



Understanding customers' healthy food choices at casual dining restaurants: Using the Value–Attitude–Behavior model

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how individual health values influence interest in healthy foods, positive outcome expectations, hedonic expectations, and behavior intentions. A total of 1188 valid questionnaires were collected from customers who had consumed healthy menu items at casual dining restaurants. The results indicated that health value was the key element that inspired customer interest in healthy eating and aroused hedonic and positive outcome expectations, which in turn enhanced intentions to purchase healthy food items. Restaurant managers are advised to establish creative marketing strategies to motivate customer interest in healthy menu items and emphasize benefits of their healthy food items. Future studies can extend the scope of research by examining differences in geographical areas or demographic profiles.

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1. Introduction

Frequent and consistent eating out of certain meals may cause health problems such as obesity (Ma et al., 2003). Restaurant foods are perceived, in popular press, as contributors to obesity rates because of the calorie and fat content, which increase customers' total calorie consumption (American Cancer Society, 2014). To avoid potential health-related problems, customer interest in healthy eating has increased, especially when consuming foods away from home (Jones, 2009). The U.S. National Restaurant Association reported that customers tend to select healthier menu items (Kelso, 2012), control portion size, and prefer to visit restaurants that offer such choices (e.g., brown rice, vegetarian dishes) (Anderson et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2013).

With the increased concern about healthy eating behavior, researchers have focused on nutritional information on restaurant menus (Hwang and Lorenzen, 2008; Sharma et al., 2011), quality of healthy food at restaurants (Kim et al., 2013), nutritional labeling (Carange et al., 2004), and visual icons for healthy items (Jones, 2009). However, what drives the customer's desire to look for healthy options on restaurant menus has been overlooked. The present study focuses on the psychological aspect of customers'

food choice process beyond the functional elements of food choices, such as nutritional information and menu labeling. Value has been considered predictive of customers' satisfaction and their intentions to revisit a restaurant (e.g., Hutchinson et al., 2009; Petrick, 2004). To the best of our knowledge, Kim et al. (2013) were the first to examine customer value in determining healthy food items in a restaurant context. Although Kim et al. (2013) attempted to connect value to health, value was conceptualized as the comparison between price and quality, rather than the psychological aspects of value related to consumer health. The fundamental customer motivations to make healthy choices at restaurants remain in question.

Despite efforts to make healthy food choices at restaurants, customers are still hesitant to choose healthy menu items if they need to sacrifice taste (Harnack and French, 2008; Mills and Thomas, 2008; Raghunathan et al., 2006). Therefore, the availability of nutritional information does not directly explain customers' healthy choices at restaurants. For this reason, it is necessary to explore which customers are likely to choose healthy menu items and understand what motivates customers to make healthy choices. To better understand customers' healthy food choices, this study employed the Value–Attitude–Behavior hierarchy (VAB) model, which explains the influence of value on customer attitudes and behaviors toward a certain object (e.g., Hansen, 2008; Honkanen et al., 2006). Tudoran et al. (2009) employed this approach to evaluate the process of decision making on fish product purchases. In their study, hedonic expectations and perceptions of fish products

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were used as a set of attitudes that influences customer intention to purchase fish. Thus, this study employed these two variables as secondary predictors of consumer behavior.

In summary, this study addresses the lack of research regarding the role of customers' health values in food choices in order to delineate why customers make healthier food choices when dining out. It examines the relationships between health values, customer expectations toward healthy food consumption, interest in healthy food, and behavior intentions. This study suggests a novel approach to understanding current trends of healthy food consumption. It also provides practical implications for restaurants by offering ways to segment target markets and strategies to address the expectations of customers regarding healthy menu items.

2. Literature review

2.1. Values, attitudes, and behaviors

In social psychology studies, the VAB model has been widely used to understand behavior (e.g. [Honkanen et al., 2006](#); [Vaske and Donnelly, 1999](#)). Values are organized in a cognitive hierarchy, in which values influence behavior indirectly through attitudes ([Tudoran et al., 2009](#)). [Homer and Kahle \(1988\)](#) apply the VAB model to the context of natural food shopping behaviors and find the causal sequence from abstract cognitions (i.e., values) to mid-range cognitions (i.e., attitudes) to specific behaviors. Moreover, they find internal values exert power on one's decision in life such as what food to eat and where to shop. Internally oriented customers are more concerned about nutrition than externally oriented customers and thus, resulting in more careful choices when purchasing food items.

Although researchers have proven the principle of the VAB approach, that is the hierarchical flow from individuals' values to their subsequent behaviors toward objects such as food (e.g., [Björk, 1998](#); [Grunert and Juhl, 1995](#)), others have modified this approach by adding or excluding constructs. For example, [Honkanen et al. \(2006\)](#) employ ethical food choice motives instead of ethnic values and examined their relationships with attitudes and intention to consume organic food. [Williams \(1979\)](#) points out the importance of values as criteria for judgment, however, ignored attitudes when anticipating choices. [Tudoran et al. \(2009\)](#) include hedonic expectations toward functional foods and perceptions of healthiness as a part of domain-specific attitude in the VAB approach. These two constructs are tested to examine the necessity of functional foods focusing on how valuable and how good these foods are for consumers. Therefore, this study chose expectations as intervening variables because the purpose was to examine who was likely to choose healthy food items at restaurants. Not all consumers who value their health will purchase healthy menu items, but the probability of consumption may increase as consumer expectations increase.

2.2. Customers' health values

Health value is a broad concept that includes customers' views on the importance of, or concerns about, health ([Tudoran et al., 2009](#)). Researchers use health value to explore the extent to which customers want to achieve goals in their lives, especially related to health ([Nejad et al., 2005](#)). [Tromp et al. \(2005\)](#) indicate that health value significantly influences customers' lifestyles and the way people decide to improve their health. Customers who eat low-calorie foods place a high value on personal health and have significant interest in a healthy lifestyle ([Gallicano et al., 2012](#); [Stephoe et al., 1995](#)). Previous research on customers' concerns about health found that health-conscious customers consider the

nutritional content of restaurant foods and try to eat healthier ([Hwang and Lorenzen, 2008](#); [Jones, 2009](#); [Sharma et al., 2011](#); [Sualakamala and Huffman, 2010](#)).

According to the [Keystone Forum Report \(2006\)](#), individuals who eat out frequently consume more calories and fewer fruits and vegetables than those who eat out less frequently. An increased incidence of health problems contributes to developing public interest in healthy eating and increasing the demand for healthy foods ([World Health Organization, 2004](#)). Although there is more public interest, the definition of healthy foods has not acquired consent in research and the industry because people perceive it differently. For example, some define healthy food as foods low in sugar or low sodium, whereas others may be referring to low-fat or low-calorie foods. Because customers are mainly concerned about fat and calories in menu items ([Chen et al., 2006](#)), the present study defines healthy foods as those that are low fat or low in calories.

2.3. Effect of health value on hedonic expectations

Customers usually have certain expectations of a food item before they taste it ([Villegas et al., 2008](#)). Hedonic expectations of a food product are defined as a perceived belief about the food, specifically related to its pleasurable attributes ([Tarancón et al., 2014](#)). [Tuorila et al. \(1994\)](#) emphasize the importance of hedonic expectations when customers make decisions whether they will like or dislike the food item. In that regard, hedonic expectations are associated with affective evaluation, which refers to the acceptance of, or the preference for, a food product ([Cardello, 1994](#)).

To remain healthy, some customers are likely to give up foods they find tasty if these foods are high in fat or calories ([Higgins et al., 2003](#)). Customers who value a healthy lifestyle are more likely to eat a healthy diet ([Sualakamala and Huffman, 2010](#)) and find the foods in these diets enjoyable, which may directly influence their acceptance of these foods ([Kähkönen, 2000](#)). As a result, these customers develop positive hedonic expectations (i.e., the expectation of liking foods) toward healthy menu options while other customers do not develop positive hedonic expectations ([Tudoran et al., 2009](#)). It seems that customers are likely to induce positive emotional responses as customers increase their experiences with food items ([Behrens et al., 2007](#)). [Wardle et al. \(2000\)](#) note that health value is an influential component for customers' food acceptance. Therefore, the present study suggests the following hypothesis:

H1. Health value has a positive influence on hedonic expectations.

2.4. Effect of health value on positive outcome expectations

Positive outcome expectations are defined as "a person's estimate that a given behavior will lead to certain outcomes" ([Bandura, 1977](#), p. 193). In social cognitive theory, physical and self-evaluative outcomes promote customers' specific actions ([Prodaniuk et al., 2004](#)). Physical outcomes reflect physical appearance and a desire to look better (e.g., better fit of clothing, losing weight, and healthier appearance) ([Anderson et al., 2000](#)). Self-evaluative outcomes include living a healthy life (i.e., feeling better, living longer, and having better health) ([Anderson et al., 2007](#)). If these positive physical outcomes are confirmed, customers may be further encouraged to eat healthy foods.

Health value plays a significant role in motivating customers to maintain a desired health state ([Tudoran et al., 2012](#)) and influences their decisions to perform specific actions to maintain or improve their health ([Tromp et al., 2005](#)). Seeking nutritional information on restaurant menus is one way to eat healthily ([Josiam and Foster, 2009](#)), as well as choosing foods with reduced portion sizes. Customers, who are aware that being overweight is a contributor to chronic illnesses (e.g., diabetes and high blood pressure), expect to

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