HEALTHIER FAST-FOOD OPTIONS – ARE CONSUMERS HAPPY WITH THE PRICE THEY PAY AND THE VALUE THAT THEY RECEIVE?

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Abstract

Changes in consumer lifestyle patterns have had a great impact on the fast-food industry worldwide and the demand for heathier food has forced such a growing industry to offer more alternatives to cater for these consumers. Many fast-food outlets have introduced healthier food options to their menus. However, there seems to be a common perception among consumers that healthier food options are more expensive. The primary research aim that pended from the literature was therefore to determine South African consumers' level of satisfaction with the price and value of the healthier food options available at fast-food outlets. The results may assist fast-food outlets in adjusting their pricing strategy and offering consumers better value for money. A mixed method approach was used to collect data whereby self-administered questionnaires comprising of closed-ended, open-ended and scaled response questions were distributed to respondents. The findings indicated a low level of satisfaction among South African consumers' with the price and value of healthier options offered at fast-food outlets.

Key Words: Customer Satisfaction, Price, South Africa

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1. Introduction

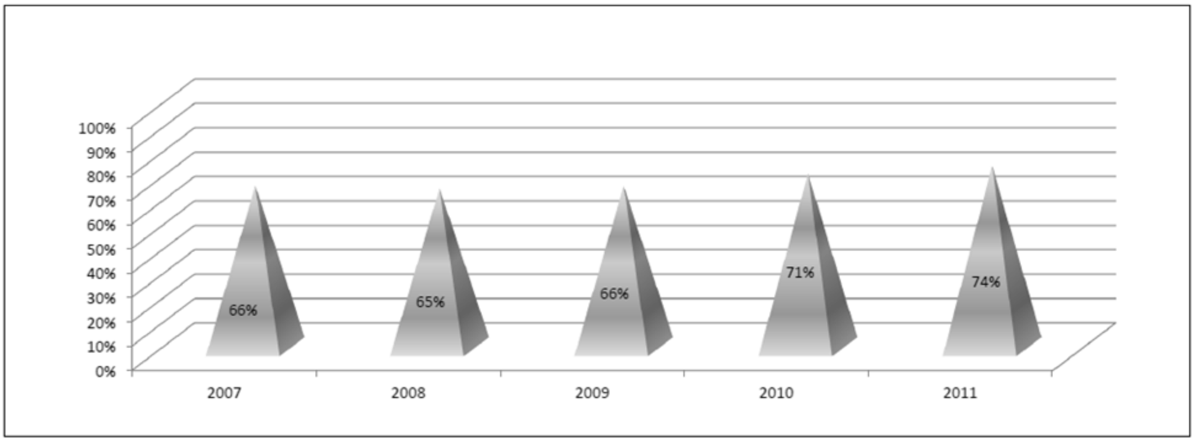
There is no doubt that the fast-food industry continues to rise (Entrepreneur, 2014). With the increased consumption of fast-food (Van Zyl *et al.*, 2010:124), the rise in the number of fast-food outlets (Sipahi, 2010:74) and the global expansion of the fast-food industry (Freemark, 2010:444), it has been named one of the fastest growing industries in the world (QSR, 2008). However, the fast-food industry is not without its challenges. Due to changing lifestyles and consumer demand for healthier alternatives, many fast-food outlets across the world have been adjusting their menus and taking steps to introduce healthier food options (Euromonitor International, 2011). While a few fast-food outlets have experienced a degree of success by offering healthier food options, some haven't (McLynn, 2010). This may be due to many factors, two of them being price and good value for money. The existing literature fails to recognise whether consumers are happy with the price and value of the healthier food options available at fast-food outlets in South Africa. This paper therefore aims to address this gap by determining the level of satisfaction among South African consumers' with the price and value of healthier fast-food options.

2. The fast-food industry and current trends

Population of the USA is just one of the major consumers of fast-food (DeRocco, 2006:122), with approximately one-quarter of the population eating fast-food every day (MacDonald, 2012). In Australia, fast-food represents one of the biggest segments within the commercial food service sector (Australian Food & Grocery Council, 2010) with the average Australian eating out about four times a week (National Heart Foundation of Australia, 2011:2). Canada's restaurant and foodservice industry has also grown immensely, generating more than $60 billion in annual sales with fast-food outlets accounting for $20.4 billion (Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, 2010) and in the United Kingdom, the market for fast-food was £10.13 billion in 2009, an increase of 4.3% from 2008 (Thompson, 2011:9).

Fast-food however, is not just a phenomenon in the developed countries but also in many developing countries (Misra & Khurana, 2008:20; Bhuian, 2000:40). The acceptance of fast-food has swiftly spread throughout many African countries, including South Africa (Bockle, 2009:8). In fact, the results of a South African study (Feeley, Pettifor & Norris, 2009: 122) indicate a higher fast-food consumption pattern among the South African adolescent group when compared with American statistics. Results show that the amount of fast-food outlet visits was almost double that of the United States teenage group surveyed. However, the nutrition transition (shifts in dietary patterns with an increased consumption of fats, sugars and refined foods) provided insight as to why this is the case (Feeley *et al*., 2009:122). There is evidence that South Africa has been experiencing a transition at a rate faster than in higher income countries which went through such a transition over many decades (Feeley *et al*., 2009:122). It appears that South Africans' love for fast-food is growing (Analytix Business Intelligence, 2012). South Africans have even been described as "…fast-food junkies who are embracing affordable, large-portioned and immediate consumption fast-food" (Franchise Association of South Africa, 2012). According to Maumbe (2010: 1), the increases in disposable income and improved living standards have led to more individuals consuming fast-food. Furthermore, De Klerk (2008: 17) points out that due to busier lifestyles, fast-food appears to be the convenient option. Analytix Business Intelligence (2012) reported that three out of four South Africans, 16 years and older (25.3 million), purchased food from a fast-food outlet in a four-week period in 2011 (figure 1). This figure is expected to reach 34.1 million by 2017 (Planting, 2013).

Figure 1. Personal purchase of a product from the outlet



	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Total adults (16+ years)	31 109 074	31 305 016	31 418 675	32 962 328	34 037 887
Personally Bought Fast Food from Fast Food Outlet Past 4 Weeks	20 563 668	20 361 619	20 726 348	23 442 703	25 258 122
% of Fast Food Buyers (16+ years)	66%	65%	66%	71%	74%

Source: Analytix Business Intelligence (2012)

Figure 1 further shows that the percentage of fast-food buyers increased from 66% in 2007 to 74% in 2011. Moorad (2012) states that the South African fast-food industry is growing at a rapid pace and there is little indication of a slowdown in the consumption of fast-food in the near future (Naidoo, 2013). Fast-food appears to be South Africa's leading consumer foodservice category, accounting for approximately 40% of all sales (Produce Marketing Association, 2013). Along with this growth, however, is the increasing change in consumer lifestyle patterns and perceptions about health. Over the years, many individuals have realised the dangers of obesity and other related health risks and have thus become more concerned about their health and wellness (Euromonitor International, 2011). This change has had a great impact on the fast-food industry in the 21st century with more individuals demanding healthier fast-food options (Lim, Tan & Tan, 2013:631). Consumers not only want to consume meals that are quick and convenient but foods that also offer nutritional benefits (Euromonitor International, 2011). Many fast-food outlets have introduced a range of healthier alternatives to cater for these consumers, however only a few have experienced success by doing so (McLynn, 2010). There are a number of factors that may influence the sale of healthier options including food quality, atmosphere, service quality, convenience and price and value. For the purposes of this paper, price and value will be the focus. There seems to be a common perception that healthier food options are more expensive than less healthy food which may be a significant contributing factor in the purchasing of these options (Zied, 2015).

3. Price and value

The current paper was based on the price and value dimension of the Institutional DINESERV Model proposed by Ng (2005:22) which measures four items, namely: good value for the price, appropriate portion size, reasonably priced item and overall value of the experience. Price can be defined as that which the buyer is prepared to give up in order to acquire a specific product or service (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2011:26), while value refers to the sum of perceived benefits (tangible and intangible) and costs to the customer (Kotler & Keller, 2009:8). It is important to note that value may mean something different to each and every person. Cant, Van Heerden and Ngambi (2010:55) points out that value can be considered by a customer in four different ways:

- low price;
- what the customer wants in a specific product or service;
- the quality that the customer receives for the price paid;
- what the customer receives for what is given.

A study conducted by the NPD Group has found that the demand for healthier food options at fast-food outlets is expected to increase. In addition, Canadian consumers looking for healthier food options are willing to pay 13% more than what they pay for less-healthy food options (McLynn, 2010). Furthermore, according to CBS News (2015) customers are willing to pay around \$8 to \$12 at fast-food outlets for a quick meal they feel good about.

A study from the Natural Marketing Institute segmented consumers within the USA by their attitudes regarding the health aspects of food. The study found that 17% of consumers were classified as "well-beings" – individuals who are passionate about eating healthier food options and is willing to pay more for it while a total of 14% were described as "food actives" – individuals who want to eat healthier but are more price-sensitive (Cardello, 2013). Although, some consumers are willing to pay more, all consumers have some sensitivity to price. It has been found that 90% of consumers choose a fast-food outlet based on price (Cardello, 2013). Furthermore, the results of a study by Klassen, Trybus and Kumar (2005:586) indicate that 62% of the respondents rated price as the most significant aspect when making a decision to purchase from a food outlet. If the price is considered too high, customers may choose to eat elsewhere (Law, Hui & Zhao, 2004: 555).

The aim of this paper was to determine the level of satisfaction of South African consumers' regarding the price and value of the healthier food options available at fast-food outlets. Customer satisfaction determines an organisations prolonged existence and financial success (Harrington, Ottenbacher & Way, 2010:81). Sulek and Hensley (2004:236) highlight the importance of customer satisfaction by emphasising that 90% of unsatisfied customers never return to the fast-food outlet. It is therefore important that fast-food outlets display a strong customer-driven orientation (Harrington et al., 2010:81). With this in mind, fast-food outlets need to measure customer satisfaction on a regular basis in order to determine how successful they are at providing products/services to the satisfaction of their customers (Nimako & Azumah, 2009: 3) and thereby improve marketing strategies. More specifically, they need to provide healthier options that offer good value for money at a reasonable price; otherwise these outlets could be missing out on one of their biggest growth opportunities.

4. Research methodology

A total of 400 self-administered questionnaires were distributed directly to students at the University of Pretoria. The questionnaire contained 9 close-ended questions, 3 open-ended questions and 2 scaled response questions whereby the degree of customer satisfaction was measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "*Very dissatisfied(1)*" to "*Very satisfied(5)*". Non-probability, convenience sampling was utilised which enabled the researcher to collect data quickly and easily. SAS JMP version 10 was used to analyse the quantitative data while the qualitative data was analysed through content analysis with NVivo version 10. The data was edited; coded, cleaned and descriptive statistics (frequency counts) were used to describe the findings.

5. Limitations

Due to convenience sampling being used to select the respondents, the findings could not be generalised to the larger population. The paper was confined to fast-food outlets and the sample only comprised of students studying at the University of Pretoria making it unrepresentative geographically. In addition, due to fieldwork being conducted during the examination period, the study may have failed to elicit viewpoints of respondents who were not present on campus at the time.

6. Results

From the 400 questionnaires received, 4 were removed due to insufficient completion and 60 due to disqualification (respondents who indicated that they did not purchase food from fast-food outlets from time to time and respondents who indicated that they were unaware of any healthier food options offered at fast-food outlets). A total of 336 questionnaires were deemed usable for further analysis.

6.1 Purchasing of healthier food options

The majority of the respondents (238 or 70.8%) indicated that they purchased the healthier food options available at fast-food outlets. Although this is a large portion of respondents, a significant number (98 or 29.2%) did not purchase the healthier food options. These respondents were asked to provide reasons for their behaviour, whereby most of the respondents (32 or 32.6%) indicated that they ate fast food as a treat and therefore did not want to eat healthily when dining out at fast-food outlets. A total of 29 respondents (29.6%) pointed out that the healthier food options were tasteless and unappealing and 23 respondents (23.5%) were of the opinion that it defeated the objective of eating out at a fast-food outlet. A further 20 (20.4%) believed that the healthier food options were more expensive or overpriced compared with other options available, followed by 12 (12.2%) who were of the opinion that the healthier food options were not that healthy. From these results, it appears that the respondents have negative perceptions towards the taste, presentation, nutrition and price of the healthier food options available which may be aspects that fast-food outlets should look into if they wish to increase their customer base.

From the 238 respondents who purchased the healthier food options from fast-food outlets, the majority (94.1% or 224) did so at least once a month. A total of 54 respondents (22.7%) indicated that they purchased healthier food options a few times a month, 37 (15.5%) once a week and 35 (14.7%) once every two weeks. Nando's, Kauai and KFC were found to be the top three fast-food outlets from which respondents had recently purchased healthier food options, with 59 (24.8%), 54 (22.7%) and 38 (16%) respondents respectively.

6.2 Respondent demographics

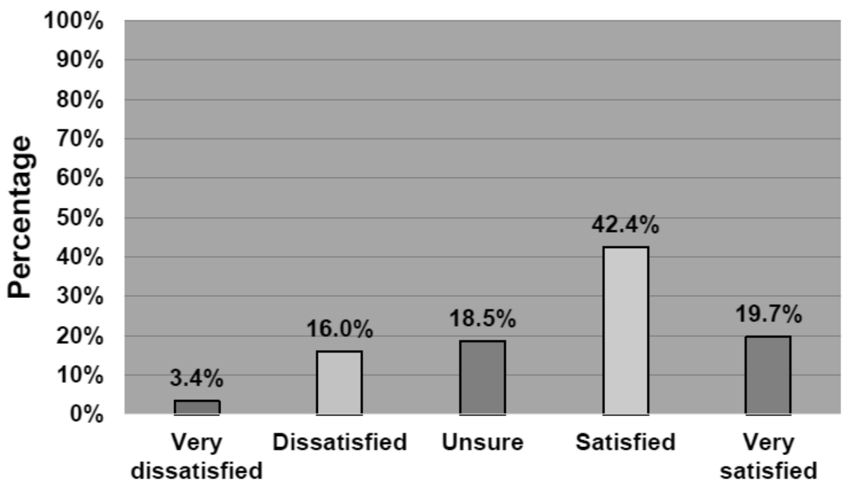
A total of 45% (107) of respondents were male while 55% (131) were female. The majority of the respondents (92% or 219) fell into the 19–23 age categories. This may be attributable to the research being conducted at a university. In terms of racial makeup, the majority of the respondents were White (45.4% or 108) whilst the minority of respondents were Asian (1.7% or 4). Most of the respondents were classified as undergraduates (95% or 226) and full-time students (95.4% or 227).

6.3 Customer satisfaction with price and value

6.3.1 Good value for the price

Figure 2 represents the respondents' satisfaction level with the value received for the price paid for healthier food options at fast-food outlets.

Figure 2. Good value for the price (n=238)



Count	
Very dissatisfied	8
Dissatisfied	38
Unsure	44
Satisfied	101
Very satisfied	47
Total	238

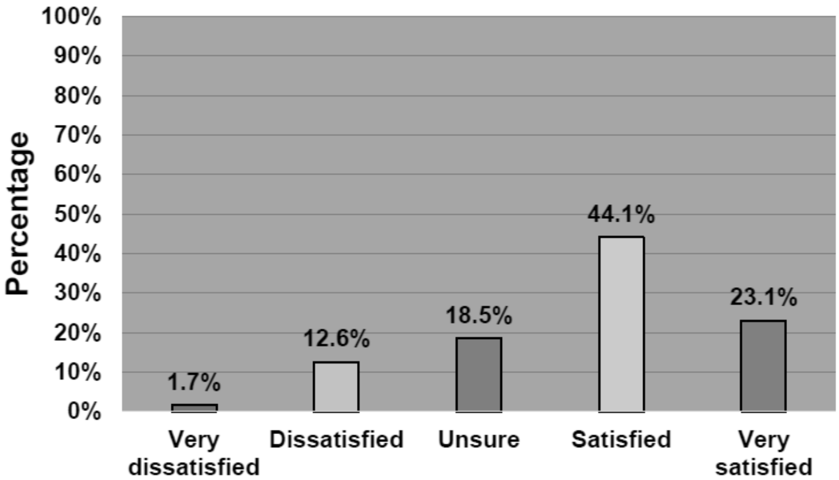
Figure 2 indicates that only 62.1% of respondents (148) were satisfied or very satisfied with the value received for the price paid for the healthier food options purchased at fast-food outlets. A total of 19.4% (46) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied and a further 18.5% (44) were unsure. These findings may be a cause for concern as a total of 37.9% of respondents (90) did not have a positive view of the value received for the price paid. This may seem to indicate that fast-food outlets are not providing enough value for the price they charge, which may further have a negative impact on the sale of the healthier food options. There appears to be a gap between what is "shown" and what customers "receive". For example, Dario (2010) undertook a project in order to create a comparison between what fast-food outlets advertise and what customers actually receive. He found that most of the food did not look as appetising and was not the same size as advertised.

In such a case, customers of fast-food outlets may feel that they are not getting what they pay for and this may lead to dissatisfaction with value.

6.3.2 Appropriate portion size

The respondents' satisfaction level with the portion size of the healthier food options at fast-food outlets is illustrated in figure 3.

Figure 3. Appropriate portion size (n=238)



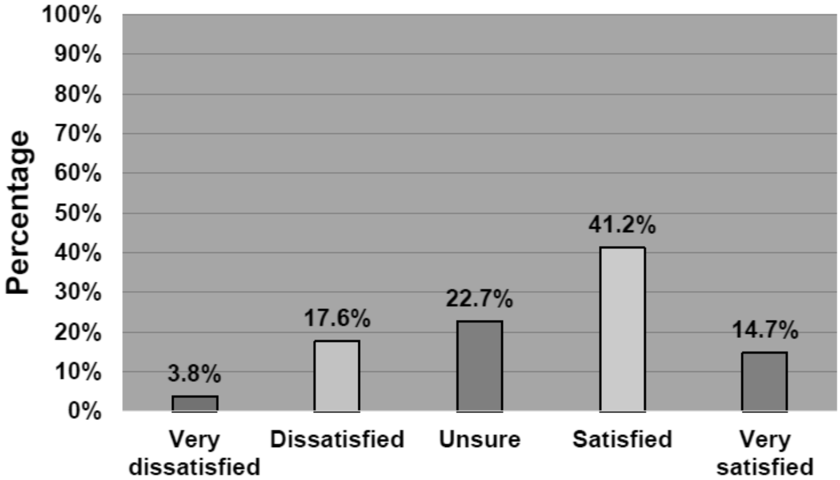
Count	
Very dissatisfied	4
Dissatisfied	30
Unsure	44
Satisfied	105
Very satisfied	55
Total	238

Figure 3 shows that only 67.2% of the respondents (160) were satisfied or very satisfied with the portion size of the healthier food options, while 14.3% (34) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. A further 18.5% of respondents (44) were unsure. The high total percentage (32.8%) of unhappy or unsure respondents (78) could be a result of small food portions served and may also explain the respondents' high dissatisfaction with good value for the price (figure 2). Although fast-food is known to be served in large portions, this may not be the case with the healthier food options. Fast-food outlets therefore may want to consider the portion sizes of the healthier food options served. Alternatively, if the price of the healthier food options is lowered, customers may then find the current portion size more acceptable.

6.3.3 Reasonably priced item

Figure 4 shows the respondents' satisfaction level with the price of the healthier food options at fast-food outlets.

Figure 4. Reasonably priced item (n=238)



Count	
Very dissatisfied	9
Dissatisfied	42
Unsure	54
Satisfied	98
Very satisfied	35
Total	238

As indicated in figure 4, only 55.9% of respondents (133) felt that the healthier food options were reasonably priced. A total of 21.4% of respondents (51) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the price of the healthier food options and 22.7% (54) were unsure, revealing that 44.1%, almost half of the respondents did not have a positive view of the price of the healthier food options. This item received the lowest satisfaction rating compared with all the other items of price and value. Price appears to be a crucial factor in respondents' decision to purchase. It is therefore concerning to find such a high dissatisfaction rating among respondents.

6.3.4 Overall value of the experience

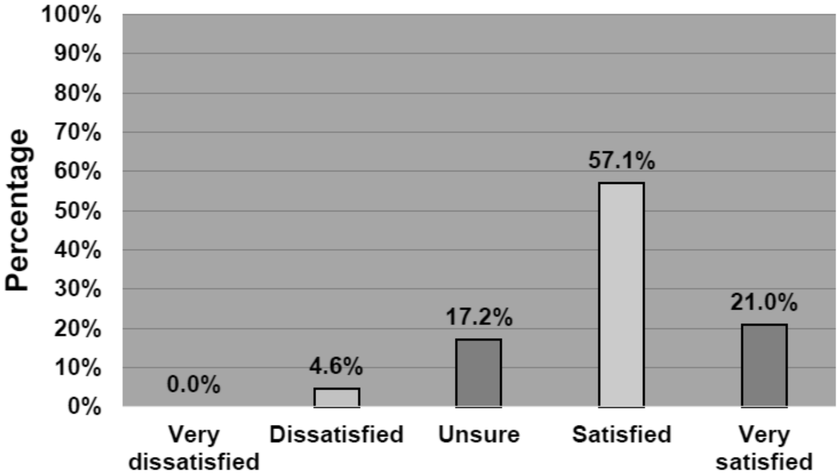
Figure 5 illustrates the respondents' satisfaction level with the overall value of the experience at fast-food outlets.

From figure 5, it can be seen that 78.1% of respondents (186) were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall value of the experience. Only 4.6% of respondents (11) were dissatisfied, while 17.2% (41) were unsure. Although the majority of the respondents were satisfied with the overall value of the experience, a significant number (21.8% or 52) were not satisfied. This may be a concern as it may affect their decision to return to the fast-food outlet and therefore influence the sales of the healthier food options. Value can be seen as a combination of quality, service and price (Kotler & Keller, 2009:8). This means that all the other Institutional DINESERV dimensions (food quality, atmosphere, service quality and convenience) may have influenced the respondents' satisfaction level with the overall value of the experience. Fast-food outlets therefore need to manage the customer experience, and train their staff to provide exceptional service and quality.

6.3.5 Overall satisfaction with price and value

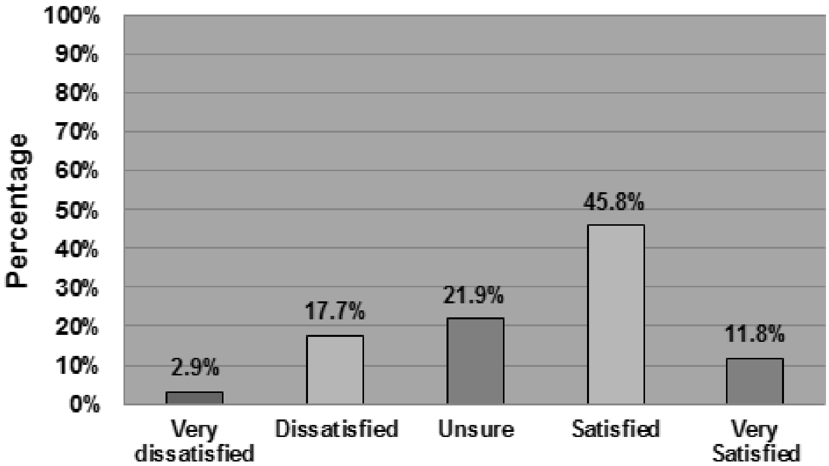
Figure 6 indicates the respondents' overall satisfaction level with the price and value of the healthy food options.

Figure 5. Overall value of the experience (n=238)



Count	
Very dissatisfied	0
Dissatisfied	11
Unsure	41
Satisfied	136
Very satisfied	150
Total	238

Figure 6. Overall satisfaction with the price and value of products (n=238)



Count	
Very dissatisfied	7
Dissatisfied	42
Unsure	52
Satisfied	109
Very satisfied	28
Total	238

As shown in figure 6, only 57.6% of the respondents (137) were satisfied or very satisfied with the price and value of the healthier food options available at fast-food outlets. However, considering that 44.1% of respondents were not satisfied with the price of the healthier food options (figure 4) this may have negatively influenced the respondents' overall satisfaction with this dimension. In this regard, fast-food outlets may find it useful to pay attention to price and value in their efforts to satisfy their customers.

6.4 Suggestions to improve price and value

Table 1 presents the suggestions by respondents to improve the price and value of the healthier food options available at fast-food outlets.

Table 1. Suggestions to improve price and value (n=135)

Category	Percentage (%)	Frequency count
Cheaper prices	76.3	103
Offer value for money	15.6	21
Bigger portions	8.1	11
Wider variety on menu	8.1	11
Improve on quality	8.1	11
More appealing menu	0.7	1
More care with preparation	0.7	1
More parking	0.7	1
Replace used oil regularly	0.7	1
Security required	0.7	1

** Total responses may not equal n and percentages may not equal 100 as this question was open-ended. Percentage was calculated using the frequency count per category divided by n.*

Table 1 indicates that over half of the respondents (76.3% or 103) suggested that fast-food outlets should lower the prices of the healthier food options. A further 15.6% (21) indicated that better value should be offered for the price paid.

Conclusions

The findings seem to indicate a relatively low level of satisfaction among respondents that is clearly a cause for concern, as just over half of the respondents (57.6%) did not have a positive view regarding the price and value of the healthier food options available. Within this dimension, respondents were least satisfied with the actual price of the healthier food options. It is concerning to find such a high dissatisfaction rating among respondents in this area.

In order to keep and increase their customer base, fast-food outlets may want to consider evaluating their pricing strategy, which is related to the value perception of customers. As indicated in section 6.1, a total of 20.4% of respondents (20) did not purchase the healthier options from fast-food outlets as they were of the opinion that these options were more expensive or overpriced compared with the other food options available. Furthermore, of the respondents who had purchased the healthier food options, the majority (76.3% or 103) suggested that fast-food outlets should lower the prices of these options. A further 15.6% of the respondents (21) felt that fast-food outlets should offer better value for money. In this regard, fast-food outlets may need to consider and adjust the pricing of the healthier food options available to ensure they are reasonably priced. In addition, they could review current portion sizes, offer healthy value-bundled meals, convey a better value-for-money message and deliver on what they promise. The magic bullet is offering healthier, tasty food at a price that makes both customers and fast-food outlets happy (Cardello, 2013). Further research could be conducted in order to establish customer expectations and perceptions in terms of value received for the price paid for healthier fast-food options; this in turn could greatly improve the satisfaction ratings.

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