



The role of perceived corporate social responsibility on providing healthful foods and nutrition information with health-consciousness as a moderator

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ABSTRACT

As customers become more health conscious and governments create legislation requiring restaurants to provide nutrition information, the restaurant industry can no longer ignore demands for healthful eating environments. This study considers providing healthful food options and nutrition information as strategies for creating healthful eating environments at restaurants, and aims to develop a theoretical explanation of consumer reactions to such actions that incorporates perceived corporate social responsibility. Data were collected using a between-subjects experimental design with scenarios. The results show that customers perceive restaurants to be socially responsible when they are provided with healthful foods and nutrition information; highly health-conscious customers react more strongly to provision of healthful foods than their counterparts. Consequently, customers have favorable attitude toward and high willingness to visit restaurants providing healthful foods and nutrition information. Restaurateurs should consider taking such initiatives to entice more customers and develop a socially responsible image.

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1. Introduction

As obesity overtakes smoking as the biggest health concern in the United States (Jia and Lubetkin, 2010), various interventions have been implemented at the individual, community, and national levels. As a part of the physical environmental context related to eating behaviors, restaurants play an important role in obesity (Story et al., 2008). Available foods at restaurants may affect the quality of consumption in negative ways, for example, increasing calorie consumption. Due to growing consumer concerns about obesity, demands for healthful menu items at restaurants have been increasing. At the same time, more customers now have high intentions to use nutrition information when selecting foods at restaurants (Bassett et al., 2008; Roseman et al., 2013; Technomic, 2013).

Providing nutrition information has become an important issue in the restaurant industry. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act requires restaurants with more than 20 units to provide nutrition information (Democratic Policy & Communication Center, 2010). Accordingly, the restaurant industry has called for menu changes in an effort to follow the law and to meet increasing

demands for healthful eating environments at restaurants. The top 10 menu trends reported by National Restaurant Association [NRA] (2012) are all related to healthful menu items, which include locally-grown produce, healthful kids' meals, and whole grain items. Other top ten food trends (Sloan, 2013) and NRA stress the importance of calorie/menu labeling as a form of transparency.

Previous studies (Burton et al., 2006; Kozup et al., 2003) investigating the effects of nutrition information and healthful items have focused mainly on the foods per se, for example, if customers have favorable attitudes toward or want to select healthful food items with lower calories than assumed. Relatively few studies have concentrated on the effects of providing nutrition information and healthful options on customers' general perceptions of restaurants, such as restaurant selection intention or restaurant image. More specifically, little has been done to examine the underlying consequences of consumer perceptions after exposure to nutrition information and healthful options at restaurants.

Previous studies applied the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) to both nutrition information and healthful food contexts (Jones et al., 2006; Schroder and McEachern, 2005). Jones et al. (2006) found that food retailers provided healthful foods and nutrition information as healthy eating CSR initiatives. Schroder and McEachern (2005) examined young consumers' fast-food purchase intention under the consideration of nutritional value as CSR actions. However, these studies did not empirically test suggested

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relationships between healthy eating initiatives and perceived CSR. Furthermore, restaurateurs are interested in the consequences of customers' perception of corporate social responsibility toward their restaurants.

Restaurant managers have been much more concerned about consumers selecting their restaurants than consumers selecting healthful foods once they are there, because restaurant selection precedes food selection. It was found that the primary factor motivating restaurant executives to provide healthful options is a potential increase in sales and profits (Glanz et al., 2007). An examination of customers' willingness to visit restaurants that provide nutrition information and healthful options will not only enrich the restaurant literature, but also reveal practical implications for restaurant managers.

General eating behaviors are affected by individual's socioeconomic and demographic factors such as age, gender, and health related factors including past healthy eating behavior or nutrition knowledge (Bower et al., 2003; Deshmukh-Taskar et al., 2007; Drichoutis et al., 2006). This study used health-consciousness as a proxy of all potential confounding factors that influence eating-related behaviors, indicated by perceptions of restaurants and willingness to visit specific restaurants in this study. For example, individuals who are female with more nutrition knowledge will be more health conscious. It has been found that more health-conscious consumers try harder to maintain healthy eating habits (Bower et al., 2003). In other words, reactions to healthy initiatives vary based on a customer's degree of health-consciousness.

This study aims to theoretically explain consumer responses toward restaurants that provide nutrition information and healthful menus by incorporating perceived corporate social responsibility as a mediator, health-consciousness as a moderator, and attitude toward restaurants as a part of a consumer's willingness to select such restaurants. The objectives of this study are: (a) to examine if providing healthful foods and nutrition information increases perceptions of CSR, and restaurant selection, and (b) to investigate if serving healthful foods and providing nutrition information impacts perceptions of CSR differently based on a customer's level of health-consciousness.

2. Literature review

2.1. Increasing demands for nutrition information and healthful foods

As consumers become more aware of the benefits of healthy eating, they are increasingly aware of healthy foods and pay more attention to nutrition (Thomas and Mills, 2006). According to Technomic's consumer trend report (2013), half of consumers polled would like restaurants to provide healthful items and would select such items if available at restaurants. Also, consumers want to see nutritional information at restaurants in order to make more healthful decisions. Roseman et al. (2013) supports this trend through a result that more than two third of participants wanted to make healthier choice with nutrition information on restaurant menus and actually selected lower caloric items on labeled restaurant menus.

Whether or not to provide nutrition information on restaurant menus has been a subject of much debate for several years. In 2010, the Affordable Care Act included a regulation requiring nutrition information to be provided at chain restaurants (Democratic Policy & Communication Center, 2010). Since providing nutrition information has been legislated in several states, cities and counties who have adopted the law, more studies have been conducted to determine if providing nutritional information is associated with positive effects on customers' food consumption. A review study

of restaurant-based interventions (Glanz and Hoelscher, 2004) showed that point-of-purchase (POP) information at restaurants has significant impact on more healthful selections at restaurants. Likewise, Burton et al. (2006) reported that consumers positively changed their intentions and choices when exposed to calorie and nutrient information.

Several studies have investigated the availability of healthful foods at restaurants (Saelens et al., 2007; Wu and Sturm, 2013) or assessed general consumer beliefs about healthy diets, though not specifically in the restaurant context (Pawlak and Colby, 2009). Despite increasing consumer interest in healthful foods, it is difficult to find studies supporting positive consumer perceptions or purchase intentions toward such foods. Only a few studies (Burton et al., 2006; Kozup et al., 2003) have shown that customer purchase intentions and choices decreased for less healthful items that contained more calories and fat than expected.

Although providing healthful options and nutrition information are recognized as important factors in improving the quality of food selection and sales at restaurants, few studies have investigated consumer perceptions after being exposed to both strategies, and the effects on their behavioral intentions toward such restaurants, not toward foods per se. Previous studies have focused on the nutrition information and healthful foods from an empirical perspective and none have developed a theoretical model that adequately describes the impacts of providing nutrition information and healthful foods on consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions.

2.2. Perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility has become a popular research area along with general trends of industries attention to CSR issues. For example, studies (Becker-Olson et al., 2006; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) in marketing and general business investigated when, how, and what specific CSR initiatives work. In the hospitality industry, effects or contributions of CSR actions have been studied (Kang et al., 2010; Lee and Heo, 2009; McGehee et al., 2009; Nicolau, 2008).

In line with this trend, the restaurant industry also can no longer disregard demands for healthy eating environments as more and more customers become interested in adopting a lifestyle that includes healthy eating, and public criticism increases over the poor quality of food-away-from-home (FAFH). Schroder and McEachern (2005) showed that most customers who patronize McDonald's and KFC expected fast-food companies to promote healthy eating initiatives as a part of CSR actions. Customer health and safety comprises one important segment of CSR in the food supply chain developed by Maloni and Brown (2006). They stressed this segment by considering customers' increasing awareness of healthy lifestyles and increasing concerns about obesity. In light of increasing concerns about obesity in the United States, CSR initiatives aimed at obesity prevention might be frequently requested in the foodservice industry.

The foodservice industry has spawned healthy eating initiatives in various formats under the CSR umbrella to satisfy customer demands for healthful eating environments. Food retailers have used the provision of healthful items and nutrition information as a marketing strategy related to CSR initiatives (Jones et al., 2006). Providing nutrition information is one way restaurants accept the role of social responsibility (Thomas and Mills, 2006). Fast food and coffee restaurants such as McDonald's and Starbucks, have responded to consumer demand for more healthful products. However, to date, there have only been anecdotal instances of customer reactions to CSR actions in the foodservice industry and they have rarely been empirically measured. Although previous studies (Hu et al., 2010; Jang et al., 2011) investigated consumers' perceptions

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