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ABSTRACT

The fast food industry is characterised by numerous players usually of the same size and selling similar products. In Zimbabwe, competition is between Chicken Inn, Chicken Slice, Pablo's, Wimpy, African Fried Chicken, TN Grill, Food Express and lately KFC. With outlets selling largely undifferentiated products, it is important to establish why customers would prefer one outlet to another. Chicken Inn is the lead fast food outlet in Zimbabwe. A questionnaire survey was conducted on Chicken Inn customers to establish the service factors they considered most important in choosing a fast food outlet. Product related factors topped on the fast food choice priority list. Healthy food and food taste emerged as the top factors to the choice of fast food outlet. Handling customer complaints and affordability of prices were other key factors cited by customers in the choice of fast food outlet.

Keywords: Fast food industry, Key Success Factor.

INTRODUCTION

The lead fast food concern in Zimbabwe is Chicken Inn. Other key firms are Chicken Slice, Pablo's, AFC, Bhello and TN Grill, and recently KFC in Belgravia.

The major products offered in this sector include chips, fish, meat pies, pizza, cold drinks, ice cream and coffee. Customers are spoilt for choice as these firms are competing head on in terms of quantities, food quality, price and customer care among other service dimensions. Roddie and Martin (2001) asserted that marketing research is needed to identify the key criteria customers use to select one service provider in the industry over another, and craft a positioning strategy that covers the service attributes relevant to customers.

Whilst the key success factors in this sector are known and most players are addressing these, it still remains to be answered why some players are fairing badly and others are doing well. It will be important to look at the service factors that might influence fast food outlet choice.

1.6 Hypotheses

H₁: There is an association between 'age range' and 'considering offer of healthy food'

H₂: There is an association between level of 'qualifications' and 'considering food taste'.

H₃: There is an association between 'occupation' and 'consideration of how complaints are handled'.

H₄: There is association between 'average income per month' and 'consideration of affordability of prices'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2009 research by Min and Min (2011) produced the following rankings for customer perceived success factors for a fast food restaurant. The first attributes were rated as highly important and those listed at the end as least significant in that market. Min and Min (2011) gave taste of food as top priority factor and word of mouth reputation as the least from a list of 15 factors. The priority list goes as taste of food, cleanliness, service response time, competitive price, quality of service, proximity to a customer's residence, proximity to a customer's school or work place, employee's courtesy, operating hours, variety of food, safety, healthy food, proximity to a highway exit or major road, amenity and word of mouth reputation. These 15 items were reduced to five dimensions, namely: service image, menu selection, location, accessibility and consumer drawing power. The consumer drawing powers include use of competitive price. On a similar analysis Dagevos and Ophem (2013) developed the four elements that define what consumers value when consuming fast foods. These include product value, process value, location value and emotional value. These variables have some linkage to the key success factors by Min and Min (2011). These are analysed in the section to come. Kivela, Inbakaran and Reece (2000) used a 28 factor questionnaire to measure satisfaction with restaurant environment in the Hong Kong market. These factors were later reduced to 5 classifications that included first and last impressions, service

excellence, ambience, food excellence and comfortable to eat there, and reservations and parking. These are similar to what other researchers like Min and Min (2011) and Ehsan (2012) had used in their studies, though with a different ranking of such factors.

Similarly to Min and Min (2011), Law and Hui and Zhao (2004) in their study for repurchase frequency, used the following key success factors that influence satisfaction, namely; satisfaction with waiting, satisfaction with the price of food, satisfaction with staff's service attitude, satisfaction with the food quality, satisfaction with the variety of food, satisfaction with convenience, satisfaction with the environment and satisfaction with seat availability. In their considerations of the above factors, those found to increase customer satisfaction were waiting time, price of the food, convenience, environment, seat availability, staff quality and quality of food.

Ehsan (2012) carried out a study in three cities of Pakistan for purpose of reducing the fast food selection factors to four. He started with ten factors, namely; variety of food, taste of food, sitting space, timely service, promotional deals, price, and location of restaurant, environment of restaurant, co-operation of staff and brand image of restaurant. After carrying out factor analysis, the four most influential factors for fast food choice were established as: variety of food, timely service, promotional deals and price (Ehsan, 2012).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A descriptive cross-sectional survey was applied in the research. The study used fast food customers who visited the Chicken Inn premises. A sample of 230 customers was established through a systematic sampling procedure. A quota of 111 females and 119 males was achieved in the study, which represented 48.3% females and 51.7% males.

Data was collected using the survey questionnaire that had multiple choice questions; yes/no questions and Likert scale items. Data analysis was done using the SPSS software and hypotheses were tested based on Chi-square tests. Major limitation of the study was failure to take phenomenological experiences through in-depth interviews and possible bias from interviewing customers near the premises of Chicken Inn, their service provider.

Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Creswell (2009) defined reliability as a measure of whether scores to items on an instrument are internally consistent, stable over time and whether there was consistency in test administration and scoring.

Cronbach's Alpha values are derived from the research results processed by the SPSS software. The benchmarks are that alpha should range from 0.50 to 1.00 for it to be acceptable. A very good and high value should be around 0.80 and above (Creswell, 2009). In this study, reliability was generally high with choice factors ($\alpha=0.735$).

Validity refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences made from a test score. Field (2009) said validity is whether an instrument measures what it was designed to measure. The research by Min and Min (2011), Kivela et al (1999) and Ha and Jang (2012) on fast food factors and restaurant rating provided some elements used in this study. The use of success factors derived from empirical research recorded in journals had improved the validity of the questionnaire. Construct validity was generally good since concepts in the literature review of fast food success variables were those maintained in the survey questionnaire of this study

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Service Factors Regarded As Most Important In Choosing Fast Foods Outlets

	Mean-value	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Dis-Agree	Strongly Disagree
1. I consider offer of healthy food	1.23	76.5	23.5	0	0	0
2. I consider food taste	1.27	76.5	21.3	0.4	1.7	0
3. I consider how complaints are handled	1.53	48.3	51.3	0	0.4	0
4. I consider affordability of prices	1.71	31.7	66.1	1.3	0.9	0
5. I consider restaurant cleanliness	1.73	30.0	67.8	1.7	0.4	0
6. I consider word of mouth brand reputation	1.74	36.1	59.1	1.3	1.3	2.2
7. I consider length of queuing and waiting time	1.77	24.3	74.8	0.4	0.4	0
8. I consider ambience factors like music, scent, temperature.	1.83	28.7	63.9	4.8	0.4	2.2
9. I consider friendliness of staff to customers	1.85	20.4	77.0	0.4	1.3	0.9
10. I consider seat availability	1.86	20.4	74.3	4.3	0.9	0
11. I consider location of the outlet	2.08	26.5	38.7	34.8	0	0
12. I consider length of operating hours	2.13	23.5	40.0	36.1	0.4	0
Overall Mean	1.47	-	-	-	-	-

I Consider Offering of Healthy Food (M=1.23)

The current lifestyle of Zimbabweans is characterised by the fear for their health. Some diseases caused by too much oil on the chips and on the pieces of meat (Divine and Lepisto, 2005). The overall Number 1 of this factor rating confirms that Chicken Inn should prepare dishes and menus that are healthy for it to gain some competitive advantage. A Chi-square test was conducted on the association between: Age Range and considering offer of Healthy Food.

H₁: There is an association between 'age range' and 'considering offer of healthy food'

The test results are shown on the table below.

Table 4.3: Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.375(a)	2	.003
Likelihood Ratio	11.633	2	.003
Linear-by-Linear Association	10.736	1	.001
N of Valid Cases	230		

Conclusion: Since p-value of 0.003 is less than 0.05, we accept H₀ and conclude that there is an association between age range and considering offer of healthy food. This rating is opposite to Min and Min (2011) who put

health food at number 13 in his 15 factor list. In the analysis, elderly people are found to be less worried of the healthy factor than younger people. This could be caused by more young respondents being exposed to health information in schools and colleges. Chicken Inn needs to be sensitive to the health concerns of these young and old people for it to survive the competition.

I Consider Food Taste (M=1.27)

Though some food that tastes good is unhealthy, the respondents preferred food which is delicious and appetising. A good taste of food can still be prepared in a healthy way and meet the expectations of customers. Food taste is influenced by colour, temperature, ingredients and the level of cooking done on it. Customers want to enjoy food when they visit a fast food outlet (Dagevos and Ophem, 2013). Chicken Inn can create its winning strategy basing on the food taste required by customers. The as hierarchical value map(HVM) by Ha and Jang (2012), however, treated menu variety as food taste which has positive healthy effects that lead to enjoyable experiences with family and friends. A Chi-square test was conducted on the association between: Qualifications and Considering Food Taste.

H₂: There is an association between level of 'qualifications' and 'considering food taste'.

The test results are shown on the table below.

Table 4.4: Chi-Square Test Results

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	15.674(a)	3	.001
Likelihood Ratio	15.388	3	.002
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.873	1	.090
N of Valid Cases	230		

Conclusion: Since p-value of 0.001 is less than 0.05, we accept H₀ and conclude that there is an association between the qualification of respondents and their consideration of food taste. In the study, respondents with higher qualifications were found to be more worried with food taste offered by a fast food outlet.

I Consider How Complaints are handled

Customer complaints in a service setting usually come from unwanted delays, given unwanted products and general service failures that may take place. The way service recovery is done gives some great measurement on the attitudes of employees and management to customers. Chicken Inn needs to train its employees to be customer –oriented when solving service failure problems. A good service recovery approach can delight customers and cause them to like the firm even more (Law, Hui and Zhao, 2004). A Chi-square test was conducted on the association between: Occupation and Consideration of How Complaints Are Handled.

H₃: There is an association between occupation and consideration of how complaints are handled.

The test results are shown on the table below.

Table 4.5: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.055(a)	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	14.699	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.944	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	230		

Conclusion: Since p-value of 0.001 is less than 0.05, we accept H_0 and conclude that there is an association between occupation and consideration of how complaints are handled. The managers, who represent those with higher job status, were more interested with how complaints are handled than the lower status groups. Being bosses at their work, this class of customers, need more respect from service providers.

I Consider Affordability of Prices (M=1.71)

Prices for the chicken and chips, pizza, ice creams and teas need to be comparably affordable in relation to its competitors. Price of a product can pull customers to a firm and the rating of (Min and Min, 2011) and Ehsan (2012) are confirmed in this study. In Zimbabwe, customers are still price sensitive at each level of service. In this analysis of prices, customers have indicated that they want affordability of fast food products. Chicken Inn should find out ways of cutting costs and then charging lower prices than competitors to take advantage of this need. A Chi-square test was conducted on the association between: Average Income per Month and Consideration of Affordability of Prices.

H₄: There is association between average income per month and consideration of affordability of prices.

The test results are shown on the table below

Table 4.6: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	11.289(a)	2	.004
Likelihood Ratio	10.401	2	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.347	1	.012
N of Valid Cases	230		

Conclusion: Since p-value of 0.004 is less than 0.05, we accept H_0 and conclude that there is an association between average income per month and consideration of affordability of prices. Those with higher income were more concerned about affordability than those with lower incomes. This could be possible since higher incomers could be treating the fast food as a staple food. They could be repeat buyers who wanted a bargain. The low income groups could be treating fast food as special day meals for hedonic purchases. They could save and buy the product once a month.

I Consider Restaurant Cleanliness (M=1.73)

This factor was rated number 5 by the respondents. The cleanliness of restaurant walls, floors, chairs and ceilings make customers attracted by the food. This is part of the physical environment that assists to attract customers. The smartness of Chicken Inn's buildings will give it some competitive advantages over its competitors. It should also be noted that cleanliness also contributes to the ambience factor.

I Consider Word of Mouth Brand Reputation (M=1.74)

The reputation of a fast food outlet as communicated by ordinary people was rated number 6 by the respondents. A negative reputation might come from key issues like poor treatment of customers by employees, fewer chips and meat offered unpleasant food taste and charging higher price than competitors. The brand remains in the minds of customers even if the firm changes some variables (Frank, 2012). Higher brand equity can be improved by ensuring key variables of the fast foods are offered and communicated to the relevant group of customers (Gabay et al, 2009).

Other Factors That Were Considered For Fast Food Choices

The other factors like queueing and waiting time (M=1.77), ambience (M=1.83), friendliness of staff to customers (M=1.85), seat availability (M=1.86), location of outlet (M=2.08) and length of operating hours (M=2.13), in their scale of preference. Some of these factors are critical for successful operation of a fast food outlet. The relationships among the variables also need to be investigated so that Chicken Inn can design powerful business strategies (Min and Min, 2011). These same factors were used for rating Chicken Inn's performance in this study.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that healthy food, food taste, handling customer complaints and affordability of prices were rated as key factors by customers, it is concluded that product related factors topped on the priority list. These factors are important for drawing customers to a shop. The hypotheses tested also concluded that young respondents are more worried on healthy product than elderly people with a p-value of 0.003 and that highly qualified people are more worried about food taste compared to those with low qualifications with a p-value of 0.001. It is also concluded that respondents who were managers were more interested with complaints handling than non-managers and self employed and that higher income customers were more worried with affordability of prices in comparison to those with low incomes.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors normally patronize Chicken Inn. This may have had a bearing on their assessment of fast food outlets.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The corresponding author conceived and designed the study alone. With the help of the co-author they collected, analysed, interpreted the data and compiled the final document.

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