



Does gender matter? Examining gender composition's relationships with meal duration and spending in restaurants



Soobin Seo^{a,1}, Johye Hwang^{b,*}

^a Hospitality Management, Department of Human Sciences, The Ohio State University, Campbell Hall, 1787 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210, USA

^b College of Hotel & Tourism Management, Kyung Hee University, 26 Kyungheedaero, Dongdaemun-gu, Seoul 130-701, Republic of Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gender composition
Restaurant revenue management
Meal duration
Spending
Spending per minute (SPM)

ABSTRACT

Although most hospitality studies have focused on the controllable variables that influence customer behaviors, this study examined uncontrollable factors including gender composition. This paper focuses on (1) investigating the effect of group gender composition (mostly male, gender-balanced, mostly female) on the following revenue management performance measures (RMPMs): meal duration, spending, and spending per minute (SPM); and (2) examining the effects of customer-based cues (party size, the presence of drinks, and dining day and hour) on RMPMs as affected by gender composition. A total of 1114 restaurant customers were observed over two consecutive weeks. A gender composition effect was found, indicating that heterogeneous (gender-balanced) groups stayed for shorter times, spent more, and were more profitable than homogeneous groups (mostly male or mostly female). The three customer-based cues showed significant effects on RMPMs in relation to gender composition, which will enable managers to develop effective marketing and waiting time management and will enhance revenue.

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1. Introduction

Revenue management has been applied to the restaurant industry to achieve maximum levels of revenue without decreasing customer satisfaction (Kimes et al., 1998). The examination of how much customers spend and how long they stay is of considerable interest to restaurateurs in terms of generating revenue through identifying profitable customers. Research has identified factors that influence restaurant customers' meal duration and spending, such as music (Caldwell and Hibbert, 2002; North et al., 2003), scent (Mattila and Wirtz, 2001), and table characteristics (Kimes and Robson, 2004). Although previous research has focused on controllable factors that can be planned and managed by managers/operators (e.g., music, table), a lack of attention has been paid to customer-based uncontrollable factors such as gender, number of females versus males, and party size that are not controlled by restaurant managers. These customer-based uncontrollable factors may heavily influence interactions among customers during their stays at restaurants. Identifying the relationships between customer characteristics and meal duration and spending may enable restaurant managers to accurately forecast customer behaviors at

the moment of the service encounter and to develop effective marketing strategies accordingly.

Gender composition, defined as the number of females versus males, is an easily observed customer-based cue that can be identified at a glance. The restaurant manager may seat groups more efficiently if the manager can predict their length of stay and spending level depending on customer-based factors such as gender composition. A better understanding of the effect of gender composition on restaurant customer behaviors (e.g., meal duration, spending) may allow restaurant managers to identify the profitability of group customers. Previous research viewed the gender composition effect as an important factor in influencing individual behaviors within groups (Fields and Blum, 1997; Randel, 2002). Most studies on the gender composition effect have found that group dynamics affect employee satisfaction and conflicts in the workplace (Randel, 2002). Hospitality research has also paid a substantial amount of attention to the effect of gender difference, but primarily in relation to employees' job satisfaction, levels of stress, and work performance (Schaap et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2009; Ng and Pine, 2003). Despite the number of studies on gender's effect on employee behaviors in the hospitality industry, little attention has been paid to the gender composition effect on restaurant customer behaviors.

Impression management theory and the conformity effect provide theoretical frameworks for explaining the psychological mechanisms that influence the relationship between gender

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +82 2 961 2241.

E-mail addresses: seo.190@osu.edu (S. Seo), hwangj@khu.ac.kr (J. Hwang).

¹ Tel.: +1 614 292 7794.

composition and customer behaviors (Sommer and Steele, 1997). According to impression management theory, people tend to create a better impression by adjusting their food intake when eating with others (Bell and Pliner, 2003; Sommer and Steele, 1997). The conformity effect also regulates people's food consumption in the form of conformance to co-eaters' levels of food intake (Salvy et al., 2007). These psychological mechanisms have been found to influence customer behaviors depending on the co-eater's gender. For example, women tend to eat less than men when the co-eater is of the opposite sex because of women's strong desire to create a positive impression on male co-eaters (Salvy et al., 2007). The effect of co-eater gender on customer behaviors will differ depending on other customer-based factors such as party size, presence of drinks, and dining time. For instance, although the positive relationship between party size and meal duration has been consistently demonstrated by numerous studies (Sommer and Steele, 1997; Bell and Pliner, 2003; Pliner et al., 2003), gender composition may modify the party size effect on meal duration and spending. The effect of drinks may also function differently in gender-balanced groups in comparison with mostly male or mostly female groups because of the differing levels of interactions among group customers influenced by gender composition.

With regard to meal duration and spending, spending per minute (SPM) is suggested as a useful measure for investigating customer profitability (Kimes and Robson, 2004). This single measure, which is calculated by dividing spending by meal duration, provides useful cues with which restaurant managers can predict customer profitability given a unit of time. Because these three measures, meal duration, spending, and SPM, are significant indicators of restaurant revenue performance, the current study refers to the three indicators as revenue management performance measures (RMPMs).

The purpose of this study is to (1) investigate the relationships between gender composition and RMPMs and (2) examine the effect of customer-based cues (party size, the presence of drinks, and dining day and hour) on the relationships between gender composition and RMPMs. By understanding how gender composition affects the amount of time and money spent by groups of restaurant customers, restaurant operators will be able to better predict the length of a group's stay, apply appropriate marketing strategies for customer segments based on their group characteristics, and perform enhanced waiting time management.

2. Literature review

2.1. Restaurant revenue management

Key issues in restaurant revenue management are how, to whom, and at what price to sell foods to maximize profits (Kimes et al., 1998, 2002). The management of meal duration has gained attention as a means of taking advantage of accurate forecasting and higher table turnover rates during peak hours, which, in turn, can generate a great deal of revenue (Noone et al., 2007). Simply reducing dining duration, however, does not necessarily guarantee higher profits, as supported by findings indicating that short stays at restaurants do not lead to substantial increases in revenue (Thompson, 2009). Thus, rather than simply reducing dining duration, it is important for restaurant managers to understand the factors that influence meal duration and spending. For instance, Bloom et al. (2012) found that meal period and party size significantly influenced meal duration, and Kimes and Robson (2004) supported that table location and type also impacted meal duration and spending. An examination of how much customers spend and how long they stay also enables restaurateurs to identify potential customer profitability using a profitability measurement, SPM

(Kimes and Robson, 2004). Thus, the current study examines three indicators as RMPMs: meal duration, spending, and SPM.

2.2. The gender composition effect

Gender is one of the most noticeable customer-based cues from the perspective of restaurant managers. Gender has also been widely examined as a fundamental demographic factor in influencing individual behaviors (Campbell, 1997; Dholakia, 1999; Joh et al., 2006; Niemeier and Morita, 1996; Otnes and McGrath, 2001). A number of studies have examined the gender differences in consumers' shopping and purchasing behaviors. Niemeier and Morita (1996) found that women shop 1.32 times longer than do men when they travel. These findings were consistent with the results of Joh et al. (2006), who asserted that women tend to spend more time on hedonic tasks (e.g., non-grocery shopping) than do men. Hospitality research has also considered gender to be a critical demographic variable. Noting that previous gender-related hospitality studies primarily focused on employee behaviors in the hotel or casino industries (Kim et al., 2009; Schaap et al., 2008), the current study on the effect of gender composition on restaurant customer behaviors will broaden and enrich existing gender-related hospitality research. Considering that customers tend to visit restaurants in groups of two or more than two people, the gender compositions of the groups may provide more useful cues to restaurateurs in forecasting group customer behaviors. The issue of gender diversity in the hospitality industry was investigated by Pinar et al. (2011), who uncovered a gender bias effect in the Turkish hotel industry. The authors found that gender diversity was a main factor in hotel employee behaviors and that in a similar fashion, gender composition may be critical for influencing restaurant customer behaviors.

Research on gender composition was initially motivated by the increasing number of women in the workplace (Blau, 1977; Kanter, 1977). A wealth of studies have examined the gender composition effect on employee job satisfaction in the workplace (Fenwick and Neal, 2002; Fields and Blum, 1997; Peccei and Lee, 2005; Tsui et al., 1992), indicating that people behave differently in heterogeneous (gender-balanced) versus homogenous groups (mostly men or mostly women). Fields and Blum (1997) suggested that both women and men exhibited the highest levels of job satisfaction when they worked in gender-balanced groups because greater heterogeneity in gender-balanced work groups promotes close relationships among group members. Contrasting results were obtained by Williams and O'Reilly (1998) who noted that gender diversity led to lower job satisfaction. Although the findings on the gender composition effect on employees' job satisfaction have not been consistent and are less clear, a consistent finding was that people behave differently depending on the gender composition in a group context.

There are two widely discussed psychological mechanisms that regulate consumer food consumption and length of stay and, further, that explain why restaurant customers exhibit different levels of food consumption and duration depending on their co-eaters: impression management and the conformity effect (Wansink, 2004). A desire to create a better impression regulates the amount of food consumed in the presence of others (Bell and Pliner, 2003; Sommer and Steele, 1997) and is influenced by the gender of co-eaters (Salvy et al., 2007). The results of these studies implied that having a meal with others influences food intake because people adjust their food consumption to produce a positive impression on others (impression management) and exhibit a tendency to conform to their co-eaters' food consumption (conformity effect). Moreover, social facilitation has also been widely studied as a driver of individual behaviors in a group context. People tend to eat more and faster in the presence of spouses or family than when eating with non-family members, indicating that the

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