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Developing Unique Restaurant Value in The University Setting

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DEVELOPING UNIQUE RESTAURANT VALUE IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to food, college students' busy lifestyle and limitations on disposable income can lead them to be more particular about finding restaurants that are quick, convenient, and affordable rather than restaurants that serve good food. Their purchasing decisions can be more often driven by the simple need to satisfy their hunger than to experience good or healthy food. Because of this, nearby restaurants have the need to operate and offer value differently than if they were further from a university campus. The aim of this study, then, is to provide recommendations to restaurant businesses whose customers are predominantly college students. How can restaurants use information on college student preferences, current trends, and competitions to improve their business? What can they do to start developing and communicating unique value effectively to successfully appeal to college students' needs?

To address these questions, this paper offers recommendations for businesses to focus on a generic strategy in order to best allocate their abilities towards providing consumers with what they want and need. This study emphasizes the importance of clarifying this strategy as a starting point for businesses to know what business elements to focus on and communicate to the college student audience. Additional recommendations are made in developing a greater brand appeal to students with an example of how small changes within a business could lead to a large chain of outcomes for the business as a whole. After considering the examples and recommendations presented, it can be said that in the university setting especially, the business processes and features of a restaurant can often matter more than the food itself in impacting consumers' perceptions of a business, and thus impacting the business' success.

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INTRODUCTION

Developing Unique Restaurant Value in the University Setting intends to find what aspects of a restaurant would allow it to succeed around a university campus. This topic is based on the idea that college students' general decision-making processes for choosing restaurants is largely influenced by different factors and priorities than non-students, which consequently affects the way that businesses near college campuses must market and manage themselves.

As discussed later in the literature review, there are many studies published on college students' restaurant preferences as well as characteristics and habits of today's college student generation. In addition, information on competitors is extremely easy to gain with today's technology. This paper, then, intends to address these questions: how can restaurant businesses near university settings effectively use the information available about their consumers and competitors to improve their business? What can they do to start developing and communicating unique value effectively to successfully appeal to college students' needs?

To address this question, this paper first provides a look at the college student market segment. The generally busy lifestyle of college students and their efforts to save money largely affect their preferences of restaurants with a convenient location and low price, yet an acceptable food quality. These findings are tested in a competitive comparison among several restaurants near the UC Riverside campus, which discusses the strengths of several restaurants and how they still manage to survive despite their downfalls.

After this, recommendations are given on the generic strategies popularized by Michael Porter to help businesses determine their main offering to consumers. The insight on the low cost strategy and the differentiation strategy are put into the context of the restaurant industry so that restaurants can determine the business aspects and offerings that should be changed to better satisfy the needs of consumers.

A major focus of the recommendations section is on brand awareness and its importance in leading students to choose a business over its competitors. These recommendations, which include social media enhancement, website mobile optimization, and other tactics, encourage businesses to take advantage of the college student group in that this marketing segment is saturated in one small area, and that many college students have large networks to connect with each other. This allows for word of mouth to spread quickly and for individuals to affect each other's consumer behavior.

Finally, this paper asserts that restaurants should be wary of what strategies to implement and what elements to focus on. This emphasizes the importance of understanding competition and generic strategy, but it also highlights the need for businesses to constantly evaluate all aspects of their business in order to improve.

It should be noted that this study is mainly geared towards providing suggestions for private or small food establishments, meaning businesses that are not owned by a large company or have a large amount of locations elsewhere. However, many aspects and recommendations can still be applied to businesses outside this group. In this paper, the terms "restaurant" and "food establishment" are used interchangeably to address any business that serves a full meal on their menu. This includes quick service and fast casual restaurants as well as full-service restaurants, both on and off campus.

METHODOLOGY

The research done focused on two different aspects. One aspect is the study on college student preferences – what their main priorities are when making decisions, and what causes them to choose a certain establishment over another. This information was found in various studies through the Business Source Complete database. The other aspect is a collection of information on techniques and trends that businesses follow in order to capture the attention of their consumers, including methods that companies employ to increase brand awareness, and tools that have been widely used in the business world to help businesses sustain technological advantage. Much of this information was taken from research centers and news sources that follow business trends, as well as from my knowledge from business classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many studies available that focus on correlations between demographic and psychographic factors and the performance of restaurants in certain locations. Some literature studies trends in restaurant performance in correlation to household information and population within certain cities (Parsa, van der Rest, Smith, Parsa, & Bujisic, 2015). Other papers would study the impact of customers' characteristics on their perception of restaurants' performance (Jin & Lee, 2016). While studies such as these provided interesting perspectives to think about as a primer to this study, few to none of them provided data or information that could be directly used in the context of a university

setting and addressing college students. Much of the literature used for this study, then, is grouped in two parts.

On one hand, there is some literature that discusses characteristics of college students – what their lifestyle is and what it implies about their decision making, and what their preferences are. The 2010 study by Kim, Hertzman, and Hwang is especially valuable because it addressed the same target market that I wished to address: college students. Their findings that food quality, location, and price was supported in many similar studies cited in their paper, and they provided detailed results of the survey they conducted to show the extent to which some attributes overpowered others.

On the other hand, there is also an abundance of information trends in usage of mobile devices, the internet, business operations, and the impact that each of these have on today's generation. Multiple studies by ComScore, for example, give insight on the rising importance for businesses to move their operations further into the online world, and Pew Research offers a huge amount of information on the growing popularity of mobile devices and the demographics of users. Many resources such as LeeBroPOS and Restaurant Engine have the specific purpose of helping restaurants find more opportunities to take advantage of the rise of technology in expanding business. These data sets and bits of information gave me the opportunity to support my recommendations and further adapt suggestions into the context of college student consumer behavior. While many of the consumer trends mentioned in these sources did not necessarily focus on college students, they still proved relevant in the correlations to age group. The information on mobile device ownership provided by Pew Research Center, for example, was divided into age groups; the percentages used in the study were

those that pertained to subjects aged 18-29 years old or who were categorized in the millennial generation.

Much of the literature that pertains to college students' restaurant preferences only go to the extent of presenting information on students' priorities, but the studies fall short of offering more in-depth recommendations on what nearby restaurants can do to satisfy students' preferences. Many people know that the generation of today's college students generally lean towards certain trends and habits, especially with their fast-paced lifestyle and affinity for technology. This study aims to add to this discussion by using this knowledge and offering ways that restaurants can create greater unique value and sustain their competitive advantage.

DEVELOPING VALUE

MARKET AND COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

Market Segmentation

The main market segment that is considered in this study is the general group of college students. UC Riverside specifically has 22,921 students as of fall 2016, meaning that the supply of consumers is very high for the number of restaurant businesses that are in close proximity to the campus. This group's general preferences and behaviors ultimately determine the performance of restaurants around campus. According to a study administered in 2010, college students are more likely to eat at quick-service restaurants that are off-campus or in national restaurant chains that are operating on campus (Kim, Hertzman, & Hwang, 2010). The average college student eats a fast food meal three to four times a week (Kim et al., 2010), meaning that with about an average of 32 weeks within an academic year, the typical student spends about \$576 to \$1152 yearly if each meal costs between seven to nine dollars. The top priorities for college students when choosing a restaurant are quality, price, and location, and a large concern especially for males is the amount of food given in relation to the price (Kim et al., 2010). In the survey conducted by Kim et al., the single factor that led to the most satisfaction was the convenient location of a specific McDonald's branch; among the same group of students, this McDonald's also ranked the highest for low prices and fast service but ranked the lowest for food quality (2010).

Though this study only compares nine attributes (low price, food quality, fast service, menu variety, healthy options, cleanliness, location, and service) for three restaurants, it is telling of the importance of overall convenience in influencing the

satisfaction of college students. In hindsight, this is a reasonable conclusion, especially considering the typical lifestyle of most college students in America.

A typical college student is extremely busy with school work, and a U.S. Census in 2011 reported that one-fifth of college students work over 35 hours per week, while more than half of college students work more than 20 hours per week (O'Shaughnessy, 2013). With such a busy lifestyle and a tiring day, it is understandable that many students tend to opt for quicker, more convenient meal options when rushing to class, work, or their next meeting. And because of the sense of urgency that students have when making their decisions on what to eat, speed and proximity can easily take priority over attributes such as food quality, nutritional value, or customer service.

Because of consumers' main priorities, businesses near university settings might be limited in what they can do to create unique value. The threat of substitutes and the bargaining power of consumers are particularly high. When students do not see certain attributes to be worth a higher price or worth a further distance, they have the ability to choose another business instead – there are no switching costs for the consumers.

It should also be noted that local businesses around university campuses also employ many university students. Because of this, restaurants near campuses are not simply providers of food for students, but they are also providers of income. This means that businesses have to take into consideration what they must do to make training and hiring processes more efficient so that a high turnover rate does not negatively impact businesses and customer service experiences.

Competitive Comparison

The competitive comparison around the UC Riverside area will be focused on six different food establishments: Lollicup Fresh, Ten Ren's Tea Time, Boba Tea House, Panda Express, Habanero's, and Mong Kok Café (appendix A). These specific establishments were chosen because they have overlapping similarities with each other; Lollicup Fresh, Ten Ren's Tea Time, and Boba Tea House are all fairly similar in what they serve – popular boba tea drinks and a variety of fried snacks or meals. Lollicup Fresh, Ten Ren's Tea Time, and Panda Express are popular food chains outside of the UC Riverside area; Lollicup Fresh, owned by Lollicup USA, Inc., has about 30 locations throughout America (Lollicup USA) while Ten Ren's has eight locations throughout Southern California (Ten Ren's Tea Time). Panda Express, on the other hand, has 1800 operating locations (Pierson, 2015). Panda Express and Habanero's are both on-campus locations, and Mong Kok Café is the closest to campus of the off-campus establishments. Ten Ren's and Mong Kok are the only two out of these that are full-service restaurants.

Lollicup Fresh rebranded from Lollicup in 2015 and renovated to have a more modern rustic design, and their ratings have been fairly steadier since then (Yelp.com, 2017). This location opened in 2011, provides free wi-fi, and offers a rewards program through FiveStars, a mobile application which adds up points that can be used to redeem rewards. Lollicup Fresh is largely popular because it comes from a bigger company that students may have known of even before they began attending UC Riverside, making it reliable for service and quality.

Ten Ren's Tea Time is also another popular food chain, especially in Southern California. It is a full-service sit-down restaurant, but also allows students to come in if

they only want to order a drink to go. This option perhaps adds versatility to the business in that it is able to appeal to students when they want quick service *and* when they want a sit-down restaurant experience. In addition, they have a much larger variety than Lollicup Fresh in full meals, snacks and sides, and drinks, with a greater emphasis on tea quality and staying closer to the cultural roots of the type of food served. Although the fact that it is a full-service restaurant often means the food will take longer to get to the customer, students still enjoy Ten Ren's because it often acts as a café or study area for students who already intend to remain in the location for a long amount of time.

Boba Tea House, in contrast, is not a part of a larger company, and instead gains most of its popularity by acting as the environment where student groups host multiple fundraisers and social events. This means that students who are new to UC Riverside or to these groups are introduced to this establishment by their peers. Although Boba Tea House is further than campus than the other establishments discussed here, students still come because their prices can be lower and because they also have a larger variety of boba drinks.

Panda Express is a hugely-known company around the world, and because of that, students already know what to expect when they buy food from this establishment. This is a huge advantage because consumers do not have to exert as much effort in their decision-making because they are already more familiar with Panda Express and its quality in service and food products. Panda Express is thus a quick and easy choice. Although there are other options that may be cheaper, their extremely convenient on-campus location may offset other negatives; students may be willing to sacrifice a few dollars for the time that they will save by opting for an on-campus restaurant.

Habanero's is also an on-campus restaurant, and it is undeniably inspired by one of America's top fast-casual restaurant chains: Chipotle. Habanero's is similar to Chipotle in both its food variety and its business model of allowing consumers to choose each component of their food and have their food being assembled right in front of their eyes. Their pricing structure is the same as well, and these similarities are arguably a huge reason behind why Habanero's is so popular among UC Riverside students.

Mong Kok Café was previously known as Life Café before rebranding and changing managers in late 2016, and it is notoriously known to have bad and slow service, with fairly low food quality (Yelp.com, 2017). However, many students still choose to go here because its business hours run the latest, its restaurant space is fairly big and can accommodate large groups, and because its happy hour offerings can be very inexpensive. While these aspects may not suffice to make up for bad service and low-quality food if Mong Kok were operating outside the university setting, they suffice in the university setting because of college students' priorities.

It is clear that all of these businesses have their own pros and cons, yet they still continue to operate and serve a fairly consistent customer base. The information on competitors and their ranking for various attributes can be used to help analyze why certain businesses are successful, and what trade-offs restaurants can make in their offerings so that they are still appealing to students despite some downfalls. Restaurants may think, for example, that it would suffice for a restaurant one mile away from campus to offer the same limited pricing options as Panda Express because it is a popular and successful restaurant, only to find that Panda Express is able to do so because students see this limitation as a trade-off for its extremely convenient location. Competitors might

also be able to assess that Lollicup is more popular than Boba Tea House because its rewards program is stronger than Boba Tea House's frequent buyer card program, and that Lollicup's environment appeals more to students who want to study in the restaurant – a new boba establishment can then use this information to realize what it should focus on in terms of its offerings to students.

As stated in the market segment section, one of the biggest priorities for students in selecting restaurants is the restaurant's location. Once a restaurant is established and opened, however, their location (and the size of location) is something that they cannot change, unless they choose to relocate. Restaurants, then, must find ways that they can work around the advantages and disadvantages of their location; if it is further from campus or student residential areas, they must offer more benefits in other avenues to entice students to make a further drive or walk to their restaurant. If a restaurant is on campus or extremely close, they may not have to focus their efforts towards marketing or offerings as much – they might be able to afford raising their prices to earn more profits, or they may not have to offer a rewards program. However, consumer tastes and competitors' business models can often change. The following section will provide a way that businesses can evaluate their competition so that they can act accordingly.

Evaluating Competition

When looking at competitors, it is fairly easy to rank them in how appealing they are for specific attributes, such as their speed of service, their food quality, their convenience of location, and other features. This can also be visually represented with a strategy canvas (appendix B). However, evaluating competitors simply by their strengths

and weaknesses may not be enough to give an adequate insight on why they are successful.

The Fishbein Model, also known as a multi-attribute model, is an extremely useful tool that restaurants can use to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of competitors in relation to the preferences of their target market. This model, popularized by Martin Fishbein (Kramer, 2017a), evaluates businesses' performance in multiple attributes using scores and weighs these scores by the importance that consumers put on each attribute. This is done by multiplying a business' ranking in one attribute to the importance of the attribute for consumers. This calculation is done for each attribute considered, and the sum of these products generates a number to signify a business' "score" based on consumers' attitudes (Kramer, 2017a). The higher a business scores, the more theoretically appealing it is to consumers compared to its competitors.

We can take the information known about the six discussed restaurants near UC Riverside and apply the knowledge that food, price, and location are the three most important factors for college students, meaning that the importance value for these three attributes are higher (ranked 5 on a scale of 1 to 5) than that of other attributes, such as menu variety or serving size (appendix C). This technique allows businesses to look at their competition and their performance in the context of certain attributes and their importance to consumers. The Fishbein Model can, of course, be expanded to include a much larger amount of attributes or more precise scoring scales depending on the detail desired.

Because this model takes importance of attributes into account, it remains useful if and when consumer preferences shift and change. Appendix D shows a case of how

competitors' rankings can change when the priorities of consumers change, even though business' attributes remain the same. In this case, there is a slightly different set of the top three scoring restaurant businesses in the competitive scene, which can lead businesses to look further into a new set of implications on what may drive greater appeal for customers.

This method of evaluating competition allows restaurants to gauge their competition while taking multiple perspectives into account. Not only does it rank businesses by their performance in multiple attributes, it weighs these values by their perceived importance based on consumer preferences and priorities. It also enables restaurants to view which competitor may be the most preferred based on consumer preferences, not only to see what competitors to watch out for, but also to better understand what strategies or offerings may be working the best to satisfy consumers. However, simply because a competitor is successful in one respect, it does not mean another restaurant would be equally successful if they were to focus their efforts on that same attribute. Each business must be able to adapt their own characteristics and strengths to best pursue their competitive advantage.

STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

After taking a look at the competitive scene, it is evident that a single business cannot dominate in every single attribute while still trying to satisfy students' demands of quality, price, and convenience. Because of this, it is important that each establishment knows where they should focus their efforts and make trade-offs. In this next section, two generic strategies are presented to help businesses determine where their main offering lies, what they should leverage more to attract customers, and thus what trade-offs they should consider making. In the brand awareness section, a few major suggestions for starting points are discussed to allow businesses to communicate their offerings to the specific and unique college student consumer group.

COMPETITIVE EDGE

It is mentioned in the 2010 study by Kim et al. that it is extremely beneficial for a restaurant to be able to focus on both quality value and practical value. However, while both aspects are important in maintaining a successful business, restaurants would be better off in clarifying what generic strategy would work best for their business. The generic strategies were originated by Michael Porter, a highly noted and influential business strategist, to illustrate ways that companies seek competitive advantage within its industry (Porter, 1985). The first of these generic strategies is the low cost strategy, in which businesses seek to become the "low cost leader" among its competitors. Firms tend to do this by finding means and resources to lower prices for consumers as much as possible, usually by taking advantage of resources that are associated with production. For food establishments, this would usually mean buying ingredients wholesale or

decreasing menu variety to lessen the ingredients to maintain in inventory. This would work best in restaurants that do not emphasize freshness, but rather focus on giving customers very quick and low-priced service, or for restaurants who focus on less variety and capitalize on a limited and specialized menu selection.

This low cost strategy may sound very appealing in the university setting, where college students put a huge emphasis on price as a decision factor, but the drawbacks of this type of strategy could be extensive. Focusing on low cost as a business' main appeal to consumers can lead to lower customer loyalty; as soon as another business can offer something similar or comparable at a lower price, customers may flock to that business instead. Otherwise, if a certain restaurant was initially able to provide such a low cost because they had access to a supplier or to low-priced special ingredients, suppliers may no longer be able to continue providing low prices if the cost or supply of inputs is affected. But perhaps the largest potential drawback behind relying on a low cost strategy is the effect it could have on aspects that businesses may not have direct control over.

When attempting to reduce costs, one avenue that restaurants may choose to take is to lower wages for employees. While this could dramatically decrease prices for customers, it could also lead to dissatisfying customer experiences. When employees are paid less or are given less hours, they may be less motivated to do their jobs well or to deliver satisfactory customer service. Lowering wage expenses may also mean decreasing the number of employees working at the same time, leading to slower service and customer dissatisfaction in regards to speed of service. Restaurant management, then, should be cautious when deciding what aspect of their business should be affected when

attempting to be a low cost leader in the area, because the actions they take may be more detrimental than beneficial for the business.

The other generic strategy that may work for certain businesses is the differentiation strategy (Porter, 1985). This strategy more strongly focuses on the brand image, features, or quality. Although businesses that use this strategy still must keep costs and pricing in mind in order to stay competitive, there is a stronger emphasis on finding specific attributes that buyers consider important and seeking ways to satisfy these preferences.

In the university setting, this can be done by evaluating and observing the habits of college students. If businesses find that many students do not finish their meals and are hesitant to pay for food they know they will be unable to finish, a restaurant may differentiate itself by offering mini or half-sized meals at lower prices than a full meal. If businesses find that students do not like to wait more than five minutes for their food yet still want high-quality options, they may choose to pursue a business model similar to Chipotle or Habanero's, which enables customers to customize their food based on ready-made but high-quality ingredients. If restaurants see that customers are increasingly buying into the trend of posting their food on social media on a very regular basis, their differentiation can be focused on aesthetically pleasing food with unique packaging.

The main drawback associated with this strategy is that differentiation often comes at a premium price, especially when focusing on added features and higher quality. These features and pricing must then be strong and appealing enough to balance the potential higher costs in customers' minds, which can be difficult for businesses to find at times when college students' priorities are set on convenience and affordability.

Businesses must then evaluate whether or not their unique value is truly as appealing to consumers in reality as they are in theory.

The many pros and cons of both generic strategies emphasize the need for restaurants to decide what features of their business they should focus on as their main selling point. This could especially be affected by the location of the restaurant and their distance from the university campus. For example, it may be the case that most students mostly come to on-campus restaurants or those closest to campus primarily for convenience, as something to quickly satisfy their hunger or even as a last resort. In this case, it is better to opt for a low cost strategy rather than focusing efforts and allocating resources towards differentiation. Otherwise, restaurants further from campus might be more able to differentiate and charge higher if students are more willing to take their time and find something more “special” to eat. Of course, there also is the possibility that they may need to focus on speed and low price as a trade-off for being further from campus.

Each food establishment will have to consider their business offerings and evaluate their abilities to determine what strategy is better suits them. A well-chosen strategy can lead to costs, resources, and efforts that are allocated optimally, which can result in much greater payoffs and more available resources to pursue further opportunities to build on their competitive advantage.

BRAND AWARENESS

When a business’ main offering for their target market is clearly established through generic strategy, businesses will have an easier time communicating what they can give to students to satisfy their wants and needs. Fore reaching out to new potential

consumers, a major goal for communicating is to lead consumers through the consumer adoption process, which consists of five stages.

In the awareness stage, consumers are made aware that the restaurant and its products actually exist; this can arguably be the easiest step in the process, especially because it requires little to no action on the part of the students. However, the materials that consumers are exposed to have to be appealing or interesting enough to lead consumers to the next stage. The interest stage is where consumers start to look for and gain more information about products and services after being made aware of a business' products and services. In the context of this study, this means that students develop a knowledge of what the restaurant serves, how far it is from campus, what the menu variety is, and other basic information. After consumers learn this information, they move on to the evaluation stage, in which they compare this new business to others they are more used to, and individuals start to decide whether or not this new entrant is something that they will like and would consider for future decisions (Kramer, 2017b).

In the last two stages, the consumers actually interact with the business; in the trial stage, customers try the product and experience the restaurant service for the first time. This is especially crucial because it determines whether or not a customer will come back, and what kind of information customers will relay to others who are in earlier stages of the adoption process. Finally, consumers move into the adoption process, where they decide that the business satisfies their needs, and considers being a regular customer (Kramer, 2017b).

By the nature of the adoption process, the number of consumers lessens as the stages progress because of individual opinions on what they experience as the process

continues. Simple logic would then say that the best way to have a large number of consumers get to the last stage would be to have an extremely large number of people exposed in the first few stages – however this may be easier said than done. This section, then, focuses on maximizing the number of students aware of a restaurant business and increasing convenience in accessing information needed to further evaluate their brand.

Throughout the adoption process, restaurants should also aim to position themselves within consumers' evoked sets. The evoked set is the small set of options that immediately come into consumers' minds when making a decision, and thus this is crucial for a business to be further considered and ultimately chosen by consumers. Businesses near universities should be proactive in their efforts to stay in the minds of consumers, especially because most small businesses may be unable to create a strong cult following similar to popular places such as In-N-Out that do not necessarily require as much effort to maintain a presence in consumers' minds. The following recommendations on brand awareness will help businesses not only place themselves in consumers' evoked sets, but also to *stay* in their evoked sets.

Social Media

A major channel in which restaurants near universities can benefit is in social media – specifically, on Instagram. Social media is undoubtedly a huge part of the college student group's lifestyle, and businesses can use this fact to their advantage in the first few stages of the adoption process. The use of mobile devices is rising, and it is especially popular among young adults, with 85 percent of Americans in the ages 18 through 29 owning a smartphone (Smith, 2015). In fact, almost one-third of mobile users

are expected to have an Instagram by the end of this year, and over one-third of millennial smartphone users are predicted to be active on Instagram by 2019 (eMarketer, 2016).

But why Instagram? According to a study done by Pew Research Center, 59% of Instagram users are between the ages 18 and 29 years old (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016), an age group very similar to the typical range of college students. Instagram was also hailed as the “king of social engagement” for brands in 2014, with 60 times more interactions on posts than Facebook (Elliott, 2014).

Instagram is especially useful to smaller businesses – social media accounts are free, and practically anyone can learn how to use them. Although it takes a certain eye and skills to create and curate a good and consistent account, it can be relatively easy to employ someone in a university community to run a restaurant’s social media account well; statistics show that around one third of online teens create webpages or blogs for others, create their own online blog or webpage, post their own art or photos online, or all of the above – and this was only in 2007 (Lenhart, Madden, Smith & Macgill, 2007). The number of curators and creators in this age group have undoubtedly grown significantly over the past 10 years, along with the skills of those who were already posting and blogging in 2007. This means that restaurant businesses near universities do not have to find an expert Marketing Director to run their social media accounts for them, which can be costly in wage expenses. Instead, they have a huge pool of social media-savvy college students that they can employ as part-time employees to cut down on costs.

The relatively low cost of running an active Instagram account is not the only reason why restaurant businesses should focus on their social media channels; seeing an

actual business' products on social media can have a huge impact on customer perceptions and behaviors, and more importantly, on their decision to buy.

A strong example of this assertion is seen in the growing beauty and cosmetic industry. An article describing social media's influence on the industry observed that Instagram does not only create a sense of urgency for followers, it also is a huge driver of purchasing decisions. From 2014 to 2015, the number of millennials say that seeing products on Instagram makes them more likely to buy rose from 11% to 31% (Brown, 2016). Not only that, a company also stated that consumers who view product images of the company's Instagram will spend four times longer on the company website to read into detailed information than consumers who do not look through their Instagram photos (Brown, 2016).

The restaurant industry, of course, is very different from the cosmetic industry – the restaurant industry is not e-commerce based (and consumers do not order their meals online nearly as often as they order cosmetic products online), but this information does put into perspective the power of Instagram and carefully curated feeds in affecting and driving conversion rates of their followers.

Marketing and creating brand awareness does not necessarily *create* a need – they instead make consumers more aware of their needs. Eating food and satisfying hunger is already a necessity long before we as an audience see advertisements about food, yet photos of food products are appealing to us because they remind us of our hunger, of our cravings, and even of how delicious something may be. Having a business' name correlated to these reminders has a large effect on being more heavily considered when consumers decide to act on their hunger and cravings.

Gaining Followers

Of course, in order to have the efforts put into social media pay off, a restaurant business will have to first obtain a sizable base of followers who are exposed these posts in the first place. This is key in the beginning of the adoption process so that larger groups can be included in the awareness and interest stages. Gaining a good amount of followers can be hard at the beginning, especially for a new business that is not well-known and has few locations. However, a restaurant business can entice people to follow them with a few incentives that may benefit the business in the long run.

A huge benefit about the college student segment is that they are all mostly concentrated in one place, and though they may live in different places, they all come to one place during the week on a very regular basis: the university campus. Every individual in this network lives in the same area, and because many students have several classes together, students' networks are broad. When the right strategies are implemented, these characteristics of college students and their networks can work successfully for restaurants' efforts.

A recommendation for new businesses trying to gain a following is lead followers straight to the trial stage of the adoption process. Giveaways are logistically simple methods that many businesses use to increase engagement and gain followers. On a certain post, a business can simply ask its followers to tag a certain number of friends in the comments to enter a giveaway and require that entrants follow their account in order to win a prize. Restaurants can then offer a free meal or a special promotion as their prize for this giveaway.

Hosting a giveaway such as this can lead to a chain of outcomes. Friends that are tagged may feel motivated to join in on the giveaway and therefore follow the restaurant's account as well – and many college students may not (or may forget to) unfollow after the giveaway is finished, especially if the restaurant hosts one on a regular basis. With these new followers, restaurants now have a larger consumer base exposed to their posts, further increasing their likelihood to be present in consumers' evoked sets. Because this strategy expands the consumer base and would consequently lead to an increase in customers and resources, restaurants need not worry about the costs incurred when giving away an occasional free meal.

Other popular social media activities can be used as well, such as encouraging customers to post a photo of the restaurant or its food with a certain hashtag and giving a prize or discount to followers whose photos are featured on the restaurant's account. Once the follower base is strong, restaurants can further use their social media to their advantage by generating greater word-of-mouth and encouraging greater interaction with the brand. However, while follower count does not necessarily translate into a larger customer base, it does ensure that the messages and visuals communicated reach a larger group of people. It then becomes more important that social media channels are presenting the right content to attract followers and benefit business.

Creating an Image

Having a social media account can do more than simply notify followers on weekly specials or show pictures of food – social media can make a huge impact on consumers' affinity for and perspective on a business and its brand.

One of the most prevalent ways that businesses can create a strong and appealing brand image is to maintain an aesthetically pleasing account that curates content past the mere product and promotional offerings of the restaurant. Instagram is an especially visual social networking application, and most accounts and influencers put an emphasis on visual appeal. In fact, there have been many studies and articles that provide data on what kinds of Instagram photos generate the most likes (King, 2015), showing how visuals can largely affect engagement and results.

Aside from curating a visually appealing feed, restaurants can benefit from posting images that relate to a certain lifestyle or look. If a restaurant's brand is modern, emphasizes freshness, or has a rustic style, it can post content that visually correlates to an image they want to portray. Their feeds can be balanced between posts about food, about price promotions, and pictures of the interior design of the restaurant. They can even include photos unrelated to the restaurant itself, as long as they consistently evoke the same type of mood or aesthetic. The more restaurants evoke certain images on their feeds, the more followers correlate the brand with a certain lifestyle, and before followers know it, they start to subconsciously link the content they see with the restaurant itself. This changes perceptions about restaurants and has the power to affect the way they feel when they interact with the brand.

Although this may not always be a huge influencer in helping students determine whether or not a restaurant will satisfy their hunger best, it can add on to the various attributes that students consider when deciding where to eat. These aesthetics can especially be powerful in maintaining a strong positive perception for followers who are still in the first few stages of the consumer adoption process.

Brand awareness efforts also do not necessarily intend to have consumers buy products immediately; instead, many efforts to advertise a business intend to constantly remind consumers about their product offerings and strengthen positive correlations with their businesses, so that when consumers are considering their options, the business can be included in consumers' evoked set. When consumers constantly see posts from a restaurant business on a news feed they already scroll through on a regular basis, they are more likely to remember that business as an option when considering places to eat. However, while it is important create a consistent aesthetically pleasing brand image, to simply be in an evoked set is not enough. Businesses have to present enough positive information to show that they can and will satisfy customer needs so that restaurants can actually be chosen from the evoked set.

Mobile Optimization of Websites

It should be noted that while maintaining brand awareness through social media is extremely important in keeping a restaurant in consumers' evoked set, this alone cannot generate maximum potential of results if restaurants' websites are not mobile optimized. While social media can offer connections between a restaurant's brand and a certain lifestyle or look, these channels can also usually lead viewers to visit restaurants' websites, where they can find more information on practical value, which can directly affect customers' decisions. Consumers' transitions from social media channels to websites also represent a progression through the first few stages in the consumer adoption process. If this information is not easily accessible or readily available, however, the efforts put into maintaining a well-curated Instagram and growing a

follower base would almost be meaningless. For this reason, it is important that all restaurants (in both generic strategies) focus on mobile-optimizing their websites so that their business can move past simply being in consumers' evoked set and be more strongly considered for the customers' final selection.

Mobile optimization is vital because as stated before, an estimated 85 percent of adults in the ages 18-29 are smartphone owners (Smith, 2015). A study in 2014 also shows that mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) generate 60 percent of online traffic (Lipsman, 2014). This information is extremely important for restaurants because mobile-optimized websites for eateries lead to a 90 percent conversion rate, while restaurants without a mobile-optimized website will only lead to a conversion rate of less than 10 percent (Restaurant Engine, 2017). An article by Restaurant Engine also asserts that 48 percent of mobile users will leave a site if they are frustrated at their experience on a certain website and will find another one that will function better on their device (Think with Google, 2012). This is a huge threat to restaurant businesses whose websites are not mobile-optimized and could lose business from a large percentage of potential customers.

It is important to note that mobile optimization is not only important to bring new customers in; it is also important in bringing back customers who are not first-timers. When students are thinking through the options in their evoked set, they may use the information only found on their websites (such as the full menu and prices) to help guide their decision. It is thus also possible for restaurants to fail to bring back returning customers by depriving customers of a more convenient and user-friendly experience.

Failure to mobile-optimize a website with easily accessible information is a lost business opportunity for restaurants. Restaurants have the opportunity to present large

amounts of important details on their websites, but this information could be useless if someone chooses to leave the website simply because it does not work on their device. This could especially be a threat to restaurants because there are no switching costs or consequences for consumers; any customer can simply choose another place to eat and never consider the business as an option again.

With the ever-increasing use of mobile devices to access websites, it is a huge investment, then, for restaurants to optimize their websites for accessibility and convenience. Not only is the restaurant increasing its online presence, it is increasing the probability that customers will be more likely to choose them over another restaurant. By making information about the business more conveniently available to consumers, it is allowing consumers to be more willing to view the business more positively in the interest and evaluation stages of the consumer adoption process and in their evoked sets.

Fundraisers

Another effort that businesses can make especially for college students is to provide fundraising opportunities. Though it is surprising how little literature there is on fundraising opportunities offered by food establishments, fundraisers undeniably make up a huge chunk of the events hosted by college students in extracurricular activities. When simply walking around a college campus such as UC Riverside, one can easily spot multiple flyers, posters, and advertisements of on-campus organizations and clubs that are hosting a fundraiser at a nearby off-campus restaurant.

The logistics of these types of fundraisers are simple: an organization sets up a time and date with a restaurant, the organization creates a flyer for the fundraising event,

and customers present this flyer to the cashier at the time of purchase within the established time frame. After that, a percentage of the purchases made – usually 10 to 20 percent – is given to the organization.

Though profitability for the restaurant is questionable with fundraisers, restaurant businesses should keep in mind that hosting fundraisers could garner potential benefit in non-monetary ways. Fundraisers can bring large groups of people into the restaurant – much larger groups than they would have on a non-fundraiser day – which could lead to greater total profit. Many of the students within these groups could be new customers, or people who would have never tried the restaurant if they did not have the incentive or motivation to support a peer group's fundraiser. If the restaurant ends up being appealing to these new customers, then they may potentially return on their own time. If not, then these new customers still have a motive to buy food or a drink for the restaurant in order to support the organization's fundraiser.

The logic behind this is fairly simple, yet fundraisers can do a lot in contributing to customers' perceptions of restaurant businesses, particularly in university areas. Earlier, it was mentioned that it may not be exactly possible for a small restaurant business year a university such as UC Riverside to create a "cult following." But it *may* be possible for a business to maybe create a sense of sentimentality for its student audience. When food establishments allow for student groups to host fundraisers, they create opportunities for these groups to build connections within their membership and create memories. These food establishments act as the environment for these groups to do so.

I myself am involved in a student organization that has hosted several fundraisers at one certain establishment since before I even became a student at UC Riverside. All of the organizations members – both new and old – enjoyed their time every time we were there, and we eventually all subconsciously connected the place with the good memories we were able to make there. Because of this, the organization continued to go to this place as a group even when we were not hosting a fundraiser, and there was no incentive to support the club financially.

Fundraising programs are especially successful around universities because the distinct college student segment is made up of many groups with a strong motivation to support their peers' organizations and thus increase the attendance of these fundraisers. While some restaurants may be reluctant to host fundraisers because they seem like they lessen profits per unit sold, but they must keep in mind that fundraisers can have large payoffs, such as bringing in new customers and generating greater customer loyalty.

MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS

Many of the recommendations made so far have a fairly common theme: they require that each restaurant business evaluate their current offerings and seek ways to add to or change their business model to bring in more customers and enhance customer loyalty. This can be done by changing marketing tactics and clarifying their main offering to consumers.

Sustaining competitive advantage, however, goes far beyond simply making a few changes every once in a while. Improvement and constant evaluation must be engrained into the regular business processes of a restaurant in order for it to succeed – this is

relevant for restaurants that focus on both the low cost and the differentiation strategy.

While this can be said for all restaurants in any environment, it is especially true for those in a university setting, especially because the group of students in the area will change every couple of years, and therefore local tastes and preferences constantly change.

As many restaurants have demonstrated in the past, implementing carefully-planned and proactive strategies can often largely contribute to cost-cutting efforts (Alonso-Almeida, Bremser, & Llach, 2015). This is because “a strong focus [...] leads to a rigorous analysis of profitable versus unprofitable products or services” (Alonso-Almeida, Bremser, & Llach, 2015). Not only would thorough review of processes help businesses eliminate unprofitable business aspects, it could also help them to identify certain processes that can be changed to be more modern or efficient. Though this may be costly up front, it could potentially be exceedingly cost-saving in the long run.

One example of the potential benefits behind reviewing current processes can be found in replacement of cashier hardware. Many consumers may have noticed the increased use of iPads for point-of-sale (POS) software and hardware – especially in food establishments – in recent years. Some customers may see this use of iPads as an upgrade; it shows that the business is modern and is continuously making improvements, especially since iPads are known to be quite expensive, starting at \$599 a piece (Apple.com, 2017). This can lead many customers, including myself, to wonder how small businesses could afford to keep up with more modern technologies, even in small ways such as this. Is operating on iPads truly a smarter financial business decision than other traditional POS systems?

A simple Google search for cash registers shows prices ranging from \$100 to \$1500, depending on the features included. Of course, there are other added costs for both iPads and traditional cash registers, such as updates, repairs, or even receipt paper, but a closer look at iPads for POS can suggest numerous advantages far beyond cost savings. For one, the cost to install iPads as a cash register is lower, and studies have shown that mobile POS systems prompt customers to increase tip amount when programmed a certain way (LeebroPOS.com, 2017). And when employees are tipped more, they could feel more motivation to satisfy customers' needs, leading to a better customer experience. The impact that this can make is undeniably large. Whether a customer's experience is shared by word of mouth or on websites such as Yelp, it can dictate whether or not customers will return or if new customers will choose to try something new.

Aside from these benefits, reports have also shown that training employees to use iPad POS systems is extremely easy and quick (Olenski, 2013). In a university setting, this is especially vital because many establishments near universities will hire students who are looking for a part-time job, in which case there will be frequent new hires. In an environment where there is high employee turnover, then, iPads can help cut down on time and costs spent on training.

The replacement of typical cash registers with iPads is of course not the only way that restaurant businesses can reduce costs and improve. It simply serves as a strong example that even small changes in the operations of a business can cause a large chain reaction that may affect consumers' perceptions of a business, and that investing in changes could lead to benefits that go beyond generating more money for a business.

This also serves as a reminder that the answer to staying competitive can also partially lie in small details. In very competitive fields, many businesses can begin looking to the same general methods to succeed and compete. When consumers set of options become incredibly close in comparison, it is the small differences that lead consumers to choose one business over another.

Evidently, good ideas and recommendations do not necessarily work every time they are implemented. This is why it is important for restaurants to consider their placing in relation to competition and to determine their generic strategy. When businesses establish these elements, they can make smarter decisions on what to constantly improve on, where to focus their efforts, and what recommendations to act on or avoid.

CONCLUSION

When taking a glimpse at the preferences of most consumers in a university environment, it seems that a restaurant's operations and business attributes can often matter more than the food itself. While this may be a bold assertion, it is supported by the idea that college students are driven to choose certain establishments because they often know that service is quick and consistent, because the business is successful in staying in consumers' evoked sets, and other aspects that are more strongly affected by restaurants' functions and operations. This assertion demonstrates why it is important for restaurant businesses to be aware of their business processes and constantly consider alternatives that could benefit their business in both the immediate future and in the long run. In an area where most of its target consumers are busy and usually simply trying to find something to satisfy their hunger, this makes sense. Most college students do not have the time to be picky about food quality, cooking methods, and uniqueness.

The idea of appealing to college students' main preferences can seem simple at first; all a business has to do is find high quality food while lowering prices as much as possible. However, appealing to consumer behavior and sustaining competitive advantage is evidently much more complicated than that. Businesses must be able to capitalize on their strengths to appeal to customers and to make up for any shortcomings they may have. To do this effectively, a business should first set the foundation of clarifying what exactly these strengths are; what are the main elements that a business can offer to students in order to best appeal to their wants and needs? For some establishments, it is the ability to offer extremely low prices. For other establishments, it is unique and high quality food or the convenience of their nearby location. And when a

business is more clear on what these strengths are – especially in relation to their competitors – they can more effectively communicate these strengths to their target audience. Businesses near universities have an advantage in that their target market is concentrated in one area, and the nature of college students knowing each other and having similar priorities allows for general trends to be effective for nearly all individuals within the segment.

A common trend that was brought up throughout the study is the idea that small changes have the power to make a large impact on other business elements indirectly. When considering what business elements to change, then, restaurants should be inquisitive and thorough in realizing what larger effects such changes can make on the business as a whole.

There is no definitive answer or solution on how a restaurant business can be ultimately and absolutely successful in satisfying all the wants and needs of its target market of college students. However, the concepts presented in this paper hope to help clarify a few elements that are important to focus heavily on specifically in the university setting, and to offer starting points for businesses who find the need to improve but do not know where to start.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – OVERVIEW OF RESTAURANTS NEAR UC RIVERSIDE

	FULL SERVICE OR QSR	PRICE RANGE FOR MEAL	YELP STAR RATING (NUMBER OF RATINGS)	RESTAURANT OPEN SINCE	REWARDS PROGRAM
LOLLICUP	QSR	\$5-8	3.5 (265) Usually 3-3.5 stars, with some 4-star ratings.	2011	FIVESTARS APP
TEN REN'S	FULL	\$8-13	3.5 (516) Fairly consistent at four stars, but with significantly low ratings for three months in 2014.	2008	FREQUENT BUYER CARD
BOBA TEA HOUSE	QSR	\$7-9	4 (356) Consistent at 4 stars.	2011	FREQUENT BUYER CARD
PANDA EXPRESS	QSR	\$6-9	3.5 (22)	2010	(NONE)
HABANERO'S	QSR	\$6-8	3 (15)	2012	(NONE)
MONG KOK	FULL	\$8-13	3.5 (42) Consistently hovers around 3 stars since 2013.	2008*	(NONE)

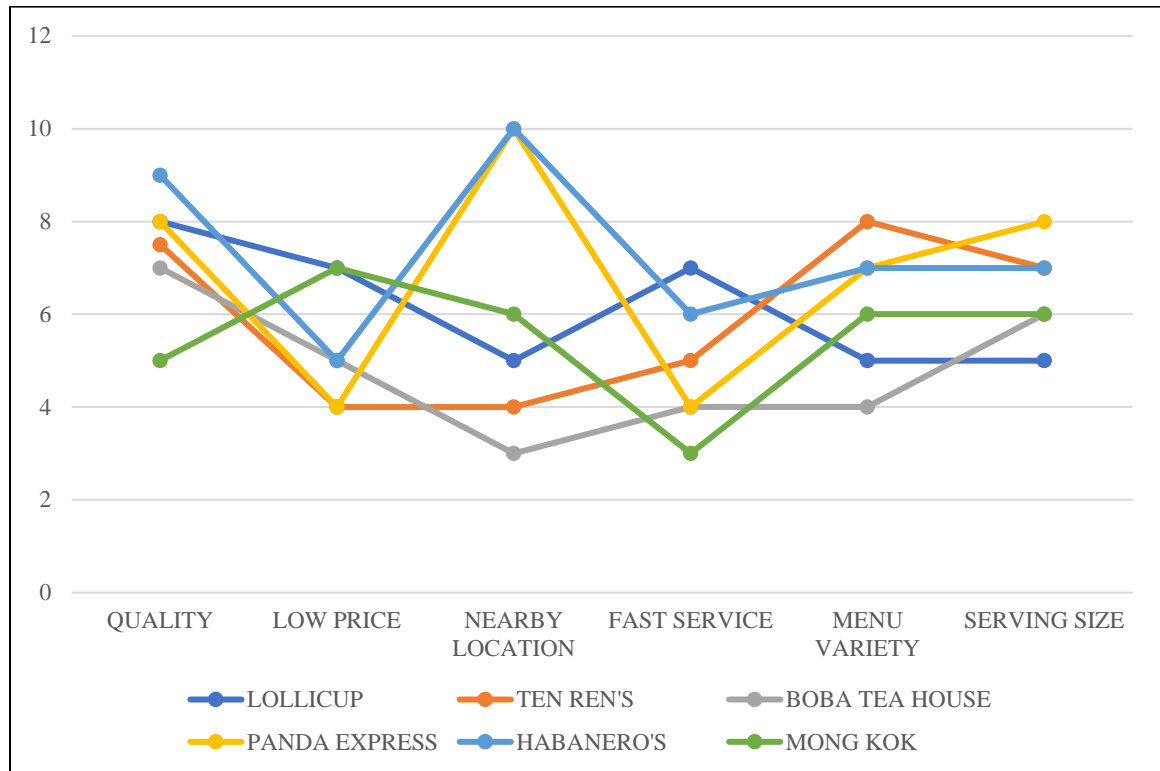
(Yelp.com, 2017)

**Mong Kok operated under the name Life Café 2008-2016.*

	AVERAGE TIME SPENT IN RESTAURANT (MINUTES)	PEAK TIMES
LOLLICUP	15-60	Lunch and dinner time usually equal; most customers on Wednesday and Sunday nights.
TEN REN'S	25-90	Evening to late night; low customer count for lunch on Wednesdays and Thursdays.
BOBA TEA HOUSE	15-60	Nighttime. Higher traffic than all other restaurants compared.
PANDA EXPRESS	N/A	Lunch time (noon – 2pm)
HABANERO'S	N/A	Lunch time (noon – 2pm)
MONG KOK	N/A	(No information found)

(Google My Business, 2017)

APPENDIX B – STRATEGY CANVAS EXAMPLE



Ratings based on information found on Yelp. While it is easy to see where some businesses are more successful than others, it is difficult to see which restaurant is overall the most appealing.

APPENDIX C – FISHBEIN MODEL EXAMPLE

	IMPORTANCE FACTOR	LOLLICUP	TEN REN'S	BOBA TEA HOUSE	PANDA EXPRESS	HABANERO'S	MONG KOK
QUALITY	5	8	7.5	7	8	9	5
LOW PRICE	5	7	4	5	4	5	7
NEARBY LOCATION	5	5	4	3	10	10	6
FAST SERVICE	4	7	5	4	4	6	3
MENU VARIETY	2	5	8	4	7	7	6
SERVING SIZE	3	5	7	6	8	7	6
		153	134.5	117	164	179	132

Note that the importance factor is higher for the top priorities of the target market (food quality, low price, and nearby location). This importance factor is multiplied by the ratings of each restaurant for each attribute.

APPENDIX D – FISHBEIN MODEL WITH ALTERED IMPORTANCE FACTORS

	IMPORTANCE FACTOR	LOLLICUP	TEN REN'S	BOBA TEA HOUSE	PANDA EXPRESS	HABANERO'S	MONG KOK
QUALITY	4	8	7.5	7	8	9	5
LOW PRICE	3	7	4	5	4	5	7
NEARBY LOCATION	2	5	4	3	10	10	6
FAST SERVICE	1	7	5	4	4	6	3
MENU VARIETY	5	5	8	4	7	7	6
SERVING SIZE	5	5	7	6	8	7	6

120

130

103

143

147

116

If consumer preferences and priorities are altered (importance factor column), the placement of businesses in relation to each other can change, even though the rankings in each attribute remain the same.

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