Customer behaviour in restaurant establishments in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: The tourism and hospitality industry was adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Restaurants were affected greatly as businesses shut down because of the lockdown restrictions and limited movement within the country. There were distinct customer behavioural differences when visiting and dining in restaurants. These establishments were expected to execute the recommended safety protocols. Due to the lack of South African studies of this nature, this paper explores the shifts in customer behaviour when customers paid visits to various restaurant establishments in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Using the convenience sampling technique, the study achieved a valid sample size of 156 respondents by visiting ten restaurants. A quantitative research method was applied for an existing questionnaire that included Likert scale questions as well as open ended questions. The data was analysed using an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) as well as a dimension reduction technique. Findings indicate that customers' behaviour has radically changed when dining out as a direct result of COVID-19. Quantitative analysis illustrates three factors: delivery service option, hospitality establishment hygiene and cleanliness and safety measures are viewed as the distinctive behaviours that customers were gravitating toward as lockdown restrictions eased. Open-ended responses were analysed using content analysis whereby three themes emerged, namely: feelings of being unsafe; fear of contracting the virus and willingness to return to restaurants. Aspects such as cleanliness, physical environment and availability of delivery services are significant when it comes to customers' willingness to dine in hospitality establishments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, customer behaviour, hospitality establishment, hygiene and cleanliness, safety, restaurants

Introduction

Many customers were concerned about dining out, even at dine-in hospitality establishments that had outdoor dining areas due to the potential risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus (Yang et al., 2020). The apprehension caused by the pandemic created avoidance behaviour for example, increasing physical distance from other individuals in social exchanges (Yang et al., 2020). There was a rising trend amongst hospitality establishment customers to avoid dine-in options as it required contact with other diners (Kim et al., 2021). Many customers became subjectively biased towards the establishment's cleanliness since the onset of the pandemic (Kraemer et al., 2020).

There were, however, customers who were less careful and who failed to comply with the safety protocols. Many customers believed that the vaccine made them immune to adhering to the safety protocols. This behaviour posed a risk of a surge in infections. As a result, many other customers were potentially unwilling to visit hospitality establishments as they were anxious that the non-compliance to safety rules put them at risk of contracting the virus (Yang et al., 2020).

Recommendations to reduce the rate of transmission of COVID-19 were proposed by the South African government for hospitality establishment managers as well as their customers. The safety practices that customers had to adhere to included the wearing of a shielding face mask,

use of a hand sanitiser, and observing social distancing. Hospitality establishment managers had to ensure that customers complied with these rules and instructions. The hospitality establishment managers furthermore had to ensure that their service staff wore protective gear, that cautionary food handling procedures were in place, that there was persistent sanitising of public areas, and the layout of tables was done in such a manner to ensure as little human contact as possible (Kim et al., 2021).

Thus, this study explores the shifts in customer behaviour when customers paid visits to restaurant establishments in the Gauteng province in South Africa to achieve the following objectives 1) To establish the changes in customer behaviour when visiting hospitality establishments in Gauteng during COVID-19; 2) To determine potentially statistically differences in perceptions of customer behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19 across gender and frequency of visiting a restaurant; and 3) To determine the willingness of customers to dine at restaurants in terms of their comfort and safety during COVID-19. Findings from this study will provide significant insights from the customer perspective, particularly in South Africa, on whether dine-in restaurants are still a popular choice of patronage or have the pandemic completely altered the customer's behaviour towards dining out.

Literatur Review

Customers' dining behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic have been the focus of research studies globally. Many previous studies have focused on customers' views on risk and the subsequent restaurant strategies to attract them. In Australia, Wang et al. (2021) investigated customers' food purchasing options such as takeout meals and dine-in options and the influence of crowdedness and safety measures employed in restaurants. Dedeoğlu and Boğan (2021) suggested that sociability positively projected customers' intention to dine in fine dining restaurants in Turkey. A study in the USA suggested that hopefulness and dread mediated the relationship between customers' shielding rationales and their food purchase-related intentions (Kim et al., 2021).

Customers often have their own opinions of public health and the observed risks of when dining at a restaurant (de Andrade et al., 2019). Even though safety should be a key factor when customers dine out, many customers are oblivious to health and safety aspects when they select a restaurant (Yost & Cheng 2021). Restaurant customers are frequently more affected by visible components such as the restaurant's menus, dining environment, and hygiene (Kim & Bachman, 2019). Safety has become a priority because of COVID-19, and reasons for dining out must therefore be convincing for an individual to take on the risk to dine out.

In China and Korea, Zhong et al. (2021) evaluated how subjective standards and restaurants' precautionary measures affected the physical and psychological risk perceptions of customers' dining-related activities. Kim et al. (2021) explain that hygiene and safety messages influenced customers' intention to purchase related menu items positively. The cleanliness of a hospitality establishment determines whether customers choose to dine-in or not in Vietnam (Hoang & Suleri, 2021; Song et al., 2021). This is to avoid the risk of food-borne illnesses due to unhygienic and mishandling of food in public eating places (Khuluse & Deen, 2020; 2022). The physical environment is a significant aspect which influences customers' service perceptions and behaviour in the hospitality industry (Hanks & Line, 2018). The cleanliness of the immediate dining environment, well-ventilated air and displayed signs allow customers to feel more at ease when dining in (Park et al., 2016; Yost & Cheng, 2021; Zhong et al., 2021). Watanabe and Omori (2020) suggest that older customers are prone to non-compliance regarding safety practices as they are less likely to embrace change. Their study furthermore suggests that customers with high uncertainty gather information that is relevant to dining in during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce the negative consequences of being uncertain. When customers fear that they might contract the COVID-19 virus, they change their behaviour accordingly when dining out. The more terrified customers are of contracting the COVID-19 virus, the more they are prepared to follow all the recommended safety precautions of the hospitality establishment.

Various restaurants' active responses to the pandemic and newly adopted safety measures could greatly enhance consumer trust, which affects their actual dining activities. Customers' dining out intentions are increased when building strong brand trust. Brand trust is built when a

restaurant can supply its customers with quality food and good service. Restaurants also build the confidence of their customers to dine out by highlighting their commitment to customers' health and safety during the pandemic (Wen & Liu-Lastres, 2022).

Restaurant management responds to customers' arising need for trust and loyalty while managing risk to increase and attain a suitably motivated restaurant customer. An optimal way to build trust and loyalty among customers is transparency. Transparency can be described as the visibility of information that may assist customers in making informed decisions (Nguyen et al., 2022). The purpose of transparency is making the whole system visible based on customer demands (Yang et al., 2022). Therefore, restaurant transparency may be accomplished by concentrating on the physical environment, service process, and quality of food. By allowing customers to observe the food-preparing and delivering processes, transparency would be attained (Slack et al., 2021). Previous research suggested that transparency could reduce customers' lopsided perceptions and alleged risks by providing facts about food products and service practices (Salazar & Oerlemans, 2015). Transparency is therefore a significant, trending, and inexpensive tool to improve customer loyalty (Agrawal, 2019).

Another option that restaurants applied successfully was food delivery services as it allowed them to remain operational and maintain social distancing simultaneously. This option facilitates the use of digital contactless options such as hands-free payments, an e-menu QR code, and/or mobile applications that allow for low or no-contact services, which provides customers with ease and security and subsequently builds customer trust and confidence (Hao & Chon, 2021; Jeong et al., 2022). The customers also avoid traveling to a restaurant and waiting for their food order and frees up time for other tasks (Chen et al., 2022). These delivery services occasionally contributed to the risk of receiving cold food. The delivery option is still a popular choice for young adults, even after the pandemic (Buettner et al., 2023).

While the consequences of the pandemic have affected various industries differently prompting suitable solutions for sustainable operations, restaurants were affected in their operating the business and the customers that chose to patronize them. Making the restaurants accountable for providing solutions for themselves as well as their customers, therefore, this study provides insight into the customers' behaviour that can directly assist restaurants in South Africa as we live in the post-pandemic era.

Methodology

Design and Sampling

The study focused on investigating customers' behaviours, particularly amongst restaurant establishments in the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The study employed a quantitative approach and followed the positivist research paradigm of which an existing questionnaire was adapted to address the research questions of the study. As the study was conducted during the period that the country was adjusting to the new-normal and when the COVID-19 national lockdowns were lifted, respondents were reluctant to spend time to participate especially whilst they were eating or dining out. Therefore, the non-probability sampling method was applied to allow for a stronger response rate. Thus, based on the willingness of the respondents, the study conveniently targeted the customers that dined in ten sit-down restaurants within the Gauteng province, South Africa. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face to customers who just patronized the restaurant establishments, and a total valid sample of 156 questionnaires was completed and achieved.

Instrument and Data Collection

For the data to be collected, the necessary ethical consent was required. Ethical clearance was sought from the Institutional Research Committee (IREC) following the thorough processes, ethical approval was attained (Ethics number UJ - 22STH13). This consent ensured that the names of restaurants visited and the respondents that chose to participate in the study would be kept confidential and anonymous. This study borrowed the relevant questions from the pre-existing questionnaire that was administered from a similar study conducted in Vietnam (Hoang & Suleri, 2021). The most applicable quantitative questions were retained from this instrument,

asking questions about the customers' behaviour towards visiting the restaurant establishment to achieve objective 1) To establish the changes in customer behavior when visiting hospitality establishments in Gauteng during COVID-19 and 2) To determine potentially statistically significant differences in perceptions of customer behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19 across gender and frequency of visiting a restaurant.

Four additional open-ended questions were included in the questionnaire that addressed objective 3) To determine the willingness of customers to dine at restaurants in terms of their comfort and safety during COVID-19. These open-ended questions probed for potential recommendations for restaurants and establishments in South Africa, as that will directly assist managers and restaurants to adjust their business practice that is more appealing to today's customer.

The first section contained a brief biographical detail of the customers, determining the level income, type of outlet they visited, the frequency of these visits, the utilization of food delivery options, the frequency of using food delivery, and how long did it take to physically dine at a restaurant once lockdown restrictions were eased. The following section was a Likert scale containing 11 items that addressed customers' behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19. These items were measured on a scale on which 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = Unsure, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree.

Data Analysis

All completed questionnaires were captured and were analysed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29. Frequencies were performed to describe the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the following multivariate tests were conducted to address the first objective of this study.

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted in this study as a dimension reduction technique. Before conducting EFA, the factorability of the data was evaluated using two diagnostic measures, namely the Bartlett's test of sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO). The KMO index value ranges from 0 to 1 with 0.6 considered as the minimum value for exploratory factor analysis to be appropriate (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

The Cronbach`s alpha coefficient was utilized to estimate the reliability of the measurement scales and independent t-tests were conducted to potentially identify statistically significant differences in perceptions of customer behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19 across gender. Additionally, a series of One-Way Analysis of Variance Tests (One-Way ANOVA) were performed in an attempt to reveal possible statistically significant differences in perceptions of customer behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19 across frequency of visiting the restaurant.

Content analysis was used to analyse the open-ended responses and themes were formulated by the similar answers to meet the second objective of this paper.

Results and Discussions

Results

Table 1 reveals that just more than half of the respondents were male (48.7%) and the remaining respondents were female (51.3%). In terms of ethnicity, the sample was dominated by Black (81.4%) followed by Coloured (9.0%), White (7.0%), and lastly Indian (2.6%).

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents

Characteristic	Category	n	Percentage
Gender	Male	76	48.7%
	Female	80	51.3%
	Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Ethnicity	Black	127	81.4%
	Indian	4	2.6%
	White	11	7.0%
	Coloured	14	9.0%

Age Group	Younger than 18 years	18	11.5%
	18 – 24 years	71	45.6%
	25-34 years	40	25.6%
	35-44 years	21	13.5%
	Older than 44 years	6	3.8%
Marital status	Single	55	35.3%
	Student	46	29.5%
	Married/living as a couple	44	28.2%
	Divorced/Separated/Widowed	11	7.0%
Level of income	0 – R5000	64	41.0%
	R5001 – R10 000	34	21.8%
	R10 001 – R25 000	33	21.2%
	R25 001 – R35 000	16	10.3%
	R35 001 – R50 000	5	3.1%
	More than R50 000	4	2.6%

The majority age group that chose to participate ranged between 18-24 years (45.6%) followed by 25-34 years (25.6%), 35-44 years (13.5%) and younger than 18 years old (11.5%). The remaining respondents were aged from 44 years and older (3.8%). In terms of marital status, Table 1 reveals that there was a fair split between the respondents with Single (35.3%), Students (29.5%) and Married/Living as a couple (28.2%). The only exception was respondents who were Divorced/Separated/Widowed (7.0%). Majority of the respondents indicated that their level of income was between 0-R5000 (41.0%), followed by 21.8% indicated that their income bracket fell between R5001-R10 000, with 21.2% of respondents indicating that their level of income was between R10 001-R25 000. 10.3% of respondents indicated that they earned between R25 001-R35 000, while 3.1% reported that they earned between R35 001-R50 000 and 2.6% indicated that their income fell in the bracket of over R50 000.

The following section presents the multivariate tests to directly achieve objective 1) To establish the changes in customer behaviour when visiting hospitality establishments in Gauteng during COVID-19 and 2) To determine potentially statistically significant differences in perceptions of customer behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19 across gender and frequency of visiting a restaurant.

Table 2. Types of outlets visited

		No	Yes	Total
Fast-food Restaurant	n	68	88	156
	%	43.6%	56.4%	100.0%
Fast Casual Restaurant	n	117	39	156
	%	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Semi-Fine Dining Restaurant	n	129	27	156
	%	82.7%	17.3%	100.0%
Fine Dining Restaurant	n	133	23	156
	%	85.3%	14.7%	100.0%

Table 2 represents the types of outlets that were visited. Due to the nature of this question, respondents selected more than one answer. Majority of respondents (56.4%) indicated they visited a Fast-food restaurant, followed by a Fast Casual restaurant (25.0%), while 17.3% of respondents indicated they visited a Semi-Fine dining restaurant and 14.7% visited a Fine dining restaurant. It wasn't unexpected that the majority of customers opted for the Fast-food restaurant. Customers were just accustomed to "new normal" and customers preferred the contactless services on offer amid the risk of COVID-19 infections (Watanabe & Omori, 2020).

Table 3. Frequency of restaurants visits

Characteristic	n	Percentage
Frequency of restaurants visited		
Daily	15	9.6%
Once a week	90	57.7%

Twice a week	41	26.3%
Three times a week	10	6.4%
Frequency of using delivery options		
Once or twice a month	67	42.9%
1 – 3 times per week	66	42.3%
More than 3 times per week	23	14.7%
By when you began dining in restaurants post easing of lockdown restrictions		
Immediately	57	36.5%
After a week	21	13.5%
After a month	78	50.0%

Results in Table 3 reveal that a majority of respondents (57.7%) indicated they frequented a restaurant at least once a week, followed by twice a week (26.3%), Daily (9.6%), and three times a week (6.4%). Almost the same number of respondents utilised the delivery option for their food with either once or twice a month (42.9%) and 1 to 3 times per week (42.3%) and the remaining respondents indicated they use this option more than 3 times per week (14.7%). COVID-19 literature stipulates that the impact of this pandemic led to limiting labor costs through reduced working hours, salary cuts, and retrenchments, thus affecting affordability to spend on luxuries (Song et al., 2021). Interestingly, when the respondents were asked by when did they begin to visit restaurants once lockdown restrictions were eased, half (50.0%) of the responses were after a month, followed by 36.5% indicated they immediately started dining out and 13.5% indicated that they began dining at restaurants after a week after lockdown restrictions were eased. Research supports that customers didn't feel comfortable using restaurants after they reopened (Azevedo & Melo, 2021).

The Barlett's test of Sphericity should reach a statistical significance of less than 0.05 for factor analysis to be suitable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). It can be seen from Table 4 that the KMO value was 0.737 and Barlett's test of Sphericity`s p-value<0.001, supporting the factorability of the items.

Table 4. Exploratory and reliability analysis results

Dimension	Item	Factor Loadings	Kaiser-Meyer Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)	Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Cronbach`s Alpha Coefficient
Delivery service option	B11	0.872			
	B12	0.771			
	B10	0.733			0.727
	B8	0.537			
Hospitality establishment hygiene & cleanliness	B1	0.827			
	B2	0.703	0.737	< 0.001	0.690
	B3	0.655			
Safety measures	B7	0.827			
	B9	0.708			0.630
	B6	0.424			

A Principal Components Analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was performed on 11 items assessing customer behaviour towards cleanliness in a restaurant during COVID-19. Using the Kaiser`s criterion of 1, three factors were extracted. Factor 1 was labelled "Delivery Service Option" due to high loadings from four items. This factor with an eigenvalue of 3.235 accounted for 32.354% of the total variance. Factor 2 was interpreted as "Hospitality Establishment Hygiene & Cleanliness". This construct with an eigenvalue of 1.541 explained 15.410% of the total variance. Factor 3 was named as "Safety Measures". This dimension with an eigenvalue of 1.200 contributed 12.000% of the total variance. The cumulative variance explained by all three factors was 59.764%, exceeding the threshold value of 60% (Wiid & Diggines, 2015).

As shown in Table 4, the Cronbach's alpha values of the study constructs range from 0.630 to 0.727, well close to the acceptable value of 0.70, considered to represent a measure of good internal consistency (Mehrolia et al., 2021).

Table 5. Independent t-test results

Dimension	Males	Females	
n	76	80	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	p-value
Delivery service option	3.72 (0.82)	3.76 (0.85)	0.771
Hospitality establishment hygiene & cleanliness	4.17 (0.70)	4.22 (0.61)	0.637
Safety measures	3.64 (0.80)	3.66 (0.84)	0.918

The results shown in Table 5 revealed no statistically significant differences in customer perceptions on delivery service option (p-value=0.771), hospitality establishment hygiene & cleanliness (p-value=0.637) and safety measures (p-value=0.918) between males and females who participated in the study.

Table 6. One-Way ANOVA results

Dimension	Once or Twice a Month	One to Three Times a Week	More than Three times a Week	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	p-value
n	67	66	23	
Delivery service option	3.71 (0.80)	3.88 (0.78)	3.45 (1.01)	0.094
Hospitality establishment hygiene & cleanliness	4.21 (0.56)	4.22 (0.58)	4.07 (1.04)	0.618
Safety measures	3.77 (0.77)	3.52 (0.80)	3.70 (1.00)	0.218

It is evident from Table 6 that no statistically significant difference was found in customer perceptions on delivery service option (p-value = 0.094), hospitality establishment hygiene & cleanliness (p-value = 0.618) and safety measures (p-value = 0.218) across frequency of visiting the restaurant.

To meet the third objective of this paper, the following open-ended questions were asked: 1) How did they feel when they visited a crowded restaurant?; 2) What practices did they want to see being done in a restaurant to make them feel safe and comfortable in a restaurant during COVID-19?; 3) What top three concerns they had when they had to visit dine-in restaurants in the COVID-19 era?; and 4) What circumstances influenced their decision to resume eating out again after the COVID-19 restrictions were eased? The following section presents the themes developed from the open-ended responses.

Theme 1 – Feeling of Being Unsafe

Majority of respondents indicated that on the onset of the pandemic they had to get accustomed to limited visits to restaurants as the fear of contracting the virus still clouded their minds. Thus, being in a crowded restaurant amplified their feeling of being unsafe due to the uncertainty of the other person's COVID-19 status, especially when customers became sluggish in following the social distancing protocols and the set regulations. For example, such responses were received: "*I am uncomfortable and afraid of the unknown.*" (R6). The words "unsafe" and "scared" were repeated by almost all respondents when it came to expressing themselves. Some respondents were explicit in their response: "*I feel uneasy and immediately start getting anx-ious*

as my mind runs wild thinking of all the germs that I easily could come into contact with." (R4); "*I feel so anxious that I don't sit down, I just order and request a takeaway*." (R8); "*If I see crowds I start to feel intimidated and anxious*." (R119).

Other respondents expressed concerns of a lack of ventilation, particularly when restaurants are crowded, which further added to their fears and discomforts. For example: "*Lack of ventilation makes me uneasy and uncomfortable*" (R96); "*I don't feel safe because when there are crowds there is insufficient ventilation*." (R20). Literature suggests that customers are generally influenced by their feelings and can be the deciding factors in a purchasing decision, ultimately resulting in a decision to dine at the restaurant or choose another alternative (Luna, 2020).

Theme 2 – Fear of Contracting The Virus

Fear is one of the most dominant negative emotions that humans can experience, which has undoubtedly augmented with the threat of COVID-19. Recent research advocates that fear is an emotional state that occurs in response to a real or perceived threat and escalates an autonomic escape action (Siddiqi et al., 2022), danger. Majority of respondents indicated that they are fearful of contracting the virus with the following direct responses:

"*I feel scared because of the risk of getting infected with COVID-19*." (R52)

"*I am afraid of getting the virus and dying*." (R134)

"*I am so concerned about being infected and infecting others*." (R138)

Many respondents preferred to stay indoors rather than visit a crowded restaurant as they feared that with more people in one place, the rate of transmission will be higher as COVID is an airborne virus. For example: "*I preferred ordering and having my food delivered compared to personally going to the restaurant*." (R134). "*I was just too scared to go out*." (R136). Recent research emphasized that the transmission of COVID-19 can occur through direct and close contact with infected people, thus, setting the fear of being near others (Cerda & Garcia, 2022). Additionally, the fear of infection was augmented when other customers failed to strictly adhere to the safety regulations of being in public, like the wearing of masks incorrectly and failing to sanitize. Almost 100% of respondents mentioned that wearing masks, sanitizing, and social distancing were their primary concerns for them from both the customer and the staff. For example, respondents expressed: "*… restaurants need to ensure the safety of their customers*." (R80) and "*…owners must be serious in curbing the spread of the virus*." (R86). Literature states that close contact environments may facilitate transmission from even a small number of cases to many people, especially if hand hygiene was not performed and masks were not used when social distancing was not maintained (Chia et al., 2020).

Theme 3 – Willingness to Return to Restaurants

Considering the ease of restrictions, restaurants had the opportunity to open their doors and resume operations. After several months of hard lockdown, individuals were beginning to feel the effects of isolation, with the additional loss of loved ones during this time. The introduction of the vaccine provided a sense of security that allowed people to venture into public spaces and promoted the willingness of customers to dine out. For example, one respondent indicated: "*I resumed eating out because the vaccine became compulsory*." (R136). Almost 100% of respondents indicated that the drop in the death toll and infection rate also encouraged customers to return to their favourite eating spots. Some respondents were a little more direct and indicated: "*…only when a cure is found*." (R67). Whilst other respondents indicated: "*I missed my favourite meal*." (R39; R120); whilst respondent (R42) expressed: "*I just got tired of cooking and eating at home*". Research supports that even during the pandemic, meal quality, service quality, and the physical environment are key aspects that influence customer behaviours (Hoang & Suleri, 2021).

Discussions

Results reveal that customers' behaviour has radically changed when dining out as a direct result of COVID-19. The original questionnaire that contained 11 items, of which 1 item with a low factor loading below 0.5 was eliminated, and the remaining items were then grouped into three factors. These factors were named accordingly: delivery service option, hospitality establishment hygiene and cleanliness, and safety measures, and can be viewed as the distinctive behaviours that customers were gravitating toward as lockdown restrictions eased, thereby achieving the first objective of this paper. This proves significant as before the pandemic existing literature emulates around the meal experience, the dining experience and food quality (Khalifa, 2015; Saneva & Chortoseva, 2018). It is evident that customers now have different concerns and expectations when they are choosing to dine out. These findings suggest that aspects such as cleanliness, physical environment, and availability of delivery services are more important when it comes to customers' dining in restaurant establishments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gursoy and Chi (2020) highlight that guests are willing to pay more for establishments that took precautions to protect their patrons by practicing all government regulations, frequently sanitizing touchpoints, and conducting staff health and safety training.

Results also reveal that there are no statistically significant differences in customer perceptions on all three factors (delivery service option, hospitality establishment hygiene & cleanliness, safety measures) between males and females. These results establish that these concerns were experienced by all customers regardless of gender and consistent with previous studies, Gursoy and Chi (2020), as well as Gursoy et al. (2021) who found a large portion of individuals are not willing to dine in at a sit-down restaurant as lockdown began to ease. These findings are prevalent for restaurants in South Africa today, as COVID-19 has provided a taste of dependence on delivery service options. Thus, customers may question themselves before deciding to physically dine out, especially if they can order in and have it delivered. Recent research advocates that online food delivery has now become the new normal in the food industry (Bannor & Amponsah, 2024). These researchers conducted a systematic review within African countries, making this study unique because it was an empirical study.

The three main themes that emerged from the qualitative data were a *feeling of being unsafe*, *fear of contracting the virus*, and *willingness to return to restaurants*. The general feel that customers were reluctant to enter public spaces when lockdown restrictions began to ease. Their apprehensions stemmed from their fears of contracting the virus, especially if restaurant establishments did not follow strict protocols and COVID-19 regulations. This is consistent with quantitative findings where only half of the respondents indicated that they would visit restaurants after a month of lockdown. Although it was notable that customers began to tire of being at home and cooking for themselves it was more important to not put themselves at risk.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized that the hospitality industry was not equipped to deal with natural and unforeseen disasters such as a pandemic. The management, revenue, employees, and operations of hospitality establishments depend on customers leaving their homes to visit dine-in restaurant establishments. This study clearly states that customers preferred the delivery option as opposed to putting themselves at risk of contracting the virus even after lockdown restrictions eased. Additionally, as the industry slowly reopened, customers who still visited dine-in establishments had to feel safe to patronize. Thus, restaurant managers had to conjure up strategic plans to ensure the safety of dine-in customers while adhering to safety regulations that complied with the COVID-19 protocols. The enforced travel restrictions curtailed movement within the country, provided an opportunity to all restaurant establishments to have/implement delivery services. Establishments that could not adapt had to shut down whilst others partnered with delivery services such as Uber Eats to stay in business. Furthermore, the continued application of the recommended safety protocols in restaurant establishments such as sanitizing can influence customers' perception of dining in restaurant establishments as opposed to opting for delivery. Although it should be noted that restaurants should not only focus on the hygiene conditions of their establishments, as this study provides empirical evidence that

customers enjoy having the delivery option, thus, sit-down and fine dining restaurants should also explore these options. Those restaurants that partnered with delivery apps out of necessity have now become a way of staying sustainable in the future.

It needs to be noted that this study targeted the customers from the restaurants industry, hence limiting the generalizability to other sectors, for example, hotels and the hospitality industry. Furthermore, this study was carried out within the province of Gauteng, thus replicating this study in parts of South Africa would be useful. Additionally, a questionnaire using convenience sampling was utilised to gather the study's data and may result in a measurement bias. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies can include a qualitative approach that provides an in-depth investigation into the customer's behaviour post-pandemic. Based on the study findings, future studies can include the customer preferences into the delivery of their meals and the dining in of restaurants.

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