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Study of Consumer Theory in International Food Franchises in the Canton of Machala: Case of UTMACH Students

Estudio de la teoría del consumidor en franquicias alimentarias internacionales del cantón Machala: caso estudiantes de la UTMACH

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vgarzon@utmachala.edu.ec<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4838-4202>**Resumen**

La presente investigación analiza el comportamiento de consumo de los estudiantes de la Universidad Técnica de Machala (UTMACH) frente a las franquicias alimentarias internacionales, desde un enfoque microeconómico basado en la teoría del consumidor. El objetivo principal es identificar los factores que inciden en las decisiones de compra de este grupo, considerando variables como el precio percibido, la utilidad percibida, el ingreso disponible, el presupuesto asignado a franquicias y las preferencias de marca. El estudio se desarrolló bajo un enfoque cuantitativo, con un nivel de investigación descriptivo y un diseño no experimental, transversal y de campo. Para la recolección de datos se aplicó una encuesta estructurada con preguntas cerradas y de opción múltiple, dirigida a una muestra representativa de estudiantes matriculados en el año 2025. La información obtenida fue analizada mediante estadística descriptiva, empleando herramientas informáticas para organizar y sintetizar los resultados. Los hallazgos permiten comprender cómo interactúan las variables microeconómicas en el proceso de toma de decisiones de consumo, revelando patrones influenciados por factores económicos, perceptivos y sociales. Se evidenció que la percepción de valor, la experiencia de marca y la accesibilidad económica influyen significativamente en la elección de las franquicias, más allá de la simple satisfacción alimentaria. Este estudio aporta información útil para empresas del sector alimentario, al ofrecer una base empírica que puede orientar estrategias de marketing dirigidas al segmento juvenil universitario. Además, constituye una referencia inicial para futuras investigaciones que deseen profundizar en el análisis del consumo juvenil desde una perspectiva económica y sociocultural.

Palabras claves: Comportamiento del consumidor, franquicias alimentarias, estudiantes universitarios, teoría del consumidor, variables microeconómicas

Abstract

The present research analyzes the consumption behavior of students at the Technical University of Machala (UTMACH) toward international food franchises, using a microeconomic approach based on consumer theory. The main objective is to identify the factors that influence the purchasing decisions of this group, considering variables such as perceived price, perceived utility, disposable income, budget allocated to franchises, and brand preferences. The study was conducted under a quantitative approach, with a descriptive research level and a non-experimental, cross-sectional, field-based design. For data collection, a structured survey with closed and multiple-choice questions was applied to a representative sample of students enrolled in 2025. The information obtained was analyzed through descriptive statistics, using computer tools to organize and synthesize the results. The findings provide an understanding of how microeconomic variables interact in the decision-making process, revealing patterns influenced by economic, perceptual, and social factors. It was found that perceived value, brand experience, and economic accessibility significantly influence the choice of franchises, beyond simple food satisfaction. This study offers useful information for companies in the food sector by providing an empirical basis that can guide marketing strategies aimed at the young university segment. In addition, it constitutes an initial reference for future research seeking to deepen the analysis of youth consumption from an economic and sociocultural perspective.

Keywords: Consumer behavior, food franchises, university students, consumer theory, microeconomic variables.

Introduction

In the city of Machala, international food franchises have maintained a prominent presence in the commercial environment in recent years, establishing themselves as one of the main consumption options for young people, especially university students. Well-known chains such as KFC, Pizza Hut, Dunkin' Donuts, Chili's, Carl's Jr., Papa John's, and McDonald's were part of the city's urban and gastronomic landscape, adapting their strategies to the tastes, habits, and economic conditions of local consumers. However, some of these brands reduced operations or ceased activities, revealing a transformation in the dynamics of supply and demand that has not yet been analyzed from a structured academic perspective (Casanova et al., 2024).

Despite the importance of these franchises in youth consumption habits, research on the topic was limited. There were no studies that delved into the selection criteria, frequency of consumption, or the economic factors influencing the decisions of students at the Technical University of Machala (UTMACH). This lack of systematic analysis hindered a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and made it even harder to relate it to formal economic theories, thus restricting the ability to interpret this behavior rigorously.

In this regard, consumer theory, widely recognized in the field of microeconomics, offered a suitable conceptual framework to explain how individuals make rational purchasing decisions, considering their limited income, market prices, and personal preferences (Rengifo & Douglas, 2020). However, in the Ecuadorian context, and particularly in Machala, no research was identified that applied this theory to the analysis of youth consumption in international franchises. Although some studies focused on purchase intentions or general eating habits, these did not explicitly incorporate key microeconomic variables such as perceived utility, disposable income, or price, which limited the applicability of their findings to the economic field (Freire et al., 2022).

Given this context, the present research gained relevance by integrating the theoretical foundations of microeconomics with an empirical analysis of the consumption behavior of UTMACH university students in relation to international food franchises. Through surveys administered to this population segment, the study sought to identify the influence of variables such as perceived utility, disposable income, and price on their purchasing decisions. This approach addressed a clear gap in both academic literature and applied knowledge, generating relevant insights for understanding the choice patterns of young consumers and providing useful

information for designing commercial strategies better suited to their reality.

Consequently, the general objective of this study was to analyze the consumption behavior of university students in relation to international food franchises present in Machala, based on the principles of consumer theory. To this end, relevant theoretical foundations were identified through a literature review, empirical data on student preferences, consumption frequency, and selection criteria were collected, and these results were correlated with key microeconomic variables in order to interpret purchasing decisions from a rational and analytical perspective.

Theoretical Review

Background on Youth Consumption and Food Franchises

Several studies have revealed consistent patterns in youth consumption behavior, especially in the realm of international food franchises. This population segment shows a marked inclination towards fast food, influenced by factors such as advertising, social media, and global trends. Franchises like McDonald's or Burger King attract not only with their products but also with the social experience they offer, becoming symbolic meeting places for young people. Elements such as perceived quality, speed of service, and brand image are key determinants in their purchasing decisions, demonstrating the importance of understanding this group's motivations to design effective business strategies (Meléndez et al., 2017).

The behavior of young consumers is characterized by a high willingness to experiment with new flavors, seasonal menus, and innovative offerings, a trait that franchises exploit through dynamic and limited-time promotions. Furthermore, convenience and speed, essential values for a generation that prioritizes time, are particularly valued attributes. Research has also indicated that aspects such as service quality and customer service significantly influence the loyalty of this type of consumer, being key to building lasting relationships with the brand (Delgado, 2024).

The phenomenon of globalization has allowed international franchises like Subway, KFC, and Burger King to successfully integrate into local markets, adapting their culinary offerings to the cultural preferences of young consumers. This ability to adapt, without losing their brand identity, has been a determining factor in their acceptance and growth. Added to this is a highly

effective marketing strategy, focused on celebrities, influencers, and viral campaigns, which reinforces these brands' positioning in the minds of young people. The perception of quality, the status conferred by consuming at certain franchises, and constant digital interaction create a shopping experience that goes beyond the product itself, connecting emotionally with this segment (Perkins, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, the behavior of young consumers can be analyzed through the principles of consumer theory, which posits that purchasing decisions aim to maximize utility within a limited budget. Applied to this context, it is observed that young people tend to choose options that offer the best balance between quality, price, and experience. Analytical tools such as price elasticity of demand allow us to anticipate how this demographic will react to changes in prices or promotions. Furthermore, studying preferences and consumption habits gives franchises the opportunity to design menus and strategies that align with the values, aspirations, and lifestyles of young people, strengthening their positioning and customer loyalty in a highly competitive market (Colín et al., 2020).

Foundations and Evolution of Consumer Theory

Consumer theory is a central pillar of microeconomics, focusing on how individuals make rational decisions about the consumption of goods and services, considering their preferences and budget constraints. Under this approach, it is assumed that consumers seek to maximize their utility, that is, the level of satisfaction they obtain from their choices (Mora, 2002).

Preferences are graphically represented by indifference curves, which show combinations of goods that provide the same level of well-being. In turn, budget constraints express consumption possibilities determined by available income and current prices. The interaction between these two elements allows us to understand how consumers adjust their decisions based on economic changes, making this theory a key tool for analyzing behavior and projecting market trends (Gallegos & Taddei, 2022).

One of the fundamental elements of this theoretical framework is the elasticity of demand, which measures the degree of consumer sensitivity to variations in prices or income. Demand is elastic when small changes in price generate large fluctuations in the quantity demanded, common in non-essential goods or those with substitutes. In contrast, inelastic demand reflects

less sensitivity, typical of essential goods such as food or medicine. Understanding this dynamic is essential both for companies, which adjust prices and commercial strategies, and also for the State when designing economic policies (Chilán, 2022).

Another relevant principle is utility maximization, which explains how consumers efficiently allocate their income among different goods, seeking to receive the same level of marginal utility. This equalization process allows us to understand how spending is distributed and how consumers modify their consumption patterns in response to variations in prices or income, proving useful for modeling individual behaviors, predicting reactions to changing economic scenarios, and designing intervention strategies (León, 2019).

Essential Assumptions of Consumer Behavior

The basic assumptions of consumer theory are fundamental pillars that allow for the construction of explanatory models of purchasing behavior (Bonilla, 2013). The first of these is the assumption of complete preferences, which posits that individuals can compare and rank all available consumption alternatives. This means that, faced with different options, consumers are able to determine which they prefer or whether they are indifferent between them, which facilitates rational and coherent decision-making. However, in practice, this ability can be affected by information limitations or external influences such as culture and advertising. Nevertheless, this assumption constitutes a key theoretical basis for understanding how consumers choose products or services, as in the case of students evaluating different food franchises (Villacis, 2021).

Second, the principle of transitivity guarantees consistency in preferences: if an individual prefers good A over good B, and good B over good C, then they must also prefer good A over good C. This consistency allows choices to be predictable and not arbitrary, facilitating sound economic models. However, in everyday life, emotional, social, or momentary factors can lead to inconsistent decisions. Even so, transitivity remains essential for understanding consumer behavior and their reaction to market changes (Tenorio & Mideros, 2022).

Finally, the rationality assumption holds that consumers act to maximize their utility within income and price constraints, choosing the options that provide the greatest benefit. Although complete rationality has been challenged by the emergence of behaviors influenced by emotions, social pressures, or cognitive

limitations, which sometimes lead to seemingly irrational decisions, it remains a useful framework for analyzing consumption, now complemented by contributions from psychology and behavioral economics (Salazar et al., 2023).

Budget Constraint and Optimal Consumption Choice

In consumer theory, the budget constraint defines the set of options available to an individual based on their income and the prices of goods or services. Graphically, it represents a line marking the possible combinations a consumer can purchase without exceeding their budget. For example, a university student with a limited income must choose between food and transportation, knowing that increasing spending in one area implies reducing spending in another. This framework explains how changes in income or prices directly influence consumer choices, reflecting real economic limitations (Nerja, 2023).

The optimal consumption choice occurs when an individual selects the combination of goods that provides the greatest possible satisfaction without exceeding their budget constraint. Graphically, this corresponds to the point where the highest indifference curve tangents to the budget line (Soledispa, 2022). In the context of food franchises, this optimal choice illustrates how a student can balance their preferences for different products, such as hamburgers and french fries, within the limits of their spending capacity, thus illustrating rational consumer behavior.

In summary, indifference curves and budget lines are graphical tools that complement the explanation of the choice process. The former illustrate the combinations of goods that generate equal levels of satisfaction for the consumer, while the latter represent the feasible purchase options according to budget and prices. These concepts allow for a detailed analysis of market dynamics and how consumers adjust their consumption habits in competitive and changing sectors such as fast food (Rodríguez, 2021).

Sociocultural and Personal Influences on Consumer Behavior

The sociocultural factors, such as culture, social class, family, and social norms, influence how consumers perceive products and services. Social trends and cultural movements, such as veganism, can drastically alter purchasing decisions. Advertising campaigns that appeal to specific cultural values can also impact how consumers view certain products,

making the sociocultural context an essential variable for understanding consumer behavior (Moreno et al., 2022).

In addition, personal factors, including age, gender, income level, marital status, and education, among others, also influence purchasing decisions, along with prior and individual experiences. Thus, a young university student may choose to consume fast food for convenience, while a professional with greater purchasing power may prefer healthier options. These personal factors, combined with sociocultural ones, create a complex environment that influences purchasing decisions, demonstrating that consumer behavior cannot be understood solely through traditional economic models, without considering the external and internal influences that affect daily choices (Gonzales & Vasquez, 2022).

Key Microeconomic Variables in the Analysis of University Consumers

In this research, the microeconomic analysis of university consumers considers variables such as perceived price, disposable income, and individual preferences to explain students' purchasing decisions. This study also includes willingness to pay, that is, the maximum price a consumer is willing to spend to acquire a good, a key variable that clarifies how students balance perceived value and economic sacrifice within the framework of their budget constraints (Roa, 2006).

Microeconomic variables are key to understanding how consumers make purchasing decisions in contexts where resources are limited. These variables, including perceived price, perceived utility, disposable income, budget allocated to franchise consumption, and brand preferences, interact in complex ways to influence purchasing behavior. By analyzing their combined influence, it is possible to identify patterns and trends that help companies design pricing and marketing strategies better suited to the needs and expectations of their customers, especially in dynamic sectors such as food franchises (Baltimore, 2023).

Perceived price is not limited to the monetary cost of a product, but also includes the consumer's subjective valuation based on quality, reputation, and comparison with alternatives. This perception influences willingness to pay and can lead a consumer to prefer a more expensive option if they associate that price with greater value or experience. Similarly, perceived utility refers to the expected benefit or satisfaction, which varies according to preferences, needs, and prior experiences.

Maximizing this utility is a central principle in decision-making, determining not only what is purchased, but also loyalty and repeat purchases (Cárdenas et al., 2023).

Likewise, disposable income directly influences consumers' ability and willingness to purchase goods and services. Higher income allows them to choose higher-quality or more expensive products or services, while a reduction in income forces them to prioritize spending and seek more economical options. Understanding this variable is crucial for franchises to adjust their offers, prices, and promotions, optimizing customer acquisition and retention in different market segments (Ramírez, 2022).

Finally, brand preferences reflect the emotional connection and accumulated experience of consumers with certain brands, influencing their purchasing decisions and willingness to pay a premium price. These preferences can stem from reputation, perceived quality, or identification with values associated with the brand, and are fundamental for building lasting and competitive relationships. From a business perspective, strengthening this connection through positioning strategies and emotional marketing is vital for maintaining loyalty and increasing market share in an increasingly competitive and segmented market (Andrade et al., 2022).

Methodology

The research adopts a quantitative approach, which allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data using structured instruments such as pre-designed surveys (Guerrero, 2022). This method facilitates obtaining objective and comparable results, focusing on identifying and characterizing the consumption trends and patterns of students at the Technical University of Machala (UTMACH) in relation to international food franchises, without intervening in or modifying the observed variables.

In terms of scope, the study is descriptive, aiming to both identify and analyze specific variables that influence consumer behavior, such as perceived price, perceived utility, and disposable income. While it seeks to describe a particular reality that is still understudied in the local context, it also explores possible relationships between these variables, based on the principles of consumer theory. This approach allows for a detailed view of the phenomenon, as well as laying the groundwork for future, more in-depth or explanatory research (Alonso et al., 2022).

Likewise, the type of research is descriptive because it allows for the systematic description of the characteristics of a population, situation, or area of interest based on a theory or hypothesis (Moreno, et al., 2021). This research is ideal for explaining and characterizing microeconomic factors related to consumer theory applied to the consumption behavior of UTMACH students. This research is suitable because it allows for the easy identification of trends, patterns, and perceptions linked to the study variables, without manipulating them or establishing causal relationships.

Regarding the methodological design, it is non-experimental, cross-sectional, and field-based, since there is no deliberate manipulation of the variables; rather, they are observed as they occur in their natural context. It is cross-sectional because data is collected at a single point in time, capturing a snapshot of consumption behavior. Finally, it is field-based because the information is obtained directly from the participants' everyday environment, such as the university campus and its digital platforms (Cruz et al., 2021).

The research method employed is analytical. This study not only seeks to describe the characteristics of food franchise consumption among university students but also to interpret the interaction of the microeconomic variables considered, allowing the decomposition of the consumption phenomenon into its essential components and identifying relationships between them to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence purchasing decisions (Lopera et al., 2010).

Population and Sample

The study population consists of the 15,042 students officially enrolled at UTMACH during the 2025-1 academic period, according to institutional records (UTMACH, 2025). Given the quantitative approach and the knowledge of the units of observation, a representative sample is required, calculated using the formula for finite populations with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. A success rate of 50% ($p=0.5$) and its complement ($q=0.5$) are assumed, considering a confidence level of 1.96 (Aguilar, 2005).

The formula used is as follows:

Equation 1.*Sample Size for a Finite Population*

$$n = \frac{N * Z^2 * p * q}{e^2 * (N - 1) + Z^2 * p * q}$$

$$n = \frac{15042 * (1.96)^2 * 0.5 * 0.5}{(0.05)^2 * (15042 - 1) + (1.96)^2 * 0.5 * 0.5}$$

$$n = \frac{15042 * 3.8416 * 0.25}{0.0025 * 15041 + 0.9604}$$

$$n = \frac{15042 * 0.9604}{37.6025 + 0.9604}$$

$$n = \frac{14440.36}{38.5629} = 375$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size (15,042)

Z = z-value for a 95% confidence level (1.96)

p = probability of success (0.5)

q = probability of failure (0.5)

e = margin of error (0.05)

To ensure the validity of the findings, only regularly enrolled students with a history of dining at international food franchises were included. The sampling technique employed was probabilistic without stratification, characterized by the random selection of individuals directly from the entire population, without subdivisions based on faculty or other internal criteria. This methodological decision is justified by logistical limitations in accessing information broken down by academic unit, thus opting for a comprehensive sampling approach that preserves both the principle of randomness and the statistical rigor of the research, following established methodological guidelines (Polo, 2022).

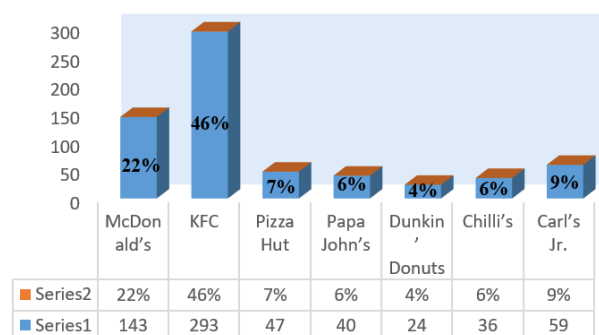
The data collection process was carried out using a structured digital questionnaire developed on the Google Forms platform. This instrument consisted of closed-ended, multiple-choice items designed to capture quantifiable data related to student consumption practices at international food franchise establishments. The questionnaire is organized into sections that address the main variables of the study: perceived price, perceived utility, disposable income, budget allocated to franchises, and brand preference. To measure aspects such as perceived utility, satisfaction, and frequency of consumption, a 5-point Likert scale was used, thus facilitating the analysis (Falla & Gonzáles, 2022).

For the analysis of qualitative variables—including brand preference and frequented establishments—frequency analysis (absolute and relative) was used, allowing for the identification of predominant patterns in the responses. Regarding quantitative variables, such as reported subjective utility and monthly income amounts, measures of central tendency and variability were calculated, with particular emphasis on the arithmetic mean and standard deviation as the main indicators.

This research is descriptive in scope with interpretive potential, limited to the context of UTMACH and focused on understanding the consumption behavior of its students in relation to international fast-food franchises. It did not seek to establish causal relationships, but rather to describe behavioral patterns based on microeconomic variables grounded in consumer theory. The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles, ensuring the anonymity of participants, the confidentiality of the information provided, and the voluntary nature of their participation. The data obtained have a strictly academic purpose, and the entire research process was conducted in accordance with the protocols and ethical regulations governing scientific research in the university setting.

Results

The surveys were conducted with 400 students officially enrolled at the Technical University of Machala, exceeding the calculation obtained in the sample of (n=375) in order to strengthen the precision and reliability of the study.

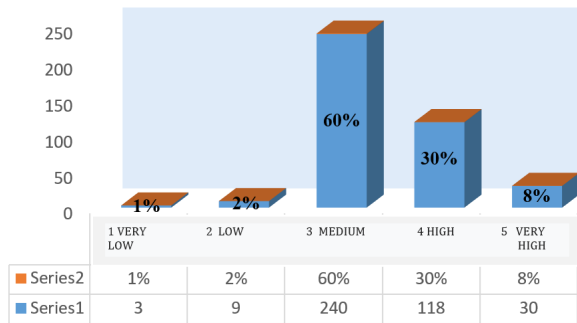
Figure 1*International Food Franchise Preference*

Since this is a multiple-choice question, the total number of responses exceeds 400 because the question allowed respondents to select up to 3 options. Therefore, the results are expressed as the total number of mentions, not the total number of respondents. Consequently, KFC is the most preferred franchise, with 293 mentions (46%), reflecting its leadership and positioning in the

city, McDonald's followed with 143 mentions (22%), demonstrating that it is also a highly preferred franchise among students. The other franchises show lower levels of preference: Carl's Jr. (9%), Pizza Hut (7%), Papa John's (6%), Chili's (6%), and Dunkin' Donuts (4%).

Figure 2

Perceived Price Rating of Favorite Franchise (Scale 1-5)



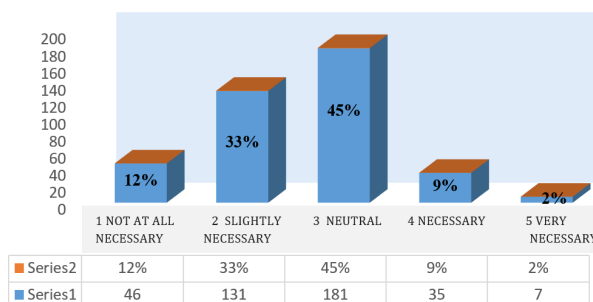
Note: 1 = Very low, 5 = Very high.

Regarding the perceived price rating, 60% of the mentions are at a medium level, meaning that most people perceive the prices of their favorite fast food as reasonable and are willing to pay them; 30% consider the prices high and would therefore question purchasing a product from these franchises; while 8% rate the price as very high, which suggests that students recognize the high cost, which may be associated with brand preference or consumption experiences.

Finally, we observed that not everyone considers the prices excessive; 3% (the sum of the "very low" and "low" responses) believe that shopping at their favorite franchise is economical. Despite these considerations, the prevailing perception is that prices are moderate or slightly high, a typical characteristic of international franchises that offer standardized products and are influenced by brand prestige.

Figure 3

Perception of the Need to Consume from International Franchises (Scale 1-5)



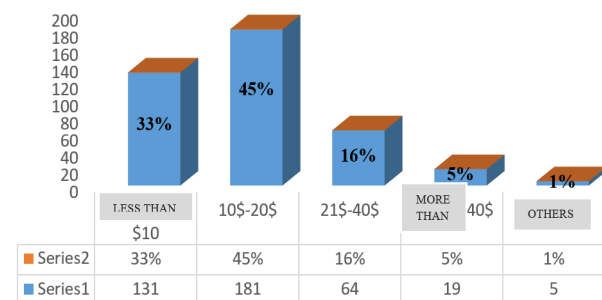
Note: 1 = Not necessary, 5 = Very necessary.

Therefore, according to the data obtained, which helps us understand how necessary students consider eating at food franchises, 45% classify it as neutral, understanding that buying fast food at these establishments is not essential to their lifestyle, but they don't rule it out either. 33% indicate it is somewhat necessary, and 12% consider it not necessary at all, representing a 45% perception of low utility. This suggests that almost half of the population does not consider eating at these franchises essential, perhaps due to healthy lifestyles, price, or a preference for local options.

On the other hand, 9% consider it necessary and 2% very necessary to consume food franchises, which shows that a minority of the population associates franchises with factors such as speed, convenience or time saving.

Figure 4

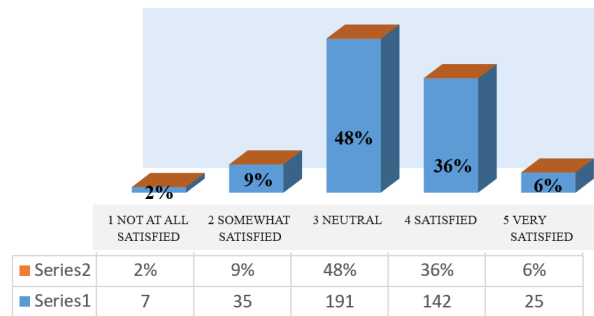
Approximate Monthly Spending on Fast Food Franchises



Regarding the monthly amount of money students allocate to franchise purchases, 45% reported spending between \$10 and \$20, followed by 33% who spend less than \$10 per month. This indicates that the majority of respondents do not spend more than \$20 per month at these establishments, representing a low to moderate expenditure and signifying that franchise purchases do not represent a significant portion of their monthly budget.

It is also observed that 16% spend between \$21 and \$40, which would be understood as more frequent or habitual consumption, while 5% spend more than \$40 and 1% are in the other response option.

Figure 5
Satisfaction with the Price-Quality Ratio of the Favorite Franchise (Scale 1-5)

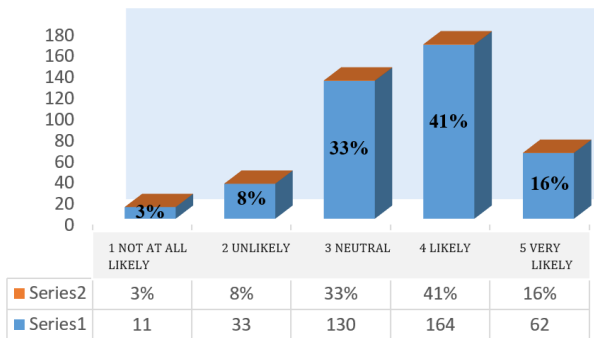


Note: 1 = Not at all satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied

Regarding satisfaction with the quality-price ratio, 48% are neutral, meaning they perceive neither a significant advantage nor disadvantage in what they pay for and what they receive. An additional 36% report being satisfied, and 6% are very satisfied. This reflects that a considerable proportion of consumers find a balance between the quality of what they consume and its price.

However, 9% mention that they are somewhat dissatisfied and 1% are not at all satisfied, although they represent a minority, it is not ruled out that there are students who do not consider that the prices justify the quality of the products offered by food franchises.

Figure 6
What is the probability that I will recommend this franchise to a friend or family member?



In conclusion, 41% of the population indicated that they are likely to recommend consuming food at their preferred franchises, followed by 16% who would definitely recommend consuming food at these establishments, reflecting a positive and favorable perception of franchises.

On the other hand, 33% do not have a clear or defined option, so they chose the neutral option, and 11% (sum of "unlikely" and "not at all likely") state that there is little or no probability of recommending consumption in franchises, which represents a dissatisfied minority.

Discussion

The study's findings reveal that the consumption behavior of students in Machala toward international food franchises can be interpreted as decisions primarily influenced by economic constraints and value indicators that minimize perceived risks in the purchase. The distribution of preferences shows a marked concentration: a single brand captures approximately 46% of the choices, while the second most preferred reaches only 22%, with the remainder distributed among other options with lower percentages. This configuration demonstrates that attributes such as uniformity in service, the perception of immediacy, and prior menu recognition function as heuristics or mental simplifications that replace exhaustive analyses of objective quality. Consequently, the marginal utility derived from the product itself remains modest; however, the overall consumption experience is acceptable enough to motivate repeat visits, provided these remain within the limits of a low monthly expenditure.

Spending capacity for this category is predominantly moderate, with 63% of respondents spending less than twenty dollars per month. This suggests an inelastic income-consumption relationship (Engel curve with a reduced slope) for these types of establishments, as positive variations in disposable income do not correlate with significant increases in either the frequency of consumption or the average value of each transaction. In this regard, previous research, such as that by Roldán et al. (2021), indicates that short-term promotional activities have limited effects over time unless complemented by operational improvements such as reduced wait times, greater geographical proximity of stores, or the design of specific offers for specific groups. In this context, price sensitivity is more pronounced among occasional or undecided consumers than among more loyal customers, suggesting that commercial strategies should prioritize simplifying the decision-making process and reducing psychological barriers, rather than focusing exclusively on price discounts.

A comparison with studies conducted in university populations in other Latin American countries reveals points of convergence, particularly in identifying convenience and brand value as key segmentation criteria within urban environments where global franchises and

local alternatives operate simultaneously. For example, Cahuana et al. (2023) document that the dominant brand typically captures between 40% and 50% of the market, maintaining favorable recommendation rates despite modest sensory evaluations. This research contributes to this body of knowledge with two distinctive nuances: first, it quantifies the proportion of consumers who express a neutral perceived utility at around 40%; second, it demonstrates that the willingness to recommend a franchise can be increased through relatively small operational improvements, such as reductions of less than 15% in service times during peak periods. This latter aspect, frequently addressed qualitatively in the literature, acquires a quantitative measurement here, allowing for more precise planning.

The results also partially align with research highlighting price sensitivity among student populations with limited resources, showing that this elasticity is not uniform and is more pronounced among those who allocate less than ten dollars per week for this purpose. However, the analysis introduces a novel perspective by conceptually dissociating the reported level of satisfaction from the actual amount spent. It was found that 31% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the experience, but still reduced their frequency of consumption, mainly due to the need to allocate their budget to other priorities such as transportation or academic materials. This finding suggests that the loyalty observed in terms of repeat purchases could be explained more by pragmatic factors—such as minimizing the effort required to search for options and the physical proximity to the campus—than by a substantial increase in the perceived benefit directly associated with the food product, as also suggested by studies in the local context (Caicedo et al., 2024).

An emerging finding, not anticipated in the initial design, was the identification of a considerable segment of undecided consumers who show a high receptiveness to minor adjustments in the commercial offering structure. The research suggests that modifications such as rethinking combinations aimed at students and transparently communicating projected wait times could capture between 8% and 12% of the demand currently received by local competitors with similar value propositions. This reactivity is significantly amplified when the establishment is located within a ten-minute walk, positioning location and efficient customer flow management as strategic factors with a potential impact greater than other actions, such as excessive menu diversification or the introduction of specialty products without adequate supporting logistics, as observed in urban dynamics studies (Calle et al., 2021).

The practical implications for managing these franchises point decisively toward creating business propositions that minimize difficulties or inconveniences for the consumer. This involves a two-pronged approach: first, configuring anticipated value packages or combinations that align with the most common spending levels; and second, establishing and rigorously monitoring operational indicators related to wait times, essential for fulfilling the core promise of convenience. The evidence gathered indicates that a 20% reduction in service time inconsistency can translate into an increase of more than five percentage points in the likelihood of recommending among neutral customers. In contrast, isolated price reductions, unrelated to operational improvements, show a marginal effect, with variations of less than 2% in monthly consumption frequency.

Conclusion

The research conducted examined the consumption patterns of international food franchises among students at the Technical University of Machala. The results confirm that their purchasing choices are the product of the interaction of multiple microeconomic factors. While a generally neutral subjective utility and a limited monthly expenditure—with most spending not exceeding twenty dollars—were observed, variables such as personal price perception, brand experience, and actual economic means exert a decisive influence. This demonstrates that, for this group, the act of consumption transcends the mere fulfillment of a nutritional need, becoming a rational choice that weighs the limitations of the available budget while simultaneously pursuing intangible values linked to brand symbolism and practicality.

The research identified that university student loyalty is conditioned more by reduced search costs and geographic proximity than by a substantial increase in the product's marginal utility. Leading brands like KFC and McDonald's concentrate preferences not necessarily due to absolute qualitative superiority, but rather because of their ability to offer standardization, speed, and familiarity, functioning as cognitive shortcuts in the decision-making process. Furthermore, it was found that strategies focused on reducing wait times and offering pre-configured combo meals have a more significant impact on attracting and retaining the undecided segment than isolated price promotions.

In summary, this work provides a valuable empirical basis for understanding youth consumption dynamics in a local context, underscoring the relevance of consumer theory for interpreting seemingly simple choice patterns. The results offer practical input for franchises to

adjust their sales and marketing strategies, prioritizing operational optimization and a clear value proposition over mere promotional activities. Finally, the study lays the groundwork for future research that explores in greater depth the sociocultural and behavioral dimensions of consumption within this segment, as well as its evolution in changing economic scenarios.

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