

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TOWARD CLOUD KITCHENS IN INDIA: INSIGHTS FROM A STRUCTURAL MODEL

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ABSTRACT

The rapid proliferation of cloud kitchens has been witnessed in recent years as a result of the evolving lifestyle of consumers and food delivery applications. Today's informed consumers compare prices, reviews, ratings and service quality before making purchasing decisions. Thus, exploring the determinants of consumer behavioural intentions towards cloud kitchens is significant for food delivery platforms and food delivery operators. Regardless of the terminology, it has remained an approach to deliver food from restaurants (on-premise dine-in restaurants) for a generation. Since, it has been a relatively complex and costly approach, it was considered uneconomical. The inception of cloud kitchens has enabled to deliver the food from cost-effective, delivery-based corners to cater online demand. The present research aims to analyze the key determinants influencing consumers' purchase decisions towards cloud kitchens and the underlying dimensions of these determinants by using Factor Analysis. Primary data were collected through semi-structured questionnaire on all the variables including online visibility, price, ratings, reviews, perceived risk, and variety of food, convenience and purchase intention. The findings reveal that consumers' purchase decisions have been mostly influenced by digital presence, trust building variables, perceived value and menu diversity. Analysis using Factor Analysis revealed four major factors; Digital Trust, Perceived Value, Service Convenience.

Keywords: Cloud Kitchens, Consumer Behaviour, Purchase Intention, Digital Trust, Perceived Value, Service Convenience, Online Food Delivery Platforms

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, cloud or ghost or virtual kitchens have gained immense popularity as consumers' eating habits change and technology advances. As more people are ordering food online, factors such as convenience, affordability and ease of digital access have played critical roles in purchase decisions. Mathur and Mathur (2021) found that these factors are bound to influence consumers' intentions to order from these cloud kitchens. Further,

this paper found that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of these kitchens as customers are moving away from dine-in and online food ordering has become more popular. Using their rapid service, hygienic food preparation and digital interaction, cloud kitchens have been efficient in catering to the expectations of today's consumers.

Many researchers have studied customer satisfaction in cloud kitchens services. Customers are more satisfied when the food is delivered on time, ordering is easy and customers have the option to pay digitally, according to Maheswari (2020). As there is no dine-in service in the cloud kitchen, total customer experience is highly dependent on the smooth functioning of the delivery platform and the quality of service delivery. The study found that consistently delivering service quality is important to make the customers satisfied and to bring them back to order from the cloud kitchens.

Customer satisfaction in cloud kitchens is also affected by the quality of food and service. To understand customer satisfaction with cloud kitchen services, Juvekar and Tarkari (2022) studied the dimensions of assurance, responsiveness and reliability of the SERVQUAL model, and found that these dimensions have an important influence on consumer perceptions and trust. While the main focus of cloud kitchens is on fast delivery and efficiency, the authors pointed out that food quality during packaging and transportation is necessary to ensure customer satisfaction and repeat purchase.

H1: Online visibility has effect on consumer purchase intention towards cloud kitchens.

Pricing is another important factor that affects consumer evaluation and purchase intention, particularly in service-based and online consumption contexts. Price is not only a monetary cost, but also a signal of quality and value (Monroe and Petroschius, 1981; Volckner and Hofmann 2007). Consumers are more likely to purchase when they consider a price to be fair or below the reference price, which depends on consumers' past experiences, market value and alternatives (Simonson and Tversky, 1992). Because cloud restaurants do not provide offline dining experiences, pricing is an even more critical factor for consumers. Consumers expect lower prices and a better value for money because cloud kitchens are viewed as a cost-effective business model that can reduce costs on rent, décor, and service staff (Choudhary, 2019). Empirical data also shows that consumers consider competitive pricing as affordable and convenient. Price is one of the most influential factors on the acceptance and purchase intention of online food delivery (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Furthermore, purchase intention and consumer confidence in digital food services are largely determined by the functional value of pricing, such as affordability and usefulness (Perrea et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2017; Watanabe et al., 2020). Cross-demographic studies also support that price is one of the key purchase factors for cloud kitchen purchase decisions (Sarbhay & Khare, 2023).

Accordingly, pricing is likely to influence consumer purchase intention toward cloud kitchen. The following hypothesis was developed:

H2 Pricing is likely to influence consumer purchase intention toward cloud kitchen.

In digital service contexts, ratings and reviews are considered the main sources of information influencing consumer purchase decisions. As the absence of an in-person interaction, reviews and ratings can be considered as the eWOM that facilitate the assessment of service quality, reliability, and performance (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). By providing authentic experiences from prior customers, they help to bridge information gaps and perceived risk, and subsequently modify the purchase intention (Pavlou, 2003; Zhu & Zhang, 2010).

In the case of cloud kitchens, reviews and ratings are of particular importance as customers are unable to evaluate the quality of the food or service before ordering. Higher reviews and ratings imply higher perceived quality, trust, and credibility, which in turn increases the chances of ordering from cloud kitchens (Filiari & McLeay, 2014). Research on online food delivery platforms also shows that consumers rely heavily on peer-generated content when exploring restaurant options and that higher ratings positively and directly influence the chance of purchase (Ray et al., 2019).

Empirical evidence from Indian market suggests that reviews and ratings significantly influence consumer acceptance and purchase decisions for cloud kitchens. High-rated cloud kitchens are perceived as popular and reliable, which enhances consumer willingness to order.

Therefore, the reviews and ratings act as persuasive cues that positively influence consumers' purchase intention toward cloud kitchens, which lead to the following hypothesis:

H3: Reviews and ratings positively influence consumer purchase intention toward cloud kitchen.

Perceived risk is an important factor that influences consumer decisions for online and technology-enabled services. It is the consumer's subjective judgment about the potential adverse outcomes of a purchase, including financial loss, inferior product quality, health risk, and poor service (Bauer, 1960). In online context, higher perceived risk leads to increased uncertainty and anxiety, which in turn negatively influence purchase intention (Pavlou, 2003).

In the context of cloud kitchens, perceived risk becomes especially critical due to the absence of physical inspection, direct interaction, and on-site consumption. Concerns related to food hygiene, consistency in quality, delivery reliability, and payment security may discourage consumers from placing orders (Ray et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown that higher perceived risk reduces trust and perceived value, thereby lowering

consumers' willingness to purchase from online food service providers (Gefen et al., 2003). The evidence from Indian cloud kitchen and online food delivery market has indicated that customers are reluctant to order from unknown or less known cloud kitchens. Perception related to safety, hygiene and service quality are the factors that influence purchase intention of customers (Choudhary, 2019; Chatterjee et al., 2022). With increasing risk perception, customers are likely to not order or tend to opt for more reliable options. In this way, it is expected that perceived risk will significantly influence consumer purchase intention towards cloud kitchens. It is hypothesised that:

H4: Risk perception significantly influence consumer purchase intention towards cloud kitchens.

Food variety is one of the factors affecting consumer choice and purchase intention in the food service context. A broader range of options increases perceived value and satisfaction by providing consumers with varying options in terms of cuisine, flavor, and dietary preferences (Kahn, 1995). More variety increases satisfaction with choice, reduces boredom, and increases the likelihood of repeat purchases, which all influence purchase intention (McAlister & Pessemier, 1982). In the context of cloud kitchens, food variety can be an important source of competitive advantage given the variety of brands and cuisines that can share the same kitchen infrastructure. Consumers perceive a diverse menu as more attractive and convenient because it can cater to the variety of tastes and preferences within a single platform (Ray et al., 2019). The importance of menu diversity influencing consumer choice and ordering behavior has also been found in prior studies of online food delivery services (Yeo et al., 2017).

According to Indian market evidence, the demand for variety and personalization from consumers has increased as a result of changing lifestyles and food preferences. Offering a larger food variety and menu options by cloud kitchens, which offer different cuisines, likely appeals to customers and increases purchase intention (Choudhary, 2019; Chatterjee et al., 2022). Consequently, we assume that food variety positively affects consumer purchase intention toward cloud kitchens, and hence the following hypothesis is proposed: H5: Food variety considerably affects consumer purchase intention toward cloud kitchens.

Existing literature review indicates that consumer behavior with respect to cloud kitchens has received considerable attention. However, most of the empirical studies have been carried out in countries like China, Taiwan and several European countries. In India, the concept of cloud kitchen is still new and has gained popularity only after the COVID-19 outbreak. Hence, there is a dearth of empirical research on the Indian consumers'

perception of cloud kitchens. Further, there has been very little focus on the relationships between important psychological constructs such as consumer trust, attitude and purchase intention in the context of cloud kitchens.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The current study has used a descriptive research methodology to explore the variables that affect the intention of Indian consumers to use cloud kitchen services. Data were collected from an online survey using convenience sampling and sent out through the most popular social media portals (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter). Respondents were students, working professionals, freelancers, entrepreneurs and homemakers.

A screening question was administered to ensure that only current respondents who have ordered from cloud kitchen were considered for analysis. The effect of key factors, pricing, online visibility, reviews and ratings, food variety and perceived risk on consumer trust, attitude and purchase intention were investigated.

There were 253 valid responses collected for the final analysis. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section was demographic information and the second section was used to capture research constructs with a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

Constructs	Cronbach's Alpha
Online Visibility	0.842
Price	0.868
Reviews & Rating	0.891
Risk Perception	0.824
Food Variety	0.857
Purchase Intention	0.903

Table:1

The internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scales were examined using Cronbach's alpha. The table shows the reliability results in Table 1. All constructs have values of Cronbach's alpha above the recommended cutoff of 0.70; therefore, the measurement scales are reliable and can be used for subsequent analysis.

The questionnaire items related to the study variables were presented first, and the demographic information of the respondents was collected afterward. The demographic questions were placed at the end of the questionnaire to reduce the respondent's fatigue and increase the likelihood of responding to the measurement items. Placing the demographic information at the end of the questionnaire increases the quality and quantity of responses because respondents are typically willing to respond to the demographic questions if they are presented after the measurement items (Hair et al., 2016).

The final analysis was conducted on 253 valid responses. The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section obtained respondents' demographic information, and the second used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" to measure the research constructs.

Demographic Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	128	50.6
	Female	125	49.4
Age	15–30 years	112	44.3
	30–45 years	97	38.3
	45 years & above	44	17.4
Occupation	Student	94	37.2
	Working Professional	141	55.7
	Homemaker	18	7.1
Monthly Income	Below ₹25,000	58	22.9
	₹25,001 – ₹50,000	87	34.4
	₹50,001 – ₹75,000	64	25.3
	Above ₹75,000	44	17.4

Table:2

SAMPLE PROFILE

The respondents in the sample were almost equally divided into male and female categories (50.6 percent and 49.4 percent, respectively). Most of the respondents (44.3 percent) belonged to the age group 15–30, followed by 30–45 years (38.3 percent). Respondents above the age of 45 years accounted for 17.4 percent of all respondents.

In terms of occupation, the majority of respondents were working professionals (55.7 percent), followed by students (37.2 percent) and homemakers (7.1 percent). In terms of monthly income, the major section of the respondents (34.4 percent) reported an income of ₹25,001 to ₹50,000, followed by respondents with an income of ₹50,001 to ₹75,000 (25.3 percent). The detailed demographic characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 2.

Construct	Composite Reliability	AVE	Item Code	Measurement Item	VIF
Online Visibility (OV)	0.912	0.776	OV1	Cloud kitchens are easy to find on online platforms	2.184
Online Visibility (OV)	0.912	0.776	OV2	Cloud kitchens have strong visibility on food delivery apps	2.356
Online Visibility (OV)	0.912	0.776	OV3	Information about cloud kitchens is easily accessible online	2.041
Price (P)	0.923	0.8	P1	Food ordered from cloud kitchens is good value for money	2.331
Price (P)	0.923	0.8	P2	Food ordered from cloud kitchens is reasonably priced	2.615
Price (P)	0.923	0.8	P3	Food ordered from cloud kitchens is economical	2.246
Reviews & Rating (RR)	0.934	0.825	RR1	Online reviews influence my choice of cloud kitchens	2.782
Reviews & Rating (RR)	0.934	0.825	RR2	Higher ratings increase my willingness to order	2.964

Reviews & Rating (RR)	0.934	0.825	RR3	I trust cloud kitchens with positive reviews	2.547
Risk Perception (RP)	0.889	0.728	RP1	Ordering from cloud kitchens involves certain risks	1.984
Risk Perception (RP)	0.889	0.728	RP2	I am concerned about food quality when ordering online	2.113
Risk Perception (RP)	0.889	0.728	RP3	I feel uncertain while ordering from unfamiliar cloud kitchens	2.267
Food Variety (FV)	0.887	0.798	FV1	Cloud kitchens offer a wide variety of food choices	2.507
Food Variety (FV)	0.887	0.798	FV2	Cloud kitchens provide multiple cuisine options	2.343
Food Variety (FV)	0.887	0.798	FV3	I can order food across different price ranges	2.23
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.936	0.831	PI1	I intend to order from cloud kitchens in the near future	2.587
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.936	0.831	PI2	I am likely to choose cloud kitchens for food ordering	2.868
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.936	0.831	PI3	I will continue using cloud kitchens regularly	2.865

Table 3. Results of construct validity using CR, AVE and VIF

The results of the assessment of construct validity using Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is reported in Table 3. The values of the CR of all constructs, including online visibility, pricing, reviews and ratings, risk perception, food variety and purchase intention, are greater than 0.70, which is the minimum recommended value. This indicates that the measurement scales for all constructs are internally consistent.

The AVE values for all constructs are greater than the minimum recommended value of 0.50, indicating that each construct has good convergent validity. This means that each construct explains a large portion of the variance of its indicators.

The VIF values for all measurement items are less than the critical value of 5. This indicates that there is no risk of multicollinearity among indicators. This means that each indicative item validly contributes to its construct. The

result shows that the measurement model is reliable and valid. It is therefore appropriate for the evaluation of the structural model.

Fornell-Larcker Criterion, Discriminant Validity

Constructs	OV	P	RR	RP	FV	PI
Online Visibility (OV)	0.881					
Price (P)	0.642	0.894				
Reviews & Rating (RR)	0.698	0.671	0.908			
Risk Perception (RP)	0.521	0.488	0.534	0.853		
Food Variety (FV)	0.604	0.557	0.586	0.472	0.893	
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.736	0.683	0.724	0.598	0.642	0.912

Discriminant validity was tested on the basis of the Fornell–Larcker criterion. The values on the diagonal (the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of each construct), are greater than the correlations of that construct with other constructs, hence discriminant validity is adequate. For example, the square root of AVE for online visibility (0.881) is greater than its correlations with pricing (0.642), reviews and ratings (0.698), risk perception (0.521), food variety (0.604) and purchase intention (0.736). The corresponding diagonal values for food variety (0.893), pricing (0.894), reviews and ratings (0.908), risk perception (0.853), and purchase intention (0.912) are greater than the correlations of each construct with others. These results indicate that the constructs are empirically distinct from each other and represent different concepts. Thus, the measurement model has adequate discriminant validity and can be used for further analysis of the structural model.

Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), Discriminant Validity

Constructs	OV	P	RR	RP	FV	PI
Online Visibility (OV)						
Price (P)	0.714					
Reviews & Rating (RR)	0.768	0.742				
Risk Perception (RP)	0.603	0.571	0.628			
Food Variety (FV)	0.681	0.644	0.659	0.552		
Purchase Intention (PI)	0.829	0.776	0.815	0.687	0.724	

Discriminant validity was evaluated by using Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). From the table, the HTMT values for all the constructs are lower than the critical value of 0.85, therefore, the discriminant validity is satisfied. For example, the HTMT value between online visibility and purchase intention is 0.829, while the value for reviews and ratings and purchase intention is 0.815, which are acceptable.

Likewise, the HTMT values for risk perception are also quite lower than the critical value (0.552 to 0.687). Therefore, the constructs (online visibility, pricing, reviews and ratings, risk perception, food variety and purchase intention) are empirically distinct and not highly overlapping. The results suggest that the measurement model has satisfactory discriminant validity and can be used for structural model analysis.

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Path Coefficient (β)	tvalue	P-value	Result
H1	Online Visibility → Purchase Intention	0.28	4.96	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Price → Purchase Intention	0.24	4.21	< 0.001	Supported

H3	Reviews & Rating → Purchase Intention	0.31	5.67	< 0.001	Supported
H4	Risk Perception → Purchase Intention	-0.19	3.42	0.001	Supported
H5	Food Variety → Purchase Intention	0.22	3.89	< 0.001	Supported

The hypothesis testing results suggest that several factors impact consumers' purchase intention toward cloud kitchens. Online visibility ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$), pricing ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$), reviews and ratings ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$), and food variety ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.001$) positively and significantly influence purchase intention. Reviews and ratings is the most significant predictor, demonstrating the importance of digital trust and peer opinions in the online food ordering process. In contrast, risk perception negatively and significantly impacts purchase intention ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = 0.001$), meaning that consumers are reluctant to order food online when they perceive that food quality, service reliability, or hygiene standards pose a threat. The results support all of the hypotheses. The findings demonstrate the importance of consumer perceptions and digital cues in determining purchase intention toward cloud kitchens.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Use of electronic word of mouth: Online food purchase behavior in cloud kitchen model in Indian context.

In this research, a structural model was used to investigate the impact of various factors influencing the purchase intention of Indian consumers toward cloud kitchen services. The results show significant positive impact of online visibility, pricing, reviews and ratings, and food variety on the purchase intention, while significant negative impact of risk perception was observed. Among all the variables, reviews and ratings were the strongest variables, which signifies the importance of electronic word-of-mouth in building the trust and reducing the uncertainty of individuals in making online food purchase decision.

The positive impact of online visibility indicates that increased digital presence can effectively replace the face-to-face interaction in cloud kitchen model by increasing the awareness and credibility of consumers. Competitive price and value for money perception also facilitate the adoption, which depicts the consumers' expectations of cost efficiency from cloud kitchen model. Food variety is also essential, which enables the consumers to meet their various tastes and preferences leading to higher choice satisfaction and repeat purchase intention. Negative impact

of risk perception, on the other hand, signifies the importance to reduce the concerns related to food quality, hygiene, and service reliability, as higher risk perception reduces the likelihood of consumer to place the order. This study adds to the extant literature by providing empirical evidence from the Indian scenario where cloud kitchen has been rapidly growing, especially in the post-COVID era. From a managerial perspective, the study highlights that cloud kitchen operators and food delivery platforms need to focus on enhancing their digital presence, offering competitive pricing, ensuring positive customer reviews, providing menu diversity, and adopting riskreduction measures to improve consumer's purchase intention. While the study is constrained by the use of convenience sampling and cross-sectional data, it adds to the existing literature by providing insights and can be a starting point for future research investigating mediating or moderating variables, longitudinal data, or comparative studies in the rapidly evolving cloud kitchen space.

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