



Sensory Marketing and Willingness to Pay a Premium Amount: Investigating the Mediating Effect of Customer Loyalty

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Abstract

Using the S-O-R paradigm, the goal of the research is to give concrete evidence that supports the importance of sensory marketing in the setting of fast food restaurants. Three waves of data were collected from 348 consumers of fast food restaurants in Pakistan who were chosen based on proportional income quotas. The research findings confirmed the hypothesis that restaurants that employ sensory marketing methods can attract more willingness to pay by customers than those that do not. The results revealed that customer loyalty mediates the relationship between sensory marketing and customer willingness to pay a premium. This study should be replicated in a number of scenarios to ensure that the findings are consistent while also unearthing new perspectives.

Keywords: Sensory Marketing, Customer Willingness to Pay Premium (WTPP), Customer Loyalty, Fast Food Restaurant Industry

1. Introduction

Customers willingness to pay is not a novel concept in the field of marketing, it has recently attracted the attention of academicians and practitioners (Farzin, Bagheri Abbassalikosh, Sadeghi, & Makvandi, 2021; Yoganathan, Osburg, & Akhtar, 2019). The fast food industry in Pakistan is expanding rapidly. The fast food restaurant industry is undergoing dramatic shifts as a result of customers' changing lifestyles, opinions, education levels, and awareness brought on by social media. In this study, willingness to pay a premium price is also an important indicator of the Pakistani fast-food restaurant sector. Diners will always pay a premium price because of the perceived quality of the restaurant's ambiance. A price premium is defined "as the number of customers who are willing to pay more for a product or brand they like when compared to a similar brand" (Netemeyer et al., 2004). WTP enables customers of fast food restaurants to evaluate all external and internal factors that influence their perception and behavior. In this way, customers valuing a fast food restaurant after examining all of their important factors which allows them to pay premium price. It can be possible the customer perception valuations might be optimistic or pessimistic. According to Aaker (2012), the amount of money people are WTP for a product and brand in comparison to further related brands is known as a price premium, and it can be negative.

Fast food companies are struggling with "how to generate a willingness to pay extra in customer?" so that their continued existence in the sector would be assured. Aside from the quality of the food and service, the most important factor in ensuring a customer's return is creating an atmosphere in the restaurant that makes them feel like they got their money's worth and ready to pay extra amount (Sabherwal, 2011). Customers' willingness to spend more at fast food restaurants will help these businesses improve their offerings in a competitive marketplace. In many emerging economies, the fast food industry has been given a substantial share of the market due to rising demand (Ghoochani, Torabi, Hojjati, Ghanian, & Kitterlin, 2018; Liu, Lee, & Hung, 2017). According to Zion Marketing Research (2017), global fast food market valuation was over USD 647.7 billion in 2021 and is expected to reach USD 998.80 billion in 2028 at a compound annual growth rate of 4.6%. Pakistani fast food restaurants in the service sector play a key role. According to Memon (2016), the fast-food production sector is the second largest industry in Pakistan. The Pakistan fast food industry stands in the 8th position and 1000 large-scale food processing businesses. Restaurants employ 1.31 percent of Pakistan's population. Based on the 2011-2012 financial study of Pakistan, the urban population of 67.55 million presents a huge potential opportunity for restaurants (Azim, Shah, Mehmood, Mehmood, & Bagram, 2014). There is growing popularity of "dining out". Regularly, more than 11 million people dine out (Khan & Shaikh, 2011). Family unit visits typically to restaurants and hotels, and their food consumption is 1.14% (Hussain & Routray, 2012).

Appearance helps restaurants portray a better image (Ryu & Jang, 2008). In restaurants, services are supplied and consumed simultaneously, but the seller's physical state affects the customer, which the administration should consider while planning the sale (Brady & Cronin Jr, 2001; Nadanyiova, Kliestikova, & Kolencik, 2018). According to the Yip and Mbouw (2018) perspective, cost and service are also considered by customers. When a balance exists between these two factors, buyers don't mind paying extra. Hence, there are many factors that influence the WTP, such as service quality, product quality, uniqueness, brand awareness, customer loyalty, corporate social responsibility and customer satisfaction, etc. But recently sensory marketing has piqued the interest of researchers and practitioners, due to its significant impacts on organizational performance, such as improved brand recognition and financial performance.

Sensual experiences include tactile, aural, and visual sensations of what humans taste, smell, hear, see and feel when they are exposed to external stimuli in a particular context (Zuckerman, 2014). In order to foster a positive perception of the firm or brand and encourage favorable consumer behavior, sensory marketing strives to give

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customers experiences (Hultén et al., 2009). From a strategic standpoint, marketers can mold consumers' expectations by implementing sensory marketing (Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014). For instance, by giving prospective clients sensory information, marketers can make their brand more tangible (Krishna, 2012). In order to increase a customer's willingness to pay a premium in the highly competitive fast-food market, more focus needs to be made on improving their sensory brand experiences. Therefore, researcher claims that customers' willingness to pay (WTP) for an ethical brand on the internet is positively impacted by tactile, visual, and aural sensory cues. Therefore, researcher claims that customers' willingness to pay (WTP) for an ethical brand on the internet is positively impacted by tactile, visual, and aural sensory cues. In another perspective, customers' willingness to pay a premium price is favorably impacted by sensory experience (Farzin et al., 2021). As a result, the current study sparked interest in investigating the direct link between sensory marketing and willingness to pay a premium.

According to current literature, sensory indicators cannot study the direct link between willingness to pay; instead, some elements, such as customer loyalty, serve as intermediates between them. Customer loyalty is critical for fast-food restaurant operators since it is inextricably related to their business's success. Loyal customers play a very crucial role for any firm in terms of relationship management strategy. Marketing researchers, business managers and consultants embrace that customer loyalty is a key problem in the field of corporate management (Keiningham, Cooil, Aksoy, Andreassen, & Weiner, 2007). Human senses have an impact on consumer loyalty in restaurant chains. Confirmed that all five sensations are crucial in the tangibilization of a service experience, and consumers are more likely to return if they enjoy the atmosphere and are satisfied with their purchases (Goldkuhl & Styvén, 2007; Satti, Babar, & Parveen, 2022; Soars, 2009). Customer loyalty in the fast-food business is not affected by price fluctuations; loyal consumers are more prepared to pay premium prices for products and services. According to the, Soedarto, Kurniawan, and Sunarsono (2019) and Narteh (2018) indicate that customer loyalty impacts the consistent willingness to pay a higher price. When customers are loyal to a product or brand, they are less likely to switch to rival products, even if a premium price is charged. Therefore, it is essential to analyze how sensory marketing directly impacts customers' willingness to pay a higher price, taking into account the role of customer loyalty as a mediator.

2. Literature Review

2.1. S-O-R Model

The Mehrabian and Russell (1974) model, known as S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response), has been extensively utilized in academic research and is particularly relevant in the context of retail. This study aimed to establish a correlation between sensory stimuli in fast-food establishments and customer's willingness to spend more. Therefore, many researcher employed an environmental psychology perspective and utilized the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) model (Farzin et al., 2021; Farzin, Ghaffari, & Fattahi, 2022). This model offers a succinct and structured framework for understanding how S.M affects consumers' internal reactions and impacts their real-life actions. As per the S-O-R paradigm, the inputs from the restaurant environment generate both internal and exterior stimuli. These stimuli then elicit internal emotions or attitudes from individuals, which eventually result in subsequent behavior. Customers at fast food restaurants may exhibit varying reactions to sensory stimuli depending on their underlying emotional responses. In this context, sensory marketing serves as a stimulus, customer loyalty represents the customer's internal feelings in terms of their whole experience, and willingness to pay more by the customers refers to the consumers' response in terms of their following behavior.

2.2. Sensory marketing to willingness to pay price premium

The first impression that consumers develop in their thoughts is the sensory stimulation that fast food restaurants deliver to influences their willingness to pay more. The customer's sensory encounter generates an enduring impression, resulting in a positive emotional connection to the brand over time. Several investigations assert that cider drinker use their sensory faculties, including taste and fragrance, to conduct a sensory assessment of the beverage. This evaluation significantly impacts the drinkers' inclination to pay a higher price for the product (Tozer, Galinato, Ross, Miles, & McCluskey, 2015). Therefore, it is widely recognized that the sensory brand experience is crucial in deciding a customer's willingness to pay for a service or product (Dwivedi, Nayeem, & Murshed, 2018; Farzin et al., 2021; Thomson, MacInnis, & Whan Park, 2005). The willingness of customers to pay is crucial for firms to remain competitive in the market and retain their brand's distinctiveness through customer senses. So, the first hypothesis of this study is as follows:

H1: There is a relationship between sensory marketing and customer willingness to pay.

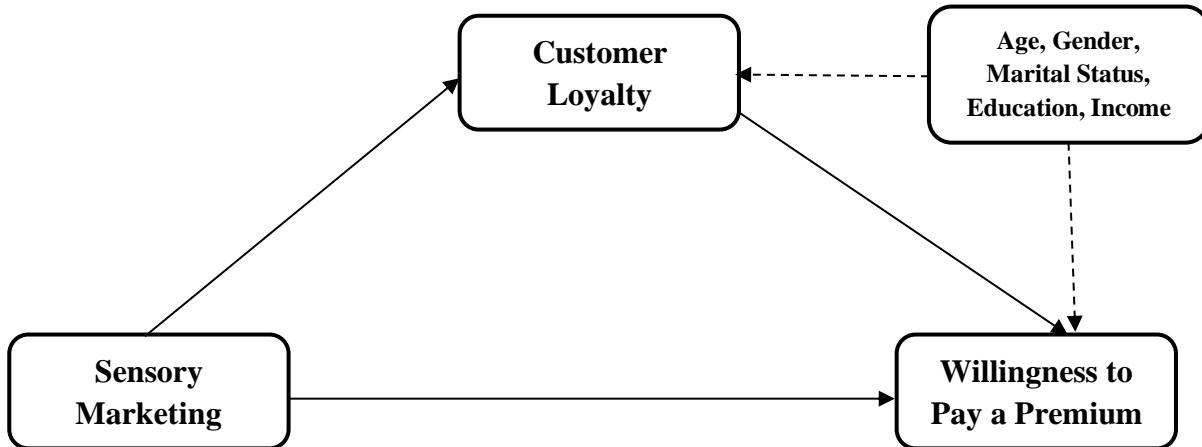
2.3. Mediating role of Customer Loyalty

Customer loyalty is a fundamental demand in business since repeating purchases of goods and services are the foundation of the organization's success and profitability (Hallowell, 1996; Silvestro & Cross, 2000). Competition in the current dynamic environment has made it difficult to maintain long-term consumer loyalty (Satti et al., 2022). To retain customers in the long term, they must first be satisfied with your goods and services through the use of sensory marketing strategies. Sensory marketing provides customers with live experiences and unique ambiances at the point of purchase, which contributes to increasing customer loyalty. According to Soars (2009), if a customer enjoys the atmosphere and generally has a positive experience with a certain firm brand, they are more inclined to purchase that brand again. Several studies demonstrate that sensory marketing impacts customer loyalty (Costa et al., 2014; Iglesias, Markovic, & Rialp, 2019; Satti et al., 2022).

On the other side, loyal consumers have low price sensitivity for reasons such as perceptions of distinctive value, trust, and affection for their favorite brand (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003; Jacoby & Chestnut, 1978). However, price sensitivity is a big issue for all customers, but it depends on the intensity of a company's products and services. Companies can outperform their competitors by charging higher prices to their loyal customers, who are less price sensitive. Therefore Ye et al. (2012), level of consumer brand loyalty has an effect on the customers' willingness to pay an additional amount (Ye, Bose, & Pelton, 2012). Numerous studies employed customer loyalty as a mediator such as customer loyalty mediate the relationship between brand image and service brand equity (Chahal & Bala, 2012), but not tested between sensory marketing and customer willingness to pay. In view of the above discussion, therefore the 2nd hypothesis of this study is as follows:

H1: Customer Loyalty mediates the relationship between sensory marketing and willingness to pay.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research setting and sample selection:

The research takes place in a fast food restaurant in Pakistan, chosen for its significance in the service industry and the country's economy. The fast-food production business is the second largest industry in Pakistan, with over 11 million people in the country dining out regularly (Khan & Shaikh, 2011; Memon, 2016). Pakistani fast-food restaurants comprise the study's population. The customer in a fast-food restaurant is considered the unit of analysis. Non-probability sampling procedures were used to draw the sample since the population was infinite (Creswell, 2018). Due to this, quota sampling was used to divide the population into sub-groups, and on a proportionate basis, respondents could be selected (De Rada & Martín, 2014; Yang & Banamah, 2014).

Target customers were divided by income since human consumption tendencies vary by income. Different income groups have also been used to examine similar research problems in modern literature (Atulkar, 2020; Satti, Babar, & Ahmad, 2021). Details of the five slabs of the quotas are given in Table 1. A preliminary investigation was done to determine the distribution of income categories among the targeted population. Afterward, the sample will be drawn. The convenience sample approach was utilized at the second level inside the quota to pick the respondents. It is clear that the respondents are chosen via convenience sampling within the target population's subgroups such as strata and quota (Levin, Beasley, & Gamble, 2004; Yusof, Musa, & Rahman, 2012).

3.2. Instrument Development

This study's sample comprises of consumer income. Quota sampling is applied in this study. The first section of the questionnaire uses a nominal scale, while the second section uses a seven-point Likert scale with options from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (2).

Demographics (T1): The respondents' marital status, income, age, gender, and education are among the seven socioeconomic background questions in this section.

Sensory Marketing (T1): Amorntatkul and Pahome (2011), Hultén (2013), Chua, Kim, Lee, and Han (2019) and Suhonen and Tengvall (2009) investigations were the sources from which the scale was adapted and adjusted to ascertain the notion of sensory marketing. The scale had seventeen components.

Customer Loyalty (T2): In this section, the scale developed by Yim, Tse, and Chan (2008), Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, and Bryant (1996) and Valerie A Zeithaml, Bitner, and Dremler (1996) is used to assess client loyalty.

Customer Willingness to Pay Price Premium (T3): This section's consumer willingness to pay a price premium scale is based on Anselmsson, Bondesson, and Johansson (2014) and . The scale is based on two factors.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The data is collected directly from the customers of the fast food restaurants. The main cities (Faisalabad, Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad) were chosen as the population for this study due to their high level of education and big proportion of the overall population. These cities rank among the top 10 in terms of population. Therefore, these cities were selected a sample.

This research's data is acquired using a three-waved longitudinal time lag approach. The period between two time frames is chosen as two to four weeks based on his or her frequency of visits to the any restaurant (Wei, Liu, Xu, Li, & Cao, 2022). Every respondent is given a unique code that allows him or her to be identified at various periods (T1, T2, and T3). There were 500 questionnaires issued at T1. At this point, the participants were asked to answer questions about the demographics and sensory marketing. With diligent follow-up, the researcher succeeded to collect 433 replies. At the time (T2), participants who had provided valid replies at T1 were approached once more to answer questions on customer loyalty. Now, just 380 answers have been returned. After 2 to 4 weeks at T3, the investigator followed up with those respondents who had provided legitimate responses at T2 to inquire about the customer's willingness to pay a premium. At the completion of this activity, 348 valid responses were collected and incorporated into the final analysis (69.40%). The demographic information of those who replied is presented in Table 1 for a comprehensive understanding.

5. Results

Data obtained were analyzed by using the SPSS v25 and SmartPLS v4 by deputing the partial least square – structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach.

5.1. Data Analysis

This research aims to investigate the mediating link of customer loyalty between sensory marketing and willingness to pay a premium amount. The data obtained from the 348 customers of the fast food chains operating in the territory of Pakistan were analyzed with the help of SPSS v29 and SmartPLS v4.0. In the first step, a data cleaning exercise was done to make data viable for data analysis purposes and all the missing values and outliers were addressed. Concerning the demographic side view of the respondents, the majority of the males responded to the questionnaires at all three time slots with 65% and 35% of females taking part in this survey. Further, middle-aged people dominate with 56% inclusion. On the other hand, 79% of the respondents hold graduation and post-graduation as their academic qualifications and 50% of respondents have an income of PKR 60,000 or less. The detailed profiles are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profiles of the Respondents

Demographics	Particulars	Frequency	Frequency
Gender	Male	228	65
	Female	120	35
Age	Up to 25 years	54	15
	Between 25-30 years	125	36
	Between 31-35 years	69	20
	Between 36-40 years	41	12
	Between 41-50 years	33	10
	More than 50 years	26	8
Education	HSSC or A-Level	24	7
	Graduate	159	46
	Post-Graduate	114	33
	Others	51	15
Marital Status	Single	138	39
	Married	210	61
Income	Up to PKR 40,000	53	15
	Between PKR 40,001-60,000	122	35
	Between PKR 60,001 to 80,000	88	25
	Between PKR 80,001 to 100,000	41	12
	Between Above PKR 100,000	44	13

Furthermore, the data normality was observed with Skewness and Kurtosis values which prevailed within the acceptable ranges as defined by Hair (2011) and Mardia (1974) (i.e., Skewness: +/- 3.0, Kurtosis: +/- 4.50).

Table 2: Descriptive, Normality, and HTMT Ratio

Constructs	Mean	S.D.	SK	KT	SM	CL	WTPP
Sensory Marketing (SM)	5.28	1.23	-1.42	1.33	--	--	--
Customer Loyalty (CL)	5.37	1.28	-0.69	-0.20	0.611	--	--
Willingness to Pay Premium (WTPP)	5.48	1.40	-0.86	0.17	0.696	0.525	--

Note: S.D = Standard Deviation, SK= Skewness, KS= Kurtosis

5.2. Measurement Model

Before testing the hypotheses, it is important to examine the suitability of the data for underlying experiments. In this respect, reliability and validity were analyzed by using various statistical tools and found appropriate as all values of Cronbach alpha and composite reliability are above the minimum thresholds (i.e., 0.70), and convergent validity was assured by analyzing the average variance extracted as all values are higher than 0.50 (Hair, 2011). Furthermore, discriminant validity was guaranteed by examining the Fornell and Larcker criterion (FLC) and Heterotrait and Monotrait ratio (HTMT). All the values of HTMT are less than 0.85 presenting clear evidence that discriminant validity is present in the data (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015). The detailed statistical results of measurement models are reflected in Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 3: Reliability and Validity Statistics

Constructs	CA	CR	AVE	SM	CL	WTPP
Sensory Marketing	0.95	0.955	0.557	0.831		
Customer Loyalty	0.777	0.870	0.691	0.533	0.746	
Willingness to Pay Premium	0.736	0.883	0.791	0.531	0.444	0.889

Note: CA= Cronbach Alpha, CR= Composite Reliability, AVE= Average Variance Extracted

5.3. Structural Model

This study aims to empirically test four structural paths to provide statistical support to the direct and mediation-related hypotheses by deploying the PLS-based structural equation modeling (SEM) with the 5000 bootstrapping technique. Furthermore, we have taken support from the bias-corrected accelerated method (BCa) for purifying the results of the indirect effect of sensory marketing on willingness to pay a premium amount through customer loyalty. The results revealed that sensory marketing has positive effects on customer loyalty ($\beta = 0.533$, $t= 14.231$, $p<0.05$) and willingness to pay premium amount ($\beta = 0.225$, $t= 3.914$, $p<0.05$). Furthermore, the customer loyalty factor is also having a compelling effect on the customer's willingness to pay a premium amount ($\beta = 0.412$, $t= 7.162$, $p<0.05$). In addition to this, the results of the mediation path clarified that customer loyalty partially mediates the relationship between sensory marketing and willingness to pay a premium amount ($ab = 0.219$, $t= 6.869$, $p<0.05$ [0.155, 0.285]). Moreover, the variance accounted for (VAF) was also calculated to back the mediation results generated through structural paths and the value of VAF (e.g., 49.3%) confirmed the partial mediation results (see Table 4 for comprehensive results). This way, these results highlight the importance of sensory marketing in enhancing the customer's willingness to pay a premium amount directly as well as indirectly through customer loyalty.

Table 4: Structural Outputs of Mediation Model

Relations	β	t	95% CI	R2	F2	Q2	VAF
SM→WTPP	0.225**	3.914	[0.104; 0.340]	0.318	0.397	0.246	
SM→CL	0.533**	14.231	[0.466; 0.601]	0.284	0.053	0.192	
CL→WTPP	0.412**	7.162	[0.299; 0.520]	0.286	0.178	0.223	
SM→CL→WTPP	0.219**	6.869	[0.155; 0.285]				0.493

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

6. Discussion

The purpose of this research is to determine how customers' willingness to pay a premium price in Pakistani fast restaurants is influenced by sensory marketing, which engages consumers by stimulating their five senses. This research will concentrate on comprehending how sensory marketing influences consumers' willingness to pay higher prices while increasing their customer loyalty. To meet the study's aims, a quantitative investigation was used and hypotheses were tested. The study's findings reveal that sensory marketing considerably increases customer's willingness to pay a premium for fast food restaurant products and services in Pakistan. According to the literature, customers' senses have a beneficial impact on their decision-making power and willingness to pay a premium (WTP) in the market (Farzin et al., 2021; Yoganathan et al., 2019).

Additionally, the mediating function of customer loyalty was also investigated. The study's findings show that customer loyalty considerably mediates the link between sensory marketing and customers' willingness to pay premium (WTP) prices. Previous literature also find that, sensory marketing provides customers with live experiences and unique ambiances at the point of purchase, which contributes to increasing customer loyalty (Iqbal, 2016; Satti et al., 2022; Soars, 2009). On the other hand, customer loyalty makes customers less price-sensitive when it comes to purchasing the products and services(Ye et al., 2012) . Numerous studies have used customer loyalty as a mediator (Chahal & Bala, 2012; Chen, Huang, Wang, & Chen, 2020). Hence, results demonstrate that sensory marketing and willingness to pay a premium are partially mediated. Higher levels of sensory stimulation and customer loyalty lead to a greater willingness to pay premium rates; therefore fast food restaurants with better ambiance and quality can attract and retain more consumers.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the indirect relationships between sensory marketing, customer loyalty and customer willingness to pay a premium in the context of Pakistani fast food restaurants chains. The current investigation supports each of the relationships proposed in the two hypotheses for the Pakistani fast food restaurant sector. It indicates that sensory marketing is vital in increasing the consumer's willingness to pay premium pricing by stimulating all of their five primary senses. There is a connection between sensory marketing, customer loyalty, and customers' willingness to pay a premium (wtp). It is critical for businesses to provide goods and services that exceed the customer requirements. These build long-term ties with clients and urge them to pay higher rates. Sensory marketing is essential for developing an effective connection and addressing the demands of customers in order to attract and retain customers at fast food businesses. The findings indicate that when managers use sensory marketing, customers' willingness to pay higher prices is determined by customer loyalty. Sensory marketing has the ability to increase customers' willingness to spend more and gain value from what they spend. It is an important and versatile tool for creating a competitive advantage in order to differentiate items and encourage consumers to pay more.

7.1. Implications

The results of this research can be applicable to other emerging countries like Pakistan, especially their service sectors. The findings and results of this investigation will add to the corpus of information about sensory marketing in emerging nations. The study's findings will support the development of theories and strategies by academicians and marketers that consider the interrelationships among all of the variables. To get the maximum outcomes, the fast food restaurant managers could focus on the meal's flavor, environment, fragrance marketing, auditory marketing and tactile marketing. The restaurant industry could apply the study's results to boost sales and enhance customer service. The management of fast food restaurants has to realize how critical it is to employ all facets of sensory marketing to increasing revenue and sales. The restaurant industry is becoming more and more competitive every day; as a result, the only ways to keep consumers coming back are through creative strategies like sensory marketing, which has to be given top priority. Customer retention is contingent upon your ability to deliver excellent surroundings and services.

The literature is lacking in empirical studies on sensory marketing, consumers' willingness to pay a premium, and the mediating role of customer loyalty. The current study intends to contribute to the current pool of knowledge regarding sensory marketing and its impact on factors such as customer willingness to pay and customer loyalty. The current study looked at the impact of the five senses on the formation of willingness to pay price premium (WTP). The existence of a mediator affects the connection between sensory marketing and WTP. Through a comparative analysis of the direct impact and specific indirect effects, the investigator is able to determine that the existence of mediators has positively impacted some direct relationships. The presence of a mediating variable among sensory marketing and willingness to pay a premium complicates the theory of sensory marketing and the possibility of explaining why certain restaurants emphasize each of the five senses.

Managers must create strategies and initiatives that enable clients to use each of the five senses. The results of this study will be useful in formulating strategies and regulations that integrate the concepts of sensory marketing. It is essential that managers understand the importance of each of the three factors and how to use them while making decisions. Organizations have to incorporate all of these factors into their marketing plans to increase their revenues and encourage customer loyalty. Through this strategy and practice, clients will be encouraged to use the organization's products and services once again.

7.2. Limitation and Future Research

Only the fast food restaurant business falls under the purview of this study, which looks at how customer loyalty acts as an intermediary between sensory marketing and consumers' willingness to pay higher prices. Scholars may investigate other factors in future research that can act as mediators and moderators in the connection between sensory marketing and customer willingness to spend more. Comparative research can be done to find areas where the results of emerging and Asian countries are alike or distinct. Similar variables can be used to investigate other service industries, which include the banking industry, etc.

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