

Guest Satisfaction with Services and Cuisines at Casual Dining Outlets in Himachal Pradesh: An Empirical Assessment Using Gap Analysis

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Abstract:

Purpose. This study empirically assesses guest satisfaction at selected casual dining food outlets in Himachal Pradesh, India, across four evaluative domains: the services offered, the cuisines served, overall guest satisfaction, and the impact of food and services on satisfaction. It also situates these findings within the state's growing food-and-culinary-tourism economy.

Design/methodology/approach. Adopting an exploratory–descriptive design executed through the normative survey method, primary data were collected from 500 guests (300 tourists and 200 non-tourists) selected by simple random sampling and measured on the 30-item, five-point Guest Perception and Satisfaction Measurement Scale (GPSMS; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.913$). Each six-item domain was analysed by one-sample t-tests against the scale ceiling of 30 and interpreted through gap analysis and a four-band perception rubric.

Findings. Across all four domains, guests' mean domain scores fell in the 'high' band (services 21.46; cuisines 21.50; overall satisfaction 21.47; impact 21.46 out of 30) and differed significantly from the ceiling (all $p < 0.01$), confirming a positive but incomplete level of satisfaction. Within segments, non-tourists scored consistently higher (≈ 23.6) than tourists (≈ 20.1). The results indicate that outlets deliver satisfying food and service while leaving a measurable gap—roughly 28–33% below the ideal—for improvement.

Practical implications. The gap analysis identifies where casual dining operators in the study area can raise satisfaction, and the segment differences caution against a one-size-fits-all service strategy.

Keywords: guest satisfaction; casual dining; gap analysis; food quality; service quality; culinary tourism; Shimla; Himachal Pradesh.

1. Introduction

Eating out has shifted from an occasional indulgence to a routine feature of urban and tourist life in India. The National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) valued the country's food-services sector at approximately ₹5.69 lakh crore in 2024—about 1.9% of GDP and some 85.5 lakh jobs—and projected growth at a compound annual rate of roughly 8.1% to ₹7.76 lakh crore by 2028, by which point India is expected to become the world's third-largest food-services market (NRAI, 2024). Casual dining

restaurants form the largest sub-category of the organised segment, occupying the middle ground between fine dining and quick-service formats: they offer table service, moderate prices, a relaxed ambience, and menu variety, and are valued for freshly prepared, attractively presented food.

Several structural forces underlie this growth. Rising female workforce participation and dual-income households have increased both disposable income and the demand for meals prepared outside the home; urbanisation has multiplied the occasions for eating out; the proliferation of shopping malls and food courts has made dining a leisure activity; and changing lifestyles among a young population have normalised the restaurant meal. The organised segment has professionalised around service quality, hygiene, ambience, and menu innovation, and casual dining has emerged as its centre of gravity, combining the accessibility of quick service with the experiential appeal of full-service dining.

Casual dining is especially significant in tourism destinations, where food itself is a motive for travel. Himachal Pradesh, a Himalayan state renowned for adventure and nature tourism, is increasingly promoting food and culinary tourism through its local cuisines and its fine- and casual-dining establishments. The scale of the opportunity is considerable: the state recorded approximately 1.60 crore tourist arrivals in 2023 (including about 62,806 foreign tourists), up around 6% on the previous year (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2024). Its capital, Shimla—an abundant natural and cultural attraction—hosts a dense concentration of casual dining outlets that serve both travelling tourists and resident non-tourists. Understanding how satisfied these guests are, and where satisfaction falls short, is therefore of direct commercial and policy relevance. Culinary tourism—travel motivated wholly or partly by the desire to experience a destination's food—elevates cuisine from a support service to a primary attraction, and makes the satisfaction of dining guests a component of destination competitiveness rather than a purely commercial concern of individual outlets.

Against this backdrop, the present study empirically measures guest satisfaction at selected casual dining outlets in Himachal Pradesh across four domains—services, cuisines, overall satisfaction, and the impact of food and services on satisfaction—using a validated instrument and gap analysis. The study's specific objectives are:

1. To identify the various services offered by selected casual dining food outlets in Himachal Pradesh and the level of guest perception towards them;
2. To evaluate the significance of the various cuisines served at these outlets;
3. To analyse the overall guest satisfaction with the selected outlets; and
4. To assess the impact of food and services on customer satisfaction.

Corresponding to these objectives, the study tests the following hypotheses (stated as tested):

1. **H01:** There is no significant guest perception towards the services offered by the selected casual dining food outlets.
2. **H02:** There is no significant guest perception towards the significance of the cuisines served.
3. **H3:** Guests have a high level of satisfaction towards the selected casual dining food outlets.
4. **H4:** There is a significant impact of food and services on customer satisfaction.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Customer satisfaction and the disconfirmation paradigm

Customer satisfaction is widely conceptualised as an evaluative response arising from the comparison of pre-consumption expectations with perceived post-consumption performance (Oliver, 1980). When

performance exceeds expectations (positive disconfirmation) the customer is satisfied; when it falls short (negative disconfirmation) the customer is dissatisfied. This expectation-disconfirmation logic underpins most contemporary satisfaction measurement and motivates the gap-analytic approach adopted here, in which observed performance is compared against an ideal reference point.

The disconfirmation paradigm sits within a broader family of satisfaction theories that clarify how consumers reconcile expectation and experience. Assimilation theory, rooted in Festinger's cognitive-dissonance work, holds that consumers minimise the psychological tension of a gap between expectation and performance by adjusting their perception of performance toward their prior expectation. Contrast theory predicts the opposite: consumers magnify a discrepancy, so that a shortfall feels worse and an over-delivery feels better than it objectively is. Assimilation-contrast theory (Anderson) reconciles the two by positing a latitude of acceptance within which small discrepancies are assimilated and beyond which large discrepancies are contrasted. Negativity theory adds that any discrepancy from a strongly held expectation generates negative affect. Equity theory frames satisfaction as a judgement about the fairness of the exchange—whether the guest's outcomes are proportional to inputs relative to the provider. Adaptation-level theory notes that judgements are anchored to a reference standard that itself shifts with experience. Together these theories imply that satisfaction is a comparative, reference-dependent judgement rather than an absolute reaction to performance—a premise directly relevant to a study that compares guests with different reference standards.

2.2 Determinants of satisfaction in restaurants

Empirical work identifies a consistent set of satisfaction drivers in the restaurant setting. Service quality, formalised by Parasuraman et al. (1988) as SERVQUAL and adapted for restaurants as DINESERV by Stevens et al. (1995), captures the tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy of service delivery. Food quality, however, is repeatedly found to be the pre-eminent driver: Namkung and Jang (2007) showed that presentation, taste, freshness, and variety strongly influence satisfaction and behavioural intentions, and Sulek and Hensley (2004) found food quality to be the single most important predictor of return intention, ahead of atmosphere and waiting fairness. Ryu and Han (2010) demonstrated that food, service, and physical environment jointly determine satisfaction, with perceived price moderating these relationships. Ambience and cleanliness constitute a further, well-documented dimension of the dining environment (Ryu & Jang, 2007), while price and perceived value (Zeithaml, 1988) shape the overall evaluation.

2.3 Ambience, price, value, and loyalty

Beyond food and service, the physical environment shapes the dining evaluation. Ryu and Jang (2007) showed that environmental perceptions influence behavioural intentions through emotional responses, and cleanliness and ambience are repeatedly identified as decisive to whether a dining experience is remembered favourably. Price and perceived value form a further axis: Zeithaml's (1988) means-end model treats value as the consumer's overall assessment of utility based on what is received relative to what is given, so that satisfaction depends not on price alone but on the price–quality trade-off. These evaluations feed loyalty. Satisfaction is a leading antecedent of repeat patronage and positive word-of-mouth, and although the satisfaction–loyalty link is not deterministic—satisfied customers are not invariably loyal—modest gains in retention are associated with disproportionate gains in profitability. For

casual dining outlets dependent on revisit and recommendation, satisfaction measurement is therefore inseparable from the management of loyalty.

2.4 Satisfaction in casual dining and culinary tourism

Within casual dining specifically, Ryu et al. (2008) established that restaurant image, perceived value, and customer satisfaction significantly predict behavioural intentions, and Ponnamm and Balaji (2014) linked visitation motives to salient attributes—food quality, food-serving quality, and ambience. Lin et al. (2015) prioritised the food-quality attributes most urgently requiring improvement, and Mathur and Gupta (2019) examined how dining atmospherics and perceived food quality shape re-patronage intention in fast-casual restaurants. Delfin, Tonico, and Barisoro (2019) ranked service-quality dimensions by their contribution to customer retention. Rivera and Murphy (2008) drew attention to a supply-side determinant of casual dining quality—the training and competencies of multi-unit managers—arguing that specialised managerial training translates into better guest experiences. In the tourism context, food functions both as a service attribute and as an attraction: culinary tourism research treats local cuisine as a destination asset capable of motivating travel and shaping the overall destination experience. Studies in the Indian hospitality setting—Jana and Chandra (2016) on the mediating role of satisfaction in mid-market hotels, and Sharma and Aggarwal (2016) on customer expectations and experiences at HPTDC hotels in Himachal Pradesh—confirm the salience of satisfaction measurement in this region while leaving casual dining outlets comparatively under-examined. The present study addresses that gap by measuring, on a validated instrument, the satisfaction of both guest segments across the full attribute bundle rather than a single dimension.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Design

The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature and was executed through the normative survey method. It proceeded in three phases: construction of a self-developed questionnaire; administration of the questionnaire to tourists and non-tourists and recording of responses on a five-point Likert scale; and statistical analysis of the collected data, followed by findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations.

3.2 Population and sample

The target population comprised guests—both tourists and non-tourists—of casual dining food outlets in Himachal Pradesh. A sample of 500 guests (300 tourists and 200 non-tourists) was selected using simple random sampling. To achieve this usable sample, 600 questionnaires (350 to tourists and 250 to non-tourists) were distributed; after editing for completeness, incompletely answered instruments were excluded, leaving 500 valid responses (Table 1).

Table 1. Composition of the achieved sample

Study area	Respondents	Distributed	Valid (analysed)
Himachal Pradesh	Tourists	350	300
Himachal Pradesh	Non-tourists	250	200
Total		600	500

Data collection followed the research code of ethics. Permissions were obtained where required, respondents participated voluntarily, and the raw responses were edited, rechecked, coded, and scored before analysis. Collection was conducted at outlets in the study area during periods of guest activity, and the schedule-cum-interview method was used so that both English- and Hindi-speaking guests could participate on equal terms.

The questionnaire additionally captured a respondent profile—age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, monthly income, and, for tourists, visit frequency, mode of travel, length of stay, travel companions, travel motive, information sources, and traveller type—so that the satisfaction data could be situated demographically. The present paper focuses on the satisfaction analysis; the profile variables provide context and a basis for the subgroup and moderator analyses proposed in Section 7.

3.3 Instrument

Data were collected using the Guest Perception and Satisfaction Measurement Scale (GPSMS), a 30-item instrument comprising five six-item dimensions, each rated on a five-point Likert scale (SA = 5 to SD = 1). The instrument's content and face validity were established through expert review, and its internal-consistency reliability was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.913$). The present paper draws on the four performance-oriented domains—services, cuisines, overall satisfaction, and the impact of food and services—each scored on its six items with a theoretical range of 6–30.

3.4 Analytical procedure and interpretation rubric

For each domain, a one-sample *t*-test compared the observed sample mean against a test value of 30—the maximum attainable (ideal) score for a six-item domain—so that the mean difference expresses the gap between actual and ideal performance (gap analysis). Descriptive statistics were used to characterise the data, and the mean domain scores were interpreted using the four-band rubric in Table 2.

Table 2. Interpretation rubric for domain mean scores (range 6–30)

Mean score band	Level of perception / satisfaction
10–15	Low
16–20	Average
21–25	High
26–30	Very high

*Note on the test value: because 30 is the ceiling of the domain, the one-sample *t*-test essentially asks whether the mean lies below the ceiling and will therefore tend to be statistically significant whenever the mean is not maximal. The mean difference (gap) and the perception band are consequently more informative than statistical significance alone; this is discussed in Section 5 and among the limitations in Section 7.*

4. Results

4.1 Services offered (Objective 1 / H01)

The pooled sample of 500 guests returned a mean score of 21.46 (SD = 2.237) on the services domain against the ideal of 30, a gap of 8.54, which was statistically significant ($t = 85.37$, $p < 0.01$). The mean

falls in the 'high' band. Analysed by segment, tourists (n = 300) scored 20.06 (SD = 1.557; gap = 9.94; t = 110.57, p < 0.01) and non-tourists (n = 200) scored 23.56 (SD = 1.230; gap = 6.44; t = 74.02, p < 0.01). Accordingly, H01 was rejected: guests hold a significant—and, by the rubric, high—level of perception towards the services offered, with non-tourists perceiving services more favourably than tourists.

Table 3. One-sample t-tests and gap analysis — Services offered (test value = 30)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Gap	t	p	Band
Guests	500	21.46	2.237	8.54	85.37	0.000**	High
Tourists	300	20.06	1.557	9.94	110.57	0.000**	Average
Non-tourists	200	23.56	1.230	6.44	74.02	0.000**	High

4.2 Cuisines served (Objective 2 / H02)

On the cuisines domain, the pooled sample scored 21.50 (SD = 2.263; gap = 8.50; t = 84.02, p < 0.01), again in the 'high' band. Tourists scored 20.07 (SD = 1.557; gap = 9.92; t = 110.46, p < 0.01) and non-tourists 23.64 (SD = 1.245; gap = 6.36; t = 72.31, p < 0.01). H02 was rejected: the cuisines served carry significant perceived value for guests, and are rated more highly by non-tourists than by tourists.

Table 4. One-sample t-tests and gap analysis — Cuisines served (test value = 30)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Gap	t	p	Band
Guests	500	21.50	2.263	8.50	84.02	0.000**	High
Tourists	300	20.07	1.557	9.92	110.46	0.000**	Average
Non-tourists	200	23.64	1.245	6.36	72.31	0.000**	High

4.3 Overall guest satisfaction (Objective 3 / H3)

Overall satisfaction with the outlets mirrored the domain results. The pooled sample scored 21.47 (SD = 2.247; gap = 8.53; t = 84.88, p < 0.01), tourists 20.06 (SD = 1.557; gap = 9.94; t = 110.57, p < 0.01), and non-tourists 23.58 (SD = 1.246; gap = 6.42; t = 72.89, p < 0.01). The alternative hypothesis H3—that guests have a high level of satisfaction—was accepted, the pooled mean lying in the 'high' band; non-tourists again registered higher satisfaction than tourists.

Table 5. One-sample t-tests and gap analysis — Overall satisfaction (test value = 30)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Gap	t	p	Band
Guests	500	21.47	2.247	8.53	84.88	0.000**	High
Tourists	300	20.06	1.557	9.94	110.57	0.000**	Average
Non-tourists	200	23.58	1.246	6.42	72.89	0.000**	High

4.4 Impact of food and services on satisfaction (Objective 4 / H4)

On the impact domain, the pooled sample scored 21.46 (SD = 2.245; gap = 8.54; t = 85.11, p < 0.01), tourists 20.05 (SD = 1.570; gap = 9.94; t = 109.72, p < 0.01), and non-tourists 23.56 (SD = 1.230; gap =

6.44; $t = 74.01$, $p < 0.01$). H4 was accepted: food and services exert a significant impact on customer satisfaction for both segments, with the impact registering more strongly (higher scores) among non-tourists.

Table 6. One-sample t-tests and gap analysis — Impact of food and services (test value = 30)

Group	N	Mean	SD	Gap	t	p	Band
Guests	500	21.46	2.245	8.54	85.11	0.000**	High
Tourists	300	20.05	1.570	9.94	109.72	0.000**	Average
Non-tourists	200	23.56	1.230	6.44	74.01	0.000**	High

4.5 Summary of results

Table 7 consolidates the pooled findings. Across all four domains the pattern is strikingly consistent: pooled means cluster tightly at 21.46–21.50 (the ‘high’ band), gaps from the ideal cluster at 8.50–8.54 (about 28% of the scale), and every comparison is significant at the 1% level. All four hypotheses were resolved in favour of a positive but sub-maximal level of guest satisfaction.

Table 7. Consolidated pooled results across the four domains (guests, N = 500; test value = 30)

Domain	Mean	SD	Gap	t	p	Band	Decision
Services (H01)	21.46	2.237	8.54	85.37	0.000**	High	H01 rejected
Cuisines (H02)	21.50	2.263	8.50	84.02	0.000**	High	H02 rejected
Overall satisfaction (H3)	21.47	2.247	8.53	84.88	0.000**	High	H3 accepted
Impact of food & service (H4)	21.46	2.245	8.54	85.11	0.000**	High	H4 accepted

** Significant at the 0.01 level. Gap = test value (30) – mean. Source: primary data.

Read against the four theoretical satisfaction levels, the aggregate picture is one of guests who are genuinely satisfied but not delighted. Converting the pooled means to a percentage of the attainable maximum places satisfaction at roughly 72% of the ideal on each domain—comfortably positive, but with almost three-tenths of the potential experience unrealised. The near-perfect consistency of this figure across four conceptually distinct domains is the single most robust feature of the data and frames the managerial task in the sections that follow.

5. Discussion

The results support a clear headline: guests of casual dining outlets in Himachal Pradesh are, on the whole, positively satisfied. On every domain the pooled mean sits in the ‘high’ band of the interpretation rubric, and food and service demonstrably drive that satisfaction. This is consistent with the restaurant-satisfaction literature, in which food quality and service quality are the dominant antecedents of satisfaction (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Ryu & Han, 2010), and it indicates that outlets in the study area are, in the main, meeting guests' expectations of freshly prepared, well-presented food and competent service.

The gap analysis, however, tempers this optimism and is arguably the study's most useful managerial output. Although guests are satisfied, the mean scores lie roughly 8.5 points—about 28%—below the ideal on every domain, and the pooled means barely clear the lower boundary of the 'high' band (21). There is, in other words, a substantial and consistent margin for improvement rather than a signal of excellence. Because the four domain gaps are almost identical, no single domain stands out as a weak link; instead, outlets face a uniform, incremental improvement task spanning service delivery, cuisine, and the overall experience.

The most pronounced pattern is the segment difference. Non-tourists scored materially higher (≈ 23.6) than tourists (≈ 20.1) on every domain, with tourist means sitting in the 'average' band and non-tourist means in the 'high' band. Read through the disconfirmation lens (Oliver, 1980), this is coherent: non-tourists, being familiar with the local offer, arrive with calibrated and more modest expectations that outlets readily meet, whereas tourists arrive with elevated, novelty-driven expectations that are harder to satisfy. The practical implication is that the aggregate 'high satisfaction' verdict conceals a less flattering picture for the very segment—tourists—that the destination most wishes to impress. This segment asymmetry is examined in detail in the companion comparative paper.

A methodological caveat conditions the interpretation of statistical significance. Testing each mean against the scale ceiling (30) means that significance is close to guaranteed whenever performance is not perfect; the p-values therefore confirm only that satisfaction is not maximal, which is unsurprising. The substantive weight of the findings rests on the effect sizes implicit in the gaps and on the perception bands, not on the very large t-statistics. A further nuance concerns the interpretation of the tourist means, which sit at 20.05–20.07—fractionally within the 'average' band (16–20) by the study's own rubric, at its very upper edge, and immediately below the 'high' threshold of 21. The tourist experience is thus best described as 'upper-average, bordering on high' rather than either mediocre or strong; small improvements would tip it into the 'high' band. This borderline position is precisely why the aggregate 'high' verdict, driven upward by the more generous non-tourist majority, should not be read as applying uniformly to all guests.

Interpreted through the family of satisfaction theories reviewed earlier, the consistency of the results across domains is itself informative. That services, cuisines, overall satisfaction, and the food/service impact all return means within a single point of one another suggests that guests form a relatively holistic, reference-anchored judgement of the outlet rather than evaluating each attribute independently—consistent with adaptation-level and assimilation accounts in which a single reference standard colours the assessment of every facet. For management, this implies that satisfaction is unlikely to be moved by improving one attribute in isolation; a coordinated lift across food, service, and ambience is more likely to shift the guest's overall reference judgement.

6. Implications and Recommendations

6.1 For restaurant operators

The consistent gap of roughly 28% below the ideal indicates that satisfaction, though high, is not saturated, and that continued investment in food quality, presentation, service procedure, and menu variety is warranted to convert 'high' into 'very high' satisfaction and to secure revisit intention and loyalty. Because the four domain gaps are near-identical, operators should resist the temptation to fix a single 'weak' attribute and instead pursue coordinated, incremental improvement across food, service, and the overall experience, since guests appear to judge the outlet holistically. Given the demonstrated importance of food

quality in the literature (Namkung & Jang, 2007; Sulek & Hensley, 2004), freshly prepared, well-presented, and authentically local dishes remain the surest levers of satisfaction, complemented by attentive, procedure-consistent service and a clean, distinctive ambience.

6.2 For serving the tourist segment

Because tourists—the destination's marquee segment—trail non-tourists on every domain and sit only at the upper edge of the 'average' band, operators should consider tourist-specific measures. Clearer menu information and honest expectation-setting can narrow the gap between what promotional imagery promises and what the meal delivers; the visible showcasing of authentic regional cuisine can turn tourists' novelty-seeking into a satisfier rather than a source of inflated expectation; and staff briefed to interpret unfamiliar dishes and manage first-time guests can convert uncertainty into a positive experience. Loyalty mechanisms for resident regulars—recognition, discounts, and consistency—should run in parallel, protecting the base that sustains outlets between tourist peaks.

6.3 For destination managers and policy

For tourism authorities in Himachal Pradesh, the findings reinforce the strategic value of casual dining and local cuisine as components of the destination product, and suggest that quality benchmarking of outlets could complement the state's broader culinary-tourism promotion. Since the food experience of tourists is measurably weaker than that of residents, and since tourist satisfaction shapes destination reputation and repeat visitation, embedding casual dining quality within destination management—through capability building, hygiene and quality standards, and the promotion of authentic culinary experiences—would help ensure that the food component of the destination matches the expectations that destination marketing creates.

7. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

Using a validated instrument and gap analysis, this study found that guests of selected casual dining outlets in Himachal Pradesh are highly, though not maximally, satisfied across services, cuisines, overall experience, and the food/service impact on satisfaction, with a consistent margin for improvement and a persistent gap between the higher-scoring non-tourists and the lower-scoring tourists.

The conclusions should be read in light of several limitations. The study was confined to selected casual dining outlets in a single state, so generalisation to other formats (fine dining, quick service, accommodation-based outlets) and other regions is not warranted. The cross-sectional design captures satisfaction at a single point and cannot speak to its evolution or to causal ordering. Reliance on a self-constructed, exclusively positively worded scale exposes the data to acquiescence and common-method bias. The analytical strategy of testing means against the scale ceiling inflates statistical significance and should, in future work, be complemented by effect-size reporting and by comparisons against empirically derived benchmarks rather than the theoretical maximum. Finally, the study did not model demographic moderators (age, income, visit frequency, travel motive) or downstream outcomes such as loyalty and word-of-mouth. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs, incorporate ambience and staff-skill dimensions, extend the frame to other stakeholders (owners, staff, residents, regulatory bodies), and test a structural model linking attribute performance to satisfaction and behavioural intentions.

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