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On-the-Go Dining in America: Comparing Convenience, Service Quality, and Satisfaction in QSR Versus Gas Station Food

Shiva Jahani
University of Central Florida, shiva.jahani@ucf.edu

Mohammed Lefrid
Grand Valley State University, lefridm@gvsu.edu

Lorie A. Tuma
Grand Valley State University, tumal@gvsu.edu

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On-the-Go Dining in America: Comparing Convenience, Service Quality, and Satisfaction in QSR Versus Gas Station Food

Purpose

The objective of this multi-group study is to examine the influence of service quality and convenience on customer satisfaction in quick service restaurants (QSRs) versus gas stations.

Design/methodology/approach

Data were collected online from 552 participants in the USA and analyzed using partial least square structure equation modeling (SmartPLS).

Findings

Service quality and convenience are strong predictors of customer satisfaction in both QSR restaurants and gas station food outlets. In addition, this study concluded significant differences between QSRs and gas stations in terms of these relations.

Research limitations/implications

This study makes a significant contribution to the foodservice and consumer behavior literature by examining the influence service quality and convenience on the customers' dining experience and satisfaction. Moreover, this study has several practical implications for foodservice practitioners and foodservice marketers. Self-selection to take the online questionnaire is considered one of this study's limitations.

Practical implications

Restaurant managers could benefit from the outcome of this study by utilizing their limited resources on improving their customers' satisfaction and restaurants profitability.

Social implications

Through the evaluation of how customers value service quality and convenience in QSRs, this study aims to provide a clear insight on how to improve the customer experience in both QSRs and gas stations.

Originality/value

This multi-group study is unique as it compares the perceptions of two groups of diners regarding restaurant dining attributed to QSRs and gas stations in the USA.

Keywords: Quick service restaurants (QSR); Convenience; Customer satisfaction; Service quality; Gas stations; Consumer spending

Introduction

Dining out has become a deeply ingrained social norm in the United States, largely driven by the proliferation of quick service restaurants (QSRs) and the increasing demand for convenient meal options that cater to busy lifestyles. In 2019, U.S. consumer spending on quick service meals exceeded $279 billion, marking a 7% growth from the previous year (Lock, 2020). This surge in demand has prompted convenience stores to expand their food offerings, including fast food and ready-to-go meals, which have positioned them as direct competitors to established QSR chains like McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's. Consequently, QSR outlets are under pressure to innovate, particularly in terms of menu development, service quality, customer satisfaction, and overall convenience (Mason et al., 2016).

Gas stations have also entered the competitive foodservice space, revamping their menus and improving their food quality, presentation, and dining environments. Popular gas stations such as Buc-ee's, Wawa, and Pilot have introduced specialized food preparation areas and contemporary dining spaces, positioning themselves as significant competitors to QSRs (Richardson et al., 2019). As competition intensifies, QSRs must now contend with these emerging foodservice providers to maintain customer loyalty and satisfaction. Service quality, as defined by Zeithaml (1988), is a key determinant of success in this regard, as it reflects the consumer's perception of a product's overall excellence. This study seeks to investigate the role of service quality and convenience in shaping customer satisfaction in gas stations compared to QSRs, filling a gap in the literature on consumer behavior across these different foodservice settings.

Literature Review

Customer satisfaction plays a pivotal role in the success of hospitality firms, especially in the fast-paced and competitive foodservice sector. Given the inherently subjective nature of service delivery, customer evaluations often vary based on prior expectations and individual perceptions. Parasuraman et al. (1985) underscored the importance of addressing the gap between expected and perceived service quality, emphasizing that dissatisfaction often results from the disconnect between what customers anticipate and what they experience. In the fast-food sector, where speed and consistency are paramount, aligning advertised services with actual service delivery is essential to maintaining high levels of customer satisfaction. Akbar and Parvez (2009) further reinforced this by asserting that firms prioritizing customer satisfaction through consistent service and product quality are more likely to achieve sustained financial success and foster customer loyalty.

An additional dimension to understanding customer satisfaction in diverse service environments is the role of acculturation. Researchers have explored how customers from different cultural backgrounds acclimate to local service contexts and how their previous experiences shape expectations. Wang and Mattila (2011) found that the acculturation level of Chinese tourists in the U.S. influenced their perceptions of service quality, subsequently affecting their overall satisfaction. Acculturation offers valuable insights when analyzing customer experiences in evolving service environments such as gas stations, which have only recently expanded into the foodservice market. This study applies acculturation theory to examine how customers adapt to the unique service settings of gas stations versus traditional Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs), which differ in terms of both convenience and service quality.

Convenience

Convenience is a critical factor in consumer decision-making, particularly in fast food dining, where efficiency and accessibility are paramount. Adiele and Kenneth-Adiele (2017) define convenience as the ease with which goods and services can be obtained, minimizing the effort or risk to the consumer. In the context of foodservice, convenience is often linked to the time savings associated with dining out, as opposed to preparing meals at home. This has become increasingly important in light of modern, fast-paced lifestyles (Lin et al., 2015). Both gas stations and QSRs have adapted their operations to meet consumer demands for greater convenience. Gas stations, in particular, have made notable strides in improving the accessibility and appeal of their food offerings, contributing to a 16% increase in food sales over the past decade (Park, 2020).

Customers' perceptions of convenience are shaped by their previous experiences and cultural expectations. International tourists, for example, who are more familiar with traditional QSRs, may find gas station food offerings less convenient due to unfamiliar service formats. In contrast, local customers who frequent gas stations may have developed a higher level of acculturation, making these establishments more convenient for them. This study seeks to explore the role of convenience in shaping customer satisfaction at gas stations versus QSRs, while also examining the potential influence of acculturation on these perceptions.

Service Quality

Service quality has been extensively researched in the hospitality industry, particularly concerning its impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) define service quality as the comparison between customer expectations and the actual performance of a service provider. In the context of gas station foodservice, where the product is largely intangible and harder to standardize, measuring service quality presents unique challenges. Liu and Tse (2018) found that factors such as promptness, pricing, and food quality have a significant impact on customer perceptions of service quality. Additionally, service quality has been shown to have a direct influence on customer loyalty, with satisfied customers more likely to return and recommend the service to others (Hellier et al., 2003).

Accordingly, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

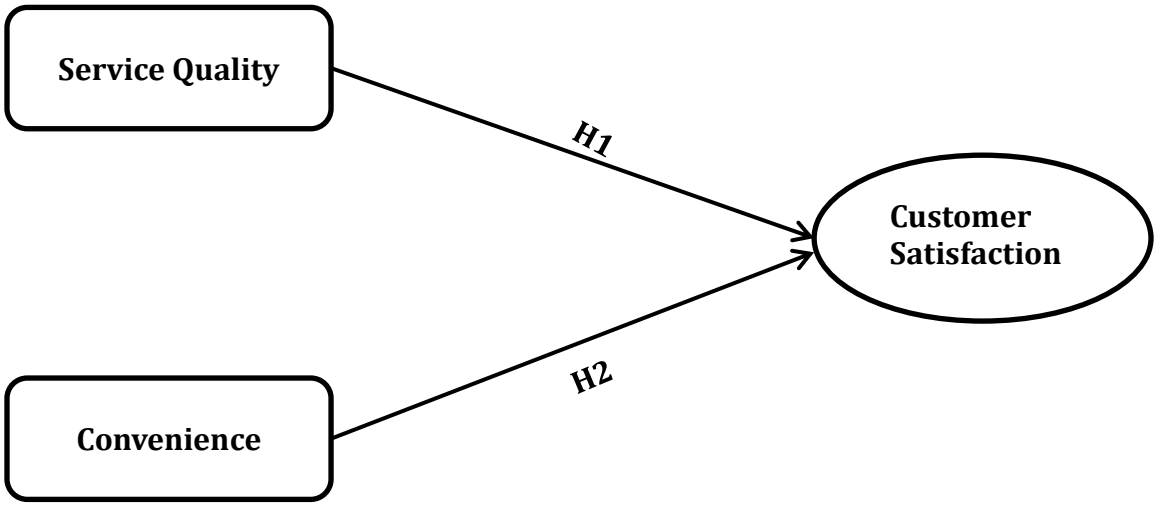
H1: Service Quality has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H2: Convenience has a positive influence on customer satisfaction.

H3: The influence of service quality and convenience on customer satisfaction is significantly different at QSR compared gas stations in the USA.

Based on the above, this study proposes the following conceptual model.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Methodology

This study utilized a sample of 552 participants to explore the influence of convenience, service quality, and customer satisfaction in gas station and quick service restaurant (QSR) contexts. Data collection was conducted through structured surveys disseminated via two platforms: Qualtrics (2020) and Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). These platforms were selected for their ability to reach a diverse participant pool, ensuring that the sample included individuals who had patronized both gas stations and QSR outlets. Screening questions were employed to confirm that respondents had experience with both types of foodservice, guaranteeing that the participants were suitable for the study's comparative focus. This sampling strategy was essential for drawing insights into the consumer behaviors and perceptions specific to each service setting. Descriptive statistical analyses were subsequently performed to provide a foundational understanding of the participant demographics and behaviors, which are outlined in the results section.

Service quality was measured using a two-item scale adapted from the Service Quality Scale originally developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985), and later refined by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra (2005). Convenience was assessed using a five-item scale derived from Berry, Seiders, and Grewal (2002). Overall satisfaction was evaluated using a three-item scale developed by Ha and Jang (2010). These validated instruments were chosen for their strong reliability and relevance to the constructs under investigation, ensuring consistent and accurate measurement of key variables. Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics, version 26, to conduct frequency and descriptive analyses. SmartPLS 3 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015) was employed to validate the conceptual framework using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), ensuring the robustness of the model. Multigroup analyses (MGA) were conducted to explore differences between subgroups, providing deeper insights into variations across gas station and QSR settings.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The sample comprised 552 participants, with female respondents constituting 48% (n = 131) at quick service restaurants (QSR) and 60% (n = 162) at gas stations, while male respondents represented 53% (n = 146) and 40% (n = 109) of the QSR and gas station samples, respectively. Age distribution was segmented into six ranges, from 18-25 to Above 65, with the 26-35 age group being the most prevalent, accounting for 41.8% (n = 231) of the total sample. The majority of respondents identified as White, with near equal representation in both groups: 71.9% (n = 200/278) for QSR and 71.9% (n = 197/274) for gas stations. Over half of the respondents in both groups reported a household income of under US$50,000. Educational attainment showed that 68.7% (n = 379) had completed some college or held an undergraduate degree. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of respondents in both groups purchased their meals during the lunch period (63.8%, n = 351). Detailed statistical tables are provided below.

Table 1. Demographics Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18- 25	104	18.8%
	26- 35	231	41.8%
	36- 45	120	21.7%
	46- 55	59	10.7%
	56- 65	32	5.8%
	Above 65	6	1.1%
Gender	Male	255	46.2%
	Female	293	53.1%
	Other	4	.7%
Race	Asian	79	14.3%
	Black	35	6.3%
	Hispanic	30	5.4%
	White	397	71.9%
	Two or more races	4	.7%
	Other	7	1.3%
Education	Some High School	8	1.4%
	High school/ GED	49	8.9%
	Some College	177	32.1%
	Undergrad College degree	202	36.6%
	Graduate degree	113	20.5%
	Missing	3	.5%
Outlet Visited	Gas Stations	274	49.6%
	Fast food restaurants	278	50.4%
	Total	552	100%

Partial Least Squares and Multigroup Analyses

Assessment of Measurement Model

To evaluate the proposed research framework, a two-step process was conducted, encompassing the assessment of the measurement model and the structural model. PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) was employed to assess the measurement model, which included the latent variables (LVs) and their associated observable items, and to evaluate the structural model to measure the relationships between LVs (Hair et al., 2016).

The research framework comprised three reflective constructs: service quality, convenience, and satisfaction. The assessment of the reflective measurement models involved testing outer loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE) to ensure reliability and convergent validity, along with discriminant validity. Convergent validity was determined through factor loadings, CR, and AVE (Hair et al., 2016). As illustrated in Appendix C, all outer loadings surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2016). CR values exceeded the recommended value of 0.7 (Hair et al., 2016), while AVE values, reflecting the overall amount of variance in the indicators accounted for by the latent construct, ranged from 0.592 to 0.763 for QSR and from 0.617 to 0.769 for gas stations. Both AVE ranges surpassed the recommended threshold of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2016), indicating acceptable reliability and convergent validity for the reflective constructs.

To evaluate discriminant validity, the conservative Fornell-Larcker criterion was employed. This criterion stipulates that the AVE for each construct should be higher than the squared correlations with other constructs in the model (Hair et al., 2016). As shown in Appendix C, the square roots of the AVEs for the constructs along the diagonal were higher than the correlations among the constructs, thereby confirming discriminant validity.

Table 2: Construct Reliability and Validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Gas Station Food				
Convenience	0.845	0.849	0.890	0.617
Service Quality	0.703	0.730	0.869	0.769
Satisfaction	0.778	0.802	0.874	0.702
QSR Food				
Convenience	0.828	0.839	0.879	0.592
Service Quality	0.692	0.713	0.865	0.763
Satisfaction	0.813	0.824	0.890	0.732

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker)

	Convenience	Service Quality	Satisfaction
Gas Station Food			
Convenience	0.786		
Service Quality	0.436	0.877	
Satisfaction	0.548	0.635	0.838
QSR Food			
Convenience	0.769		
Service Quality	0.443	0.873	
Satisfaction	0.476	0.708	0.855

Assessment of the Structural Model and Multigroup Analysis

The structural model assessment was conducted using PLS-SEM, incorporating advanced analysis techniques to examine the direct relationships among the constructs and the differences between the two groups, QSR outlets and gas station customers. The structural model was assessed using a multi-method approach, employing multi-group analyses (MGA) with two different nonparametric methods: Henseler's bootstrap-based MGA (Henseler, Ringle, & Sinkovics, 2009) and the permutation test (Chin & Dibbern, 2010). A p-value lower than .05 was used to indicate significant differences between specific path coefficients across the two groups (Henseler et al., 2009; Sarstedt et al., 2011). Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate the Structural models of this study.

Figure 2: Gas Station Food Structural Model

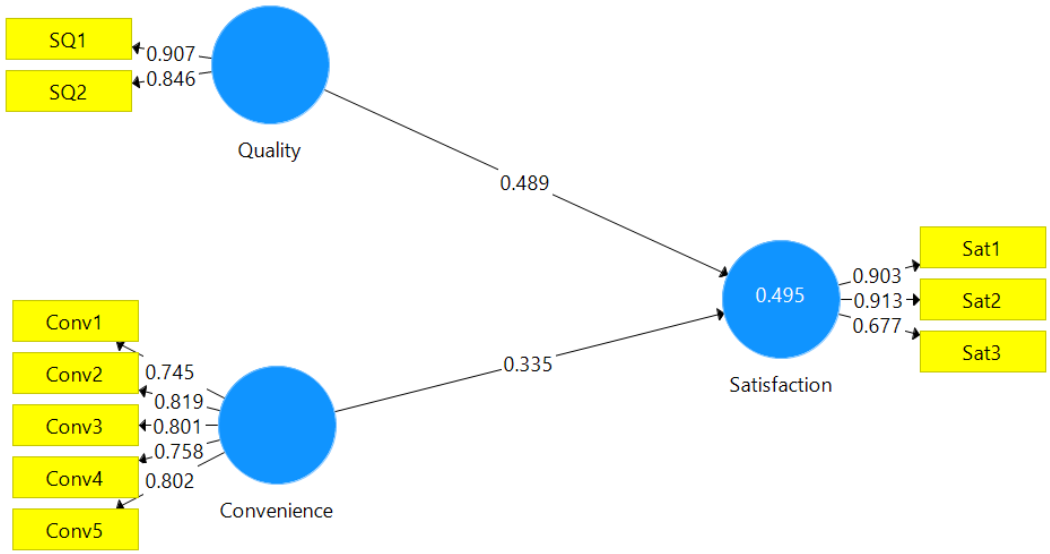
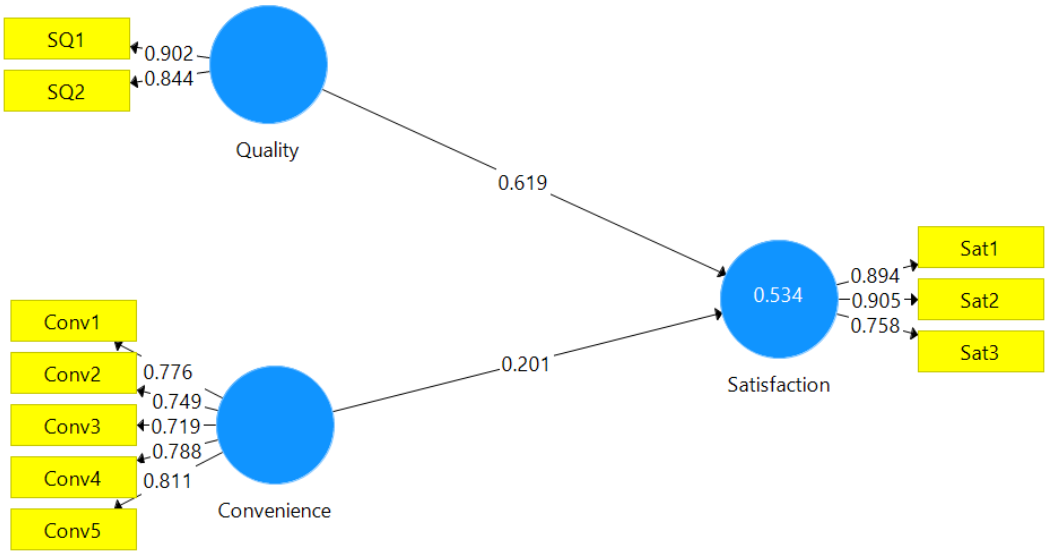


Figure 3: QSR Structural Model



Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the impact of convenience and service quality on customer satisfaction within two distinct foodservice environments: gas station food outlets and quick service restaurant (QSR) outlets. Additionally, it sought to examine the differential perceptions of these constructs between gas station and QSR customers. Through the analysis of these variables, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of fast-food consumer preferences and expectations regarding convenience, service quality, and overall customer service in both contexts.

The results indicated that both convenience and service quality had a significant effect on satisfaction among participants in both gas stations and QSR outlets. However, the findings revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups regarding their perceptions of how convenience and service quality influenced their levels of satisfaction. Detailed tables illustrating these results are provided in Table.

In contrast to the traditional belief that QSR outlets have a stronghold on fast food consumers, this study found that gas stations are becoming formidable competitors, directly challenging the market share of QSRs. The finding that there is no significant difference between gas stations and QSRs in terms of how customers perceive convenience and service quality challenges existing assumptions. It suggests that gas stations have effectively enhanced their service offerings to meet or even surpass customer expectations, positioning themselves as viable alternatives to established QSR outlets. This insight expands our understanding of the evolving foodservice industry, revealing how gas stations have closed the service gap traditionally held by QSRs.

The results underscore the continued significance of both convenience and service quality in shaping customer satisfaction across both types of foodservice outlets. Prior research has consistently highlighted the centrality of convenience in customer satisfaction, with fast food consumers prioritizing efficiency and speed in their decision-making processes (Han & Back, 2007; Richardson et al., 2019). In line with this, many participants in this study indicated that travel—whether commuting or on long trips—was a major factor influencing their decision to

dine at either gas stations or QSRs. This finding reinforces the established understanding of convenience as a driver of satisfaction in the fast food industry (Kim & Kim, 2009).

However, a surprising result emerged regarding service quality. Historically, service quality was a consideration primarily for QSRs, given the limited interaction at gas stations, where customers typically served themselves. Liu and Tse (2018) identified service promptness as a key determinant of customer satisfaction in QSRs, which was expected to differentiate these outlets from gas stations. Yet, this study reveals that gas stations have improved their service design and offerings, thereby elevating customer expectations for service quality. This shift has made customer interaction at gas stations a crucial component of satisfaction, much like at QSRs. As gas stations increasingly enhance their foodservice operations, customers now demand comparable levels of service quality, with a particular emphasis on employee interactions and responsiveness.

Theoretical Implications

This finding adds a new layer to the existing body of knowledge, demonstrating that gas stations are no longer perceived as secondary or lesser foodservice providers. Instead, they are competing head-to-head with QSRs in terms of both convenience and service quality. This shift challenges earlier research, which often excluded gas stations from serious consideration in studies on service quality and customer satisfaction (Quintal & Polczynski, 2010; Richardson et al., 2019). Therefore, this study, therefore, extends the literature by showcasing how gas stations have adapted and evolved to become competitive players in the fast-food landscape. Thus, this study demonstrates that gas stations have significantly closed the perception gap with QSRs in a relatively short period. This addresses a critical gap in the existing literature, which has historically focused on traditional hospitality settings (hotels, fine dining) and has not adequately explored how evolving service environments, such as gas stations, can impact customer satisfaction.

In conclusion, this study has contributed to filling gaps in the literature on customer satisfaction, subjective well-being, and the fast-food industry by highlighting the emergence of gas stations as serious competitors to QSRs. It provides a foundation for future research and offers actionable insights for foodservice managers aiming to thrive in a competitive and evolving market.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study's findings underscore the importance of convenience and service quality as critical drivers of success in the foodservice industry. QSR outlets must now recognize gas stations as legitimate competitors, given their ability to provide similar levels of convenience and service quality. QSR managers should consider differentiating their brands further and focusing on unique value propositions—such as enhanced service experiences, personalized interactions, or superior food quality—while maintaining efficiency. Additionally, they may consider implementing or refining post-meal cleanup services, table delivery, or other convenience-focused practices to keep pace with evolving customer expectations.

For gas station managers, the findings are particularly encouraging. Gas stations have rapidly captured a significant share of the fast food market, and there are opportunities to build on this momentum. Investing in marketing strategies targeting travelers and commuters who prioritize convenience will be critical in maintaining and expanding market share. Gas station managers should also consider expanding co-location collaborations with fast food franchises to further enhance convenience and drive customer satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation of this study is the lack of prior research comparing gas stations and QSRs in terms of service quality, convenience, and satisfaction. This made it challenging to contextualize the findings within the broader literature. Moreover, the sample's demographic characteristics, skewed towards younger individuals with household incomes under $50,000, may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should aim to explore the difference in rural versus urban outlet locations are shaping consumer preferences at gas stations and QSRs. Also, a gender-focused study could reveal how factors such as age, education, and social status influence customer decisions.

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