

An Empirical Study of Consumer Responses to Health-Oriented Menu Offerings in Urban Indian Quick-Service Restaurants

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Abstract

This research uses a qualitative approach to examine at how people describe on what they perceive of health options at quick service restaurants (QSRs). A total 25 number of in depth interviews were conducted, through which primary data was derived and then thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Also, the Theory of Planned Behaviour is employed as a theory for this study which we would use to uncover the issues of self-identity, emotional connection and the want for personalization. A detailed process of code generation is included for the analysis of the transcribed data, which would be followed by the categorization of these codes and the distillation of the recurring themes to uncover underlying patterns of what consumers are thinking.

The health assessments of products from the QSR industry are seen to be very much at the discretion of what customers perceive to be true, in large part the reliability of the QSR brand, the degree to which they are made aware of what is in the menu items, the social setting in which they are eating and the cultural values which play a role. Also, there is a definite and growing trend of customers' moving toward QSRs that puts emphasis on being transparent in its information and has a large range of health options. Thus, it is recommended that more in-depth empirical studies be done into how changing consumer behaviour is a factor in the growth of the QSR industry and how they influence the purchasing decisions made by consumers.

Keywords: Perception, attitude, fast-food, quick-service restaurants, healthiness

1. Introduction

There has been a dramatic change in how we eat across the globe because of an increase in quick-service restaurant establishments. This dramatic change is representative of a shift away from home-cooked meals, once perceived based on the idea of being nutritious to the now preferred fast, easy-to-prepare meals offered by fast-food restaurants (Chitnis, 2019). With the increase in demand for convenience dining choices due to urbanisation in India, a significant number of people are changing how they consume food by replacing the traditional home-cooked meals with quick and easy options. As a result of this new urban Indian lifestyle, more citizens are now dealing with hectic work schedules, which is why quick-service restaurants have become a popular alternative in the face of an increasingly busy world. The primary drivers behind this change are urbanisation, an increasing number of dual-income families, and busy lifestyles (Kaur and Singh, 2025).

As a result of socio-economic developments, including rapid technological advances, Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs) have become increasingly appealing to customers who want access

to many different foods and speedy service (Goyal & Singh, 2007; (Restaurants & Food Service Industry – Analysis and Insights, 2025). With an increased demand for budget-friendly, easily accessible, and rapid meal choices from consumers, as well as the recent developments of digital food delivery companies, more and more QSRs have opened up (Patropis and Arispe, 2025). The QSR business is projected to continue its rapid growth, with estimates suggesting that India's QSR industry will generate revenue around \$25.46 billion in 2024; then grow to over \$8.7 billion by 2029 (Statista; Mordor Intelligence, 2024). The rapid growth of QSRs mirrors the changes occurring in food consumption amongst Indians.

Consumers living in urban locations are exclusively searching out convenience and speed via QSRs because of limited time and the difficulty of preparing meals quickly (Rao, et al., 2021). This generation has become especially attracted to QSRs, due to the businesses providing budget-friendly meal prices and ease of not needing to prepare your meal (Friddle et al., 2001). In contrast to the benefits of providing affordable and easy-to-prepare meals, many QSRs have received criticism for being associated with developing unhealthy eating trends. Many of the QSR menu options contain high quantities of saturated fat and calories combined with high sodium levels and have been associated with obesity and heart disease (Mohiuddin, 2020; Smith, 2024). This contradiction shows how the convenience and availability of QSR food meet current consumer demand for quick-service meals while simultaneously posing potential future impacts on public health.

QSRs are starting to become aware and understand the evolution of a new consumer consciousness, which has shifted from an era of uncertainty around food and health towards an era in which individuals are better informed about food and nutrition and therefore choosing to eat healthier, more balanced meals (Paul et al., 2012). As part of this evolution, many internationally and domestically based QSRs will continue to add new menu items within the next five years and offer consumers a wider variety of protein options, use whole grains over refined grains, provide more salad selections, and give clearer information regarding their products' nutritional values, as this has become increasingly important to consumers. In order to compete effectively, QSRs will need to adapt their business models to better meet the needs of their customers; these changes are a recognition by QSRs of their responsibility to provide products that reduce the guilt associated with eating and support the ideals of those who wish to maintain a healthy lifestyle through nutritious and well-balanced meals. The Deloitte Future of food (2021) shows that Indian consumers are developing new tastes and preferences for food (namely, increased demand for healthier options in the fast-food segment). There is growing health awareness among the population that is driving this change in taste; however, there is also a larger movement of people towards 'clean' or whole foods (minimally processed) and following plant-based diets and buying from sources that are ethically and environmentally responsible. These changes in the way people are eating now, as well as the way people will eat in the future, will affect restaurants in how they create their overall business models (Kapsdorferova et al., 2024).

Research supports several key components of consumer perception toward fast food. These components are primarily taste, convenience, price, hygienic conditions and nutrition (Goyal & Singh, 2007). Historically, taste and accessibility have been the primary motivators for consumers to choose Quick Service Restaurants (QSR); however, recent studies indicate that consumers place a greater emphasis on food safety and health-related decisions when making purchases from QSRs (Gallarza-Granizo et al., 2019). As a result of this growing concern

around food safety and health, QSRs are being compelled to demonstrate their hygiene practices and nutrition standards with more transparency to align with the changing expectations of consumers and to help build brand trust and encourage repeat purchases by the consumer. The changing lifestyle of increasing numbers of people suffering from chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension has led to an increase in demand for healthier meal selections in the fast-food industry (Samuel, 2023). Generally, due to their desire for health and fitness goals, younger consumers seem to be more likely change their eating patterns from fast food restaurants. The existing body of research demonstrates how consumers perceive themselves as well as their health motivations can affect Fast Food Chains (i.e., QSR). India and international marketing strategies, therefore demonstrating the ongoing difficulties faced by QSRs in providing nutritional value along with the ease of use synonymous with their core products. Additionally, through a comprehensive view of the interaction between health consciousness and QSR Marketing Practices and the implication on Public Health Discourse, we can obtain valuable insight into the dynamic relationship between Health Consciousness and the Impact of QSR Marketing on Consumers (Basha et al., 2019). This study uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as a foundation for empirically examining urban Indian consumer perceptions and behavioural Responses to QSR marketing practices.

2. Literature Review

Rapid urbanisation has facilitated numerous changes in society that have impacted the evolution of fast food in India. Additionally, the rapid pace of change in lifestyles and increasing awareness around health and nutrition has affected how consumers see QSRs (Quick Service Restaurants). This review will analyse the perceptions held by Indian consumers regarding the potential for QSRs to assist with making healthier food choices.

2.1 Fast Food Consumption and Health Concerns

According to Pingali et al. (2019), fast-food is playing an increasingly important role in the global food system by not only changing the way people consume food, but also shaping the way people feel about food culturally. Because of the large part fast-food plays in modern-day living, it is of great interest to research, practitioners, and nutritionists alike (Freeman, 2007). The most apparent benefits of QSRs are that they are cost-effective, quick, and easy to eat and are therefore often used as an alternative to home-cooked meals. According to KPMG (2016), technological advancement and heightened consumer demand are key contributors to the growth of the Indian Food Service Sector. The growth of fast food Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs) within India is primarily due to an increase in urbanization, changes in the way people live and work, and an increased demand for convenience and value when it comes to dining. The entrance of large multinational brands like McDonald's, KFC and Domino's Pizza into the marketplace has undoubtedly resulted in a considerable degree of integration of fast food into everyday life and thus has changed consumer behaviour toward this type of food (Anand, 2011). At first, fast food was seen as a quick and easy way to eat on the go, but it soon became a favoured option due to the ease with which it can be purchased and the flavour profiles of the menu items they offer (Smith & Robinson, 2024).

With the growth of the fast-food industry (Liu et al., 2024) comes a variety of challenges in relation to eating patterns, obesity rates, and the long-term ramifications of consuming processed foods. There are numerous reports in circulation that indicate that fast food has a higher fat, sugar and sodium content than an average meal made at home (KPMG, 2016) even though it is relatively easy to purchase. Changing perceptions of food and consumers becoming more nutritionally aware have influenced a growing trend where consumers are gravitating toward healthier options and away from fast food. Health awareness, as well as negative press

associated with health issues that come with the consumption of fast food, continues to pose a challenge to the fast-food industry (Jaworowska et al., 2013).

2.2 Consciousness for Healthy Food

Young people feel increasingly informed about health and nutrition. This increased awareness is leading to a different attitude towards food selections. Consumers are becoming more aware of where their food comes from and want to eat healthier by reducing the number of calories they consume, eating organic or plant-based products such as whole-wheat pizza, protein-packed salads, or wraps that are vegan-friendly (Ditlevsen et al., 2018). Additionally, a report from Deloitte states that consumers are becoming aware of how food affects their health and that they are seeking out foods with fresh and minimally processed ingredients.

Moreover, packaging at the point of sale has contributed significantly to consumers being informed about nutritional value in Fast Foods and their ability to make better choices (Julia et al., 2021). The way that consumers have categorised food today into “junk” or “healthy” is creating a barrier for consumers to achieve a healthy balanced diet (Chapman & MacLean, 1993). Some consumers can easily transition to a healthy lifestyle while others struggle, based on their different lifestyles. The change can also be seen in the way that governments are promoting healthy and organic food products (MoFPI, 2021). As a result, the Indian Fast-Food industry is undergoing a change that sees both international and domestic brands introducing a range of nutritious options for consumers seeking healthier food choices (Prabhavathi et al., 2014).

2.3 Role of QSR in shaping consumer perception

For health-conscious consumers, many quick-service restaurants are continuously changing their menus to offer them healthier choices. Brands, both domestic and international, are focusing on offering healthier food options in the form of baked items, low-calorie options and organic/plant-based products (Deloitte, 2019). According to KPMG's report, brand loyalty is increasing among consumers who prefer brands that focus on food quality and nutritional value. However, food environments and their respective quality are not the same. The majority of food options available from brands are junk, which causes consumers great difficulty in making healthier choices and ultimately leads to issues of increased obesity as indicated in various studies (Sallis et al. 2009).

2.4 Challenges and Opportunities

While the population is often concerned with healthy eating, some food service brands are increasing their offerings of health-oriented food items. For example, Subway has focused on using leaner protein sources, as well as marketing their “fresh” ingredients, while Pret A Manger has a greater emphasis on using organic ingredients as a means of providing the health-conscious consumer with a connection to the brand. In India, new brands such as One8 commune, Nutriobox, Eat Fit, and Fresh Menu are focusing more on producing healthy and balanced meals that are suited to the time-sensitive consumer of today and are shifting their focus toward healthy food options. In addition to this, established international fast food restaurant chains such as KFC and McDonald's have changed their menu offerings to include grilled items and salads, resulting in more choices of healthier items on their menus. Finally, there is an increasing trend toward plant-based meal options, with examples such as the introduction of the plant-based Whopper at Burger King and the response from Domino's Pizza to provide health-oriented menu items based on consumer demand. While there are many innovative food items being introduced in the industry as a result of growing awareness among

consumers about their choices of food due to campaigns promoting healthy eating, there are still many barriers that must be overcome. One of the biggest barriers is the ongoing issue of sodium levels in prepared food and the prevalence of misleading marketing practices, therefore this issue must be reviewed by regulatory agencies and monitored further (FICCI, 2018).

2.5 Theoretical Framework: Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

This research is framed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), a robust model for predicting human social behaviour. The study focuses on how Attitude, Subjective norms, and Perceived Behavioural Control influence perception and attitude related to health-oriented QSR choices.

1. Attitude: In this context, attitude is not merely a preference for taste but it is shaped by Self-Identity Alignment and Perceived Healthiness. It reflects the degree to which a consumer views health-oriented fast food as favourable or unfavourable based on their personal identity.
2. Subjective norms: These are the perceived social pressures to perform or not perform a behaviour. In the Indian context, this is heavily influenced by Cultural norms and Social influence (family expectations versus peer pressure).
3. Perceived Behavioural Control (PBC): This refers to people's preferences of their ability to perform a given behaviour. In the QSR setting, PBC is manifested as Customisation Flexibility, the ability of the consumer to alter the ingredients to meet their health ingredients. The study seeks to extend the applicability and explanatory power of the TPB within the unique QSR health context in India, augmenting its core constructs with context-specific variables. The study seeks to extend the applicability and explanatory power of the TPB within the unique QSR health context in India, augmenting its core constructs with context-specific variables.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Inductive Research Design

The objective of the current study is to examine the consumer perceptions and attitude towards the idea that fast-food, usually offered in Quick-service restaurants (QSRs), can be considered as a healthy diet option. As the study is exploratory in nature and no specific study on the phenomenon is available, it was believed that the qualitative approach would be most appropriate for this study. Although the approach allows for collection of the totality of determinants of consumer attitudes and perceptions, the use of quantitative methods by themselves is insufficient to capture these elements. The study uses a qualitative method of in-depth interviews to provide a deep and rich insights into consumer attitudes and perceptions (Vehmas et al., 2024).

3.2 Sample Participants and Data Collection

During this study, participants were chosen in a purposive manner from the urban areas of India due to an increase in the demand for fast food over the past few years. By selecting 24 participants that provided a representation of different ages, genders, dietary practices, and socio-economic statuses, it was possible to identify multiple perspectives associated with fast-food consumption and gather data through in-depth face-to-face interviews with each participant. The interviews were conducted at either the participant's home or at a neutral site selected by mutual agreement and took approximately 30-45 minutes from start to finish, with the entire process being recorded digitally following participant consent prior to the interview. The use of a semi-structured interview guide allowed the interviewer to ask both open-ended questions directed towards a specific theme as well as provide opportunities to explore additional ideas by utilizing the opportunity to ask more open-ended questions from

participants. In combination, these approaches yielded more in-depth data on consumers' perceptions and psychosocial behaviours surrounding health-oriented options offered in QSRs.

Data Processing and Transcription

The interviews were transcribed word for word to make sure that data was accurate and to keep its integrity. The primary source of the data analysis was the comprehensive transcripts.

Respondent	Age	Occupation
Resp 1	58	Private sector
Resp 2	20	Student
Resp 3	25	Private sector
Resp 4	24	Private sector
Resp 5	25	Own business
Resp 6	24	Private sector
Resp 7	28	Student
Resp 8	50	Private sector
Resp 9	27	Private sector
Resp 10	22	Student
Resp 11	21	Student
Resp 12	33	Private sector
Resp 13	24	Private sector
Resp 14	22	Student
Resp 15	21	Student
Resp 16	38	Govt. sector
Resp 17	27	Semi-govt.
Resp 18	35	Private sector
Resp 19	29	Own business
Resp 20	63	Retired
Resp 21	27	Private sector
Resp 22	27	Private sector
Resp 23	19	Student
Resp 24	23	Private sector

Table 1: Respondents information

3.3 Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) developed a thematic analysis process to systematically identify common trends from the interview data collected. The analytic approach was both structured and flexible, with the initial phase of the analysis being the process of open coding (, where transcripts were examined systematically, one line at a time, for unique patterns, which were assigned multiple codes. Following on from this, axial codes were created by grouping all codes that had similar meanings under a common heading, looking at the relationship between these groupings (an example might be "how I see my identity and how that relates to where I choose to obtain food"). The last phase was the creation and consolidation of selective codes into a single master conceptual framework that highlighted how people use their health-related experiences when making decisions about using quick-service restaurants (the concept of how

people view food through the lens of their health). In this manner, themes were developed to illustrate the varying degrees of complexity in which consumers understand their options when they decide to purchase health-related foods at quick-service restaurants.

Respondent's name	Codes	1st order	2 nd order	3 rd order
Respondent 1	"I am an aged person. So in my age, we don't prefer fast food but still sometimes we would want to have."	My food choices reflect my personal identity.	Self-Identity alignment	Attitude
Respondent 2	"I only eat it occasionally... As I work out, I have my good meals every day for good health."	My food choices reflect my personal identity.		

Table 2: The coding process in practice

4. Findings

This section provides the results of an empirical study that examined consumers' attitudes and perceptions toward fast-food products offered in Quick-Service Restaurants (QSRs) with regard to whether or not these products may be included as a part of a healthy diet. Four primary themes emerged during thematic analysis of the collected data and are presented in this section: alignment of self-identity, perceptions of healthiness, the influence of others, and cultural norms. Each theme provides an in-depth interpretation of how participants interact with health-based choices in QSRs.

1. Self-Identity Alignment

The relationship between a consumer's lifestyle orientation and his/her dietary choices influences the consumer's choices in QSRs. For those consumers who place a high priority on health and wellness when making product purchasing decisions, they would be more inclined to purchase from brands that provide the consumer with low-calorie, organic, or plant-based alternatives since these types of products would allow them to align with their personal values and goals on health. When these perceived healthier choices are available, this positively impacts their evaluation of the QSR as a whole. On the other hand, participants that placed a greater emphasis on convenience or indulgence were able to overlook the nutritional aspects of fast-food because they were looking for taste and easy access to food over health. In a few cases, respondents expressed to the interviewer that there was a disconnect (tension) between their stated health intentions and the actual behaviour of consuming fast-food. When a consumer's identity is connected to what they eat, it allows them to justify what they are eating. For example, one participant stated:

"I'm older. We weren't raised with fast food as a staple in our diets; it was more of a treat." - *Transcript No. 1*

His decision was based on his own preferences as well as the needs of his family, and on the practicality of the situation. This reflects a conscious consideration of his identity.

"I'll make my decision when I'm on my own, but when I'm with family and friends, I put their needs and preferences ahead of my own." - *Transcript No. 1*

This statement shows that this participant is making food choices based on an awareness of his health; he takes responsibility for himself, can be pragmatic and value traditional values; additionally, he prioritizes his well-being. The other participant stated that he makes independent food choices that are not influenced by his family or friends, and demonstrates the qualities of a thoughtful and intentional consumer:

"They can ask for anything they want. I'm going to get what I want, it's as simple as that." - *Transcript No. 17*

2. Emotional connectedness

Consumer perception of the health value of food from specific quick-service restaurant brands has been influenced heavily by emotional attachment to the brand. Due to this emotional connection, consumers frequently overlook any possible health issues associated with eating at such a restaurant due to a strong sense of nostalgia and positive experiences with dining in these restaurants. Additionally, marketing tactics that place an emphasis on connecting with families, as well as providing individualized service, help to build stronger emotional associations with a specific quick-service restaurant brand, which makes consumers more likely to accept claims regarding the health value of the food at that restaurant. One participant stated that she feels very emotionally connected to the comfort food of her youth, particularly her mother's cooking:

"I absolutely adore her cooking, and I miss the meals I had growing up." - *Transcript No 2*. Additionally, she has an affinity for a restaurant in her local area that grows its own produce because it gives her a holistic feeling of satisfaction and comfort when eating. As she stated: "When you eat at a restaurant where the food is grown on-site, you don't look at it as fast-food; you look at it as a home-cooked meal." - *Transcript No 2*.

This shows how a person is influenced greatly by their emotions, memories, and experiences with people in their life when deciding what to eat and their opinions on food.

3. Customisation Flexibility

The customers who were looking for healthier dining options prefer to have control over the contents of their meal, and thus it is important for them to be able to customise their meal. The QSRs are seen as being most accommodating to the needs of health-conscious customers by allowing customers to choose the size of their meal, how it is prepared (grilled vs fried, for example) and what ingredients are included. As noted in an example from one participant, their preference for fast food is to have a lot of vegetables, as found in Subway sandwiches, and to deliberately avoid the less healthy items (such as processed carbohydrates) in favour of healthier alternatives with more vegetables. The participant's quote indicates:

"I'd see the portion of vegetables to be the most nutritious; however, the bun and the rest of the sandwich (subsequently) are the unhealthy components." - *Transcript no 21*

In addition, one participant discusses:

"I am willing to eat "the least unhealthy" fast food; thus, this demonstrates the desire to personalise my own meal in order to meet their health-conscious lifestyle." - *Transcript no 21*

Based on the statements in the transcript, customisation flexibility is shown through the proactive approach taken by the participant to alter their fast food choices by selecting healthy ingredients, reviewing nutrition information and choosing healthy options.

4. Brand Credibility

Brand trust continues to be a critical influence on consumer behaviour. A Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) that has established a reputation for delivering on its health-related claims is

likely to have consumers view its offerings as healthy. The opposite is also true. When consumers find that the health-related marketing claims do not match the actual offerings, the brand's credibility is damaged. One participant described a strong preference for both McDonald's and Nirula's. The participant identified the experiences associated with both brands from childhood and the participant stated that the long-standing history and usage of these brands have developed a sense of loyalty and belief in their quality. This brand loyalty and trust are significant factors in building brand credibility.

"These two brands are so close to me as a child that I have become accustomed to them, which is why I expect to benefit from the brand experience." - *Transcript No 9*

This transcript supports the idea that participants' perceptions of these two brands are shaped by their experiences, trust, and expectations concerning product quality and brand transparency.

5. Ingredients Transparency

Consumers want to know the parts of what they consume when eating out. Quick-service restaurants (QSR) were evaluated more highly based on their transparency in providing information about the source of their products and their nutritional quality than those that did not provide this information. When QSRs were not transparent with their customers, consumers exhibited feelings of distrust in addition to negative perceptions with respect to the overall quality of the food served by the establishment. In one example, a participant was able to identify that high-end restaurants were the only type of restaurants to provide detailed nutritional information that lists what ingredients are contained in a certain food item, as well as the exact quantity of proteins, fats, and other components in the food:

"The participant referenced that high-end restaurants accommodate customers with food allergies by specifying the particular components such as gluten or eggs included in the food served at that restaurant and by listing them on the menus." - *Transcript no 24*.

Participants are requesting that QSRs also follow this approach in listing their food items on the menu, as well as listing what type of additives they are utilising in the preparation of their food. When a participant was asked for an example of what they wanted to see that has been added to the QSR menu, they stated:

"They should have a list of ingredients. The ingredients they use to prepare their food in their kitchen. For example, if they use MSG, then they should indicate whether they are using MSG or Aginomoto." - *Transcript No 22*.

6. Perceived Healthiness

Many factors affect people's impressions of how healthy foods are, as these include how nutritious the food is, what's advertised about it, its importance as part of a brand's image and reputation, and how the food looks. Most of the time, participants judged how healthy food products were based on product labels, menu descriptions of the product, and how the product was presented as part of its brand image and name, rather than the specific nutritional information. Advertisement terms, such as organic, low-fat, and natural foods, create positive biases in a person's mind, thus leading to them perceiving that those types of foods are healthier. As such, using these descriptive words by a food company often creates positive thought patterns regarding purchasing items. Where consumers are familiar with a certain brand and know that it has an established reputation for providing healthy options, they frequently assume that the company's products will also provide them with healthy choices, regardless of the actual ingredients in the company's products. The participant referred to specific fast-food restaurants, like Nutriobox, that provide healthier fast-food options. Many products sold at

these locations contain better quality ingredients and preparation methods. For example, the participant explains that, "When you eat at this fast-food establishment, you will see that each ingredient used is very healthy. Additionally, when you eat at this restaurant, the panner patty that you are eating will be listed as being a non-fried product, but in reality, it is actually cooked with shallow frying methods." - *Transcript no 18.*

Also, other participant notes that some foods, including lettuce, cucumbers, and tomatoes, can make fast-food somewhat healthier, but she thinks that overall fast-food cannot be regarded as healthy because of the deep-fried and maida-based buns:

"There might be some ingredients like, you know, if you put lettuce or cucumber or tomatoes or whatever, but overall with the deep fried patty and the, you know maida bun, I don't think that overall it cannot be unhealthy." - Transcript No 13.

7. Social Influence

The impact of social influence was considerable in determining fast-food preferences. Influences from acquaintances, family inclinations, and communal dining situations frequently shaped consumer actions. Participants observed that the dynamics within their groups could either support positive choices or encourage indulgent behaviours, influenced by the dominant norms in their social environments.

According to one of the participant, the fact that many of his current friends are health-conscious has indirectly influenced both his awareness and his behaviour in the direction of healthier and more nutritious options:

"The majority of my friends are extremely concerned about their health. They advise not to eat outside very often. They even prefer jaggery instead of sugar. Their habits make me think more about the choices I make." - Transcript No 5.

Also, other participant is aware that his friends have a significant influence on the way he chooses to eat at fast-food restaurants. They frequently recommend particular fast-food restaurants or dishes based on the variety and taste of the offering. He adds, that his friends eat fast-food more often when he is with them and that their tastes in food affect his choices:

"Friends know a lot about fast-food and they know good places from where we can eat it. And yes, family too have a lot of knowledge about the food which is healthy, but they don't prefer me eating fast-food everytime. With friends, whenever they tell me to go out and eat, I love that." - Transcript No 10.

8. Cultural Norms

Cultural norms shape consumer perceptions of fast food. In the transcripts, participants frequently associated fast food with convenience and indulgence, whereas home-cooked meals were perceived as healthier and more traditional. Participants emphasised their cultural values around eating fresh food, maintaining a balanced diet, and making healthier choices, including fast-food meals. The participant indicated that she and her family are influenced more by regional cuisines, mainly from the South of India, such as Idli and Dosa, because these dishes have much less fat and appear healthier than food from other regions in India. The participant noted that a consumer's culture and upbringing play an important role in determining how likely they are to eat a nutritious diet. For instance, in the participant's case, both her upbringing and that of most consumers in India have led them to avoid highly processed foods. "My parents told me to eat less fast food and to prepare my own meals from home. This is because my parents, and every typical Indian family, believe that homemade meals are healthier and better than fast food. My parents have the same belief."

5. Discussion

This study represents a pioneering effort to empirically investigate consumer behaviour within the Indian QSR sector through the lens of the health-indulgence paradox. By adapting the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the research elucidates how urban consumers negotiate the conflict between the convenience of fast food and the imperative for health.

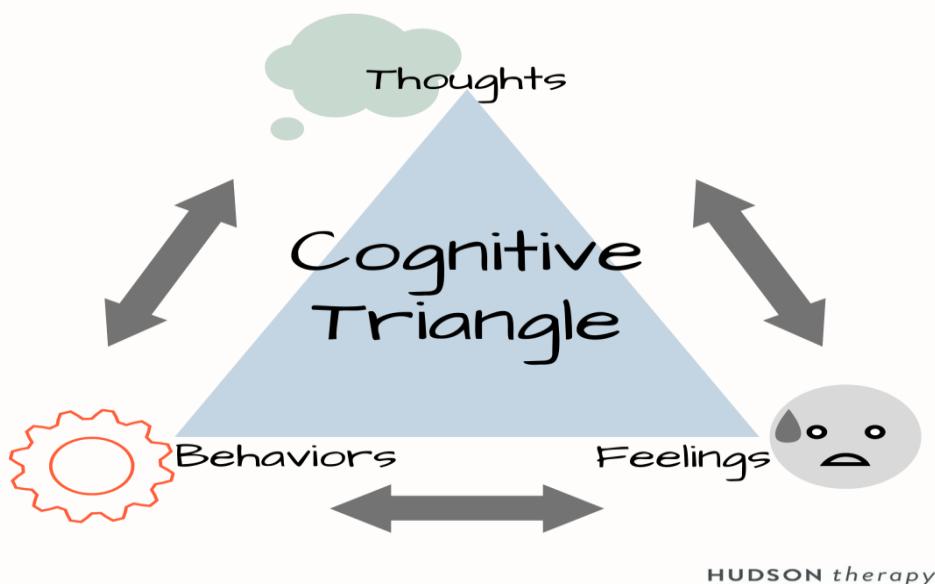


Figure 1: Cognitive Theory Framework

The conceptual framework that was built from this analysis is shown in Figure 1; it illustrates the connections between the constructs of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and the emergent themes. The diagram demonstrates the interrelationship of behaviours, thoughts, and feelings. For example, the Customisation Flexibility leads to the perception of control over behaviour (i.e., the feeling of having "control"); Cultural Norms and Social Influence shape one's perception of what is acceptable to do based on what others think.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study provides three significant theoretical contributions to the fields of consumer behaviour and health marketing.

First, the study advances the extension and explanatory power of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) with respect to the unique health environment of Quick Service Restaurants (QSR) in India. It highlights the importance of brand credibility, cultural norms, and self-identity alignment as antecedents of attitudes and subjective norms towards eating more healthfully. Specifically, consumers' alignment of self-concept with healthful branded offerings (e.g., "I am a responsible eater") appears to positively contribute to the likelihood of positive purchase behaviour, provided that those health-oriented offerings are perceived as credible.

Secondly, the study provides evidence for the importance of perceived behavioural control through consumers' desire for customisation flexibility (i.e., the ability to make their own menu choices). Unlike in most western markets (where standardised menu items predominate), Indian consumers prefer greater participation in the construction of their meals to minimize potential health-related risks; this is also consistent with Nunkoo et al. (2021).

The third contribution of the study is that it draws attention to the attitude-behaviour gap that mediates shared cultural and family norms. Many consumers maintain a positive attitude towards health, but will still yield to social pressures or cultural/familial norms around home-cooked meals.

5.2 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provide meaningful and useful recommendations for fast-casual operators and menu developers. The first recommendation highlights the potential of using menu customisation to enhance choice and produce a sense of control in food purchasing. The inclusion of “build-your-own” type menus provides an opportunity for consumers to exercise choice and select individual ingredients; this enhances PBC (perceived behavioural control) and subsequently increases the level of confidence that they are making a healthy food choice. An example of this is the use of Korean Cafes and Restaurants where consumers can choose their vegetables, dairy products, meats, etc. when making a soupy salad. A second recommendation is the need to overcome consumer misconceptions regarding health claims by increasing the level of transparency regarding health claims and how operators are able to use health claims in their marketing activities. Fast-casual operators must provide consumers with interpretative, consumer-friendly information about the ingredients used and how they are sourced, any additives used, and the nutritional information, as this will help consumers trust the claims being made and be an essential indicator of healthfulness. The third and final recommendation is for operators to target identity-based positioning when developing the marketing communication strategy. In addition to focusing on functional health claims (e.g., low-fat, low-calorie), operators can create an image of health that resonates with health-conscious consumers' values and self-identity. As a result, operators can increase the likelihood that consumers with the intent to purchase will actually buy their product.

5.3 Policy Implications

Public health policy makers must take into account the significance of regulation and promotional models in the creation of health improvement programs. It has been shown through this study that regulatory requirements for nutritional labelling should be extended to require clear, simple, and easily understood nutritional labels on all food and drink products sold in QSRs. This will result in a greater understanding between consumers and manufacturers, which will enable consumers to make informed choices on food products they purchase. In addition to the display of accurate nutritional values on food products sold in QSRs, the development of health improvement programs should also include consideration of cultural norms and values of a population with respect to food consumption. Regional food products often have positive health perceptions based on their perceived health benefits, while family customs and beliefs regarding food consumption often have a large influence on the choices made with respect to food. All of these factors should be taken into consideration when attempting to develop programs that encourage the use of healthier alternatives to traditional Western fast food products in a culturally relevant manner.

Public health policy makers should consider the importance of regulation and promotion in developing programs designed to improve health. The findings indicate that there is a need for regulations to require clear, simple and easy-to-understand nutritional labelling on all food and beverage products sold in QSRs, rather than limiting the labelling of nutrients to premium or organized retail. This will help reduce the information gaps that exist between consumers and manufacturers, allowing consumers to make informed decisions about the foods they consume. In addition to providing accurate nutritional information about food products sold in QSRs,

public health initiatives should also take cultural norms regarding food consumption into account when designing programs to improve health outcomes. The perceived health benefits of regional foods, as well as the strong influence of family traditions and practices in relation to food consumption, should also be considered when developing an intervention that promotes healthier alternatives to Western fast-food options in a culturally meaningful way.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this research demonstrate that customers' attitudes about fast-food have changed, with customers tending to embrace healthier menus in Quick Service Restaurants. The literature indicates that customers' dietary choices are influenced by several factors, including the regulatory environment, consumer participation on the Internet and brand innovation, through qualitative measures of data collected through transcripts and consumer stories. Future research needs to assess how an emphasis on health and experiences would affect the long-term viability of the reforms that have occurred in the quick-service restaurant (QSR) industry and also create the need for ongoing empirical research that examines the impact of these changes on both consumer health and the sustainability of the QSR industry. The shift that has taken place in the quick-serve restaurant industry is one of tremendous value as it will ultimately have a lasting impact on the future of fast-food as a long-term sustainable source of food. Thus, there is a need for a new line of empirical research with the highest priority being given to future studies assessing the impact of the health-oriented strategies that many QSRs have adopted on long-term consumer behaviours.

Limitations and Future Research: Due to its exploratory nature and these limitations, the results of this study cannot be used to predict behaviours of rural/older populations in India. Future studies may wish to conduct a quantitative analysis of the extended TPB model by employing a larger sample across different geographic locations as well as conducting longitudinal studies to assess how perceptions/practices may change over time as the demand for healthy fast food products continues to increase.

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