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The Influence of Service Quality and Customer Expectations on Customer Satisfaction in Food Services

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Abstract:_This study explores the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, emphasizing the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions. Using the SERVQUAL model, key dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, and assurance were analyzed. Findings indicate a consistent shortfall in perceived service quality, especially in responsiveness. These gaps significantly affect overall customer satisfaction. Addressing them is crucial for improving service delivery and customer loyalty._

Keywords:_Service quality, customer satisfaction, servqual, expectation-perception gap, customer loyalty_

1. INTRODUCTION

The food service industry is a vibrant and essential sector globally, playing a significant role in economies and daily life. In an increasingly competitive market, customer satisfaction has emerged as a paramount factor for the survival and success of food outlets. Satisfied customers are more likely to return, show loyalty, and promote services through positive word-of-mouth, while dissatisfaction can rapidly damage a business's reputation and revenue.

Customer satisfaction is a multifaceted concept, shaped by both tangible elements—such as food quality and physical ambiance—and intangible factors like service delivery, staff behaviour, and emotional experience. Among these, service quality is widely acknowledged as a critical determinant. The SERVQUAL model, which examines service quality across dimensions such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, provides a structured framework to assess the alignment between customer expectations and perceptions.

This study focuses on the dynamic relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the context of food outlets, particularly addressing the expectation-perception gap. It also considers how demographic factors influence customer evaluations of service. While substantial research has explored customer satisfaction across various industries, limited attention has been paid to the specific and diverse settings of food outlets—especially those serving heterogeneous populations such as highway travellers.

Therefore, this study aims to identify key determinants of customer satisfaction in food outlets, analyse the impact of service quality on satisfaction, examine the influence of demographic characteristics, explore gaps between expected and perceived service quality and offer practical recommendations for enhancing service delivery and customer retention in the food service sector.

ORGANIZATION: The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature on customer satisfaction, service quality, and demographic influences. Section 3 details the research methodology employed, including the research design, sample selection, data collection, and analytical techniques. Section 4 presents the results of the data analysis and their interpretation. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the research objectives and existing literature. Finally, Section 6 concludes the study, offers practical recommendations, acknowledges limitations, and suggests avenues for future research.

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2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer satisfaction is a critical measure of organizational performance and a primary goal in the food service industry, as it directly influences customer retention, loyalty, and word-of-mouth promotion ([5], [8]). Defined as the outcome of a customer's evaluation of the total service experience, satisfaction is shaped by the comparison between expected service and the perceived actual performance [4]. The Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory explains that when service delivery exceeds expectations, customers report positive satisfaction; when it falls short, dissatisfaction arises. In highly competitive environments such as highway food outlets, maintaining high satisfaction is essential to staying relevant and profitable.

Service quality plays a fundamental role in shaping customer satisfaction, and the SERVQUAL model introduced by Parasuraman et.al [6] remains the most widely accepted framework for assessing it. This model evaluates five key dimensions: tangibles (physical facilities and appearance), reliability (accurate and dependable service), responsiveness (willingness to help customers), assurance (staff competence and courtesy), and empathy (personalized care). These elements together influence customers' perceptions of service quality, and any deficiencies across these dimensions can significantly affect satisfaction levels [10].

Several empirical studies confirm that service quality and customer satisfaction are strongly interrelated, particularly in the food service context. Factors such as food quality, ambience, price fairness, and employee behaviour also contribute to satisfaction, but service quality often acts as the primary driver [10]. Importantly, customer satisfaction does not occur in isolation; it is often moderated by demographic variables such as age, gender, income, and education. These characteristics influence how customers interpret service quality and how they weigh the importance of various service attributes [1].

A central concern in service quality literature is the gap between customer expectations and perceptions, often referred to as the customer gap in the SERVQUAL model. This discrepancy is crucial in evaluating service effectiveness, as unmet expectations usually result in dissatisfaction, whereas exceeded expectations elevate satisfaction [6]. Understanding and addressing this expectation-perception gap is vital for food outlets, especially those operating along highways like NH-44, where service consistency, speed, and customer attentiveness are paramount. By identifying these gaps, food outlets can make targeted improvements to enhance overall service quality and customer satisfaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive and inferential research design to examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in highway food outlets, with a specific focus on identifying the gaps between perceived and expected service quality. The methodology was framed to explore the critical dimensions influencing satisfaction and to assess the moderating role of customer demographics.The research was conducted across food outlets located along National Highway-44 (NH-44) in Haryana. The population consisted of customers frequenting various types of food service establishments, including government-run, privately-owned, and multinational corporation (MNC) outlets. This diversity allowed for comprehensive insights into consumer experiences across multiple operational formats.

A total of 600 customers were selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure balanced representation from all three categories of food outlets:

a)   Government catering undertakings:200 respondents

b)   Private catering undertakings:200 respondents
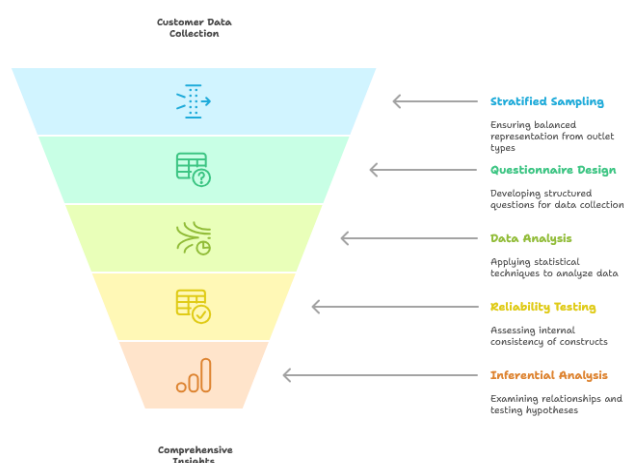
c)   MNC catering undertakings:200 respondents

This stratification enhanced the reliability and generalizability of the findings across the food service industry on NH-44.Primary data was gathered through a structured questionnaire consisting of both closed-ended and scaled items:

a)   Demographics: Age, gender, income, education, etc.

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b) Satisfaction factors: Questions on food quality, ambiance, pricing, staff behaviour and overall experience.

c) Service quality: Items adapted from the SERVQUAL model, measuring both expected and perceived service quality across five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) using a 5-point Likert scale.

d) Overall satisfaction: Direct items to assess customer satisfaction levels.

The questionnaire was subjected to pre-testing to ensure clarity, construct validity, and reliability prior to its final administration. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques was employed using appropriate statistical software to analyze the collected data.Descriptive statistics were utilized to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents through frequencies and percentages. Measures of central tendency and dispersion, such as the mean and standard deviation, were applied to assess responses related to service quality and customer satisfaction. The results were effectively presented through tables, charts, and graphs to facilitate interpretation.Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha to evaluate the internal consistency of the service quality constructs. The alpha coefficients indicated high levels of reliability across all outlet types: 0.9585 (expectations) and 0.9266 (perceptions) for government outlets; 0.9454 (expectations) and 0.9639 (perceptions) for private outlets; 0.9827 (expectations) and 0.9834 (perceptions) for multinational corporation (MNC) outlets; and 0.9658 (expectations) and 0.9787 (perceptions) for the overall sample. These values confirm excellent internal consistency of the measurement instruments.Inferential statistical techniques were applied to examine relationships and test hypotheses. Correlation analysis was used to explore the associations between service quality dimensions and overall customer satisfaction. Regression analysis assessed the predictive influence of service quality on satisfaction levels. Paired sample t-tests were employed to evaluate the gaps between perceived and expected service quality, while ANOVA and independent samples t-tests were conducted to identify significant differences in satisfaction across various demographic groups.This rigorous and methodologically sound analytical framework provided a comprehensive and reliable evaluation of the key constructs and relationships investigated in the study.

Research Methodology

Customer Data Collection

Stratified Sampling — Ensuring balanced representation from outlet types

Questionnaire Design — Developing structured questions for data collection

Data Analysis — Applying statistical techniques to analyze data

Reliability Testing — Assessing internal consistency of constructs

Inferential Analysis — Examining relationships and testing hypotheses

Comprehensive Insights

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Demographic profile of customers 4.1:The demographic analysis involved a descriptive examination of the respondents' characteristics using frequencies and percentages. The sample comprised 600 customers, distributed equally among government, private, and multinational food outlets. Key demographic insights revealed a diverse customer base:

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a)   Age Group: A significant proportion of respondents (e.g., 18–30 years) accounted for a majority, indicating strong engagement of young adults with highway food outlets.

b)   Gender Distribution: Both male and female customers participated, offering a balanced gender representation.

c)   Occupation and Income: Customers from various occupational backgrounds and income levels participated, reflecting the broad consumer base typical of highway establishments.

This demographic segmentation is essential for understanding consumption behaviour and for designing tailored service strategies.

Reliability test results and analysis 4.2: To ensure the internal consistency of the measurement scales assessing customer expectations and perceptions of service quality, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each category of food outlet.

a)   Expectations Reliability

i.   Government Outlets: $\alpha = 0.9585$

ii.   Private Outlets: $\alpha = 0.9454$

iii.   MNC Outlets: $\alpha = 0.9827$

iv.   Overall Sample: $\alpha = 0.9658$

b)   Perceptions Reliability

i.   Government Outlets: $\alpha = 0.9266$

ii.   Private Outlets: $\alpha = 0.9639$

iii.   MNC Outlets: $\alpha = 0.9834$

iv.   Overall Sample: $\alpha = 0.9787$

All values exceed the accepted threshold of 0.70 [3], indicating excellent internal consistency and validating the suitability of the questionnaire for further analysis.

Analysis of factors influencing customer satisfaction 4.3: Descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, were computed for key satisfaction variables such as food quality, cleanliness, ambiance, staff behaviour and pricing. The key observations included:

a)   Food Taste and Hygiene consistently received the highest mean scores, highlighting their primary importance.

b)   Ambiance and staff behaviour also ranked high, reflecting customer sensitivity to environmental and interpersonal factors.

c)   Speed of service displayed greater variance, indicating inconsistent experiences across outlets.

These insights emphasize the multi-dimensional nature of satisfaction and point toward priority areas for quality enhancement.

Relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction 4.4: To examine the connection between service quality and overall customer satisfaction, correlation and regression analyses were conducted.

a)   Correlation analysis indicated a strong positive relationship between all five SERVQUAL dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy) and customer satisfaction.

b)   Regression analysis confirmed that:

i.   Reliability (e.g., timely service, accuracy of orders) and

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ii.   Assurance (e.g., knowledgeable and courteous staff)were the most significant predictors of customer satisfaction.

These findings corroborate existing hospitality research and reinforce the importance of consistent and confident service delivery.

Relationship between demographic profile and customer satisfaction4.5: To determine if demographic factors influence satisfaction levels, ANOVA and independent samples t-testswere employed. The results showed:

a)   Customers aged 31–45 years reported higher satisfaction with ambiance compared to younger groups.

b)   No significant gender-based difference was found in overall satisfaction levels.

c)   Income-level differences were observed in perceptions of value for money, indicating socio-economic factors can influence satisfaction expectations.
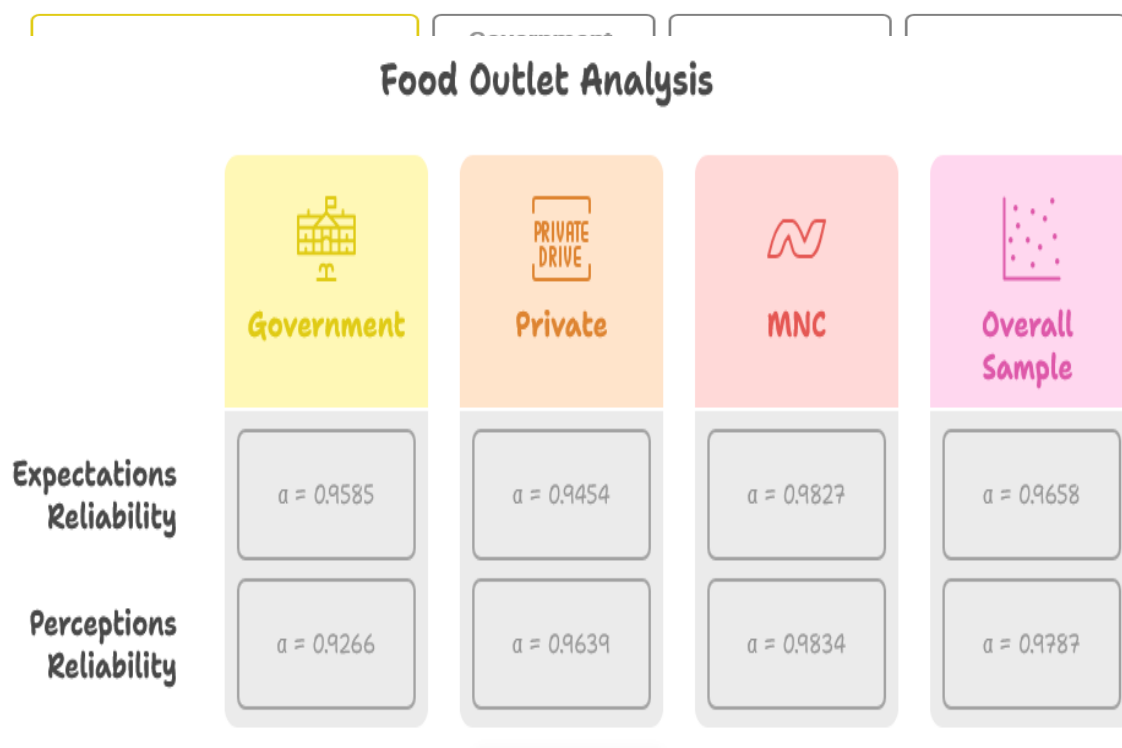
These findings suggest the necessity for segment-specific service strategies.

Gaps between perceived and expected service quality4.6: To evaluate the service quality gap**,** paired-sample t-tests were conducted between the expectation and perception scores for each SERVQUAL dimension.The results revealed:

a)   Negative gaps across all dimensions, with the largest gap in responsiveness (e.g., delays in service, billing).

b)   Moderate gaps were observed in tangibles (e.g., seating and restroom cleanliness) and empathy(e.g., personalized attention).

These gaps indicate that while customers enter with high expectations, the actual experience often falls short, especially in operational efficiency and staff responsiveness.

Customer Satisfaction Research Across Food Outlets

Food Outlet Analysis	Government	Private	MNC	Overall Sample
Expectations Reliability	$\alpha = 0.9585$	$\alpha = 0.9454$	$\alpha = 0.9827$	$\alpha = 0.9658$
Perceptions Reliability	$\alpha = 0.9266$	$\alpha = 0.9639$	$\alpha = 0.9834$	$\alpha = 0.9787$

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5. Discussion and Findings

The findings of this study provide comprehensive insights into the determinants of customer satisfaction in highway food outlets along NH-44 in Haryana. The study not only confirms established theories in service quality literature but also brings forth nuanced understanding specific to the Indian highway catering context.A key outcome of the study is the high reliability of the measurement instrument, with Cronbach's Alpha values exceeding 0.90 across all types of food outlets and service quality dimensions. This underscores the robustness of the SERVQUAL framework, aligning with foundational works such as [6]. The consistency in internal reliability across Government, Private, and Multinational (MNC) food outlets affirms the universal applicability of SERVQUAL in varied organizational contexts within the food service sector.

The study strongly supports the positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, echoing findings from [8], who identify service quality as a core antecedent to customer satisfaction. Specifically, reliability and assurance emerged as critical service dimensions influencing satisfaction—demonstrating that customers highly value consistent service execution, timely delivery, and the competence of service personnel. These findings emphasize that even high food quality alone is insufficient if the delivery mechanism lacks precision or dependability.Another dimension explored was the influence of demographic factors on customer satisfaction. The results revealed that while certain demographic groups, such as customers aged 31–45, reported significantly higher satisfaction in specific dimensions (e.g., ambiance), the associations were not consistent across all variables. This suggests that demographic segmentation offers only a partial view, and future strategies may benefit from incorporating psychographic or behavioural segmentation to develop deeper customer insights. These findings resonate with Kumar and Gautam [1], who stress the variability of customer expectations based on individual traits.

Perhaps the most critical insight derived from the analysis is the existence of negative gaps between customer expectations and perceptions, especially in the responsiveness dimension. These gaps indicate that food outlets are falling short in delivering the promptness and attentiveness that customers anticipate—particularly during peak service hours. According to Oliver's [5]expectancy-disconfirmation theory, such unmet expectations directly contribute to dissatisfaction. The consistent gap in responsiveness suggests that waiting time, billing delays, and inattentive staff behaviours are key pain points that need urgent managerial attention. Furthermore, smaller yet significant gaps in tangibles (e.g., cleanliness) and empathy (e.g., staff personalization) highlight the importance of maintaining both physical infrastructure standards and emotional engagement with customers.Overall, this study confirms that customer satisfaction is a multi-dimensional construct that integrates both tangible attributes like food quality and physical setting, and intangible factors such as service behaviour and emotional connection. While highway food outlets often emphasize quick service and affordability, this study highlights that service quality elements are equally crucial and cannot be overlooked. Managers must strive to not only meet but exceed customer expectations by bridging perceptual gaps, optimizing operational efficiency, and refining customer interaction strategies.

These findings contribute to the existing body of literature by contextualizing service quality and satisfaction in the under-researched area of Indian highway food outlets and offer actionable insights for service providers aiming to enhance customer loyalty and competitiveness in a dynamic and evolving food service landscape.

Summary of key findings 5.1: The findings of the study reveal several important insights. The measurement instrument demonstrated a high level of reliability, as evidenced by strong Cronbach's Alpha values. Among the various dimensions of service quality, reliability and assurance emerged as key determinants of customer satisfaction. Additionally, food quality and hygiene consistently ranked as top priorities for consumers, irrespective of the type of food outlet.Demographic factors, particularly age and income, were found to significantly influence customer satisfaction in specific areas of service delivery. Notably, the largest gaps between customer expectations and perceptions were observed in the responsiveness dimension, highlighting a pressing need for improvements in real-time service efficiency.These results provide valuable, evidence-based guidance for policymakers and food outlet managers aiming to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction along India's highway corridors.

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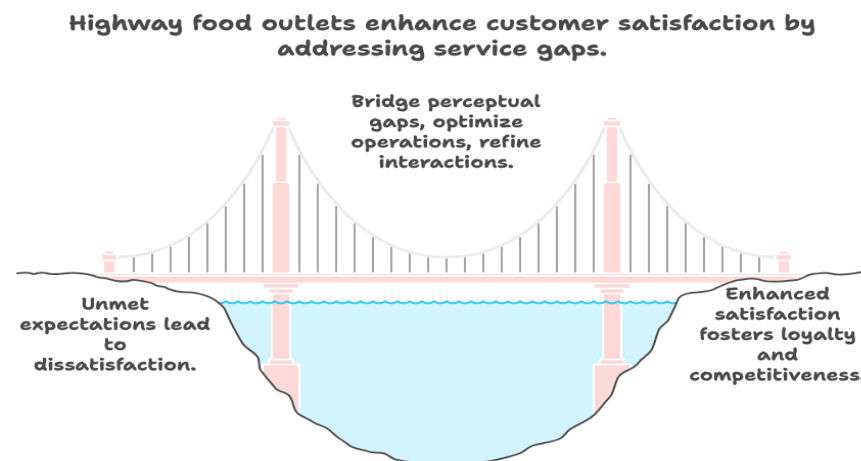
6. onclusion and Future Scope

This study offers a holistic examination of customer satisfaction within food outlets along National Highway-44 in Haryana, emphasizing the critical role of service quality dimensions—tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy—in shaping customer perceptions and experiences. The findings reaffirm that customer satisfaction is not solely influenced by food quality, but is significantly driven by how well services are delivered, particularly the consistency, promptness, and professionalism exhibited by staff.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that service quality is a robust predictor of satisfaction, supported by high Cronbach's Alpha values, confirming the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement tools. Among the key findings, responsiveness consistently showed the largest gap between expectations and perceptions, signalling a need for operational improvements, particularly during peak service hours. Similarly, gaps in tangibles and empathy suggest opportunities for enhanced cleanliness and personalized service delivery.

The research also highlights the influence of demographic variables such as age, income, and occupation on satisfaction, though the effects were not uniformly significant across all dimensions. This indicates that a customized service strategy, rather than a generic approach, is more likely to enhance customer satisfaction across diverse customer segments.

Overall, the study contributes to both theory and practice by validating the applicability of the SERVQUAL model in the highway catering context and providing actionable insights for food outlet managers to enhance service performance, customer loyalty, and competitive positioning.

Future Scope: While the present study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of customer satisfaction and service quality in highway food outlets, several directions remain open for future exploration and refinement. Longitudinal studies could be undertaken to monitor shifts in customer satisfaction and perceptions of service quality over time, accounting for seasonal variations, evolving consumer preferences, and the effects of continuous service improvements. Additionally, future research may investigate the moderating or mediating roles of variables such as brand image, emotional engagement, loyalty programs, and the influence of social media in shaping the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

Employing qualitative methodologies—such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic studies, or focus group discussions—could provide deeper insights into the emotional and experiential dimensions of customer satisfaction that quantitative techniques may overlook. Furthermore, comparative studies across different categories of food service establishments, including fine dining restaurants, quick-service outlets, and mobile food vendors, can yield sector-specific determinants of satisfaction.

Given the growing integration of technology in service delivery, future research should also consider the impact of digital interfaces, such as online ordering systems, AI-powered customer assistance, mobile applications, and digital payment mechanisms, on both customer satisfaction and perceived service quality. Collectively, these

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research directions will contribute to the development of a more nuanced, adaptable, and customer-centric framework, enhancing the overall quality of service delivery within the food and hospitality industry.

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