

## Summary of Observation

[TITLE]	Non-participant Observation on Fast Food Consumption
[LOCATION]	Food Court @ Yorkdale Shopping Mall
[DATE]	September 29 2017
[START TIME- END TIME]	3:00pm – 5:00 pm
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### DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITY

[Time of the day]

It is an early afternoon on Friday. The outdoor temperature is around 25 degrees Celsius. It has a bright sunshine after a heavy rain in the morning.

[Physical setting]

The food court is located on the second level of the north section of the shopping mall, and can be accessed by both elevator and escalator. The food court is a L-shape area. The elevator and escalator both connect to the short end of L-shape area, and this is the only entrance/exit of the area. There is not outlet at the other end of area. The eating area is in the middle, surrounding by about 20 restaurants along both sides.

There is a large-sized transparent roof on one end of the food court area, and a huge floor-to-ceiling window wall on the other end. Therefore, these two eating areas have natural bright lighting during daytime. For the rest of the sitting area, laser lights are used, producing soft, warm color, less diffuse lighting.

There are various of choices for sitting. A majority part of the eating area is equipped with the normal-height table for four people and four wood minimal-designed chairs. Another option is the same type of the table, but with a long well-padded sofa on the other side of the table and wood chairs on the opposite side. There are also few bar-height tables with high stools, usually next to the aisle. Some well-padded high chairs are available for young children.

The noise level is pretty high in this area. There is background music playing light music. The voice level for conversations between customers is also high. Some noises come from the restaurant, particularly from Asian-food restaurants that have open kitchens (cooking noises).

[Participants and their activities]

The following information is documented chronologically.

- Who: Two young black girls

What: They don't carry shopping bags. They go directly towards the restaurant facing the aisle as they come in. They wait in line, checking their cellphones. When it is their turn, one girl talks to the staff, while the other girl leaves and goes to the restaurant next to it. The girl finishes her order and starts to talk to her phone when she is waiting. When the staff gets her meal ready, she asks for putting her meal into the take-away box. The other girl

comes back. Both of them carry the take-away boxes and leave the food court.

- Who: Three middle-east young men

What: Each of them carries one or two shopping bags. They quickly scan the restaurants around them area, then separate from each other. I keep tracking two of them. They first go to an Asian style restaurant, checking the menu on the wall. After a short conversation, they move to another restaurant, checking the menu on the wall again. Then they make the decision and wait in the line to get their order.

- Who: A woman with a 5-years-old boy

What: The mom is away ordering the food, while the child sits alone on the sofa next to the aisle, waiting and looking at his mom. After his mom comes back, they go to another table in the middle of the eating area. The kid plays by himself. The woman is having her meal and talks to the boy occasionally. There is another young lady sitting opposite to them. But there is no conversation among them.

- Who: A group of six young people

What: There is a group of six young adults, half male and half female, sitting beside the abovementioned mom and boy. They put two table together and sit closely. They have finished their meals. They are checking their cellphone and sharing some amusing information. They spend another 20 minutes talking and then leave.

- Who: A senior Asian couple

What: They don't carry shopping bags. They walk side by side slowly along the aisle, checking the restaurants one by one. They make a stop in front of the restaurant that interests them. They look at the menu on the wall and have some conversations. After that, they keep moving, checking other restaurants. Finally, they finish their tour and leave the food court without ordering anything.

- Who: Two young ladies and a couple with a baby in the stroller

What: They keep talking to each other while walking along the aisle. They make a stop in front of one restaurant, then look over the menu on the wall. The couple stay in the line, while the other two young ladies move to another restaurant not faraway.

- Who: Two young Asian girls

What: They don't carry shopping bags. They go directly to one restaurant without hesitation, and wait in the line. They quickly finish their order and find a place to eat the meal.

- Who: A middle-aged couple

What: They carry some shopping bags. They walk one after another along the aisle and stop in front of one restaurant. They check the real food behind the counter window and constantly have conversations. The wife places the order first, then the husband. The wife waits for her husband to finish the order, and then pays for the bill.

- Who: A young lady and a middle-aged lady (both Asians)

What: The young lady has a short conversation with the middle-aged lady, then she goes to order food, while the middle-age lady sits on the sofa waiting. The young lady finishes the order and brings food back to the table. They share the food together.

- Who: A young couple  
What: They come to the food court hand in hand. The young man is pointing to one restaurant and another while having the conversation with the lady. They make a stop in front of a restaurant. While they are waiting in line, they keep the conversation. Once they get the order, the young man holds the tray and they find a place to sit.
- Who: A young man and a young lady  
What: Neither of them order anything. They sit opposite to each other, and have conversation for around 40 minutes, then leave the food court.
- Who: A man and a young child (about 8 years old)  
What: The child firstly sits down on the high stool beside the bar-height table, having her meal ordered from KFC. The man leaves the child alone and goes to another restaurant. Couple minutes later, he comes back bringing a sushi dish for himself. During the meal time, they hardly talk to each other. But they have some conversation after the meal.
- Who: A white senior couple  
What: They make a stop in front of a restaurant. They check the menu on the wall, also ask the staff to confirm things. The wife makes the order first, then the husband. The husband pays for the whole bill. They choose a sofa close to the restaurant to sit. The wife takes the sofa, while the husband sits on the chair.
- Who: A young man and a senior woman  
What: They carry several shopping bags. They firstly find a table and the senior lady take the seat and rest. The young man goes to check out the food and finally order something from one restaurant. He brings a tray back, put it on the table next to the aisle, and asks the senior lady to come over. Once the woman changes the seat, the young man goes back to the restaurant, and bring another tray back to the table.
- Who: Two young ladies with a baby in the stroller  
What: One of them check the menu, then asks the staff questions. The staff explains something by pointing to the menu which is on the left-side wall of the restaurant (right next to the cashier). Both of the lady and the staff physically point to the same menu on the wall and keep the conversation back and forth. Then that lady makes the order. After they get the meal, they find a table close to the restaurant, where can also accommodate the stroller beside the table. One of the lady start to eat, while the other feed the baby in the stroller first. Then they take turns.
- Who: A single black woman  
What: She goes to the KFC restaurant and waits in the line. Without too much talking, she finishes the ordering and stand aside, waiting for the meal.
- Who: A young lady with a baby in the stroller  
What: She walks along the aisle, checking each restaurant, and stop in front of one restaurant. She reads the the menu on the wall and asks questions. The staff hands over a paper menu to her. She read through the paper menu first and talk to the staff again. Then staff keeps talking, pointing to the food constantly. The lady places the order, then find a

place that can accommodate the stroller to have her meal.

## REFLECTIONS

- There is only one entry/outlet for this area, which reduces the area's accessibility.
- The restaurants that is located close to the dead end of the area might be at a disadvantage compared to those close to the entry of the food court.
- There is one aisle in the middle of the food court area, which allows customers to cut cross the eating area and get to the other side of the food court as a short cut.
- Aisles are wide enough to accommodate crowds of people, and big stroller as well.
- Various sitting options can suit different needs.
- There is free WIFI provided by the shopping center, it is very convenient for customers to use the internet.
- Various of food options, especially exotic food restaurants, satisfy the needs from different ethnic group's.
- The restaurant which is right facing the aisle might be at an advantage, because it is more accessible than restaurants next to it.
- When customers are browsing the restaurants, they are walking on the aisle and usually keep distance from the counter. They would move closer to the counter only when they want to ask something or decide to buy from the restaurant. However, if there are real food displaying on the counter, people tend to move closer and check out the food. In that circumstances, most of them would also have some conversations with the staff regarding the food. This process might facilitate the decision making process.
- The restaurants that have open-kitchen or have their food displayed tend to have longer waiting line in front of them than other restaurants.
- It is not clear how the length of the waiting line (long or short) would influence customers' behavior.
- It usually takes 2-3 minutes for the customer to get their meal. If there is long line ahead, the total waiting time will be longer. If there is a large group of people, it seems taking longer for them to finish the order.
- During this waiting period, customers usually wait beside the pickup corner. They might talk on phones, check their smartphones, or have conversation with their companions.
- For some customers, they seem very familiar with the food menu (usually the famous brand). Without further asking questions or checking out the menu, they can make the order very quickly.
- Customers, who look like visiting the the food court/restaurant for the first time, it takes longer for them to choose and decide what to order.
- Most of the restaurant have their menu hanging on the back wall at higher-than-eye level. Therefore, customers have to raise their heads to read the menu.
- Due to the distance, the texts on the menu are sometimes hard to recognize. have heavy texts

on them, on the wall have a dense content. It may be especially hard for seniors, poor eyesight people.

- When customers ask staff something regarding the menu, they can only make a reference to the menu far away behind them rather than having something in their hands, which is less effective.
- One restaurant has their menu presented on the left-side wall of the restaurant, right next to the cashier. It makes much easier for the customer to discuss with staff regarding the menu, because both of them can point to the same menu on the wall and keep them on the same page.
- Another restaurant uses the whole wall on the back to present their food and places several screens on the counter facing customers, all these make the perception of their food and products much easier to the customers.

### **EMERGENT THEMES**

The purpose of this observation is to understand the current experiences and behaviors of people as they arrive, order, and consume their food or drinks in order to developing a customer loyalty platform for fast food restaurants and cafes. Therefore, based on the observation and reflection, here are the emergent themes might help to achieve the goals.

#### **[Minimize customer's cognitive load]**

When customers are facing the ocean of choices, they are experiencing a heavy cognitive burden in their mind. A customer might be overwhelmed and confused. It won't do any good to their decision making. The overwhelmed information could come from various aspects, like visual (crowded pictures or texts), verbal (staff's introduction on food/options), imagination (no real food seen), memory (what customers have/will order), spatial (menu is not approachable), etc.

It seems like a trend that restaurants are working on details to minimize customers' cognitive load. For example, by presenting the real food on the counter, customers can see what they get in real time, they don't need to rely on their imagination to make the order. Or making the menu/food pictures large enough so that it is easier to be recognized by customers. Presenting the menu spatially closer to the customers (a large screen on counter in front of the customers, or on wall right next to the cashier so that the staff can physically point to it), these can also make the order process much easier. Or if there are only limited options, customers can easily get familiar with the item and make the order fast.

Therefore, for developing a loyal platform for a restaurant, one key thing to consider is to minimize customers' cognitive load in order to facilitate the order process.

#### **[Increase customers' engagement during waiting]**

It usually takes 2-3 minutes for the customers to get their meal. When customers are waiting for ordering the meal or picking up the meal, they might need to find things to do to kill time. Some customers might just wait there without doing anything, while some might check their phones or talk to their companion(s). But none of these activities are restaurant/food related. Because almost every customer has smartphone, it is fairly easy for them just choose to play with their phones and avoid further interaction with staff or other restaurant element.

Would it be better if the restaurant can take advantage of this period and engage customers to some fun activities relevant to the restaurant, the food, or the services? The purposes of setting some activities for customers to do during their waiting time have two folds: (1) to reinforce the brand and its service in customers' perception, and (2) to bring a good experience of spending the time with the restaurant. Here are some possible activities to consider: showing some interesting facts/numbers about the restaurant, their customers, history, owners, or quality control, etc.; showing a riddle, a picture game that can link to the brand, food or services; a game encouraging customers to use restaurant's app.

Therefore, for developing a loyal platform for a restaurant, another aspect to consider is to decrease customers' impatience and make their waiting experience a bit more engaged.