

# Consumer Rights Awareness Among Restaurant Customers: The Case Of Balıkesir

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## Abstract

Consumer rights are among the fundamental regulations aimed at ensuring the economic and legal security of individuals who purchase goods and services. When consumers are dissatisfied with the products or services they receive, they have the opportunity to seek redress through various legal channels. Contemporary studies on consumer rights primarily focus on general consumer behavior, levels of awareness, and legal processes. However, research examining consumer rights awareness on a sectoral basis particularly within the service industry remains limited. Restaurant services stand out as a domain where consumer rights are directly experienced, and where factors such as service quality, hygiene, and pricing play a significant role in customer satisfaction. Despite this, no research has been found specifically addressing the awareness levels of restaurant customers regarding their consumer rights. The aim of this study is to determine the level of awareness among individuals who benefit from restaurant services regarding consumer rights, and to contribute to the related literature. In this study, the interview technique, one of the qualitative research methods, was employed. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with customers who received service in restaurants (dine-in and fast food) operating in Balıkesir, Türkiye, between April 1 and May 30, 2025, using a convenience sampling method. Based on the data collected from 38 participants, it was found that restaurant customers generally have a moderate level of awareness regarding consumer rights. The most frequently reported issue was hygiene deficiencies. A majority of participants stated that they primarily attempted to resolve their complaints through verbal feedback.

**Keywords:** Consumer Rights, Awareness Level, Balıkesir, Restaurant.

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## INTRODUCTION

A consumer is the final user of a product or service and may be an individual or an economic enterprise. While consumers may purchase products, they do not necessarily have to use them; unlike customers, consumers are the ones who directly use goods or services. (Mishra & Varshney, 2024: 641) Consumers face various risks in the products and services they purchase. Therefore, in the event of potential adverse situations, the necessary actions must be predefined and carried out in a systematic manner. The history of consumer protection dates back as far as Babylon and Rome (Kaynak & Akan, 2011:42). It is known that modern consumer rights regulations first emerged in the United States in the late 19th century. In parallel with these developments, the first legal regulation on consumer protection in Turkey was enacted on February 23, 1995, under the title "Law No. 4077 on the Protection of Consumers." Through these regulations, consumer rights were placed under legal protection.

One of the main issues consumers face during consumption is related to pricing. The first consumer organizations were established primarily to prevent such price exploitation. Although these early efforts had limited impact at the beginning, over time the concept of "consumer protection" gained recognition in the field of law and began to be reflected in judicial rulings. Legal and administrative regulations aimed at protecting consumers can be considered interventionist policies developed by governments in favor of economically disadvantaged consumers (Üçöz, 2012: 26). However, consumer protection is not solely a legal matter; it is an interdisciplinary issue that also encompasses economic and sociological dimensions (Kaynak&Akan, 2011:42). The problems experienced by consumers, as well as the behaviors and attitudes

they exhibit in response to these problems, fall within the scope of sociology. This is because consumer complaint behaviors vary across different cultures (Liu & McClure, 2001).

Although legislation on consumer protection provides an important foundation, its effectiveness is directly related to consumers' awareness of their own rights. The mere existence of legal regulations is not sufficient. It is crucial for consumers to be informed about how to exercise these rights and to know the appropriate channels to follow when they encounter problems (Dickinson & Shaver, 1982). Therefore, informed and conscious consumers not only defend their own rights but also contribute to the creation of a fairer and more transparent market environment.

In modern economies, consumer protection must continuously adapt to safeguard against unfair practices and to ensure market fairness. The evolving nature of the Law on the Protection of Consumers not only focuses on safeguarding consumer rights but also addresses honest digital transactions and environmental sustainability. International organizations such as UNCTAD, UNGCP, and the OECD have incorporated legal improvements that aim to effectively manage digital transactions and promote sustainable practices within the scope of consumer protection (Corrales Compagnucci, Fenwick, Haapio & Vermeulen, 2022). Within the scope of the accessible literature, no study was found that specifically examined restaurant customers' awareness of consumer rights. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the level of consumer rights awareness among individuals who use restaurant services in the city center of Balıkesir. It was anticipated that the findings obtained from this research would contribute to the existing body of literature and help fill this gap. The sub-objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify the most common consumer complaints and to determine the behavioral patterns exhibited by consumers when faced with such problems
- To contribute to the relevant literature and support future research on the subject.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### CONSUMER RIGHTS AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT

The term "consumer" was initially introduced and employed by economists. Over time, the concept extended beyond economics and gained significant importance in the field of law (Acar, 2012: 10). In the Law No. 6502 on the Protection of Consumers, the consumer is defined as "*a natural or legal person acting for non-commercial or non-professional purposes*" (Law on the Protection of Consumers, 2014). According to the Turkish Language Association, a consumer is defined as "*a person who benefits from, purchases, uses, or consumes goods and services*" (Turkish Language Association, 2025).

Consumers are exposed to various risks due to factors such as lack of information about the goods and services they purchase, difficulties in evaluating the price-quality balance, the presence of a wide variety of products in the market, and misleading advertising practices. This situation has necessitated certain initiatives aimed at protecting consumer rights (Kaynak and Akan, 2011). Consumer rights are shaped by the scope and content of legal regulations (Sirmen, 2013). The first institutional initiatives for consumer rights are considered to have been launched in 1962 by then-President of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Kennedy laid the foundation for modern regulations in this area by publicly declaring four fundamental rights of consumers. These four basic rights were: the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard. These principles continue to serve as a basis for the comprehensive and positive treatment of consumer rights and for ensuring fair and timely resolution in administrative courts (Schrader, 2007: 85)

The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP) were first adopted in 1985 and revised in 2015. These guidelines provide a comprehensive framework for: protecting consumer rights, promoting ethical business practices, and encouraging fair trade in global markets (Wei, 2017). Over time, these rights have evolved into a more extensive framework at the international level. In 1985, the United Nations redefined them under the title of fundamental consumer rights, expanding their scope and global recognition (Şahin, 2024: 22).

The United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection (UNGCP) serve as a global framework offering minimum standards and cooperation principles. With the 2015 revision, its scope was significantly expanded to directly address corporate responsibility and best practices, emphasizing areas such as the protection of vulnerable consumers and access to essential services. Thanks to its comprehensive nature and consensual adoption, the UNGCP has acquired a strong moral authority, positioning itself as a reference point for both developed and developing countries. Moreover, through the UN's active involvement in capacity-building and collaborative initiatives, consumer protection has transcended

national borders and has become a prominent issue on the international policy agenda (Benöhr, 2020: 123-124)

The universal consumer rights adopted on April 16, 1985 and most recently updated in 2016 by the United Nations (United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, 2016) are as follows:

1. Protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers
2. Protection of consumers from hazards to their health and safety
3. Protection and promotion of the economic interests of consumers
4. Access to adequate information to enable consumers to make informed choices according to their individual wishes and needs
5. Availability of effective consumer dispute resolution and redress mechanisms
6. Freedom to form consumer and other relevant groups and the opportunity of such organizations to present their views in decision-making processes
7. Ensuring that the level of protection afforded to consumers using electronic commerce is not less than that afforded in other forms of commerce
8. Protection of consumer privacy and the free flow of information globally.

Thanks to the aforementioned declaration of the United Nations, consumer rights accepted by many countries have acquired a universal dimension that is recognized and protected on a global scale. At the international level, organizations such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) have strengthened consumer protection frameworks (Ezechukwu, 2023; Häberli, 2016).

At the regional level, the European Commission's agenda titled "Strengthening Consumer Resilience for Sustainable Recovery," adopted in 2020 and projected to continue until 2025, presents a proactive approach to modern challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to digital and green economies (Kindylidi & Cabral, 2021).

In Turkey, legal regulations for the protection of consumer rights were first systematically established with the enactment of the "Law No. 4077 on the Protection of Consumers" in 1995. This law is considered a significant step toward safeguarding consumers' economic interests and raising awareness. Subsequently, the scope of consumer rights was expanded through amendments introduced by the "Law No. 4822" enacted in 2003. However, changes in consumption habits, the process of globalization, and transformations in marketing techniques rendered the existing legal framework inadequate over time. For this reason, the need arose for a more comprehensive and contemporary regulation regarding consumer protection, and the "Law No. 6502 on the Protection of Consumers" was enacted in 2013 (Aslan, 2016). With this most recent regulation, consumer rights were redefined in line with modern standards. Within this framework, the implementation and supervision of consumer protection practices were assigned to specific institutions and authorities. In Turkey, the Ministry of Trade is the competent authority directly responsible for consumer rights. Consumers can submit their complaints directly to the Ministry through platforms such as the e-Government portal, the Presidential Communication Center (CİMER), and the Consumer Helpline (Alo 175).

Consumers' efforts to make their voices heard in support of sustainability constitute an important action in service of the public interest. This may take the form of reacting to negative circumstances or rewarding positive behaviors. In doing so, consumers can penalize certain suppliers while rewarding others (Schrader & Thøgersen, 2011, ss. 6-8).

Another effective initiative for protecting consumer rights is the establishment of consumer organizations. It is known that such organizations first emerged in the United States around the mid-20th century. This movement later spread to Europe and other parts of the world (Hayta, 2007). In Turkey, consumer organizations are defined under the "Definitions" section of Law No. 6502 as *"associations, foundations, or their umbrella organizations established for the purpose of consumer protection"* (Consumer Protection Law, 2025). Organizations established to protect consumers can be classified as public institutions, private sector-based entities, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations founded by consumers themselves. In addition, there are also consumer cooperatives that aim to safeguard consumers' economic interests. Among the first organizations established in Turkey are the Consumer Protection Association (TÜKÖDER) and the Consumer Rights Association (THD) (Günel, 2022: 812). Figure 1 illustrates several consumer protection organizations operating in Turkey. The common aim and objective of these organizations is to contribute to the development of awareness regarding the pursuit of rights and to provide support to consumers in addressing potential problems that may arise during this process.

**Figure 1.** Consumer Protection Organizations in Turkey

Public Institutions	Private Sector-based Entities	Non-governmental Organizations	Cooperatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Ministry of Trade</li> <li>•Consumer Arbitration Committees</li> <li>•Competition Authority</li> <li>•Ministries of Health and Agriculture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Advertising Self-Regulatory Board (RÖK)</li> <li>•Brand Quality Association</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•TÜKODER</li> <li>•TÜDEF</li> <li>•TÜKO-BİR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Food Cooperatives</li> <li>•Farmer-Consumer Cooperative</li> </ul>

Source: Compiled by the authors

## CONSUMER RIGHTS AWARENESS

In order for consumers to protect themselves against potential problems, they must first be aware of their fundamental rights. Ibarra and Revilla (2014:67) defined consumer awareness as the knowledge of the universal consumer rights. However, merely knowing these rights is not sufficient for true awareness. Along with current consumer protection laws and regulations, it is also essential to be informed about the characteristics of the product or service and the appropriate channels for filing complaints (Dickinson and Shaver, 1982:241). Possessing an adequate level of awareness in this regard enables individuals to make informed decisions and increases the likelihood of satisfaction (Makanyeza, 2015).

There are numerous socio-demographic factors that influence consumer rights awareness. Relevant studies indicate that awareness levels regarding consumer rights remain considerably low (Usta, 2001; Altunışık et al., 2004; Nart, 2008; Kaynak & Akan, 2011; Pakmak & Koçoğlu, 2019). Although consumers are aware of legal regulations, they report having low levels of awareness regarding their rights (Usta, 2001). Age is one of the significant variables influencing consumer awareness. In particular, individuals above a certain age tend to exhibit more conscious attitudes toward their rights, shaped by life experiences and the consumer-related issues they have encountered (Pakmak & Koçoğlu, 2019). Furthermore, gender can also play a decisive role in shaping awareness. Research shows that male and female consumers may differ in how they perceive and defend their rights, and these differences are reflected in their levels of awareness (Usta, 2001).

Various studies have identified that as individuals' education levels increase, their awareness of consumer rights also tends to rise (Dickinson & Shaver, 1982; Usta, 2001; Lam & Tang, 2003; Gülmez, 2006; Kaynak & Akan, 2011; Pakmak & Koçoğlu, 2019). Education not only encourages individuals to engage in rights-seeking behavior but also equips them with the ability to critically evaluate the information presented to consumers. Occupational status, particularly retirement, is another variable that influences interest in and awareness of consumer rights (Şahin & Kor, 2009; Pakmak & Koçoğlu, 2019). Retired individuals often have more free time and a greater tendency to share negative experiences, which contributes to this heightened awareness. These findings underscore the importance of designing consumer rights education and awareness campaigns with careful consideration of demographic characteristics.

## METHOD

The primary aim of this study is to determine the level of consumer rights awareness among customers dining in restaurants located in the city center of Balıkesir. Balıkesir is known for its rich culinary culture and is often referred to as “the province that feeds Turkey” (Demirel & Karakuş, 2019: 1385). Due to changing economic and socio-demographic conditions, as well as the rise in gastronomic tourism, the habit of dining out in Balıkesir has notably increased in recent years (Demirel & Karakuş, 2019; Doğdubay & Şahin, 2023). Therefore, the study population consisted of customers who dined in restaurants (including eateries and ready-to-eat food establishments) in Balıkesir. A qualitative research design was adopted, and semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection tool. Qualitative research allows for the in-depth and holistic examination of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of events within their natural settings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The data collected through the interview technique provide detailed insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives on the subject matter.

The interview form used in the study was developed by the researchers through a review of the relevant literature (Gülmez, 2006; Nart, 2008; Kaynak & Akan, 2011). Prior to finalization, expert opinion was sought. In this context, two Professors, one Assistant Professor, and one Research Assistant contributed to the process. In addition, feedback was obtained from two consumers to assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the questions, and necessary revisions were made accordingly to finalize the form. The interview form consisted of three main sections. The first section included questions aimed at identifying the demographic characteristics of the participants (gender, age, occupation, income level). The second section contained questions designed to measure the participants' level of awareness regarding consumer rights. The third and final section included questions related to the violations of consumer rights experienced by participants during their restaurant visits. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with 38 participants selected through a convenience sampling method. The data collection process was carried out between April 1 and May 30, 2025. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed into written format, and subsequently analyzed.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 demonstrates the demographic characteristics of the participants .

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants**

Variable	Group	n	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	18	47,4
	Male	20	52,6
Education Level	Primary Education	2	5,3
	High School	4	10,5
	Associate Degree	5	13,2
	Bachelor's Degree	25	65,8
	Postgraduate	2	5,3
Year of Birth	1970–1980	3	7,9
	1981–1990	3	7,9
	1991–2000	12	31,6
	2001–2007	20	52,6
Occupation	Private sector	12	31,6
	Public employee	11	28,9
	Student	14	36,8
	Unemployed	1	2,6
Monthly Per Capita Income	0–10.000 TL	10	26,3
	11.000–22.000 TL	13	34,2
	23.000–33.000 TL	1	2,6
	34.000–44.000 TL	6	15,8
	45.000–55.000 TL	3	7,9
	55.000 TL and above	5	13,2

According to Table 1, an examination of the gender distribution of the individuals participating in the study revealed that 47.4% were female and 52.6% were male. These proportions indicated that the sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender representation. Regarding educational levels, the majority of participants held a bachelor's degree (65.8%), followed by associate degrees (13.2%), high school diplomas (10.5%), primary education (5.3%), and postgraduate degrees (5.3%). This suggested that the majority of individuals included in the study were highly educated. An analysis of participants' birth years showed that 52.6% were born between 2001 and 2007, while 31.6% were born between 1991 and 2000; the proportion of participants born before these periods was limited to 15.8%. This finding indicated that the majority of the study participants belonged to a younger age group. In terms of occupational status, 36.8% were students, 31.6% were employed in the private sector, and 28.9% were public sector employees. Only 2.6% of the participants reported being unemployed. This distribution suggested that the majority

of participants were either actively engaged in the labor market or were still in the education process. When examining the participants' monthly per capita income levels, it was found that 34.2% were in the 11,000–22,000 TL range and 26.3% fell within the 0–10,000 TL range, with these two groups together constituting 60.5% of the total sample. In this context, it was evident that the sample predominantly comprised individuals from middle- and lower-income groups, whereas higher-income groups were underrepresented. These demographic findings revealed that the study was based on a sample largely composed of young, educated individuals with a moderate income level, and it was anticipated that their awareness of consumer rights might be shaped by this specific socioeconomic profile.

Figure 2 illustrates the participants' monthly frequency of dining at restaurants.

**Figure 2. Participants' Monthly Frequency of Dining At Restaurants**

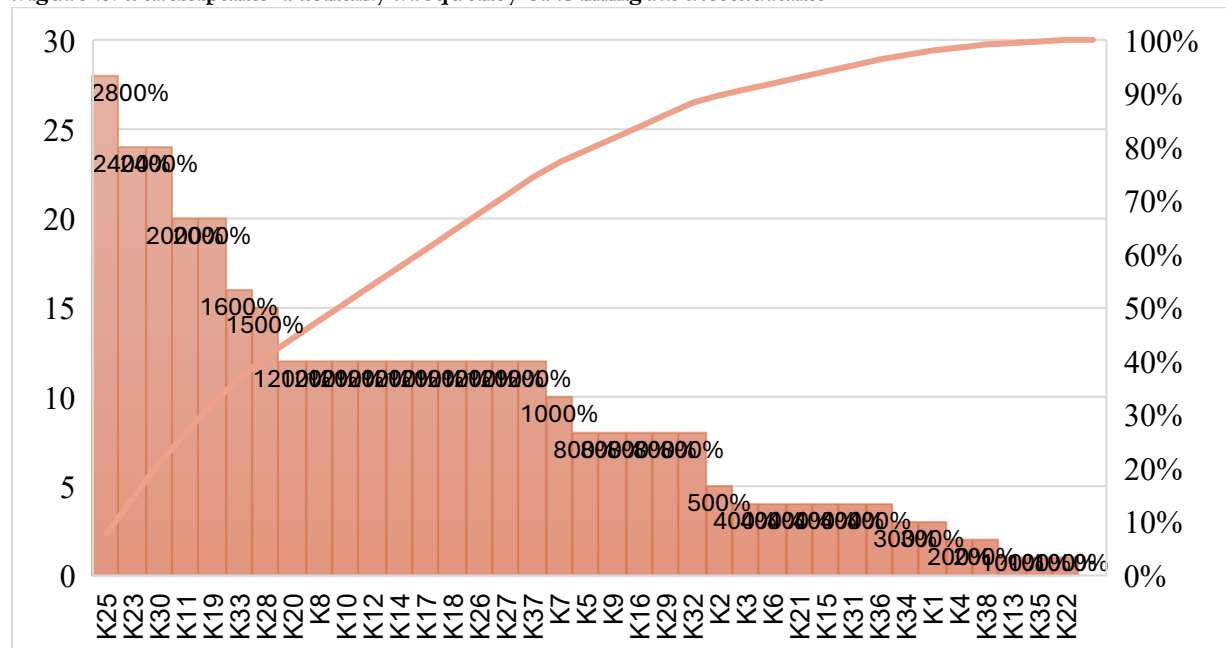


Figure 2 displays the distribution of participants' monthly frequency of dining at restaurants. The orange bars indicate how many individuals fall within each frequency range, while the red dashed line represents the overall average (approximately 8.95). This visualization revealed that the majority of participants dined at restaurants between 8 and 12 times per month. Participant K25 was the most frequent diner. This participant explained their situation as follows: "Since I work in a shopping mall, I eat out almost every day". Figure 3 presents the participants' level of awareness regarding consumer rights.

**Figure 3. Participants' Level Of Awareness Regarding Consumer Rights**



In the second section of the interview form, questions were included to determine participants' level of awareness regarding consumer rights. In this section, participants were first asked the question "How would you rate your level of knowledge on consumer rights?" and respond to it on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). Based on the data obtained, the arithmetic mean of participants' responses to this question was calculated as 3. This result indicated that participants generally had a moderate level of knowledge concerning consumer rights. Figure 3 displays the participants' level of knowledge regarding consumer rights.

Table 2 presents the participants' level of knowledge regarding consumer rights.

**Table 2. Level of Knowledge Regarding Consumer Rights**

Are You Aware of Your Rights as a Consumer?	n	Percentage (%)
Yes	9	23,68

Partially	24	63,16
No	5	13,16
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100</b>

According to Table 2, the analysis of responses to the interview question “Are you aware of your rights as a consumer?” revealed that the majority of participants had only partial knowledge in this regard. Specifically, 63.16% of the respondents answered “Partially,” indicating the existence of a basic awareness of consumer rights, yet suggesting that this knowledge had not been sufficiently deepened. Additionally, 23.68% of the participants stated that they were aware of their rights, which demonstrated that the number of individuals who were fully informed about consumer rights remained limited. In contrast, 13.16% reported not knowing their consumer rights at all. This finding highlighted the need for more effective dissemination of consumer education and awareness-raising practices across society. Overall, the results indicated that participants’ awareness of consumer rights was at a moderate level, yet there was a clear need for systematic efforts to enhance this awareness.

Table 3 presents the sources from which participants have obtained information about consumer rights  
**Table 3. Sources of Information on Consumer Rights**

Where Did You Learn About Your Consumer Rights?	n	Percentage (%)
Family	6	13,33
School	10	22,22
Media and Television	13	28,89
Legislations	3	6,67
Individual research	13	28,89
<b>Total*</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100</b>

\* One participant provided more than one answer.

According to Table 3, the responses to the question “Where did you learn about your consumer rights?” revealed that participants utilized a variety of information sources. The most frequently cited sources were media and television, along with individual research, each selected by 28.89% of the respondents. Participants indicated that they primarily gained knowledge about consumer rights through content encountered in everyday life or through their own personal efforts. This highlighted the effectiveness of both mass communication tools and individual initiative in disseminating information on consumer rights. Educational institutions were the source for 22.22% of participants, while 13.33% reported acquiring such knowledge from their families. These findings underscored the significant role of schools in the transmission of information on consumer rights, although this role appeared to be less dominant compared to media channels. Finally, legal sources such as legislation were identified as the least utilized source of information, with only 6.67% of participants reporting that they obtained knowledge from such materials. This relatively low percentage may be attributed to the complexity and inaccessibility of legal texts, making them less practical for the general public.

Table 4 presents the participants’ level of knowledge regarding consumer rights.

**Table 4. Consumer Rights Knowledge Status**

Are you familiar with the Consumer Protection Law?	n	Percentage (%)
Yes	7	18,42
Partially	12	31,58
No	19	50,00
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100</b>

According to Table 4, the responses to the question “Are you familiar with the Consumer Protection Law?” indicated that the majority of participants lacked sufficient knowledge in this area. Data showed that 50% of the participants stated they were not familiar with the law. This proportion suggested that the

legal foundations of consumer rights were not widely recognized within society and that the level of legal awareness remained low. Meanwhile, 31.58% of the participants reported having partial knowledge of the law, implying a basic awareness of consumer rights, although their understanding of legal regulations appeared to be superficial. Only 18.42% of the participants claimed to be familiar with the law, which revealed that a limited number of individuals were knowledgeable about their legal rights. These findings underscored the need for more comprehensive consumer education and public awareness campaigns, particularly in terms of making legal rights more accessible and understandable to the general public.

Table 5 presents the participants' level of knowledge regarding the consumer helpline.

**Table 5. Awareness Level Regarding the Consumer Helpline**

Do You Know the Phone Number of the Consumer Helpline?	n	Percentage (%)
Yes	12	31,58
No	26	68,42
<b>Total</b>	38	100

According to Table 5, the responses to the question "Do you know the phone number of the Consumer Helpline?" indicated that the vast majority of participants were unaware of this service. Specifically, 68.42% of respondents stated that they did not know the number. This figure highlighted a lack of promotion regarding support mechanisms offered to consumers and revealed a low level of public awareness concerning such services. On the other hand, 31.58% of participants reported that they were familiar with the helpline number. Although this suggested that a certain segment of the population possessed knowledge about accessing official support channels, the majority appeared to have limited potential to benefit from this opportunity. These findings underscored the importance of disseminating not only information about consumer rights but also about the available procedures and channels for the protection of these rights. In particular, it is crucial to increase the visibility of direct communication platforms such as the Alo 175 Consumer Helpline.

Table 6 presents the participants' membership status in consumer protection associations.

**Table 6. Membership Status in Consumer Protection Associations**

Are You a Member of Any Consumer Protection Associations?	n	Percentage (%)
Yes	0	0
No	38	100
<b>Total</b>	38	100

According to Table 6, the responses to the question "Are you a member of any consumer protection associations?" revealed that none of the participants were members of such civil society organizations. The data indicated that 100% of respondents stated they were not affiliated with any consumer association. This finding suggested a weak connection between individuals and organized structures dedicated to protecting consumer rights, highlighting the limited level of civic engagement in this field at the societal level. The fact that none of the participants reported membership in these associations raised questions about the visibility and public awareness of such organizations, as well as a potential lack of motivation or consciousness among individuals to participate in them. Considering the importance of not only individual awareness but also collective action in the context of consumer rights, this result pointed to a significant gap. The findings underscored the need to enhance the visibility and influence of civil society organizations operating in the field of consumer protection. Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of informing individuals about these organizations and developing incentives to encourage membership and active participation.

Table 7 presents the problems encountered by participants in restaurants.

**Table 7. Incidents of Consumer Rights Violations**

Theme	Category	Code	Participant	Frequency of Recurrence
⚠️ 🧻 🍴	Hygiene Issues	Finding hair in the food	K18, K20, K29	3



		Presence of insects, small stones, or other foreign substances in the food	K7, K8, K9, K10, K11, K13, K22	7
		Soured or spoiled food items	K16	1
	Order and Product Issues	A product different from the one ordered	K2, K4, K14, K15, K37	5
		Incomplete order	K4, K7, K15, K22	4
		Visual-product inconsistency	K14	1
	Pricing Issues	Discrepancy Between Menu Price and Checkout Price	K3, K9, K13, K31	4
		Excessive pricing	K5, K29, K33	3
	Service and Communication Issues	Waitstaff inattentiveness	K2	1
		Reservation issue	K10	1
		Unaddressed complaints	K2	1
	Defective Product	Poor taste quality	K17, K19	2
		Improperly cooked meals	K16	1
		Cold or burnt food service	K38	1

In the final section of the interview form, participants were asked questions regarding incidents of consumer rights violations they experienced in restaurants. Table 7 presents the responses to the question: “Have you encountered any situations in the restaurants you visited that violated consumer rights? If so, could you describe the incident?” According to the table, a total of 13 participants stated that they had not experienced any violations of consumer rights. The remaining 25 participants, however, described various problems they had encountered. The most frequently reported issue was related to hygiene deficiencies. Specifically, 7 participants mentioned encountering physical cleanliness problems such as insects, stones, or other foreign objects, while 3 individuals reported finding hair in their food. Under the category of order and product-related issues, five participants stated that the wrong item was delivered, four participants reported missing items in their orders, and one person indicated that the delivered product did not match its visual representation. Regarding pricing problems, four participants mentioned discrepancies between menu prices and checkout prices, while three participants reported being subjected to excessive pricing practices. In terms of service quality, issues such as inattentive waitstaff, reservation problems, and unresolved complaints were each cited by one participant. Lastly, concerning product defects, two individuals complained about the tastelessness of the food, and one person each reported problems with undercooked meals and food being served cold or burnt. These findings revealed that consumers experienced significant dissatisfaction in terms of both hygiene and service quality, suggesting a need for systematic review and improvement by service providers.

Table 8 presents the participants’ reactions to the problems they encountered in restaurants.

**Table 8. Reactions to the Encountered Problems**

Theme	Category	Code	Participant	Frequency of Recurrence
Reactions to the Encountered Problems	Verbal	Communication with the waiter	K1, K5, K8, K10, K12, K13, K16, K17, K18, K22, K27, K29, K35, K36, K37	15
		Speaking with the manager	K6, K7, K14, K15, K21, K24, K25, K26, K28, K32, K34	11
	Written	Complaint via e-Government	K3	1
		Complaint by e-mail	K23	1
		Comments on Social media	K6, K9, K15, K22	4

	<b>Passive Attitude</b>	Not being able to share the complaint	K19, K33	2
		Leaving the restaurant	K33	1
	<b>Depending on the situation</b>	Verbal feedback if there is an instant solution, written feedback if not	K2, K4, K11, K20	4
		Tolerance in small businesses, complaint in chain stores	K6	1
	<b>Legal Actions</b>	Filing a complaint with the consumer arbitration committee	K30, K31	2

According to Table 8, responses to the question "As a consumer, if you encounter a problem at a restaurant, what steps would you take? How would you express your complaint?" reveal that participants primarily rely on verbal communication to address their issues. A total of 15 participants reported communicating with the waiter, and 11 participants preferred speaking directly with the manager. In contrast, the number of participants who responded in writing was quite low: only 1 person submitted a complaint via e-Government, 1 person by email, and 4 people commented on social media. This indicates a low utilization rate of digital complaint mechanisms. Additionally, 2 participants stated they couldn't share their complaint. 1 participant reported leaving the venue following the issue without saying anything. 4 participants explained that their response depended on the situation, opting for verbal feedback when an immediate solution was available and written feedback otherwise. 1 participant mentioned tolerating small businesses but filing complaints against chain restaurants. Only 2 participants initiated legal action by applying to the consumer arbitration committee. Overall, the findings indicated that most participants preferred direct, face-to-face solutions, while written and legal complaint mechanisms were less commonly used. This suggested that consumers generally expected immediate resolution and were less inclined to pursue formal procedures.

Table 9 shows the participants' tendency to revisit the restaurant where they experienced a problem.

**Table 9. Tendency to Revisit the Business where a Problem was Experienced**

Would you prefer to revisit a business where you previously experienced a problem?	n	Percentage (%)
Yes	6	15,79
No	18	47,37
Depends on the circumstances	14	36,84
<b>Total</b>	38	100

According to Table 9, in response to the question "Would you prefer to revisit a business where you previously experienced a problem?", the majority of participants (47.37% - 18 people) stated that they would not prefer to return to such a business. This result highlights the significant impact of negative customer experiences on brand loyalty. On the other hand, 14 participants (36.84%) indicated that their decision would depend on the circumstances, suggesting that if the business offered an apology, compensation, or demonstrated a solution-oriented approach, they might give it another chance. Only 6 participants (15.79%) stated that they would prefer to revisit the business despite the issue. These findings clearly demonstrated how crucial customer satisfaction and effective crisis management were for business sustainability. Prompt and meaningful responses to consumer complaints can turn a negative experience into renewed loyalty.

Table 10 shows participants' intention to share the problems they experienced with others.

**Table 10. Intention to Share the Experienced Problem with Others**

Would you share the problem you experienced with others?	n	Percentage (%)
Yes	30	78,95
No	1	2,63
Depends on the severity of the problem	7	18,42
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>100</b>

According to Table 10, the responses to the question "Would you share the problem you experienced with others?" showed that 30 participants (78.95%) reported sharing the problems they encountered with people around them. This high rate of experience sharing among consumers implied that negative brand images could spread quickly and lead to potential customer loss for businesses. On the other hand, only 1 participant (2.63%) stated that they did not share their experience, which may indicate individuals who are more introverted or have lower motivation to resolve problems. Seven participants (18.42%) stated that this depended on the severity of the issue, suggesting that serious problems were more likely to be reported, while minor issues could be tolerated. As a result, since consumer complaints are not limited to the business itself but extend to social circles and cause indirect effects, it is crucial that businesses manage each customer experience with great care.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to examine the level of awareness among customers regarding consumer rights in restaurants, which are a significant component of the service sector. According to the data obtained, it was found that participants had a limited and mostly moderate level of awareness of consumer rights. This result is consistent with the relevant literature (Usta, 2001; Altunışık et al., 2004; Nart, 2008; Kaynak & Akan, 2011; Pakmak & Koçoğlu, 2019). Participants stated that they had partial knowledge of consumer rights, and that this information was mostly acquired through their own efforts and the media. Based on the results, it was determined that only 7 people knew about the Consumer Protection Law, and 12 people were aware of the Consumer Hotline. The level of consumer rights awareness among the participants clearly indicates that the consumer rights law alone is not sufficient. For the legislation to function effectively, mechanisms such as consumer education, information dissemination, and complaint management need to be developed.

Ülker et al. (2021) examined consumer complaints based on nationalities and found that American consumers were more attentive to service-related failures, whereas Turkish consumers were more sensitive to food-related issues. In general, the factors restaurant customers pay the most attention to are listed as tasty and fresh food, cleanliness, and hygiene (Doğdubay & Avcıkurt, 2009). Among the study participants, 11 individuals stated that they most frequently encountered problems related to a lack of hygiene in restaurants. A similar finding was reported in the study by Kozak and Güçlü (2006), which investigated complaints in the field of tourism and revealed that problems in food and beverage establishments predominantly stemmed from issues in production, presentation, hygiene, and inappropriate staff behavior. The hygienic and safe preparation and service of food and beverages are not only critical to the restaurant's reputation but also play a decisive role in the destination's likelihood of being revisited (Dolmacı & Bulgan, 2018, p. 235). Despite this significant impact, consumers often refrain from sharing their complaints with the establishments. It appears that more than half of the consumers participating in the study preferred providing direct verbal feedback rather than resorting to formal complaint mechanisms when faced with service-related issues. Participants generally stated that they opted for written channels only when the issue remained unresolved. This tendency can be explained by consumers' lack of time and motivation, insufficient knowledge about the process, and limited belief in the resolution of the problem (Kozak, 2007: 141). Despite the problems they experience, consumers may sometimes continue to patronize the same business. Six participants indicated that if the problem was minor, they would consider revisiting the same establishment. Eighteen respondents stated they would not return, while fourteen noted that their decision would depend on the specific circumstances. Consumers tend to adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward businesses they favor. According to a study

by Sing and Widing (1991), 54.3% of consumers reported that they would revisit a business if they were satisfied with the resolution of their complaint. Additionally, approximately 20% of consumers whose complaints were either unresolved or who chose not to voice them also expressed an intention to revisit the establishment.

The cost of losing a customer is significantly higher than the cost of addressing complaints through corrective actions or finding any form of resolution (Heung & Lam, 2003). One of the easiest ways to lose a customer is through word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. It was observed that a considerable number of participants (30 individuals) reported sharing their negative experiences with people in their social circles. Even if consumers do not share their complaints with the business either verbally or in writing, they tend to talk about them with others. For this reason, businesses need customer complaints both to identify shortcomings and to mitigate negative perceptions that may damage their reputation (Namkung, Jang & Choi, 2011). Therefore, businesses must establish direct and proactive communication with their customers.

Certain measures are needed to enhance participants' awareness of consumer rights. In this regard, the following recommendations were developed:

- Both individual awareness and corporate responsibility can be promoted through initiatives such as incorporating consumer awareness education into school curricula, organizing public engagement events, and awarding "consumer-friendly" badges to successful businesses.
- Educational and informational campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of consumer rights can be expanded. Mechanisms such as the Consumer Protection Law and the Consumer Hotline can be promoted through public service announcements, social media platforms, and informational brochures.
- Simplified and interactive information on consumer rights can be delivered through mobile applications, and quick access to such information can be facilitated in cafés and restaurants via QR codes.
- Inspection and training programs can be implemented to improve hygiene and cleanliness standards in restaurants. Staff can be provided with regular training on hygiene and food safety practices.
- One of the major issues encountered is the discrepancy between menu prices and checkout prices. To minimize this problem, menu prices can be regularly updated, and digital price monitoring systems can be utilized. It is also crucial to ensure that staff are well-informed about pricing and that transparent information is provided to consumers.
- Requests and complaints submitted through suggestion boxes can be reviewed at regular intervals, and timely feedback can be provided to customers.
- Social media platforms can be actively utilized to effectively gather customer feedback. This approach enables prompt responses to issues while also enhancing overall customer satisfaction.
- The procedures for accessing formal complaint mechanisms can be simplified and made more accessible. By expanding the use of online complaint systems, consumers' ability to submit grievances can be significantly facilitated.
- Improving complaint management processes can foster customer loyalty. By offering prompt and fair resolutions to problems, businesses can encourage customers to choose their services again.
- Staff participation in regular in-service training on complaint management and customer relations can be encouraged. This would help foster a more solution-oriented approach to handling customer complaints.
- Monthly satisfaction and complaint analysis reports can be prepared in restaurants based on customer feedback. These reports can be used to identify deficiencies and implement necessary improvements accordingly.
- Strategies can be developed to prevent the formation of a negative image through word-of-mouth communication. By strengthening customer experience management, dissatisfaction can be prevented from turning into adverse outcomes.

These recommendations will contribute to making consumer rights not only a matter of legal framework but also visible and comprehensible in all aspects of daily life. This study was limited to restaurant customers located in the city center of Balıkesir. Future research may include restaurants offering different types of services in various cities, allowing for comparative analysis of the findings.

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