



# The effect of customization and gender on customers' attitude



Alana Wolf<sup>a</sup>, Lu Zhang<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Michigan State University, School of Hospitality Management, Broad College of Business, 645 Shaw Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

<sup>b</sup> Michigan State University, Broad College of Business, 645 Shaw Lane, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether customization and gender have a significant effect on consumers' attitude towards menu options at a given restaurant. It also examines the outcome that gender has on perceived control and decision-making. Hypotheses were developed using hypothetical restaurant menu-based scenarios and surveys. Our results indicated that male customers exhibited a similar level of attitude across both 'build-your-own' and 'you-pick-two' customization conditions. However, female customers showed more overall positive attitudes toward the 'build-your-own' menu as compared to the 'you-pick-two' menu. Depending on gender based target markets for restaurants, managers should employ different menu design strategies to attract customers.

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of customization stems from the belief that people enjoy tailoring their choices. This is true whether a customer at Burger King wants to have their burger be built their way with only onions and pickles with one squirt of mayo, or in contrast, dining at a fancy 4-star Chinese restaurant and want to order the Mongolian Beef mild with extra peppers and a spring roll on the side. Customization allows both picky eaters and easy-to-satisfy customers to feel comfortable with their decision-making thus confident that they will enjoy their chosen dish.

As it can be assumed, customization is not a newfangled idea. While interviewing with *Food Business News*, Mary Chapman, senior director of product innovation at Chicago-based Technomic, Inc., explained that "Customers want it how they want it, when they want it. Customization revolves around health, portion size, locations... whether it's from retail or a restaurant or both, what they're going to share and what they're not" (Watrous, 2014). Chapman truly hits the nail on the head in her statement justifying how customization works and how customers react to it. To extend on that idea, individuals tend to leave restaurants more satisfied if they were able to modify their meal given the options of build-your-own or you-pick-two, as opposed to not. Popular restaurants that participate in these types of menus include Panera Bread, Cosi, IHOP, Bagger Daves, Fuddruckers and even Ruby Tuesday with their admired

salad bar, and this is only to name a few in the market. For example, according to Kathy Hayden of *Fsr*magazine.com, IHOP has started to implement a menu option where customers are able to form their own piled-on pancakes with chosen toppings such as jelly, fresh bananas, cannoli filling, strawberry compote and more. Additionally, IHOP has found that this customization option has also helped with their flexible pricing strategy during the tough economy. This strategy includes upcharging guests for specific add-ons, toppings or side dishes, such as a side of bacon or scrambled eggs.

Customization also has an effect on overall customer satisfaction in many different ways. In a study conducted by Kuo and Cranage (2011), participants from the United States and Taiwan were presented with a restaurant scenario and were asked to rate their satisfaction with the service process. From their data, it was suggested that participants in both countries favored most the high customization and low participation condition further justifying the idea that most people, not only from particular cultural backgrounds, favor food options where they feel that they have the most control. The effect of perceived control is important as well when it comes down to customization. Overall, it can be said that customers are more confident with their food choice when they feel that they have the most control over it. This includes how their meat is cooked, if their salad dressing is on the side or having half a cup of tomato bisque soup and half a turkey sandwich as their entrée.

The current study sets out to understand two different types of customizations (build-your-own vs. you-pick-two) and their distinct impacts on customers' evaluations and perceptions of the menu. These two types of menus are chosen because they represent different levels of customizations. Further, we examine the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [wolfalan@msu.edu](mailto:wolfalan@msu.edu) (A. Wolf), [zhanglu@broad.msu.edu](mailto:zhanglu@broad.msu.edu) (L. Zhang).

moderating effect of gender. The link between customization and gender is made by considering perceived control as the underlying psychological mechanism. Next, we review the literature on consumer satisfaction towards customizable menus along with gender specific research about decision-making towards food options.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Customization strategies

According to [Lampel and Mintzberg \(1996\)](#), standardization was perceived as traditional in that it created a quality-based norm for goods and services that companies had to maintain in order to be successful. Years later, customization strategies were introduced as the new standardization in the business world which customers are now expecting. It is believed that with this new age of customization, it has brought new technologies, increased competition and more assertive customers convincing businesses to create products and services that are personalized. Prior research has suggested that customization is not one definition but encompasses an array of distinctiveness (e.g., [Lampel and Mintzberg, 1996](#); [Mintzberg, 1988](#)). For example, [Gilmore and Pine \(1997\)](#) suggested four types of customizers: collaborative (companies conduct a dialogue with individual customers to articulate their needs and make customized products accordingly), adaptive (companies offer one standard, but customizable, product that users can alter it themselves), cosmetic (a standard product differently to different customers), and transparent (companies provide customized products without letting customers know explicitly). Additionally, [Duray \(2002\)](#) identified a customization typology based on two factors – customer involvement and modularity. Modularity decreases variety of components which allows for repetitive manufacturer while customer involvement provides customization. Customers can be involved in either the early design stage (high degree of customization) or only at the final assembly stages (low degree of customization).

In regards to customization in the food industry, [Wang et al. \(2013\)](#) conducted an experiment that observed the outcomes of additive customization (inclusion process for screening choice options) and subtractive customization (exclusion process for screening choice options). The results of their study suggest that additive customization fits a promotion focus while subtractive customization fits a prevention focus. Moreover, according to [Kuo and Cranage \(2011\)](#), customization has a direct effect on overall consumer satisfaction. They later focus on the cultural aspect of customization by comparing participants' responses from two countries, Taiwan and the U.S., regarding physical participation and customization levels in the food industry. Their findings concluded that there was no significant difference between customization and the likelihood of the self-serving bias between the two countries.

### 2.2. Gender and decision making

[Narayan and Corcoran-Perry \(1997\)](#) define decision making as the interaction between a problem or opportunity that needs to be addressed and a person who wishes to address it within a specific environment. The essence of decision making via [Cannon-Bowers et al. \(1996\)](#) include factors such as uncertainty, time/money constraints, information/goals, consequences of decision, motivation, self-regulation, emotions, cognition, social pressure and work pressure. These factors all work together in order to come to a conclusion. In their gender vs. decision making experiment, a survey was taken by both genders and concluded that women allocated more importance than did the men to uncertainty, time and money constraints, consequences of decision and task factor, emotions

and social pressure. On the other hand, men scored higher than women in information and goals, motivation and work pressure. There were no differences in cognition, self-regulation and environmental factor. In summary, these results show that women base their decisions more on uncertainty, doubts and vitality. They place more value on time and money, concern with consequence and are simply more aware of everything. Similarly, [Bakewell and Mitchell \(2006\)](#) found that male consumer decision-making traits are different from females. The results of their study showed that three factors specifically, 'Store Promiscuity', 'Store Loyal/Low-Price Seeking and "Confused Time Restricted" were applicable to males. They tended to be more indifferent to stores, use simplifying decision-making styles such as speed shopping in order to not be linked to a feminine activity. Accordingly to [Meyers-Levy \(1988\)](#), males tend to base their decisions more off personal opinion rather than analyzing all available information and/or options. As a result, males are more inclined to come to decisions faster than women. In contrast, females tend to base their decisions off multiple sources of information in a more thorough and explanatory way. Another stream of research examines gender difference in risk perceptions and indicates that women have been found to perceive greater risks than men in a wide variety of domains such as financial, medical, and environmental (e.g., [Finucane et al., 2000](#)). Gender differences in perceptions of the likelihood of a negative outcome have been observed as well (e.g., [Barke et al., 1997](#)). Females generally perceive negative outcomes as more likely to occur and consequences of a negative outcome is perceived as more severe by females (vs. males) ([Slovic et al., 1997](#)). As such, females tend to place more emphasize on perceived control for the purpose of risk reduction as well as reducing the likelihood of a negative outcome ([Garbarino and Strahilevitz, 2004](#)).

### 2.3. Perceived control

Perceived control demonstrates one's competence, superiority and mastery over the environment ([White, 1959](#)) based on cognitive, decisional and behavioral components ([Averill 1973](#)). Prior research suggests that perceived control is a crucial determinant of the quality of two types of interactions – interpersonal and human environmental ([Hui and Bateson, 1991](#)). For example, [Schutz \(1966\)](#) proposed control as one of the three kinds of interpersonal needs that drive human social behaviors. A feeling of control is an essential determinant of satisfactory interactions with other people. Similarly, in the area of human environmental psychology, [Proshansky et al. \(1974\)](#) suggest that people tend to feel and behave more positively when they perceive more control in the environment. In the service industry, a study conducted by [Noone \(2007\)](#) indicate that customer perceived control within the dining experience has a positive effect on perceptions of employee performance while also taking into account the moderating influence of restaurant type. Results showed that high customer perceived control leads to higher perceptions of employee performance than low perceived control. Additionally, it was found that increased control has a greater positive effect on employee performance ratings in fine dining restaurants than in more casual restaurant atmospheres ([Noone, 2007](#)). These indications play an important role in evaluations of service quality and overall customer satisfaction.

Based upon the literature review, we connect customization strategies and the gender effect by considering the role of perceived control. More specifically, build-your-own and you-pick-two are different from each other in terms of customer involvement based on [Duray's \(2002\)](#) typology. Build-your-own customization involves customers in the early design stages of the production cycle, which provides a higher degree of customization and gives customers more control over the entire process. On the other hand, you-pick-two includes customer preferences only at

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