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Behavioral intention in the luxury fast food restaurant

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the impacts of personal interaction encounters, service excellence, product quality and positive emotion on consumer behavioral intentions in luxury fast food restaurants. The paper investigates samples of luxury fast food restaurants' customers in Shiraz, using stratified random sampling. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed by fast food restaurant staffs to randomly selected customers who were waiting for checks after dinner. In all, 780 customers were asked to complete a survey on a voluntary basis. A total of 738 completed questionnaires were obtained and used in this study. The paper adopted the structural equation modeling approach to test the hypothesis. The empirical validation of the conceptual model supports the research hypotheses. The results support the fully mediating role of service excellence in the relationship between personal interaction encounters and behavioral intentions. This study explores how positive emotion mediates the impact of product quality and behavioral intentions. The paper also finds support for linear relationship between behavioral intention and actual behavior.

Key words: Personal interaction encounters, service excellence, product quality, positive emotion, behavioral intention, actual behavior.

INTRODUCTION

The main interest of managers in a luxury fast food is to produce more profits which, in turn, are achieved via maintaining loyal patronage, generating positive "word of mouth" recommendations (one effective method to recruit new shoppers), and increasing the time and money consumers spent while shopping. Thus, fast food restaurants managers need to understand how to motivate consumers' spending behavior. First, Soderlund and Öhman (2005) showed intentions-as-expectations and intentions-as-wants are positively associated with customer satisfaction as well as repatronizing behavior. In general, individuals shop to obtain hedonic and/or utilitarian values (Babin et al., 1994). A luxury fast food restaurant may turn out to be more profitable if it could satisfy both types of shoppers. When a luxury fast food is perceived as exciting, consumers may visit it more frequently and be less likely to visit other luxury fast food restaurants (Lumpkin et al., 1986). Although service

encounters and customer experiential value have been researched separately in a number of studies, the two have not been examined simultaneously in a fast food restaurant context. The present study aims to fill this gap by examining the relationships among service encounters, customer experiential value, and customer behavioral intentions in the context of luxury fast foods restaurants. Specifically, this study applies experiential value conceptualization developed by Holbrook (1994) and relates it to personal interaction encounters with the fast food restaurants as a means of explaining customer behavioral intentions. Hence this study suggests that customer experiential value mediates the relationship between service encounters and consumer behavioral intentions.

Consumers today are seeking value, choice, and a great customer experience. Market trends also show that the role of customer experiential value has attracted

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growing attention among practitioners in the fast food context (Keng et al., 2007). One main contribution of the present study is to link service encounters with the experiential value theory. Specifically, we argue that fast food restaurant customers' responses to one of the main components of their service encounters (personal interaction encounters) is reflected by a dimension of experiential value: service excellence.

The effect of physical stimuli on consumer behavior has been of consistent interest to marketing practitioners and scholars (Bitner, 1992; Turley and Milliman, 2000). In the past three decades, researchers have recognized the influence of physical stimuli as tangible cues in customer evaluations of service quality, and ultimately in repeat purchase, in a variety of service settings (Baker, 1987; Bitner, 1992). Along similar lines, Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) study in environmental psychology suggests that environmental stimuli (S) lead to an emotional reaction (O) that, in turn, drives consumers' behavioral response (R) based on the stimulus–organism–response (S–O–R) paradigm. The model posits that pleasure is one of the consumers' emotional states in response to environmental stimuli (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974).

Due to the hedonic nature of a quality fast food restaurant experience, human interactions are essential in creating satisfaction and future revisits (Stevens et al., 1995). In other words, the level of service provided by fast food restaurant employees may be another critical component of fast food restaurant service quality. Thus, overall service stimuli should be considered in seeking to better understand fast food restaurant's customer experience. This study extends Mehrabian and Russell's framework of physical stimuli, consumer emotions, and behavioral response by adding fast food industry-specific stimuli as an example of the service experience situation. More specifically, one of the objectives of this study is to assess the effects of perceived quality on emotion and behavioral intentions in the fast food restaurant context (Jang and Namkung, 2009).

The structure of the present paper is organized as follows: after exploring the literature review of this study the conceptual model figure 1 is proposed based on literature review. Subsequently, we outline the data and measures before we report and discuss the empirical results. Finally, based on the findings, we point out several practical implications for luxury fast food restaurants managers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Service encounter is shaped by customer perceptions of service providers. The service encounter process is the means through which consumers evaluate the level of service provided by the organizations, service personnel, and even the interaction with other consumers during a certain period (Bitner et al., 1997). Bitner and Brown

(2000) proposed that service encounters influence customer satisfaction, loyalty, repurchase intentions, and word-of-mouth recommendations. That is, service encounters can be considered a complex process in which personal service interactions operate in conjunction to shape customer expectations of service quality (Cox et al., 2003; Coye, 2004).

Service excellence as viewed by customers is considered part of the reactive side of the customer experience. The perceived excellence value reflects the product performance and generalized consumer appreciation of a service provider who demonstrates his/her expertise and maintains a reliable service performance. Holbrook (1994) suggested that consumers favor particular objects or experiences owing to their ability to accomplish certain objectives or perform certain expected functions. That is, excellence value involves ensuring that patronizing fast food restaurants results in value-added services that exceed ordinary expectations.

Applying Mehrabian and Russell's model, many studies have been conducted on the role of environmental stimuli as a predictor of emotional responses, such as pleasure as a predictor of consumer behaviors, such as extra time spent in a fast food restaurant and actual incremental spending (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Wakefield and Blodgett, 1994, 1996). Despite the great contribution of Mehrabian and Russell's model to the literature, it is undeniable that environmental stimuli provide only limited information about customer evaluations of perceived quality in many service settings, because environmental stimuli are only a subset of overall service stimuli. That is, other aspects of service stimuli, in addition to environmental stimuli, exist and may have important but different roles in service settings. For example, within a fast food context, product stimuli such as food taste, freshness, and presentation, compose a set of stimuli, which, along with physical environment, may act as a significant predictor of emotional responses and future behaviors (Kivela et al., 1999).

Personal interaction encounters and service excellence

Scholars in service marketing have often focused on personal interaction because making service encounters more enjoyable can "reduce the perceived risk associated with purchasing a service and improve the buying experience" (Julian and Ramaseshan, 1994). One of the main components of the service encounters is personal interactions with the service provider (Bitner, 1990; Harris et al., 2003). Personal interaction encounters are viewed as a period of time during which a consumer interacts with service personnel (Bitner, 1990). The quality of personal interaction encounters can be assessed based on the service provider's competence, listening skills, and level of dedications (Chandon et al., 1997). Thus, the

investigation of service encounter in this study considers personal interaction encounters (Shostack, 1977; Booms and Bitner, 1982; Baker, 1987).

Perceived excellence value corresponds to reactive-extrinsic utilitarian value (Mathwick et al., 2001). Holbrook (1994) argued that extrinsic value relates to a means-ends relationship wherein a product/service/event is a means to carrying out some further purpose. Notably, Zeithaml (1988) suggested that the value derived from perceived excellence reflects consumer appreciation of a service provider's ability to deliver on its promises. Those promises might be realized through demonstrated expertise and task-related performance. Consumers make inferences regarding a service provider's overall offerings based on informational cues such as fast food quality and face-to-face personal encounters with frontline service personnel. Personal interactions can be considered an effective component of quality service that would lead customers to perceive an excellent value in shopping (Keng et al., 2007).

H₁: A positive relationship exists between personal interaction encounters and service excellence.

Product quality and positive emotion

In a fast food restaurant setting, many stimuli could influence the customer's emotional state. These stimuli encompass both tangible and intangible features of the fast food restaurant such as product attributes, physical environments, and service aspects. According to Campbell-Smith (1967), food, and service are the key elements in fast foods that broaden the appeal of the meal experience. As for product attributes, previous studies have noted that the most essential part of the fast food restaurant experience, "food quality," which includes an appealing taste, freshness, menu item variety, and appealing presentation, influences customer satisfaction (Johns and Tyas, 1996; Kivela et al., 1999; Raajpoot, 2002). Studies have focused on different food quality attributes such as presentation (Raajpoot, 2002), healthy components (Johns and Tyas, 1996), and freshness (Acebrón and Dopico, 2000; Johns and Tyas, 1996; Kivela et al., 1999) and have reported that these attributes serve as tangible cues of service quality in fast food restaurants. Finally, Jang and Namkung (2009) have noted that quality of product has an effect on positive emotion.

H₂: A positive relationship exists between product quality and positive emotion.

Behavioral intention

High-service quality as perceived by customers often

leads to favorable behavioral intentions, while low-service quality tends to cause unfavorable behavioral intentions. Providing quality services enhances fast food restaurant competitiveness, improves fast food restaurant reputation and increases customer repurchase desire. Recently, Burton et al. (2003) suggested that customer experience associated with behavioral intentions. Keng et al. (2007) found that service excellence has an effect on behavioral intention.

An extension of the relationships between stimuli and emotional responses leads to consumer behaviors. Donovan and Rossiter (1982) provided empirical evidence that the pleasure and arousal derived from the physical environment influence retail outcomes (time spent browsing the fast food restaurant's environment, the tendency to spend more money than originally planned, and the likelihood of returning to the fast food restaurant). Similarly, Baker et al. (1992) found that not only pleasure but also arousal were positively related to willingness to buy. Moreover, previous researchers have incorporated behavioral intentions, such as willingness to repurchase, willingness to purchase more in the future, and willingness to recommend the fast food to others (Baker et al., 2002; Hightower et al., 2002; Macintosh and Lockshin 1997). Donovan and Rossiter (1982) were interested in understanding patronage intentions, such as willingness to return to the fast food and to deliver good word-of-mouth to fellow customers, because of the need to forecast customer buying behavior. Behavioral intention is defined as "the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not perform some specified future behavior" (Warshaw and Davis, 1985). That is, intention to perform a behavior is the proximal cause of such a behavior (Shim et al., 2001). Jang and Namkung (2009) in their study used behavioral intentions as an outcome construct influenced by positive emotion.

H₃: A positive relationship exists between service excellence and behavioral intention.

H₄: A positive relationship exists between positive emotion and behavioral intention.

Actual behavior

Actions which are taken in a specific scenario or situation for a specific purpose are considered as actual behavior (Ajzen, 1989). It is measured in this study by investigating whether consumers take actions for purchasing within one month or a short-term due to the attractiveness of the fast food, and the willingness of consumers to come back to the fast food in the future due to the good impression formed in the past.

Actual consumer behavior is affected by behavior intention of consumers. Behavior intention of a consumer may affect his or her actual behavior. Davis (1986) and

Table 1. Respondent profile.

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	391	52
Female	347	48
Age		
18–24	237	32
25–34	210	28
35–44	141	19
45–54	94	12
55 and over	56	9
Education level		
Primary	87	11
High school	293	39
University	245	33
Postgraduate	113	17

N=738.

Davis et al. (1989) also proved that the behavior intention is one of the factors that determine the actual behavior. Taylor and Todd (1995) found in their research on the behavior model of a computer resource center that the behavior intention of the staff that has experience of purchasing computer devices has a positive effect on his or her actual purchasing behavior. Taib et al. (2008) also found that actual behavior is most influenced by behavioral intention.

H₅: A positive relationship exists between behavioral intention and actual behavior.

METHODOLOGY

Measurement items

To empirically test the hypotheses, multi-item scales validated in previous studies were identified and modified to fit the study setting. The product quality of the fast food restaurant included four items taken from Johns and Tyas (1996), Kivela et al. (1999) and Raajpoot (2002). Each item was measured using a 7-point scale: "How much do you agree or disagree with these statements?" (1 = extremely disagree and 7 = extremely agree).

Items related to personal interaction encounters (five items) were taken from Keng et al. (2007) rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).

Based on Izard's (1977), the researchers generated a pool of emotion items embedded in the fast food experience. The positive emotion items (four items) were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (In this fast food restaurant, I do not feel this emotion at all) to 7 (In this fast food restaurant, I feel this emotion strongly).

Items related to service excellence (five items) were taken from Brady and Robertson (2001) and Stevens et al. (1995) rated on a

seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7).

Behavioral intention was operationalized with responses to five items using a 7-point scale (1 = extremely disagree and 7 = extremely agree) based upon Zeithaml et al.'s (1996) study.

Actual behavior was measured through one item adapted from Lin (2008) rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "Not likely" (1) to "very likely" (7). The measurement items operationalized for testing hypotheses are presented in Table 2.

Data collection and analyses

A pilot test, using 40 students at Shiraz University in Iran who had visited a luxury fast food restaurant within 4 weeks, was conducted to ensure the reliability of the scales.

Several modifications were made based on feedback from the pilot test. Before the questionnaire was finalized, three managers at luxury fast food restaurants and two faculty members familiar with the topic area further reviewed the questionnaire, and slight revisions in wording were made based on their suggestions.

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed by fast food restaurant staffs to randomly selected customers who were waiting for checks after dinner. In all, 780 customers were asked to complete a survey on a voluntary basis. A total of 738 completed questionnaires were obtained and used in this study. The demographic characteristics of the respondents including age, gender and education level represented in Table 1.

The data were analyzed following Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step approach: A measurement model and a subsequent structural model. The multiple-item scales of six constructs were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis to determine whether the manifest variables reflected the hypothesized latent variables (Table 2). The adequacy of the individual items was assessed by composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Once the measures were validated, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the validity of the proposed model and the hypotheses.

Table 2. Reliabilities and confirmatory factor analysis properties.

Parameter	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliabilities	AVE	Item reliabilities	Standardized factor loadings
Product quality	0.75	0.84	0.73		
Food presentation is visually attractive				0.86	0.71
The fast food offers healthy options				0.90	0.88
The fast food serves tasty food				0.85	0.73
The fast food offers fresh food				0.89	0.87
Service excellence	0.79	0.81	0.64		
The fast food serves my food exactly as I ordered it				0.91	0.78
Employees are always willing to help me				0.87	0.77
The behavior of employees instills confidence in me				0.77	0.83
The fast food has my best interests at heart				0.90	0.81
When I think of this fast food, I think of service excellence				0.82	0.79
Positive emotion	0.81	0.77	0.66		
Joy (joyful, pleased, romantic, welcoming)				0.71	0.87
Excitement (excited, thrilled, enthusiastic)				0.84	0.89
Peacefulness (comfortable, relaxed, at rest)				0.80	0.77
4) Refreshment (refreshed, cool)				0.76	0.85
Behavioral Intentions	0.86	0.89	0.87		
I would like to come back to this fast food in the future				0.75	0.84
I would recommend this fast food to my friends or others				0.86	0.93
I would say positive things about this fast food to others				0.88	0.76
I have a strong desire to dine at this fast food				0.79	0.73
I will come back to this fast food				0.81	0.80
Personal interaction encounters	0.77	0.71	0.70		
Employees were very attentive to me				0.84	0.72
Employees offered good advices				0.91	0.84
I dealt with an honest service provider				0.80	0.79
Employees seemed competent				0.76	0.87
The interaction with the employees was a very positive experience				0.77	0.74
Actual behavior	0.80	0.85	0.78		
Assess the likelihood that you will come back to this fast food again in the future				0.89	0.91

Table 3. Correlation matrix.

Variable	Personal interaction encounters	Service excellence	Product quality	Positive emotion	Behavioral intention	Actual behavior
Personal interaction encounters	-	0.32	0.14	0.18	0.19	0.38
Service excellence	0.57	-	0.28	0.30	0.08	0.20
Product quality	0.45	0.68	-	0.32	0.14	0.11
Positive emotion	0.29	0.53	0.55	-	0.05	0.33
Behavioral intention	0.69	0.54	0.44	0.27	-	0.25
Actual behavior	0.23	0.36	0.28	0.48	0.43	-

Inter-correlations are presented in the lower triangle of the matrix while the squared correlations are given in the upper diagonal of the matrix.

RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, this study first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with a maximum likelihood to estimate the measurement model by verifying the underlying structure of constructs. This study also checked unidimensionality, reliabilities, and validities of the six-factor measurement model before testing the structural model (Table 1). The level of internal consistency in each construct was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha estimates ranging from 0.75 to 0.86 (Nunnally, 1978). All of the composite reliabilities of the constructs were over the cutoff value of 0.70, ensuring adequate internal consistency of multiple items for each construct (Hair et al., 1998).

Convergent validity was satisfied in that all confirmatory factor loadings exceeded 0.71 and was significant at 0.01 (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs exceeded the minimum criterion of 0.50, indicating that a large portion of the variance was explained by the constructs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 1998).

Discriminant validity was tested by comparing the average variance extracted (AVE) with the squared correlation between constructs (Fornell

and Larcker, 1981). The AVEs were greater than the squared correlations between any pair of constructs, suggesting discriminant validity. Discriminant validity signifies that a construct does not significantly share information with the other construct. That is, the six-factor confirmatory measurement model demonstrated the soundness of its measurement properties. The χ^2 value with 260 degrees of freedom was 619.437 ($p < 0.001$). Given the known sensitivity of the χ^2 statistics test to sample size, several widely used goodness-of-fit indices demonstrated that the confirmatory factor model fit the data well ($\chi^2 / df = 2.382$, $NFI = 0.977$, $CFI = 0.986$, $IFI = 0.986$, $RMSEA = 0.069$).

As the next step, the proposed structural model was estimated (Figure 2). The estimation produced the following statistics: $\chi^2_{(261)} = 620.261$ ($p < 0.001$), $\chi^2 / df = 2.376$, $NFI = 0.98$, $CFI = 0.99$, $IFI = 0.99$, $RMSEA = 0.069$. The model's fit as indicated by these indexes was deemed satisfactory; thus, it provides a good basis for testing the hypothesized paths.

The path coefficients shown in Figure 2 and Table 3 illustrates that personal interaction encounters significantly influenced service excellence (path coefficient = 0.57, $t = 2.45$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 which hypothesized a positive relationship between

product quality and positive emotion was supported (path coefficient = 0.69, $t = 2.78$, $p < 0.01$). As expected in hypothesis 3, service excellence had a significant impact on behavioral intention (path coefficient = 0.63, $t = 3.79$, $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis 4 for linking positive emotion and behavioral intentions was supported (path coefficient = 0.55, $t = 3.17$, $p < 0.01$). Finally, hypothesis 5, which predicted a positive relationship between behavioral intention, and actual behavior was also supported (path coefficient = 0.71, $t = 3.87$, $p < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

To yield a broad picture of service encounter, the present study presents a potential framework for understanding the relationship among service encounter, service excellence, and customer behavioral intentions in the luxury fast food restaurant context. These theoretical propositions are grounded primarily in the perspective of the customers. The overall empirical results provide strong support for the importance of personal service encounter which influence service excellence which in turn significantly influence customer behavioral intentions.

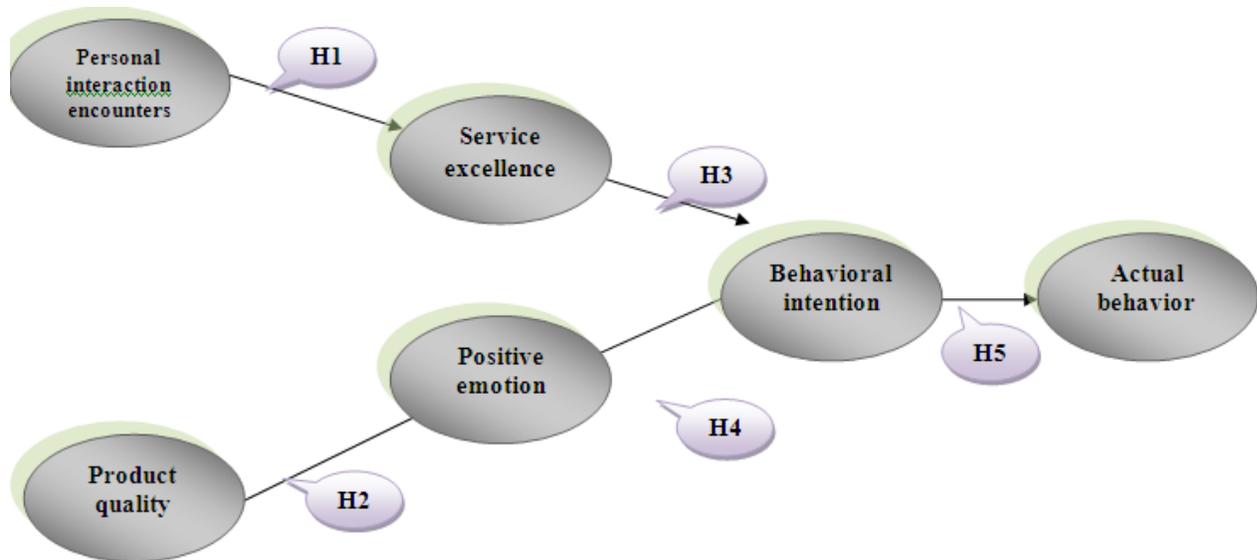


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

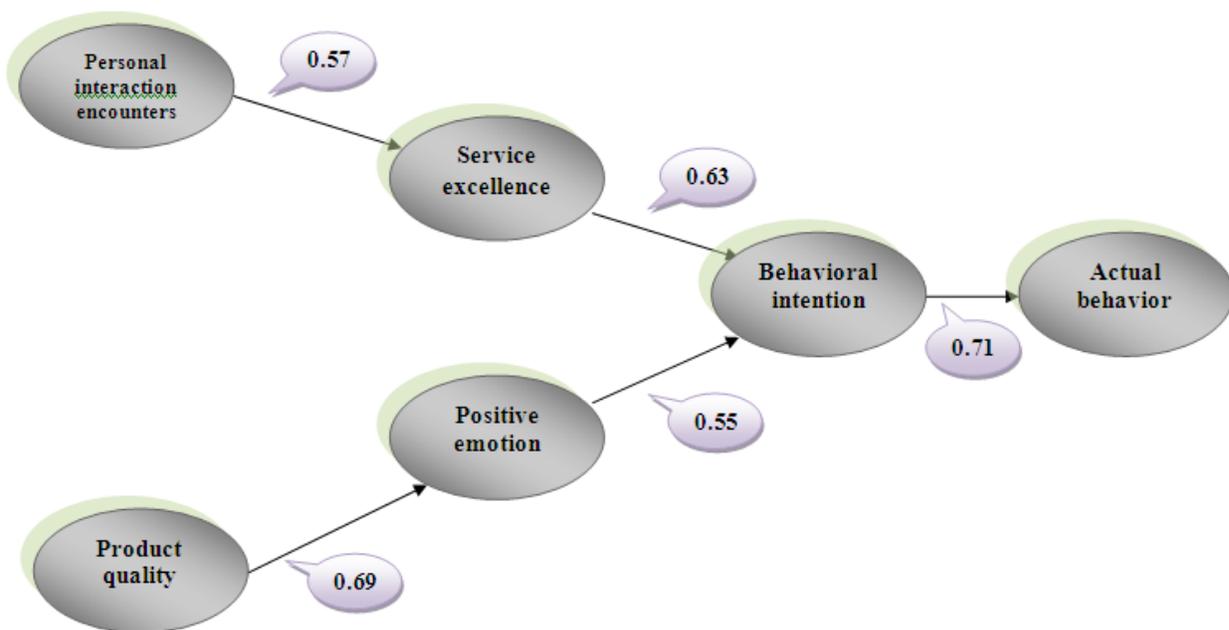


Figure 2. Structural model.

The positive relationship between personal interaction encounters and the perceived service excellence indicates that quality merchandise and courteous, knowledgeable, and efficient service providers can lead to an image of excellent service. These results are consistent with previous research findings (Hartline and Jones, 1996; Bitner et al., 1994).

A number of studies have examined the relationship between service quality, and behavioral intentions (Keng et al., 2007). Notably, their conclusion is in concert with

our findings in that customer experiential value mediates the impact of personal interaction encounters on behavioral intention.

Previous research has applied the Mehrabian and Russell model to examine the role of environmental stimuli in the creation of emotion and consumer behaviors (Jang and Namkung, 2009). However, few have taken into consideration the attributes that are potentially important for products.

This study examines the way in which positive emotion

mediate between product quality and consumer behavioral intentions (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Baker and Cameron, 1996). The mediating effects demonstrate how consumer perceptions of quality can affect his or her behavioral intentions via the creation of positive emotion.

Managerial implications

Besides theoretical implications, this study provides several managerial implications. The results of this study can help fast food restaurant managers to better understand how product quality can contribute to eliciting positive emotion and eventually affect consumer behavioral intentions. Moreover, the findings suggest that fast food restaurants managers should pay attention to product quality to heighten customer's positive emotion. Luxury fast food restaurant managers should not ignore the importance of product quality because it could act as a basic qualifier for fast food restaurants (Sulek and Hensley, 2004).

Another possible explanation for the significant relationship between product quality and positive emotion might be a function of the expectations of fast food restaurant consumers. Customers may want to be delighted, not just satisfied, especially in a quality fast food restaurant. Product quality might have to exceed expectations to generate positive emotions. Therefore, in a competitive business environment, fast foods restaurants managers should maintain the quality of products at a level that meets or exceeds customer standards and provide positive emotion to generate future favorable behaviors.

Another managerial implication of this study is that positive emotion appeared to mediate the relationships between product quality and post-dining behavioral intentions. The role of positive emotion should be obvious given the hedonic nature of fast food restaurants. Thus, fast food restaurant managers could improve the probability of favorable behavioral intentions by improving product quality, which would elicit positive emotions.

Since, customer experiential value has been demonstrated to be significant predictor of customer behavioral intentions; an excellent service experience should draw the full attention of all involved individuals, from top management to employee. From a managerial perspective, the customers' perceived experiential value can be improved by increasing the quality of personal service encounters. Listening to customer demands and resolving problems identified by customers are critical to retaining current customers and promoting positive word-of-mouth.

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