

# FACTORS INFLUENCING RESTAURANT SELECTION IN THE COVID-19 ERA: A STUDY OF CONSUMER PREFERENCES IN INDIA

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**Abstract:** COVID-19 struck the humanity at the end of 2019 and since then it has been ravaging the mankind. Since then the economies have been badly affected; businesses have shut down and the restaurant businesses are no exception to it. Now, when the vaccination programs are being carried out by the governments all around the world, including India, and restrictions are going away, the customers will be coming out to the restaurants. This paper intends to study what are the factors which will make the Indian customers choose a restaurant and to find out if there have been effects of the pandemic on the criteria of restaurant selection. To find the answers to these, a questionnaire with ten various factors was designed and circulated by using Google Form. The data thus collected was analyzed by applying one sample t-test and Gap analysis. The hypothesis was tested and it was found that the pandemic had an impact on the restaurant selection criterion. 'Personal hygiene of the staff', 'quality of food ingredients' and 'taste of food' are the most important factors for customers in deciding to choose a restaurant and 'location' with no impact on restaurant selection.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, restaurant, restaurant selection factors.

**JEL:** D12, Z32, M39.

## 1. Introduction

In December 2019, a new unknown pneumonia like flu was detected and was later declared a global pandemic. The absence of any vaccine and

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limited medical facilities forced the governments to resort to the shutdown of economy and stay at home orders were issued. Travel was restricted and restaurants were either shut or were allowed in very limited capacity (Gössling et al., 2021; Gursoy & Chi, 2020; J. Kim & Lee, 2020). World went into lockdown to counter the crisis. India faced one of the stringent lockdowns where a population of 1.38 billion was locked into their homes for months in March, 2020 (Hebbar, 2020). Since then the world has seen much more severe second, and at some places, even third wave of COVID-19, including India (TOI, 2021). The country again went in the lockdown mode and once again the restaurants, which were opened up after the first wave subsided, became partially functional and were operating only in home delivery mode, dining in was prohibited by the government. Even though there is no official data available, industry associations like FHRAI expect that around 50 per cent of the restaurants will remain shut even when the restrictions are eased up and about 30 per cent will permanently shut (Thenewsminute, 2021). Study conducted on US consumers found that in the COVID-19 scenario, 1 out of 3 consumers will be dining out less than what they used to do before the pandemic struck (Renner et al., 2021). It can be inferred that factors influencing the decision making of restaurant selection will change in the COVID-19 era. The dining out culture in India was rising up and the restaurant industry was thriving before the pandemic hit. The Indian restaurants witnessed 450% growth in 2019 in table booking compared to 2018 (Outlookindia, 2020). As Indian restaurant industry is struggling to cope in the COVID-19 era, it becomes important to study the factors, which are going to be significant in restaurant selection for the Indian consumers. This paper focuses on studying the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on restaurant selection criteria of Indian consumers and examining what the most important factor in restaurant selection is.

## 2. Literature review

In the study conducted by researchers P. Liu and E. Tse on US restaurants, 32 attributes were under survey and the respondents considered the factors while dining out. Top five of these factors included food safety, taste, freshness of food, cleanliness of dining and service of the food ordered (Liu & Tse, 2018). In a study conducted on the residents of Dhaka in order to identify the factors which influence dining out, maintenance of privacy, brand name, availability of readymade food, availability of variety & junk food and

customer service were found to be the most important factors in selection of a restaurant (Islam et al., 2018). Y. Zhong and H. Moon conducted a study to assess four aspects which included perceived price and three quality dimensions related to physical environment, food quality and service quality. Their study revealed that perceived price and food quality of a restaurant has direct and positive effect on customer satisfaction. Furthermore, price can positively impact the consumers' perception towards the quality of a restaurant (Zhong & Moon, 2020). The customer satisfaction is related to the restaurant selection hence the satisfaction holds high significance for customers (Islam et al., 2018). The study conducted by researchers K. Karamustfa and P. Ülker on foreign tourists found cleanliness to be the most important attribute (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020). N. Joshi, in her study on restaurants in the Indian city of Dehradun, concluded that the top five factors for restaurant preference were food quality, price, taste, location and cleanliness. The study also revealed that ambience is the least preferred factor by consumers (Joshi, 2012). Contrary to it, the study on the influence of brand image and price on customers' restaurant selection revealed that brand image had significant impact on customers' preference which included attributes such as ambience, food and service, whereas price does not have any effect (Yi et al., 2018). The study carried out to understand the preferences for fast food outlets in Saudi demonstrated that cleanliness was the most important factor followed by taste, friendliness, speed of the service and variety of menu as the top five factors of restaurant selection and price being the least important (Bhuan, 2000). The study conducted by the scholars J. Choi and J. Zhao ranked service, ambience, cleanliness, food presentation as the top preference attributes of the consumers of South Florida (Choi & Zhao, 2010). The research on preference for fast food outlets found price to be the most influential factor followed by cleanliness, atmosphere, taste and location (Wibowo & Tielung, 2016). In Dublin, F. Cullen carried out a study on preference for restaurant selection in two aspects, namely, dining out for a social reason and eating out as a substitute for cooking at home. In the aspect related to social reason he found quality of food, type of food, cleanliness, location and good reputation as the top most influential factors while for dining as substitute for cooking at home, location, quality of food, cleanliness, price and type of food were found to be the most influential factors (Cullen, 2005). The researchers, H. Kim and L. Chung, in their study focusing on beef restaurants, found price to be the most preferred factor in restaurant selection (Kim & Chung, 2017). Among Thai FITs, type of food and price were found to be the most preferred factor

(Pitchayadejanant et al., 2021). Food quality was found to be the most preferred attribute while studying selection criteria for Chinese restaurants in Chennai city, followed by service quality, overall hygiene and cleanliness of the restaurant, restaurant environment quality and value for money (Sudhagar & Rajendran, 2017). R. Ahlawat and M. Ghai, in their study on the street food, found taste to be the most influential factor, followed by grooming of the food handlers, value for money and quality of ingredients used, while cleanliness and location of the kiosk were at the bottom of preferences (Ahlawat & Ghai, 2019). In another study, service and price were found to be the most preferred attributes, followed by ambience (Vu et al., 2019). Quality of food, origin of raw material used for preparing the dish, food safety and cleanliness were found to be the most significant factors of restaurant selection in the study carried out by (Fidan et al., 2018). The study conducted in Malaysia found the price to be the most important factor for selecting a restaurant. Price was then followed by word of mouth, personal or past experience, then variety in the menu and popularity as the top five factors of selection. Location was at the seventh spot in this study among nine factors (Chua et al., 2020). In a similar study conducted on Indian customers, price, quality of food, variety of food and beverages, referral and location were the top five most influential factors in restaurant selection from 25 factors studied (A. Gupta, 2019). An exploratory study carried out in Gwalior, India, on preferences for restaurants suggested quality of food, safety, menu and location as top preferences from 15 factors studied (Upadhyay et al., 2007). Studying the online restaurant selection factors in Indian cities puts forth taste, price, discount and offers, quantity of food and hygiene as the most influencing factors (Shanmugam et al., 2021).

Hence, it can be inferred from the above discussed studies that price, food quality, cleanliness, ingredients, location, ambience, taste and service are the top factors which guests consider while selecting a restaurant.

### **3. Research methodology**

#### **3.1 Objectives**

The paper intends to achieve the following objectives:

- a. to study the impact of COVID-19 on restaurant selection criterion;
- b. to find out the most important factors in selection of a restaurant in the COVID-19 era.

### 3.2 Hypothesis

To achieve the above stated objectives the following hypothesis were designed:

**H<sub>0</sub>1** There is no significant impact of COVID-19 on restaurant selection criterion in the study area.

**H<sub>0</sub>2** In the era of COVID-19, there is no important factor when choosing a restaurant.

### 3.3 Research design

Based on the studies mentioned above, a questionnaire was designed. It included questions regarding the demographic profile of respondents and factors of preference in restaurant selection: location (Factor -1), quality of food ingredients (Factor-2), taste of food (Factor-3), quality of service (Factor-4), ambience (Factor-5), comfortable and spacious restaurant (Factor-6), friendliness of staff (Factor-7), value for money (Factor-8) and personal hygiene of staff (Factor-9). One more factor was also included in view with the focus of the agencies on the special practices to be followed by the food service providers and the factor was termed as special hygiene related precautions (to counter COVID-19 spread) adopted by restaurants (Factor-10). The respondents were asked to rate these factors on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 meant to be unimportant and 5 meant to be the most important. The questionnaire was circulated using Google Forms on the social media platform to gather maximum responses. The data was collected between the February and April, 2021. A total of 338 responses were received. All responses were from the Indian population, hence valid for the study. To analyze the data gathered, one sample t-test and Gap analysis were conducted. The results were depicted using tables and figures. The positivity rate of the COVID-19 cases in India during that period had fallen, and was around 2 %, restrictions were withdrawn and there was a sense among the population that the COVID-19 was over. Even the health minister of India addressing MEDICON-2021 said that we were in the endgame of the COVID-19 (*Harsh Vardhan Says India Is in the Endgame of COVID-19 Pandemic*, 2022). Hence it gives an insight of the scenario once the COVID-19 will be over. However, India suffered a deadlier second wave of COVID-19 which picked in May, 2021 (Sharma, 2022) and is still receiving cases in thousands (Worldometer, n.d.). It appears that the world will have to live with this virus for a longer period if not forever.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Analysis of demographic profiles

A total of 338 responses were collected in the given time period. The demographic profile of studied population is given in Table 1.1.

*Table 1.1*  
*Demographic profile of sample population*

Characteristics	Frequency	%age
<b>Gender (n=338)</b>		
Male	212	62.72
Female	126	37.28
<b>Age (n=338)</b>		
Below 18 years	22	6.50
18-25 years	160	47.35
26-35 years	104	30.77
36-45 years	32	9.47
Above 45 years	20	5.91
<b>Occupation (n=338)</b>		
Business	16	4.73
Job	120	35.50
Student	175	51.78
Others	27	7.99

*Source- Primary data*

From Table 1.1, we can infer that the majority of the respondents are male, in the 18-25 age group and are students.

In order to achieve the objective “To study the impact of COVID-19 on restaurant selection criterion” and to test its corresponding null hypothesis “**H<sub>0</sub>1** There is no significant impact of COVID-19 on restaurant selection criterion in the study area”, the researcher has conducted one sample t-test and Gap analysis and results are calculated Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Results of One sample *t* – test for Impacts of COVID-19 on restaurant selection criterion

Group	N	Hypothesized Mean	Mean	S.D	Mean Difference	t-ratio	p-value
All Respondents	338	50	43.39	08.00	06.70	15.40	0.000**

Source: Primary Data

## 4.2 Analysis of factors

Table 1.2 shows that sample mean of total respondents' (338) level of agreement is 43.39 and value of hypothesized or population mean is 50 (test value) and the mean difference of 08.00 between them and value of S.D., t-ratio, and p value are 8.00, 15.40 and 0.000 respectively. Hence, p value is 0.000 ( $p=0.000 < 0.01$ ) which is less than 0.01 and 0.05. Therefore, there is a significant mean difference between sample and hypothesized or population mean of respondents (N=338) regarding the impact of COVID-19 on restaurants selection criteria. Thus, the null hypothesis "**H<sub>01</sub>** - There is no significant impact of COVID-19 on the restaurant selection criterion in the study area" is **rejected** and its corresponding objective "To study the impact of COVID-19 on restaurant selection criterion" is also **achieved**.

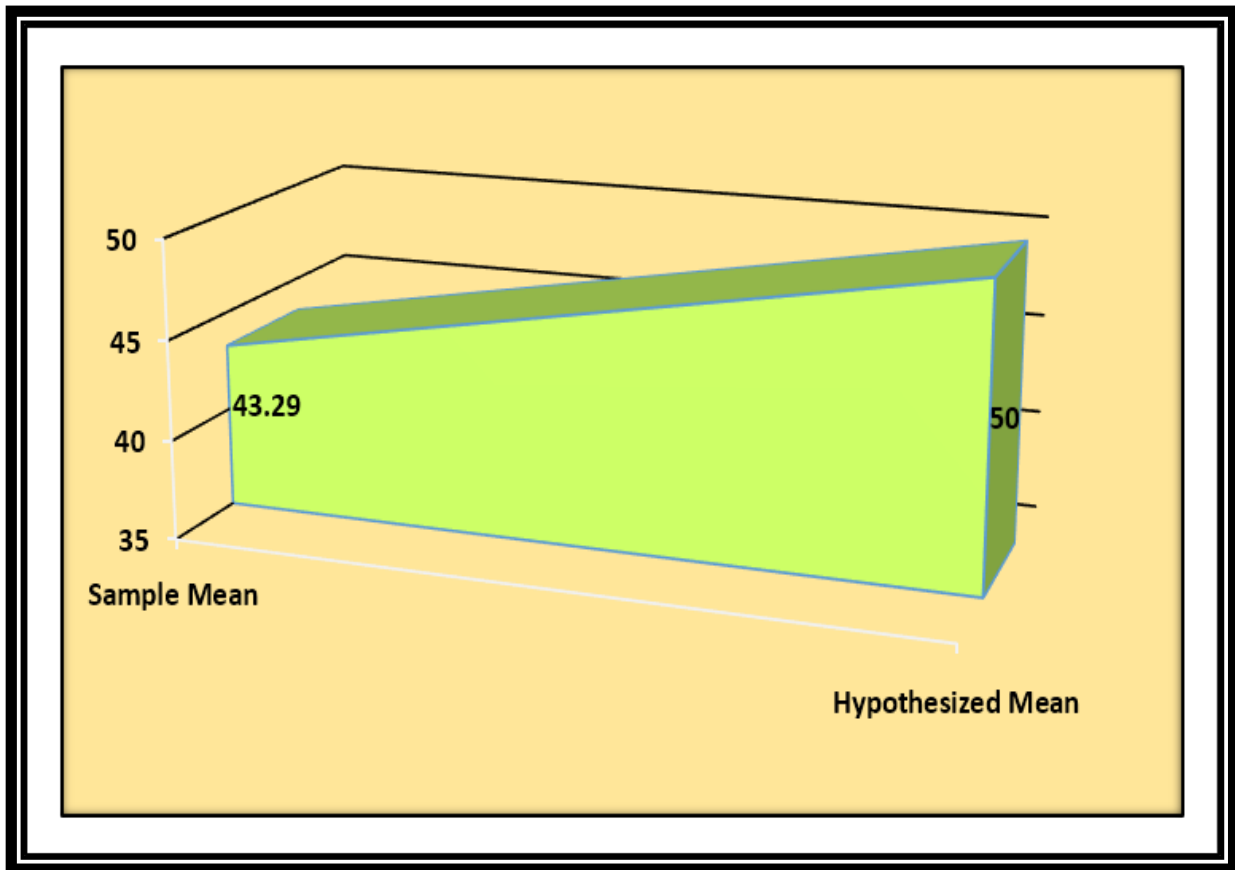
Further, with the help of Table 1.3 and an area graph it is also examined whether the sample mean of respondents falls under which category level of agreement regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the restaurant selection criterion.

Table 1.3

Level of agreement category of Respondents regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the restaurant selection criterion

Mean Scores	Level of Impact
10-20	Low
21-30	Average
31-40	High
41-50	Very High

Source: Adapted from (Al-Khadash, 2015; S. Gupta et al., 2021)



*Figure 1.1 Area Graph of level of agreement of respondents regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the restaurant selection criterion*

From Table 1.3 and Graph 1.1, it is clear that respondents (N=338) have very high level agreement regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the restaurant selection criterion, as sample mean (43.29) falls within the very high level of impact category (41-50).

In order to achieve the intended objective “To find out the most important factors in choosing a restaurant in the COVID-19 era” and to test the corresponding null hypothesis “ $H_0$  There is no important factor in choosing a restaurant in the era of COVID-19”, the researcher conducted a one sample t-test and Gap analysis and results are calculated in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4 shows that the average on all the selected factors except for factor number -1, which has 3.97 and value of hypothesis or population mean is 5 (test value) for all 10 factors. The value is the p-ratio - 0.000 ( $p=0.000 < 0.01$ ) to each factor, which is less than 0.01 and 0.05. Therefore, there is a significant mean difference between the sample and the hypothesis or population mean of respondents (N=338) on each factor in choosing a restaurant in the COVID-19 era. Thus, Null hypothesis “ $H_0$  There is no



important factor in selection of restaurants in the COVID-19 era” is **rejected** and its corresponding objective “To find out the most important factors in selection of restaurant in COVID-19 era” is also **achieved**.

*Table 1.4  
Results of One sample t – test for important factors*

Group	N	Hypothesized Mean	Mean	S.D	Mean Difference	t-ratio	p-value
Location	338	5	03.97	01.19	01.03	15.83	0.000**
Quality of food ingredients	338	5	04.49	0.94	0.50	09.86	0.000**
Taste of food	338	5	04.48	0.98	0.52	09.73	0.000**
Quality of service	338	5	04.44	0.99	0.56	10.28	0.000**
Ambience	338	5	04.17	1.01	0.83	15.26	0.000**
Comfortable and spacious restaurant	338	5	04.20	0.99	0.79	14.81	0.000**
Friendliness of staff	338	5	04.19	1.08	0.80	13.73	0.000**
Value for money	338	5	04.42	0.91	0.58	11.75	0.000**
Personal hygiene of staff	338	5	04.53	0.95	0.47	09.19	0.000**
Special hygiene related precautions (to counter COVID-19 spread) adopted by restaurant	338	5	04.39	1.09	0.61	10.15	0.000**

Source- Primary Data

Further, with the help of Table 1.4 and an area graph this is also investigated that sample mean of respondents is lying under which level of

agreement category towards most important factors in selection of restaurant in COVID-19 era.

*Table 1.5*

*Level of agreement regarding the most important factors*

Mean Scores	Level of Agreement
1-2	Low
2-3	Average
3-4	High
4-5	Very High

*Source: Adapted from (Al-Khadash, 2015; S. Gupta et al., 2021)*

Table 1.4 shows that the following factors play the most important role in the selection of restaurants in the COVID-19 era: Factor-2 (Quality of food ingredients), Factor-3 (Taste of food), Factor-4 (Quality of service), Factor-5 (Ambience), Factor-6 (Comfortable and spacious restaurant), Factor -7 (Friendliness of staff), Factor -8 (Value for money), Factor-9 (Personal hygiene of staff) and Factor-10 (Special hygiene related precautions to counter COVID-19 spread adopted by restaurants), whereas Factor-1 (Location) is not so important.

It is clear from the analysis that personal hygiene of staff is the most influential factor. It is congruent with the study of (Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020). However, they found cleanliness as the most important factor. This study indicates that it is the personal hygiene of staff, rather than of the premises of the restaurant, considered as the most important factor. Quality of the food ingredients is the second most important factor as identified by the studies carried out by (Sudhagar & Rajendran, 2017; Vu et al., 2019). Third of the most influential factors is the taste of food. Similar response concerning the taste as a factor was produced by the studies of (Ahlawat & Ghai, 2019; Joshi, 2012). Quality of service and value for money are the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> most preferred factors. On the other hand, location is at the bottom of the preference list and the previous studies carried out. (Ahlawat & Ghai, 2019; Chua et al., 2020; Liu & Tse, 2018)

## **5. Conclusion and implications**

The COVID-19 pandemic has badly hit the restaurant industry and it has a significant impact on the restaurant business. The restaurant industry is looking to bounce back. As the study is intended to find the most important

factor in restaurant selection, it reveals 'personal hygiene of staff' to be the most important. Analysis of the various factors of preference for selecting a restaurant to eat out has also suggested the changed behaviour of Indians since the COVID-19 struck. The results of the study were compared to previous studies done on Indian consumers regarding the factors influencing the restaurant selection. It was found that the previous studies ranked hygiene related factors at a lower level in influential attributes such as 'Neat and clean environment', taking 7<sup>th</sup> place (A. Gupta, 2019) and 'Overall hygiene and cleanliness of the restaurant' - 3<sup>rd</sup> place (Sudhagar & Rajendran, 2017). Even the study carried out in 2021 by Shanmugam, Krishnan and Tholath on selection of restaurants online during COVID-19, ranked 'hygiene' in 5<sup>th</sup> place; they ranked 'taste' as the most influential, while the current survey ranks it in the 3<sup>rd</sup> place (Shanmugam et al., 2021). 'The quality of food ingredients' is among the top two factors as it was in the previous studies (A. Gupta, 2019; Upadhyay et al., 2007). The present study finds 'location' of a restaurant does not matter to Indian consumers in the COVID-19 era as compared to previous studies where it was among the top five factors (A. Gupta, 2019; Upadhyay et al., 2007). As the world is still discovering COVID-19 cases, restaurant operators, especially in India, need to take care of hygiene. This study provides insight into changing customer preferences in the COVID-19 era and can be positively utilized by restaurant operators to improve their business. The results of this study will also help researchers interested in studying the factors influencing restaurant choice. Future studies could examine the relationship between demographics and the factors influencing restaurant selection.

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