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An Empirical Study of Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction, and Loyalty Dynamics among Visitors to South Indian Restaurants in Northern India

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Abstract

This study investigates the intricate relationships between service quality dimensions, customer satisfaction, and loyalty among patrons of South Indian restaurants in Northern India. Given the growing popularity of South Indian cuisine in diverse regional settings, understanding the factors that contribute to customer experiences in this niche market is essential for restaurateurs and stakeholders in the hospitality industry. A total of 712 respondents were initially surveyed from several key northern states using a judgmental sampling approach. However, 338 responses were deemed inappropriate for analysis, resulting in a final sample of 374 participants. The research utilized the SERVQUAL scale to assess perceived service quality, in conjunction with validated measures of customer satisfaction and loyalty. This methodological triangulation allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the factors influencing visitor experiences in South Indian food joints.

The findings reveal that specific dimensions of service quality—particularly tangibility, reliability, and assurance—significantly impact customer satisfaction. Patrons who perceive high levels of these qualities tend to report greater satisfaction with their dining experiences. Conversely, tangibility, responsiveness, and empathy emerged as critical dimensions influencing customer loyalty. Visitors who felt that their needs were promptly addressed and that staff were empathetic were more likely to demonstrate loyalty to the establishment.

Moreover, the analysis highlights that visitor demographics—such as age, culinary background, and previous dining experiences—play a vital moderating role in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. This suggests that different visitor profiles may prioritize distinct service quality attributes, necessitating tailored approaches to service management. The implications of these findings are substantial for the restaurant industry, particularly for South Indian food outlets in Northern India. By understanding the specific service quality elements that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, restaurant operators can refine their service delivery models. This may include investing in staff training, improving the physical environment, and adopting more personalized service strategies to cater to diverse customer preferences. In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on service quality in the hospitality sector, offering actionable insights that can lead to enhanced customer experiences and sustained loyalty in a competitive culinary landscape. Future research could further explore the longitudinal effects of service quality improvements on customer retention and business performance.

Keywords – Customer Satisfaction, Gastronomic Experience, Loyalty, Service Quality, South Indian Restaurant, Visitor Type.

Introduction

Background

Gastronomic tourism is connected with tourists' experience of food and other related activities during travel (Shalini & Duggal, 2015). Gastronomic delicacies are considered to be a significant aspect of the overall satisfaction and quality experience of the tourists during their visit (Shalini & Duggal, 2015). The linkage of local food and tourism allows the tourists to connect with the culture of a place and as per studies it has been observed that one-third of the total expenditure of tourists is spent on experiencing the local food (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012). Satisfaction of tourists is of prime importance not only to trigger the desire to visit the food outlet again but also to recommend others (Cakici et al., 2019). Tourists who are satisfied with their experience tend to revisit and spread positivity among friends and relatives which in turn leads to higher revenue generation for a destination (Arasli et al., 2021).

The restaurant industry serves a diverse group of customers, including tourists, business travelers, families, couples, solo diners, first-timers, and repeat visitors (Sanchez-Cañizares & Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). Each visitor type has unique needs and preferences when it comes to dining out. For example, tourists may prioritize the ambiance and cultural experience of the restaurant, while business travelers may prioritize the speed and efficiency of the service (Sanchez-Cañizares & Castillo-Canalejo, 2015). However, families may prioritize the affordability and family-friendly atmosphere of the restaurant, while couples may prioritize the intimacy and romantic ambiance (Toudert

& Bringas-Ra'bago, 2021). On the other hand, solo diners may prioritize the ease of dining alone, while first-timers may prioritize the meal quality and the service to determine if they will return (Toudert & Bringas-Ra'bago, 2021). Thus, repeat visitors are likely to have established preferences and expectations for the restaurant, which may change over time based on their previous experiences (Toudert & Bringas-Ra'bago, 2021).

Indeed, it's a well-known fact that Indians have a deep and passionate love for food. Indian cuisines are incredibly diverse, with a wide variety of flavors, ingredients, and cooking styles that cater to various regional tastes and preferences (Narayan, 1995; Sen, 2004). Over the past few years, South Indian cuisine has become increasingly popular in North India (Nandy, 2004). Known for its distinct flavours and healthy ingredients, South Indian food has become a favorite among food lovers in the region (Nandy, 2004; Sengupta, 2010). Many restaurants in North India have started offering South Indian dishes on their menus to cater to the growing demand for this cuisine (Baviskar, 2021). The popularity of South Indian food can be attributed to its wide variety of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, including Dosas, Idlis, Vadas, and Sambar, among others (Nandy, 2004; Iyer, & Ananthanarayan, 2008). Additionally, the use of coconut, curry leaves, and other flavorful spices in South Indian cuisine has won over the taste buds of North Indian food enthusiasts (Nandy, 2004). The craze for South Indian food in North India has led to the opening of numerous South Indian restaurants in the region.

Research Gap

While substantial research has explored the relationship between service quality, visitor satisfaction, and loyalty within the foodservice sector (Qin & Prybutok, 2009; Khan & Shaikh, 2011; Aftab et al., 2016; Keshavarz et al., 2016; Zhong, 2020), there remains a notable gap concerning the specific context of South Indian food establishments. South Indian cuisine has seen increasing popularity in North India, marked by the growth of dedicated South Indian restaurants (Nandy, 2004). However, given the rise in competition within this sector, it is crucial for South Indian restaurants to focus not only on food quality but also on service quality to enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive positioning. Limited studies have examined how the unique characteristics of service quality in South Indian restaurants influence visitor satisfaction and loyalty, particularly considering different visitor types. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding and improving the customer experience in South Indian food outlets.

Research Objectives

- This study aims to address the identified gap by examining the impact of service quality on visitor satisfaction and loyalty in South Indian food outlets. Specifically, the research objectives are to:
- Investigate the influence of service quality on visitor satisfaction and loyalty within South Indian restaurants.
- Assess the moderating role of visitor types (e.g., first-time vs. repeat visitors) in the relationship between service quality and visitor satisfaction.
- Contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the foodservice sector, particularly within the South Indian restaurant context, thereby providing a foundation for future research in this area.

Significance of Study:

The findings of the study have a wide range of practical implications for food businesses. Restaurant owners and managers can consider the expected visitor type when designing and implementing service quality strategies. Varied sorts of visitors may have varied expectations and preferences, and these expectations and preferences may alter based on the type of food outlet and the circumstances of the visit. The owners and managers may customize their service quality plans to fit the individual requirements and preferences of their visitors by recognizing the moderating influence of their type, which can lead to improved levels of satisfaction and loyalty.

Review of Literature

Customer Satisfaction:

Satisfaction is the inner peace that emanates from the consumption experience (Schmidt & Spreng, 1996; Vukmir, 2006). Satisfaction is a cognitive outcome that is derived from service experience (Huang et al., 2015). The purchased products are used and the services are experienced by a customer which gives them satisfaction (Jiradilok et al., 2014). The perceived quality or experience is the consumers' views on any goods or services that they want to buy or consume (Zeithaml, 1988). Researchers typically consider that customer happiness and the perception of the features of the service are the two connected and essential factors in service management (Kassim & Asiah Abdullah, 2010). The success of any business depends upon customer satisfaction and it becomes essential to identify the factors that influence customer satisfaction (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000).

Customer satisfaction has been a major concern for businesses as it is closely linked to customer loyalty and business success (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; El-Adly, 2019). Customer satisfaction is especially significant in the restaurant business since it immediately influences the customer's eating experience and is likely to return (Leninkumar, 2017; Kim & Bachman, 2019). High levels of customer satisfaction often lead to increased customer loyalty, and loyal customers, in turn, contribute significantly to a restaurant's success. As a result,

restaurant owners and managers must understand the aspects that impact customer satisfaction (Saad Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Keshavarz et al., 2016). SERVQUAL is a widely used model for assessing service quality which involves five dimensions (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction:

Perceived service quality is nothing but the evaluation of product or service offerings, whereas customer satisfaction is its transactional assessment. Employee reactions, price, and food quality have been identified as influencing factors of customer satisfaction in this industry. The research on food restaurants in China has revealed that service quality, food quality, and perceived value are the precursors to customer satisfaction (Prybutok, 2008). Tan et al. (2014) examined the customer perception regarding the fast food restaurant's service quality, with a modified DINESERV scale and using a mixed-methods approach, and found a positive effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and suggested areas for improvement (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020). Different aspects of food quality, such as taste, food safety, menu variety, and presentation, have also been identified as important contributors to customer satisfaction (Liu & Jang, 2009). According to studies, the taste and presentation of food at mid to upmarket restaurants have a significant impact on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Ryu et al., 2012). Previous studies have found a strong relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in the food service business (Kim et al., 2009; Min and Min, 2011). Additionally, Nguyen et al. (2018) found that the SERVQUAL dimensions have a significant impact on customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. Abdul and Zainal (2016) found a significant influence of perceived value, emotional price, monetary price, behavioral price, and reputation, on customer satisfaction. Their findings revealed that emotional, monetary, and behavioral prices had a highly significant influence on customer satisfaction. This suggests that emotional experiences, monetary considerations, and behavioral aspects of the customers significantly contribute to their overall satisfaction. The service quality was measured by the SERVQUAL scale by numerous researchers (Lee, 2011; Vijayvargy, 2014; Daengs et al., 2020; Song et al., 2022). The effects of all five dimensions were also studied and proved to have a significant effect on customer satisfaction. Various studies conducted to explore the association between the SERVQUAL dimensions and satisfaction has been discussed below:

Tangibility

Tangibility refers to the physical look of the restaurant, including the amenities, equipment, and staff appearance. It is an important factor that can influence various aspects of the customer experience. Tangibility plays a significant role in customer satisfaction, particularly in the context of service-based businesses and experiences (Panda & Das, 2014; Aftab et al., 2016). Tangible aspects like easy-to-navigate store layouts or user-friendly physical products can improve accessibility and convenience, leading to greater customer satisfaction (Liu et al., 2017). Customers perceive a higher level of service quality when the restaurant has modern and well-maintained facilities (Daengs et al., 2020; Song et al., 2022). Customers perceived the physical appearance of the staff, such as their attire and grooming, as an important factor in their overall dining experience (Nguyen et al., 2018). Hence, investing in the physical appearance of the food place and its staff can positively impact customer satisfaction (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020).

Reliability

Reliability is an important element of SERVQUAL. This dimension is particularly important in the restaurant industry, as customers expect their orders to be accurate and delivered on time (Hildebrandt & Ulmer, 2022). When customers perceive a product or service as reliable, it can lead to higher levels of satisfaction and loyalty (Cheng et al., 2021). Reliability can mitigate concerns that customers might have about investing time or money in a product or service (Setiono & Hidayat, 2022). Several studies documented a positive association between reliability and customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Saad Andaleeb & Conway, 2006; Daengs et al., 2020). Nguyen et al. (2018) found that customers were more satisfied when the restaurant was able to deliver their orders on time and without errors. They were more likely to return to the same restaurant if they had a positive experience with the reliability of the service.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is a crucial element in the food industry when it comes to customer satisfaction. The food industry includes restaurants, cafes, food delivery services, and other food-related businesses (Ali et al., 2021). Service providers can respond to customer requests and complaints promptly. Several previous studies (Al-Tit, 2015; Kanyama et al., 2022) found a positive association between responsiveness and customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry. Customers were more satisfied when their complaints were resolved quickly and efficiently (Meuter et al., 2000). Similarly, Lee and Kim (2020) found that customers perceived a higher level of service quality when the staff was responsive to their requests. Businesses that prioritize responsiveness by focusing on order accuracy, communication, customization, customer service, and feedback management are more likely to create positive experiences for their customers (Rao, 2013; Daengs et al., 2020). These results suggest that

responsiveness has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

Assurance

It means the knowledge and courteousness of the restaurant's staff and their capabilities to inspire belief and confidence in the customers (Saad Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Several studies have shown a positive link between assurance and customer satisfaction in the restaurant industry (Omar et al., 2016). Customers are more satisfied when the staff are found knowledgeable and promptly respond (Saad Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). When customers are confident that their food is safe, it enhances their satisfaction and trust in the establishment. Similarly, customers perceived a higher level of service quality when the staff was courteous and polite (Lee, 2011; Mahsyar & Surapati, 2020). In the food industry, assurance is not only about delivering high-quality food but also about creating an atmosphere of trust and confidence throughout the dining experience (Gopi & Samat, 2020). These findings suggest that investing in staff training and ensuring that they have the necessary knowledge and skills can positively influence customer satisfaction.

Empathy

Empathy refers to the service provider's capability in addressing the customer's emotional needs (Wieseke et al., 2012). Several studies have found a positive association between empathy and customer satisfaction in the food service business. Empathy plays a significant role in enhancing customer satisfaction in the food industry. It fosters trust, creates positive emotional connections, and demonstrates a commitment to meeting customer needs (Jiang et al., 2021). Customers are more satisfied when the staff can understand their emotional needs and respond appropriately (Kassim & Asiah Abdullah, 2010). Empathetic food establishments prioritize the needs and preferences of their customers. They actively listen to customer feedback, take note of special requests, and tailor their services accordingly (Slack et al., 2020). Customers perceive a higher level of service quality when the staff can create a warm and welcoming atmosphere (Huang et al., 2015).

From the literature concerning the service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction, the following hypotheses have been designed:

H1a: There is a positive association between Tangibility and Customer Satisfaction

H1b: There is a positive association between Reliability and Customer Satisfaction

H1c: There is a positive association between Responsive and Customer Satisfaction

H1d: There is a positive association between Assurance and Customer Satisfaction

H1e: There is a positive association between Empathy and Customer Satisfaction

Visitor Type

Types of Visitors to the Restaurant

Tourists are a common visitor type for restaurants (Diaries et al., 2018). They are people who are traveling and visiting a particular area. They often seek out local cuisine and unique dining experiences. Tourists may also have different dietary requirements or food preferences than locals (Vu et al., 2019). Restaurants that cater to tourists often have menus that highlight local specialties, and they may offer a range of international cuisines to appeal to different tastes. Business travelers are another common visitor type for restaurants (Jang et al., 2003) and they are people who are traveling for work and may be in a hurry or have specific dietary needs (Jang et al., 2003). So, restaurants that cater to business travelers often offer quick service and may have a range of healthy options on the menu (McKercher et al., 2008). Additionally, families are another significant visitor type for restaurants (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997). They often visit restaurants to celebrate special occasions or enjoy a family outing (Fleischer & Pizam, 1997). Thus, restaurants that deal with families often have a relaxed and casual atmosphere, with menus that offer a range of options that appeal to both adults and children (Gomez et al., 2018). Another type of visitor is couples that seek out romantic dining experiences (Brochado et al., 2020). As they may be celebrating a special occasion or simply looking for a romantic evening out and restaurants that cater to couples often have an intimate atmosphere, with low lighting and soft music (Brochado et al., 2020). They may also offer special menus or wine pairings to enhance the romantic experience. The other type is solo diners which are becoming increasingly common (Fan & Khattak, 2009). They are people who dine alone and may be seeking out a place to eat that is welcoming and comfortable (Fan & Khattak, 2009). The food outlets that offer services to solo diners often have a bar or communal table where diners can sit and interact with other patrons and they may also offer smaller portion sizes or a range of small plates to make dining alone less intimidating (Goode, 2018). In addition to the above two types, other important visitor types for restaurants are: first-time visitors and repeat visitors.

First-Time and Repeat Visitors

Visitors visiting a destination for the first time are called First time visitors (Fakeye & Crompton, 1991). First-time visitors in a restaurant set-up are those who have never been to that restaurant before and may have heard about the restaurant through word-of-mouth, online reviews, or advertisements. So, they are often seeking an excellent dining experience and may have high expectations (Johns & Kivela, 2008). The first-time visitors were motivated

and enthusiastic to discover and thus took part in a broad range of activities and on the other side the repeat visitors had certain precise aspirations like they love to spend time with family and prefer to shop and dine (Lau & McKercher, 2004). It is observed that restaurants that deal with first-time visitors need to ensure that they offer exceptional food, service as well as atmosphere to make a good first impression (Brochado et al., 2020). Furthermore, repeat visitors are customers who have visited the restaurant before and enjoyed their experience enough to return and they may have a favorite dish or menu item that they always order, or they may be looking to try something new (Lau & McKercher, 2004). Repeat visitors are essential to the success of a restaurant because they often become loyal customers and recommend the restaurant to others (Saad Andaleeb & Conway, 2006). Businesses need to repeat the customers where repeat consumption takes place due to an encouraging attachment to a place (Kunamaneni et al., 2019). Hence, restaurants that cater to repeat visitors need to ensure that they maintain the quality of their food, service, and atmosphere to ensure that customers continue to return (Pantelidis, 2010). Understanding the different visitor types for restaurants is essential for providing a great dining experience; so, to provide services to various types of visitor's restaurants need to offer menus, atmospheres, and services that cater to their specific needs and preferences (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2003; Brown et al., 2020). By doing so, restaurants can ensure that their customers have an enjoyable experience that meets their expectations (Johns & Kivela, 2008). Moreover, understanding the different visitor types for restaurants, including first-time and repeat visitors, is crucial for providing a great dining experience (Johns & Kivela, 2008). Each visitor type has unique needs and preferences that can influence their level of satisfaction with the dining experience (Verma et al., 2000). Therefore, restaurants that understand and cater to these differences can create a loyal customer base and generate positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Kassim & Asiah Abdullah, 2010). By delivering exceptional food, service, and atmosphere that meet the expectations of each visitor type, restaurants can ensure that their customers are satisfied and will surely return for future visits (Tripathi, 2018). It is vital to understand the expectations of various types of visitors coming to a restaurant to understand the levels of their satisfaction because it varies from customer to customer. Hence, to understand the moderating impact of visitor type on the association between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction the following is hypothesized:

H2: Visitor's type moderates the effect of (H2a) Tangibility, (H2b) Reliability, (H2c) Responsiveness, (H2d) Assurance, and (H2e) Empathy on customer satisfaction.

Customer Loyalty

Loyalty can be viewed through two elements: behavior and attitude (Kandampully & Suhartanto, 2000; Heskett, 2002). The behavioral dimension involves repeat purchases, whereas the attitudinal dimension involves an intention to repurchase and recommend. The existence of true customer loyalty requires a strong attitudinal commitment to a brand (McMullan & Gilmore, 2008). This involves having consistently favorable beliefs and feelings toward the brand, which can be measured through various indicators such as liking the brand and feeling committed to it (Kassim & Asiah Abdullah, 2010). When customers have the intention to repurchase and recommend, they are more likely to remain loyal to a restaurant. Attitudinal dimensions are good indicators of a loyal customer, while behavioral dimensions reflect a customer's preference for a restaurant or service over time (Han & Ryu, 2009; Leninkumar, 2017).

Mediation of Customer Satisfaction:

Research has shown that quality service is a crucial factor in developing customer loyalty, with satisfaction acting as a mediator. Providing a high-quality service that meets or exceeds customer expectations is key to achieving satisfaction and repeat business (Surahman et al., 2020). Customers who are satisfied with a restaurant are more likely to return regularly and actively recommend it to others, spread positive word-of-mouth, and sustain long-term patronage (Shahid Iqbal et al., 2018). While customer satisfaction is important, loyalty should be given even greater attention, as it is the ultimate measure of success in the hospitality industry (Tripathi, 2018). However, the association between customer satisfaction and loyalty is complex and depends on elements like customer attitudes and behavioral intentions. Therefore, satisfaction plays a significant role in developing customer attitudes and intentions, ultimately leading to loyalty and positive recommendation intentions (Namkung & Jang, 2007). Hence, understanding and managing customer satisfaction is crucial for the success of a restaurant business. Various empirical evidences show that quality service dimensions such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy, and assurance have positive effects on customer satisfaction (Omar et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2018; Song et al., 2022) and satisfaction leads to customer loyalty. The following hypotheses are framed to understand the mediating impact of customer satisfaction on the association between service quality and customer loyalty:

H3: Customer satisfaction positively mediates the relationship of (H3a) Tangibility (H3b) Reliability, (H3c) Responsiveness, (H3d) Assurance, and (H3e) Empathy with customer loyalty.

Research Methodology

Overview

Research for the present study was conducted in North India covering major states i.e. Uttar Pradesh (Agra, Mathura-Vrindavan, Allahabad, and Lucknow), Punjab (Patiala, Ludhiana, Jalandhar, and Chandigarh), Haryana (Karnal, Faridabad, and Kurukshetra) and Delhi NCR (Delhi, Ghaziabad, Noida and Gurugram). The visitors from famous South Indian restaurant chains or restaurants from the mentioned cities were surveyed. The outlets of ‘Sagar Ratna’, ‘DS Dosa Factory’, ‘Sankalp Restaurant’, ‘Moets Coco Palm’, ‘Mr. Idli’ and other famous local South Indian restaurants of the mentioned places were chosen for gastronomic experience analysis of first-time and repeat visitors in terms of their satisfaction and loyalty. A judgmental sampling technique was used to collect the data. To collect the data, 15 to 20 respondents from each South Indian food outlet from the 42 outlets situated in the mentioned 15 cities were surveyed. A total of 712 responses were collected with this method and data was collected through a standardized and structured questionnaire in printed form. All the questions were close-ended and a limited number of options were given to respond. Finally, during the data cleaning process, 338 responses were discarded due to improper fill-up and missing data issues. Finally, 374 responses were found suitable for data analysis.

Measurement Instruments

The statements were framed by using the previous literature and four variables were taken for the assessment of the satisfaction of first-time and repeat customers. The questionnaire was framed based on previous literature and has two sections. The first section comprised socio-demographic details of visitors (gender, age marital status, and place of origin,) and their travel patterns (frequency of traveling). The second section measured the gastronomic experience of the visitors as per their perceived service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty toward the selected food outlets.

All five constructs of perceived service quality were measured by using a SERVQUAL scale adapted from Ahmad et al. (2019). The customer Satisfaction scale was also extracted from Ahmad et al. (2019) and the 4-item scale given by Lai (2019) was used to measure customer loyalty. Questionnaire responses were taken using a 5-point Likert-type scale with strongly disagree as 1 and strongly agree as 5 in a continuum.

Previous researchers had already validated the scales used in this investigation. However, to assess their suitability for the current study, a factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed. The goal of this research was to reassess the scales' applicability for the current investigation. The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) results showed that all items had factor loadings greater than the minimal criterion of 0.50, indicating their importance for future investigation. Table 1 also includes information on the Kaiser- Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. A KMO score greater than 0.8 suggests that the sample used in this investigation is adequate. Furthermore, Bartlett's test produced a p-value less than .001, suggesting that the variables comprised are significantly appropriate.

Table-1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO		.806
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4975.919
	df	406
	Sig.	.000

Source: Authors Input

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS 21 statistical software was used for analyzing the data. To examine the statistical difference between the comments on gastronomic experience between the first-time and return visitors, a t-test analysis was used. Then, the proposed structural model was examined using SEM (structural equation modeling) in AMOS 21.0 (Arbuckle, 2012). AMOS

21.0 was also used for the mediation analysis. The sample size criterion for SEM has been satisfied by keeping a threshold of 200 (Hoogland & Boomsma, 1998; Kline, 2004). Cronbach's alpha and CFA were used to assess the reliability and validity of scales (Hooper et al., 2008; Byrne, 2013).

Findings:

Participants' Profile:

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Among the participants in the final sample, 54.4% (n=203) were found to have experienced the South Indian food outlets for the first time, whereas 45.6 percent (n=171) were repeat visitors. However, there was no significant gender difference between the two groups ($\chi^2(1) = .017$, p

=.873). Male participants were somewhat more prevalent among first-time visitors and repeatvisits, with 55.17 percent and 57.3 percent, respectively.

Table- 2: Respondent's demographic profile and comparison of First time and Repeat visitors

Demographic Profile		First-time visitors (n=203)	Repeat visitors (n=171)	X2 (DOF) chi-square	P
Gender	Male	112 (55.17%)	98 (57.3%)	1.16 (1)	0.521
	Female	91 (44.8%)	73 (42.6%)		
Marital Status	Single	104 (51.23%)	68 (39.76%)	1.07 (2)	0.613
	Married	99 (48.76%)	103 (60.23)		
Age	18-30	86 (42.36%)	94 (54.97%)	7.612 (3)	0.002*
	31-50	92 (45.32%)	64 (37.42%)		
	51 or above	25 (12.31%)	13 (7.60%)		
Place of Origin	Gurugram	26 (12.8%)	12 (7.01%)	12.715	0.032*
	Ghaziabad	12 (5.91%)	4 (2.33%)		
	Lucknow	2(0.98%)	42 (24.56%)		
	Faridabad	11(5.41%)	5 (2.92%)		
	Ludhiana	13 (6.40%)	-		
	Kurukshetra	14 (6.89%)	-		
	Mathura-Vrindavan	8 (3.94%)	8 (4.67%)		
	Allahabad	28 (13.79%)	46 (26.90%)		
	Delhi	58 (28.57%)	36 (21.05%)		
	Noida	6 (2.95%)	3 (1.75%)		
	Agra	7 (3.44%)	8 (4.67%)		
	Patiala	4 (1.970%)	2 (1.16%)		
	Ghaziabad	8 (3.94%)	5 (2.92%)		
	Karnal	3 (1.47%)	-		
	Jalandhar	3 (1.47%)	-		

Source: Authors input

There is a significant difference related to different age groups of first-timers and repeatvisitors ($\chi^2(3) = 7.612$, $p = 0.002^*$ where the age group between 18-30 (first-time visitors) was 86(42.36 percent), age group of 31-50 were 92 (45.32 percent) and above 51 were 25 (12.31percent). For the repeat visitors age group of 18-30 was 94 (54.97 percent), between 31-50 the number was 64 (37.42 percent) and 51 or above was 13 (7.60 percent). Concerning marital status, there was an insignificant difference between first-time and repeat visitors ($\chi^2(2) = 1.07$, $p = 0.613$ Single first-time visitors were 104 (51.23 percent) and married 99 (48.76percent) whereas, for the repeat visitors, the single was 68 (39.76%) and the married were 103(60.23 percent). Furthermore, it was found that in terms of place of origin, there was a significant difference between first-time and repeat visitors ($\chi^2(8) = 12.715$, $p = 0.032^*$). Most of the repeat visitors were from Allahabad (26.90 %), Lucknow (24.56 percent), Delhi (21.05 percent), and Gurugram (7.01 percent). Table 3 describes the descriptive statistics of thevariables including mean, standard deviation, and inter-correlation of the variables.

Table-3: Mean, Standard Deviation, and Inter-correlations among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Tangibles	1	.179**	.658**	.944**	.162**	.329**	.248**
Responsiveness		1	.164**	.176**	.943**	.427**	.258**
Reliability			1	.645**	.156**	.413**	.335**
Assurance				1	.164**	.330**	.237**
Empathy					1	.254**	.175*
Satisfaction						1	.261**
Loyalty							1

** = $P < 0.01$ level (2-tailed).

Source: Authors input

Measurement Model and Validity

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to examine the overall fit of the model by embracing the opinions of diverse researchers (Boomsma, 2000; McDonald & Ho, 2002; Schreiber, 2008). As advised by Byrne (2013), the goodness-of-fit measurement indices applied in this research, namely GFI, PGFI, CFI, and TLI, offer an indicator of the model's uni-dimensionality. Table 4 shows that all of these indices are above the minimum acceptable limits, and the RMSEA value of 0.071 was found lower than the intended range, suggesting an adequate model fit.

Table-4: Fit statistics of the model

Model Fit	Cut-off Criteria	Model Statistics	Remarks
CMIN		631.754	
DF		356	
CMIN/Df	≤3 (Hair et al., 2010)	1.775	Excellent
GFI	≥.8 (Homburg & Baumgartner, 1995)	.903	Excellent
PGFI	≥.5 (Wu, 2009)	.739	Excellent
CFI	≥.9 (Hair et al., 2010)	.941	Good
TLI	≥.9 (Byrne, 2011)	.933	Good
RMSEA	≤.08 (Steiger, 1990)	.044	Excellent

Source: Authors input

It is also worth noting that all of the regression weights were determined to be greater than 0.6. To establish construct convergent validity, the factor loadings of all statements should be greater than 0.5 (Kline, 2015). Moreover, the composite reliability (CR) and the average variance extracted (AVE) value should be greater than 0.7 (Hair et al., 2010), and 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) respectively. Furthermore, as shown in Table 5, the diagonal values were consistently greater than the corresponding values in the respective rows and columns, indicating discriminant validity. Table 5 displays the findings for both convergent and discriminant validity.

Table 5: Convergent and Discriminant Validity Statistic of Variables

	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	T	RL	RS	AS	E	CS	CL
T	0.908	0.667	0.059	0.938	0.817						
RL	0.902	0.649	0.059	0.909	0.243	0.805					
RS	0.818	0.530	0.262	0.820	0.125	0.235	0.728				
AS	0.890	0.672	0.262	0.922	0.163	0.073	0.512	0.820			
E	0.825	0.613	0.227	0.848	0.079	0.129	0.338	0.122	0.783		
CS	0.866	0.618	0.227	0.876	0.213	0.186	0.131	0.285	0.476	0.786	
CL	0.921	0.744	0.164	0.944	0.235	0.104	0.221	0.305	0.405	0.211	0.863

(T-Tangibility, RL-Reliability, RS-Responsiveness, AS-Assurance, E-Empathy, CS-Customer Satisfaction, and CL-Customer Loyalty)

Source: Authors input

Gastronomic Experience attributes the difference between First-time and Repeat Visitors:

An independent sample t-test was conducted to understand if there was an effect of first-timers or repeat visitors on five gastronomic experience attributes (service quality). Table 6 reveals the mean of gastronomic experience attributes between the two types of visitors.

Table 6: Means of Gastronomic experience attributes for first-time and repeat visitors

	Mean value		Skewness		Kurtosis		Levene Stat.	p-value	t-value	p-value
	FV	RV	FV	RV	FV	RV				
Tangibility	3.52	4.02	.14	.04	1.13	1.12	9.013	.003	4.85	.000
Reliability	3.42	3.89	.27	.02	1.07	1.04	.919	.338	3.23	.000
Responsiveness	3.60	3.86	.01	.16	1.05	.95	.656	.419	3.77	.000
Assurance	3.33	3.95	1.11	1.44	1.21	1.20	5.810	.016	4.50	.000
Empathy	3.50	3.90	.39	.06	.34	.25	.639	.425	3.04	.000

*Significant at 5% level

Source: Authors input

The findings show a considerable difference in service quality aspects between first-timers and repeat visitors. Tangibility (FV: M=3.52, RV: M=4.02; $t=4.85$, $p<.05$), responsiveness (FV: M=3.60, RV: M=3.82; $t=3.77$, $p<.05$), reliability (FV: M=3.42, RV: M=3.89; $t=3.32$, $p<.05$), assurance (FV: M=3.35, RV: M=3.95; $t=4.50$, $p<.05$). These findings clearly show that repeat visitors had higher mean ratings, indicating a higher level of agreement in perceiving higher service quality.

Structural Model

The proposed research model was further put for SEM analysis in AMOS after testing the reliability and validity. The structural equation modeling (SEM) study results show a substantial association between service quality aspects and customer satisfaction, confirming the acceptance of all hypotheses. Tangibility (H1a=0.259, $p<0.05$), reliability (H1b=0.329, $p<0.05$), responsiveness (H1c= 0.376, $p<0.05$), assurance (H1d=0.565, $p<0.05$), and empathy (H1e=0.542, $p<0.05$) all demonstrate a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Table 7 shows the direct effect results of SEM analysis.

Table 7: Results of Structural Model (Direct Effect)

Hypothesis	Relationships			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Hypothesis Acceptance
H1a	CS	<--	T	.259	.134	2.107	**	YES
H1b	CS	<--	RL	.329	.059	5.531	***	YES
H1c	CS	<--	RE	.376	.134	2.815	**	YES
H1d	CS	<--	AS	.565	.132	4.280	***	YES
H1e	CS	<--	E	.542	.135	4.009	***	YES

Notes: 1. *** p -value < 0.01; ** p -value < 0.05

(T-Tangibility, RL-Reliability, RS-Responsiveness, AS-Assurance, E-Empathy CS-Customer Satisfaction, and CL-Customer Loyalty)

Source: Authors input

Moderation Analysis

The moderating impact of visitor type was examined to investigate possible statistical variations in perception between the visitors without having any prior experience and recurrent visitors. Table 8 summarizes the data concerning the moderating effect.

Table 8: Moderation Effect of Visitors' Type on Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction

Notes: ** p -value < 0.05

(T-Tangibility, RL-Reliability, RS-Responsiveness, AS-Assurance, E-Empathy, CS-Customer Satisfaction, and CL-Customer Loyalty)

Source: Authors input

Hypotheses	Relationships			First Time		Repeat Visitors		z- score	If z VALUE < 1.96 i.e., no significant difference
				Estimate	P	Estimate	P		
H2a	CS	<--	T	0.798	0.009	0.058	0.727	3.46**	Moderation
H2b	CS	<--	R L	0.429	0.000	0.105	0.365	0.056	No Moderation
H2c	CS	<--	R E	0.613	0.022	0.398	0.019	2.84**	Moderation
H2d	CS	<--	AS	1.197	0.000	0.466	0.004	3.68**	Moderation
H2e	CS	<--	E	0.743	0.006	0.557	0.001	2.60**	Moderation

A multi-group structural equation modeling (SEM) study was also done for both first-time and repeat visitors to explore the association between service quality factors and overall satisfaction among tourists. Table 8 shows the significant moderating effect of visitor type on the association of all service quality attributes, namely tangibility (H2a: $Z=3.46$), responsiveness (H2c: $Z=2.84$), assurance (H2d: $Z=3.68$), and empathy (H2e: $Z=2.60$), with tourists' overall satisfaction. However, the moderating impact of visitor type on the association between reliability and overall satisfaction was not found to be significant (H2b: $Z=0.056$). As a result, it can be inferred that there is a considerable moderation of visitors' types on the gourmet experience and customer happiness.

Mediation Analysis

Following the moderation effect study, the model was subjected to mediation analysis to evaluate the function of customer satisfaction as a mediator in the link between service quality and customer loyalty. Table 9 and Figure 1 show the outcomes of the mediation study. Customer satisfaction, according to Hypothesis H3a, mediates the relationship between tangibility and customer loyalty. The findings show that tangibility has a substantial indirect influence on consumer loyalty ($\beta=0.376$, $p<0.05$). The statistical findings partially support hypothesis H3a by demonstrating that, even after accounting for mediation, the direct effect of tangibility on customer loyalty remains considerable. Similarly, the indirect impact of dependability and responsiveness on customer loyalty was shown to be significant in H3b ($\beta=0.045$, $p<0.05$) and H3c ($\beta=0.052$, $p<0.05$). Additionally, the direct effects after mediation remained significant, indicating partial mediation of customer satisfaction in the relationship between reliability and responsiveness with customer loyalty. Furthermore, the mediating role of customer satisfaction between assurance and career satisfaction H3d ($\beta=.079$, $p<0.05$) and empathy and career satisfaction H3e ($\beta=.073$, $p<0.05$) were found to be significant with full mediation as the direct effect after mediation become insignificant.

Table-9: Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction

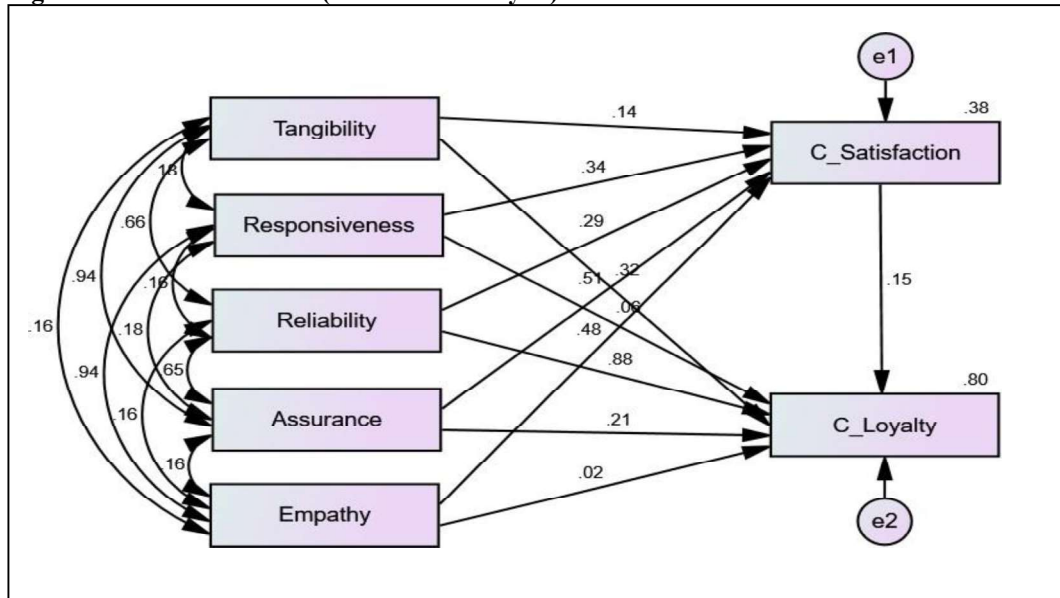
Hypothesis	Relationship (Satisfaction as a mediator)	Total effect	P value	Direct Effect	P value	Indirect effect	P value	Mediation remarks
H3a	T --> CL	.538**	.004	.315**	.004	.376*	.022	Partial
H3b	RL --> CL	.921**	.001	.876**	.001	.045**	.001	Partial
H3c	Rs --> CL	.412**	.008	.657**	.016	.052*	.047	Partial
H3d	As --> CL	.255*	.011	.167	.154	.079**	.002	Full
H3e	Ep --> CL	.179*	.05	.191	.320	.073**	.009	Full

Notes: 1. ** p -value < 0.01 ; * p -value < 0.05 .

(T-Tangibility, RL-Reliability, RS-Responsiveness, AS-Assurance, E-Empathy, CS-Customer Satisfaction, and CL-Customer Loyalty)

Source: Authors input

Figure 1: Structural Model (Mediation Analysis)



Source: Authors input

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to look at the effect of gastronomic experience and service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty towards prominent South Indian cuisine establishments in North India. The study examined the attitudes of both first-time and return visitors. A moderation and mediation model was created and analyzed to determine the relationship and effect of service quality on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Initially, the study looked at the link between perceived service quality and customer happiness, as well as the perception variations between first-time and return visits to the selected food establishments. The study's

empirical findings show that all service quality parameters have a substantial impact on the overall satisfaction of both first-time and return guests to South Indian restaurants in North India. This supports prior studies (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2003; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Ha & Jang, 2010; Karim & Chi, 2010; Ryu & Han, 2010a) showing total satisfaction is derived from the quality of services provided. High service quality promotes repeat visits and visitor satisfaction and leads to perceived value for money (Yüksel & Yüksel, 2002). These findings are consistent with previous research (Qin & Prybutok, 2009; Hanaysha, 2016). Moreover, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty are also closely interconnected in the restaurant industry. High levels of customer satisfaction often lead to increased customer loyalty, and loyal customers, in turn, contribute significantly to a restaurant's success (Omar et al., 2016; Daengs et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2020; Song et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the study looked at the function of customer satisfaction as a mediator. According to research, service quality has a favorable impact on customer satisfaction (Lee, 2011; Thaichon et al., 2014; Vijayvargy, 2014; Su et al., 2016) and influences customer loyalty both directly and indirectly through customer satisfaction (Ladhari, 2009; Daengs et al., 2020; Song et al., 2022). Past research has demonstrated strong correlations between service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty (Falk et al., 2010; Matos & Rossi, 2009). According to previous research (Lam et al., 2004; Yi & La, 2004; Santouridis & Trivellas, 2010), customer satisfaction plays a significant and positive mediating role in the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty (Yee et al., 2010; Hadi et al., 2016; Slack & Singh, 2019). To foster customer loyalty in the restaurant industry, it's essential to prioritize and consistently deliver exceptional dining experiences, actively seek and respond to customer feedback, and implement customer retention strategies such as loyalty programs, personalized marketing, and engagement initiatives. By doing so, restaurants can not only enhance customer satisfaction but also build a loyal customer base that contributes to long-term success and sustainability.

Conclusion

The current study sought to investigate the effects of gastronomic experience on customer satisfaction and loyalty towards South Indian food outlets in North India while controlling for visitor type. A moderation and mediation model was presented to study the link between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty from both first-time and repeat visitors' viewpoints. The study's findings revealed that all aspects of service quality, including tangibility, dependability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, had a substantial impact on the overall satisfaction of visitors to South Indian food outlets in North India. These findings are in line with earlier research. Furthermore, the study found that visitor type moderates the impact of service quality on customer satisfaction, implying that first-time visitors in South Indian food outlets view service quality characteristics differently than recurrent visitors. It was discovered that delivering value for money not only helps visitor happiness but also stimulates repeat visits and client loyalty.

Suggestions

South Indian food outlets must prioritize the improvement of tangible aspects such as the furniture, service and non-service equipment, staff appearance, etc. to entice visitors. The continuous improvements of such tangible aspects will help the outlets in retaining customers. Repeat visitors normally expect to get similar or better services than their previous experience with the restaurant. Hence, it is the sole responsibility of the management to live up to the expectations of their customers and offer reliable service every time so that the customers can be retained. During the service the visitors expect the outlets to address their requests very promptly, may it be during an order or any complaint. A prompt and positive response is always expected from the customers hence the outlets should train their service personnel to be patient and proactive rather than reactive. The staff of restaurants must adopt a sound and stringent customer complaint policy. The South Indian outlets must ensure the taste and delicacies of the most iconic dishes of the South are maintained even if they are served somewhere in the northern region. Various types of visitors come to the South-Indian restaurants serving food in north India including the residents, the South origin people residing in north India, the travelers of South India, and the food lovers from other localities as well. The status, culture, gender, age, and qualification of people also vary prominently, so, it is the responsibility of the service staff to stand on their feet and understand their budget, requirements, consumption patterns, and other expectations of the customers regarding the food services. Hence, the management of the restaurants needs to train their employees so that they can serve all types of visitors as per their requirements. In sum, the research emphasizes the relevance of service quality as a significant factor as a predictor for customer satisfaction and triggering their repeat purchase. It emphasizes the need to provide high-quality services at a cost-effective budget. To encourage repeat visits and long-term customer connections, the chain must continually give great service experiences. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for South Indian food outlets to structure their services with the varied viewpoints and expectations of first-time and repeat visitors in mind. The moderating element of visitor type was discovered. This indicates that methods and approaches should be managed according to the demands and preferences of each visitor segment. By recognizing and accommodating these variances, the service quality can successfully increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. The food establishments may provide a great eating experience that may generate repeat business and build long-term customer connections by

concentrating on enhancing service aspects and recognizing the diverse perspectives of different visitor categories.

Implications:

Practical Implications

The findings of this research have substantial management implications for restaurant businesses looking to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. This study focuses on the management implications of maintaining excellent service quality, taking visitor perceptions into account, and recognizing visitor types for increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty within restaurant chains. South Indian food outlets may improve their overall performance and develop closer ties with their clients by applying these findings. To begin with, it emphasizes the need to maintain good service quality in producing value for money and, eventually, boosting customer satisfaction. Restaurant businesses may enhance it by prioritizing the delivery of great service experiences, which will have a beneficial influence on customer loyalty. Second, the study emphasizes the need to consider visitors' diverse perspectives when developing tactics to increase customer loyalty. Recognizing that first-time and return customers have varied prospects and preferences, the restaurants must customize their offerings. By knowing and responding to these individual demands, they can develop personalized experiences that resonate with each visitor group, promoting a feeling of loyalty and recurring patronage. The restaurant chains must actively study and grasp the characteristics and behaviors of all types of visitors. In this way, they can successfully enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty by adjusting their offerings and tactics to line with the preferences and expectations of these diverse groups.

Theoretical Implications:

The study's findings support the premise that service quality influences both customer satisfaction and loyalty. This is consistent with past research that has emphasized the need for high-quality service to generate favorable customer outcomes. Moreover, the study offers insight into the moderating impact of visitor type, broadening our understanding of the complex interactions between service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. The research improves the existing knowledge base by recognizing the impact of visitor type and emphasizes the need to adjust tactics and experiences to match the varying requirements and expectations of different tourist segments. Furthermore, the novelty of the study is that it proposed a moderation and mediation model which provides a useful foundation for future research in the field of culinary experience. This model provides a systematic approach to investigating the complex links between service quality and loyalty, opening the way for deeper insights and more extensive research in this sector. The findings show the significance of service quality as a driver of customer satisfaction and loyalty, as well as the moderating role of visitor type. The suggested moderation and mediation model provide a strong framework for future study, allowing academics to dive further into the nuances of the link between service quality, customer pleasure, and loyalty in the context of gastronomic experiences.

Limitations and Future Scope

The study has some drawbacks which can be removed in future research studies. First, this study's findings are limited to South Indian food outlets in North India. Cultural and geographical differences might have a varied impact on consumer perceptions and behaviors. So, future research might compare the results of this study with various geographical or cultural contexts to detect potential changes in the impact of the eating experience on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Second, the study has sample size and representativeness constraints. To improve the generalizability of the findings, future studies might use bigger and more varied populations. Third, in the current research, a cross-sectional research design is performed, which restricts the capacity to demonstrate causal links. To enhance causal inferences and establish the temporal sequence of the variables, future research might use longitudinal or experimental approaches. Researchers can acquire insights into the long-term consequences of service quality as well as gourmet experience on customer loyalty by recording visitors' views and subsequent behaviors. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported data, which may induce response bias and subjectivity. Using objective measurements or combining self-report data with observational or objective data might improve the findings' reliability and validity. Lastly, the study might be conducted to investigate customer segmentation based on visitor type and other pertinent criteria. Understanding diverse people's needs, preferences, and expectations of different customer segments can help restaurants tailor their services and offerings categorically, which ultimately helps to enhance customer satisfaction as well as customer loyalty.

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