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Quality and Sustainability Strategies Implemented by Fast Food Restaurants

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Abstract. *In order to stay competitive in the market, many fast-food restaurant owners are now implementing various measures to promote sustainable development. They include obtaining ingredients from local and organic farms, reducing energy or water use, and implementing recycling and composting. As the percentage of overweight people continues to rise, the interest in healthy eating has also increased. People are becoming more aware of the importance of maintaining a healthy diet and its impact on their overall health. The fast-food industry needs to adjust, implementing new quality strategies to make their businesses more efficient and attractive to consumers. The authors of this research study used a combination of exploratory research and quantitative marketing research to identify the quality strategies and sustainability measures and understand how consumers perceive their implementation. They conducted surveys and interviews with a sample of consumers to gather data on their attitudes and preferences regarding sustainable and quality measures in restaurants. The research results showed that most respondents want to consume fresh, healthy dishes and support the sustainability and quality measures that restaurants apply. Respondents also consider factors such as the waiting time and the quality-price ratio significant when choosing a restaurant. These findings suggest that consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of sustainability and are willing to support restaurants that are promoting it.*

Keywords: quality strategies, sustainable development, fast-food industry, marketing research, quality.

Introduction

In fast-food restaurants, quality plays a significant role. Restaurant profitability depends on offering quality products and services, satisfying customer's needs and cultivating customer loyalty.

Fast-food consumption has evolved over the past few decades into a proper lifestyle. This unique culture tends to spread globally and supports an ultramodern style that simplifies daily life. (Surcel, 2009). Lately, entrepreneurs who own restaurants are focusing on measures to ensure sustainable development and each restaurant implements new quality strategies to make it more efficient (Madar, Neacșu, 2020).

Romania has seen a significant increase in fast-food consumption in recent years. This trend is particularly pronounced among the country's younger generations, many of whom are drawn to the convenience and affordability of fast food. Despite concerns about the effects that fast-food has on public health, the industry has continued to grow and is now worth billions of euros.

As mentioned by Bîlbîie A. et.al (2021), "Romania is a middle-income country, where 1.2 million people accounting for 6% of the entire population, report themself as fast-food consumers. Among them, 200.000 people eat fast food daily. Between 2017 and 2019, the rate of fast-food

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consumption among Romanians has doubled, reaching a total market size of 14 billion RON (an equivalent of almost 3 billion euro)."

Sustainability from a general perspective in organizations is an economic component that relies on 3 essential pillars: the economic, social and environmental. Lately, entrepreneurs are paying more attention to business sustainability (Ahmad Saufia et al., 2016) to ensure the sustainable development of companies in the community where they operate.

In fast-food establishments, sustainability refers to the efforts undertaken by these companies to conduct their operations socially and environmentally responsibly. Fast-food sustainability in restaurants has been a growing concern in recent years as the industry continues to expand and the environmental impact of fast-food production and consumption becomes increasingly apparent. Studies have shown that the fast-food industry significantly contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, land and water use. Additionally, the industry's reliance on single-use packaging and disposable products has led to an important waste increase. The measures that restaurants should consider could be reducing packaging waste, using organic and local producers for products and running their businesses more sustainably.

In addition to highlighting consumer ideas, attitudes, and behaviors towards this industry and the quality and sustainability measures employed, the present paper's purpose was to identify the primary quality strategies that fast food restaurants employ. The authors blended exploratory analysis and quantitative market research to achieve this.

Literature Review

When thinking about the concept of fast food, consumers choose as the first option the idea of fast food served from behind small windows and products packed in paper, cardboard or plastic.

Statistics and "some research suggests that living in areas that are densely populated with fast food restaurants can impact individual health due to the increased accessibility of fast food for consumption" (Amith et al., 2021) and could lead to an increase in the percentage of obese people.

Every restaurant is looking to adopt different strategies to attract customers. As mentioned by Chun and Nyam-Ochir (2020, p.1), "entrepreneurs have realized that favorable customer feedback is key for developing a long-term sustainable operation. A thorough understanding and knowledge of the factors that influence customer satisfaction is useful to allow restaurant owners and managers to design and deliver the right products to customers."

In addition to the highest level of management and well-implemented marketing strategies, quality management plays a vital role because by implementing different quality strategies, restaurants offer a wide range of products at affordable prices.

Food quality is essential because people usually search for excellent and healthy food. Nonetheless, the quality of the food is considered to be crucial to the restaurant industry. It is a significant characteristic that suits consumer needs, satisfy the consumer's demands and expectations and its excellence is considered an essential element of the total dining experience (Rajput A., Gahfoor R., 2020). Thus, fast food restaurants constantly add new menus to keep old customers or new ones loyal. Usually, in fast food restaurants, the light is intense to shorten the time spent in the restaurant, the focus being on speed.

They frequently have modest decor and straightforward seating layouts because they are made for quick service and efficient operations. For customers looking for a quick bite on the go, convenience and price are the main priorities. Menu boards and ordering systems are displayed to make ordering more accessible, the atmosphere of the fast-food restaurants is to create a warm and appealing space that motivates consumers to come back.

Fast food restaurants that copy the American style have concurred in recent years with Japanese, Chinese, Italian or Mexican-style restaurants. In these, the "fast" style was replaced with a slower pace of service and a relaxing atmosphere that allows customers to test the products and enjoy the time spent in them.

Many Sushi Master restaurants have implemented another style that differs from the usual one. The products are served on stone plateaus and bamboo sticks which replaced the cutlery. However, they have kept the type of fast service, offering food in disposable packaging. On the other hand, they provide customers with a pleasant atmosphere and Japanese music in the background.

McDonalds and KFC offer diversified products, but they are primarily frozen and high in fat and calories. Japanese, Chinese or Thai fast-food restaurants offer prepared products only after the order is placed, with the provision of calorie control for each serving.

Researchers contend that a restaurant's dedication to supporting sustainable and healthy eating initiatives has numerous positive effects on its bottom line. One advantage is that it makes patrons more likely to visit and draws in customers who care about their health. Other advantages include boosting dining value and customer happiness and giving the restaurant a positive, healthy or sustainable green image. Additionally, socially responsible restaurant practices are considered healthy, sustainable initiatives for customers, neighborhoods and society (Yoon et al. 2020).

Overall, the fast-food industry has a long way to go regarding sustainability. However, it is encouraging that some fast-food chains have begun to take steps towards more sustainable practices. For the industry to become more sustainable, it will be necessary for more fast-food restaurants to implement similar sustainable practices. It is essential to mention that many of these commitments from fast food chains are voluntary and not necessarily legally binding. Therefore, some critics argue that more than self-regulation is needed and that government policies and regulations must enforce sustainability in the fast-food industry.

Considering all the aspects mentioned above, the research questions which emerge are: What factors impact customer behavior in fast-food restaurants? How do fast-food restaurants differentiate themselves and improve customer satisfaction through quality and sustainability measures? How can fast-food restaurants communicate and implement sustainable practices effectively? How can fast-food restaurants improve overall quality and customer experience?

The research questions aim to understand the critical drivers of customer behavior in fast-food restaurants and the impact of quality and sustainability measures on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Also, to explore the effective communication and implementation of sustainable practices and the overall improvement of quality and customer experience in fast-food restaurants.

Methodology

Quantitative market research was integrated with exploratory analysis as part of the methodology.

The exploratory investigation sought to pinpoint the primary quality initiatives used by fast food chains. To do this, the writers investigated internal restaurant publications and examined websites and market-related reference resources.

The authors conducted quantitative research to determine consumer perceptions of fast food restaurant's quality and sustainability initiatives, as well as consumer attitudes and behaviors.

The objectives aimed at achieving the purpose of the research are:

O1- identifying respondent's opinions on fast food products and the reasons for choosing a fast-food restaurant.

O2- determination of respondent's views and attitudes toward the quality measures taken by fast food chains.

O3- determination of the respondent's views and opinions towards the sustainability initiatives used by fast food businesses.

The goal was to collect as many completed surveys as feasible, given the exploratory character of the study. 530 persons were still included in the sample after the first question, which determined whether or not they ate fast food, was answered. The sample's gender breakdown was as follows: 41.32% men and 58.68% women. According to their environment, respondents were distributed as follows: 65.28% lived in an urban region and 34.72% in a rural one. Table 1 shows the ages of the participants polled and it can be seen that most of them (76.42%) fall within the 25–50 age range.

Table 1. Descriptive information of survey participants

Categories		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Under 25 years	139	26.23	26.23	26.23
	25 - 35 years	161	30.38	30.38	56.61
	36 – 50 years	105	19.81	19.81	76.42
	51 – 65 years	71	13.39	13.39	89.91
	Over 65 years	54	10.19	10.19	100.0
	Total	530	100.0	100.0	

Source: Authors' own research.

530 adults in Romania were questioned. The questionnaire administration using the computer-assisted Web interviewing (CAWI) technique was necessary due to the significant geographic dispersion of the population under study. The Google Forms software was used to complete the survey. The data was gathered from October 2022 through November 2022. The questionnaire had a total of 22 questions, 16 of which were about gathering data on the subject being studied, namely the opinions and attitudes of the population questioned about the quality strategies and sustainability measures implemented by fast-food restaurants, and the final 6 questions were about identifying the respondents.

The database was manually created and coded before being finalized. The IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) application was used to examine the data. The authors organized and managed the entire research process, from creating the questionnaire to analyzing the data.

Results and discussions

Depending on the market conditions, companies adopt different quality strategies. Various strategies found at the level of fast-food restaurants were framed in the quality strategies defined by Todorut (2007).

Based on their examination of the market, the authors found that maximum performance, domination by quality, differentiation by quality, and seeking style by quality are the most popular quality strategies in the fast-food sector.

The maximum performance strategy. From a typological point of view, McDonald's implements a strategy of maximum performance, as it is the market leader in fast food restaurants in the global market. It provides quality products to its customers, conducts market research and

responds promptly to the questions or requests of the target audience. The goal of the maximum performance strategy is to produce products or services with the highest possible performance to attain quality superiority. The restaurants that dominate the worldwide market typically use this tactic, like McDonald's and KFC, which purchased cutting-edge technology for product preparation, and Pizza Hut, which invested in cutting-edge ovens.

Diversification through quality. In addition to the strategy of maximum performance, McDonald's also adopts the strategy of quality diversification. By employing this strategy, it attempts to enter new markets with goods and services that are superior to those of the competitors in terms of quality classes or levels. They used this tactic by adding McSundae ice cream, served in plastic cartons with chocolate, caramel, and strawberry toppings, to the menu. One of the company's potential future uses for this product is to increase the size of the selection by releasing a brand-new variety of diet ice cream called McSundae Fitline, which contains necessary components including cottage cheese, cream, yogurt, sweeteners, and exotic fruits (pineapple, pineapple, apple, apple, mangoes, papaya). KFC has adopted this tactic as the only restaurant that serves teriyaki-glazed spicy wings and French fries.

The strategy of diversification through quality was also adopted during the pandemic by the restaurant Sushi Master, which introduced burgers, besides Japanese dishes, managing to attract customers from the competition (the closest competition is McDonald's). It offered double portions at a lower price than competing firms. Alternatively, at a minimum order of 150 lei, they offered a mini burger as a gift to satisfy all the desires of the consumers, offering a more comprehensive range of products in one place.

The strategy of domination through quality. Sushi Master, the Japanese sushi restaurant franchise in the local market, adopts the strategy of domination through quality, which involves maintaining a market or market segment and a high sales volume. Sushi Master offers fresh products compared to its competitors, who offer ready-made products. Sushi Master offers customers products made after receiving the order and so it has managed to remain the best sushi restaurant in the local market.

The differentiation strategy by quality it is founded on understanding the qualities of products or services, such as dependability, maintainability, availability, and accessibility, in terms of manifestation forms and level of achievement. Due to the extensive movement of commodities, the abundant supply, and the shortened shelf life of items, the consumption of meat products is a significant cause of food waste worldwide. Beyond Burger introduced artificial meat in order to create a more sustainable future. It received positive consumer feedback and became a leader in the market of sustainable restaurants. They have many contracts signed on all continents of the world. The brand is promoted by all the restaurants with which they collaborate. It is a strategy of differentiation by quality because it has created a unique product (meat imitated from vegan products), quality through which it has managed to conquer the global market and created new barriers for smaller players newly entered to the fast-food field.

Pizza Hut also adopts the strategy of differentiating by quality by introducing personalized by customers products in the menu (pizza with personalized ingredients).

The strategy of looking for style through quality. The strategy of looking for style through quality, which represents the increase of the aesthetic appeal of the product, is adopted by Sushi Master. This fast food offers beautiful, colorful and tasty products. Similarly, this strategy is applied by the Cartofiseria, which offers spiraled shape potatoes.

The strategy of focusing on a quality level. Sushi Go adopts this strategy of focusing on a certain level of quality, so it uses only salmon eggs in the preparation of products, unlike other competitors using masago, tibico or painted eggs.

The quantitative study findings are organized around each of the objectives mentioned above, as follows:

O1 – *identifying respondent's opinions on fast food products and the reasons for choosing a fast-food restaurant.*

Of the total respondents, only 6.04% said they do not consume products from fast-food restaurants, mainly because they do not consider them healthy. The remaining 93.96% said they consume fast-food and were asked to specify how often they do it (fig. 1). The majority of respondents consume fast food products monthly (34.15%) and weekly (30.57%). The least respondents consume these products daily (14.53%) or occasionally (20.75%).

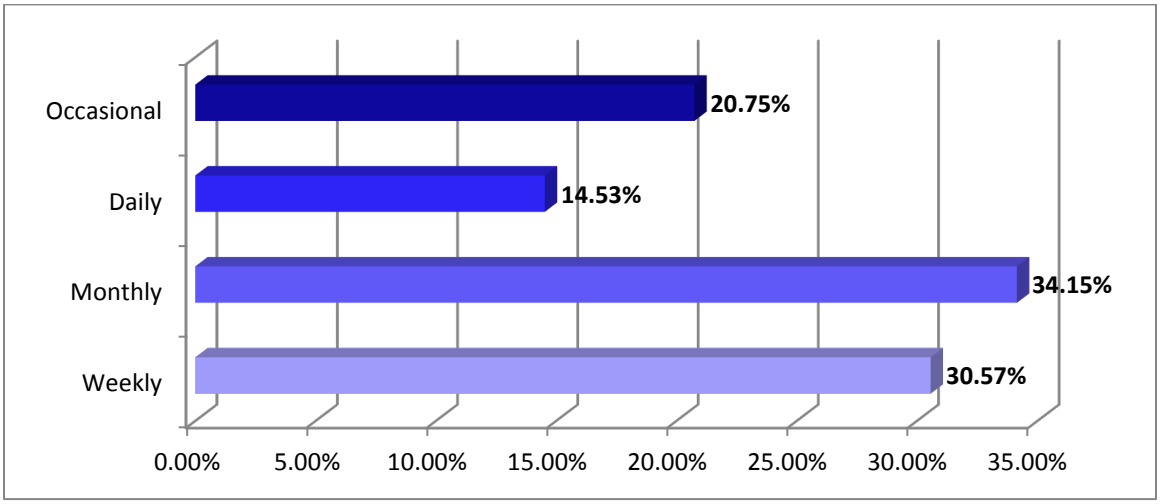


Figure 1. The frequency with which respondents consume fast food

Source: Authors' own research.

The researchers also sought to pinpoint the primary drivers of respondent's preference for fast food. The subjects were asked to list the key justifications for consuming fast food. They mentioned the following as their top options (fig. 2): taste of food (28.11%), quality-price ratio (23.77%), the reduced cost compared to other preparations (lower price) (20.19%), quick preparation (18.30%) and accessibility (9.63%).

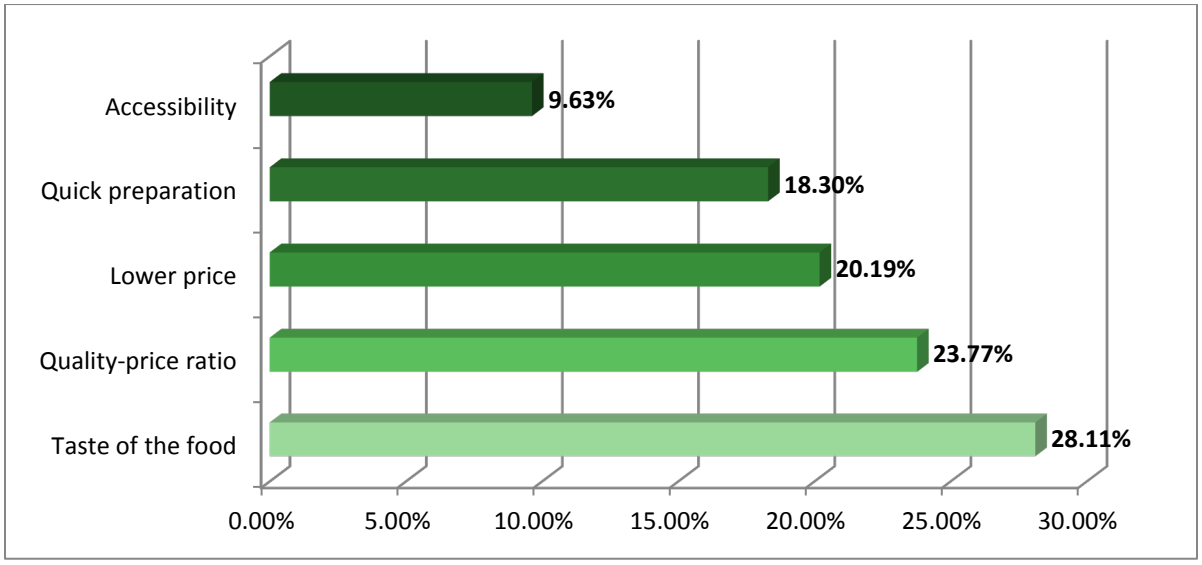


Figure 2. The reasons why respondents choose fast food

Source: Authors' own research.

O2 – *determination of respondent's views and attitudes toward the quality measures taken by fast food chains.*

The authors found eight traits of the quality strategies that fast-food businesses most frequently employ (the strategy of maximum performance, the strategy of domination through quality and the strategy of differentiation through quality). Respondents were asked to rate the significance of these factors in selecting a fast-food establishment (table 2).

Table 2. The importance of characteristics in choosing a restaurant

Characteristic	Not important at all (1)	Not important (2)	Moderately important (3)	Important (4)	Very important (5)	Scor
1. Waiting time	24	101	102	176	127	3.53
2. Personnel kindness	54	102	98	164	112	3.34
3. Employees qualification	82	168	79	129	72	2.89
4. Preparation of products on the spot	22	81	105	181	141	3.64
5. Offering a wide range of products	61	120	101	143	105	3.21
6.The location of the restaurant	76	114	96	142	102	3.15
7. Quality-price ratio	16	53	108	187	166	3.82
8. Loyalty programs	71	195	74	122	68	2.85

Source: Authors' own research.

The data processing showed that for the subjects, the most important characteristics considered when choosing a fast-food restaurant are:

- Quality-price ratio (3.82 scores);
- Preparation of products on the spot (3.64 scores);
- Waiting time (3.53 score).

The characteristics that investigated persons do not pay any attention to in choosing their favorite restaurant are:

• Loyalty programs (score 2.85);

• Qualification of employees (score 2.89).

The authors identified that women attach greater importance to the characteristics of "quality-price ratio" and "preparation of products on the spot" and men to the characteristics of "waiting time" and "staff courtesy."

O3 – *determination of the respondents' views and opinions towards the sustainability initiatives used by fast food businesses.*

Most respondents (88.3%) said that it is important for them that fast-food restaurants where they choose to buy food implement sustainability measures and get involved in environmental projects. The subjects were asked to choose a sustainability measure use by fast-food restaurants (fig. 3).

According to the respondents, the most used sustainability measures are: replacing paper straws with plastic straws (20.38%), introducing packaging made of recyclable materials (19.25%), reusable packaging (17.92%), replacing plastic cutlery with wooden cutlery (16.23%), collecting used oil (14.72%), selective waste collection (11.5%).

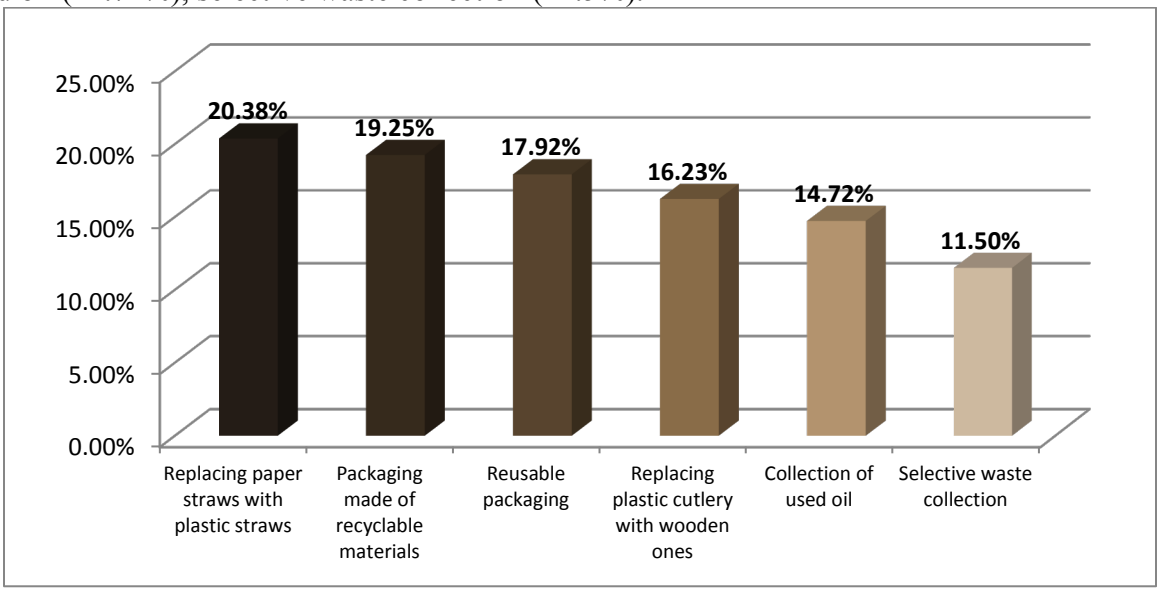


Figure 2. The most used sustainability measures by fast food restaurants

Source: Authors' own research.

Research has shown that more and more fast-food consumers are buying mainly from restaurants with sustainability measures and well-implemented quality management. A majority of respondents (80.94%) agree that sustainable behavior is necessary and, in this respect, commend the initiatives of restaurant business owners.

An example of this is the Sphera Franchise Group (which owns KFC, Pizza Hut, Pizza Hut delivery and Taco Bell restaurants) which supports the local community in which it conducts its business by working with local suppliers that provide about 70% of the ingredients and food used in the preparation of the products. Restaurants in the Sphera Franchise Group have replaced plastic straws with recycled paper straw that is 100% recyclable. In addition to introducing paper straws,

the Group invests in recyclable and biodegradable packaging for products and focuses on their visual and sustainable appearance.

Some KFC restaurants are enrolled in the Harvest program and donate high-quality food to non-governmental organizations to support people from disadvantaged backgrounds and reduce the imminent problem of food waste.

Another fast-food chain, Subway, has committed to sourcing all of its seafood from sustainable sources by 2025, and has also committed to sourcing 100% of its beef and chicken from sustainable sources by 2025.

Conclusion

The quality of the products and services offered differentiates restaurants in a competitive environment. Thus, fast-food restaurants adopt different quality strategies to increase customer satisfaction. Regarding the research questions identified, the authors consider that they have been adequately addressed and the results have provided the necessary answers.

People usually choose fast-food for various reasons, such as convenience, price, taste, variety, and accessibility. The food is often perceived as being inexpensive and a good value for the money. Fast-food restaurants are widely available and offer quick service, making it an easy option for people who need more time. The taste of fast-food can also be a factor as it appeals to many people's palates, as the restaurants offer a wide variety of menu items that cater to different tastes and dietary needs. Lastly, fast-food chains are easily accessible and located conveniently, making them a popular choice for busy individuals and families.

The research found that respondents want to consume fresh, healthy dishes, and they also support the sustainability and quality measures that restaurants apply. When they choose a restaurant, they are mainly guided by the waiting time and the quality-price ratio.

Furthermore, fast-food restaurants can improve their overall quality by implementing strategies like consistency in food preparation and taste, use of high-quality ingredients, implementing food safety and sanitation protocols, providing employee training programs, gathering regular customer feedback, offering healthier options and alternatives, being transparent in sourcing and preparation, offering mobile ordering and contactless payment options, providing a clean, inviting atmosphere, and constantly innovating and updating menus to keep up with customer demands and trends.

The fast-food restaurants have recently been focusing on implementing various measures to contribute to sustainable development, such as the introduction of paper straws, recycled casseroles and recycled paper bags. By applying several sustainability techniques, fast-food companies can enhance their operations and attract more customers. These include decreasing packaging waste, establishing energy-efficient procedures and obtaining the necessary ingredients from regional and organic farmers.

Additionally, fast-food restaurants should also focus on providing customers with a clean and safe environment. They should provide high-quality customer service and offer various menu options that address different dietary needs and preferences. By implementing these strategies, fast-food restaurants can improve their operations and also attract customers looking for high-quality, sustainable options.

Based on the paper's findings, the authors recommend that restaurant owners become more involved in educating the general public about the quality and sustainable development. Restaurants can educate customers on sustainability matters by incorporating suitable messaging into marketing and advertising efforts, providing information on sustainable practices, offering

locally sourced or organic menu items, hosting events or workshops that focus on sustainability, partnering with local organizations that focus on sustainability, leading by example, creating a culture of sustainability within the restaurant, educating and training employees on. By combining communication and action, restaurants can effectively educate customers on the importance of sustainability and inspire them to adopt these practices in their own lives.

The main drawback of the study is that random sampling could not be carried out, making it impossible to statistically validate the sample and extend the findings to the total population under study. However, the authors believe the work brings significant scientific advances in the subject studied in the present paper.

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