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Improving online food ordering and delivery service quality by managing customer expectations: evidence from Italy

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Abstract

Purpose – Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, many restaurants and catering businesses have introduced or improved online food ordering and delivery services (OFODSs). This study aims to identify service quality expectations about OFODSs, to examine their content and to suggest management strategies to meet these expectations.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a qualitative method, four focus groups were conducted amongst Italian users of OFODSs.

Findings – The results reveal three dimensions of expectations, each comprising two categories that can be set along a continuum: (1) basicness of expectations (ranging from implicit to explicit), (2) accuracy of expectations (ranging from fuzzy to precise) and (3) attainability of expectations (ranging from realistic to unrealistic). Content may refer to technical, social, economic, legal and technological aspects. To meet customer expectations, the following strategies are suggested: customer reassurance, flexibility, continuous improvement, customer education, adaptation to customers' requirements and monitoring of exceptions.

Practical implications – This study provides specific activities in which restaurants and catering businesses could invest to enact the management strategies that emerged from the analysis.

Originality/value – This paper proposes a new classification of expectations and framework for improving OFODS quality by managing customer expectations.

Keywords Customer expectation, Service quality, Digitalisation, Covid-19, Restaurant, Customer satisfaction

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has profoundly changed customers' purchasing behaviours and methods, by forcing businesses to face new and complex challenges (e.g. Belarmino *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, new laws, regulations and repeated closures have severely affected restaurants' and catering businesses' practices. To limit the loss of orders and respond to the expectations of customers, many restaurants and catering businesses have chosen to renew their offerings by introducing or improving food ordering delivery services (Khan, 2020), including delivery of food shopping and raw materials in addition to ready-made foods. In the face of Covid-19 lockdowns worldwide, most restaurants and catering businesses have shifted to online food ordering and delivery services (OFODSs),

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enabling the use of home food delivery services via online ordering applications (apps) and offline delivery of products (e.g. Al Amin *et al.*, 2021; Pal *et al.*, 2022). In this sense, digitalisation has enabled these businesses to respect safety regulations that prohibit direct contact between people, requiring the practice of social distancing and the adoption of cashless transactions to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2022).

With the spread of the pandemic, the use of OFODSs – and, more precisely, improvement of their quality – has become crucial for restaurants and catering businesses to survive and attract new customers (e.g. Dirsehan and Cankat, 2021), as well as for the customers themselves, who are increasingly drawing on such services to interact with restaurants without physically going inside (e.g. Francioni *et al.*, 2022; Mehrolia *et al.*, 2021; Naeem, 2021). Anxiety, fear and perceived risk of infection – which is not likely to disappear any time soon – have influenced the use of OFODSs (e.g. Gordon-Wilson, 2022; Botelho *et al.*, 2020) by requiring businesses to reflect on how to improve these services to continue to compete after the pandemic.

Previous research has neglected these aspects, by focussing on intention to use (Hong *et al.*, 2021), and perceived risk, of online food delivery (Poon and Tung, 2022), as well as customer characteristics (e.g. Mehrolia *et al.*, 2021) and their satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Pal *et al.*, 2022). Transversal to these topics, many studies have been undertaken on the role of digitalisation via apps (e.g. Gani *et al.*, 2021; Al Amin *et al.*, 2021; Tandon *et al.*, 2021) and, to a lesser degree, chatbots (De Cicco *et al.*, 2021). Very little attention has been paid to service quality (Chan and Gao, 2021); in particular, no research has addressed how these services could be improved from this perspective. Given that the health emergency will affect consumption habits and shopping patterns in the medium to long term (e.g. Lim *et al.*, 2022), we argue the importance of conducting research in this vein. The unprecedented impact of the pandemic on society is leading OFODS businesses to respond to potential changes in customer expectations of OFODS. After all, competitiveness increasingly depends on businesses' ability to effectively respond to customers' expectations (e.g. Parasuraman, 1998). Thus, a greater understanding of such expectations is required to advance management studies on the enhancement of their quality (Edvardsson, 1998) and, at the same time, to develop actions that will lead to improvements by OFODS managers. This suggests the two following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What do customers expect to receive from OFODSs?

RQ2. What actions can OFODS businesses undertake to meet customer expectations?

Seeking answers to these questions, this study investigates how the pandemic has affected customer expectations of OFODSs, their content and the management strategies that restaurants and catering services have developed. Precisely, three primary objectives are set: (1) to identify customer service quality expectations of OFODSs, (2) to examine the content of these expectations and (3) to suggest management strategies to meet customer expectations of service quality improvement. To this end, this research examines customers' perceptions of OFODSs during the Covid-19 pandemic, given that perceptions fuel expectations (Rust *et al.*, 1999). In methodological terms, this study employed focus group interviews as a specific method of explorative data collection and performed content analysis to examine the data.

The findings of this study enrich the theory by expanding the debate on customer expectations of OFODSs and proposing a framework for effectively managing them, as well as providing recommendations for practice, by suggesting management strategies to increase the likelihood of continuing to compete in the future.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. After providing a literature review focussing on digitalisation, the customer approach to OFODSs and customer expectations, the research method is described. Next, the results are proposed and discussed, and their theoretical and practical implications are outlined. Finally, the study's limitations and directions for future research are presented.

2. Literature review

2.1 The online food ordering and delivery services context

Businesses and customers have changed the way they interact. The spread of technology and digital tools has increased the availability and variety of information sources. As a result, today's customers are more demanding and more fickle than in the past. They benefit from various channels and touchpoints (e.g. computers, tablets, smartphones and social media), which have increased since the outbreak of the pandemic in line with human mobility restrictions and fear of social contact. The restaurant and catering industry has developed appealing and user-friendly apps and tech-enabled driver networks to overcome difficulties due to lockdowns and physical distancing requirements.

The recent food literature has explored the changes in food consumption since the beginning of the pandemic and the potentialities of OFODSs by investigating consumers' attitude, willingness to use and behaviour towards these services. For example, Troise *et al.* (2020) conducted quantitative research in the Italian context to investigate consumers' willingness to adopt OFODSs, employing food choices, convenience, trust and the perceived risks related to the pandemic as contextual factors. Specifically, they found that perceptions of Covid-19-related risks had a negative effect on behavioural intention towards OFODSs. Anwar *et al.* (2022) argued that social influence, information quality, price-saving orientation and time-saving orientation positively affect attitude towards OFODSs by enhancing the intention to use apps via smartphones in Malaysia. Wen *et al.* (2022) highlighted that attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control and trust (i.e. the four basic constructs in the theory of planned behaviour model) positively predicted consumers' intentions to continue to use food delivery apps. Similarly, Lee *et al.* (2023) adopted the technology acceptance model to explore consumers' intention to use OFODSs and found that ease of use and usefulness positively influence intention to use apps. This result is in line with Gani *et al.* (2021), who found that information and food service attributes influenced the perceived usefulness of OFODSs and shaped respondents' intention to use them. In addition, behavioural intention towards OFODSs and perceived trust considerably influenced the use of these apps. According to Nigro *et al.* (2022), convenience, variety of food and time savings influence behavioural intentions. Al Amin *et al.* (2021) revealed that hygiene, subjective norms, attitudes and behavioural control were related to behavioural and continuance intentions to use mobile food delivery apps. In contrast, perceived food safety was related to behavioural intention, and social isolation was related to continuance intention. Pal *et al.*, 2022 found that amongst mobile app attributes, information design has the greatest impact on both satisfaction and loyalty and confirmed that satisfaction is the greatest predictor of loyalty, followed by food quality.

Other studies have focussed on the aesthetic appeal of online food delivery apps in revisit intentions or the convenience of food delivery. Specifically, Kumar *et al.* (2021) revealed that app aesthetics generated pleasure, arousal and dominance amongst consumers during the pandemic. Kumar and Shah (2021) confirmed this revealing that pleasure and dominance are the most significant predictors of continued usage intentions for food delivery apps. Tandon *et al.* (2021) found that visibility acted as an antecedent of all consumption values and significantly influenced purchase intentions, while attitude positively and significantly influenced purchase intentions.

2.2 The customer approach to online food ordering and delivery services

Scholars have examined customers' intention to use OFODSs and their perceived risk. Specifically, Hong *et al.* (2021) showed that perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, price-saving benefit, time-saving benefit and trust are the predictors that significantly affected online food delivery usage intention, but no moderation effect of Covid-19 was found.

Poon and Tung (2022) revealed that perceived risk negatively affected consumers' desire to use these services that perceived physical risk and Covid-19 risk negatively affected their intention to use these services and that perceived risk did not moderate the relationship between desire and intention. Other scholars have analysed customers' characteristics, satisfaction and loyalty. In particular, Mehrolia *et al.* (2021) argued that customers with a high perceived threat, low product involvement, low perceived benefits of OFODSs and low frequency of online food orders are less likely to order food through these services. OFODSs can be considered a way through which local businesses attempt to face times of crisis and improve their competitiveness. In this regard, consumer behaviour research (Kim *et al.*, 2022) has shown that affective responses to the Covid-19 pandemic such as fear and hope positively influence customer intentions to support local businesses. In addition, customers are increasingly willing to use online and mobile payments (Purohit *et al.*, 2022), thus creating a favourable context for the development of OFODSs.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is scant research on OFODS quality following the Covid-19 outbreak. Chan and Gao (2021) proposed the up-to-date quality of online food delivery (DEQUAL) index using 32 validated indicators to measure the up-to-date quality of online food delivery and suggested how to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty to a restaurant. Research in the food literature has explored the effect of OFODS service quality on customer satisfaction and loyalty. In this regard, Koay *et al.* (2022) found that assurance, maintenance of meal quality and hygiene, reliability, security and system operation are significant predictors of customer satisfaction.

However, no research has addressed how OFODS quality could be improved by investigating what customers want. Indeed, service providers can obtain important benefits in understanding and recognising customer expectations, such as offering or improving quality service (e.g. Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Webb, 2000). In light of this, this research examines customer expectations of OFODSs during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2.3 Customer expectations

According to the service management literature, "what a customer expects to get from the service provider can define customer expectation" (Hsieh and Yuan, 2021, p. 514). There is agreement that expectations are not unidimensional, as several authors cited in Table 1 have highlighted (e.g. Boulding *et al.*, 1993; Walker, 1995; Hubbert *et al.*, 1995; Lee *et al.*, 2000; Ojasalo, 2001). A multi-expectation framework that differentiates between expectations regarding the adequate level of service (the lowest level of service that a customer can accept) and the desired level of service (the level of service that a customer hopes to receive) has been proposed (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1988; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993). Expectations can be examined in terms of content; for example, they have been related to the technical, social, economic and political aspects of the interaction between a service provider and customers or context (Mittilä and Järvelin, 2001). In technical terms, expectations can be analysed in relation to quality standards of service delivery, physical environment, the staff's professional skills and internal efficiency. In social terms, expectations can concern different organisational cultures or partnerships, while general economic fluctuations can affect expectations from an economic viewpoint. Finally, expectations can be examined in political terms. In relation to the topic of this study, these expectations can be investigated more correctly in legal terms, given that the perspective of regulation enables us to examine how to protect consumer expectations in terms of legal rights and interests. Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011, both inform and protect consumers regarding the provision of food information. Based on this regulation, consumers, for example, can make informed choices and make safe use of food, with particular regard to health, economic, environmental, social and ethical considerations. Accordingly, they can

Author(s), year	Typology of expectations	Description
Boulding *et al.* (1993)	Will expectations	What customers perceive will happen in their next service encounter
	Should expectations	What customers expect should occur
Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) and Zeithaml *et al.* (1993) (a multi-expectation framework)	Expectations about the adequate level of service (would)	The minimum acceptable level of service that customers wish to receive without being disappointed
	Expectations about the desired level of service (should)	What customers wish or hope to receive, or what they believe can and should be provided to them in relation to their personal needs
Walker (1995)	Active expectations	Expectations that are consciously anticipated by the customer
	Passive expectations	Customers are not aware of expectations until they become disconfirmed
Hubbert *et al.* (1995) and Lee *et al.* (2000)	Normative expectations	The service desired/ideal features preferred by customers
	Predictive expectations	The service features customers believe service providers will offer
Ojasalo (2001)	Fuzzy expectations	Customers feel that something is wrong or lacking in the service delivery; therefore they would change something, but they do not know what and how could be changed
	Implicit expectations	Service characteristics or elements are self-evident and obvious to customers; therefore they notice them when these expectations are not met
	Unrealistic expectations	Expectations impossible or highly unlikely to be met for any service provider
	Precise expectations	Expectations consciously formed and acknowledged
	Explicit expectations	Conscious assumptions or wishes about the service that are widely required by customer to service provider
	Realistic expectations	Expectations that are possible to be fulfilled by a service provider

Table 1.
Types of expectations from the service management literature

expect that online ordered food respects precise legal rules that are aimed to provide them with a clear indication of the components, ingredients or physiological effects without being deceived.

With specific reference to customer expectations about OFODSs beyond legal requirements, very few studies have hitherto been conducted. In this regard, in the consumer behaviour literature, Meena and Kumar (2022) highlighted the importance of exploring customer expectations with regard to OFODSs by exploring social media data regarding OFODS companies' performance and customers' expectations during the Covid-19 pandemic in India and the USA. Their findings suggest that OFODS managers should devote time to understanding customer expectations during a crisis, because these differ from usual expectations (such as prompt service and good food).

This lack of academic studies related to the importance for managers of better adopting strategic and operational actions aimed to improve OFODS quality and, thus, their competitiveness suggests further investigation of this topic is required. To this end, this research aims to examine customer expectations – and their content – so as to formulate recommendations for OFODS providers regarding implementable management strategies from a service quality improvement perspective.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

Due to this study's explorative nature, qualitative research via focus groups was adopted (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Focus group interviews are suitable for obtaining a wide range of ideas and impressions about the subject under examination. This research technique also enables understanding individuals' perceptions of a given phenomenon by capturing attitudes and beliefs concerning the topic examined. Further, this method allows researchers to obtain more opinions from participants in a limited period of time and encourages them to answer questions freely and flexibly by using relaxed storytelling methods (Riessman, 2008). Finally, group dynamics were stimulated to gather the information that may not emerge through one-to-one interviews (Babbie, 2011). Content analysis was used because it facilitates detecting, examining and presenting themes emerging from qualitative data (Saldaña, 2015). This method was employed to provide a solid contribution to the literature on customer expectations management, moving iteratively between theory and the data to grasp better the empirical phenomenon (Dubois and Gadde, 2014).

3.2 Analysis of the study context: development and regulation of OFODSs in Italy

Driven by the pandemic, the food delivery industry has experienced consistent growth. In Italy, growth was exponential (in 2021, it was about 59%), affecting Italian consumers' habits and behaviours. However, terms such as "delivery", "take away" and "drive through" are not mentioned or taken into account at the regulatory level. They are expressed in terms of "distance selling", as argued by the Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011, or of "distance contract" as highlighted in the EU Consumer Rights Directive 83/2011 and in the Consumer Code. In particular, a distance contract is any contract concluded between a trader and a consumer in the framework of services without the physical presence of the subjects in question (Art. 45).

In this legal context, digital platforms, for example, act as middle ground between the professional and the customer. They have to assure customers regarding the correct presentation and labelling of food products (Regulation 1169/2011) as well as guarantee the safety and traceability of the food itself (Directive 178/2002). In addition, online platforms have to inform customers through the application about mandatory disclosure and allergens' reporting.

In terms of health and hygiene, food transport plays a key role. Italian legislation (Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica [DPR] 327/80) regulates the suitability and sanitisation of means of transport and hygiene requirements during food transport and provides a table showing the transport temperatures for various foods. Delivery modes can take several forms; some OFODS businesses invest in applications or websites, while others choose riders owned or managed by external businesses.

3.3 Sample and data collection

Overall, 30 Italian customers aged 19–75 years participated in four focus group interview sessions between June and December 2021. Each group comprised seven or eight participants recruited through a snowball sampling approach. The participants were selected using personal networks according to the three following criteria: (1) use of a digital OFODS more than ten times between February 2020 (the beginning of the pandemic in Italy) and May 2021, (2) regular use of digital devices such as smartphones, computers and tablets during daily activities (not necessarily for online shopping) and (3) availability to participate in the focus group. Overall, 20 initial participants were contacted via email.

A cover letter explained the study's purpose, the importance of participants' opinions, the possibility of withdrawing at any time during the research and that no financial incentives

would be offered for participation. Participants who responded to the email (12 of the 20 contacted) were asked to provide the contact details of two other persons meeting the selection criteria, who were then contacted regarding participation. Overall, 36 individuals agreed to participate. After an initial screening, 30 participants were retained because they met all the criteria. They were then divided into four diverse groups (in terms of gender, age and frequency of use of OFODSs during the pandemic) to maximise exploration of different perspectives within each group. Since the topic was very specific and all participants were familiar with it, it was considered that diversity of composition would not prevent in-depth discussion (Bloor, 2001). Table 2 presents the participants' profiles.

The focus groups were conducted online because of the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Each focus group session lasted about an h and a half. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was gathered via personal email individually sent to each participant. After introducing the topic and the purpose of the group discussion, the moderator stimulated the conversation with the support of an interview protocol to provide a structure and logical flow to group discussion. The use of technical language was avoided to prevent possible misinterpretations. The interview protocol was designed based on the literature review on service quality expectations, and included the following five questions: (1) What do you want to receive from OFODSs? (2) What elements do you consider indispensable and take for granted from OFODSs? (3) Which elements do you consider most in choosing an OFODS?

				Use of the OFODSs during the 2020 year (range of times)			
Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	20–30	31–40	41–50	>50
P1	56	Female	Self-employed			✗	
P2	59	Male	Self-employed		✗		
P3	60	Male	Self-employed		✗		
P4	57	Female	Employee worker			✗	
P5	75	Female	Retired			✗	
P6	56	Female	Self-employed		✗		
P7	66	Female	Self-employed		✗		
P8	50	Male	Self-employed			✗	
P9	43	Female	Employee worker		✗		
P10	44	Female	Employee worker	✗			
P11	46	Female	Employee worker			✗	
P12	43	Female	Employee worker		✗		
P13	53	Female	Self-employed			✗	
P14	48	Female	Employee worker			✗	
P15	26	Male	Employee worker		✗		
P16	40	Male	Self-employed				✗
P17	32	Female	Employee worker			✗	
P18	26	Male	Employee worker		✗		
P19	30	Male	Employee worker			✗	
P20	26	Female	Employee worker		✗		
P21	23	Male	Employee worker			✗	
P22	19	Female	Student	✗			
P23	20	Female	Student		✗		
P24	19	Female	Student	✗			
P25	23	Female	Student		✗		
P26	23	Female	Employee worker		✗		
P27	19	Male	Student	✗			
P28	45	Male	Self-employed				✗
P29	70	Male	Retired		✗		
P30	26	Male	Employee worker			✗	

Table 2.
Profile of the participants to the focus group interviews

(4) Have you experienced or received anything unexpected from an OFODS? (5) What do you expect OFODS businesses to do to meet your expectations?

Participants were assured that no answer was inappropriate and that everyone should feel free to express personal opinions that no person would be able to dominate other individuals and that privacy was guaranteed through anonymous and aggregate processing of the information provided.

Before the data collection, a pretest in the form of open-ended conversations (Jafari *et al.*, 2013) was performed with three customers. Based on feedback, some words were changed for clarity and easier comprehension. The interview protocol included questions regarding service elements considered indispensable to provide a satisfactory OFODS, service quality aspects and desired improvements. Focus group interviews were conducted in Italian and later translated into English (the research team is fluent in both languages) to ensure the meaning of the original responses was retained (Hogg *et al.*, 2014).

3.4 Data analysis

All focus group discussions were audio and video recorded and later transcribed to be checked for accuracy. Content analysis employed a range of techniques to meet the specific goals of this study. Precisely, the approach developed by Gioia *et al.* (2013) was used to guide coding activity in identifying customer expectations regarding OFODSs (the first goal of this study). Nvivo 11 software supported the analysis. The coding process followed three steps. First, after gathering informants' voices as first-order codes, abstract concepts from the first-order categories were derived according to the extant theory. In this regard, the Ojasalo (2001) model, which conceptually distinguishes fuzzy, implicit, unrealistic, precise, explicit and realistic expectations, was used because it was developed to improve long-term service quality and customer satisfaction. Second, after reaching theoretical saturation, aggregated theoretical dimensions – namely, customer expectations – were identified by organising the second-order themes according to the inductive interpretation of the data (Miles *et al.*, 2014). To obtain a unique coding scheme, the researchers carefully checked and compared codes by reducing similarities and differences to build a manageable number of codes. The coding process was iterative and abductive by navigating between the empirical data and the customer expectation theory.

A direct content analysis investigation (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) was employed to categorise the content of customer expectations (the second goal of this study). Specifically, the customer expectation theory guided the initial coding activity (Mittilä and Järvelin, 2001), namely, technical, social, economic and legal terms, to which this study adds technological aspects, which are fundamentally related to digitalisation tools.

Finally, to identify suitable management strategies regarding OFODS quality, content analysis was performed in a conservative manner, without intentionality, through a blended approach (Miles *et al.*, 2014) by two researchers (authors); only what was explicit in the data was included in the textual corpus for analysis. Each researcher carefully checked and coded the collected data separately. After comparing similarities and differences, a coding scheme was identified to cluster codes in more general analytical themes, which became the management strategies for OFODS quality.

4. Findings

4.1 Customer expectations regarding online food ordering and delivery service quality

From the analysis, 14 types of expectations inductively emerged. They were abductively traced back to the six categories of expectations proposed by Ojasalo (2001): implicit, explicit, precise, fuzzy, realistic and unrealistic. Based on these, this study identified three main dimensions: basicness, accuracy and attainability of expectations. Table 3 shows the response frequencies concerning this classification of expectations.

Dimension of customer expectations	Category of expectations	Types of expectations	Frequency
Basicness of expectations	*Implicit expectation*	Punctuality of delivery	30
		Accuracy of delivery	30
		Quality of the delivered product	27
		Appropriateness of the fee applied for the online purchase	25
		Compliance with hygiene and safety regulations	25
		Professionalism, empathy and kindness of service provider	24
	Explicit expectation	Multichannel service	26
		Product and delivery customised	24
		Payment service	22
Accuracy of expectations	*Precise expectation*	Information about the service	25
	Fuzzy expectation	After-sales contact	17
		Availability and variety of the offer	15
Attainability of expectations	*Realistic expectation*	Sustainability-oriented service	22
	Unrealistic expectation	Skills to broaden service range	20

Table 3.
Types of expectations about OFODS quality

The first dimension consists of the basicness of expectations, which includes implicit (i.e. those taken for granted by customers) and explicit (i.e. expected but not taken for granted) expectations. In this study, participants mainly focussed on the category of implicit expectations. The interviewees highlighted six expected service characteristics that they considered essential and obvious but that were not met in their experience of OFODSs: punctuality of delivery, accuracy of delivery, quality of the delivered product, appropriateness of the fee applied for the online purchase, compliance with hygiene and safety regulations, professionalism, empathy and kindness of the service provider.

Regarding punctuality of delivery, participants believed that OFODSs should communicate their efficiency in terms of timeliness of delivery to avoid generating false expectations that may produce dissatisfaction. Moreover, regarding delayed delivery, interviewees expected to be promptly notified and to receive an immediate explanation and apology. Customers implicitly expected the accuracy of service delivery in terms of the type and ingredients of the product ordered and the exact geographical location of the rider. Concerning the quality of the delivered product, participants expected that the quality of dishes, raw materials and the presentation (aesthetic) of the food should not be inferior to that usually found at the physical restaurant or point of sale. Regarding the appropriateness of the fee applied to online purchases, customers expected OFODSs to be cheaper than that of a restaurant. Concerning compliance with hygiene and safety regulations, interviewees expected health and safety measures to be respected when preparing, transporting and delivering food. This expectation is essential in the current situation as safety concerns have increased with the pandemic. The last implicit expectation – in order of frequency – was professionalism, empathy and kindness of the staff and rider. Participants expected personalised products and services, and providers' professional behaviour in the case of complaints, for example, by explaining any disservice and offering compensation via a free product rather than a discount for subsequent purchases.

In terms of explicit expectations, the study participants expected (1) multichannel service, (2) product and service customisation and (3) payment service. Concerning multichannel service, although participants usually used the telephone to order, they appreciated the

ability to contact the service provider through multiple devices and online channels, consult other customers' reviews and track their orders in real time. Interviewees preferred service providers' websites as their source of information, while e-commerce or apps were preferred for online purchases. Another tool widely appreciated was WhatsApp. Concerning product and service customisation, interviewees expected customisation of dish ingredients according to their needs and preferences. Customisation should be available through apps, websites or messaging services. Participants believed it is appropriate to increase or decrease a product's price following a request to add or reduce ingredients. In addition, participants expected the possibility of easily changing the timing and method of delivery through an app or on the website (e.g. by adding a note to the order). Respondents expected to be able to ask for cutlery and single-serve condiments. They also preferred to have the option of different payment methods, including cash and electronic payment terminals, PayPal or Satispay. Contactless payment systems were preferred for hygiene and convenience reasons (i.e. It is inconvenient to carry the exact cash required.).

The second dimension proposed is the accuracy of expectations, which involves precise (i.e. detailed) and fuzzy (i.e. vague) expectations. Specifically, in terms of precise expectations, participants expected OFODSs to provide descriptions, ingredients and photographs of the dishes on delivery boxes. Respondents also expected more information, precision and transparency (pre-purchase and delivery stages) regarding a product's offer and delivery methods during the customer journey, regardless of touchpoints. Interviewees expected online catalogues to be updated with the insertion of available products, real-time promotions and, in general terms, adequate advertising of the service offered. In terms of fuzzy expectations, participants mentioned after-sales contact and availability and variety of offers. In detail, interviewees expected that OFODSs' after-sales service would enable customers to express their opinions and possible complaints. Regarding availability and variety of offers, respondents desired customer centricity during the entire purchase journey, by believing that no restrictions should be placed on the range of products that may be ordered via OFODSs and that more attention should be paid to meeting specific needs related to food allergies.

Finally, the third dimension consists of the attainability of expectations, which involves both realistic (i.e. attainable) and unrealistic (i.e. difficult to meet) expectations. Regarding realistic expectations, many interviewees appreciated service providers' commitment and care regarding environmental and social sustainability. Respondents suggested the importance of sustainable packaging, recyclable or reusable containers and sustainable transport. Focus group participants were also willing to pay more for sustainable transport. Regarding social sustainability, interviewees expected greater attention to the most vulnerable social categories affected by the pandemic; for example, providing specific measures (e.g. discounts and free deliveries for food shopping) for older people or people with disabilities. In addition, more attention to riders' rights and dignity was emphasised. Unrealistic expectations fundamentally included skills to broaden their service range in geographical and clockwise terms. More specifically, several participants in focus groups customers noted that they would appreciate the opportunity for greater geographical coverage of peripheral areas with homogeneous product offerings. Further, customers expected high flexibility from service providers regarding additional time slots.

4.2 Content of customer expectations

The second objective of this study was to examine the content of the expectations of OFODSs. In this regard, the single categories (not the dimensions) were considered to analyse their content more in depth.

Implicit expectations are related to technical, social, economic and legal aspects. Specifically, punctuality, accuracy of delivery and quality of the delivered product depend on

technical aspects of OFODSs, professionalism and kindness of service providers which are related to social aspects; appropriateness of the fee applied for the online purchase is closely related to economic aspects, and compliance with hygiene and safety regulations is connected to legal aspects. Explicit expectations are related to technological and – to a lesser degree – technical and economic aspects. Specifically, a multichannel service, customised product and delivery, and payment services depend on technological aspects. For product and service customisation, both technical and economic aspects are relevant.

Precise expectations, which include information about the service, depend on technical aspects of communication (both online and offline) and service delivery methods. Fuzzy expectations regarding after-sales contact as well as availability and variety of offer are related to social and technical aspects, respectively. Specifically, the possibility of complaining about poor service is a social and technological aspect to be considered, while the need to consider food allergies is a technical aspect to be met.

Finally, realistic expectations that include sustainable services and riders' rights refer to social and technological aspects. Unrealistic expectations (i.e. skills to broaden the service range) are related mainly to the economic and technological aspects of OFODSs.

4.3 Management strategies to improve service quality

Based on the identified categories of customer expectations, the following management strategies are suggested. Regarding implicit expectations, this research suggests that providers of OFODSs reassure (potential) customers about the essential presence of minimum conditions without which customer dissatisfaction could be generated. Suggested strategic actions to respond to customers' explicit expectations include flexibility, which is the ability to cope with qualitative variation in demand without incurring excessive cost increases. Even fuzzy expectations deserve adequate attention aimed at extrapolating aspects of service improvement capable of significantly increasing customer satisfaction and the competitiveness of the OFODS. The recommended approach involves searching for continuous improvement and recognising weak signals from the context and stakeholders. Educating customers is a strategic orientation to meet expectations. Through this activity, customers can fully comprehend the characteristics and unique properties of the product offered, as well as the delivery methods and times. This study suggests that OFODS providers implement an adaptation plan to customer requirements concerning realistic expectations. Customers' realistic expectations are potentially acceptable by all OFODS providers. Finally, carefully monitoring exceptions is a suitable strategic activity to respond to unrealistic expectations.

4.4 A framework for improving online food ordering and delivery service quality

Figure 1 depicts a framework for managing customer expectations regarding OFODS quality by combining the different customer expectations about these services with the management strategies proposed in this study to improve these services in the ongoing and post-pandemic situation. Specifically, this framework highlights (see the central section of Figure 1) the three main dimensions (basicness, accuracy and attainability of expectations) and the six categories (implicit, explicit, precise, fuzzy, realistic and unrealistic expectations) of customer expectations that should be considered to develop management strategies regarding OFODS quality. The 14 types of expectations that emerged from the focus groups are not shown in Figure 1 for clarity of presentation. Each of these dimensions and categories of expectation can affect service quality in connection with OFODSs. Figure 1 also illustrates (the external section in the centre of Figure 1) that customer expectations can refer to technical, social, economic, legal and technological aspects of OFODSs.

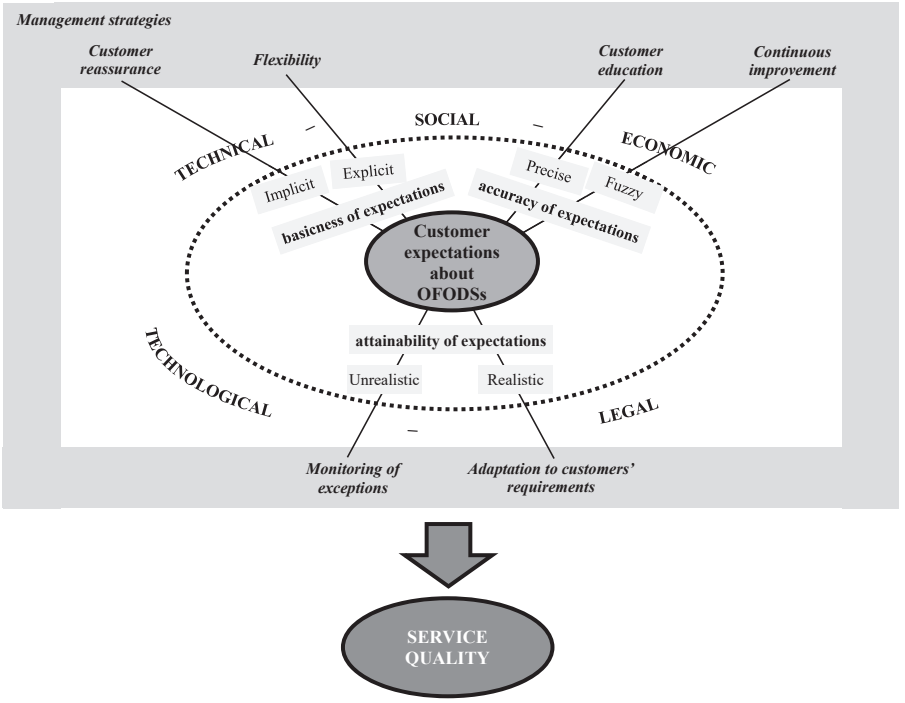

Figure 1.
Improving OFODS quality by managing customer expectations: a framework

In addition, Figure 1 (the outermost section) presents the six management strategies that may be implemented to improve OFODS quality. This means that each OFODS provider's strategic actions should meet specific customer expectations to improve service quality.

The conceptual framework provides a starting point for quality management researchers, restaurants and catering business managers seeking to enhance the understanding of what customers desire over the short and long term in the face of ongoing threats.

5. Discussion

This study explored how customer expectations about OFODS quality can be managed. Concerning the first RQ (What do customers expect to receive from an OFODS?), this research identifies customer expectations and examines them in terms of content. First, this study reveals that customers have multiple expectations of OFODSs: most of these are clear and easily controllable by a service provider (explicit, precise and realistic expectations). However, others are undefined and thus barely controllable because of a lack of knowledge regarding what the customer expects (fuzzy expectations). Even if difficult to determine, discovering what customers consider obvious in service is fundamental for satisfaction (implicit expectations). Once this category of expectations is acknowledged, it is possible to prepare for expectations and positively influence customer satisfaction. Finally, while unrealistic expectations cannot be immediately fulfilled, they must be carefully monitored. These results align with those of Ojasalo (2001), who conducted a study on professional services and demonstrated the possibility of extending this model to more analysis

contexts. Indeed, this study categorises customer expectations of OFODSs according to this classification but proposes a more macroclassification by aggregating the expectations identified into three-dimensional axes: basicness, accuracy and attainability. These three dimensions fall along a continuum, in which implicit–explicit, precise–fuzzy and realistic–unrealistic represent the extremes between which a variety of expectations could be identified. This aspect highlights that expectations vary according to customer perceptions. For example, in terms of basicness, the same expectation could be perceived as more implicit or more explicit depending on the customer. In other words, customers always develop the expectations proposed in theory, but what changes is an expectation's intensity. During the focus group, participants repeatedly mentioned multiple implicit and explicit expectations rather than other types of expectations. Hence, it can be argued that many customers have clear ideas about what they desire (explicit expectations) and what they necessarily want (implicit expectations) from service providers (Olsson *et al.*, 2021). Implicit expectations become evident when they are not met. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that customers may have experienced low service quality or a lack of service, if not a real disservice. Consequently, they have implicitly developed more expectations, which OFODS providers must monitor and meet, because, even if the fulfilment of expectations does not increase satisfaction, their partial or total absence will create a negative quality judgement by generating high dissatisfaction. In this sense, this research reveals the importance of examining OFODS apps in terms of satisfaction (e.g. Suhartanto *et al.*, 2019; Annaraud and Berezina, 2020) by paying specific attention to implicit expectations.

Second, with reference to the content of expectations, this research highlights technical, social, economic and legal aspects of OFODSs by confirming Mittilä and Järvelin's (2001) model and adding technological aspects as a further element of analysis. Given that four of the six categories identified – explicit, fuzzy, realistic and unrealistic – include technological aspects, this study emphasises the critical role of digitalisation in OFODS quality. In line with previous research (e.g. Al Amin *et al.*, 2021; Pal *et al.*, 2022), this study finds that online platforms and apps are preferred for ordering food; however, this research also emphasises the use of WhatsApp as an alternative sales channel, given its extensive use and user-friendly interface according to customers of all ages. In addition, all participants of various ages purchased OFODSs using different technologies. This result supports the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh and Davis, 2000) in relation to OFODSs, according to which human behaviour towards acceptance of technology depends on its perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness and behavioural intention. The adoption of a multichannel approach using appealing and user-friendly apps (e.g. Kumar and Shah, 2021; Mehrolia *et al.*, 2021; Pal *et al.*, 2022) has enabled both customers and service providers such as restaurants and catering businesses to not only overcome the difficulties facing them because of lockdowns and physical distancing requirements but also – and especially – to take advantage of the opportunities that digitalisation offers.

Concerning the second RQ of this study (What actions can OFODS businesses undertake to meet customer expectations?), this research suggests different management strategies to meet the multiple expectations identified. More precisely, this analysis reveals customer reassurance, flexibility, continuous improvement, customer education, adaptation to customer requirements and monitoring exceptions as practical guidelines to help OFODS providers improve service quality during and after the pandemic. Restaurants and catering businesses should internally develop their skills and business practices to respond to customer expectations around technical, social, economic, legal and technological aspects. The results of this study can be used to project beyond the current situation by suggesting to OFODS providers a reference guide for similar future situations.

6. Implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

This study extends previous service management and consumer behaviour research on customer expectations (e.g. Boulding *et al.*, 1993; Walker, 1995; Ojasalo, 2001) by revealing three dimensions of expectations, each comprising two categories that fall along a continuum: (1) basicness of expectations (ranging from implicit to explicit), (2) accuracy of expectations (ranging from fuzzy to precise) and (3) attainability of expectations (ranging from realistic to unrealistic). In line with previous studies (e.g. Ojasalo, 2001), this research provides practical evidence that customer expectations of OFODS quality can be managed via a framework that includes implicit, explicit, precise, fuzzy, realistic and unrealistic expectations. Thus, this study theoretically supports the importance of classifying customer expectations to enhance service quality (Edvardsson, 1998).

Previous research on service quality in OFODSs has measured the effect of various service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction (e.g. Koay *et al.*, 2022). By investigating in-depth customers' expectations regarding service quality in OFODSs, this study identifies further categories of expectations that pertain to the broader characteristics of the service provider, such as providers' commitment to environmental and social sustainability (e.g. Baratta and Simeoni, 2021).

This study also highlights that digitalisation, especially mobile apps, supports the importance of technological aspects by highlighting the interaction between service providers and customers in addition to the technical, social, economic and legal content of expectations (e.g. Mittilä and Järvelin, 2001).

The relevance of this study extends beyond the contingent situation, given that it proposes an initial framework for effectively managing customer expectations about OFODS quality that can be broadly used to manage these services during and in the early post-pandemic period.

6.2 Practical implications

This study provides guidelines for implementing the management strategies that emerged from the analysis. To meet implicit expectations of customer reassurance, OFODS providers should primarily invest in the following activities: (1) provide an accurate ordering collection system that enables precise calculation of processing and delivery times; (2) activate partnerships with research structures capable of developing specific equipment and containers suitable to contain and transport the product handled by the company; (3) aim for a harmonious increase in the quality and attractiveness of the products offered and delivered and (4) organise the training of internal staff and riders to increase their professionalism, courtesy and attention to compliance with health and hygiene standards, especially during a pandemic.

To meet explicit expectations of flexibility, technological innovations could be introduced in booking channels or payment systems by weighing the cost increase according to economic sustainability and business size. Further, OFODS quality could be designed to provide customers with multichannel services, such as a website, which should be user-friendly across any device (e.g. avoiding images or videos that hinder navigation), e-commerce and app. In addition to the direct channel, this study suggests that OFODS providers – especially small businesses – guarantee their presence on platforms by taking advantage of greater geographical coverage of peripheral local areas. This will enable customers to follow their orders in real time, monitor delays, consult reviews of other customers and make faster purchases.

To meet fuzzy expectations of service improvement, the recommended approach is to seek continuous improvement, which is the ability to recognise weak signals emerging from the

context and stakeholders. To understand fuzzy expectations, management could (1) enhance relationships with customers by activating and constantly monitoring possible multichannels of communication with the customer; (2) provide for post-delivery contact aimed at assessing the degree of customer satisfaction and possibly addressing potential disservices; (3) interpret the information collected and signals from customers to identify actionable initiatives to improve the service and increase customer satisfaction and, consequently, the company's competitiveness; and (4) notify the customer of changes introduced to the OFODS so that they are aware of and can benefit from them.

To meet precise expectations of customer education, management should use social media and websites to communicate truthfully and transparently with the customer. This aspect carries significant weight, considering the central role of customer reviews when choosing an OFODS provider.

To meet realistic expectations of an adaptation plan, OFODS providers may have already begun to adapt their business to customer expectations, primarily when these expectations concern globally relevant topics such as digitalisation or sustainability. If OFODSs' commitment towards these topics is lower than customers expect, it will be necessary to identify specific initiatives to align with customer expectations.

Finally, to meet unrealistic expectations of monitoring exceptions, OFODS providers can explain to customers the aspects of a service that cannot be provided and the reasons for this. Further, as certain customer expectations occasionally conflict and are only partially acceptable, management must evaluate how to balance the satisfaction of these expectations against the firm's characteristics and value orientation. Consider, for example, an expectation expressed by focus group participants for expanding the geographical and hours-of-operation coverage of the activity of OFODS providers. This expectation implies strengthening the distribution system at the management level, which could be economically and socially unsustainable for the company's staff and riders.

7. Limitations and future research

This research is not without limitations. First, the choice of the sample was limited to Italian cases; second, the method used did not employ a random selection process. Therefore, the results of the interviews cannot be generalised.

Future research could overcome these limitations by interviewing more customers from different countries to highlight similarities and differences. In this vein, furthermore, a cross-cultural comparative analysis could be undertaken in future studies by analysing and comparing contexts where different food shopping cultures are present. Future studies could focus on various age groups coupled with specific technologies to emphasise differences in managing OFODSs based on customer expectations. While a few studies have focussed on the attitudes of younger consumers towards using food delivery apps and chatbots (Dave and Trivedi, 2019; De Cicco *et al.*, 2021), they have overlooked seniors and other age groups. Since seniors generally experience more difficulty using new devices than younger people, more research should be conducted to study how people of different ages respond to new technologies when using OFODSs, focussing on generational differences. From a digitalisation perspective, future research could also examine drone food delivery services. To date, most scholars have examined attitudes and behavioural intentions towards using these services by highlighting the role of sustainability (e.g. Choe *et al.*, 2021; Hwang *et al.*, 2020; Khalil *et al.*, 2022). However, studies of customer expectations of these services are still lacking. Such studies could provide service providers with recommendations to better meet their customers' expectations and better satisfy them. Further, it would be interesting to examine how OFODS demand will evolve in the post-pandemic context, that is, whether demand will return to pre-pandemic levels and whether service providers such as restaurants

will be able to maintain this kind of service and at what level, to meet customer expectations. Finally, with regard to the three dimensions of expectations proposed in this study, scholars could consider the assessment of expectations using a scale as a future research avenue.

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