

# Exploring the Choice Behavior of Catering Consumers According to the EKB Model

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## ABSTRACT

This paper using the pioneering Engel, Collet, and Blackwell model, describes five continuous decision-making processes, problem identification, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior, to explore how catering consumers make decisions. Through the questionnaire survey, this paper has completed two objectives. One is to investigate the types of selected restaurants, analyze the relationship between them according to the needs of respondents. Another goal discusses the information sources of consumer preferences and the impact of prices on these sources. The findings show that the most frequently cited demand variables are time with family and friends and convenience. Most of respondents said they would consult information before choosing a restaurant, with popular sources of information including third-party institutions and online media. In addition, as prices rise, so does the number of respondents seek information. When respondents spend time with their family and friends, the most popular choice is casual dining.

**Keywords:** EKB Model, restaurants, consumers decisions, price, information.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background

As a pillar industry of China's tertiary sector, the catering industry plays an irreplaceable role, accounting for more than 10% of the total social sales of consumer goods [1]. However, from the perspective of enterprise sales, assets and employment, the overall size of the catering industry is still dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises. Due to almost no barriers to entry and tremendous competitive pressure, the restaurant industry's net profit level is not high, only 10% [2]. Although the number of enterprises and self-employed households entering the market every year is very high, the number of failures is still high [3]. The performance of the catering industry depends to a large extent on how to meet customer needs, improve customer satisfaction as much as possible, and stimulate customers' repeated consumption. Therefore, it is essential to explore how customers make specific decisions. This is challenging because the catering industry provides both products (the food itself) and services (the server and restaurant environment).

Therefore, this paper will use the EKB model to research how restaurant consumers make decisions.

### 1.2. EKB Model

Engel Collet Blackwell Model [4], also known as the EKB model, is a relatively complete and clear theory in consumer behavior research, focusing on the analysis from the perspective of purchase decision.

EKB model believes that the decision-making process of consumers consists of five steps:

Need cognition. When consumers only feel a difference between their ideal situation and the current actual situation, problem perception occurs. This stage is further complicated by the availability of Internet information, and the increasing number of advertising campaigns that draw consumers' attention to unrecognized needs.

Collect information. When consumers are aware of a problem, they will seek out relevant information about it. Information search can be divided into internal search and external search. In the former, consumers are looking for information from existing data or past purchase experience. When internal investigation fails to meet their needs, they will turn to external searches, such as

mass media, marketers, relatives and friends. As for whether to look outside, we must compare the expected benefits with the expected costs.

**Scheme evaluation.** When consumers collect the required information they need, they can evaluate various possible schemes accordingly. Program evaluation includes evaluation criteria, beliefs, attitudes, and personal aspirations.

**Choice.** When consumers evaluate various possible solutions, they will choose the one that best solves the original problem and purchase. However, at this time, there may still be some unpredictable circumstances, such as the lack of funds and the impact of stores, which may lead to the final choice being different from the initial expectation.

**Purchase results.** After consuming and using a product or service, satisfaction or purchase cognitive disorder may occur and be stored in memory.

These are the five stages in the consumer decision-making process. However, this process may also be affected by other factors, such as external culture, reference group, family influence, individual internal motivation, personality type, demographic variables, and so on, among which demographic variables and personality types are the main factors that constitute the difference in consumers' purchasing behaviors.

### 1.3. Restaurant Choice

Restaurants are retailers that provide products and services. The main difference in purchasing physical products and services is that consumers rely more on word of mouth when purchasing services. Restaurants are a mixture of physical products or services, so it is crucial to understand what consumers expect (good products or services or both). Restaurant customers regard food quality, food type, cost performance, and atmosphere as the most important factors, which shows how important physical products are for restaurants to obtain higher ratings. However, it does not indicate whether the service is important. Although most consumers think highly of good food, good service is one of the critical factors of consumer satisfaction, without which the rating will be affected.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study will attempt to use the EKB model to explore or explain how catering consumers make decisions. The research question of this paper is to explore how catering consumers choose restaurants by using the EKB model. The research objectives of this paper involve the following aspects.

1. According to the needs of respondents, investigate the types of selected restaurants and analyze the

relationship between them;

2. Analyze the information sources of consumer preferences and the impact of price on these information sources.

Objective 1 involves steps other than step 2 in the EKB model; goal 2 focuses on step 2 which is information collection. By addressing these two goals, we hope to answer research questions.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Data collection process

The data was collected by questionnaire survey, and 223 samples were collected. All the data came from the Internet. After the questionnaire is published through a third-party platform, anyone who can see the link can click to enter the questionnaire. Since our research goal is not limited to interest groups, samples are not limited to specific groups. We can fully understand the decision-making process through these 223 samples.

### 3.2. Description of data summary

All ten questions in the questionnaire are single-choice questions. The efficiency of filling the questionnaire is 100%, with no errors, omissions, or multiple choices. All the questionnaire results have been recorded in Excel, and the data has been filtered and extracted into the table for analysis

### 3.3. Demographic Distribution

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the sample by age and sex. In the whole sample, women account for 67% and men 33%. It can be inferred that women are more interested in restaurant selection than men. The top three respondents are over 55 years old (28%), 26-35 years old (26%), and 18-25 years old (23%). The majority of respondents to the questionnaire are the elderly and young people, which can be inferred that young people and the elderly are more likely to eat out.

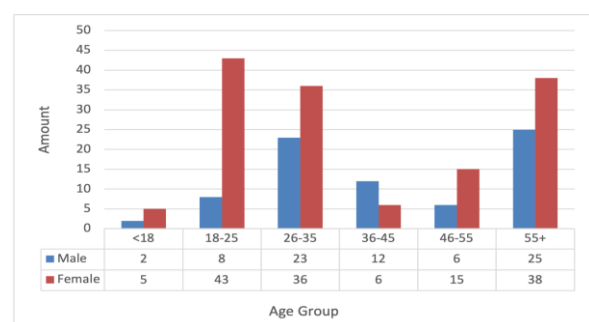
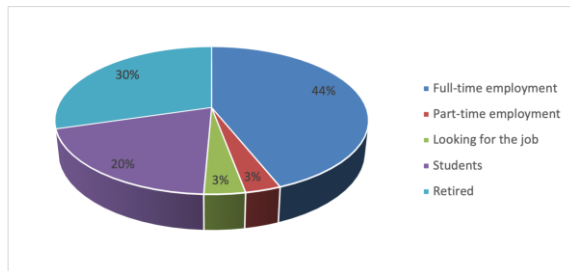


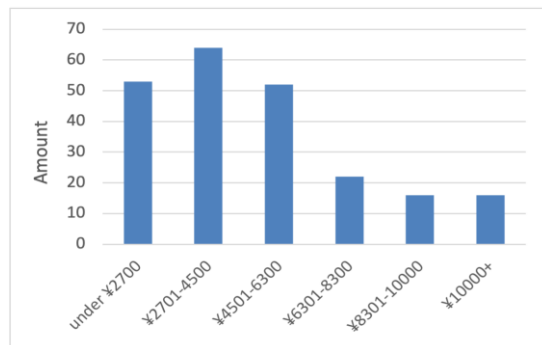
Figure 1. Gender and age distribution of respondents

Figure 2 shows the employment status of all interviews, among which 98 are full-time employees, accounting for 44% of the total sample (223), followed

by retirees (30%) and students (20%). Less than 10% of respondents are part-time or looking for a job. It is reasonable to infer from the pie chart that when consumers choose a restaurant, their decision is an individual-led behavior.



**Figure 2.** Employment status of respondents



**Figure 3.** Average monthly income of investigators

Figure 3 shows that the average monthly income of more than 70% of respondents is less than 6,300 yuan. When designing the questionnaire, the author refers to the national per capita disposable income and national wage income in 2020, dividing the income range [5]. This indicates that the income level of most respondents is in the middle level, which plays a universal role in exploring the decision-making process of catering consumers, and the research has a specific reference value.

## 4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

To investigate the type of restaurant selected according to the needs of respondents (goal 1), we analyzed the relationship between customers' intentions and the kind of restaurant they chose. This goal involves the first step in the EKB model, requirement identification. The second step is selective evaluation, and the third step is purchase or selection.

**Table 1.** Display of restaurant type and demand relationship (number of respondents)

	Fast Food	Cafe	Pubs	Casual	Fine Dining	Take away	Delivery	Special
Connivance	13	1	0	27	2	2	9	0
Special	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Business	0	0	0	2	4	0	0	0
Entertainment	3	1	0	14	0	2	0	0
Family or Friends	5	0	2	99	5	7	1	4
Colleague	3	0	0	9	0	0	1	1
Other	0	0	0	1	2	0	2	1

The most frequently mentioned reason for going to restaurants is to get together with family or friends, about 55 percent of total answers, followed by convenience at 24%. The above figure shows the summary data of the restaurant types selected by respondents according to their different needs.

Among restaurant types, leisure catering is the most popular choice among all the factors in a choosing restaurant, with leisure catering being the choice with the highest number of votes. Of the 223 respondents, 152 (about 68%) chose leisure catering as their first choice.

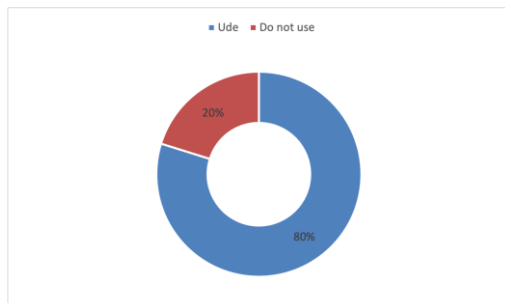
Fast food is also one of the choices with high turnout, accounting for about 10% of the respondents. It is worth noting that fast food is not their best choice when people

choose restaurants based on convenience, although convenience is the second most dominant factor

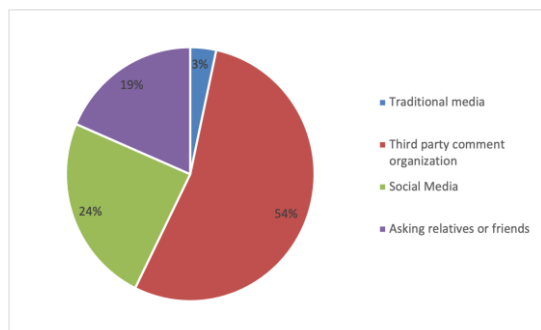
In addition, when family or friends get together, consumers tend to have more diverse choices. Various types of restaurants appeared in the questionnaire results. On the contrary, high-end restaurants may align with the business environment and reception level in the restaurant selection under business activities.

Our second goal is to analyze the information sources of consumer preferences and the impact of prices on these sources, which relates to the second step of the EKB model. As can be seen from Figure 4, about 80% of respondents admit that they use information. Combining with figure 5, 54% of respondents search for information

about restaurants through third-party comment agencies. The second is to utilize online media to find the information they need, about 25%. Less than 3% of them rely on traditional media. In addition, about a fifth of respondents suggest they did not use external information.

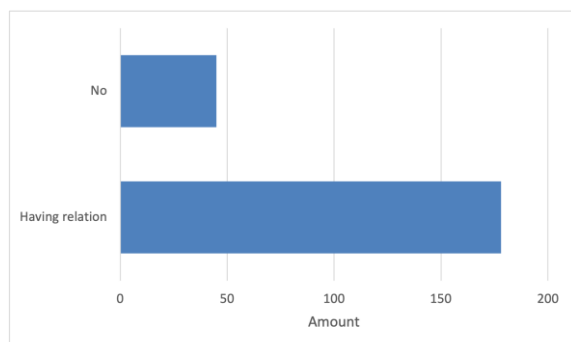


**Figure 4.** Information used when selecting a restaurant.



**Figure 5.** Distribution of access to information

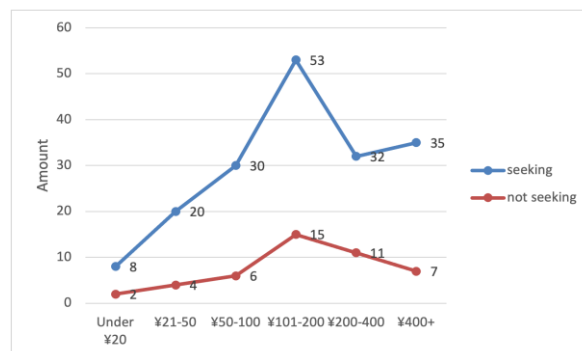
Figure 6 shows the internal relationship between restaurant budget and usage information. Approximately 70% of respondents believe that their budget for a restaurant will affect whether they choose information to help decision-making, which explains that the idea of estimated expenditure may appear before confirming the type of restaurant and proper restaurant selection. Consumers first set a bottom line of expenditure (cost), and then evaluates and makes a final decision based on information in the options that meet the price.



**Figure 6.** Relationship between restaurant budget and information use

The information provided in Figure 7 is fascinating. It reveals that the per capita price was less than 200 yuan in the last time. With the increase in restaurant expenditure, the number of respondents using information also increased, and the curve showed a

downward trend after the price exceeded 200 yuan. We can speculate that consumers willing to spend a lot of money at restaurants are less likely to use this information to make decisions.



**Figure 7.** Relationship between restaurant expenses and seeking information

#### 4.1. Key Findings

Firstly, it is observed that the most frequently cited demand variables are 'gathering with family or friends' and 'convenience'. The second step is to look up information about the product in the EBK model; however, consumers can choose not to search for information. The most popular source of information is third-party review agencies, followed by 'online media'.

Secondly, as the price increases, the number of respondents looking for information also increases, indicating a positive correlation between price and information-seeking behavior, which shows that as prices rise, information becomes essential.

Concerning comparing and making choices, these are the third and fourth steps, respectively. Thirdly, leisure catering is the top choice for various needs, especially when respondents choose to spend time with their family and friends. The most popular option is leisure catering. Fast food also plays a vital role in the convenience demand variable

#### 4.2. Research Significance

From the perspective of catering consumers, this paper analyzes consumers' dining choice behavior based on EKB model. Through the visualized daily consumption demand, readers can more easily understand the summary of consumer psychology and behavior by EKB model. Therefore, catering enterprises should not only invest in advertising but also provide high-quality service to spread word-of-mouth. This information can be used for advertising, restaurant models, staff training, and restaurant location.

#### 4.3. Future Direction

This paper focuses on decision-making from the perspective of individuals, which serves as a basis for

future research. Since most restaurant choices are made collectively, decision-making at the group level can be further explored. This article does not cover the last step in the EKB model, post purchase evaluation. In practical application, the results of this part may be closely related to the information collected in the second stage. This article does not consider the impact of past consumption results on new demand, and future research can focus on this aspect.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### 5.1. Summary

This study focuses on decision application to solve how catering consumers choose restaurants according to the EKB model. This study is divided into two objectives. The first goal is to show that the most cited demand variables are gathering with family or friends and convenience, and how these needs translate into the choice of restaurants (types). According to the survey results, 152 out of 223 respondents chose casual dining, accounting for about 68%. However, different needs translate into different types of restaurants. For example, high-end restaurants are the top priority for business events. While for others, the best choice is still leisure catering. However, the results of the first goal did not establish a cause-and-effect relationship, meaning that the study results could not explain how much convenience could justify fast food as a need or intent. There are some interesting comments on the second goal. The survey results show that when the price exceeds 200 yuan, some respondents' demand for information decreases, but before the cost reaches 200 yuan, there is a positive correlation between price and information.

### 5.2. Limitation

One of the limitations of this study is the demographic distribution of the data. For example, about 67% of the respondents are women, and the collection of demand variables may have been biased. The age distribution of respondents is uneven, and the collection of demand variables may be incomplete.

Moreover, only individual decision-making is considered, rather than group decision-making. Therefore, more research on collective decision-making is needed. In addition, with the popularity of takeout in China, the impact of online decision-making should be considered.

This study is descriptive, which only describes the characteristics of decision-making. However, the results can be used as the basis for future research to solve specific problems, or simply as an extension of understanding the decision-making process.

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