

THE EFFECT OF EXPERIENTIAL PROVIDERS ON RESTAURANT PATRONAGE DECISIONS

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Customers enjoy engaging in pleasant dining experiences. Schmitt (1999) proposed in his theory of experiential marketing that these experiences were linked with experiential providers (EXPRO), which include communication, verbal identity and signage, product presence, cobranding, spatial environment, electronic media, and people. We designed this study on the basis of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB) to explore whether experiential providers influence customers' intentions and decisions (see Figure 1).

The 32-item survey, rated on a 5-point Likert scale anchored by 1 = *totally disagree* and 5 = *totally agree*, was conducted after a pilot test was implemented. A total of 317 valid questionnaires were collected within a 2-month period in the spring of 2010 in Northern Taiwan. SPSS version 15.0 was used for statistical analysis of descriptive statistics, survey items, and the model itself by using factor analysis, multiple regression, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and *t* test. The respondents consisted of 51.7% females and 48.3% males. The hypothesis that the experiential providers will significantly moderate or increase customers' intentions so that they lead to patronage decisions was supported in this survey, $R^2 = 0.167$, with experiential providers as a moderator, $\Delta R^2 = 0.043$, $p < .001$. The results showed that female customers perceived the three most important experiential providers to be people ($M = 4.27$), spatial environment ($M = 4.16$),

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and product presence ($M = 4.11$) whereas male customers valued people ($M = 4.05$), product presence ($M = 3.79$), and spatial environment ($M = 3.71$) as the most important. In addition, female customers were significantly more receptive to all seven experiential providers compared to male customers. The results suggest that restaurant operators should provide quality services that appeal to customers' intentions when they are searching for pleasant dining experiences (i.e., people), in addition to delicious food (i.e., product presence), and unique, comfortable setting designs (i.e., spatial environment). Excellent services, including special designs for women's dining and customized food, could attract and increase female customers' patronage intentions and decisions because they are more receptive to experiential providers. In contrast, male customers have less interest in communication, cobranding, electronic media, verbal identity, and signage, so different promotions will need to be designed to attract their business. There is both theoretical and practical value in this study because it enriches hospitality literature and supports the practical aspects of hospitality service provision. This research should be expanded in the future to widen and increase its value.

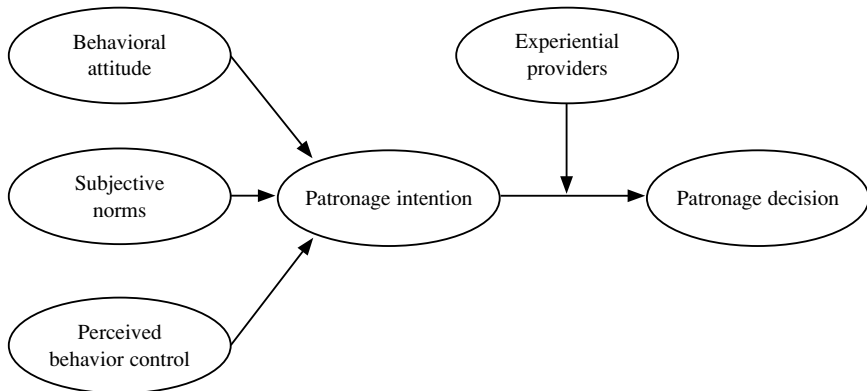


Figure 1. *Conceptual model of the decision process of restaurant customers.*

Keywords: theory of planned behavior, experiential marketing, experiential providers, restaurant industry, customer dining experience, gender.

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