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Evaluating the Eating Out Experience within the Framework of Consumption Theories Based on the Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption**

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Abstract

This study shows that eating out today is a much more complex phenomenon than merely satisfying a basic physiological need for food. It is closely associated with individuals' social interactions, cultural backgrounds, and lifestyle preferences. Recent research in gastronomy and tourism highlights that eating out reflects lifestyle preferences and identity expressions rather than serving merely a functional purpose. Expanding on this viewpoint, the current study examines the eating out experience through three phases; the pre-experience stage (expectations, information-seeking, and motivation), the during-experience stage (service environment, service quality, and sensory and emotional responses), and the post-experience stage (evaluation, satisfaction, loyalty, and repurchase intention) and discusses each phase concerning key consumption theories. The study found that existing studies on eating out behaviors primarily focus on the act of eating itself, neglecting both the pre- and post-experience phases. Building upon this gap, the study aims to propose an evaluation of experiential stages within a theoretical framework by integrating consumption theories (Utility Theory, Consumer Choice Theory, Expectation Disconfirmation Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and Theory of Consumption) with the Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption. The study aims to contribute to the academic literature and the tourism sector by explaining how the eating out experience is shaped before, during, and after consumption, and by offering practical recommendations for food and beverage businesses from the perspective of tourism marketing, through an interdisciplinary approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Eating out has become an increasingly visible topic in consumer behavior and food studies, mainly because it reflects broader changes in contemporary lifestyles. Rather than being viewed solely as a routine act of nourishment, it is now approached as a social and cultural practice that shapes and is shaped by people's daily lives. As Warde & Martens (2000) emphasize, eating out carries both practical and symbolic significance, and differences in these factors influence eating-out habits among social groups regarding frequency and location, as well as factors such as income, age, region, class, gender, and household. In addition to classical criteria such as taste, service quality, atmosphere, and price, which are effective in restaurant preferences, experiential and symbolic elements are gaining importance (Bitner, 1992; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

From this perspective, the term consumption is used in sociology and cultural studies to refer not merely to eating and drinking. Instead, eating indicates the ways in which individuals utilize commodities or goods, including food, as well as those that cannot be eaten (Lupton, 1996, p. 23). Eating-out behaviors also play an important role in the marketing and consumer behavior literature. In this sense, eating out, which has become one of the significant cultural and social elements of daily life, refers to the consumption of food and beverages produced and served outside the home environment (Edwards, 2013; Petterson & Fjellström, 2007; Özdemir, 2010). However, much of the existing scholarship remains fragmented, focusing either on the functional attributes of the meal or isolated post-consumption outcomes like satisfaction and loyalty. Eating out should be understood in the context of the entire system of food production and consumption. The perishability of eating experiences and the urgency of the services offered result in rising prices, increasing the need to reduce the perishability of meals and the time sensitivity of the services. Consumers can reduce the time needed for food consumption and their reliance on the catering market by enhancing the capital intensity of home meal preparation (Cullen, 1994, p. 6). Olsen et al. (2000) describe eating out as a distinct product that is targeted toward particular social demographic groups and marketed for specific purposes. In this context, the idea of eating out typically refers to products consumed in food and beverage businesses (Özdemir, 2010, p. 218).

Beyond this functional definition, eating out has increasingly taken on more complex meanings. In recent years, the practice of eating out has evolved from merely an activity that meets individuals' basic needs to a means of social interaction, identity formation, and the pursuit of experiences (Özdemir, 2010; Warde & Martens, 2000). While the literature acknowledges that eating involves pre-consumption expectations, the service encounter, and post-consumption evaluations, there is a notable lack of an integrated theoretical framework that treats these stages as a continuous, interlocking narrative. The act of eating out is not limited to satisfying nutritional needs; rather, it represents a consumption that intersects with social identity, cultural values, economic preference mechanisms, and experiential dimensions.

From this perspective, eating out can be analytically structured as a process within the literature. It is examined it is examined within the framework of a three-stage model that includes evaluation, satisfaction, and loyalty tendencies at post-consumption, beginning from pre-consumption expectations and decision-making processes, through the eating moment, including service encounters and the effects of the physical environment. These experiential stages become more meaningful when interpreted alongside major consumption theories. In line with this, an extensive literature review indicates that consumption-related theories are generally discussed within the

framework of consumer behavior and decision-making. Especially in a geography like Türkiye, where eating out is increasingly widespread, an in-depth examination of the three-stage structure of this experience reveals an important gap in the existing literature. This study addresses this critical gap by synthesizing major consumption theories with the processual nature of eating out experience. Based on this gap in the literature, the present study aims to provide an original and explanatory contribution by bringing together the experiential phases of eating out with key consumption theories, thereby contributing to the academic literature and producing practical implications that may support sector professionals.

Methodology

This study, which was carried out in order to contribute to the evaluation of the eating out experience within the scope of stages and consumption theories and models, to the national and international literature because it is not found in detail in the literature, has the nature of a conceptual research based on literature. It is a conceptual research based on a literature review, conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of the eating out experience within the framework of consumption theories and models. Conceptual research forms one of the cornerstones of scientific research, shaping our understanding of complex phenomena by providing the theoretical groundwork upon which empirical studies are built, guiding the development of new theories and guiding empirical studies in different contexts (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024, p. 1). In this regard, the study method was preferred because it provides a holistic and multi-dimensional understanding of the stages of the eating out experience. Accordingly, rather than collecting original data, this study focuses on consolidating existing knowledge from empirical and theoretical literature regarding the experiential nature of eating and consumer behavior. In this process, the relevant literature was reviewed in detail and the existing academic literature on the theoretical and conceptual framework was examined (Jevons, 1871; Menger, 1871; Bentham, 1789; Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Pavesic, 1989; Bitner, 1992; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999; Warde & Martens, 2000; Baker et al., 2002; Park, 2004; Hansen et al., 2005; Knutson et al., 2006; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Petterson & Fjellström, 2007; Petterson & Fjellström, 2007; Narine & Badrie, 2007; Rapp, 2008; Özdemir, 2010; Edwards, 2013; Özdemir, 2018).

A literature search was conducted using multiple academic databases. To conduct this literature review, a structured data collection process was followed. During the data collection process, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Scopus, PubMed, ScienceDirect and JSTOR academic databases were scanned and studies focusing on related concepts and academic reliability levels were effective in the sources. Utilizing multiple databases served to enhance the thoroughness of the study, the relevant literature from various academic fields was captured. The keywords “experience”, “consumption”, “eating out”, “eating out experience”, “theories of consumption” and “models of consumption” were used in Turkish and English. Priority was given to studies that demonstrated a connection to the subject matter, provided significant theoretical value, and met the standards of academic reliability. Redundant entries along with non-scholarly sources were omitted to maintain the integrity. The studies obtained as a result of detailed literature review have been collected for analysis and the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study has been established. In order to increase the reliability of the content, comparisons were made between the sources. As a result of the literature review on the concepts of eating out experience, a theoretical framework has been created for the stages of the consumer’s eating out experience before, during and after. Concepts linked to consumption theories

and the experiential nature of behavior were extracted and categorized during this phase. Related consumption theories and models have been evaluated for this purpose. The concepts related to the experience stages were evaluated and it was determined that the concepts could be classified as pre-experience, during/at the moment of experience and post-experience. Sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions of experience and consumption theories and models are discussed from the consumer's perspective. Since only publicly available, accessible and ethically unproblematic secondary data were evaluated in the research, participants were not included. No data has been collected in this direction. The principles of integrity and clarity of the study have been followed. A literature review was conducted according to this method. Since this study is a review article, it does not require report approval from an ethics committee.

Literature Review

The Concept of Experience and Dimensions

Experience is a subject that has long been discussed in both the social sciences and the marketing literature, yet it is still interpreted from diverse perspectives and defined in various ways due to its broad, abstract nature. The Turkish Language Association (2024) defines experience as "all the information that a person has acquired in a certain period of time or throughout his life, experience''; Pine & Gilmore (1999) consider it as a sum of the physical, emotional, cognitive, and intellectual impressions that an individual has during an activity. Mossberg (2007), on the other hand, defines experience as a multidimensional concept that affects the consumer in emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions that is formed by the combination of different components. A common point emphasized across these definitions is that the basis of experience should include the active participation of the individual (Knutson et al., 2009, p. 3), indicating that experience is a highly personal and individual reality (Polat & Özdemir, 2021, p. 410). In this context, while people can directly affect an activity or performance in active participation, they remain simply observers by experiencing the event without direct involvement in passive participation (Pine & Gilmore, 2011, pp. 19–21).

Accordingly, the concepts of consumer experience and experiential marketing emerged as a result of traditional marketing approaches not being able to adequately meet consumer needs (Schmitt, 1999, p. 57). Simultaneous developments such as the widespread use of information technologies and increased accessibility, the increase in the search for innovation, intense competition in the service sector, and the integration of communication and entertainment (Knutson et al., 2006; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999) have played an important role in the emergence and development of these concepts. In particular, the spread of information technologies, diversification of consumer expectations, and the increasingly competitive environment have further heightened the importance of experiential marketing (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999). Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) were the first to discuss the concept of experience in the context of products and consumption, defining it as a unique thing arising from the use of a product or service. The conceptual model developed by Verhoef et al. (2009) regarding the determinants and regulators of customer experience demonstrates that customer experience has a comprehensive structure and is shaped not only by aspects such as the service interface, store atmosphere, product variety, and pricing that the business can manage, but also by various factors beyond the control of the business.

From this perspective, understanding customer experience requires examining its underlying dimensions. In the literature, experience has been discussed within different dimensions. Schmitt (1999) classifies experiential responses

into five categories: sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational. Pine & Gilmore (1999) examine experience in four main realms: entertainment, education, escapism, and aesthetics. These realms are shaped by the degree of connection and involvement an individual has with their surroundings. In the context of tourism, these dimensions enrich visitors' experiences and make them memorable. Quan & Wang (2004) and Uriely (2005) approached the tourist experience as a multidimensional structure, not as a simple repetition of daily routines in food and beverage consumption, but as necessary complements to daily routines and habits. From the consumers' perspective, experiences are enjoyable, engaging, and memorable moments for those who participate in or visit such events (Oh et al., 2007, p. 120). Carù & Cova (2003), who address experiential marketing in the context of consumer experience, emphasize that the concept of consumption has become dependent on goods and services purchased from the market rather than on the experiences we have in our daily lives with family, friends, at work, or at school. The customer experience encompasses every interaction the customer has with the brand. This signifies before buying, when the customer gathers information, whether at locations or on the website; during the purchase, regarding offers, payment options, and shipping; and post-purchase, when the customer has inquiries or requires spare parts (Homburg et al., 2017, p. 388). In this context, experiences are social and cultural processes that are not limited to the consumption of products or services, but are shaped by the events an individual encounter throughout life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Denzin, 1992; Carù & Cova, 2003; Mossberg, 2007; Fox, 2008; Eriksson & Wiklund, 2010).

In service contexts, this broader understanding of experience becomes particularly significant. The experiential aspect of service delivery, particularly in the food and beverage sector, directly affects the value customers perceive and their level of satisfaction (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Richards, 2012). Thus, understanding the role of experience requires attention not only to what is consumed but also to how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their interactions with products, services, and environments.

Eating Out Experience

Eating out habit today has become increasingly common under the influence of socio-cultural, economic, and demographic changes. Understanding the increase in time people spend on food and beverage consumption outside the home is irregular and difficult to interpret; this is because devoting time to cooking at home is often considered a form of labor, while spending long hours at work is regarded as a burdensome endeavor (Warde et al., 2007, p. 373). The behavior of individuals regarding food and beverage consumption outside the home is shaped by personal preferences, as well as social norms and cultural habits (Edwards, 2013; Özdemir, 2010; Petterson & Fjellström, 2007). Some scholars, like Narine & Badrie (2007), highlight the importance of eating out behavior within the broader context of food production and consumption, emphasizing its role in modern nutrition patterns. Similarly, Olsen, Warde & Martens (2000) argue that eating out reflects a product of marketing strategies aimed at satisfying the diverse expectations and needs of social groups. However, it is seen that this activity is not limited solely to the quality of food and beverages, but instead extends far beyond a structure of multidimensional experiences, such as the quality of service, the ambiance of the place, social interactions, and emotional satisfaction (Rai et al., 2024; Hanefors & Mossberg, 2003). The sum of these elements increases customer satisfaction and directly affects customers' intention to revisit (Yoon et al., 2007, p. 373). As noted by Warde & Martens (2000), eating out was initially motivated by functional benefits (convenience and time savings) while today the emphasis has shifted toward

the search for aesthetic and emotional satisfaction (Carvalho de Rezende & Rodrigues Silva, 2014, p. 92). The realization of this process depends on a comprehensive evaluation of the decision-making process, including the pre-, during-, and post-consumption stages of the eating out experience, and these evaluations are of great importance (Özdemir, 2018, p. 48). Özdemir (2018) developed a theoretical model in his study examining eating out. This model presents eating-out behavior not merely as a physiological need but as a multifaceted behavior encompassing psychological, social, and economic dimensions.

The eating out is examined in three stages: before, during, and after the eating experience. The pre-consumption stage includes individuals' motivations and expectations during the decision-making process for eating out. The consumption moment refers to the period when the food is satisfying, the service quality, the ambiance of the environment, and social interactions take place. Experience in the service sector is an inevitable outcome of the consumption process occurring in an environment consisting of tangible and/or intangible components that holds particular significance in situations where tangible elements are lacking, a factor that has led an increasing number of businesses to recognize the strategic value of experience within the marketing mix (Manhas & Ramjit, 2013, p. 56). Each stage plays a significant role in shaping overall experience and satisfaction and is of great importance in understanding consumer behavior in the context of eating (Liu & Jang, 2009; Ryu & Han, 2010; Özdemir, 2010).

Building on this understanding of consumer behavior, it is important to consider how eating out functions within specific experiential contexts such as tourism. In the context of tourism, the eating out experience is regarded as an essential element that enriches the cultural and sensory experiences of destination visitors. In this regard, tourists prefer to eat out to try new tastes, socialize, and observe local lifestyles (Choe & Kim, 2018; Richards, 2012).

These diverse motivations highlight the complex nature of eating out experiences. The experience of eating out is now seen as a multilayered process in which social interaction, cultural exchange, and individual satisfaction are intertwined, and a holistic approach that covers the pre-, during-, and post-consumption stages provides a basic framework for understanding the nature of eating out behavior.

Stages of Experience (Pre-Consumption, During- Consumption, and Post- Consumption Phases of the Eating Experience)

Eating experience is generally described in literature as a dynamic process that includes several stages rather than as a single moment. Consumers create expectations before experiencing the product, during the experience itself, and after the experience (Hansen et al., 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Özdemir, 2010; Pettersson & Fjellström, 2007). Within this framework, customer interactions are conceptualized in three distinct stages: pre-experience, during-experience, and post-experience, each of which shapes consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (O'Sullivan & Spangler, 1998, p. 192). Özdemir (2010) defines the eating-out experience as the consumption of products offered by commercial food and beverage businesses in exchange for payment outside the home environment, noting that this experience is a multi-layered structure that focuses more on the moment of consumption. Taken together, the eating out experience is better understood as a comprehensive consumption experience that includes not only food consumption but also the social, physical, and service elements of the place.

Pre-Experience Stage: Expectations, Information Seeking, and Motivation

The pre-experience stage is an essential period when consumers become aware of their needs, begin information gathering, and evaluate the alternatives shaping their view of the upcoming service experience. Among the key factors that shape restaurant preferences are marketing communication, brand image, social media content, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Pantelidis, 2010; Jeong & Jang, 2011). These factors create consumer expectations and guide their decision to select a specific location. Additionally, internal variables, such as consumers' demographic characteristics, knowledge levels, and prior experiences, affect the formation of expectations, while external variables, including the physical environment and social setting, shape this process (Wijaya et al., 2013, p. 39).

As a result of these expectation-forming processes, consumers develop certain motivations that shape their behavioral choices. Consumers' decision to eat out is generally driven by specific motivations, including time-saving, social interaction, entertainment, the pursuit of taste, and convenience (Park, 2004; Narine & Badrie, 2007; Pavesic, 1989; Warde & Martens, 2000). These elements show that eating is not merely a physiological response but also a social and emotional experience. The decision-making process in the service sector is more complex than product-based consumption, as consumers actively participate in the service production process and simultaneously produce the experience (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2012, p. 150). In this process, consumers form expectations based on prior experiences and acquired knowledge, and shape their choices accordingly (Gustafsson et al., 2006, p. 85). Therefore, the pre-experience stage directly affects the perception and quality of the consumer's future experience.

During-Experience Stage: Service Environment, Perceived Quality, and Emotional Responses

The during-experience stage begins when the actual consumption process takes place and the customer interacts with the restaurant's physical and social environment, during which they encounter the atmosphere of the place, the behavior of the staff, and the sensory qualities of the food and beverages. This stage is considered the one in which the consumer's perceptions of the experience are shaped and expectations are fulfilled (Bitner, 1992; Baker et al., 2002). The experience stage is the period in which the physical environment, service quality, and sensory perceptions interact with one another, allowing the consumer to evaluate the eating experience in a holistic manner (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Gustafsson et al., 2006; Rapp, 2008). The restaurant's atmosphere, interior layout, cleanliness, lighting, music, and general environmental factors can all affect customer satisfaction and the overall quality of the experience (Bitner, 1992, p. 66). Moreover, sensory attributes such as freshness, presentation, taste, and portion size of food and beverages play a major role in shaping how consumers perceive (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Gustafsson et al., 2006). During the experience, sensory factors play a crucial role and are shaped by variables such as the texture and temperature of the food, an individual's taste and smell perceptions, cultural and familial background, interest or indifference to certain foods, portion size, and sounds coming from both indoor and outdoor (Gustafsson et al., 2006, p. 90). Positive interactions with the staff, particularly personalized and professional service, enhance the perceived value of the experience and positively impact consumer satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985; Baker et al., 2002; Rapp, 2008).

The integration of these diverse sensory and social elements highlight the extent to which eating experiences are highly context-dependent upon environmental and situational contexts. Eating out motivations and the experience itself vary from one person to another and depend on contextual factors. In this regard, from a situational perspective, consumer experiences are shaped both by individual preferences and dynamic factors such as physical environment,

social interactions, and purpose of the visit. Accordingly, prior research has emphasized the importance of adopting a situational perspective to better understand customer experiences during restaurant visits (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004; Köster, 2003; Meiselman, 2001).

Post-Experience Stage: Evaluation, Satisfaction, and Loyalty

Consumers evaluate whether their experience met their expectations in the post-experience stage, and this evaluation affects behaviors such as satisfaction, contentment, repurchase intention, and word-of-mouth communication (Oliver, 1980; Sparks et al., 2003). Several studies suggest that different components of the eating experience come together at this stage. Jönsson & Knutsson (2009) note that the elements of the eating out experience interact with one another, while Rapp (2008) states that when the quality of food and beverages meets consumer expectations, the restaurant's interior design and social interactions can strengthen or weaken the overall sense of satisfaction.

From this perspective, the interplay between different elements of the eating experience extends beyond the post-consumption moment itself. It is observed that the post-eating experience rarely depends on the food consumed alone. The overall atmosphere of the eating environment, the quality of service, and the social interactions occurring during the meal all contribute to how the experience is remembered (Sparks et al., 2003, p. 7).

One of the key factors impacting customer loyalty is the extent to which the eating experience meets or fails to meet prior expectations. Meeting or exceeding expectations leads to positive emotions, while unmet expectations lead to dissatisfaction. Therefore, the expectation-disconfirmation model provides a theoretical framework for evaluating eating-out experiences, and post-eating satisfaction is often interpreted in terms of expectations during the pre-eating stage (Oliver, 1980, p. 460). Positive experiences encourage brand loyalty and repeat visits, while negative experiences may lead the consumers toward alternatives. Additionally, positive customer service interactions and enjoyable social engagements with companions increase post-meal satisfaction, while negative experiences can diminish enjoyment regardless of food quality (Kim et al., 2009, p. 17). In this context, restaurant consumers evaluate their experience based on how well the restaurant's performance meets their expectations (Johns & Pine, 2002, p. 121). Therefore, customer satisfaction and loyalty strategies at this stage are of great importance for the sustainable success of food and beverage businesses (Ingram & Jones, 1998; Namkung & Jang, 2007).

Association with Consumption Theories and Models

The concept of consumption and the studies in this field have been the focus of multiple disciplines, including economics, psychology, sociology, and marketing. Various theories have explained consumer behavior, each providing distinct perspectives on why, how, and when consumers make their purchasing decisions. Within its short historical development, research on consumer behavior has evolved from approaches emphasizing rational choice to trends focusing on seemingly irrational purchasing needs and ultimately to the use of logical flow models based on limited rationality (e.g., Howard and Sheth, 1969; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). However, today's consumer behavior perspectives take a broader view. Rather than limiting consumption to the mere act of purchase, they consider the consumer as a holistic consumption process that extends from the recognition of needs and information seeking to the evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase stages (Bray, 2011, p. 2). Accordingly, any theory concerning consumer choice must be dynamic and account for temporal imbalances (Vatter,

1965, p. 39). Considering these theories in an integrated manner helps evaluate consumer behavior within a multidimensional framework shaped by economic, psychological, and cultural factors. Pre-experience decision-making, restaurant selection, post-experience satisfaction, as well as the social norms and meanings associated with each stage of the pre-, during-, and post-experience phases are examined in this study using consumption theories.

Utiliy Theory

Utility Theory, which explains the rational behavior of consumers in expectation and decision-making processes before the experience, was initially introduced by 18th-century economists Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham and later developed within the framework of neoclassical economics (Jevons, 1871; Menger, 1871). Utility theory is one of the oldest and most fundamental concepts in economic literature, initially introduced by Jeremy Bentham (1789) and later systematized by Alfred Marshall (1890/1920). Utility, as used by Bentham, is characterized as the tendency of an object or action to increase or diminish general happiness. A key aspect of the utility defined in this manner is that it is conceptually distinct from the choices that are ultimately made (Read, 2007, p. 47). This theory assumes that consumers will choose the option that provides the greatest benefit among the available alternatives (Bentham, 1789; Jevons, 1871; Menger, 1871).

From this theoretic perspective, utility has been subject to different interpretations over time. Historically, the concept of utility has been considered in two primary senses: first, as a psychological phenomenon in terms of hedonic and emotional responses that guide behavior; and second, as a measurable and quantitative economic variable (Kahneman, Wakker & Sarin, 1997, p. 375). Jeremy Bentham (1789) defined utility as the ultimate aim of an individual's actions, grounded in basic emotions such as pleasure and pain. This perspective is beneficial in explaining how decisions are made during the pre-experience phase, such as restaurant selection. In this stage, the consumer recognizes their needs, seeks information, evaluates alternatives, and makes a choice. Utility theory provides a significant theoretical framework for understanding consumer motivations and choices in the pre-experience phase of planned consumption behaviors, such as eating out.

Consumer Choice Theory

In recent years, interest in neurobiological mechanisms underlying consumer preferences and decision-making processes has grown across various disciplines such as psychology, economics, neuroscience, and marketing, and researchers have aimed to methodically understand how the brain processes information and assigns value during decision-making (Hsu & Yoon, 2015, p. 116). These findings have been extensively discussed in various academic journals at the intersection of neuroscience and consumer research (Hubert & Kenning, 2008; Ariely & Berns, 2010; Plassmann et al., 2015). It has been shown that the brain makes decisions about food choices, for example, based on earlier experiences and internal value signals (Bault & Rusconi, 2020, p. 1). The theory was initially grounded in the principles of rationality and utility maximization, but over time it has been enriched by contributions from the social sciences, especially behavioral economics, psychology, and neuroscience (Deaton & Muellbauer, 1980; Hsu & Yoon, 2015). In this context, significant effort has been invested in studying whether the brain makes these decisions by calculating and evaluating value signals, by detailing the computational and neurobiological characteristics of the different processes involved, and how they affect choices (Rangel & Clithero, 2014, p. 125).

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how decision-making processes can also be interpreted within choice. Consumer Choice Theory focuses on how individuals determine their spending behaviors (Valentia, 2023, p. 1). Its primary purpose is to understand the preferences of consumers among various goods and service options and the mechanisms that determine these preferences. The practical implications of the Consumer Choice Theory can be clearly observed in eating out behavior. Restaurant selection involves much more than merely satisfying a nutritional need and is shaped by multiple variables, including time management, social interaction, hedonic satisfaction, status display, and emotional expectations (Scozzafava et al., 2017; Chua et al., 2020). As noted by Anker (2024), consumer preferences represent not only economic decisions but also meanings related to self-expression, which reflect the individual's way of expressing how they wish to live and what they find valuable. The theory acknowledges that consumption might be only temporarily thrilling. Still, it identifies a valuable function for such consumption in the experimental exploration of various ways of living, which shapes and directs the creation of a personal vision of a good life (Anker, 2024, p. 603).

Expectation Disconfirmation Theory

The question of how unmet expectations shape consumer satisfaction has long been a subject of research in the consumer behavior literature, and Oliver (1980, 1993) developed the most comprehensive theoretical framework. The Expectation Disconfirmation Theory, developed by Oliver (1993), provides an alternative perspective to the Expectation-Confirmation Theory, focusing on disconfirmation rather than confirmation as the basic concept for explaining consumer satisfaction (Shukla, Srivastava & Dwivedi, 2024, p. 3). The Expectation Disconfirmation Theory assumes that consumers hold specific expectations before consuming a product and that their satisfaction levels are determined by comparing these expectations with the actual performance (Oliver, 1980; Shukla et al., 2024). The theory explains how consumers compare their expectations for a product or service with its actual performance and how their post-purchase satisfaction levels and related behaviors are shaped by whether their beliefs are confirmed or not. The central concept of the theory, disconfirmation, occurs when there is a noticeable gap between expectations and the perceived actual performance (Bhattacherjee & Premkumar, 2004, p. 231). These two conditions are related to distinct psychological processes and have a determining effect on consumer satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Homburg, Koschate & Hoyer, 2006; Santos & Boote, 2003; Oliver, 2010). In the literature, confirmation-based approaches are observed to dominate the explanation of consumer satisfaction (Oliver, 2010; Golder, Mitra & Moorman, 2012). Studies, especially in the fields of marketing and service management, have demonstrated that pre-purchase expectations are cognitively compared with post-experience perceptions, and the outcome of this comparison shapes satisfaction levels (Churchill & Surprenant, 1982; Yang, Lu & Chau, 2013). From a marketing perspective, at the time of purchase, consumers may not always be able to assess a product's relevant intrinsic features. Consumers cannot taste new food products before purchasing them unless free samples are offered. In these situations, the consumer relies on external factors such as warranty, brand name, and packaging as substitutes for inherent product characteristics (Zeithaml, 1988, p. 9). Oliver (1980, 1993, 2014) explains this process with the sequential steps of expectation, performance, disconfirmation, and cognitive adaptation.

Consumer Theory

The phenomenon of consumption has a multi-layered and dynamic structure that cannot be reduced merely to the acquisition and use of products. Traditional consumer research has predominantly focused on the utilitarian aspects

of tangible goods, attempting to explain consumer behavior through economic variables such as income, price, and rational choice (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 137). Modern consumption theory focuses not only on what individuals consume but also on how, when, and with what motivations they consume. In this regard, consumer experience is conceptualized as a holistic expression of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses that arise from individuals' interactions with products, services, and brands (Zhang et al., 2024, p. 3).

This shift toward a holistic understanding of consumption has been further developed in the literature through alternative conceptual frameworks. Pine & Gilmore's (1999) experience economy framework provides a significant contribution in this context by emphasizing the meaningful and emotional aspects of consumption rather than its purely utilitarian aspects. Two key elements stand out within this developmental process: first, the behavioral approach, which integrates insights from cognitive psychology into human behavior; and second, the in-depth examination of economic behaviors within the context of consumption, offering a richer understanding of consumer conduct (Foxall, 2001, p. 167). This approach, integrated with Bitner's (1992) Servicescapes model, helps to explain how the physical and social components of the service environment affect consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Attributes such as spatial layout, physical environmental conditions, and social interactions play an integrative role in the perceived value of the consumption experience. From this perspective, consumption theory provides a comprehensive context for eating-out experiences by explaining consumer behavior shaped by the interaction of multi-layered elements such as experience, value, culture, and identity.

Consumer Culture Theory

Kozinets (2001) defines consumer culture as a system of sometimes overlapping and sometimes conflicting identities and practices in which individuals construct collective meanings through commercially produced images, texts, and objects. Consumer culture is a multi-layered field of action in which individuals engage not only in consumption practices aimed at meeting their needs but also in expressing social identities, establishing a sense of belonging, and generating symbolic meanings (Holt, 2002, p. 72). Consumer Culture Theory does not claim to be a holistic or comprehensive theoretical model; instead, it refers to a set of theoretical approaches that cover consumer actions in terms of the relationships between market dynamics and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 868).

Within this broader interpretive framework, different scholars have emphasized specific dimensions of consumer culture. Holt (2002) defines consumer culture as the dominant form of consumption shaped through businesses' marketing activities and argues that this culture is closely related to individuals' identity formation processes. In this respect, the theory distinguishes itself from other traditional consumer behavior theories by providing access to the experiential and symbolic layers of consumption processes (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). In this regard, the theory offers opportunities for multidimensional analysis in both the field of marketing and cultural studies.

The Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption

The Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption, the most frequently used in the analysis of service experiences, examines the consumption process in three primary stages: pre-consumption, consumption, and post-consumption (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011, pp. 36–37). Because services are intangible, produced and consumed simultaneously, and rely heavily on interactions between the provider and the customer, the service experience cannot be reduced to the

moment of consumption; its pre-consumption and post-consumption phases are also integral parts of a whole experiential process (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015, p. 117).

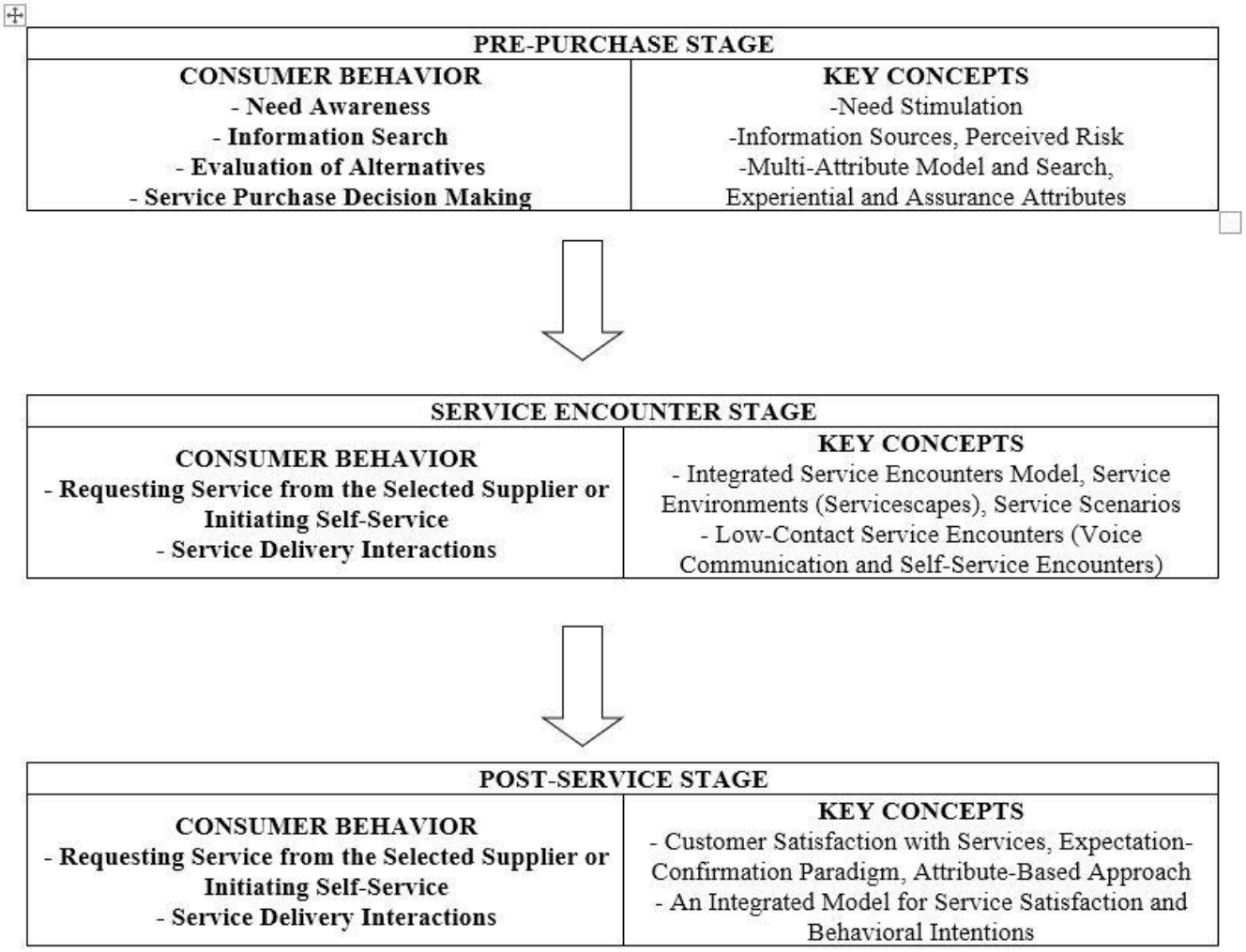


Figure 1. The Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption

Reference: Tsiotsou, R. H., & Wirtz, J. (2015). The three-stage model of service consumption. Handbook of service business içinde (pp. 105-128). Edward Elgar Publishing.

The pre-consumption stage includes processes of information gathering, evaluating alternatives, and forming expectations before the consumer decides to purchase the service (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015, p. 107). In this process, consumers form expectations about the service based on past experiences, comments from their friends or family, advertising messages, and content on digital platforms (Konuş, Verhoef & Neslin, 2008, p. 399). Particularly in experience-oriented sectors such as tourism or gastronomy, user reviews and visual content can directly influence how consumers make decisions (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2012, p. 153).

These pre-consumption evaluations ultimately shape the expectations that consumers bring into the actual service encounter. The consumption stage is a dynamic process in which the service is actually delivered and the consumer interacts directly with the service provider, both parties simultaneously produce the service experience (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015, p. 110). While the provider and consumer interact to produce the perceived service value during the service encounter jointly, the consumer evaluates the experience, starts comparing the service performance with

earlier expectations, and shapes future behavior accordingly in the post-consumption stage (Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2012, pp. 151–154). This evaluation typically takes the form of a comparison of whether expectations have been met (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988, p. 17). A positive experience may lead to behaviors such as repurchase intention, loyalty, and favorable word of mouth, while a negative experience may lead to complaints, unfavorable reviews, or avoidance of the service (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1996, p. 34). Focusing on the financial implications of long-term customer relationships, Zeithaml et al. (1996) argue that customer loyalty positively impacts businesses' profitability, and that customers who maintain long-term relationships with a company due to satisfaction with the service are more likely than short-term customers to purchase additional services and to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication.

Since customer loyalty is largely shaped by the quality of the service experience, understanding how consumers perceive service quality becomes essential. Multiple factors shape how consumers interpret the quality of the service experience, including food presentation, the ambiance, staff behavior, and the attitudes of other customers (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2011, p. 42). Among the most cited frameworks is Bitner's (1992) concept of the servicescape, which emphasizes the physical characteristics of the environment, particularly elements of ambiance and design (Lin & Liang, 2011, p. 352). Bitner's (1992) Servicescape Theory reveals that the physical environment in which a service is provided is a fundamental factor affecting both customer and employee behavior, thereby explaining how the physical setting shapes consumer experiences in the service sector. Bitner (1992) conceptualizes service environments in three primary components: ambient elements (sensory stimuli such as lighting, music, temperature, and scent), spatial layout and functionality (furniture arrangement and ease of movement), and signs, symbols, and artifacts (colors, signage, and brand-related elements). Customers' responses to the service environment often occur on emotional (pleasure, arousal), cognitive (perceived value and quality), and social (tendency to interact) levels (Bitner, 1992; Rosenbaum & Massiah, 2011). The Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption, developed by Tsiotsou & Wirtz (2012), considers the service experience from a holistic perspective and comprises three basic stages: pre-purchase (pre-consumption), service encounter (consumption), and post-encounter (post-consumption). When considered alongside the Servicescapes Theory, it becomes evident that the service consumption process is not merely an interaction but a multidimensional experience.

To clarify the theoretical structure of the study, the relationships between the main consumption theories and the three stages of the eating out experience are summarized in Table 1. This framework illustrates how each theory contributes to different stages of the consumer journey in a complementary manner.

Table 1. Matrix of Eating Out Experience Stages and Consumption Theories

Consumption Theory/Model	Pre-Experience (Before)	Experience (During)	Post-Experience (After)
Utility Theory	Decision-making based on perceived utility and expected benefit	Evaluation of utility during consumption experience	Comparison of expected vs. actual utility
Consumer Choice Theory	Preference formation and selection among alternatives	Resource allocation during consumption decision	Evaluation of choice satisfaction
Expectation Disconfirmation Theory	Formation of expectations	Experience performance vs. expectations	Satisfaction / dissatisfaction
Consumer Theory	Need recognition, decision-making	Consumption decision evaluation, resource allocation, service encounter participation	Evaluation of outcomes, satisfaction judgment, behavioral intentions
Consumer Culture Theory	Cultural meanings shaping expectations	Identity expression during consumption	Meaning reconstruction after experience
The Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption	Expectation formation and information search before service encounter	Service delivery and co-created consumption experience	Post-consumption evaluation (satisfaction, loyalty, WOM)

Moving beyond fragmented literature, this study proposes an integrated conceptual model that synthesizes the eating out journey of a consumer. This matrix provides a synthesized overview of how major consumption theories and models correspond to different stages of the eating-out experience. As illustrated, each theoretical perspective emphasizes distinct dimensions of the consumption process. Pre-experience is predominantly associated with cognitive and predictive mechanisms such as expectation formation and decision-making. The during-experience stage highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of consumption, where value is created through service encounters and contextual influences. In contrast, the post-experience stage is largely concerned with evaluative and affective outcomes, including satisfaction judgments, perceived value, and behavioral intentions such as loyalty and word-of-mouth. By integrating these theories within a unified stage-based framework, the table demonstrates that eating-out behavior can be more comprehensively understood as a temporally structured and multidimensional process rather than a single consumption act.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study addresses the eating out experience, analyzing its three stages (pre-experience, during experience, and post-experience) within the framework of consumption theories and models. Studies in consumer behavior have largely focused on specific outcome variables such as purchase decisions, preferences, and satisfaction, often overlooking the dynamic, experiential journey of consumption. This gap is especially evident in complex, multidimensional settings such as the dining industry (Oliver, 1980; Zeithaml et al., 1996). In literature, theoretical approaches to consumer behavior generally focus on purchase decisions, preferences, and satisfaction; however, these processes have not been examined in depth enough in the context of a multidimensional experience such as eating out. In this context, the study evaluates eating out not merely as a functional consumption activity but also as a symbolic, social, and experiential process, thereby addressing a significant gap in the literature. This aligns with earlier perspectives emphasizing that consumption is shaped by a combination of social identity, emotional responses, cultural norms, and environmental conditions (Warde & Martens, 2000; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In this sense, consumer actions within the food and beverage sector represent a dynamic sequence that is simultaneously affected by individual needs and the surrounding context. In the pre-experience stage, information seeking, motivation, and expectation formation are highlighted; in the experience stage, place, service quality, and sensory factors are

emphasized; and in the post-experience stage, satisfaction evaluation, loyalty development, and word-of-mouth communication stand out. The study offers practical implications for the tourism and foodservice sectors. The three-stage structure of the consumer experience guides businesses on which stages interventions can be implemented to increase customer satisfaction. Effective marketing communication and online interactions can positively shape consumer expectations before the experience, while factors such as the ambiance, service quality, and sensory elements play a decisive role in shaping satisfaction during the experience. Finally, the post-experience stage is reflected in satisfaction evaluation, loyalty intentions, and word-of-mouth behavior, which are consistent with established post-consumption evaluation frameworks (Oliver, 1980; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Post-experience, the focus shifts to fostering consumer loyalty and generating positive word of mouth. From an academic perspective, this study makes significant contributions at both the conceptual and theoretical levels. By conceptualizing consumption as an experiential journey, this research addresses the academic necessity for more integrative perspectives within the field of consumer experience studies. Given today's rapidly changing consumption practices, this experience-oriented approach is expected to serve as a valuable reference in both academic research and sector applications.

As this study is primarily conceptual, the theoretical linkages suggested herein necessitate empirical testing in future studies. There is a clear opportunity for subsequent studies to evaluate the predictive strength of these frameworks across diverse service environments and demographic groups. Specifically, investigating the dynamic interplay between sensory, affective, and behavioral experiential elements and their impact on post-purchase results would be highly beneficial. Moreover, the generalizability of this three-phased model could be enhanced through cross-cultural analyses and the application of quantitative methodologies

Theoretical Implications

The present study has some important theoretical implications. Previous research on consumer behavior has predominantly focused on outcome-oriented variables such as purchase decisions, satisfaction levels, or loyalty, while it has not adequately considered the processual and temporal dimensions of experiential consumption (Oliver, 1980; Zeithaml et al., 1996). This study provides a theoretical framework that examines the eating out across three stages: pre-experience, during the experience, and post-experience, enabling a more holistic analysis of consumer behavior. Accordingly, Utility Theory and Consumer Choice Theory primarily explain the pre-experience stage, where consumers engage in decision-making processes. The during-experience stage is more effectively captured by experiential and service-based perspectives such as the Experience Economy and service encounter theories, which emphasize sensory, emotional, and environmental influences. Finally, Expectation Disconfirmation Theory and Consumer Culture Theory provide stronger explanatory insight in the post-experience stage by addressing satisfaction formation, loyalty intentions, and meaning-making processes. One of the study's most original contributions is demonstrating the applicability of both classical and contemporary consumption theories and models, namely, Utility Theory, Consumption Theory, Consumer Choice Theory, Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory, Consumer Culture Theory, and the Three-Stage Model of Service Consumption, within the context of eating out (Bentham, 1789; Jevons, 1871; Menger, 1871; Oliver, 1980; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Consequently, the study presents an original framework that theoretically elucidates the dynamic interaction among consumer expectations, the service experience, and post-consumption evaluations, offering a comprehensive perspective on consumption.

Practical Implications

Within the scope of this study, various implications are presented for food and beverage businesses and tourism industry professionals based on the three-stage structure of the eating out experience. In this context, analyzing the factors that affect consumers' information-seeking processes during the pre-experience stage is critical to developing effective marketing communication strategies targeted to the relevant audience. During the consumption stage, the design of the physical environment, ambiance, employee behavior, and the quality of food and beverages must be evaluated collectively. The service-oriented approach, emphasizing that service providers create value at every point of interaction with the customer, further supports this process (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Grönroos, 2008). The post-experience stage is directly linked to outcomes that provide sustainable competitive advantage, such as customer satisfaction, loyalty building, and positive word of mouth (Oliver, 1980; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Actively collecting and analyzing customer feedback is also a strategic necessity for improving service quality. Due to its conceptual nature, this study does not present empirical findings; models by discussing the eating-out experience holistically, including its cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions, thereby offering a theoretically applicable framework for experiential marketing (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Serving as a guide for developing sustainable service strategies for the food and beverage businesses and the tourism sector, the study positions the consumer experience as a strategic process that must be managed from beginning to end.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study aims to evaluate experiential consumption processes and the associated consumption theories by conceptualizing the eating out experience. However, due to the nature of the research, it carries certain limitations. It is based on a conceptual framework developed through a literature review rather than an empirical dataset. While this limitation provides an opportunity for future research, it constrains the generalizability of the findings and indicates that theoretical inferences have not been tested against field realities. Accordingly, several recommendations for future studies can be proposed. First, it is necessary to empirically test the proposed three-stage experiential structure and the conceptual framework. Collection of insights into consumers' eating out experiences, for instance, through survey-based methods, would strengthen the practical relevance of the theoretical framework. Second, conducting comparative studies with the focus of different demographic groups and types of food and beverage businesses would enhance the generalizability of the findings. In this context, the recommendations could be developed to contribute not only to the academic literature but also to practitioners, thereby extending their relevance and applicability.

Declaration

All authors of the article have made an equal contribution to the writing process. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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