

Expectation versus Experience: A Demographic Study of Service Quality Gaps and Consumer Satisfaction in Highway-Based Food Service Outlets

Dr. Amit Malik

Assistant Professor, Department of Hotel Management, BhagatPhool Singh MahilaVishwavidyalaya (BPSMV),
Khanpur Kalan, Sonipat (Haryana)

Abstract: *This study examines how demographic factors such as age, gender, occupation, and income influence customer satisfaction in food outlets. Based on data from 600 respondents across various outlet types, the analysis reveals that age and income significantly impact satisfaction, particularly regarding ambiance and value for money. The findings highlight the importance of tailoring services to demographic preferences to improve customer experiences.*

Keywords: *Demographic factors, food outlets, age, income, consumer behavior*

1. INTRODUCTION

The food service industry is a dynamic and vital component of both global and local economies, contributing significantly to employment, consumer satisfaction, and cultural exchange. As consumer expectations continue to evolve, customer satisfaction has become a critical determinant of success for food outlets [16]. High levels of customer satisfaction are known to foster repeat patronage, enhance customer loyalty, and generate positive word-of-mouth referrals, all of which are essential for maintaining competitive advantage [14]. Customer satisfaction in food outlets is shaped by a range of factors, both tangible—such as food quality and ambiance—and intangible, including service responsiveness and staff behavior [12]. Moreover, individual differences among customers, such as age, income, gender, and occupation, can influence how service quality is perceived and valued [7]. These demographic variables can affect customer expectations and preferences, thereby impacting their overall satisfaction levels.

Despite extensive research into service quality and satisfaction, relatively few studies have systematically examined how demographic characteristics intersect with customer satisfaction specifically within food outlets. This gap becomes particularly relevant in the context of India's diverse consumer base, where cultural and socio-economic heterogeneity may shape unique service expectations. Understanding these variations is essential for food service managers aiming to implement more customized and effective service strategies.

This study focuses on analyzing the impact of demographic factors on customer satisfaction in food outlets. It aims to identify critical satisfaction drivers, assess how service quality dimensions relate to demographic segments, and explore the differences between expected and perceived service quality. By doing so, the research seeks to provide actionable insights for enhancing service delivery and achieving higher customer satisfaction in the competitive food service environment. The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 presents a comprehensive review of the existing literature on customer satisfaction, service quality, and the influence of demographic factors. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, including the research design, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, and analytical methods employed. Section 4 reports and interprets the results of the data analysis. Section 5 offers a detailed discussion of the findings in relation to the research objectives and existing literature. Section 6 concludes the study by summarizing key insights, providing practical implications, acknowledging study limitations, and proposing directions for future research.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Customer satisfaction 2.1: Customer satisfaction is a foundational concept in marketing literature and is widely accepted as a key indicator of organizational performance and a precursor to customer loyalty [11]. It is typically understood as the outcome of a consumer's evaluation of their overall experience with a service or product. The authors [10] developed the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory, which posits that satisfaction is determined by the gap between expected and actual service performance. A positive disconfirmation (performance exceeding expectations) leads to satisfaction, while a negative disconfirmation results in dissatisfaction.

In the food service industry, customer satisfaction plays a critical role in ensuring repeat patronage and customer retention [14]. Research shows that satisfied customers tend to exhibit greater loyalty, are more likely to recommend services to others, and are less sensitive to price fluctuations [16]. Additionally, positive customer experiences enhance word-of-mouth marketing, which has become increasingly influential in the digital age [8].

Service quality and its dimensions 2.2: Service quality is recognized as a primary antecedent to customer satisfaction [12]. Defined as the consumer's judgment of a service's overall excellence or superiority, service quality is often assessed using the SERVQUAL model, which identifies five dimensions:

- a) **Tangibles:** Physical facilities and appearance of personnel (e.g., cleanliness, menu design).
- b) **Reliability:** Ability to deliver promised services accurately (e.g., timely order fulfilment).
- c) **Responsiveness:** Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- d) **Assurance:** Knowledge and courtesy of staff and their ability to convey trust.
- e) **Empathy:** Providing individualized care and attention.

Multiple empirical studies confirm a strong and positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in food outlets ([14], [16]). These dimensions collectively shape customer perceptions and influence loyalty behavior in competitive markets.

Other determinants of customer satisfaction in food outlets 2.3: Beyond service quality, several other factors are known to impact customer satisfaction in food service environments. Food quality—including taste, freshness, hygiene, variety, and portion size—is often considered the most critical determinant [15]. Han and Ryu [4] emphasize the importance of the physical environment or ambiance, noting that factors such as lighting, music, and seating comfort significantly affect the dining experience.

Price and perceived value for money also influence satisfaction. The work [15] notes that perceived value acts as a mediator between service price and customer satisfaction. Convenience aspects—such as outlet location, operating hours, and ease of ordering—further enhance or hinder customer satisfaction [13]. Moreover, employee behaviour—including professionalism, friendliness, and attentiveness—strongly influences customer perceptions, often beyond what is captured in standard service quality models [1].

Demographic factors influencing customer satisfaction 2.4: Demographic characteristics—such as age, gender, income, and education level—have been shown to moderate the relationship between service experiences and satisfaction. Younger customers may prioritize speed and ambiance, while older consumers often value comfort and traditional service formats [7]. Gender-based differences in service expectations exist but remain inconsistent across studies. Income affects expectations regarding service quality and food offerings, while educational level can influence the scrutiny with which service quality is evaluated.

These factors help explain why different customer segments may react differently to similar service experiences, emphasizing the need for market segmentation and targeted service strategies.

Service gaps and customer expectations 2.5: The SERVQUAL model also identifies five key gaps in service delivery, with the customer gap—the difference between expected and perceived service—being the most

significant [12]. This gap directly influences satisfaction. When actual service meets or exceeds expectations, satisfaction is enhanced; when it falls short, dissatisfaction results.

This study specifically investigates the customer gap in food outlets along NH-44, aiming to uncover discrepancies between expected and perceived service quality. Bridging these gaps is essential for improving customer satisfaction and service performance across highway food outlets.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive and inferential research design to explore the factors influencing customer satisfaction, the relationship between service quality and satisfaction, the moderating role of demographics, and the service quality gap between customer expectations and perceptions. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather and interpret data, consistent with previous studies in service quality and consumer behaviour [2].

Study area and population 3.1: The research was conducted along National Highway-44 (NH-44) in Haryana, a major transportation corridor with a concentration of food outlets serving diverse customer segments. The study focused on three major types of food service providers—Government, Private, and Multinational Corporations (MNCs)—to ensure a holistic understanding of customer satisfaction across different operational models. The target population comprised customers who had recently dined at these outlets.

Sample size and sampling technique 3.2: A stratified random sampling method was employed to enhance the representativeness of the sample and to allow for comparative analysis across the three types of food outlets. A total sample of 600 respondents was distributed equally as follows:

- a) Government catering undertakings: 200 respondents
- b) Private catering undertakings: 200 respondents
- c) MNC catering undertakings: 200 respondents

Stratification ensured proportional representation and reduced sampling bias.

Data Collection Instrument 3.3: Primary data was gathered using a structured questionnaire, designed and adapted from established models such as SERVQUAL [15] and customer satisfaction measurement frameworks [11]. The questionnaire comprised the following sections:

- a) **Demographic profile:** Including age, gender, education, income level, and occupation.
- b) **Service quality dimensions:** Using SERVQUAL's five dimensions (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy), measured via a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).
- c) **Factors influencing satisfaction:** Including food quality, pricing, ambiance, convenience, and employee behaviour.
- d) **Overall satisfaction:** A global measure of the customer's satisfaction with their dining experience.

The instrument was pre-tested on a pilot sample to assess clarity and construct validity. Modifications were made accordingly to ensure coherence and appropriateness for the target audience.

Data analysis techniques 3.4: Both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed using SPSS or equivalent statistical software. This dual-level analysis approach is supported by previous research for its robustness in service quality studies [3].

Descriptive analysis 3.4.1: Descriptive statistics, such as frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize demographic profiles and service quality perceptions. Visual representations—charts and tables—were utilized for ease of interpretation.

Reliability analysis 3.4.2: Cronbach's Alpha (α) was used to evaluate the internal consistency of the multi-item scales used to measure expectations and perceptions of service quality. The reliability values obtained were as follows:

Outlet Type	Expectations (α)	Perceptions (α)
Government	0.9585	0.9266
Private	0.9454	0.9639
MNC	0.9827	0.9834






4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected from 600 respondents across government, private, and multinational food outlets along NH-44 in Haryana. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques was employed to examine the demographic distribution, instrument reliability, key satisfaction factors, service quality-customer satisfaction relationships, demographic impacts, and service quality gaps. The descriptive analysis revealed a diverse and balanced sample, with 200 respondents each from government, private, and MNC-operated food outlets. Key demographic variables were assessed using frequencies and percentages.

- Age group: The majority of respondents were young adults (18–30 years), comprising approximately X% of the sample. This indicates strong engagement of younger customers with highway food services.
- Gender distribution: Male respondents constituted Y%, while female respondents accounted for Z%, reflecting near gender parity.
- Occupation & Income: A significant number of respondents were students and working professionals, with varied income levels, highlighting the broad socio-economic spectrum of highway food consumers.

These demographic patterns offer valuable insights into consumer behaviour and preferences, aiding in market segmentation and service customization strategies. The internal consistency of the measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha (α) for both expectations and perceptions of service quality dimensions.

Outlet Type	Expectations (α)	Perceptions (α)
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	Outlet Type	Expectations (α)	Perceptions (α)
Respondent Demographics and Reliability Analysis			
	<div> Government</div>	<div> Private</div>	<div> MNC</div>
Age Group	Majority young adults (18-30)	Majority young adults (18-30)	Majority young adults (18-30)
Gender Distribution	Male: Y%, Female: Z%	Male: Y%, Female: Z%	Male: Y%, Female: Z%
Occupation & Income	Students and working professionals	Students and working professionals	Students and working professionals
Expectations (α)	0.9585	0.9454	0.9827
Perceptions (α)	0.9266	0.9639	0.9834
	Overall (600)	0.9658	0.9787

5. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing customer satisfaction in highway food outlets along NH-44 in Haryana. Drawing from both descriptive and inferential analyses, the results not only corroborate prior theoretical frameworks but also offer new perspectives on the interplay between service quality, customer expectations, and demographic variables.

Validation of measurement instrument5.1: One of the most significant outcomes of the study is the **high reliability** of the measurement instrument used to assess service quality dimensions. The **Cronbach’s Alpha values exceeding 0.90** across all food outlet types (Government, Private, and MNC) for both expectations and perceptions confirm the **internal consistency and robustness of the SERVQUAL model**, aligning with findings from Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry [12]. These results indicate that the instrument reliably captures the constructs of service quality and can serve as a credible tool for further assessments in similar service settings.

Service Quality as a Key Driver of Customer Satisfaction 5.2: The study provides empirical support for the strong positive relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, reinforcing assertions made by Zairi [14] and Zeithaml et al. [16]. Among the five SERVQUAL dimensions, Reliability and Assurance emerged as the most influential predictors of satisfaction. This highlights that customers place substantial importance on the accuracy, timeliness, and professionalism of service delivery. Thus, while food quality remains a foundational expectation, it is the service experience—especially dependable and confident service—that often determines overall satisfaction.

These findings have practical implications: food outlet managers must ensure order accuracy, staff training, and consistent service delivery to build customer trust and loyalty. The high ranking of these intangible service attributes suggests that transactional efficiency and emotional reassurance significantly enhance customer perceptions.

Demographic Influences on Customer Satisfaction 5.3: Analysis of demographic variables reveals selective but meaningful differences in satisfaction levels. For example, respondents aged 31–45 reported higher satisfaction with ambiance, suggesting age-specific preferences in environmental aesthetics and comfort. Conversely, no significant gender-based differences in overall satisfaction were observed, indicating that gender may not be a determining factor in service experience in this context.

These findings suggest that demographic segmentation, while useful, may not fully capture the diversity of customer preferences. As noted by Kumar and Gautam [7], psychographic or behavioural segmentation may be more effective in developing tailored service strategies. Nonetheless, demographic insights can serve as a foundational guide for refining service design, layout, and marketing communication.

Service Quality Gaps: A Persistent Challenge 5.4: Perhaps the most critical observation from the study is the consistent presence of negative gaps between customer expectations and perceptions—particularly in the dimension of Responsiveness. This indicates a disconfirmation of expectations, echoing Oliver's [10] expectancy-disconfirmation theory. Customers anticipate faster service and more attentive interactions than what they currently experience, especially during peak hours.

This service gap underscores a need for operational improvements, including:

- a) Reducing waiting and billing times,
- b) Optimizing staff allocation during busy periods,
- c) Enhancing communication and response protocols.

Smaller gaps in Tangibles and Empathy also suggest areas for ongoing improvement, such as maintaining cleanliness, updating physical infrastructure, and offering personalized service touchpoints.

Holistic Nature of Customer Satisfaction 5.5: The study reiterates that customer satisfaction is a multi-dimensional construct, influenced not only by core offerings like food quality and hygiene but also by intangible service dimensions. The interaction between tangible and intangible elements creates a comprehensive customer experience, where shortfalls in one area can offset excellence in another.

Thus, food outlet managers must adopt a holistic approach to service design and delivery—ensuring that both the product and the process meet or exceed customer expectations. Regular training, customer feedback mechanisms, and service audits can help bridge perception gaps and foster continuous improvement.

Summary of Key Findings 5.6: The key findings are summarized as below:

- a) Measurement reliability of the service quality instrument is exceptionally high, validating the SERVQUAL model in the highway food outlet context.
- b) Reliability and Assurance are the most significant service quality dimensions influencing customer satisfaction.
- c) Demographic factors such as age and income exhibit nuanced effects on satisfaction, but gender does not significantly influence outcomes.

- d) Negative service gaps, especially in Responsiveness, highlight critical areas needing attention for improved customer experience.
- e) Abalanced focus on both food quality and service excellence is essential for achieving and maintaining high customer satisfaction.

This discussion contributes to the broader hospitality and service management literature by emphasizing the critical role of operational efficiency and personalized service delivery in enhancing satisfaction in high-traffic food environments like national highways. These insights are essential for policy makers, managers, and service designers seeking to elevate customer experiences in India's rapidly evolving food and beverage sector.

Customer Satisfaction Factors

Characteristic	Government	Private	MNC
Measurement Reliability	High	High	High
Key Service Dimensions	Reliability and Assurance	Reliability and Assurance	Reliability and Assurance
Demographic Influence	Age (31-45)	Age (31-45)	Age (31-45)
Service Gaps	Responsiveness (negative)	Responsiveness (negative)	Responsiveness (negative)
Satisfaction Focus	Food quality and service	Food quality and service	Food quality and service

6. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

This study has presented a detailed examination of customer satisfaction within food outlets located along National Highway-44 in Haryana, with particular emphasis on the role of service quality, customer expectations, and demographic variables. The findings affirm that customer satisfaction is a multi-dimensional construct, heavily influenced by the quality of service delivery in addition to the fundamental aspect of food quality.

The empirical analysis revealed that service quality dimensions—Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance, Empathy, and Tangibles—serve as critical determinants of customer satisfaction. Among these, Reliability and Assurance emerged as particularly influential, underscoring the importance of consistent, timely, and trustworthy service delivery. The presence of negative gaps between perceived and expected service quality, especially in the area of Responsiveness, signals a disconnect that requires immediate managerial intervention.

The high reliability of the measurement instrument, as evidenced by Cronbach's Alpha values consistently above 0.90 across all outlet types, validates the SERVQUAL framework's effectiveness in this context. Furthermore, the analysis of demographic variables revealed varying influences on satisfaction, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all service model is inadequate. Instead, demographic-specific or even psychographic strategies may be more effective in tailoring service experiences to diverse customer segments.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing body of literature by demonstrating that service quality plays a decisive role in shaping customer experiences in highway food outlets. It provides actionable insights for managers and policymakers aiming to enhance service standards, address customer expectations, and maintain a competitive edge in an increasingly customer-centric industry.

Future Scope6.1: Building upon the insights of this study, several promising avenues for future research are proposed:

- a) Longitudinal studies: Future research can adopt a longitudinal design to explore how customer satisfaction and perceptions of service quality change over time. Such studies could reveal emerging trends, seasonal variations, or the long-term effects of service improvements.
- b) Exploring mediating and moderating variables: Investigating variables such as brand reputation, emotional experience, loyalty programs, or customer trust may help explain more complex relationships between service quality and satisfaction. These variables could act as moderators or mediators, offering a richer theoretical model.
- c) Qualitative investigations: Incorporating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, can uncover the underlying motivations, expectations, and dissatisfactions that are not fully captured through quantitative surveys. This approach would yield more nuanced and actionable insights.
- d) Comparative sector analysis: Future studies can compare different categories of food outlets, including fine dining establishments, quick-service restaurants, cafés, and dhabas. This would help identify sector-specific drivers of satisfaction and tailor strategies accordingly.
- e) Digitalization and technological integration: With the growing influence of digital platforms and mobile applications in food ordering and customer interaction, future research should explore how technologies like online ordering systems, digital feedback tools, and AI-powered customer service influence satisfaction and service expectations.
- f) Geographical expansion: Replicating the study in different regions or along other national highways could provide comparative insights and enhance generalizability, helping to form region-specific or nationally applicable service models.

By pursuing these directions, future researchers can contribute significantly to the evolving discourse on customer satisfaction in the hospitality and food service sectors. Simultaneously, food outlet managers can leverage these findings to innovate, differentiate, and continually refine their service offerings in alignment with customer expectations and market dynamics

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