

Structural Equation Model of Variables that Influence Thai Fast Food Restaurant Brand Loyalty

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Abstract: Thailand's 'street food' is world-renowned for its profusion of exotic flavors and fragrances, making Thai food one of the most sought-after of international cuisines. Therefore, the authors examined which factors contributed to a Thai fast food restaurant's brand loyalty (BL). From June 2017 to October 2017, the researchers surveyed 20 fast food service restaurants during three service periods. Every fifth customer was randomly selected and asked to fill out the questionnaire, from which the survey achieved a 79.66% response rate (478 questionnaires). The structural equation model (SEM) analysis between variables influencing BL was conducted employing a latent variable LISREL 9.10 path analysis. Accuracy interpretation of the SEM on BL made use of a goodness-of-fit (GOF) assessment. Results revealed that all causal variables in the model had a positive influence on Thai fast food restaurant BL, which can be combined to explain the variance of the factors affecting BL (R² by 78%. Also, BL was shown to be influenced by four variables, and when ranked in importance weremarketing communications (MC), customer satisfaction (ST), brand quality (BQ), and brand value (BV), with TE values equal to 0.88, 0.51, 0.49 and 0.30 respectively.

Keywords: Brand loyalty, cuisine, street food, Thai food, Thailand

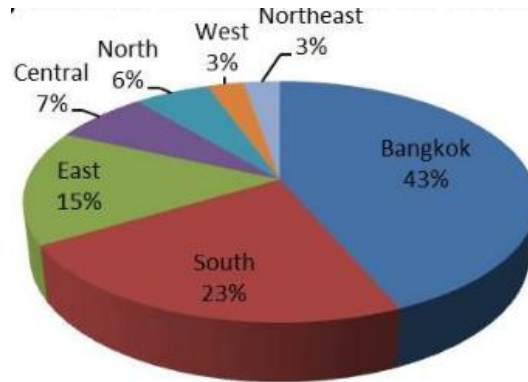
Introduction

Thailand's 'street food' needs little introduction and is world-renowned for its profusion of exotic flavors and fragrances, making Thai food one of the most sought-after of international cuisines (Sornsaruht & Sawmong, 2018). As a walk through Bangkok forcefully reminds, these flavors and fragrances are seemingly inexhaustible. Globally, street food has become renowned for being at the forefront of food innovation and popularity (Pennell, 2018). However, Thai fast food is not just known in Thailand, as many dishes are world-famous. Proof of this came in 2017 when 35,000 global travelers were surveyed concerning their favorite international dishes. From the results, four Thai dishes made it into the top 10 of the 50 dishes selected (Cheung, 2017).

Furthermore, tourism to Thailand has exploded, with Thai government officials now projecting 41.1 million foreign tourists in 2019 who will spend \$69.35 billion (Sritama, 2018). This foreign tourist spending represents approximately 12% of Thailand's gross domestic product [GDP], with the tourism sector accounting for 5.8 million jobs or 15.5% of the country's total employment (Stapornchai, 2018). Therefore, Thailand has become a very attractive global tourism brand, and as a consequence, it has become a premier world tourist destination, which is now ranked tenth globally (Marukatat, 2018).

Also, it has been reported that within the Thai hotel, restaurant, and institutional foodservice (HRI) sector, there are over 150,000 eateries (Sirikeratikul, 2016) (Figure 1). The continuous upward growth of the HRI sector is driven by both the unrelenting growth in the country's tourism sector and the urbanization of the country's rural population. Additionally, the average spending per tourist per day is about \$150, with 19% of this allocated to food and drinks (Sirikeratikul, 2016).

Figure 1.Registered restaurants in Thailand by region in 2016



Source: Sirikeratikul (2016)

These opportunities have not been lost on multitudes of Thai fast food restaurant entrepreneurs, who are now embracing foreign tourists, local workers, and shoppers in their quest for fast, delicious, and affordable Thai dishes. Thus, from department store shops to large retail shopping malls in Bangkok, fast food shops are springing up. However, competition is fierce, with the fast-food environment fast-paced and stressful.

Technology is also changing the face of fast-food dining, as Internet connectivity, smartphone applications, and social media have opened up numerous ways in which consumers can select a restaurant, order online, and choose when and where they dine. Therefore, these lifestyle tools are changing the landscape of the fast-food experience for both Thais and foreign tourists, as many are moving away from the traditional open-air food stands to indoor, retail-mall restaurants (Sirikeratikul, 2016). With these consumer lifestyle tools, restaurant entrepreneurs seek innovations and new modern food products sought after by a new consumer generation. Therefore, marketing communications and social media play a crucial role in the advertising, sales staff and promotion process, news distribution, and public relations.

Furthermore, restaurant entrepreneurs must understand that customer satisfaction comes from pleasing their patrons, leading to being more competitive and growing. This is constituent with Angelova and Zekiri (2011) which also determined that the foundation for any successful business is customer satisfaction, which leads to repeat purchases, positive word of mouth, and eventually, brand loyalty. Seeman and O'Hara (2006) also noted that managing customer relationships is a business strategy whose aim is to create more customers while increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty and while at the same time, educating them. Therefore, the key to a sustainable competitive advantage is delivering high-quality service.

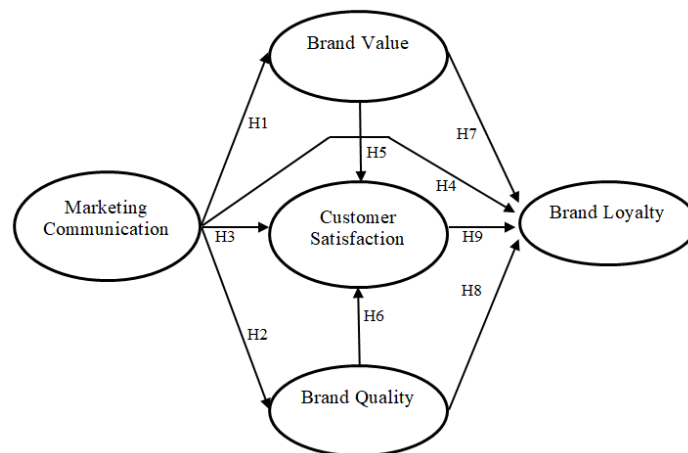
Additionally, Park (2009) indicated that restaurants need to provide a clear brand image to their customers while offering better value, more convenience, and a healthier alternative. Keller (1998) also stated that branding is an essential objective of marketing, with building a solid brand image a primary focus of many restaurant managers. Aaker (1996) also discussed brand equity in terms of brand awareness, a brand's perceived quality, brand associations, brand loyalty, and brand assets, and stated that due to differentiating brands or products, brand owners could charge premium prices while also maintaining a customer's brand loyalty (Aaker, 2013).

Conceptual model

Therefore, from research conducted with Thailand's fast-food restaurant entrepreneurs as well as an extensive review of the literature, theory, and other experts, the authors determined that restaurant brand loyalty (BL) was affected by a variety of factors, including marketing communications (MC), brand value (BV), brand quality (BQ), and customer satisfaction (ST). These relationships were conceptualized for the study in the following nine hypotheses and the framework shown in Figure 2:

- H1: MC directly influences BV.
- H2: MC directly influences BQ.
- H3: MC directly influences ST.
- H4: MC directly influences BL.
- H5: BV directly influences ST.
- H6: BQ directly influences ST.
- H7: BV directly influences BL.
- H8: BQ directly influences BL.
- H9: ST directly influences BL.

Figure 2. Conceptual model



Methods

Population and sample

The population was fast-food restaurant customers in Thailand. In 2017, an initial sample of 600 questionnaires was obtained from a random sampling of every fifth patron who used one of the 20 fast-food restaurants identified by the researchers. The survey focused on diners using the restaurant during the morning, noon, and evening meal periods.

The number of items targeted for collection and SEM analysis was based on statistical sample size theory. One often-cited rule is from Schumacker and Lomax (2010), in which it is suggested that sample sizes for CFA and SEM data analysis should use the total number of questionnaire item statements * 20, with a minimum sample size of more than 200 cases suggested.

Research tools

The questionnaire consisted of seven parts, including the restaurant patron's personal information in Part 1 (gender, age, level of education, profession, monthly income, and when and how often they frequented the restaurant) (Table 1). The survey questionnaire from Part 2 through Part 7 made use of a five-level Likert agreement scale to assess the respondent's level of importance they placed on each item, with '7' indicating 'strongly agree = 6.50-7.00,' '4' indicating 'moderate agreement = 3.50-4.49,' and '1' indicating 'minimal disagreement = 1.00-1.49.' Initial testing of the reliability for the survey items was calculated using Cronbach's α and ranged from 0.73 – 0.86, which was ranked as 'good' (Cho & Kim, 2015). This included Part 2's BL with 4 items ($\alpha = 0.87$), Part 3's MC with 5 items ($\alpha = 0.86$), Part 4's BV with 4 items ($\alpha = 0.77$), Part 5's BQ with 4 items ($\alpha = 0.88$), and finally, Part 6's ST with 4 items ($\alpha = 0.75$). Each part has observed variables, their confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results, and the Cronbach's α reliability test results are found in Tables 2 and 3.

Ethics clearance

Ethics approval for the study was obtained from the King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang (KMUTL), Human Ethics Committee before consultation with the experts involved in questionnaire review, the pre-test sample group of 30 restaurant patrons and the initial sampling group of 600 restaurant patrons (Pimdee, 2020). Upon initial contact with each individual, the study's objectives were outlined, and each participant was assured the information obtained was confidential, and no identities would be disclosed.

Collection of the data

The authors utilized the assistance of graduate research assistants to collect customer questionnaires from 20 Thai fast-food restaurants from June 2017 to October 2017 during three service periods. Every fifth customer was randomly selected and asked to fill out the questionnaire, from which the survey achieved a 79.66%

response rate. From the initial 600 questionnaires collected, only 478 questionnaires were free of response error and suitable for data analysis.

Data analysis

The structural equation model (SEM) analysis between variables influencing brand loyalty (BL) was conducted utilizing latent variable path analysis using the LISREL 9.10 program. Moreover, accuracy interpretation of the SEM on BL made use of goodness-of-fit (GOF) criteria presented in Table 4. If the statistic passed the established GOF criteria, it supported the model's accuracy consistent with the empirical data.

Results

Table 1 details the results of the restaurant patron's questionnaire. The results show that 59.83% were women, with most patrons (52.09%) being under 30 years of age. Additionally, most of the restaurant's customers (58.37%) had also obtained an undergraduate degree and earned \$319 - \$638 per month (40.79%).

Table 1. Thai Fast Food Restaurant Brand Loyalty Patron Analysis (n =478)

<i>Item 1: Sex</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>%</i>
Male	192	40.17
Female	286	59.83
Sum	478	100.0
<i>Item 2: Age</i>		
Less than 30years old.	249	52.09
31-40 years old.	120	25.10
41-50 years old.	83	17.36
51-60 years old.	17	3.56
Over60 years old.	9	1.88
Sum	478	100.0
<i>Item 3: Education</i>		
Lower than primary school	6	1.26
Primary school completion	22	4.60
Lower secondary school completion	20	4.18
High school completion	49	10.25
Vocational Certificate / Diploma / Diploma	89	18.62
Bachelor/undergraduate degree	279	58.37
Higher than a bachelor's degree	13	2.72
Sum	478	100.0
<i>Item 4: Profession/work</i>		
Government service	29	6.07
State enterprise	29	6.07
Private company	89	18.62
General employee	151	31.59
Private business	128	26.78
Other	52	10.88
Sum	478	100.0
<i>Item 5: Monthly Income (In Thai Baht)</i>		
Less than 10,000 (10,000 TB - US\$319)	127	26.57
10,20-001, 000	195	40.79
20,30-001, 000	104	21.76
30,40-001, 000	36	7.53
40,50-001, 000	10	2.09
Over 50, 000	6	1.26
Sum	478	100.0
<i>Item 6: How many Number of times per month you patron this restaurant</i>		
3-1times per month	134	28.03
6-4times per month	66	13.81

10-7times per month	142	29.71
Over nettimes per month	136	28.45
Sum	478	100.0
<i>Item 7: The most frequently used period</i>		
morning	9	1.88
lunch	265	55.44
evening	186	38.91
other	18	3.77
Total	478	100.0

CFA results

Anderson and Gerbing (1998) have suggested that when analyzing both the internal and external latent variables, a multi-step approach helps analyze each separately. Therefore, Table 2 (external variable) and Table 3 (internal variables) present the results of this analysis. Additionally, a GoF assessment was conducted, whose results are presented in Table 4.

Table 2.CFA of the External Latent Variable MC

Latent variable	α	AVE	CR	Observed variables	Item	loading	R ²
Marketing communication (MC)	0.86	0.48	0.82	Advertising	MC1	0.57	.33
				Sales staff	MC2	0.83	.68
				Promotion	MC3	0.69	.48
				News and public relations	MC4	0.61	.37
				Direct marketing	MC5	0.72	.52

Note. Chi-Square = 1.36, df = 2, *p*-value = 0.50746, RMSEA = 0.000, AVE = average variance extracted, CR (t-value) = critical ratio

Table 3.CFA of the BV, BQ, ST, and BLInternal Latent Variables

Latent variables	α	AVE	CR	Observed variables	Item	loading	R ²
Brand Value (BV)	0.77	0.31	0.64	Brand value	BV1	0.64	.38
				Making the brand known	BV2	0.48	.23
				Product benefits	BV3	0.51	.26
				Value recognition	BV4	0.61	.38
Brand Quality (BQ)	0.88	0.41	0.73	High quality	BQ1	0.55	.31
				Uniform standards	BQ2	0.43	.19
				Belief in quality	BQ3	0.75	.56
				Famous brand	BQ4	0.77	.59
Customer Satisfaction (ST)	0.75	0.47	0.78	Service quality	ST1	0.65	.42
				Service value	ST2	0.69	.48
				Atmosphere	ST3	0.67	.45
				Cleanliness	ST4	0.74	.55
Brand Loyalty (BL)	0.87	0.40	0.72	With this brand loyalty	BL1	0.63	.40
				Choose this brand first.	BL2	0.71	.51
				Recommend to others	BL3	0.47	.22
				No plan to switch to another brand.	BL4	0.68	.47

Note. $\chi^2 = 43.47$, degrees of freedom = 52, *p* - value = 0.79402, RMSEA = 0.000, AVE = average variance extracted

GOF appraisal

The study's CFA was done using LISREL 9.10 with the model's measurement fitting the data being confirmed with the model's chi-square (χ^2) non-significance being confirmed and the GOF statistics presented in Table 4 (Byrne et al., 1989).

Table 4. GOF index, criteria, supporting theory, values, and results

Criteria Index	Criteria	Supporting theory	Values	Results
χ^2	$p \geq 0.05$	Jöreskog and Sörbon (2015).	0.84	not-significant
χ^2/df	≤ 2.00	Byrne et al. (1989).	0.84	passed
RMS	≤ 0.05	Kenny and McCoach (2003).	0.00	passed
GFI	≥ 0.90	Jöreskog et al. (2016).	0.98	passed
AGFA	≥ 0.90	Hooper et al. (2008).	0.96	passed
RMR	≤ 0.05	Kenny and McCoach (2003).	0.02	passed
SOME	≤ 0.05	Kenny and McCoach (2003).	0.02	passed
NFI	≥ 0.90	Schumacker and Lomax (2010).	0.99	passed
CFI	≥ 0.90	Schumacker and Lomax (2010).	1.00	passed
Cronbach's α	≥ 0.70	Tavakol and Dennick (2011).	0.75-0.88	good

Note. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, RMR = root mean square residual, GFI = goodness of fit index, AGFI = adjusted goodness of fit index, RMR = root mean square residual, SRMR = standardized root mean square residual, NFI = normed fit index, CFI = comparative fit index.

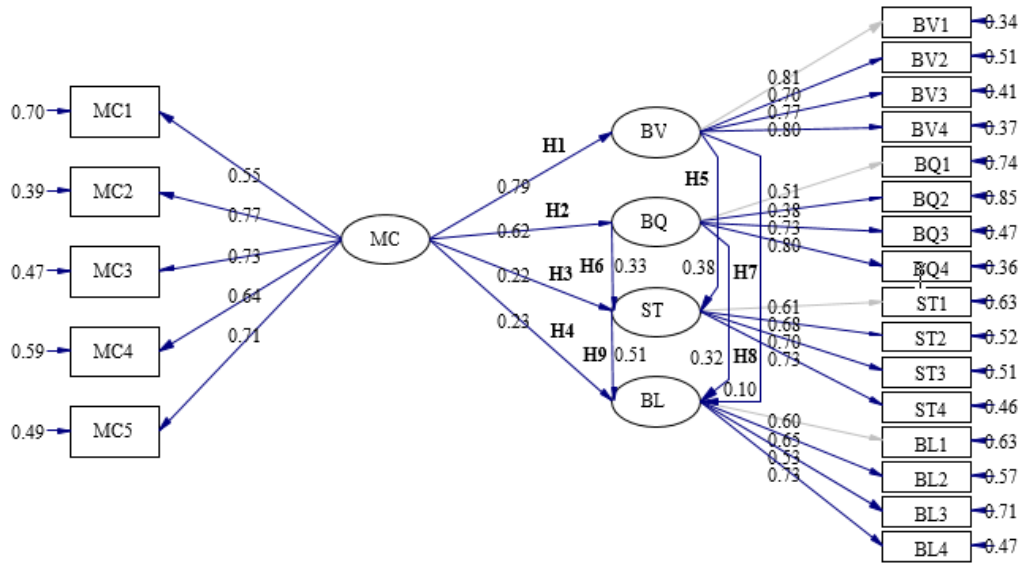
Table 5. Correlation (r) Coefficients, Composite Reliability (ρ_C) and AVE Results

Latent Variables	MC	BV	BQ	ST	BL
MC	1.00				
BV	.68**	1.00			
BQ	.47**	.44**	1.00		
ST	.64**	.64**	.52**	1.00	
BL	.62**	.63**	.49**	.71**	1.00
ρ_V (AVE)	0.47	0.59	0.39	0.46	0.40
ρ_C (Composite Reliability)	0.81	0.85	0.71	0.77	0.72
\sqrt{AVE}	0.68	0.77	0.62	0.68	0.63

Note. **Sig. $\leq .01$

Figure 3 shows the study's final SEM. Interpretation of the results shows that the quantities close to the variables indicate their squared multiple correlations. Quantities near path arrows are standardized factor loadings or correlations (Kenny & McCoach, 2003). A box designates measured variables, and latent variables, including disturbances, are represented by ovals. Straight lines represent paths with an arrowhead pointing from the causal variable toward the effect variable. Figure 3 and Tables 6 and 7 confirm the accuracy of the SEM and its variables that influence Thai fast-food restaurant brand loyalty.

Figure 3.SEM of the variables that affect Thai fast-food restaurant BL



Note. $\chi^2 = 67.60$, degrees of freedom = 80, p -value = 0.83701, RMSEA = 0.000

Mediation Effects

All causal variables in the model positively influence Thai fast food restaurant BL, whose combination together explain the variance of the factors affecting BL (R^2 by 78%. Table 6 shows the direct effect [DE], the indirect effect [IE], and total effect TE of each construct (Bollen, 1987), with BL shown to be influenced by four variables, when ranked in importance are MC, ST, BQ, and BV with TE values equal to 0.88, 0.51, 0.49 and 0.30 respectively.

Table 6.Standard Coefficients of Influences of Factors Influencing BL

Dependent variables	R ²	Effect	Independent variables			
			MC	BV	BQ	ST
Brand loyalty (BL)	.78	DE	0.23*	0.10	0.32**	0.51**
		IE	0.65**	0.20**	0.17**	-
		TE	0.88**	0.30**	0.49**	0.51**
Satisfaction (ST)	.54	DE	0.22*	0.38**	0.33**	-
		IE	0.51**	-	-	-
		TE	0.73**	0.38**	0.33**	-
Brand quality (BQ)	.39	DE	0.62**	-	-	-
		IE	-	-	-	-
		TE	0.62**	-	-	-
Brand value (BV)	.63	DE	0.79**	-	-	-
		IE	-	-	-	-
		TE	0.79**	-	-	-

Note. *Sig. < .05, **Sig. < .01

Table 7.Final hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses	Coef.	t-values	Results
H1: MC directly influences BV	0.79	14.73**	Consistent
H2: MC directly influences BQ	0.62	8.51**	Consistent
H3: MC directly influences ST	0.22	1.97*	Consistent
H4: MC directly influences BL	0.23	2.10*	Consistent
H5: BV directly influences ST	0.38	4.06**	Consistent
H6: BQ directly influences ST	0.33	4.55**	Consistent

H7: BV directly influences BL	0.10	1.18	Inconsistent
H8: BQ directly influences BL	0.32	3.78**	Consistent
H9: ST directly influences BL	0.51	4.72**	Consistent

Note. *Sig. < .05, **Sig. < .01

Discussion

All the factors positively influenced a Thai fast-food restaurant's brand loyalty [BL] due to a variance of 78% (R^2). Ranked in importance, factors influencing BL were MC, ST, BQ, and BV, with total effect [TE] values of 0.88, 0.51, 0.49, and 0.30, respectively.

MC was determined to play the essential role in Thai fast-food restaurant consumer BL from the study's SEM analysis, as the coefficient estimate = 0.79, t-value = 14.73, and ** $p \leq 0.01$. Furthermore, the restaurant patrons felt that the sales staff played the most significant role in MC, followed by direct marketing and promotion. The study's conclusion of the importance of this relationship is backed up by multiple studies, including Alwi (2009) and Da Silva and Alwi (2008), which indicated that a corporation's brand image is more likely to relate to customer loyalty by way of customer satisfaction.

The second most relationship determined from the study was the moderately positive connection between ST and BL (TE = 0.51). Further data supporting this was the coefficient estimate = 0.62, t-value = 8.51, and ** $p \leq 0.01$. Also, Hussain (2018) and Fiore et al. (2000) both expressed the vital need for restaurant entrepreneurs to create a pleasant environment where customers enjoy coming. This determines the patron's satisfaction, visit duration, and restaurant revisit intention (Turley & Fugate, 1992). A diner's satisfaction also relates to service speed, which can be more important than food quality or the location's ambiance (Parsa et al., 2017).

The next variable relationship deemed most important was BQ to BL (TE = 0.49), which was additionally supported by the coefficient estimate = 0.32, t-value = 3.78, and ** $p \leq 0.01$. Finally, Erkmen and Hancer (2019) have suggested that a restaurant's patrons play an essential part in creating a restaurant's successful brand image. Additionally, it was suggested that the service quality of employees is the crucial element in achieving a unique image.

Conclusion and Implications

Thai food-related entrepreneurs usually begin with smaller fast-food restaurants due to the lower initial investment cost, with studies estimating this sector at 80% of all restaurants. Along with the shift of Thailand's rural population into the cities, street vendors are dwindling, while smaller restaurants in shopping-centered mega markets are expected to explode. The shift is also bringing a higher expectation of quality and variety, usually at the expense of the one-person street cart.

However, these economic and cultural changes have come with massive technological disruption in smartphones and their use with social media. Moreover, it would be difficult to imagine a small, fast-food restaurant entrepreneur attempting to grow their brand without embracing the changes these technologies have brought. Stated in another way, if one entrepreneur does not, another will immediately achieve a technological advantage leading to a more significant competitive advantage. Brand loyalty is essential, but entrepreneurs need to keep pace with technology and innovate in ways that preclude them from being removed from the competition.

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