

MODELING CUSTOMER LOYALTY INTENTIONS, FOOD QUALITY AND DEMOGRAPHIC MODERATORS IN SUBSISTENCE MARKETS

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Abstract

The study sought to determine the strength of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention in the restaurant industry. More importantly, the study sought to determine the moderating effects of demographic variables (age, gender and level of education) on the association between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. The study was informed by the theory of customer loyalty. To substantiate the model of the study, a sample of 200 respondents was drawn from selected restaurants using a structured questionnaire. The main effects between food quality and customer loyalty intention were tested using inferential statistics whereas moderated effects of demographics (age, gender and level of education) were computed using moderated multiple regressions. All the hypothesised moderators were supported with significant interaction effects. The results suggest that the nexus between food quality and customer loyalty intention is not a straight forward relationship. More sensitive consumers were young adults, females and those with tertiary education. Therefore, the study validates the food quality and customer loyalty scales in a subsistence market. Testing moderating effects of demographic profiles brings precision in theoretical models in restaurant consumer behaviour studies, which are sparse in extant literature.

Keywords: Customer loyalty intention, food quality, restaurant consumer behaviour, demographics, Zimbabwe

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1. INTRODUCTION

The restaurant industry's profitability hinges on high sales volumes since culinary services have got short purchase cycles. This entails the need for re-patronage in order to attract sustained revenue inflows. Most

business organisations especially restaurants have a cocktail of initiatives that are meant to induce re-patronage behaviours. The most common incentives are price inducements, good service, convenience in terms of location and operating hours, promotions, service customisation, and service guarantees (Hasan, 2021; Zeithaml, Bitner & Gremler, 2013). These loyalty initiatives, are expected to increase the frequency of patronage, lower transactional costs, promote cross selling, and induce positive word-of-mouth communication (Antikasari et al., 2021).

However, among several factors that are the determinants of customer loyalty intentions, food quality has consistently emerged as prime predictor in the restaurant industry (Danurdara, 2021). Dobrin et al. (2015) essentially streamlined product quality as a direct antecedent of competitiveness. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the strength of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions in the restaurant industry in subsistence markets and the possible moderating effects of several demographic factors such as age, gender, and level of education. Whereas such studies are saturated in affluent markets (Dobrin et al., 2015; Riva et al., 2022), restaurant consumer behaviour studies in developing economies are scarce (Mukucaey et al., 2022). Basing on the institutions theory, any empirical research done in first world countries cannot be expected to have the same results in emerging markets (Burgess and Steenkamp, 2006), let alone in subsistence markets. The testing of moderation effects increases the precision related to theories in social science (Edwards & Berry, 2010). A moderating variable usually affects the magnitude and direction of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Thus, a moderating variable can either have an enhancing effect or a buffering effect on the relationship between two variables (James & Brett, 1984).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Food quality

Food quality is one of the most important elements in dining experiences (Namkung & Jang, 2007). There are several factors that influence the perceptions of food quality such as taste, temperature, presentation, diversity in terms of food choice, and healthy food options (Danurdara et al., 2021). Food quality refers to the extent to which a dish meets and exceed a customer's expectation. The main reason for choosing what to eat is taste (Junita, 2021). Food taste has both descriptive properties such as salty, and sweet, and evaluative properties such as delicious and disgusting. Taste provides a very important role premised on the evolutionary perspective ranging from health protection to sensing nutrients in food (Beauchamp & Jiang, 2015).

There are five types of tastes all of which play different, but significant roles (Beauchamp & Jiang, 2015). Sweet taste signifies energy food, bitter taste mitigates against the risk of ingesting toxic food, saltiness heralds the presence of essential minerals in food, sour taste alerts consumers to

microbiological contamination in food, while unami taste guarantees nutritional balance (Efeyan, Comb & Sabatini, 2015; Hajeb & Jinap, 2015; Beauchamp & Jiang, 2015). However, the major challenge with managing taste as a competitive advantage is that it cannot be protected from competitors using copyrights (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2008).

Temperature is another sensory element of food quality (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Temperature interacts with other sensory elements like taste to determine the overall quality of food. One method of maintaining proper food temperature is to avoid preparing food way ahead of being served, and using modern technology such as microwaves and thermostat bowls.

The other food quality constituent element is food presentation (Rawlima, 2022). Food presentation refers to the visually attractive techniques used in food plating. Food presentation provides some evidence on how well the food was cooked. Effective food presentation involves an execution of the three techniques which are namely balance, garniture, and arrangement (Rawlima, 2022). Balance refers to the selection of food items that have an element of variety and contrast while avoiding awkward combinations. Arrangement refers to the order in which meat, vegetables and starch are presented. The most commonly accepted arrangement is that meat items should be at the forefront, followed by vegetables, and lastly starch. Garniture refers to the process of decorating food items through adding other different food items. A platter garnish should be an assortment of carefully and uniformly trimmed and cooked vegetables that maintain a proper texture and colour (Rawlima, 2022).

Preference for healthy food options is one of the attributes of food quality (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Health salience or health consciousness is triggered by incessant increase in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure (BP) that are believed to be associated with consumption of highly processed foods (Ahrens, 2005). Gradually consumers are shifting towards eating more whole wheat grains, reduced saturated fats, added sugars and sodium, vegetables and fruits. The customers identify health food options through checking for food prepared using proper cooking methods such as boiling, grilling, baking, steaming, and barbequing, while at the same time avoiding foods that are creamed, sautéed, fried, or breaded (Namkung & Jang, 2007).

Food provision restaurants must provide perceived value to their customers (Deac, Dobrin, Gîrneală, 2016). To augment perceived value and health benefits, restaurants should serve food that is fresh and comes in different varieties (Kegler et al., 2022). Usually, various food items that are supplied in a fresh state are a panacea for healthy food (Escobar-lopez et al., 2022). However, the interaction between healthy food choices and taste has not been complimentary. Usually less healthy food is the one that is tastier, and as such customers rarely attain both healthy and tasty food at the same time (Rawlima, 2022).

Thus, food taste, temperature, presentation, and a provision for healthy options constitute food quality. Food quality has been reported in several empirical studies as the main reason behind customer loyalty behaviours of customers (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Kivela et al., 1999, Mukuca et al., 2022).

2.2 Customer loyalty intention

Customer loyalty intention which is also known as re-patronage intention is defined as a customer's likelihood to patronise the same service based on the current evaluation (Soderland & Ohman, 2003). In this study customer loyalty intention and re-patronage intention are used interchangeably. Loyal customers are characterised by repeat purchases or patronage, spreading of positive word-of-mouth, accepting new products from the service provider, and recommending the service outlet to anyone who cares to listen (Liu, Guo, & Lee, 2011). Business organisations immensely benefit from having loyal customers through attaining competitive advantage, growth in sales performance (Reichheld, 1996), constructive criticism and ideas, less transactional costs, and are brand ambassadorship from satisfied customers (Akbar, 2013; Han & Ryu, 2009).

Customer loyalty is a bi-dimensional construct comprising of both attitudinal and behavioural elements (Han & Ryu, 2009). Attitudinal loyalty refers to psychological commitment formulated by consumers following the purchase exercise which manifests in the form of re-patronage intentions and willingness to recommend (Han & Ryu, 2009), while behavioural loyalty refers to re-patronage behaviour (Khan, Aabdean, Salman, Nadeen & Rizwan, 2016). In the event of it being less convenient to measure the actual loyalty behaviour researchers tend to rely on customers' customer loyalty intentions (Makudza, 2021). Intention is a surrogate indicator of actual behaviour. Most of the loyalty programmes implemented by businesses tend to reward behavioural loyalty (Kumar & Shar, 2004). Thus, customer loyalty intentions are likely correlated with actual loyalty behaviour (East, Gendall, Hammond & Lomax, 2005). Customer loyalty has been studied in several contexts such as service loyalty, brand loyalty (Keller, Aperia & Georgson, 2012), store loyalty, and e-loyalty (Valvi & Fragkos, 2012; Huang, 2008).

The social exchange paradigm by Blau (1964) and Homas (1961) provides the theoretical basis for the link between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. While the social exchange theory does not directly address food quality and customer loyalty intentions, it can however be used to infer the prediction about the positive and significant relationship between these two constructs. The social exchange theory involves one giving up something with the aim of gaining something in interpersonal transactions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Blau, 1964). When a customer perceives to have received quality service or product, he becomes indebted to the service provider (Tsai, 2001). He would then

settle that indebtedness through patronising the same service provider through exhibiting both behavioural and attitudinal loyalty. Based on the social exchange theory it can be hypothesised that;

H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention.

2.3 DEMOGRAPHIC MODERATORS

Research in social sciences has recognised that any relationship between constructs is not independent of the context or other confounding variables giving way for the need to assess the influence of moderating variables (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). Demographic variables have been identified as the most common moderators of the bivariate relationships in social sciences (Mandongwe et al., 2021). Demographics are useful for various marketing decisions like segmentation, targeting, and positioning (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Demographic variables are more appealing in the sense that they can be measured easily and objectively. The key demographic variables hypothesised as moderators in this study are age, gender, and level of education. These moderating variables were hypothesised based on theory. Moderating effects involving categorical variables should be grounded on theory that suggests a strong relationship between a criterion and one group of the predictor and a weak or no relationship with another group of the predictor variable.

2.3.1 Age

Age is a complex construct that can be understood from a multiple of perspectives such as chronological, biological, psychological and social (Moschis, Lee & Mathur, 1997; Moody, 1988). Chronological age is related to the number of years a person has been surviving (Elliott et al., 2021). Biological age is associated with physical changes related to ageing (Zhang, Trapp, Kerepesi & Gladyshev, 2022). Psychological age refers to behavioural capabilities such as intelligence, memory, emotions, learning, and motivations (Cellini, Giorgio, Mioni & Riso, 2021). Social age depends on how the society thinks a person is aged based on social activities like dressing (Moschis, Lee & Mathur, 1997).

Age is not only a predictor of customer loyalty intention, but also a possible moderator of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention (Masa, 2021). The moderating effect of age on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention can be explained through inferences from the information processing theory (Jablonska et al., 2022). The theory suggests that as people get old, they tend to seek less information, while shifting to schema-based or heuristic forms of information processing (Rawlima, 2022). Thus, old aged adults are expected to be in a state of inertia

where varying levels of food quality within the market may not greatly influence their levels of loyalty. However, young adults may extensively use the available information about food quality acquired in the form of either word-of-mouth communication or marketing communication to modify their customer loyalty intentions (Rawluma, 2022). Thus, the variability in perceptions of food quality may in the same magnitude trigger variability in young adults' customer loyalty intentions.

Therefore, it is expected that age moderates the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention with that relationship being stronger for young adults than old aged adults. It is therefore hypothesised that;

H2: Age has a positive and significant moderating effect on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention.

2.3.2 Gender

Gender refers to the sexual orientation of the respondents (Lee, 2022). It is a binary variable where someone is designated as either male or female (Jaunait, 2022). Sex differences normally forms the basis for gender differences Sex differences refer to biological differences between males and females (Lee, 2022). Males and females have got different internal and external genitalia, different types and levels of hormones, and different composition of genetic factors (Newman, 2018). It is believed that these different biological configurations inform different gender roles and identity. Men and women are believed to approach purchase and consumption decisions differently. Gender differences are common on appeals to products and services such as hairdressing, clothing, cosmetics, magazine; among others (Jobber & Ellis-Chadwick, 2013). Previous research has suggested that women exhibit higher levels of loyalty than men to either individuals, group of persons, organisations (Melnyk, van Osselaer & Bijmolt, 2009).

Gender is another possible moderator of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. This possible moderating effect is grounded in the social role theory (Eagly, 1987) which states that men are socialised to assume risky behaviours than women in a family or a society. It therefore, follows that men are primed to shift their allegiance from one service provider to another in the event that they perceive any variability on the usual product quality. This then makes the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention stronger on men since they tend to match their levels of loyalty with their perceptions of quality. On the contrary, females are socialised to be less risk takers (Eagly, 1987). This implies that they are primed to maintain their fidelity to a regular service provider even if they perceive some variations in product quality. Thus, the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions may not be stronger for women than men. It is therefore posited that;

H3: Gender has a positive and significant moderating effect on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention.

2.3.3 Level of education

The word education is derived from the Latin word 'Educatum'. Education in general is defined as a life time experience that leads to behaviour modification, while formal education is defined as knowledge impartation by identified and certified individual(s) or institution(s) over a specified period of time using a pre-planned curriculum (Harris, 2022). Formal education is usually classified as primary, secondary and tertiary (Lavi, 2022). Primary education is specifically for adolescences, while both secondary and tertiary education is applicable to adults (Harris, 2022; Lavi, 2022). In marketing studies, education has always been one of the most important demographic variables (Kotler & Keller, 2016). It has been useful particularly in the segmentation of large heterogeneous markets such as stationery, school attire, textbooks, laptops, and social events.

Education is one of the possible moderators of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention. The theory of information processing is again the bases for this possible moderation (Jablonska et al., 2022). As one's level of education increases, it is expected that the level of information searching, comprehending, dissemination and evaluation increases (Rawlima, 2022). Thus, the increase in the levels of education is associated with complex purchase behaviours. Conversely, it is expected that less educated people do not seek new information, but rather rely on schema-based forms of information processing. It follows that less educated customers may not have enough resources to indulge in information search or meet switching costs. The less educated are likely to remain with the same service provider regardless of the variations in product quality. Contrary to this, educated customers may adjust their levels of customer loyalty to be in parallel with the extensive information that informs their perceptions of product quality (Rawlima, 2022).

Therefore, the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions is expected to be stronger on highly educated customers than less educated customers. Thus, it is suggested that;

H4: Level of education has a positive and significant moderating effect on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The respondents in this study were customers of restaurant businesses in Harare the capital city of Zimbabwe which is home to more than two million people. The customers surveyed were patrons of

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both fast-food and full-service restaurants registered with the city council of Harare. A sample of size of 200 respondents was chosen based on the recommendations from several researchers (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014; Kline, 2010; Lacobucci, 2009).

Respondents were contacted randomly as soon as they were leaving the restaurant immediately after finishing their meals. Lone customers were targeted in order to avoid confounding social effects (Barger & Grandey, 2006). Verbal consent was sought from selected respondents. Ideally written consent forms would have been proper, but generally customers are not willing to be involved in beauracratcic procedures when dealing with their social activities like dining out. In order to stimulate respondents' willingness to participate the questionnaire was deliberately made short and concise through avoiding redundant questions.

To remain consistent with previous studies, validated measures were adopted from previous studies. Slavec and Drnovseck (2012) advocated for use of validated measurement scales since the legitimacy and development of a research field relies on reliable and valid measures. The use of validated measurement scales transforms a field into a science (Colliver et al., 2012). The lack of validation and operational definitions of the constructs are usually the most common threats to construct validity (Colliver, Comlee & Verhulst, 2012). These threats were minimised by also adopting validated measurement scales and established operational definitions from the extant marketing literature. Table 1 shows the nature and sources of items for latent variables in this study.

TABLE 1 MEASUREMENT SCALES ITEMS

Construct	Item code	Item narration
Food quality	FQ1	Food presentation is visually attractive
	FQ2	The restaurant offers a variety of menu items
	FQ3	The restaurant offers healthy options
	FQ4	The restaurant serves tasty food
	FQ5	The restaurant offers fresh food
	FQ6	Food is served at the appropriate temperature
Customer loyalty intentions	CL1	I will say positive things about this restaurant to other people
	CL2	I will recommend this restaurant to someone who seeks my advice
	CL3	I will consider this restaurant my first choice
	CL4	I will encourage friends and relatives to patronise this restaurant

Source: adapted from Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman (1996), Raajpoot (2000)

Food quality was measured using six food attributes themed around food presentation, variety of menu items, healthy options, taste, freshness, and temperature (Raajpoot, 2000; Johns & Tyas, 1996; Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 1999; Steven, Knutson & Patton, 1995). Food quality perceptions were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Customer loyalty intention was measured using four items adopted from Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman (1996). The items were themed around the spreading positive-word-mouth, recommending to others, re-patronage intention, encouraging friends and relatives to patronise the same restaurant. The items were scaled on a 7-point anchors ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 7(strongly agree).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Sample distribution

The study was primarily dominated by young ones and young adults aged between 18 to 39 years (64.5%). The elderly above 60 years were least represented with a frequency of 4.5%; whilst those aged between 40 to 59 years were about 31%. Male respondents outnumbered females with a gender response ratio of males to females of 53:47. A rather balanced response was obtained based on residential location as high-density and low-density residents almost squared-off at about 50% apiece. Single respondents were 62% whilst those married constituted 38%.

TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES

ATTRIBUTE	N	%
Age		
18-29	81	40.5
30-39	48	24.0
40-49	38	19.0
50-59	24	12.0
60+	9	04.5
Total	200	100
Gender		
Male	106	53.0
Female	94	47.0
Total	200	100
Residential area		
High density	101	50.5
Low density	99	49.5
Total	200	100
Marital status		
Single	124	62.0
Married	76	38.0
Total	200	100
Education		
Primary	16	08.0
Secondary	54	27.0
Tertiary	130	65.0
Total	200	100
Employment		
Employed	129	64.5
Unemployed	71	35.5
Total	200	100

In terms of education, the majority had a tertiary qualification, followed by high school and primary qualifications respectively. Interestingly, 64.5% of the entire sample were formally employed, whilst the remaining 35.5 were unemployed.

4.2 Factor structure

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used in this study to validate multi-item measurement scales and to determine the underlying factor structure. Factorability of data was supported by KMO value of 0.774, and the statistically significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ($\chi^2(45)1209.952, p=0.00$). The other tests for factorability were also encouraging. Most of the diagonal values on the anti-image matrix and communalities were above 0.5. Equally important were most of the correlation coefficients on the correlation matrix which were above 0.3.

TABLE 3. ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX

	Factor	
	1	2
FQ1	.856	
FQ4	.845	
FQ5	.800	
FQ6	.773	
FQ3	.730	
FQ2	.725	
CLI3		.955
CLI1		.945
CLI4		.833
CLI2		.728
Eigenvalues	4.377	1.667
% of variance	43.77%	16.67%
Cronbach's alpha coefficient	0.689	0.643
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.		
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.		

Source: Research findings computed using SPSS

The presence of convergent validity in this study was evidenced by the significant loadings of the items in their respective factors. Discriminant validity was also evidence by the absence of cross loading items. Reliability coefficients of the two latent variables attained using the Cronbach's alpha were 0.689 for food quality and 0.643 for customer loyalty intention. Moreover, in this study the variance extracted by the first factor was 43.77% which is less than 50% signifying the absence of common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

4.3 Hypotheses testing

Table 4 presents the results of the tested model.

TABLE 4. MAIN AND MODERATING EFFECTS BETWEEN CUSTOMER LOYALTY INTENTION AND FOOD QUALITY

Variable	Food quality-Customer loyalty intentions		0.624 (t=11.124; p=000)		
	Moderating variable		Moderating effect		
	Comparison group	Reference group	R Square change	Interaction term	
Age	B=0.804 (t=15242; p=0.000)	B=0.338 (t=0.2959; p=0.004)	0.064 (p=0.000)	-0.349 (t=-4809; p=0.000)	
Gender	B=0.594 (t=7523; p=0.000)	B=0.692 (t=0.9196; p=0.000)	0.009 (P=0.086)	0.114 (t=1728; p=0.086)	
Education	B=0.567 (t=5674; p=0.000)	B=0.695 (t=0.10928; p=0.000)	0.730 (p=0.000)	0.420 (t=5171; p=0.000)	

Source: Research findings

H₁ suggested that there is a positive and significant relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. This hypothesis was supported as evidenced by the standardised beta coefficient of 0.624 (t=11.124, p=0.000), holding other predictors constant. Table 4 indicates that the model involving food quality and moderators (age, gender and the level of education) explains 39.6% of the variation in customer loyalty intentions.

H₂ posited that age has a positive and significant moderating effect on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. The results presented in Table 4 indicate that age moderates the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions as evidenced by the significant change in R² by 6.4%. The evidence of the moderating effects of age on the relationship food quality and customer loyalty intentions is further reflected by the p value (0.000) of the interaction term of food quality and age which is indicated in Table 4. The relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions is strong for the age group of less than 40 ($\beta=0.804$; t=15424; p=0.000), and weaker for the above 40 age group ($\beta=0.338$; t=2959; p=0.004). However, since the hypotheses for main effect is still significant after the inclusion of the moderating variable in the model, there is partial moderation. Full moderation occurs when the main effect becomes insignificant, while the moderation becomes significant in the same model. The moderating variable weakens the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention as evidenced by the negative regression coefficient of the product term.

H₃ predicted that gender has a positive and significant moderating effect on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. This hypothesis was accepted basing on the evidence that there was a significant R² change (p=0.86) by 0.9%. Furthermore Table 4 indicates that gender

moderates the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions as evidenced by the significant interaction term (Food quality * Gender) at a p value of 0.86. The relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions is weaker for males ($\beta=0.594$; $t=7523$; $p=0.000$), than for females ($\beta=0.692$; $t=9196$; $p=0.000$). However, since the hypotheses for main effect is still significant after the inclusion of the moderating variable in the model, there is partial moderation.

H₄ posited that level of education has a positive and significant moderating effect on the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. This hypothesis was accepted on the basis of a significant R² change ($p=0.000$) by 7.3%. The interaction term of food quality and level of education is significant at a p value of 0.000 indicating that the level of one's education moderates the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. The relationship between food quality is less strong for secondary education ($\beta=0.567$; $t=5674$; $p=0.000$) than for tertiary education ($\beta=0.695$; $t=10928$; $p=0.000$). The level of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions is still significant after adding the interaction term. This indicates that the level of education partially moderates the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions.

5. DISCUSSION

The main effects in this study indicated that there is a positive and significant relationship between the quality of food served in Zimbabwean restaurants and customer loyalty intentions also widely known in the extant services marketing literature as re-patronage intention. This confirms the findings in the existing research stream that elaborate the existence of a positive and significant relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Kivela et al., 1999).

While it is indeed factual that a significant correlation between variables is not evidence of causation (Hayes and Matthes, 2009), causality can still be grounded on evidence from theory (Edwards & Berry, 2010), and inferred from temporary ordering of events. Thus, the positive and significant correlation between food quality and customer loyalty intentions is established through theory and augmented by the empirical findings in this study. The implications of this established relationship are that when restaurant businesses provide quality food, they tend to benefit from re-patronage behaviours that manifest in the form of repeat business, spreading of positive word of mouth, encouragement of relatives and friends to patronise the same restaurants, and recommendations of the restaurant to anyone who seeks the regular patron's advice.

The relationship between food quality and re-patronage intention was proved to be moderated by demographic variables such as age, gender, and level of education. It was revealed in this study that the levels of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions varies across the

levels of age measured as a qualitative binary variable that ranges from young adults to old aged adults. The relationship was found out to be strong amongst the young adult's group and less strong amongst old aged adults. This is in line with the hypothesised direction of the postulated link. This finding lends support to the validity of the information processing theory in predicting the moderating effects of age on the relationship between food quality in restaurants and the levels of re-patronage intention.

The results related to H₂ imply that restaurateurs must ensure that the quality of their food is always better than that of competitors targeting the young adults. Young adults are more exposed to information on a variety of competitive offers in the market and are willing to shift their allegiance in the event that they become aware of better offers elsewhere. This age group does not believe in fidelity when it comes to seeking for the maximisation of their satisfaction with service offerings in general and culinary services in particular. Therefore, restaurateurs should strengthen their market intelligence and keep abreast with what their competitors are offering to the market.

The relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions was also moderated by gender. Previous research has already proved that males and females respond differently to marketing stimuli in different markets. In this study the relationship between the quality of food and re-patronage intention was found to be weaker for males and strong for females. While the hypothesis on the moderating effect of gender was found to be significant and consequently accepted, the direction of the relationship from the analysed data was opposed to the one specified in the development of the hypothesis. In the hypothesis it was expected that the relationship would be strong for males and weaker for females. However, an explanation for this variance can be explained by the current trends in information seeking behaviours of both males and females. Generally, women are progressively becoming more exposed to various information sources since the serendipitous emergence of social media such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Women tend to enjoy lurking around social media more than man. Businesses in general and restaurants in particular are increasingly availing their menu information on social media and patrons are equally providing feedback of their menu experiences on social media. This has resulted in women getting exposed to the information about the quality of food than men. More so, traditionally women have adopted the social role of preparing meals at home. This has enhanced their capabilities of evaluating the quality of served food than men, resulting in their ability to shift their patronage in line with their perceptions of food quality.

The level of education was also found to be a moderator of the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intentions. The direction of the hypothesis that the relationship would be strong for those with tertiary education qualifications and weak for those without tertiary education qualifications received empirical support in this study. This further lends supports to the prediction power of the

information processing theory. While restaurateurs have an obligation to provide quality food to both tertiary and non-tertiary qualification holders, they must be aware that tertiary qualification holders are more sensitive to the levels of food quality. Any adjustment in food quality levels is likely to be met with an equal measure of the variations in patronage behaviours. This implies that tertiary and non-tertiary qualification holders are two distinct market segments that respond differently to marketing stimuli related to food quality.

6. CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study concludes that the relationship between food quality and customer loyalty intention is strong, but varies across different demographic groups such as age, gender, and education. However, more enlightenment can further be attained if other additional variables within and outside demographic groups are tested for their moderating capabilities. For instance, variables such as income have been used in moderators in several studies. Furthermore, a more robust research design that controls for other conceptually viable predictors of re-patronage intention would add more weight to the precision with which the link between food quality and re-patronage intention is established and predicted. Such constructs among others include service quality and atmospheric quality (Mhlanga & Tichawa, 2016).

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