

A Study of Motivation Factors among Frontline Employees in Quick Service Restaurants: A Human-Centric Perspective

Rana P¹, Shivangi^{2*}

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¹ Priyanka Rana, Professor, Department of Management, IIMT University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.

^{2*} Shivangi, Research Scholar, Department of Management, IIMT University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Frontline employees are central to service delivery and customer satisfaction in Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs), yet they frequently operate under high workload pressure, demanding schedules, and limited career advancement opportunities. This study examines the motivation factors influencing frontline employees in the QSR sector from a human-centric perspective, emphasising the importance of employee well-being, dignity, and engagement. The research analyses both intrinsic motivation factors—such as recognition, job satisfaction, and opportunities for personal growth—and extrinsic factors, including compensation, training, job security, and managerial support. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to frontline employees working in selected QSRs. The study employs descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to identify the most significant determinants of employee motivation. The findings reveal that supportive leadership, fair reward systems, positive work environments, and opportunities for skill development play a crucial role in enhancing employee motivation and reducing turnover intentions. The study concludes that adopting human-centric motivation strategies can improve employee performance, service quality, and long-term sustainability in the QSR industry.

Keywords: frontline employees, employee motivation, quick service restaurants (QSRs), human-centric approach, job satisfaction, employee engagement, service quality

Corresponding Author	How to Cite this Article	To Browse
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1. Introduction

The Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) industry has become a vital component of the global service economy, contributing significantly to employment generation, economic growth, and urban consumer culture. In India, the rapid expansion of QSRs is driven by factors such as rising disposable incomes, urbanisation, increasing participation of women in the workforce, and changing food consumption patterns. International and domestic QSR brands operate in a highly competitive environment where speed, consistency, and service quality are critical to business performance. At the core of these operations are frontline employees, including service staff, counter executives, kitchen assistants, and delivery personnel, who play a crucial role in ensuring smooth daily operations and shaping customer experiences.

Frontline employees in QSRs are often required to perform repetitive and physically demanding tasks under strict time constraints while maintaining high standards of customer interaction. The nature of their work exposes them to work pressure, irregular shifts, emotional labor, and limited job autonomy. These challenges frequently result in stress, low morale, absenteeism, and high employee turnover, which are persistent issues in the QSR sector. High attrition not only increases recruitment and training costs but also disrupts service consistency and negatively affects customer satisfaction. As a result, understanding and enhancing employee motivation has become a strategic priority for QSR management.

Employee motivation refers to the internal and external forces that initiate, direct, and sustain work-related behavior. In the QSR context, motivation is influenced by a combination of extrinsic factors such as wages, incentives, job security, and working conditions, as well as intrinsic factors including recognition, sense of belonging, meaningful work, and opportunities for learning and growth. While financial rewards are essential in meeting basic needs, research suggests that non-financial and psychological factors play an equally important role in sustaining long-term motivation, particularly in service-oriented industries where human interaction is central.

Traditionally, QSR management practices have emphasized efficiency, standardization,

and cost minimization, often adopting a transactional approach to employee management. However, such approaches may fail to address the emotional and psychological needs of frontline employees, leading to disengagement and reduced commitment. In contrast, a human-centric perspective places employees at the center of organizational strategies, recognizing them as valuable stakeholders whose well-being, dignity, and development are critical to organizational success. This perspective aligns with contemporary human resource management practices that stress employee engagement, empowerment, and supportive leadership.

Theoretical frameworks such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, and Self-Determination Theory provide valuable insights into employee motivation. Maslow emphasizes the fulfillment of physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs, while Herzberg distinguishes between hygiene factors and motivators that influence job satisfaction. Self-Determination Theory further highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. Applying these theories to the QSR industry helps explain how human-centric practices—such as recognition, skill development, participative management, and respectful workplace culture—can enhance employee motivation and engagement.

Despite the growing body of literature on employee motivation, there remains a limited number of studies that specifically focus on frontline employees in Quick Service Restaurants from a human-centric perspective, particularly in the Indian context. Existing studies often emphasize financial incentives and operational outcomes, while underestimating the role of emotional well-being, work-life balance, and employee voice. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive examination of motivation factors that integrates both economic and human dimensions of work.

In light of this, the present study aims to analyze the motivation factors affecting frontline employees in Quick Service Restaurants through a human-centric lens. By identifying the key intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of motivation, the study seeks to contribute to the existing literature and provide actionable recommendations for QSR managers to develop effective motivation strategies.

Ultimately, the study emphasizes that motivated and satisfied frontline employees are essential for delivering superior service quality, achieving competitive advantage, and ensuring sustainable growth in the QSR industry.

2. Review of Literature

Employee motivation has long been recognized as a critical factor influencing job performance, satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness, particularly in service-oriented industries such as Quick Service Restaurants (QSRs). Frontline employees in QSRs directly interact with customers and play a vital role in shaping service quality, brand image, and customer loyalty. As a result, understanding the factors that motivate these employees has attracted increasing attention from researchers and practitioners. Motivation refers to the internal and external forces that stimulate individuals to take action, influence their direction of behavior, and sustain effort toward achieving organizational goals. Vroom (1964) described motivation as a process that governs choice among alternative voluntary actions. Similarly, Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasized that motivation can be intrinsic, driven by personal interest and satisfaction, or extrinsic, influenced by external rewards such as pay and incentives. In the QSR context, where work is often repetitive and demanding, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play a crucial role in maintaining employee engagement.

Motivation Theories and Human-Centric Perspective

Several motivational theories provide a foundation for understanding employee behavior. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) suggests that individuals are motivated by the fulfillment of a series of needs ranging from physiological to self-actualization. In QSRs, basic needs such as wages and job security must be satisfied before higher-level needs such as recognition and personal growth can motivate employees.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1968) distinguishes between hygiene factors (salary, working conditions, company policies) and motivators (achievement, recognition, responsibility). Research indicates that while hygiene factors prevent dissatisfaction, motivators are essential for enhancing job satisfaction and motivation.

This theory supports a human-centric approach by highlighting the importance of meaningful work and recognition beyond financial rewards.

Self-Determination Theory proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000) further emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key drivers of intrinsic motivation. Applying this theory to QSRs suggests that empowering frontline employees, providing skill development opportunities, and fostering supportive relationships can significantly enhance motivation and well-being.

Motivation in the Fast-Food and QSR Industry

Several empirical studies have examined employee motivation in the fast-food and QSR sectors. Habon et al. (2019) found that young employees dominate the fast-food workforce and that motivation is influenced by incentives, training, and work environment. Their study highlights that physically demanding work requires motivated employees who can maintain service speed and quality.

Umali et al. (2013) examined incentives and motivation in selected fast-food chains and concluded that both monetary and non-monetary incentives significantly improve employee performance and job satisfaction. Similarly, Awang and Muhd Yusuf (2020) reported that rewards, training, and promotion opportunities positively affect job satisfaction among fast-food employees.

Plata et al. (2020) analyzed organizational culture in fast-food restaurants and found that supportive management and employee recognition contribute to higher motivation and engagement. Their findings emphasize the role of organizational climate in shaping employee attitudes.

Role of Job Satisfaction, Incentives, and Career Growth

Job satisfaction is closely linked to employee motivation and retention. Al-Dalahmeh et al. (2018) found a significant positive relationship between job satisfaction and employee performance, mediated by employee engagement. In the QSR sector, where turnover rates are high, satisfied employees are more likely to remain committed and deliver quality service.

Studies by Kefay and Kero (2019) and Gupta and Sharma (2022) highlight that incentive schemes, both financial and non-financial, serve as powerful motivators for frontline employees.

However, several researchers argue that incentives alone are insufficient. Ahmed and Arif (2020) emphasized that lack of clear career growth opportunities is a major cause of employee turnover in the fast-food industry.

Balinda (2023) and Fountain (2018) highlighted the importance of mentorship and training programs in enhancing employee motivation, confidence, and long-term career development. These findings align strongly with a human-centric approach, which focuses on employee growth and well-being. Research findings on the influence of demographic variables on motivation are mixed. Some studies, such as Jaurigue et al. (2023), found that demographic characteristics like age, gender, and marital status have no significant impact on motivation levels. In contrast, Umezurike (2021) suggested that individual characteristics may influence specific aspects of motivation, such as recognition preferences and career expectations. These mixed results indicate the need for further research, particularly in the QSR context.

3. Research Gap

Although extensive research exists on employee motivation, limited studies focus specifically on frontline employees in Quick Service Restaurants from a human-centric perspective, especially in the Indian context. Most existing studies emphasize financial incentives and operational outcomes, while neglecting psychological well-being, emotional support, and employee dignity. Moreover, the combined impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors on frontline employees remains underexplored. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive study that integrates human-centric motivation practices within the QSR industry.

4. Results and Discussion

Tables 1 to 4 present the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age, gender, marital status, and educational qualification. Understanding these characteristics is important, as demographic factors often shape employees' motivation, work expectations, and engagement levels in the Quick Service Restaurant (QSR) sector.

The age-wise distribution of respondents indicates that the majority of frontline employees belong to the 18–30 age group, accounting for 168 out of 288 respondents (58.30%).

This finding suggests that QSRs predominantly employ young individuals, who are generally more energetic, adaptable, and capable of handling the fast-paced and physically demanding nature of frontline service roles. This result is consistent with the findings of Habon et al. (2019), who reported that young adults are preferred in fast-food establishments due to their physical stamina, mental alertness, and ability to cope with quick service demands. From a human-centric perspective, younger employees may also seek motivation through learning opportunities, recognition, and career development, highlighting the need for structured training and growth-oriented motivation strategies in QSRs.

In terms of gender distribution, male employees constitute 52.80% (152 respondents), while female employees represent 47.20% (136 respondents). The relatively balanced gender composition indicates that QSRs provide employment opportunities to both men and women, although males slightly outnumber females. The preference for male employees may be attributed to the requirement of multitasking roles such as kitchen operations, inventory handling, and physically demanding activities, as also observed by Habon et al. (2019). However, the substantial participation of female employees reflects increasing inclusivity in the QSR workforce. From a motivation standpoint, gender-neutral policies, equal recognition, and supportive work environments are essential to enhance employee morale and engagement among frontline staff.

With regard to marital status, a significant majority of respondents (77.10%) are unmarried, while only 22.90% are married. This pattern suggests that QSRs tend to recruit unmarried employees who may have greater flexibility in terms of working hours, shift rotations, and workload. The findings align with the study of Camungay et al. (2022), which indicates that employers often prefer single employees as they are perceived to be more focused on career development and personal growth. From a human-centric approach, unmarried frontline employees may be more motivated by career advancement, skill acquisition, and financial incentives, whereas married employees may value job security and work-life balance.

The educational qualification of respondents shows that the highest proportion of employees are high school graduates (36.10%), followed by intermediate-level education (34.70%), graduates (23.60%), and postgraduates (5.60%). This distribution reflects the entry-level nature of frontline positions in QSRs, which typically require basic educational qualifications and on-the-job training rather than advanced academic credentials. This finding is consistent with Plata et al. (2020), who noted that fast-food chains often employ high school graduates or part-time students depending on operational requirements. From a motivational perspective, employees with lower educational attainment may be more influenced by extrinsic motivation factors such as wages, incentives, and job security, while those with higher education levels may seek recognition, growth opportunities, and meaningful work.

Overall, the demographic analysis highlights that frontline employees in QSRs are predominantly young, unmarried, and moderately educated individuals. These characteristics underline the importance of adopting human-centric motivation practices that address their specific needs, including fair compensation, supportive supervision, skill development, recognition, and a positive work environment. Tailoring motivation strategies to the demographic profile of employees can significantly enhance engagement, reduce turnover, and improve service quality in the QSR industry.

Table 1: Gender-wise Distribution of Respondents (n = 288)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	152	52.80
Female	136	47.20
Total	288	100.00

Table 2: Age-wise Distribution of Respondents (n = 288)

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–30	168	58.30
31–40	72	25.00
41–50	42	14.60
50 & Above	6	2.10
Total	288	100.00

Table 3: Marital Status of Respondents (n = 288)

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Married	66	22.90
Unmarried	222	77.10
Total	288	100.00

Table 4: Educational Qualification of Respondents (n = 288)

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Post Graduate	16	5.60
Graduate	68	23.60
Intermediate	100	34.70
High School	104	36.10
Total	288	100.00

Table 5: Mean Extent of Employees' Motivation in the Fast-Food Industry (Incentives and Promotions)

SN	Motivation Indicators (Incentives & Promotions)	Mean	Interpretation
1	The fast-food establishment provides incentives that encourage me to work hard.	3.68	Very High Extent
2	The incentives provided make me satisfied with my employment.	3.71	Very High Extent
3	Rewards offered by the quick service restaurant motivate me to deliver high-quality work.	3.68	Very High Extent
4	Incentives provided by the organization increase my enthusiasm toward my job.	3.75	Very High Extent
5	The organization offers a variety of incentives tailored to individual employee needs.	3.75	Very High Extent
	Composite Mean (Incentives)	3.73	Very High Extent
6	The fast-food establishment provides rewards that motivate me to improve my performance.	3.24	High Extent
7	Rewards and promotions help me progress in my career.	3.75	Very High Extent
8	The reward system increases my loyalty to the organization.	3.27	Very High Extent
9	Bonuses are used to retain skilled and talented employees.	2.95	High Extent
10	Bonuses encourage a healthy competitive environment in the workplace.	3.52	Very High Extent
	Composite Mean (Rewards & Promotions)	3.35	Very High Extent

Scale Interpretation:

3.27–4.00 = Very High Extent

2.52–3.26 = High Extent

1.75–2.51 = Low Extent

1.00–1.76 = Very Low Extent

5. Discussion

Table 5 presents the mean extent of employee motivation in the fast-food industry with respect to incentives, rewards, and promotional practices. The results indicate that most motivation indicators fall under the **"Very High Extent"** category, with mean values ranging from 3.68 to 3.75.

The composite mean score of 3.73 for incentives suggests that frontline employees perceive incentive mechanisms as highly motivating and satisfying.

These findings imply that incentive-based motivation strategies play a significant role in encouraging employees to work harder, remain enthusiastic, and deliver high-quality service. The high mean scores related to job enthusiasm and satisfaction indicate that incentives not only fulfill financial needs but also contribute positively to employees' emotional and psychological well-being—an essential aspect of the human-centric perspective.

The composite mean of 3.35 for rewards and promotions also reflects a very high extent of motivation, suggesting that career advancement opportunities, loyalty-enhancing rewards, and performance-based bonuses are effective in motivating frontline employees. However, slightly lower mean scores for retention-related bonuses (2.95) indicate scope for improvement in long-term employee retention strategies.

These findings are consistent with the study by Kefay and Kero (2019), who emphasized that incentives serve as external motivators that encourage sustained effort and improved performance. Similarly, Umali et al. (2013) concluded that incentive systems significantly enhance employee performance and job involvement in fast-food establishments. From a human-centric approach, these results highlight that motivation in QSRs is strengthened when organizations recognize employee contributions, offer growth opportunities, and address both material and psychological needs.

Overall, the results confirm that well-designed incentive and promotion systems significantly enhance motivation among frontline employees in the fast-food industry, leading to higher engagement, improved service quality, and organizational effectiveness.

6. Impact of Incentives, Benefits, and Promotion on Employee Motivation

The findings indicate that all respondents perceived employee benefits and incentives as having a substantial impact on motivation and work behavior.

A majority of the respondents reported that incentives significantly enhance employee performance by encouraging greater effort, commitment, and enthusiasm toward work. This suggests that incentive systems in fast-food establishments play a critical role in stimulating employees to deliver high-quality service, even in demanding and fast-paced work environments.

Furthermore, respondents strongly agreed that incentives contribute to reducing employee turnover, strengthening employee loyalty, and improving overall job satisfaction. From a human-centric perspective, this reflects the importance of addressing both economic and psychological needs of frontline employees. When employees feel rewarded and valued, they develop a stronger emotional connection with the organization, which enhances engagement and reduces intentions to leave.

However, with respect to employee advancement and promotion, the composite mean score was 3.35, categorized as a **very high extent**, yet the findings reveal a nuanced outcome. While promotion opportunities are perceived as important, the results suggest that promotion alone may not be sufficient to significantly motivate employees to improve performance or ensure long-term retention. This may indicate that promotional opportunities in fast-food restaurants are either limited in number, infrequent, or not clearly structured, thereby reducing their motivational impact. It also highlights a potential gap between employee expectations and organizational career progression policies.

These findings are consistent with Awang and Muhd Yusuf (2020), who noted that promotion is commonly perceived as a reward involving increased responsibilities, higher status, and improved compensation. Their study emphasized that promotion opportunities are positively associated with job satisfaction, particularly when linked with career development, leadership recognition, and personal growth support. In the fast-food industry, promotion becomes a motivating factor only when employees perceive it as attainable and aligned with their long-term career aspirations.

Additionally, promotion prospects are often influenced by employees' productivity, skill development, training participation, and accumulated work experience.

Employees who believe that sustained effort and competence will lead to advancement are more likely to remain committed to the organization. As argued by Dikshit and Jain (2017), employees prefer to stay with organizations that provide continuous learning opportunities and pathways to assume more challenging and meaningful roles. This reinforces the need for transparent and structured promotion policies within QSRs.

7. Relationship Between Demographic Factors and Employee Motivation

Table 6: Correlation Coefficients and p-values

Variables → Employees' Motivation	Correlation Coefficient (r)	r ²	Critical Value	t-value	p-value	Result
Age	0.011	0.000	1.981	0.118	0.906	Not Significant
Gender	-0.057	0.004	1.981	0.693	0.491	Not Significant
Marital Status	-0.076	0.005	1.981	-0.921	0.358	Not Significant
Qualification	-0.085	0.006	1.981	-1.027	0.305	Not Significant

Note: p-value < 0.05 indicates significance

8. Discussion

Table 6 presents the relationship between selected demographic variables and employee motivation in the fast-food industry. The results show that age, gender, marital status, and educational qualification have no statistically significant relationship with employee motivation, as all p-values are greater than the 0.05 significance level. The Pearson correlation coefficients for all variables are very low, indicating a weak or negligible association.

These findings suggest that frontline employees in the fast-food sector are motivated largely independent of their demographic characteristics. Regardless of age, gender, marital status, or educational background, employees demonstrate similar levels of motivation and commitment toward their work.

This reflects the standardized nature of frontline roles in QSRs, where motivation is more strongly influenced by organizational practices such as incentives, recognition, and supportive management rather than personal background factors.

The results align with the findings of Jaurigue et al. (2023), who observed that employee motivation and performance were not significantly affected by individual demographic characteristics. Instead, employees with positive attitudes and strong motivation exhibited higher dedication and effectiveness in performing their roles. This further supports the argument that motivation in service industries is shaped more by workplace environment and management practices than by personal attributes.

In contrast, Umezurike (2021) highlighted that while demographic factors may not influence overall motivation, they can affect specific motivational preferences. For instance, female employees were found to be more motivated by recognition and supportive supervision, while male employees showed greater motivation toward responsibility-driven roles. Similarly, employees with higher educational qualifications were often less satisfied with limited growth opportunities, whereas less experienced employees expressed dissatisfaction with compensation levels. These contrasting findings suggest that although demographic variables may not determine motivation intensity, they may influence the type of motivation that employees value most.

Moreover, the study found no significant difference in perceptions of benefits across demographic groups. However, younger and unmarried employees reported a slightly stronger positive impact of benefits on job satisfaction compared to older or married employees, indicating the relevance of customized motivation strategies.

9. Conclusions

The study concludes that motivation among frontline employees in the fast-food industry is strongly influenced by incentives, benefits, training, and career development opportunities rather than demographic characteristics. Fast-food establishments provide employees with essential skill development, job orientation, mentoring, and continuous support to enhance their performance and career growth.

Incentive systems play a significant role in improving employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

However, promotion practices in fast-food establishments appear to be less effective in motivating employees, possibly due to limited advancement opportunities or unclear promotion pathways. This highlights the need for structured career progression frameworks to retain skilled and competent employees.

The findings further confirm that employee motivation is not significantly affected by age, gender, marital status, or educational qualification. Employees remain committed to fulfilling their responsibilities regardless of personal background. Importantly, motivated employees contribute positively to service quality, customer satisfaction, organizational performance, and overall workplace harmony.

From a human-centric perspective, investing in employee development, recognizing contributions, and fostering supportive work environments are essential for enhancing motivation, engagement, and long-term sustainability in the Quick Service Restaurant industry.

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