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Using the Involvement Construct to Understand the Motivations of Customers of Casual Dining Restaurants in the USA

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the motivations that *push* consumers to dine out and restaurant attributes that *pull* diners to a specific restaurant. Surveys were administered to a convenience sample of 559 respondents at a large university in the Southwest of the USA. Crosstabs, ANOVA, Correlations, Factor Analysis and Multiple Regression were employed to explore differences and relationships between variables. Findings identified a profile of diners at casual restaurants. Using the involvement construct, the push-pull motivational framework, and the hedonic and utilitarian motivational framework, results of this study indicate two primary reasons behind the decision to dine out at casual restaurants and six principal attributes that draw customers into these types of restaurants. In addition, diners were categorized into high/medium/low involvement categories and the linkages between involvement levels and motivations were explored. Both hedonic and utilitarian motivations were identified. Furthermore, motivational factors and restaurant attributes were found to predict diner loyalty. This paper provides the restaurant industry with insight and understanding as to what attracts diners into an establishment and what influences decisions behind dining out.

Keywords

Casual Dining Restaurants, Involvement, Push-Pull Motivators, Hedonic-Utilitarian Motivators, Restaurant Attributes, Consumer Behavior, Customer Loyalty

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INTRODUCTION

Dining, either inside or outside the home, is an integral part of American society, with dining at restaurants becoming increasingly popular as Americans seek more convenience when deciding what is for dinner. Within a typical day, the restaurant industry grosses \$1.7 billion in sales, with the average family spending over \$2500 dining out in 2010 (National Restaurant Association [NRA], 2012). When making the decision to dine out, Americans are faced with several alternatives, from fast food, to casual, to fine dining. What draws consumers into these types of establishments and what pushes them to dine out instead of dining at home? In some cases, the consumer draws on previous knowledge and experiences and repeats an earlier action in which the result was satisfactory. Other times, a true decision must be reached and consumers are forced to make an active choice. These consumer decisions fall along a spectrum from well thought through, complex resolutions to automated, or habitual, quickly-made decisions (Njite, Dunn, & Kim, 2008). With increasing competition in the industry, it becomes crucial for restaurants to differentiate themselves in order to appeal to more broad population segments (Baltazar, 2011).

Only a few studies have examined what drives the average American to dine at a restaurant instead of preparing a meal at home (Epter, 2009; Warde & Martens, 2000). However, various studies have been conducted on the importance of restaurant attributes (Choi & Zhao, 2010; Harrington, Ottenbacher & Kendall, 2011; Rydell, Harnack, Oakes, Story, Jeffery & French, 2008). Rydell et al. (2008) identified the most commonly cited reasons for dining at fast-food establishments primarily related to convenience, such as “they’re quick” and “they’re easy to get to”, and socialization aspects, such as “it is a way of socializing with friends and family”. Additionally, Njite et al (2008) identified customer relations, employee competence, and convenience as important factors influencing consumers to dine at fine-dining establishments.

In their seminal work on perceptions and measurement of service quality, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1998) identified 5 key dimensions of service quality (SERVQUAL). This was refined to be applied within a restaurant setting by Stevens, Knutson, and Patton (1995), who developed the DINESERV instrument to measure service quality in food service. The five dimensions used in DINESERV (Stevens et al., 1995) were identical to the SERVQUAL study by

Parasuraman et al. (1988). They are *Tangibles*-Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials; *Reliability*-Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately; *Responsiveness*-Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service; *Assurance*-Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence, and *Empathy*-Caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers.

Though studies have been conducted examining restaurant attributes, the subject is still underrepresented in the literature, especially within the casual dining sector. Furthermore, some important constructs from the consumer behavior literature, often utilized in the fields of tourism and marketing, have rarely been applied to the study of restaurant consumers. Current research has yet to implement the push-pull framework, used commonly in tourism and marketing (Josiam, Kinley, & Kim, 2004; Klenosky, 2002; Pesonen, Komppula, Kronenberg, & Peters, 2011), to analyze what drives, or “pushes”, Americans to eat outside their homes, and what “pulls” Americans into a specific restaurant. Additionally, the involvement construct developed by Zaichkowsky (1985) has been implemented within the tourism literature (Josiam et al., 2004; Smith, Costello, & Muenchen, 2010; Uysal & Hagan, 1993; Yuan & McDonald, 1990), as well as extensively within consumer behavior literature, but less often when examining dining. Finally, hedonic and utilitarian principles, used within research on shopping and merchandising (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994), have yet to be examined in the context of the casual dining restaurant.

The current study addresses these gaps in the literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how the involvement construct can be adapted and used as a tool to segment diners visiting casual restaurants. Researchers used the push-pull motivation theory framework, adapted from previous research, and examined various individual and restaurant characteristics to better understand their impacts on consumer experience outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic influences

Although the general assessment of the economy of the USA remains negative (Stensson, 2010), consumers are increasingly becoming more positive about their personal financial situation. A report from the National Restaurant Association (of the USA) projects full-service sales to total \$201.4 billion in 2012, a 2.9 percent gain over 2011's volume of \$195.7 billion. The report points out that despite increasing sales, operators are faced with the daunting challenges of increasing

food costs and the complexities and costs of building and maintaining sales volume. (Batty, Grindy, Riehle, Smith, & Stensson, 2012). Notwithstanding substantial sales growth within the restaurant industry, consumers of today are restrained in their spending. With income growth remaining modest or sometimes decreasing in recent years, it is no surprise that households implemented unprecedented spending cutbacks during the economic downturn-particularly on services, which includes the restaurant industry (Stensson, 2010). Research suggests spending cuts were seen across all income groups but were particularly prevalent among middle class households with incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000 (Altman, Grindy, & Riehle, 2011). As both restaurants and consumers experience comparable impact from an unpredictable economy, it is especially important for restaurant operators to better understand the motivations of their customers and the impact of restaurant attributes, such as food quality, service quality and ambience on their overall dining experience. Batty et al., (2012) found that even during good economic times, one size does not fit all consumers. Restaurant operators are well aware that they must tailor their food, service, and marketing to the kind of consumer they desire to reach.

Restaurant and food attributes

Factors influencing consumers' decision making when selecting a restaurant have varied depending on context and motivations for dining out (Choi & Zhao, 2010). Consumer preferences and decisions to purchase products and/or services depend on a myriad of factors, including the physical environment where the potential transaction is to take place (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010). Park (2004) believes consumers weigh the overall value of an offering in terms of the degree to which each attribute is present and the importance they see the attribute as having (attribute-value theory). As it applies to food attributes, Namkung and Jang (2007) found there is no consensus on individual attributes that constitute a food item's quality. However, Harrington et al. (2011) determined food appeal relates to aspects such as taste, presentation, temperature, and portion size. Previous research has also placed much emphasis on consumers' perception of food safety. Food safety is very important for restaurant consumers, as perception of poor hygiene and safety practices may result in the loss of customers to restaurants that consumers considered safer (Harrington et al., 2011). A crucial challenge facing the restaurant industry today is to provide quality food that is not only compelling for the customers but also superior to business competitors (Namkung & Jang, 2007).

Consumer perception of dining experiences

The perception of consumer dining experiences has also been found to play a vital role in whether consumers dine out at a restaurant or in the comfort of their own home. Stevens, Knutson, and Patton (1995), developed the DINESERV instrument to measure service quality in food service, based on the SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1998). These studies have shown that consumers' perceptions of the service quality experience are determined both by the physical attributes of the restaurant and the food and the intangible aspects of service such as *empathy*, and *assurance*. Kim, Jeon, and Sunghyup (2012) found that when consumers consider a set of restaurants in their minds; they unconsciously consider which restaurant can have a positive impact on their quality of life. Once the decision to visit a particular restaurant is made, the overall value of the experience may also be judged using a combination of tangible and intangible factors (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010). Concerning dining out, people are constantly looking for comfort as well as quality and an enjoyable environment (Choi & Zhao, 2010). Harrington et al. (2011) found restaurant customers often make dining decisions by simultaneously evaluating several criteria. Customers might consider food quality, price, promotions, and recommendations, among other benefits desired. Arguably, the dining experience also relies on the value-for-money aspect of food and service components (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010). It is noteworthy to mention word of mouth is still consumers' top source for making a restaurant choice (Batty et al., 2012).

Repeat and referral patronage

In today's competitive marketplace, diners have a plethora of restaurant choices (Harrington et al., 2011). To be successful in today's challenging business environment, restaurant operators need to understand what motivates consumers to choose one restaurant over another (Batty et al., 2012). Considering the competitive nature of the restaurant industry, Harrington et al. (2011) believed restaurant managers need to understand customer preferences so that they can integrate these demands into their product and service attributes.

Additionally, customer satisfaction is the most important antecedent factor in loyalty (Yoon & Jung, 2012). Research on this topic suggests it is easier for a restaurant to capture the sales of repeat customers than it is to attract new ones. Moreover, because of the importance of repeat customers to the success of full-service restaurants, it is imperative that restaurant operators appeal to frequent diners. Batty et al. (2012) defined frequent full-service customers as those who dine out at a full-service restaurant more than once a week on average. These

frequent diners are ultimately the core customer base in good times and bad. Namkung and Jang (2007) reported certain behaviors signal that customers are bonding with a company. These behaviors can be a simple gesture such as leaving a server a significant tip or complimenting a restaurant's chef. Mattila (2001) pointed out that enticing diners to become loyal by simply awarding them points or gifts is short-sighted and counterproductive. Mattila (2001) found that loyalty is driven by attitudinal, emotional and behavioral issues. Additionally these behaviors are indicators of how consumers define their levels of engagement and involvement with a restaurant.

Involvement

Involvement can be described as “a motivational and goal directed emotional state that determines the personal relevance of a purchase decision to a buyer” (Brennan & Mavondo, 2000). As it has been found to have significant influence on consumer decision making, it is considered an important element of defining and assessing different dimensions of product or service evaluation (Chang, Burns, & Francis, 2004; Cohen & Goldberg, 1970). Zaichkowsky (1985) divided involvement into three distinct categories: personal, physical, and situational. Focusing on personal involvement, evaluating the “needs, values, and interests” of consumers can shed light on the level of involvement a guest feels regarding dining in a casual restaurant.

Peters (2005) believed that involvement is better conceived as a function of subject, object, and situation. Furthermore, Peters (2005) considered involvement to be the reflex of strong motivation in high personal perceived relevance in regards to a product or service, reported on a scale that ranges from high to low. Many studies have broken down involvement into high, medium, and low (Josiam et al., 2004; Kinley et al., 2010). For example, Kinard and Capella (2006) advocated that highly involved consumers perceive greater benefits than less involved consumers across service types, and further suggested that consumers perceive greater relational benefits when engaged in a relationship with high contact, customized service versus more standardized, moderate contact service).

The involvement construct has been extensively studied in various consumer behavior areas, including tourism (Clements & Josiam, 1995; Josiam, Huang, Bahulkar, Spears & Kennon, 2012; Josiam et al., 2004; Josiam, Smeaton, & Clements, 1999; Kinley, Josiam, & Lockett, 2010) and in some hospitality avenues (Beldona, Moreo & Mundhra, 2010; Bruwer & Huang, 2012). Additional previous research has studied involvement across a broad range of segments within the hospitality and tourism industries. A study by Clements and Josiam

(1995) indicated that highly involved students traveled more over spring break than low involvement students. Beldona et al. (2010) conducted a study on variety-seeking eating behaviors and involvement levels, finding that highly involved consumers were more likely to be described as seekers of authenticity, engaging, and aware, while low involvement consumers were described as unwilling to take risks, and lacking curiosity. Furthermore, Peters (2005) used the involvement construct to measure consumer behavior involvement in fine dining restaurants, while Leach (2010) measured customer involvement in food hygiene. Although a few studies have been conducted using the involvement construct in the food and beverage sector of the hospitality industry, no study has measured consumer involvement with dining in casual restaurants or the impact of involvement on diner motivations.

Push and Pull motivators

Push and pull motivators, first defined by Crompton (1979) have been used within studies of tourism to analyze the process behind the decision to visit a specific destination (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Kim, Lee, & Klenosky, 2003; Sangpikul, 2008). As a psychological motivation, a push motivator is described as a predisposition to an event, such as dining out or traveling, while a pull motivator is an external attractor to a destination (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996). Furthermore, though not fully independent of each other, push and pull motivators are two separate decisions, made unconsciously or consciously in sequential stages. A consumer is first *pushed* to act by an internal need, and then is *pulled* to a location by external resources (Kim, 2006).

The push-pull framework has often been used in tourism research as a method of analyzing travel motivations, but has yet to be studied widely in the foodservice/restaurant literature as a means of analyzing motivations for dining out. Adapting the push-pull framework to use within the restaurant industry, this study attempts to identify the important push and pull motivators acting on consumers when deciding where to dine.

Hedonic vs. Utilitarian construct

People dine out because they obtain a benefit from the foods they eat and the restaurants they visit (Park, 2004). Various motives have been identified for dining out at restaurants. These motives include efficiency, taste, socialization, health, the external environment, economic factors, and entertainment (Park, 2004; Choi & Zhao, 2010). Additionally, patrons often dine at casual restaurants when exhausted, pressed for time, or when already out (Epter, 2009).

When faced with a decision, a person makes a choice based on feelings or facts, hedonic or utilitarian motivations (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). Many studies in retail and merchandising separated attributes into hedonic and utilitarian (Cardoso & Pinto, 2010; Olsen & Skallerud, 2011; Allard, Babin, & Chebat, 2009; Carpenter & Moore, 2009; Kang & Park-Poaps, 2010), but only a few hospitality papers have done the same (Park, 2004; Ryu, Han, & Jang, 2010).

According to Sarkar (2011), utilitarian attributes are those that pull weight with a person's logical side of the mind where they rationalize things, while hedonic attributes are those that emerge from feelings and emotions of an individual. Hedonic value is more subjective than utilitarian value and stems from entertainment aspects rather than task completion (Baek, 2009; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Additionally, hedonic values are unique to the consumer, can have symbolic meanings, and can increase emotional arousal (Spangenberg, Voss, & Crowley, 1997). Similarly, Dhar & Wertenbroch (2000) defined hedonic as "experiential consumption, fun, pleasure and excitement" whereas utilitarian is the opposite, seen as "instrumental and functional".

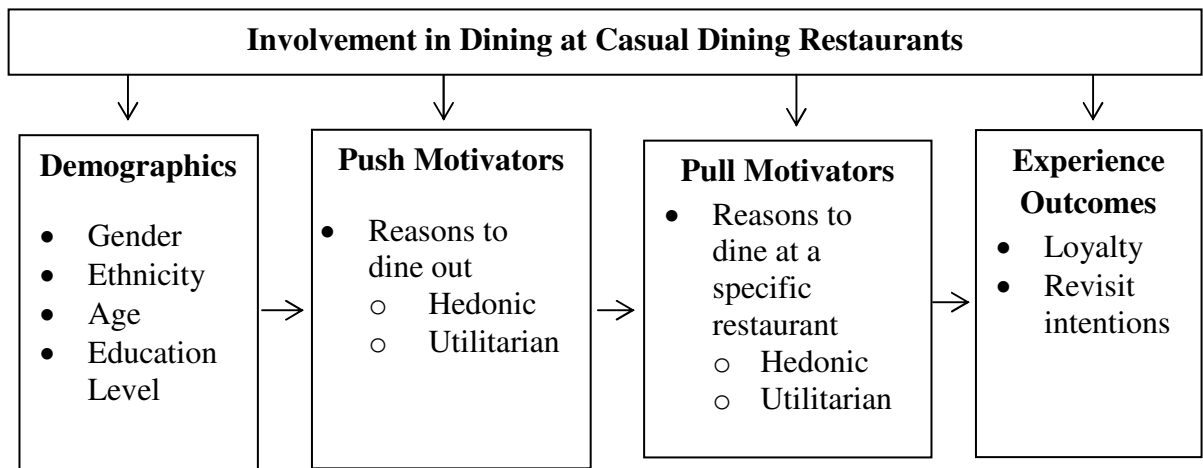
Within the restaurant industry, Nejati and Moghaddam (2012) sought to determine if gender differences exist in hedonic and utilitarian reasons to eat at fast-casual restaurants in Iran. The study identified hedonic characteristics as "pleasure oriented" and utilitarian characteristics as "goal oriented" to describe reasons for dining outside the home. Researchers found that both hedonic and utilitarian motivations were important motivations to Iranian fast-casual diners. Additionally, Park (2004) separated restaurant attributes such as simplicity and convenience as utilitarian attributes and tested items like the mood and interior design of a restaurant as hedonic attributes. Visiting a restaurant for its functional values (utilitarian values) – such as satisfying one's hunger, enjoying convenient food, or economical eating – are goal directed behaviors; by contrast, recreational and experiential visiting are hedonic orientations. Results indicated that hedonic values were more influential than utilitarian attributes over how often patrons dine out (Park, 2004). Indeed, Mattila (2001) has pointed out that committed customers certainly value good food; in addition they place a high value on emotional and social benefits such a friendship, familiarity and a fun atmosphere.

RESEARCH MODEL AND OBJECTIVES

Using the involvement construct as a framework, in conjunction with the push-pull motivation theory and hedonic-utilitarian principles, this study analyzes how various characteristics influence consumer decisions to dine out, how restaurant

characteristics determine where consumers visit, and how involvement levels influence diner loyalty and revisit intentions. (Figure 1). This study adapts the push-pull framework to the restaurant industry and investigates what pushes consumers to dine away from the home and additionally examines what pulls consumers to the restaurant where they ultimately dine. While there are a multitude of restaurants to choose, diners can ultimately only dine for the selected meal at one location. Looking at previously conducted research, Choi and Zhao (2010) analyzed patrons' choices of restaurants based on pull factors. Questions within Choi and Zhao's (2010) survey asked respondents to indicate the importance of preferences for choosing a restaurant when dining out. The survey adapted for this study used aspects of Choi and Zhao's 2010 survey as well as various other studies (Njite, et al., 2008; Narine & Badrie, 2007; Yamanaka, Almanza, Nelson & DeVaney, 2003) to effectively analyze the pushes and pulls of dining out at casual restaurants.

Figure 1: Research Model



For this study, 'casual restaurant' is defined as a restaurant in which moderately priced food is served in a casual atmosphere with table service. Examples of casual dining restaurants in the United States include, but are not limited to, Chili's, Outback Steakhouse, On the Border, Red Lobster, and Applebee's. To guide respondents, these popular names were also given on the survey.

The specific objectives for this study were to:

1. Identify respondents' level of involvement with dining in a casual restaurant.
2. Examine the relationship between diner involvement levels and demographic characteristics.
3. Examine the relationship between diner involvement and frequency of dining out.
4. Identify consumer motivators for dining at casual restaurants.
 - a) Classify motivators as Push or Pull
 - b) Categorize motivators as Hedonic or Utilitarian
5. Compare casual diner involvement segments in terms of push/pull motivators, hedonic/utilitarian motivators, and experience outcome variables.
6. Examine the role of involvement and motivators on diner loyalty.

METHODS

Sample and data collection

According to a 2010 report by Brinker International, (operators of multiple casual dining brands such as Chili's and Maggiano's Little Italy), the target market for their brands is between 18 and 54 years old (Brooks, 2011). Another casual dining chain - Outback Steakhouse - analyzing the casual dining market, pinpointed the target market for their brand between 18 and 53 years old (Berry, Blankenstein, Britz, & Zuchowicz, 1998). Accordingly, the researchers sought to obtain a sample in that age group. Thus, college students were surveyed. Though the majority of respondents were college students, this cohort wields formidable spending power and hence, need to be investigated as their discretionary spending increased 13% from \$270 billion in 2009 to \$306 billion in 2010, making them an important demographic segment. Greenberg (2012) reported that a recent annual

survey of college students found that those students spent over US\$13 billion while dining out in 2011. This makes college students a very relevant sample for this study. Thus, the student sample was obtained by sampling students enrolled in classes at a leading university in the Southwest of the USA. Students were approached in class and given the option to participate in exchange for class credit.

For the 26 - 55 age group, diners were surveyed at lunchtime at a restaurant on the same university campus that was open to the public. Diners were approached and asked for their participation by researchers after their server had taken their drink order, but before their meal was ordered. Respondents were informed that their survey was anonymous and that no personal identifiers were being collected. Upon completion of the survey, the questionnaires were folded, sealed, and placed directly by the respondents into a large envelope. No incentive was given to restaurant diners. To mitigate for this convenience sampling method, a large sample of 600 was targeted. A total of 559 usable surveys were collected on campus. Data collection was extended over a two month period (September-October, 2012) to secure a broad and diverse representation given the constraints of an on-campus convenience sample.

Instrument

The involvement construct was measured using a 10 point bipolar scale adapted by Josiam et al. (2004). This scale was originally constructed by Zaichkowsky (1985) with 20 bipolar scaled questions and was originally deemed reliable with Cronbach's alpha equal to 0.95.

All respondents were asked to indicate their personal level of involvement as a diner at a casual restaurant for each of 10 items on a five point scale, in which (1) indicated the lowest level of involvement and (5) indicated the highest level of involvement. The involvement scale originally used by Josiam et al. (2004) utilized a seven point scale, but researchers condensed the scale to for this study to five points to fit with other scales used within the survey. To calculate each individual's involvement score, all responses were summed up and a mean was then calculated within SPSS.

Push motivators reflected consumers' motivations for dining out instead of cooking or eating at home. Again, the respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of use of various motivations for dining out in a casual restaurant using a five point scale ranging from never to always. Examples of push motivators

included “Cooking at home is too much effort”, “I do not know how to cook”, and “My friend(s) want to go out to eat”. Push motivators were adapted from studies conducted by Epter (2009), Cullen (2004), and Warde et al. (2000).

Pull motivators indicated respondents’ motivations for eating at a specific restaurant. Respondents were asked to indicate how important each pull motivator was when selecting a casual dining restaurant to dine at. The attributes consisted of 23 items such as “the food is safe to eat”, “The staff is well-trained and competent”, “the restaurant accommodates my special needs, as well as my groups”, and “the price of the food”. Again, motivators were measured on a five point scale ranging from not important to extremely important. Pull motivators were influenced by several previous studies, including Harrington et al. (2010; 2011), Choi and Zhao (2010), and Yamanaka et al. (2003). Additionally, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1998) identified 5 dimensions of service quality (SERVQUAL) also used as push motivators in the survey used within this study. This was refined to be applied within a restaurant setting by Stevens, Knutson, and Patton (1995). The five dimensions used in DINESERV (Stevens et al., 1995) were identical to the SERVQUAL study by Parasuraman et al. (1988). Though a point of examination, the survey did not indicate, nor did it separate out, restaurant attributes by hedonic or utilitarian components. Examples of hedonic attributes include “interior design”, “music”, and “lighting”, while examples of utilitarian attributes include “food safety”, “restaurant location”, and “cleanliness”.

Experience outcomes were also analyzed within the survey. Participants were asked four questions regarding their reactions to restaurant experiences and asked to rate each on a five point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. This section included questions regarding loyalty and revisit intentions. The loyalty and revisit intention issues consisted of 4 items. Loyalty was measured by two items - “If I like a restaurant, I am a loyal customer and return there often” and “I like to try new restaurants – so, I rarely visit the same restaurant again.” Revisit intention was measured by two items - “If I had a really bad experience at a restaurant, I will never return to that restaurant location again,” and “If I had a really bad experience at a restaurant, I will never return to that restaurant chain again.”

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

	N	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	186	33.3
Female	367	65.7
<i>Age</i>		
18-25 years old	287	51.3
26-35 years old	104	18.6
36-55 years old	98	17.5
56+ years old	69	12.3
<i>Race</i>		
African American	46	8.2
Caucasian	390	69.8
Hispanic American	51	9.1
Other	72	12.9
<i>Level of Education</i>		
High School/GED	42	7.5
Some College/Associate Degree	296	53.0
Bachelor's Degree	137	24.5
Post Graduate Degree	81	14.5
<i>Student Status</i>		
Student	323	57.8
Not a student	230	41.1

Note: Totals differ due to missing data.

A total of 559 usable surveys were collected. Survey respondents were predominately female, Caucasian, and had some college education. Most were college students between the ages of 18-25, which is expected as this survey was administered on a college campus. These demographics (Table 1) differ from the general American population, but can still be applicable to the restaurant industry in the United States. As indicated earlier, the target market for casual restaurants is approximately 18 to 55 years old (Barry, Blankenstein, Britz, & Zuchowicz, 1998; Brooks, 2011). Based on the family life cycles of consumer behavior (Murphy & Staples, 1979; Lansing & Kish, 1957), age demographics were broken into four categorical brackets, roughly coordinating with family life stages

(young/single, young/married, married/kids, and empty nesters). Young/single and young/married, especially those without children, report higher discretionary income thus spend more on dining out. Additionally, those falling into the empty nester category also have higher discretionary spending, but tend to dine out less frequently than younger age groups (Kotler, Bowen & Makens, 2006). Additionally, Zalatan (1998) reported findings that a shift to women as the primary decision makers for the family has occurred in the last few decades, indicating the purchasing potential of females, thus making the overrepresentation of females relevant.

Additionally, the strong prevalence of the college-aged consumer within this study is not to be discounted, as the purchasing power of young adults in the United States is growing. As previously indicated, the purchasing power of the young American is substantial. It is estimated that American college students spent over US\$13 billion while dining out in 2011 (Greenberg, 2012).

Objective 1: Identify the level of involvement of the diner in a casual restaurant.

Table 2. Casual Dining Involvement Levels

	Low Involvement	Medium Involvement	High Involvement
	1.00-2.33	2.34-3.66	3.67-5.00
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Numbers and Percentages	53 (9.5%)	342 (61.2%)	164 (29.3%)
Mean Involvement Score =	3.25		
Median Involvement Score =	3.30		
Modal Involvement Score =	3.00		
Reliability =	.907		

The ten item involvement scale used for this study was taken from a study conducted by Josiam et al. (2004) regarding involvement of the tourist shopper. The involvement scale was originally adapted by Josiam et al. from Zaichkowsky's (1985) 20 item involvement scale. Cronbach's alpha was used to compute the reliability of the scale in this study, and was reported at 0.907. This is only slightly lower than the reliability of the scale used by Josiam et al. in 2004, and the original Zaichkowsky scale, which were both reported at 0.95. The high

alpha values found in this study with the modified scale give confidence to use this measure in future studies pertaining to restaurant consumers.

The mean involvement score was found to be 3.25 (SD =.7203) on a 5.0 scale. The median score of 3.30 was close to the mean score, indicating a relatively normal distribution (Table 2).

The range of mean involvement scores was divided into three categories of low (score of 1.0–2.33), medium (2.34-3.66), and high (3.67-5.0) involvement. While high, medium and low involvement has not been examined within the context of the restaurant industry, Josiam et al. (2004) conducted analyses using the same methodology with involvement in tourist shoppers and found that most tourist shoppers fall into the medium involvement category, followed by the high involvement category. Additionally, low involvement tourist shoppers were the fewest in number. Similarly, this study resulted in numbers that were comparable to the Josiam et al. study on tourist shoppers. More than half of the sample population was classified as medium involvement diners, while just under one third of the sample was classified as high involvement. Less than 10% of diners were characterized as low involvement. It is not surprising to find that the low involvement category has the fewest individuals as eating is a necessity and respondents must have some involvement or interest in it, if not just merely a way of satisfying a basic human need. Additionally, few people never dine out, or do not secure some benefits from dining out. Furthermore, dining out requires a decision to be made, so even low involvement diners must be somewhat involved in the decision making process.

Objective 2: Examine the relationship between diner involvement and demographics.

Using the crosstabs procedure with chi-square, the three diner involvement segments were compared in terms of demographic characteristics (Table 3). No significant differences were found between involvement levels in age, race, education level, or student status. However, significant differences were identified between males and females in terms of involvement levels. Females reported significantly higher involvement levels than males regarding dining in casual restaurants.

Table 3. Demographic Characteristics by Involvement Segments

		Segments by Involvement Levels			Chi-square
		Low	Medium	High	
		N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	
<i>Gender</i>					8.720*
	Male	14 (26.4)	130 (38.3)	42 (26.1)	
	Female	39 (73.6)	209 (61.7)	119 (73.9)	
<i>Age</i>					
	18-25 years old	27 (50.9)	172 (50.4)	88 (53.7)	6.079 (NS)
	26-35 years old	12 (22.6)	71 (20.8)	21 (12.8)	
	36-55 years old	7 (13.2)	58 (17.0)	33 (20.1)	
	56+ years old	7 (13.2)	40 (11.7)	22 (13.4)	
<i>Race</i>					5.441 (NS)
	African American	3 (5.7)	23 (6.7)	20 (12.2)	
	Caucasian	37 (69.8)	245 (71.6)	108 (65.9)	
	Hispanic American	6 (11.3)	31 (9.1)	14 (8.5)	
	Other	7 (13.2)	43(12.6)	22 (13.4)	
<i>Level of Education</i>					1.537 (NS)
	High School/GED	5 (9.6)	25 (7.4)	12 (7.3)	
	Some College/Associate Degree	29 (55.8)	178 (52.4)	89 (54.3)	
	Bachelor's Degree	13 (25.0)	85 (25)	39 (23.8)	
	Post Graduate Degree	5 (9.6)	52 (15.3)	24 (14.6)	
<i>Student Status</i>					5.377 (NS)
	Student	32 (61.5)	184 (54.6)	107 (65.2)	
	Not a student	20 (38.5)	153 (45.4)	57 (34.8)	

*Significant at $p < .05$; NS = no significant difference between categories

Objective 3: Examine the relationship between diner involvement and frequency of dining out.

Correlation analysis was employed to determine if a relationship exists between frequency of dining at a casual restaurant and diner involvement levels (Table 4). Researchers found a significant positive correlation between diner involvement and frequency of dining out. As diner involvement increases, frequency of dining out at casual restaurants also increases.

Additionally, researchers ran a crosstabs analysis with chi-square to determine if there were differences between involvement levels and frequency of dining out (Table 4). Significant differences were found between involvement

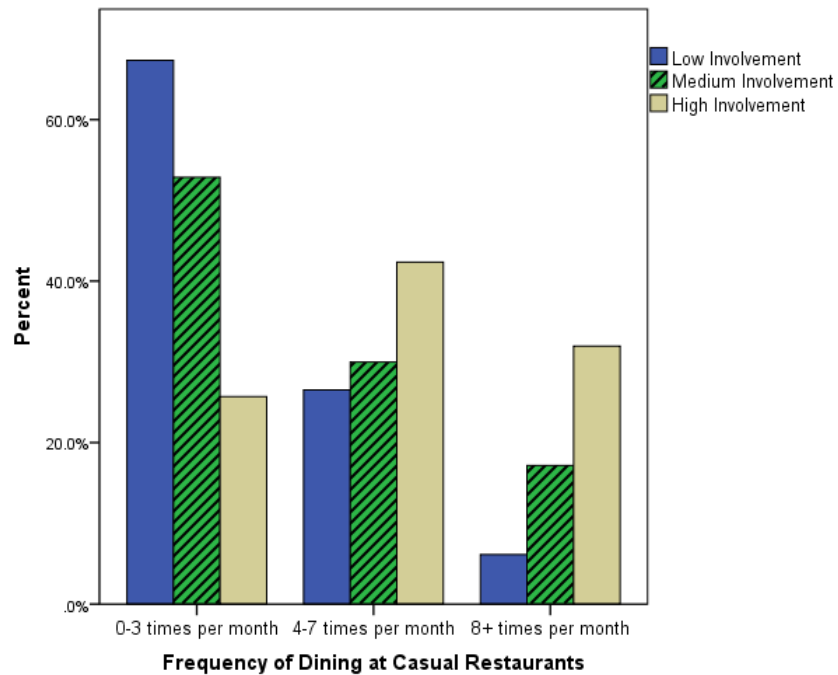
levels and frequency of dining out at casual restaurants (Graph 1). Consistent with the correlations analysis, it is seen that high involvement diners eat out at casual dining restaurants more frequently than low and medium involvement diners.

Table 4. Involvement & Dining Frequency

	Segments by Involvement Levels			Chi-square
	Low N (%)	Medium N (%)	High N (%)	
<i>Frequency of Dining Out</i>				41.680**
0-3 times per month	33 (67.3)	157 (52.9)	37 (25.7)	
4-7 times per month	13 (26.5)	89 (30.0)	61 (42.4)	
8+ times per month	3 (6.1)	51 (17.2)	46 (31.9)	
<i>Statistics</i>				
$r = 0.281$ **				

**Significant at $p < .01$

Graph 1: Frequency of Dining Out By Involvement Level



Objective 4: Identify the key factors of the 'push' and 'pull' motivators of the casual diner and categorize them into Utilitarian and Hedonic motivators

Factor analysis was employed to identify groupings of the nine push motivators and the 23 pull motivators. Researchers followed this by naming each of the factors with titles reflecting their central concepts. From the nine push motivators, principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation produced two resulting factors. These factors displayed medium-to-high reliabilities, with Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.548 to 0.841 (Table 5). The researchers labeled the factors as follows:

- "Kitchen Challenged Diner" - These are diners who are unwilling or unable to cook. They do not want to put effort into the aspects of cooking, such as learning recipes, preparing, or washing dishes. They simply don't want to cook, nor do they enjoy cooking. Therefore, these are consumers who are "pushed" out of their kitchens to dine out in order to avoid cooking. It is noteworthy that all the items in this factor are *utilitarian* in nature, pertaining to practical or objective issues.
- "Social Supper" - These are diners who eat out for social reasons. They are "pushed" to dine out to accompany friends or family, or to celebrate a special occasion. Additionally, they may crave something specific and may convince their friends and family to accompany them out for a specific item or type of food. It is noteworthy that all the items in this factor are *hedonic* in nature, pertaining to enjoyment or celebration.

From the 23 pull motivators, principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation identified six factors (Table 6). The researchers labeled these as follows:

- "Service Quality." Diners are pulled to a restaurant that offers consistent, prompt service from well trained, knowledgeable and competent staff. The items in this factor are all utilitarian. It is noteworthy that these are the exact five dimensions of service quality identified in the original SERVQUAL study by Parasuraman et al. (1988) and subsequently utilized in the DINESERV study by Stevens et al. (1995).
- "Ambience." Diners are pulled to a restaurant which has a good feel, including proper lighting, acceptable music, well designed interior, and overall atmosphere. The items in this factor are all hedonic.
- "Value." Diners are pulled to a restaurant in which they feel they get more for their dollar, through portion size, price of food and non-alcoholic

beverages, and the promotions or coupons offered to diners. The items in this factor are all utilitarian.

- “Happy Hour/Social Aspect.” Diners are pulled to a restaurant in which there is some buzz. They hear their friends or others talking about it and they are pulled in by the prices and selection of alcoholic beverages. The key items in this factor are hedonic in nature.
- “Cleanliness/Hygiene.” Diners are pulled in by a clean environment, which helps insure that the food is safe to eat. The items in this factor are all utilitarian.
- “Practicality of the Restaurant.” Diners are pulled to a restaurant because it is close by or easy to get to, it accommodates their special dietary needs, or it offers a certain type of food that they are after. The items in this factor are all utilitarian.

Objective 5: Compare casual diner involvement segments in terms of push motivators, pull motivators, and experience outcome variables.

Using ANOVA, the three involvement segments were compared in terms of push motivators (Table 5), pull motivators (Table 6), and outcome variables (Table 7).

Table 5. Factor Analysis - Push Motivators & Relationship with Involvement Levels

	Factor Loading	Segments by Involvement Levels			F-values
		Low means	Medium means	High means	
<i>Factor 1: Kitchen Challenged (Utilitarian)</i>					
Alpha = .841; Explained Variance = 37.751					
I lack knowledge of Recipes	0.839	1.55	1.82	1.97	3.006*
I do not know how to cook	0.814	1.57	1.60	1.80	2.415 (NS)
I do not like to cook	0.755	1.71	2.00	2.26	4.749**
Cooking is too much effort	0.719	2.20	2.46	2.70	4.457*
I do not have the equipment to cook	0.686	1.68	1.80	1.95	1.939 (NS)
I do not like washing dishes	0.631	1.94	2.44	2.55	3.973*
<i>Factor 2: Social Supper (Hedonic)</i>					
Alpha = .548; Explained Variance = 18.470					
My friends want to go out to eat	0.730	3.25	3.29	3.51	3.961*
There is a special occasion	0.661	3.35	3.59	4.04	14.355**
I am craving a specific food	0.525	2.69	3.06	3.34	9.223**

*Significant at $p < .05$; **Significant at $p < .01$; NS = not significant

Table 6. Factor Analysis - Pull Motivators & Relationship with Involvement Levels

	<i>Factor Loading</i>	<u>Segments by Involvement Levels</u>			<i>F-values</i>
		<i>Low means</i>	<i>Medium means</i>	<i>High means</i>	
<i>Factor 1: Service Quality (Utilitarian)</i>					
Alpha = .893; variance explained = 16.320%					
Service is consistent	0.881	4.17	4.23	4.31	0.955 (NS)
Staff is well-trained and competent	0.869	4.15	4.20	4.28	0.816 (NS)
Staff is prompt	0.803	4.19	4.28	4.36	1.275 (NS)
Staff is knowledgeable	0.757	3.72	3.84	3.97	1.856 (NS)
Service I receive	0.749	4.25	4.41	4.46	1.713 (NS)
<i>Factor 2: Ambience (Hedonic)</i>					
Alpha = .807; variance explained = 12.05%					
Interior design	0.790	2.68	2.62	2.85	3.774 *
Lighting	0.762	2.87	2.76	2.85	0.604 (NS)
Atmosphere	0.754	3.40	3.38	3.54	1.759 (NS)
Music	0.742	2.62	2.54	2.65	0.811 (NS)
<i>Factor 3: Value (Utilitarian)</i>					
Alpha = .597; variance explained = 9.91%					
Portion size	0.653	2.85	3.09	3.27	4.145*
Value I receive	0.630	3.96	3.85	4.07	3.765*
Price of food	0.623	3.87	3.79	4.21	2.627 (NS)
Price of non-alcoholic beverages	0.583	1.79	2.09	2.33	5.101**
Promotions/Coupons	0.493	2.36	2.53	2.80	3.682*
<i>Factor 4: Happy Hour/Social Aspect (Hedonic)</i>					
Alpha = .639; variance explained = 8.91%					
Friends want to go	0.741	3.43	3.35	3.65	5.864**
Hear people talking about it	0.718	2.81	3.00	3.34	8.012**
Types of drinks	0.524	2.45	2.69	2.95	4.761**
Price of alcoholic beverages	0.470	2.47	2.55	2.70	1.058 (NS)
<i>Factor 5: Cleanliness/Hygiene (Utilitarian)</i>					
Alpha = .746; variance explained = 7.19%					
Food is safe	0.767	4.32	4.50	4.59	2.399 (NS)
Restaurant is clean	0.748	4.32	4.42	4.49	1.269 (NS)
<i>Factor 6: Practicality of Restaurant (Utilitarian)</i>					
Alpha = .185; variance explained = 5.097%					
Location of restaurant	0.597	3.51	3.46	3.93	3.230*
Food type/selection	-0.523	4.15	4.12	4.33	4.551*
Restaurant accommodates needs	0.390	3.19	3.04	3.23	1.218 (NS)

*Significant at $p < .05$; **Significant at $p < .01$; NS = not significant

Push motivators and involvement segments. Lowest scores across the table were consistently seen across the low involvement diner segment, while the highest scores were consistently seen among the high involvement diner segment (Table 5). In almost every category across the board, those who gave high ratings to the push motivators for dining out also fell in the high involvement category consistently, while those who assigned low importance to push motivators for dining out fell into the low involvement category. Additionally, for the push motivators ascribed to “Kitchen Challenged Diners”, significant differences were seen between groups across the board, except for “I do not know how to cook” ($F = 2.415, p = 0.090$) and “I do not have the right equipment to cook with” ($F = 1.939, p = 0.145$). Looking at the push motivators within “Social Supper”, significant differences were found between groups in all three push motivator categories. Furthermore, as evidenced by the higher scores for the hedonic motivators, diners classified into the high involvement category seem to be more driven by the hedonic aspects of dining out rather than the utilitarian aspect of not having to cook. This is not surprising, as dining out at a casual restaurant is an indulgence, rather than a necessity.

Pull motivators and involvement segments. Many differences exist between groups within pull motivator categories (Table 6). While generally a hierarchical effect is seen across categories, multiple categories resisted this trend, especially those regarding restaurant environment. Within the restaurant ambience factor, low involvement diners assign more importance to interior design, music, and atmosphere than medium involvement diners. Additionally, they assign more importance to lighting than both medium and high involvement diners. Low involvement diners also ascribe more importance to “friends want to go”, “Price of food”, “Value I receive”, “food type/selection”, “Location of restaurant”, and “restaurant accommodates special needs” than medium involvement diners. Low involvement diners place more emphasis and value in the utilitarian aspects of dining out rather than the hedonic qualities that medium and high involvement diners express greater value or interest in.

Moreover, significant differences between all involvement groups were seen in “interior design”, “portion size”, “value I receive”, “price of non-alcoholic beverages”, “promotions/coupons”, “hear people talking about it”, “friends want to go”, “types of drinks”, “location of restaurant” and “food type/selection”. Each of these attributes had a hierarchical effect, with low involvement members rating each of these attributes lowest and high involvement individuals rating each of these attributes highest.

While the importance of the factors varied among diner involvement segments, the analysis did indicate that similarities exist between the groups. All three involvement groups regarded “Food type/selection”, “Food is safe”, “Restaurant is clean”, “Service I receive”, “Service is consistent”, “Staff is well-trained and competent”, and “Staff is prompt” as the most important pull motivators. Furthermore, all three groups indicated “Promotions/coupons”, “Types of drinks”, “Price of non-alcoholic beverages”, and “Price of alcoholic beverages” as the least important pulls motivators. This suggests that diners are pulled to a restaurant because it is clean, they receive good service, and the menu offers food that the diner is seeking, rather than because they can get a good deal or the restaurant has the right type of drinks.

Experience outcomes and involvement segments. The three involvement groups varied significantly on loyalty and revisit intention to a specific location, but there was no significant difference between groups in revisit intention to a chain and “I like to try new restaurants and rarely return” (Table 7). High involvement diners had the highest levels of experience outcomes across the board, and low involvement diners had the lowest levels of experience outcomes across the board.

High involvement diners were more likely to remain loyal to a restaurant they enjoyed than low involvement diners. Additionally, high involvement diners were also more likely to never return to a restaurant location in which they had a bad experience than low involvement diners.

Researchers again see a hierarchical effect with low involvement diners exhibiting lower scores on experience outcomes and high involvement diners exhibiting higher scores regarding experience outcomes. There were no significant differences between “I try new restaurants and rarely return” and “if I have a bad experience, I never return to that chain”.

Table 7. Experience Outcomes and Involvement Levels

	<i>Segments by Involvement Levels</i>			<i>F -Values</i>
	<i>Low</i> <i>(N=40)</i>	<i>Medium</i> <i>(N=250)</i>	<i>High</i> <i>(N=143)</i>	
If I like a restaurant, I am loyal	3.94	4.25	4.51	9.263**
I try new restaurants and rarely return	2.64	2.75	2.82	0.596 (NS)
If I have a bad experience, I never return to that location	3.58	3.79	3.99	3.078*
If I have a bad experience, I never return to that chain	2.83	3.06	3.09	0.953 (NS)

*Significant at $p < .05$; **Significant at $p < .01$; NS = not significant

Objective 6: Examine the role of involvement and push/pull motivators on diner loyalty.

A regression analysis was employed to determine which factors of involvement, push motivators, and pull motivators were most important when predicting loyalty of diners (Table 8). Significant predictors of loyalty of diners were the “Kitchen Challenged Diner” factor, “Service Quality” factor, and “Practicality of Restaurant” factor. The more likely the diner was pushed to dine out because they did not want to put effort into making dinner and pulled to a restaurant because of the service quality of the restaurant and the practicality of the restaurant for meeting their needs, the more likely the diner would be loyal to the restaurant. The most powerful predictor for loyalty is the service quality received at a location (Beta=.253), followed by the push factor of “Kitchen Challenged diners” (Beta=.140), and then the “practicality of the restaurant” (Beta= -.138). If a restaurant offers exceptional service, casual restaurant diners are more likely to remain loyal and return to a location, especially when that restaurant offers a convenient dining location and provides the dinner with what they are seeking.

Table 8. Predicting Loyalty

Factor	Loyalty Beta
"Kitchen Challenged" factor	0.140**
"Service Quality" factor	0.253**
"Practicality of Restaurant" factor	-0.138**
Final statistics	
$r = 0.309$; $d.f = 515$; $f = 17.966^{**}$; $r^2 = 0.095$	
**Significant at $p < .01$	

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION

The findings of this study demonstrate that involvement can be successfully used as an important tool for segmenting casual dining consumers. Results indicate significant differences between males and females in terms of dining involvement. In addition, relationships were found between involvement levels and push and pull motivators, as well as hedonic and utilitarian motivators. Furthermore, loyalty was shown to be predicted by push motivators and restaurant attributes. A closer look at these results is warranted. An inclusive discussion in the context of the literature follows.

Involvement scores and segments

Research is limited regarding the implementation of the involvement construct with casual dining customers. The findings of this research indicate a majority of individuals fall into the medium involvement category (61.2%) and 29.3% fall within the high involvement category. Few participants identify as low involvement diners (9.5%). Researchers have proposed that decision-making is moderated by involvement, suggesting that why patrons dine at a specific location is dependent on involvement levels of the diner (Cobb and Hoyer, 1995; Olsen, 2007; Tarkianinen and Sundqvist, 2005). When highly involved, individuals express more motivation to apply the mental effort needed for evaluating all options (Kim, Jeon, & Hyun, 2012).

Researchers concluded that medium involvement describes the typical diner, expressing a need for food, socialization and some element of convenience. Low involvement diners were few in numbers because eating out is an integral part of life in American society. Even when little interest is expressed in the choice of dining establishment, push motivators, such as “my friends want to go out to eat” or “there is a special occasion”, still act on the low involvement group to get them to dine out at restaurants. It is important for restaurateurs to draw in these three segments using the pull factors identified to increase patronage at their restaurants.

Involvement and demographics

The study found no significant differences between any demographic characteristics and involvement in dining at casual dining restaurants, with the exception of gender. Women are often the buyers for the family (Barber, 2009; Josiam et al, 2004), often making over 80% of the daily consumer purchasing decisions as they are often more informed than men, which can account for the difference seen in involvement between men and women. Furthermore, Zalatan (1998) stated a shift towards females as the main decision makers in the home, which suggests that researchers can have confidence in these results as they are consistent with previous findings.

Additionally, no differences were seen between involvement levels and age, race, student status, or level of education. This could be because the survey was conducted among the core target market for casual dining restaurants. It appears that operators are successful in meeting the needs of this target market. This lack of differences also validates the use of a student sample, as students

were shown to be aligned with non-student diners in their motivations and involvement levels. This lack of difference is likely because pleasure is derived from dining out regardless of demographic characteristics. Consumers dine out because they enjoy the experience and/or receive some type of benefit from it, whether from a social aspect (hedonic motivation), or from a practical aspect (utilitarian motivation).

Why consumers dine out: involvement and push motivators

Two factors identified through factor analysis were “Kitchen Challenged Diners” and “Social Supper”. Significant differences were identified between involvement segments in four of the six push motivators in the “Kitchen Challenged Diner” factor and all three of the “Social Supper” items.

Diners falling into the “Kitchen Challenged” category can be attracted to a restaurant by the promotion of convenience factors, such as speed of service, perceived value, and the ease of the ordering and paying processes. Those who fall into the “Social Supper” category can be attracted to a restaurant through the use of happy hour drink specials, group specials, accommodating special occasions and promoting a good environment for socialization. Thus, using these push motivators in marketing campaigns will help casual dining restaurants attract consumers by “pushing” them out of their homes and “pulling” them into a restaurant.

Where consumers dine out: involvement and restaurant pull motivators

Research suggests that different involvement segments should be targeted individually. The low involvement segment likely dines out for utilitarian reasons. Low involvement diners are not strongly motivated to dine out, so identifying reasons for them to do so is the challenge of marketing to this segment.

The high and medium involvement segments comprise just over 90% of the study population and express more interest in dining out. The challenge restaurateurs’ face is not in pushing these groups to go out, but to get them to visit their establishment.

Though differences do exist in the sample, all three involvement segments ascribe a high level of importance to consistent service and a well-trained staff, as identified in previous studies (Njite et al., 2008). Additionally, all three segments identified food safety and restaurant cleanliness/hygiene as elements most important to selection of a restaurant. Keeping an establishment clean and with high health ratings increases the likelihood that consumers will patronize the establishment repeatedly, and develop loyalty.

It is interesting to note the correlation in involvement and push motivators regarding value. The more involved one is in dining at a casual restaurant, then the more likely they are to be concerned with portion size, value, and price of their meal. This is likely because, as this study has identified, those in the high involvement segment dine out more frequently than those in the low involvement segment. As they dine out more frequently, it is not surprising that they may have to watch their spending, especially in a recovering economy. Conversely, low involvement diners are likely to show less concern regarding value aspects because they may be able to spend more each time because they go out less often than their high involvement counterparts.

Findings also indicate that a well thought out interior design scheme coupled with consistent service pull in the most customers. However, basics, such as menu selection and value aspects, also play a role in the customer decisions, particularly in high involvement diners. Additionally, ensuring food safety and restaurant cleanliness is essential to drawing in all three involvement segments. If a restaurant appears dirty or delivers undercooked food, it risks low loyalty and low revisit intention.

Involvement and experience outcomes

Involvement levels were a significant predictor of loyalty and revisit intentions, particularly among high involvement diners. Josiam et al. (2004) found this true among tourist shoppers as well. The more highly involved a tourist shopper was, then the higher the likelihood of revisit and overall satisfaction. Similarly, results show that when diners are highly involved, they are more likely to remain loyal to that restaurant. As quality of service was identified as a main pull factor, keeping service quality high through strong training programs for the wait staff, and ensuring consistency and prompt service will help improve revisit intention and customer loyalty.

Furthermore, if diners have had a poor experience at a restaurant location, they are unlikely to return to that location. It is interesting to note that the same is

not true for the chain. No significant difference was noted between involvement and having a poor experience and never returning to the chain. This is likely because respondents identified service as the most important pull factor and service varies between locations for many reasons. A diner who has a bad experience at one location can easily visit another location of the chain and receive great service there.

Involvement and frequency of dining out

A significant positive correlation was identified between involvement scores and frequency of dining out. As involvement increases, so does frequency of dining out. This is not surprising, as higher involvement generally translates to a higher interest in the activity, and those who express a greater interest in an activity tend to participate more frequently in that activity.

Prediction of customer loyalty

The most important predictor of customer loyalty to a casual dining restaurant was found to be the pull factor of “Service Quality” through a multiple regression analysis. In line with previous findings within this study, service aspects are again found to be the most important, indicating that a high level of professionalism within the restaurant service is very important to casual dining consumers. The most significant push factor was the “Kitchen Challenged Diner” factor, indicating that diners are seeking convenience and minimal effort to procure a meal. Instead of dining at home, they seek a meal elsewhere to avoid the hassles of cooking and cleaning up the kitchen.

It is noteworthy that all the predictors of loyalty are utilitarian in nature. Consumers are “pushed” to dine out for practical reasons and they seek a restaurant that can deliver on the core operational issues of good food, good service, and good value for their money. This is consistent with many previous studies on how customers evaluate restaurants.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The casual dining sector is a multi-billion dollar industry. However, there is a paucity of research in this area, particularly on the key topic of diner motivations. This study has shown how the involvement construct can be adapted and used as a tool to segment diners visiting casual restaurants. Diner motivations were examined from both a push/pull framework and a hedonic/utilitarian framework,

providing deeper insight into the mind of the consumer. These analyses helped to identify *why* consumers dine out, and then how they decide *where* to dine out.

In summary, this study found that consumers could be segmented into three involvement categories – low, medium, and high – with differing motivations and behaviors. Low involvement diners were more likely to be influenced pushed to dine out due to utilitarian reasons, such as inexperience in the kitchen. Additionally, they were pulled into casual dining restaurants for utilitarian purposes, such as convenience and location of the establishment. On the other hand, higher involvement segments were pushed to dine out for hedonic purposes, such as celebrations or socialization, and pulled into restaurants for hedonic reasons, such as the ambiance of the restaurant, and the items that facilitated socialization, such as happy hours. This is consistent with Mattila (2001), who pointed that committed customers place a high value on the socialization aspects of dining such as friendship and a fun atmosphere. Predictors of loyalty also tend to be utilitarian in nature, relating the operational aspects of the restaurant experience for all involvement groups.

Managerial and Marketing Implications

This study has clearly shown that diners in all three involvement categories are primarily motivated by core operational issues of service quality, pricing, and menu selection. Service was the most important pull factor identified among involvement groups. Ensuring high service quality through strong training programs for staff, and guaranteeing consistency and prompt service through standard operating procedures will help improve revisit intention and customer loyalty. The study shows that consumers are motivated to visit restaurants for both hedonic and utilitarian reasons. As previously suggested, operators of restaurants should focus on key standards of operations in the areas of service, food quality, and menu selection.

Additionally, it is important to address hedonic motivations of diners. Consumers, especially those in higher involvement groups, visit restaurants for hedonic purposes. Thus, it is advisable to provide an environment which promotes socialization and celebration. Restaurant promotional activities, such as providing lower priced drinks and snacks during happy hour, singing ‘happy birthday’ to guests, and giving complimentary desserts for special events, can effectively increase loyalty and revisit intention among diners.

The findings of this study will allow restaurateurs to better understand the socio-demographics and motivations of diners at different levels of involvement. Restaurateurs can better target the three involvement segments through a focus on

service quality and convenience factors. Hedonic and utilitarian aspects appeal to diners in all three segment groups and therefore it is important to address both when creating marketing campaigns. Marketing campaigns on visual and print media should not ignore the utilitarian aspects of menu selection and value. Since the casual dining restaurant is often a place for enjoyment, it is important to highlight hedonic aspects that pull diners to an establishment. Advertisements featuring romantic couples, family birthday celebrations, and other socialization opportunities should be prominently exhibited. Indeed, this study reinforces the old saying in the restaurant industry – “Sell the sizzle, not just the steak”.

Limitations of the study and future research

Although many of the findings within this study are significant, limitations of the study should be considered. This study was limited in the fact that respondent came from two main sources: classrooms and a restaurant – both on the same campus. Future studies should seek to draw a larger random sample from multiple locations to increase confidence in the findings and increase the ability to generalize findings to a broader population. Additionally, involvement in casual dining is likely to differ from involvement in other restaurant segments, such as fast food and fine dining. Thus, future research should look to implement the involvement construct in other areas within the restaurant industry and compare them to this study.

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