



Understanding Guest Trust in Fine Dining Restaurants: A Study of User Reviews VS Brand Promotions in Pune

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Abstract

This paper examines the way in which customers of the fine dining restaurants in Pune build trust and make choices to dine in the current digital world. The reliance on the online sources is on the rise, and guests become exposed to two essential sources of information: brand promotion and user-generated reviews. The study will attempt to find out which of these sources is more reliable and how much it affects the ultimate choice of restaurants.

A structured questionnaire was used to develop a descriptive survey, and survey questionnaires were filled out by people, who had visited fine dining restaurants in Pune. The results indicate that the majority of guests are eager to use the Internet to find information and make a choice, and the personal recommendations and online reviews have become the most credible sources of information. The reviews left by the users were always seen as more valid and true in such critical areas as the quality of the food, service, atmosphere, and the cost-effectiveness. Conversely, brand promotions were taken with a little bit of delusion particularly where they failed to reflect what the guests were experiencing.

The research finds that brand promotions are useful in creating awareness and initial interest, whereas genuine guest feedbacks are more conclusive in creating trust and impacting final booking decisions. Such experiences reveal the need of restaurants to concentrate on giving a stable experience that leads to favourable word of mouth.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on how the user-generated reviews and brand promotions affect the decision of the guests on the guest trust and restaurant choices of fine-dining restaurants in Pune (2, 11, 18, 24, 27). As digital platforms rapidly develop and consumer behaviour shifts, the sources that guide restaurant decisions have become extremely essential to the hospitality sector (1, 14, 15, 23).

Over the past years, Pune has become a major fine dining destination, mainly due to the changing lifestyles, increasing disposable incomes, and increased exposure to the world food and service standards (1, 25). Eating out in the city is not just a way to fill the stomach, but it has turned into a social and experience (25). Customers now demand not just food, but also well-planned areas, good service, quality, and a good brand image (7, 22, 19). Consequently, the selection of a fine dining restaurant has been more reflective and thoughtful to the guests (13, 18). In addition to this change in dining habits, the manner in which information is obtained by the guests has also evolved remarkably (14, 17). Online information can now be easily accessed due to the prevalence of smartphones and digital platforms (9, 16). Prior to going to a fine dining restaurant, people usually review, rate, find pictures, and read recommendations on Google Reviews, Zomato, Instagram, food blogs, and websites of specific restaurants (2, 6, 12,

27). These sites assist the visitors to develop anticipations about the eating experience prior to their initial visit (3, 11, 13). Trust is one of the major components of this process since the guests base their decision on the available information to minimize uncertainty and make informed decisions (7, 19).

2. Background of the Study

Two primary sources of guest trust in the fine dining restaurants are user-generated content, and brand promotions (18, 24, 26). User review will include the personal experiences of other guests who have been to the restaurant (2, 11, 12). The quality of food, the speed of service, atmosphere, cost, and customer satisfaction are frequent topics of these reviews (3, 13). This content is perceived as authentic and credible by many guests since it is provided by other diners, but not the restaurant (2, 24, 27). Good reviews can give positive assurances to guests and motivate them to come and bad reviews might cast doubts and scare away would-be guests (17, 20).

Alternatively, restaurants develop and manage brand promotion in order to represent a meticulously designed image (4, 10, 26). These promotions involve advertisements, social media, influencer collaborations, and sponsored content to draw attention and give it a luxury feel (5, 8, 15, 23). Brand promotions seek to communicate quality, uniqueness, and exclusivity (10, 21, 26). However, guests increasingly recognize that promotional messages are meant to highlight strengths and may not capture the full dining experience (4, 16). As a result, guests often view brand promotions with skepticism (18, 24).

With the rise of digital media and growing competition among fine dining restaurants, maintaining the balance between perceived authenticity and promotional appeal has become more important than ever (1, 23). Understanding how these two factors influence guest perceptions provides a solid foundation for examining guest trust and behaviour in today's dining landscape (7, 19, 24).

This forms the basis for the present study, which seeks to investigate which of these two sources, user-generated reviews or brand promotions, holds greater influence over guest trust and dining decisions in Pune's fine dining segment (18, 24, 26).

3. Need and Significance of the Study

When choosing a fine dining restaurant, guests usually compare brand promotions with user reviews to decide which source they trust more (18, 24, 26). In fine dining restaurants where prices and expectations are high, any inconsistency between promotional claims and actual guest experiences may erode trust (7, 19). Many fine-dining restaurants in Pune offer similar experiences and cuisines; therefore, trust becomes a major factor in dining choices, repeat visits, and recommendations (10, 21).

Fine dining restaurants operate in a uniquely high-stakes environment compared to other segments of the food service industry (25). When visiting a fine dining restaurant, guests not only invest significant money but also time, expectations, and social significance (25). It can be a business dinner, a holiday event or some special personal experience but the choice made to visit a fine restaurant has much more consequences than visiting a casual restaurant (25). Therefore, trust is a highly significant element in pre-visit information as the guests cannot simply forget about the bad experience as they can about a cheaper meal (7, 19).

Although literature on online reviews and internet marketing in the hotel sector has been increasing, limited research has been conducted on the various impacts of user-generated reviews and brand advertisements on guest loyalty towards fine dining in Pune (1, 14, 15, 23). The majority of the existing studies are related to online reviews or to overall category of restaurants, but they do not consider the fine-dining experience (2, 12, 24). This paper seeks to address that gap, putting into the spotlight the fine-dining customers in Pune and to understand how confidence is built by simultaneously using both forms of information (18, 24, 26).

The results of the research are important to various stakeholders in hospitality (1, 23). The owners and managers of fine-dining restaurants can apply the insights to assess the alignment of their current promotional measures that they are currently using with the real experiences their guests are getting (10, 21). It will ease the burden of the marketing teams to make better decisions on where they should focus their communication budgets (14, 15). Also, the paper is an addition to scholarly sources on the issue of digital trust and consumer behaviour in the Indian hospitality setting, which is to be used in future studies (2, 18, 24).

4. Statement of Problem

As digital platforms gain more and more popularity, before making a decision on a restaurant, the guests of a fine dining restaurant in Pune consider two primary sources of information customer reviews and restaurant ads (2, 14, 18, 24). However, these sources often present different perspectives regarding key aspects such as food quality, service, ambiance, and value for money (3, 13).

The problem lies in the lack of clarity regarding which source guests trust more and to what extent this trust influences their final decision-making (18, 24, 26). While brand promotions aim to create a desirable image, user reviews reflect

actual guest experiences, potentially leading to variations in perception and expectations (4, 10, 2, 11).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how guests evaluate and compare user reviews and brand promotions across different dining factors, and which of these sources have a greater impact on building trust and influencing the final restaurant selection decision in Pune's fine dining segment (18, 24, 26).

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To understand how guests of fine dining restaurants in Pune search for information before making a dining decision.
2. To examine the level of trust guests place in user-generated reviews while selecting fine dining restaurants in Pune.
3. To analyze guest perceptions of brand promotions used by fine dining restaurants in Pune.
4. To compare guest trust in user reviews versus brand promotions when choosing fine dining restaurants.
5. To study how trust in online information impacts guest decision-making, including restaurant selection and willingness to visit.
6. To identify gaps between guest expectations formed through promotions and actual experiences shared through reviews.

6. Literature Review

The restaurant industry has increasingly become influenced by digital information sources that shape guest decision-making. With the growing use of online platforms, consumers now rely on user-generated reviews, ratings, and social media content to evaluate restaurants before making dining choices. At the same time, restaurants actively use promotional strategies such as advertising, influencer marketing, and social media campaigns to attract potential guests. Previous research has explored how these sources of information influence guest perceptions, trust, and restaurant selection decisions.

According to recent research, digital platforms are increasingly becoming relevant in the information search process prior to choosing restaurants. In their study, Srivastava, George, and Sharma (2025) discovered younger consumers are depending more on online reviews and peer recommendations, as well as digital platforms, to guide their decisions on where to eat. Their study revealed that hygiene, the quality of the service and online rating are very important factors in selecting a restaurant to Indian consumers.

In the same vein, Jadhav, Patil, and Kulkarni (2023) studied the consumer behaviour associated with food delivery apps and found that the availability of restaurant information, ratings, and customer reviews significantly affect the decision to eat in a restaurant. Access to open information on the Internet adds to the rating of restaurant credibility and developing expectations by guests before visiting restaurants.

In line with these observations, Mishra and Singh (2021) noted that Web sites like Zomato and Swiggy have emerged as the main sources of information about the evaluation of restaurants. Their research revealed that ratings and reviews are frequently used by consumers to choose restaurants, especially in urban markets.

Previous studies by Kaur and Singh (2017) also found that online review websites are noteworthy decision-making tools used by visitors to new restaurants. Peer feedback is likely to be used to minimize the uncertainty that consumers have regarding service quality and dining experiences.

Recent reports indicate that the online reviews and peer-generated feedback are given a lot of trust by the guests. Patil et al. (2026) provided an analysis of large-scale restaurant review data with the help of machine learning and came to the conclusion that guest reviews play a crucial role in consumer trust and restaurant choice.

On the same note, Nain (2025) discovered that user-created reviews on sites like Zomato and Google Play a significant contribution in determining the reputation and perception of restaurants. The study revealed that the guests tend to believe peer reviews as compared to conventional promotional messages.

It was also noted by Pattanshetty and Murthy (2024) that online ratings and feedback have a significant impact on the performance of restaurants and the trust of the guests. The positive reviews increase brand credibility whereas negative reviews can scare potential guests away.

In line with these findings, Kumar and Bansal (2022) emphasized that the detailed review of the guests in terms of food quality, service, and ambiance have a considerable impact on the consumer trust and restaurant preference. Similar results were also obtained by previous studies, including Kapoor and Vij (2020) and Bansal and Gupta (2018), who concluded that consumers are more likely to rely on peer-created reviews than promotional messages since they are viewed as genuine and impartial.

The studies show that brand promotions are significant in getting the attention of guests and brand perception. Verma and Singh (2025) discovered that promotional methods, including social media campaigns, influencer partnerships,

and online adverts, augment restaurant recognition and awareness among consumers.

Likewise, Agarwal and Mehta (2024) found that promotional offers, online ads, and brand narrations have potential in attracting first-time diners in restaurants in metropolitan cities. Nevertheless, their research pointed out that positive experiences during dining are critical in retaining guests.

Another study by Deshpande and Kulkarni (2024) examined the strategies employed by high-end restaurants to market their brands on social media platforms and concluded that attractive visuals in promotional messages on platforms like Instagram had a significant impact on the perception of the restaurant brand among consumers.

Previous research on the same topic like Shah and Patel (2023) and Kapoor and Saini (2022) also found that regular promotional message delivery in the form of adverts and participation in social media enhances brand image and brand recall among customers.

A number of researches have been conducted to compare the impact of user-created reviews and brand promotion. Singh and Verma (2023) discovered that customers are more dependent on electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and online recommendations compared to promotional campaigns by restaurants.

Likewise, Sharma and Gupta (2022) also found that social media promotions only contribute to brand awareness but guests rely on peer reviews as more credible when dining.

Previous studies conducted by Verma and Tiwari (2016) also established that guests tend to believe the experiences of other consumers online than the traditional advertising messages. These results imply that consumer trust is more likely to be influenced by peer feedback than promotion communication.

Researchers have always indicated that the level of trust in online information plays a major role in determining consumer behaviour. Chatterjee and Dutta (2021) discovered that restaurants that have better online ratings and positive reviews attract more visitors and have a better brand reputation.

On the same note, Sinha and Bhattacharya (2020) pointed out that good online reputation management enhances the trust of guests and long-term relationship between restaurants and consumers.

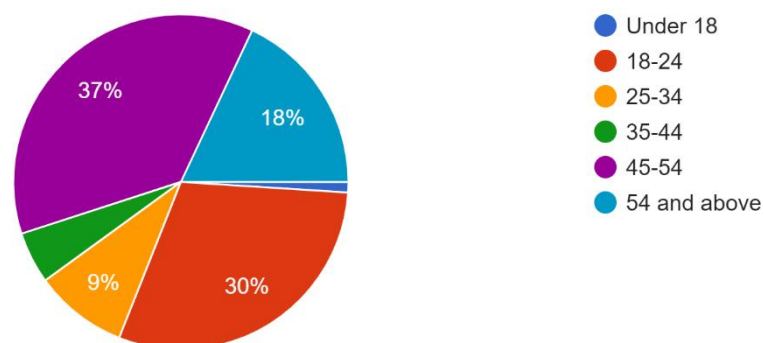
Previous studies by Patel and Shah (2017) also showed that positive guest reviews and high online reputation were major determinants of restaurant choice at urban markets.

Other studies indicate disparities between the promotional communication and the actual guest experiences. According to Choudhary and Jain (2023), promotional deals like discounts and campaigns will attract guests to visit restaurants on the first occasion; nevertheless, to maintain trust in the long run, satisfaction of the guest and peer reviews will matter.

On the same note, a study by Mehra and Bhatia (2021) established that consumer perceptions are informed by digital marketing campaigns, although in many cases, guests tend to check the promotional statements presented by hotels via online reviews before deciding to eat out.

Previous studies by Mehta and Sharma (2019) and Goel, Gupta, and Singh (2019) also indicated that online review sites can offer legitimate feedback that consumers can use to determine whether the promotional messages are accurate or not about what the right experience should be like at the restaurant.

7. Data Analysis



Question:

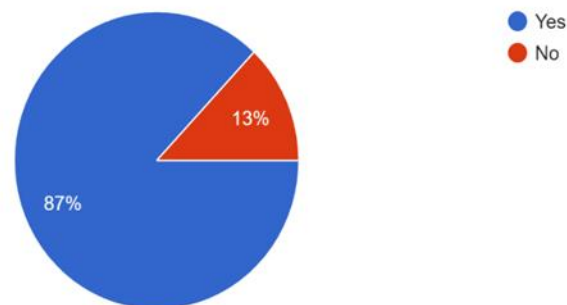
What is your age group?

Interpretation:

The pie chart shows a relatively equal distribution among each age group providing an accurate picture of the fine-

dining audience in Pune. The highest proportion is persons between 45 and 54 years with a figure of about 37 per cent of the respondents. The younger group of 18-24 years old comes next making up about 30%. The age group of 54 and older provides about 18 and the age group of 25-34 provides almost 9. The age group of 35-44 years is a very small percentage and only a very small percentage is below the age of 18.

This distribution implies that both older and younger, digitally conscious and financially sufficient guests will be drawn to fine dining. The more robust representation of mature respondents increases the validity of the data, since they are more prone to have higher spending power and exposure to dining. On the whole, the sample represents an effective and realistic combination of the fine-dining customers in Pune.



Question:

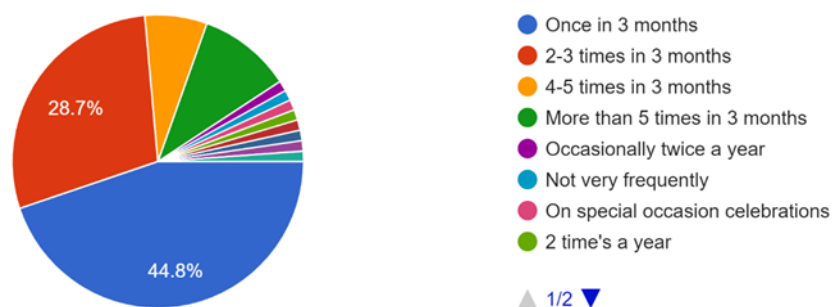
Have you ever been to a fine dining or gourmet restaurant in Pune?

(Fine dining means high end stand-alone restaurants with high quality ambience and full table service - e.g. Tsuki, Gather, Bastian, Aragma, Cobbler and Crew, One8 Commune, Gong, Nannas Negroni, etc.)

Interpretation:

The chart is based on a screening question that determines whether the respondents had been to fine-dining restaurants in Pune or not. An overwhelming majority of 87% answered in the affirmative with a smaller percentage of 13% not answering.

This is a clear indication that the majority of participants have real-life dining experience, which makes their responses more credible and valuable in terms of assessing trust, reviews and decision-making behaviour. Experienced persons were locked out to ensure that the study was authentic. This enhances the validity of the findings in totality.

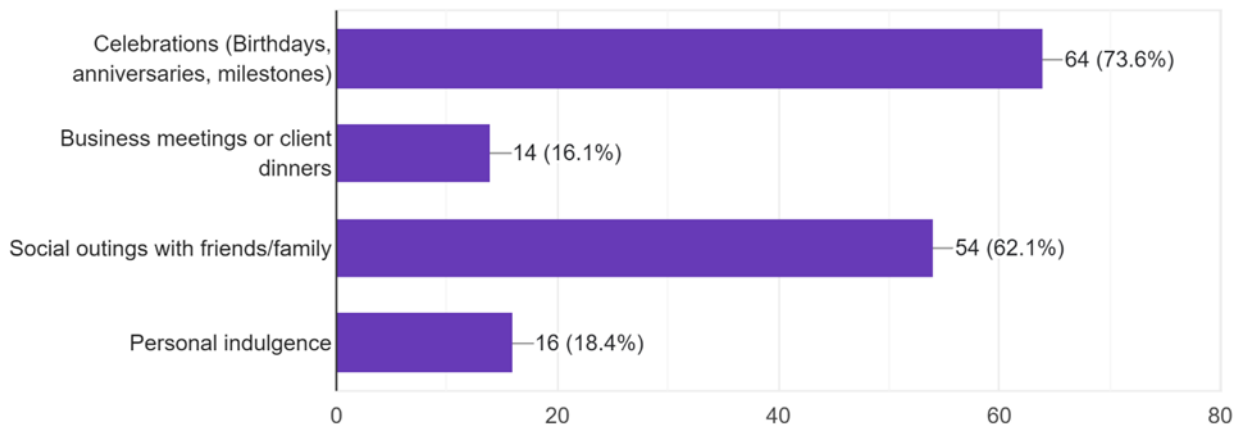


Question:

How often do you go to Fine Dining restaurants?

Interpretation:

The results on the frequency of dining indicate that having a fine meal is not a habit among majority of the respondents. Approximately 45% of them attend after every three months, meaning that such experiences are treated as a luxury. Towards an intermediate involvement, almost 29 percent of them eat out a couple of times during this period. A small percentage of them visit more frequently and very few of them do it only during special occasions. This trend indicates that fine dining is mostly eventual. Visits are not very frequent and therefore the guests will be more careful and picky when it comes to picking a restaurant. Consequently, the element of trust becomes paramount, and reviews and brand image affect their decision-making.

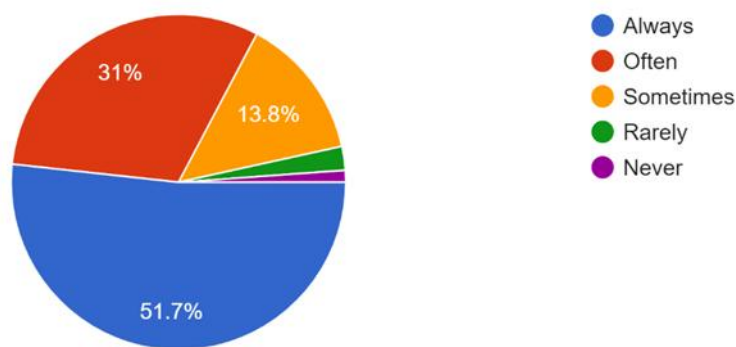


Question:

Occasions for Choosing Fine Dining Restaurants

Interpretation:

Celebrations are the main motivator to attending fine-dining restaurants. Approximately 74 percent of the people eat out during special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries. Close behind at 62 are social outings with friends and families. Fewer of them come to have fun (18%), or to work (16%). This points out that fine dining is closely linked with emotional and memorable experiences. Due to the significance of these events, the visitors are more attentive to the choice of the restaurant, and trust, reputation, and reviews become critical in their selection.

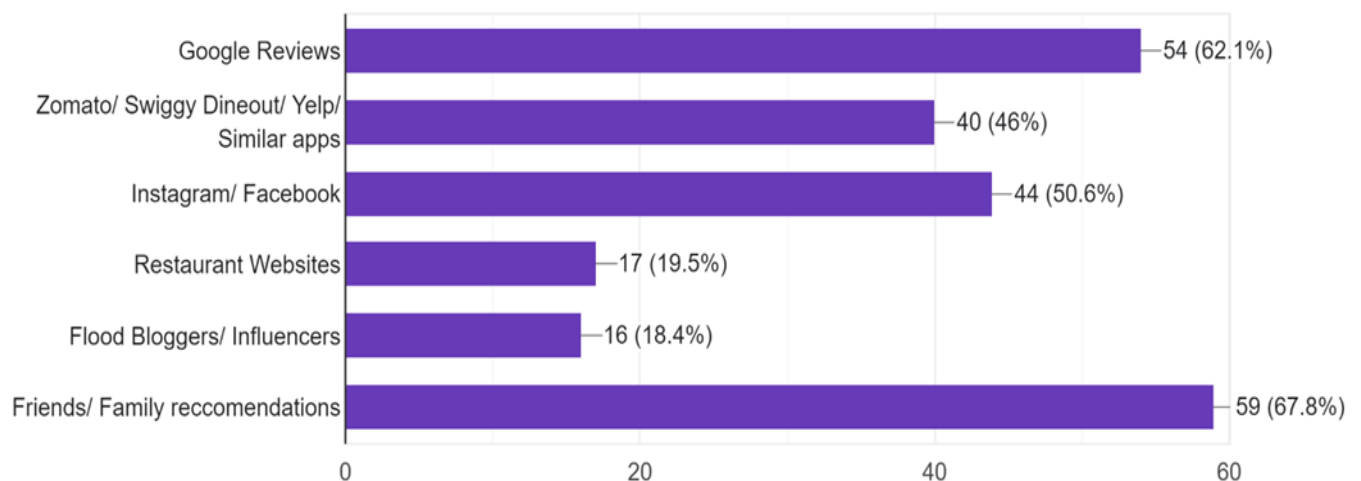


Question:

Do you use the internet to find information about a Fine Dining restaurant?

Interpretation:

The pie chart shows that 51.7% of the individuals would always read reviews and thereafter make their dining decisions. 31% of people refer to reviews quite often, followed by 13.8% who also participate in this activity sometimes. Before people make their decision to eat at fine dining restaurants, a huge number would read user reviews.



Question:

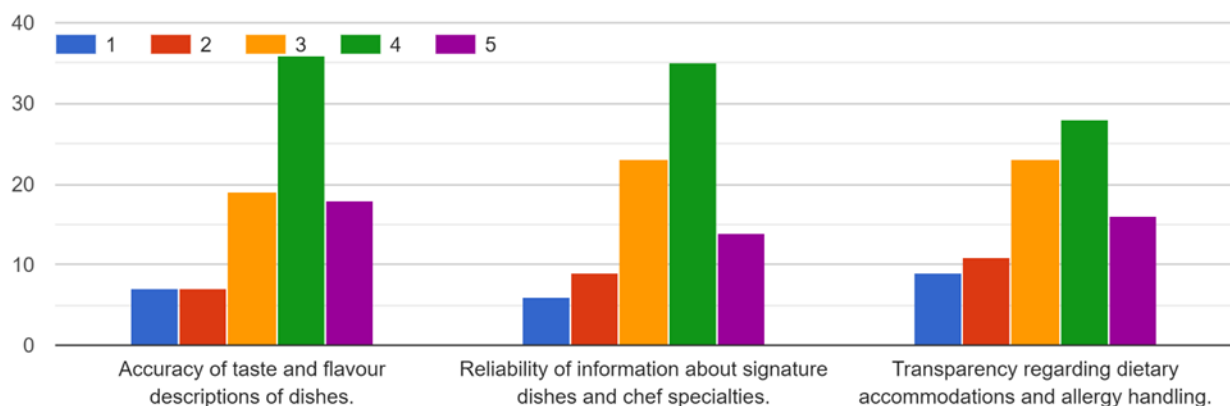
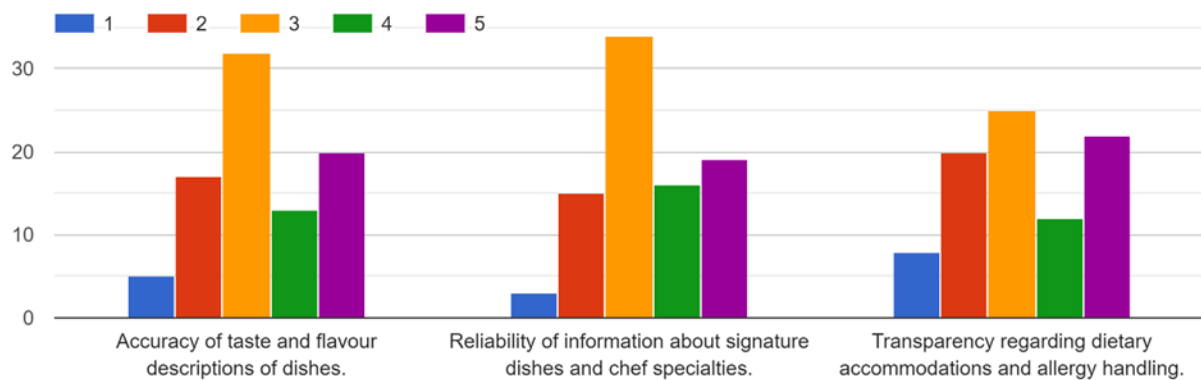
What are the sources that you tend to consult prior to choosing a Fine Dining restaurant in Pune?

Interpretation:

Regarding sources of information, friends and family are the most credible with roughly 68% having to do with their recommendations. A close second to Google reviews is 62%. Social media like Instagram and Facebook, applications like Zomato, Swiggy and Dineout are also popular. On the contrary, the number of respondents who rely on official restaurant websites or influencer posts is lower. This is a clear indication that individuals appreciate genuine, familiar experiences as opposed to organized marketing messages. Offline or online, word of mouth is dominant in the decision-making process, whereas brand-controlled messages are handled with some care.

Trust Comparison Across Key Dining Factors while choosing Fine Dining restaurants in Pune.

Food Quality & Menu Claims:

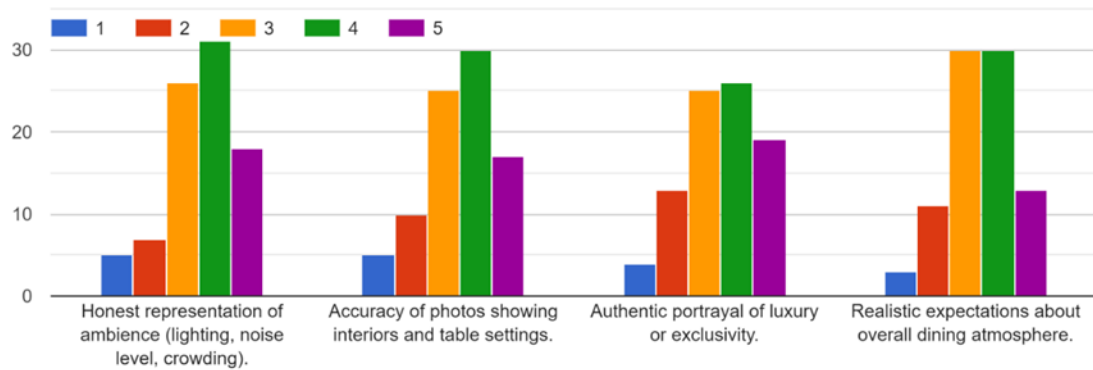
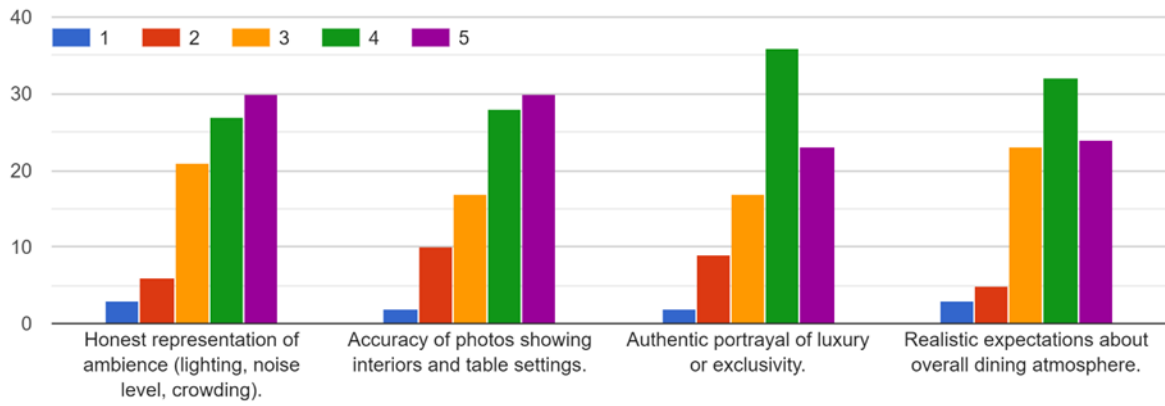


Interpretation:

Comparing perceptions of food quality, brand promotions will be rated moderately with most of the answers falling within the neutral ratings. These assertions are not fully accepted or disregarded by the guests, but there is a bit more confidence in the way signature dishes are served.

Conversely, user reviews have a higher rating, particularly taste and authenticity. It implies that visitors will be more convinced of peer-generated content and will be more connected to real-life dining experiences. All in all, promotions will bring interest but reviews will determine final food-based decisions.

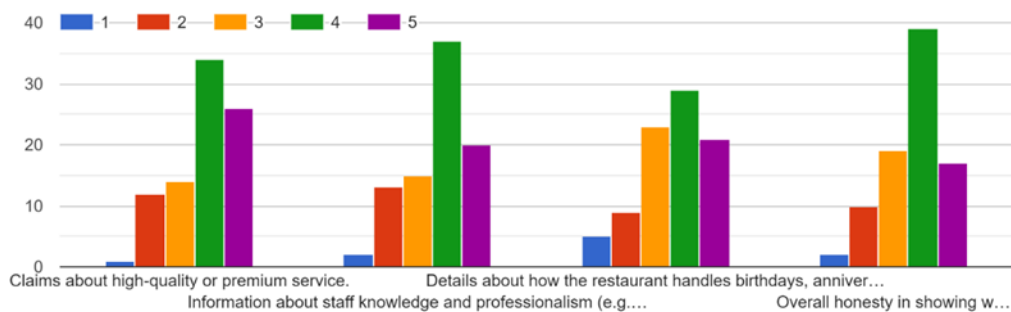
Ambiance & Atmosphere

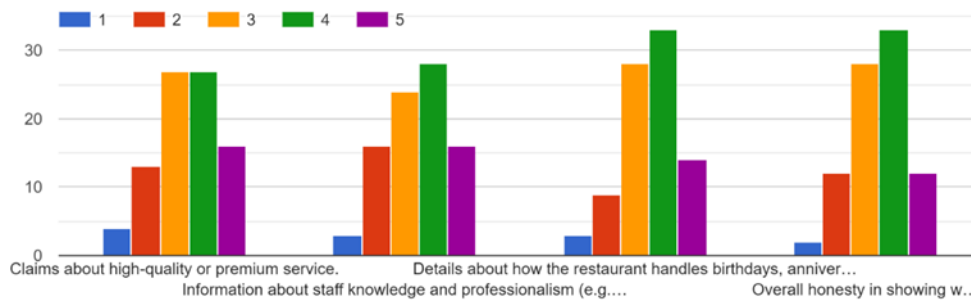


Interpretation:

A similar trend is observed in perceptions of ambience. The reviews made by users are rated higher especially in describing the overall experience of the restaurant, luxuriousness, and exclusiveness. This implies that the guests rely on peer reviews in assessing the dining environment. Brand promotions are fair to demonstrate the interior with professional pictures however a little less persuasive to depict the experience. Therefore, promotions give more prominence to appearance whereas reviews give a more realistic picture.

Service & Staff



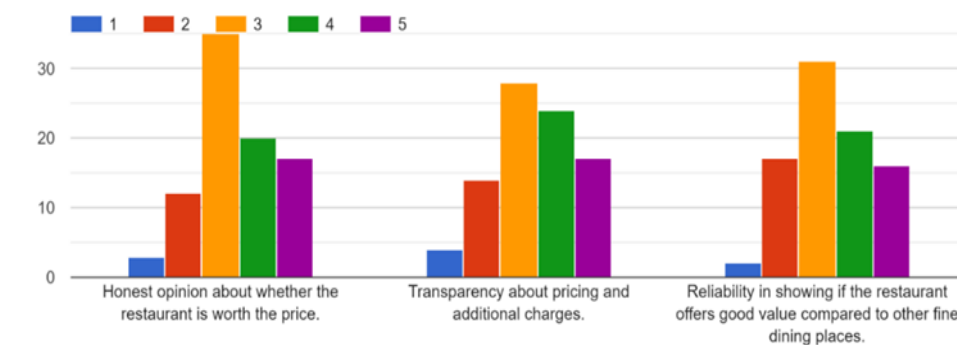
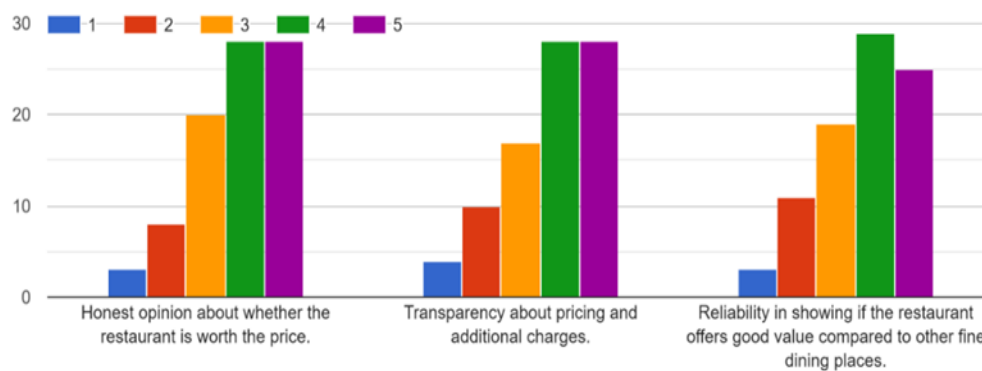


Interpretation:

User reviews are once more rated higher in terms of service quality, particularly in terms of revealing veritable eating experiences and employee conduct. Reviews help guests to know the level of service and special occasions being addressed by the restaurant.

Brand promotions have mediocre ratings, and they are doing well on the aspect of highlighting celebratory services, but they create doubts concerning the assertions of high-quality service and professionalism. This indicates that visitors rely more on reviews to get a fair assessment of the quality of service.

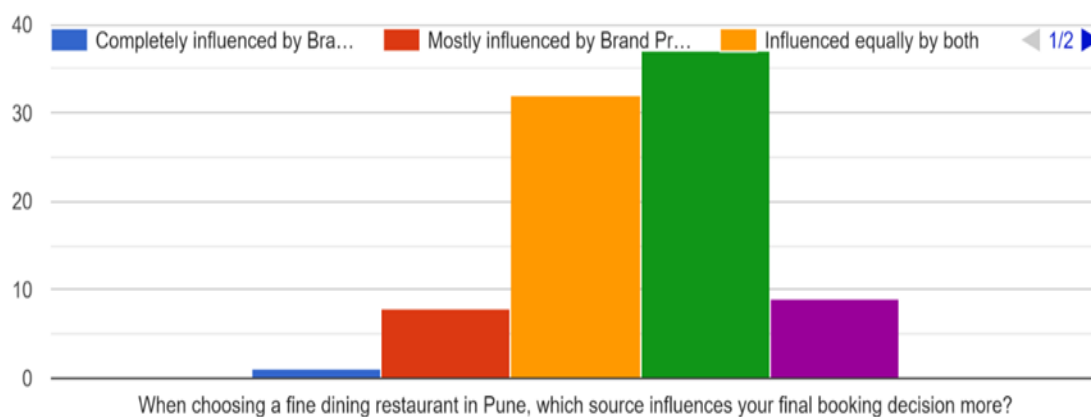
Value, Pricing & Overall Trust



Interpretation:

User reviews are obviously favored when it comes to assessing the pricing and value of money. Customers have confidence in fellow customers to give truthful information on whether the experience is worth the money.

Brand promotions on the other hand are considered to be a little biased, since they are likely to make the pricing appear favorable. This brings about an apparent lack of trust particularly in matters relating to transparency and value comparisons.

**Question:**

Which Source Influences the Final Booking Decision?

Interpretation:

Lastly, most respondents when questioned about their overall decision-making revealed that user reviews are the most important. Many of them take into account the reviews and promotions, yet a very small portion is dependent on promotional content.

This is a clear indication that though brand promotions assist in generating initial awareness, the ultimate decisions made depend much on actual customer experiences. Simply put, the comments made by customers regarding a restaurant are more important than what the restaurant expresses.

8. Findings

1. Online research has become a common element of the selection of a fine-dining restaurant.
2. The experience-based sources like reviews and personal recommendations are the most trusted by the guests.
3. User reviews are always seen to be credible in terms of food, service, ambiance and prices. Brand promotions create awareness but done with care.
4. The domain where promotions fare a little better is ambiance since it is more visual.
5. Reviews are obviously more effective than promotions in such crucial areas as service, the quality of foods, and the value of money.
6. Fine dining is mainly occasion and emotion based.
7. Rare visits result in better and cautious decision making.
8. Reviews by users have a strong impact on final booking.
9. Pricing and service claims are the most significant trust gaps.
10. Fidelity between promise and delivery is very fundamental in building trust.

9. Conclusions

The research was conducted to learn the way the guests of Pune select the fine-dining restaurants and are more dependent on user reviews or brand publicity. The results make it quite clear that user reviews are more credible in all the key dimensions, such as food, service, ambiance, and value-to-money. Though promotional content would facilitate the development of interest, it is the experiences of other customers that would influence decisions. Reviews are more likely to be trusted by guests as they seem to be more authentic and familiar. A key takeaway is that, in today's digital environment, customer experience itself is the most powerful marketing tool. The restaurants, which provide quality on a regular basis, are more likely to be rated positively, which will attract more guests. Conversely, failure to fulfill promises made during promotions can lead to a shrinking in trust. Finally, the fine-dining segment will be more about authentic and consistent experiences rather than polished marketing. Real guest feedback helps to build trust, and such trust is important in long-term sustainability and reputation.

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