a seven-level scale to access the restaurant patron's opinions about each of the questionnaire items. The number '7' was used to 'strongly agree', '4' indicated moderate agreement, and '1' indicated 'minimal agreement.' Additionally, from the experts feedback and the pre-test of 30 questionnaires, Cronbach's α was determined to be from 0.73 – 0.86 (Tables 3 & 4), which was ranked as 'good' (Cho & Kim, 2015; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). This included part 2's MC with 5 items (α = 0.86), part 3's BV with 4 items (α = 0.77), part 4's BQ with 4 items (α = 0.88), and finally, part 5's ST with 4 items (α = 0.75).

Data Collection

The researchers collected data from 600 Thai fast food restaurant customers from June 2017 to October 2017. A team of research assistants was sent to 20 fast food service shops during three service periods in the morning, lunch period, and evening hours. Every fifth diner was selected randomly and asked to answer the questionnaire, of which 79.66% response rate was obtained. From the initial 600 questionnaires collected, 478 questionnaires were found to be free of response error and suitable for data analysis.

Data Analysis

LISREL 9.10 software program was used to conduct the CFA and the SEM between variables influencing ST. Interpretation of the accuracy of the SEM on ST made use of goodness-of-fit [GoF] criteria presented in Table 2. If the calculated statistics passed the established GoF criteria, it supported the model's accuracy being consistent with the empirical data.

Results

Restaurant Patrons' Characteristics

Table 1 shows the results from part 1 of the restaurant patron's questionnaire. From this, we can see that 59.83% were women, with most patrons (52.09%) were less than 30 years of age. A high number of restaurant customers (58.37%) had also obtained an undergraduate degree and were earning $319 - $638 per month (40.79%).

Table 1. Thai fast food restaurant patron analysis (*n =478*)

Item 1: Sex	Frequency	Percent
- Male	192	40.17
- Female	286	59.83
Total	478	100.0
Item 2: Age		
- Less than 30 years of age.	249	52.09
- 31-40 years of age.	120	25.10
- 41-50 years of age.	83	17.36
- 51-60 years of age.	17	3.56
- Over 60 years of age.	9	1.88
Total	478	100.0
Item 3: Education		
- Lower than primary school	6	1.26
- Primary school completion	22	4.60
- Lower secondary school completion	20	4.18
- High school completion	49	10.25
- Vocational Certificate / Diploma / Diploma	89	18.62

- Bachelor/undergraduate degree	279	58.37
- Higher than a bachelor's degree	13	2.72
Total	478	100.0
Item 4: Profession/work		
- Government service	29	6.07
- State enterprise	29	6.07
- Private company	89	18.62
- General employee	151	31.59
- Private business	128	26.78
- Other	52	10.88
Total	478	100.0
Item 5: Income per month (1 USD = 30.6192 Thai ฿.)		
- Less than 10,000	127	26.57
- Between 10,001-20,000	195	40.79
- Between 20,001-30,000	104	21.76
- Between 30,001-40,000	36	7.53
- Between 40,001-50,000	10	2.09
- Over 50,000	6	1.26
Total	478	100.0
Item 6: Number of times per month you patron this restaurant		
- 1-3 times per month	134	28.03
- 4-6 times per month	66	13.81
- 7-10 times per month	142	29.71
- Over ten times per month	136	28.45
Total	478	100.0
Item 7: The most frequently used period		
- morning	9	1.88
- lunch	265	55.44
- evening	186	38.91
- other	18	3.77
Total	478	100.0

(Source: Authors' own compilation)

CFA Results

The CFA results are presented for the external latent variable MC in Table 3, while table 4 presents the CFA results for the internal latent variables BV, BQ, and ST (Anderson and Gerbing, 1998). Additionally, a goodness-of-fit [GoF] assessment was conducted, whose results are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. GoF appraisal, values, and theory (Source: Authors' own compilation)

Criteria Index	Criteria	Supporting theory	Study Values	Results
Chi-square: χ2	$p \geq 0.05$	Rasch (1980).	0.67	passed
χ2/df – degrees of freedom	≤ 2.00	Byrne et al. (1989)	0.91	passed
RMSEA - root mean square error of approximation	≤ 0.05	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.00	passed
GFI - goodness of fit index	≥ 0.90	Jöreskog et al. (2016)	0.98	passed
AGFI - adjusted goodness of fit index	≥ 0.90	Hooper et al. (2008)	0.96	passed
RMR - root means square residual	≤ 0.05	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.02	passed
SRMR - standardized root mean square residual	≤ 0.05	Hu and Bentler (1999)	0.02	passed
NFI - normed fit index	≥ 0.90	Schumacker and Lomax (2010)	0.99	passed
CFI - comparative fit index	≥ 0.90	Schumacker and Lomax (2010)	1.00	passed
Cronbach's Alpha	≥ 0.70	Schumacker and Lomax (2010)	0.75-0.88	passed

Table 3. CFA of the external latent variable MC.

Latent variable	α	AVE	CR	Observed variables	Item	loading	R^2
Marketing Communication (MC)	0.86	0.48	0.82	Advertising	MC1	0.57	.33
				Sales/wait staff	MC2	0.83	.68
				Promotion	MC3	0.69	.48
				News and public relations	MC4	0.61	.37
				Direct marketing	MC5	0.72	.52

(Source: Authors' own compilation)

Chi-Square = 1.36, df = 2, *p*-value = 0.50746, RMSEA = 0.000, AVE = average variance extracted, CR (t-value) = critical ratio

Table 4. CFA of the internal latent variables BV, BQ, and ST

Latent variables	α	AVE	CR	Observed variables	Item	loading	R^2
Brand Value (BV)	0.77	0.31	0.64	Brand value	BV1	0.61	.37
				Brand recognition	BV2	0.42	.22
				Product benefits	BV3	0.52	.27
				Perception of value	BV4	0.62	.39
Brand Quality (BQ)	0.88	0.41	0.73	High quality	BQ1	0.54	.30
				Uniform standards	BQ2	0.43	.19
				Belief in quality	BQ3	0.74	.55
				Famous brand	BQ4	0.78	.61
Customer Satisfaction (ST)	0.75	0.47	0.78	Service quality	ST1	0.66	.43
				Service value	ST2	0.70	.49
				Atmosphere	ST3	0.67	.45
				Cleanliness	ST4	0.74	.55

(Source: Authors' own compilation) Chi-Square = 17.57, df = 22, *p*-value = 0.73113, RMSEA = 0.000, AVE = average variance extracted, CR (t-value) = critical ratio

Correlation Decomposition

Table 5 shows the values from the correlation decomposition by use of the direct effect [DE], indirect effect [IE], and the total effect [TE] (Bollen, 1987), which shows that all the causal variables in the SEM had a positive effect on the Thai fast-food restaurant ST, which can be combined to explain the variance of the factors affecting ST (R (^{2}by 60%. Furthermore, the influence of the three latent variables on ST was shown to most influenced by MC (TE = 0.77), BV (TE = .038), and finally, BQ (TE = .027).

Table 5. Correlation decomposition of the latent variable effects

Dependent variables	R^2	Effects	Independent variables		
			MC	BV	BQ
Customer Satisfaction (ST)	.60	DE	0.36**	0.30**	0.27**
		IE	0.41**	0.09*	-
		TE	0.77**	0.39**	0.27**
Brand quality (BQ)	.39	DE	0.36**	0.33*	
		IE	0.26*	-	
		TE	0.62**	0.33*	
Brand value (BV)	.64	DE	0.80**		
		IE	-		
		TE	0.80**		

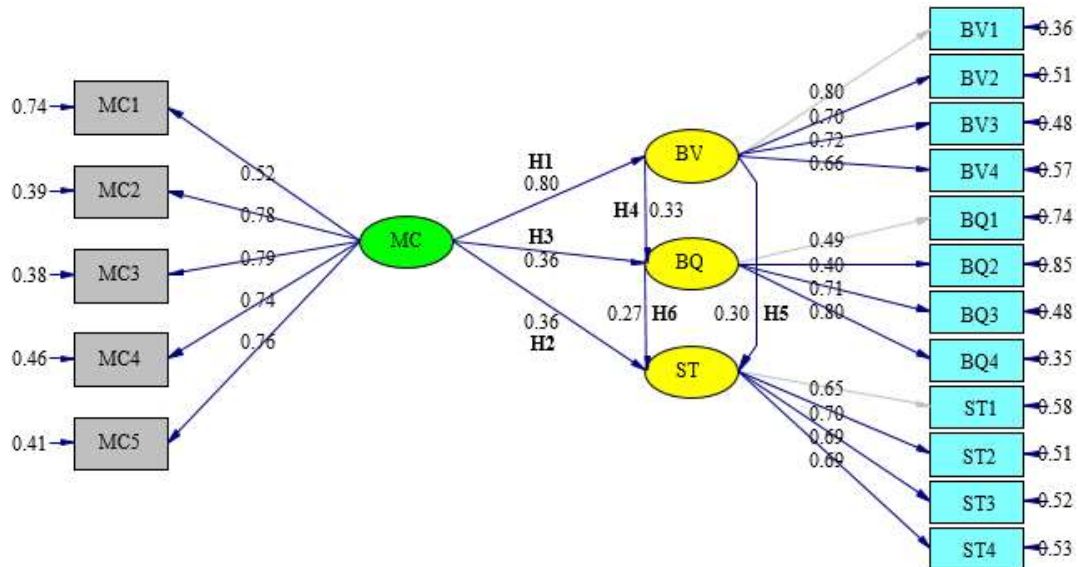(Source: Authors' own compilation) *Sig. < .05, **Sig. < .01*

Table 6 further supports the reliability of the SEM's results as all factors showed good levels of internal consistency, as their composite reliability [CR] is between 0.70 and 0.84 (Bollen, 1987). Figure 2 presents the final SEM for Thai fast-food restaurant ST, whereas, Table 7 shows the results from the testing of the six hypotheses.

Table 6. SEM variables influencing ST

Latent Variables	MC	BV	BQ	ST
Marketing Communications (MC)	**1.00**			
Brand Value (BV)	.68**	**1.00**		
Brand Quality (BQ)	.47**	.44**	**1.00**	
Customer Satisfaction (ST)	.64**	.64**	.52**	**1.00**
ρv (AVE)	0.53	0.52	0.39	0.47
ρc (Composite Reliability)	0.84	0.81	0.70	0.78
Square root of the AVE	0.73	0.72	0.62	0.68

(Source: Authors' own compilation) **Sig. < .01

Figure 2. Final Model (Source: Authors' own compilation)
$\chi 2 = 56.51$, df = 62, *p*-value = 0.67306, RMSEA = 0.000

Table 7. Final hypotheses testing

Hypothesis relationship	Coef.	t-value	Results
H1: MC directly affects BV	0.80	14.64**	Consistent
H2: MC directly affects BQ	0.36	3.39**	Consistent
H3: MC directly affects ST	0.36	4.06**	Consistent
H4: BV directly affects BQ	0.33	2.89*	Consistent
H5: BV directly affects ST	0.30	3.16**	Consistent
H6: BQ directly affects ST	0.27	3.57**	Consistent

(Source: Authors' own compilation) *Sig. ≤ .05, **Sig. ≤ .01

Discussion

All the model's causal factors had a positive influence on ST, with the variance of the combined factors influencing ST (R^2) being 60%. Ranked in importance, factors influencing ST were MC, BV, and BQ, with total effect [TE] values of 0.77, 0.39 and 0.27, respectively.

Marketing Communications (MC)

Additionally, from the study's SEM analysis, MC was determined to play a strong and positive role in a Thai fast-food restaurant's BV (H1), as the standardized coefficients from

the regression analysis indicated coef. = 0.89, t-value = 14.64, and $p \leq 0.01$ (Table 7). Concerning H2 and the relationship between MC and BQ, this was determined to be weak but positive as the standardized coefficients from the regression analysis indicated coef. = 0.36, t-value = 3.39, and $p \leq 0.01$. Finally, the relationship examined in H3 was also shown to be direct and positive as the standardized coefficients from the regression analysis indicated coef. = 0.36, t-value = 4.06, and $p \leq 0.01$. Furthermore, the study's restaurant patrons felt that under MC, the sales/wait staff played the most significant role in ST, followed by promotion (MC3) and news and public relations (MC4), which today, is usually conducted with social media tools such as Facebook or Line in Thailand (Collins, Thomas & Tietjen, 2018; Keller & Libai, 2009). Social media has now turned into a two-way communications channel between the restaurant patron and the restaurant's staff/owners, where orders can be placed, and delivery instructions are given. A multitude of software applications and platforms exist today for this purpose, with Facebook, Line, Snapchat, and Instagram being some of the most recognized names (Collins et al., 2018). The influence of these applications is, therefore, substantial to a restaurant's entrepreneur.

Brand Value (BV)

Also, BV was determined to play a weak but positive role in a Thai fast-food restaurant's BQ (H4), as the standardized coefficients from the regression analysis indicated coef. = 0.33, t-value = 2.89, and $p \leq 0.05$ (Table 6). There was also a positive but weak, relationship between BV and BQ (H5) as the standardized coefficients from the regression analysis indicated coef. = 0.30, t-value = 3.16, and $p \leq 0.01$. This is consistent with other studies in which quick-casual restaurant images significantly influence perceived value (Ryu et al., 2008).

Brand Quality (BQ)

Finally, in H6, the influence that BQ played on ST was also shown to be positive as the standardized coefficients from the regression analysis indicated coef. = 0.27, t-value = 3.57, and $p \leq 0.01$ (Table 6). Research has also determined that retail store's physical size, it product-related attributes and customer interaction will have a significant and positive direct effect a store's corporate brand image (Da Silva & Alwi, 2008).

Customer Satisfaction (ST)

The study's conclusion of the importance of the relationship between MC and ST is also affirmed by other studies (Da Silva & Alwi, 2008; Kitchen & Burgmann, 2015; Sirikeratikul, 2016), which indicates that an organization's brand image in a retail store are more likely to relate to consumer loyalty via ST. Also, in small restaurants in Jordan, service quality and food quality were determined to have a positive influence on ST (Al-Tit, 2015). Additionally, in an investigation of small, fast-food restaurants in Busan, Korea, the findings indicated that food quality, brand image, brand awareness, and brand association significant factors in a restaurant's ST (Ahn, 2015). Furthermore, research on US fast food patrons indicated that speed of service, quality, and price were essential aspects in a fast-food restaurant's selection (Kara et al., 1995).

Conclusion and Implications

The study proposed a study of interrelationships and influences of MC, BV, BQ, on ST. It was determined that MC had the most significant influence on a Thai fast-food restaurant's ST. It was also determined that all the causal factors in the model had a positive influence on

ST, with the variance of the factors influencing ST (R^2) being 60%. Ranked in importance, factors influencing ST were MC, BV, and BQ.

Even today, personal contact with the wait staff and the management entrepreneur(s) have the most significant influence on how well a customer is satisfied. However, small, fast-food restaurants are what most new Thai entrepreneurs begin with due to their low initial investment cost. Also, often, these entrepreneurs have little to no experience within a start-up business. Furthermore, research has estimated that fast-food restaurants make up approximately 80% of the estimated 150,000 restaurants in Thailand, but many new establishments fail within a short-period from their start-up. Therefore, great attention to customer satisfaction and retention is of paramount importance.

Once again, this landscape is changing quickly due to the hyper-growth in foreign tourism and the urbanization of Thailand's rural population. Restaurant locations are also shifting due to the entry and influence of hypermarkets, especially in small neighbourhood shopping centres. Fast-food entrepreneurs have also been forced to raise their standards in these locations, which has usually come at the expense of traditional street vendors.

Another aspect of Asian cultures is that eating is influenced more by its social or entertaining value. Attention and more exceptional care must be given to patrons, which is more important than saving time. Marketers, therefore, should consider these cultural factors when targeting their customers (Lee & Ulgado, 1997). However, along with these cultural and economic shifts has come massive technological disruption in the forms of social media platforms and smartphones. It is hard to imagine a small, fast-food restaurant entrepreneur and their brand growing their business without embracing the changes these technologies have brought. Simply stated, if one entrepreneur does not, another will, and immediately achieve a technological advantage leading to greater customer satisfaction and higher competitive advantage. Brand value and brand quality are essential, but technology innovation through marketing communications can quickly push competitors out of the way for a faster, cheaper, and more efficient service.

Limitations

The small size of the sample could potentially be a limiting factor in the study, with practical implications also determined by the fact that Asian patrons are significantly influenced by personal attention and entertainment. However, technology and its associated expected 'delivery speed' might be changing these cultural norms. Therefore, an additional investigation needs to be undertaken to evaluate the influence of social media within this environment. However, this study is original and timely as it identified the growing importance of social media tools in the fast-food marketing communications process in Thailand.

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