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ABSTRACT

Background

The rapid transformation of the restaurant industry in urban India has led to a notable shift in consumer preferences from traditional dining establishments to theme-based restaurants that emphasize immersive and experiential consumption. The present study investigates the key factors influencing this transition, with specific reference to consumers in Chennai.

Aim

The aim of the study is to examine the factors influencing the shift in consumer preferences toward theme-based restaurants in Chennai, with specific emphasis on demographic characteristics, social media influence, and experiential dining attributes such as ambience and thematic appeal.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research design, utilizing primary data collected through a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 111 respondents who actively engage in dining out and interact with food-related digital content. The data were analyzed using statistical tools including descriptive statistics, chi-square test, correlation analysis, and multiple regression to examine the relationships between demographic variables, social media influence, and experiential factors.

Findings

The finding revealed that age and income significantly influence consumer preferences, while occupation does not exhibit a statistically significant effect. The study further established that social media platforms and food vloggers play a critical role in shaping restaurant selection, with strong positive correlations observed between vlogger influence, trust, and behavioral intention. Among experiential factors, ambience emerged as the most influential predictor, followed by thematic uniqueness and cleanliness, indicating a clear shift toward experience-oriented consumption.

Conclusion

The study concludes that consumer behavior in the restaurant sector is increasingly driven by a

combination of digital influence and experiential value creation, reflecting the broader transition toward an experience economy. The research contributes to existing literature by providing empirical evidence from a metropolitan Indian context and offers practical implications for restaurant operators to enhance customer engagement through innovative themes, aesthetic appeal, and strategic digital marketing.

KEYWORDS: *Theme-Based Restaurants, Consumer Preference, Social Media Influence, Food Vloggers, Experiential Dining.*

INTRODUCTION

The dining-out trend has witnessed a shift in the past decade in the Indian metros due to the changed lifestyle and growing consumers. Theme based restaurants create a completely immersive environment. And this concept of food with certain themes has become the new fashion among the youth.

This is a result of larger global shifts, specifically a focus on "instagrammable" experiences through digital amplification by social media. It is observed that in India, the restaurant business has been expanding at a CAGR of 11.8% during 2018-2023, along with experiential dining as a significant component (National Restaurant Association of India, 2024). This is also witnessed in Chennai, as post-COVID-19 trends reveal that theme-based eateries noticed an increased foot fall of 25-30% compared to commoneateries, as revealed by industry surveys. However, there is a lack of concrete research regarding the factors that drive these trends, especially found in tier-1 Indian cities like Chennai.

The current research attempts to verify the factors that impact the transition in preference for consumers to eat at theme-based restaurants in the city of Chennai. The dependent variable in there search work is the transition in preference for consumers, which has been measured using the Likert scale technique. The most significant variables are: Demographic characteristics (Age, Income, Occupation), Social media influence (exposure & engagement), Ambiance (thematic distinctiveness, visual appeal), Value-for-money perception (Pricing relative to experience) etc.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The restaurant industry in Chennai is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a noticeable shift from traditional dining establishments to theme-based restaurants that prioritize unique and immersive experiences. While food quality remains a fundamental factor in consumer decision-making, it is increasingly being supplemented—and in some cases, over shadowed—by elements such as ambience, recommendations from food vloggers. Today's consumers are drawn toward establishments that offer a complete experiential environment rather than just a meal. However, there is a lack of empirical understanding regarding the specific drivers of this shift. It remains unclear whether experiential elements like theme and décor now outweigh traditional considerations such as price and taste, or how social media specifically dictates these choices. Consequently, this study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing consumer perceptions and identifying the key drivers behind the evolving preference for theme-based dining in Chennai.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kinjal Gosai (2021) investigated the impact of online food delivery applications on customer relationships in the restaurant sector across major cities in Maharashtra using a stratified sampling

method. The study employed structured questionnaires and revealed that consumer decisions were significantly influenced by online reviews, ratings, and promotional strategies.

Female respondents demonstrated higher sensitivity toward negative reviews, while younger consumers exhibited increased engagement with digital platforms. The study concluded that digital interfaces had become a dominant factor in shaping restaurant selection behavior.

Dwivedi et al. (2021) examined the role of social media marketing in influencing consumer decision-making in the hospitality industry. Using quantitative analysis, the study found that user-generated content and influencer endorsements significantly enhanced brand trust and purchase intention. The research emphasized that interactive platforms such as Instagram and YouTube played a critical role in shaping experiential expectations among consumers.

Nabil Messabia, Paul-Rodrigue Fomi, and Chokri Kooli (2022) analyzed the adaptive strategies of SMEs in the restaurant sector during the COVID-19 pandemic using qualitative interviews. The findings highlighted that innovation, digital transformation, and resilience were essential for survival. The study also indicated that consumer expectations shifted toward safety, hygiene, and enhanced dining experiences, thereby accelerating the transformation of the restaurant industry.

Kim and Kim (2022) explored the influence of restaurant ambience and atmospheric elements on customer satisfaction and revisit intention. Using structural equation modeling, the study demonstrated that visual appeal, lighting, and thematic consistency significantly affected emotional responses and behavioral intentions. The findings supported the concept that ambience is a critical determinant of experiential dining.

Liu, Shin, and Burns (2022) investigated the role of online reviews and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) in restaurant selection. The study found that credibility, volume, and valence of online reviews significantly influenced consumer trust and purchase decisions. It concluded that digital opinion leaders, including food vloggers, played a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions.

Sthapit, Björk, and Coudounaris (2023) examined experiential value in the restaurant industry, focusing on sensory and emotional engagement. The study revealed that immersive experiences, including themed environments and aesthetic presentation, significantly enhanced customer satisfaction and loyalty. The authors argued that restaurants must shift from service delivery to experience staging.

Harrigan, Daly, and Coussement (2023) analyzed the impact of social media engagement on customer behavior using advanced analytics. The study demonstrated that higher engagement with influencer content resulted in increased brand attachment and visit intention. It also highlighted that authenticity of content was a key factor in influencing consumer trust.

Sunil D. Mashru (2024) evaluated customer-perceived service quality in the restaurant industry using the SERVQUAL model. The study found that tangibility and responsiveness were the most significant dimensions affecting customer satisfaction. It also revealed that social motivations such as gatherings and celebrations influenced dining frequency, reinforcing the experiential nature of restaurant visits.

Parikh, Janak (2024) investigated consumer preferences in quick service restaurants and found that food quality remained a primary determinant; however, menu diversity and customization significantly influenced customer retention. The study highlighted a shift toward

differentiated and personalized dining experiences.

Gössling, Scott, and Hall (2025) explored post-pandemic transformations in hospitality consumption behavior. The study found that consumers increasingly preferred unique, safe, and experience-oriented dining environments. It emphasized that digital platforms and visual content significantly influenced destination and restaurant choices.

Mariani, Perez-Vega, and Wirtz (2025) examined the role of influencer marketing in hospitality services. The findings indicated that food vloggers acted as powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers, significantly affecting awareness, trust, and behavioral intention. The study concluded that influencer credibility and content quality were critical determinants of effectiveness.

Leung, Bai, and Stahura (2026) analyzed the impact of digital content and experiential marketing on restaurant performance. The study demonstrated that visually appealing and theme-based dining experiences significantly enhanced customer engagement and revisit intention. It further highlighted that integration of digital promotion with experiential elements created a competitive advantage.

SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE

The reviewed studies collectively establish that:

- Social media and food vloggers significantly influence consumer awareness, trust, and restaurant selection.
- Ambience and experiential factors have emerged as dominant determinants of customer satisfaction and revisit intention.
- Post-pandemic consumer behavior reflects a strong preference for immersive, safe, and visually appealing dining environments.
- The industry is transitioning toward an experience-driven consumption model, where emotional and symbolic value complement functional attributes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the impact of demographic factors (age, income, occupation) on dining preferences
2. To evaluate the influence of food vloggers and social media platforms on restaurant selection
3. To analyze the importance of ambience, theme, and unique dining experiences.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the factors influencing the shift in consumer preferences toward theme-based restaurants in Chennai. Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire, incorporating Likert scale items (five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree) to measure respondents' perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select respondents who actively engage in dining out or follow food-related content on digital platforms, ensuring relevance to the research objectives. The sample size comprised 111 respondents, which was considered adequate for conducting statistical analysis such as frequency distribution, correlation, and regression.

The geographical scope of the study was confined to Chennai city, focusing on urban consumers who are exposed to evolving dining trends and digital influences. Data collection was carried out over a defined period using both online and offline modes to ensure a diverse representation of respondents.

For data analysis, appropriate statistical tools—including descriptive statistics, chi-square test, correlation analysis, and regression techniques—were applied to interpret the relationships between demographic variables, social media influence, and experiential factors affecting consumer preferences.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study is limited to specific area that is Chennai city.
- The study was conducted during a short period of time and the respondents are limited.
- Time constraints may affect the study of the in-depth research.
- The respondents may vary time to time and person to person that may affect the research.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

OBJECTIVE 1: Impact of Demographic Factors on Dining Preferences

Table 1.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Below 20	18	16.2
	20–30	52	46.8
	30–40	21	18.9
	40–50	12	10.8
	Above 50	8	7.2
Gender	Male	60	54.1
	Female	48	43.2
	Others	3	2.7
Income	<25,000	20	18.0
	25,000–50,000	34	30.6
	50,000–75,000	28	25.2
	75,000–1,00,000	17	15.3
	>1,00,000	12	10.8

Table 1.2: Chi-Square Test (Demographics vs Dining Preference Shift)

Variable	Chi-square Value	p-value	Significance
Age	12.45	0.014	Significant
Income	10.32	0.035	Significant
Occupation	8.91	0.062	Not Significant

The results indicate that age and income exert a statistically significant influence on consumer preference shifts toward theme-based restaurants ($p < 0.05$). Younger respondents (20–30 years)

demonstrate a stronger inclination toward experiential dining, likely due to higher exposure to social media trends and lifestyle orientation. Income also plays a critical role, suggesting that consumers with moderate to high income levels are more willing to spend on themed dining experiences. However, occupation does not show a statistically significant relationship, implying that life style preferences transcend occupational categories. This finding reinforces the argument that psychographic variables may be more influential than traditional demographic segmentation.

OBJECTIVE 2: Influence of Food Vloggers and Social Media

Table 2.1: Platform Usage for Following Food Vloggers

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Instagram	82	73.9
YouTube	65	58.6
Facebook	21	18.9
X(Twitter)	9	8.1

The findings demonstrate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between social media influence and consumer behavioral intention. Instagram emerges as the dominant platform, reflecting the visual-centric nature of food consumption trends.

Table 2.2: Mean Scores of Social Media Influence (Likert Scale)

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
Influence of food quality reviews	4.21	0.76
Discounts/promotions influence	3.98	0.82
Discovery of new restaurants	4.35	0.69
Trust in vloggers	4.10	0.74

The high mean scores (>4.0) across variables such as discovery and trust suggest that food vloggers function as key opinion leaders in shaping dining decisions. Correlation analysis further confirms that increased trust in vloggers significantly enhances both visit intention and word-of-mouth recommendation behavior.

Table 2.3: Correlation Analysis (Social Media Influence vs Behavioral Intention)

Variables	Correlation(r)	p-value
Vlogger influence vs Visit intention	0.68	<0.001
Vlogger trust vs Recommendation behavior	0.72	<0.001

This indicates a transition from traditional marketing toward digital influence ecosystems, where

peer-generated content drives consumer engagement and decision-making.

OBJECTIVE 3: Importance of Ambience, Theme, and Experience

Table 3.1: Mean Scores of Experiential Factors

Factor	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ambience/Décor	4.42	0.65
Unique Theme/Food Items	4.28	0.71
Service & Hospitality	4.05	0.78
Cleanliness & Sanitation	4.36	0.68
Amenities	3.89	0.83

Table 3.2: Regression Analysis (Experiential Factors→Preference Shift)

Variable	Beta(β)	t-value	Significance
Ambience	0.41	5.82	Significant
Unique Theme	0.33	4.96	Significant
Cleanliness	0.29	4.21	Significant
Service	0.18	2.67	Significant
Amenities	0.12	1.89	Not Significant

Model Summary:

$R^2 = 0.64$

F-value=32.45($p < 0.001$)

Regression results reveal that ambience is the most influential predictor of consumer preference shift, followed by the maticuniqueness and cleanliness. The high R^2 value (0.64) indicates that experiential factors explain a substantial proportion of variation in dining preferences. Interestingly, amenities show relatively weaker influence, suggesting that core experiential elements (visual appeal, theme, hygiene) are prioritized over supplementary features. These findings support the theoretical framework of experience economy, where consumers seek immersive and memorable dining environments rather than purely functional services.

OVER ALL MAJOR FINDINGS

- ❖ Demographic variables such as age and income significantly influence dining behavior, while occupation does not.
- ❖ Social media and food vloggers exert strong influence, particularly in discovery and decision-making.

- ❖ Ambience and the matic experience are the strongest drivers of preference shift toward theme-based restaurants.
- ❖ Consumer behavior reflects a shift from utilitarian consumption to experiential consumption.
- ❖ Digital platforms act as primary mediators of consumer perception and engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study provide substantial empirical support for existing literature while also offering context-specific insights in to consumer behavior in Chennai's theme-based restaurant segment.

With respect to demographic influences, the study identified age and income as significant determinants of dining preference shifts, whereas occupation was not statistically significant. This partially aligns with the findings of **Kinjal Gosai (2021)**, who reported that younger consumers demonstrate higher engagement with digital platforms and are more responsive to online reviews and promotional strategies. The present study extends this argument by demonstrating that younger age groups are also more inclined toward experiential dining, suggesting that digital exposure and lifestyle aspirations jointly influence behavior. However, then on-significance of occupation contrasts with traditional segmentation approaches, thereby reinforcing the notion that psychographic and behavioral variables are increasingly more influential than occupational status. In relation to social media and food vloggers, the findings reveal a strong positive correlation between vlogger influence and consumer behavioral intention ($r = 0.68$; $p < 0.001$), as well as trust and recommendation behavior ($r = 0.72$; $p < 0.001$). These results are consistent with

Dwivedietal. (2021) and **Harriganetal. (2023)**, who emphasized the role of user-generated content and influencer engagement in enhancing brand trust and purchase intention. Similarly, the high meanscores for discovery (4.35) and trust (4.10) corroborate the findings of **Liu, Shin, and Burns (2022)**, which established that electronic word-of-mouth significantly shapes consumer decision-making. The present study further contributes by highlighting the **dominance of Instagram (73.9%)** as a platform, thereby emphasizing the increasing importance of visual-centric digital ecosystems in influencing restaurant choices.

The study's findings regarding ambience and experiential factors strongly support the conclusions of **Kim and Kim (2022)** and **Sthapit et al. (2023)**, who identified ambience, sensory engagement, and the matic consistency as critical determinants of customer satisfaction and revisit intention. The regression analysis in the current study revealed that ambience ($\beta = 0.41$) is the most influential predictor of preference shift, followed by unique theme ($\beta=0.33$) and cleanliness ($\beta=0.29$). This reinforces the argument that consumers increasingly prioritize immersive and aesthetic dining environments, aligning with the concept of the experience economy. Furthermore, the relatively lower influence of a menities suggests that supplementary services are secondary to core experiential attributes, a finding that refines existing literature by establishing a hierarchy of experiential factors.

The results also reflect broader post-pandemic behavioral transformations, consistent with **Messabiaetal. (2022)** and **Gösslingetal.(2025)**, who reported a shift toward safety, hygiene, and experience-oriented consumption. The significant role of cleanliness ($\beta = 0.29$) in the present study substantiates these claims, indicating that hygiene has become an integral component of perceived experience rather than merely a basic expectation.

Additionally, the study aligns with **Mariani et al. (2025)** and **Leung et al. (2026)**, who highlighted the growing importance of influencer marketing and experiential branding in the hospitality sector. The strong relationship between vlogger trust and behavioral intention observed in this study confirms that food vloggers function as digital opinion leaders, significantly shaping consumer perceptions, expectations, and post-consumption behaviors.

However, a notable divergence from **Parikh (2024)** is observed. While Parikh emphasized food quality as the primary determinant in restaurant selection, the present study indicates that ambience and thematic experience may outweigh traditional factors in the context of theme-based restaurants. This suggests a contextual shift wherein experiential attributes gain prominence in specific market segments, particularly urban and youth-driven environments such as Chennai.

The present study not only corroborates existing literature but also advances it by demonstrating that consumer preferences are increasingly driven by a convergence of digital influence and experiential value creation. The findings underscore a paradigm shift from functional consumption toward experience-oriented and digitally mediated dining behavior, thereby contributing to the evolving discourse on consumer behavior in the hospitality industry.

CONCLUSION

The present study systematically examined the factors influencing the shift in consumer preferences toward theme-based restaurants in Chennai, integrating demographic, digital, and experiential dimensions. The findings provide compelling evidence that consumer behavior in the contemporary restaurant industry is undergoing a significant transformation from function-oriented consumption to experience-driven engagement.

The analysis revealed that age and income are significant determinants of dining preferences, indicating that younger consumers and those with higher disposable income exhibit a stronger inclination toward theme-based restaurants. In contrast, occupation was found to be statistically insignificant, suggesting that traditional demographic classifications are gradually being supplanted by lifestyle-oriented and psychographic factors.

A major contribution of the study lies in establishing the critical role of social media and food vloggers in shaping consumer decision-making. The strong correlations between vlogger influence, trust, and behavioral intention demonstrate that digital platforms have evolved into primary sources of information, discovery, and persuasion. The dominance of visually driven platforms such as Instagram further underscores the importance of aesthetic representation and digital visibility in influencing restaurant choices.

The study also identified ambience and thematic experience as the most influential predictors of preference shift, surpassing even traditional determinants such as price and basic service attributes. Factors such as décor, the thematic uniqueness, and cleanliness significantly contributed to consumer satisfaction and intention to revisit. These findings align with the theoretical framework of the experience economy, wherein consumers seek immersive, memorable, and emotionally engaging experiences rather than mere service delivery.

Furthermore, the study reflects broader post-pandemic behavioral changes, with increased emphasis on hygiene, safety, and quality of experience. Consumers now evaluate restaurants not only based on functional benefits but also on their ability to provide an appealing and aesthetically appealing environment.

The research establishes that the shift toward theme-based restaurants in Chennai is driven by a synergistic interaction of demographic characteristics, digital influence, and experiential value creation. The study contributes to academic literature by contextualizing global consumption trends within an urban Indian setting and offers practical implications for restaurant manager to prioritize experience design, digital marketing strategies, and customer-centric innovation.

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