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## Why Wait? The Fine Line between Anticipation and Despair in Food Truck Choices

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**Why Wait? The Fine Line between Anticipation and Despair in Food Truck Choices**

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HOSP6900 Hospitality Capstone

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### **Abstract**

This paper will research the psychology of how people interpret the length of a queue, specifically for a food truck, and determine if the wait equates to a better product instead of a lack of planning and organization. The research involves basic queuing theory, field theory and the anticipatory model in an effort to understand what drives the customers to make the decision delay gratification for what they assume will be a superior product.

When approaching an unfamiliar group of food trucks at the same location, all of which have different queue lengths, what drives the consumer to select a specific food truck? Beyond the mathematics and models of queuing theory (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018), when given options, how do people decide that waiting in a queue that is longer for a similar product (food) equates to a superior product? What makes the difference when waiting is frustrating vs. anticipatory and how can this information be applied advantageously to food truck operations? This study will explore the correlation between longer food truck queues and the perception of a higher quality product.

In one article, the authors go a step further by stating “It may be that long lines for GFT’s are interpreted as a sign of quality, reinforcing the GFT consumers’ level of satisfaction. Essentially, a GFT consumer might ask herself, ‘how could I not be satisfied with having dined at this GFT given everyone else seemed to suffer long waits just to eat there?’” (McNeil & Young, 2019, pp. 345-346)

There is a difference in the customer perception of a quality service from a “gourmet” food truck verses a standard food truck that makes reaching a conclusion difficult. The anticipatory model shows that there is a willingness to wait for a quality product if the customer

selected the item they are waiting for. The customer will most likely appreciate the food item more after delaying the gratification, resulting in a higher rating and customer loyalty. This seems to be the case with the gourmet food trucks where service time is not a real factor in the overall service experience.

### **Introduction**

There are many ways to purchase food for immediate consumption in most metropolitan cities. These include restaurants of all varieties, delivery services, grocery stores and food trucks (sometimes referred to as food pods or mobile food units). Food trucks, defined by Merriam-Webster as “a large, wheeled vehicle from which food is sold that typically contains cooking facilities where the food is prepared,” have become a popular choice. Food trucks satisfy the customer’s preference for consumption immediately after purchase, rather than delaying the consumption (Ainsley, 1975). There is also research suggesting that at times, people will choose to delay their consumption; in other words, choose to wait for the reward (Frederick, Loewenstein, & O'Donoghue, 2002). By choosing to delay gratification of immediate consumption, a person then creates anticipation, and increases the value of the experience (Caplin & Leahy, 2001). This self-imposed delayed gratification, coupled with the anticipation that this choice has created, plays a role in deciding what is worth waiting for (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010). When approaching an unfamiliar group of food trucks at the same location, all of which have different queue lengths, what drives the consumer to select a specific food truck?

Beyond the mathematics and models of queuing theory (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018), when given options, how do people decide that waiting in a queue that is longer for a similar product (food) equates to a superior product? What is the psychology behind why people

assume that a longer queue equates to a better product instead of reflecting a lack of planning and organization? What makes the difference when waiting is frustrating vs. anticipatory and how can this information be applied advantageously to food truck operations? This study will explore the correlation between longer food truck queues and the perception of a higher quality product.

### **Literature Review**

Queuing is a common practice in the foodservice industry, and as expected, an important part of the research for this project. Understanding the desire and willingness to queue for a given product is critical for this proposal. There are several articles on this subject that will be referenced in the findings. The first of two articles reviewed here on this subject is found in the September 2018, Volume 60, Issue 3 of the *Chinese Journal of Psychology* titled “Decisions on Queue- A Study of Cognitive and Brainwave Responses” and authored by Chih-Chin Liang and Fang-Yu Kuo. This study involves the willingness of customers to queue for a service with just the knowledge that they must wait versus being given updated information about the length of time they will continue to wait (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018). Brainwaves of the customers were monitored and reflected the response to the information given regarding the estimated time remaining in the queue (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018). The study also went into depth with a survey that asked about the customers’ willingness to wait in the queue to begin with (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018). The conclusion from this study indicated that messages/updates about wait times in the queue had a major impact on the customer (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018). It went on to conclude that companies should “... improve service messages to avoid negative customer emotions” and “...should provide wait time information to customers” (Chih-Chin & Fang-Yu, 2018, p. 215).

Another article focused on the effect of queueing comes from the March 1998, Volume 24, Issue 4 of the *Journal of Consumer Research* titled “The Effect of Delay Type and Service on Consumers’ Reactions to Waiting”, authored by Michael K. Hui, Mrugank V. Thakor, and Ravi Gill. The study “considers the interaction effect of service stage (conceptualized as the distance to the goal state of the service encounter) and delay type (procedural, correctional, and unknown) on consumers’ reactions to waiting” (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998, p. 469). It refers to the field theory (Lewin, 1943) that the longer the delay to the goal, the increased negative impact to the customer experience (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998). This study also references the anticipatory model that suggests that the “...direction of the impact should be the other way around” (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998, p. 469). This anticipatory theory refers to the feeling one has to the passage of time when the outcome appears to be forthcoming, or close to the natural conclusion of the goal (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998). The study also discusses the impact of commitment/effort a person has invested in the task of waiting and how “people who have spent more time and effort in the task should exhibit stronger commitment to, and higher anticipation of, goal attainment” (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998).

The other area of research for this literature review is the area of marketing and psychology. The first of two journal articles I will be referencing is the December, 2019 Volume 4, Issue 2 of the *Journal of Tourism & Leisure Studies* titled “Theme Park Experience: Factors Explaining Amount of Pleasure from a Visit, Time Allocation for Activities, Perceived Value, Queuing Quality, Satisfaction, and Loyalty” authored by Maksim Godovykh, Ady Millman and Asli D.A. Tasci. This article discusses the theme park experience and the literature that it draws from is also theme park-focused, but this specific article references information not found in the other literature involving anticipation, remembering the experience and time allocation for

waiting in the line (Godovykh, Milman, & Tasci, 2019). The study dives into a newer concept for theme parks, virtual lines. Although the wait time was the same, it allowed the consumer to spend time doing other things while “waiting,” such as shopping and eating (Godovykh, Milman, & Tasci, 2019). The result was a higher satisfaction rate, more loyalty, and higher perceived value than those who waited in the actual line. One of the unanticipated findings from this study was the “...amount of participants’ consequential pleasure from anticipation and remembering the visit surpassed their pleasure from the visit itself” (Godovykh, Milman, & Tasci, 2019). That means for some, the anticipation and recalling the experience was more important than being in the moment of the experience (Godovykh, Milman, & Tasci, 2019).

The other article is found in the June 2010 Volume 47, issue 3 of the *Journal of Marketing Research* titled “When Choosing Makes a Good Thing Better: Temporal Variations in the Valuation of Hedonic Consumption” authored by Elaine Chan and Anirban Mukhopadhyay. This research dives into how the valuation of delayed consumption of pleasure-based products (food, music, etc.) varies as time passes between the decision to indulge and the consumption of the goods (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010). The research investigates what steps drive the anticipation and what happens after the consumption is complete. The authors found that when “...consumers make their own choices, they exhibit increases in evaluations of delayed consumption, but only if the interval between choice and consumption is relatively short” (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010, p. 497). They also hypothesize that when the consumer is given a choice of their own pleasurable consumption activity, they are fundamentally motivated toward it because of the autonomy they had when making the choice (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010). If this goal is not met, the intensity may increase until it is achieved (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010).



## **Methodology**

Because of the time constraints for the completion of this proposal, the data collection will be derived from peer-reviewed secondary sources, specifically, peer-reviewed articles in the area of queue theory and the psychology behind perceived value and anticipation found in credible trade journals.

## **Findings**

### **Field Theory and the Anticipatory Model**

In this section we will review the empirical research in the areas of field theory and the anticipatory model as it is associated with the foodservice and entertainment industry in general. Field theory was developed by psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1943 in literature to explain the interaction between the individual's feelings, behavior and temporal understanding of his/her surroundings during a given time (Lewin, 1943). Field theory suggests that there are psychological forces in an individual's life space. The first is the (internal) needs of the individual and the second is the limitations of the surroundings, such as barriers and other external forces (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1980). As an individual recognizes a distance or obstacles in the way of reaching a goal, a significant amount of psychological force helps the individual overcome the obstacles and press on to the goal. This starts to dissipate (to a degree) after the goal is within reach (Boltz, 1993). For the case in foodservice, the further away from the goal (ordering a meal), the more anxiety and irritation the customer will feel; conversely, the closer to the ordering location with fewer barriers, the anxiety dissipates.

The anticipatory model brings a different perspective to how an individual perceives a barrier or delay to goal. This model theory is based on the idea that as time passes, the

individual is more aware when the outcome (or goal state) is forthcoming (sunk cost effect) (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). As a result, any barrier to achieving a goal will create the anticipation to attain the goal as it approaches (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998). There is also evidence that suggests that if an individual invests time and is committed to a task (waiting in line for a good or service) this commitment will elevate the response to a successful completion of the goal (Hui, Thakor, & Gill, 1998).

Carmon and Kahneman (1996) documented a study around the anticipatory theory that concluded that a long wait time that concluded with a high perceived value and emotional state resulted in a higher level of remembered experience compared to a shorter wait in a queue (Carmon & Kahneman, 1996). In their study about the theme park experience, Godovykh, Milman and Tasci (2019) concluded that “Satisfaction was explained by the amount of pleasure from anticipation, remembering, perceived queuing quality, and perceived value for the money-perceived value’s effect being double as much as the others” (Milman & Tasci, 2018).

The anticipatory model, or the understanding and willingness to wait for what is perceived as a superior outcome, is tied to the acceptance of delayed gratification over immediate satisfaction.

### **Delayed Gratification**

Resisting immediate gratification for delayed or deferred gratification for a higher quality product is the essence of what waiting in a queue for a food truck entails. In a study done by Nisan, the author asked participants to assess the good-tasting food they were expecting to consume immediately versus food that they expected to eat a week from now and discovered that they rated the food they were expecting to eat a week later a higher rating (as opposed to the

food they were to eat immediately) (Nisan, 1973). One of the factors that is important with delayed gratification, especially in the area of food, is that the choice to wait for a specific item must be of their own choosing (as opposed to a choice made by another) for the individual to experience the anticipation. For example, authors Nowlis, Mandel, & McCabe (2004) found that there was anticipation in delays that were unknown or created by outside forces, where participants (intentionally delayed) were asked to wait for a chocolate bar an unknown amount of time (30 minutes for every participant) (Nowlis, Mandel, & McCabe, 2004). As they predicted in the study, the participants who were delayed enjoyed the chocolate more than the participants who consumed it immediately, as long as they had made the choice of the chocolate themselves (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010). Chan & Mukhopadhyay (2010) also hypothesized that, if given the opportunity to choose what they want to consume for pleasure, they are more likely to be drawn to it, and in turn activating the goal of consumption (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010). If the goal is not fulfilled from the start, it may increase intensity and eventually lead to anticipation (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trotschel, 2001). The authors went on to summarize that "...given a temporal separation between choice and consumption, different streams of research have demonstrated that there may be either a decrease (i.e., discounting) or an increase (i.e., anticipation) in the valuation of delayed consumption" (Chan & Mukhopadhyay, 2010).

### **Gourmet Food Truck Service**

Hedonic values have favorably influenced individual's perception (directly and indirectly) when it comes to the food truck experience (Shin, Kim, & Severt, 2019). Simple, practical values as they relate to a meal served inauspiciously from a mobile kitchen have elevated the attitude of food trucks in general (Shin, Kim, & Severt, 2019). Although the

utilitarian appeal of a food truck is a factor in the overall appreciation of the experience, the service (accuracy and timeliness) is important. Shin, Kim and Severt (2019) conducted an importance-performance analysis (IPA) with a sample of 467 consumers with service- and quality-based questions based on the customers' recent food truck experience (Shin, Kim, & Severt, 2019). The findings revealed that food truck vendors were meeting expectations with a quick turnaround time with orders. The study also recognized that the food truck staffs were offering a consistent and reliable service, correcting any errors with orders or food in a timely manner (Shin, Kim, & Severt, 2019). This study implies that the food truck segment is meeting the expectation of the customers who patronize this sector of the food service industry.

A study of gourmet food trucks by McNeill and Young echoed these findings with one exception: the wait time for food for a gourmet food truck (GFT) was not a significant factor in the in the overall service quality experience (McNeil & Young, 2019). With the GFT customers, the most relevant areas of the service experience included: the ability to answer questions about allergies, dietary restrictions and ingredients in general, a tasty meal, friendly staff and accuracy in filling the order (McNeil & Young, 2019). Order accuracy was important because of the to-go nature of food truck service: once you have left the premises there is no correcting any issues unless you make the journey back to the GFT. The interesting finding in this study (McNeil & Young, 2019) was that wait time was not a concern for the customers who were choosing a GFT experience. This is not the case with traditional restaurants, where research shows that slow service and waiting for an extended time for a seat would result in a negative customer satisfaction rating (Hwang, 2005). In fact, they study found "no relationship between convenience and customer satisfaction for the GFT respondents to the study" (McNeil & Young, 2019, p. 346). The authors go a step further by stating "It may be that long lines for GFT's are

interpreted as a sign of quality, reinforcing the GFT consumers' level of satisfaction. Essentially a GFT consumer might ask herself, 'how could I not be satisfied with having dined at this GFT given everyone else seemed to suffer long waits just to eat there?'" (McNeil & Young, 2019, pp. 345-346)

### **Limitations**

The limitations found in this study would be the lack of primary source data collected through observation and valid, reliable survey. Food trucks are a unique and relatively new dining option: the gourmet food truck scene started to gain momentum in 2008 and has been strong ever since (Martin, 2014). As a result, there is limited secondary data specific to the topic of queuing and service beyond articles focused on customer satisfaction. The current research is limited when it comes to generic food truck and a higher end or "gourmet" food truck where the tolerance for waiting for food is more along the line of a high-end restaurant versus a quick service location.

### **Practical Implications**

Understanding that the customer has a need for your product and will hold an anticipatory reaction for a limited time could be used to the owner/operator's advantage. Queuing is a given in the food truck business and knowing the threshold of the customer's willingness to wait and how it could be anticipatory instead of irritating can be helpful. Food truck owner/operators can use this information to tailor the menu and production speed to the customer base they are serving to maximize this feeling of anticipation instead of quashing it or extending it too far.

### **Conclusion**

There is a difference in the customer perception of a quality service from a “gourmet” food truck a standard food truck that makes reaching a conclusion difficult. The anticipatory model shows that there is a willingness to wait for a quality product if the customer selected the item they are waiting for. The customer will most likely appreciate the food item more after delaying the gratification, resulting in a higher rating and customer loyalty. This seems to be the case with the gourmet food trucks where service time is not a real factor in the overall service experience. The findings also suggest that long lines are associated with quality and are reinforcing the customer’s satisfaction (McNeil & Young, 2019). Unfortunately the research is narrow and limited in this specific (GFT) area and is not touched on in other studies.

Further research is needed in this area in other forms of mobile food service operations of all quality levels before a clear conclusion can be determined.

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