

OPERATIONAL DRIVERS OF DIGITAL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IN FOOD RETAIL: A STRUCTURED REVIEW OF EXECUTION, RELIABILITY, AND CUSTOMER OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the operational determinants of digital customer experience (DCX) in the food retail sector through a structured review of existing literature. While prior research has predominantly focused on the relationship between customer experience and behavioral outcomes, limited attention has been given to the operational mechanisms that shape digital experiences in high-frequency, fulfilment-dependent environments.

The findings reveal that reliability and execution consistency are the primary drivers of digital customer experience, outweighing traditionally emphasized factors such as personalization and interactivity. This suggests that, in food retail, customer experience is evaluated primarily through service outcomes rather than digital interface quality alone.

The study contributes by reframing digital customer experience as an execution-driven construct, integrating insights from customer experience, service quality, and retail operations literature. It further proposes a hierarchical model in which operational performance forms the foundation of customer experience in digitally mediated retail environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital platforms in retail has transformed how customers interact with food retailers, shifting a significant portion of transactions to mobile applications and online channels. While this transformation has improved accessibility and convenience, it has also increased customer expectations regarding service reliability, delivery accuracy, and overall experience quality.

Customer experience (CX) has been widely recognized as a key driver of competitive advantage in retail (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). However, much of the existing literature conceptualizes CX primarily in terms of interface design, usability, and customer engagement. This perspective is increasingly insufficient in sectors such as food retail, where the final service outcome—delivery accuracy, timing, and product condition—plays a critical role in shaping customer perceptions.

In practice, customers do not evaluate digital platforms in isolation. Instead, they assess the entire service process, including backend operations such as order fulfillment and logistics execution. Failures in these areas often outweigh the benefits of well-designed digital interfaces, yet the integration of operational factors into digital customer experience frameworks remains limited.

Despite this, the integration of operational factors into digital customer experience frameworks remains limited. Existing research has largely treated CX as a front-end construct, with insufficient attention to the role of execution reliability and service consistency.

This study addresses this gap by examining the operational drivers of digital customer experience in the food retail sector through a structured review of existing literature. It argues that digital customer experience should be understood as an execution-based outcome, shaped by the alignment between digital platforms and operational processes.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a structured literature review approach to synthesize and critically evaluate existing research on digital customer experience (DCX) and its operational determinants in food retail contexts.

Unlike a traditional narrative review, a structured review follows a systematic and transparent process for identifying, selecting, and analyzing relevant studies. This approach enhances the reliability of findings and reduces selection bias by applying predefined criteria throughout the review process.

The method is particularly appropriate for this study, as it allows the integration of insights from diverse research streams, including customer experience, service quality, retail operations, and omnichannel management, into a unified analytical framework.

2.2 Study Selection Criteria

Studies were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure consistency and relevance.

Inclusion Criteria:

Peer-reviewed academic articles or high-quality industry reports
Studies addressing customer experience, service quality, or retail operations
Research that includes digital or omnichannel contexts
Studies discussing operational factors such as reliability, fulfillment, or delivery

Exclusion Criteria:

Purely technical or UX/UI design studies without operational relevance
Studies unrelated to retail or service environments
Duplicate or non-English publications
Opinion-based articles lacking empirical or theoretical grounding

2.3 Screening Process

The selection process was conducted in multiple stages:

- Initial Identification: A broad search generated an initial pool of studies based on keyword relevance.
- Title and Abstract Screening: Irrelevant studies were excluded based on title and abstract review.
- Full-Text Review: Remaining studies were assessed in detail to ensure alignment with the research focus.
- Final Selection: A refined set of studies was retained for thematic analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis Method

A thematic analysis approach was applied to identify recurring patterns and relationships across the selected studies.

The analysis followed three main steps:

- Open Coding: Key concepts and recurring themes related to digital customer experience and operational performance were identified.
- Categorization: Similar concepts were grouped into broader categories, such as reliability, execution consistency, and usability.
- Theme Synthesis: Final themes were developed by comparing findings across studies, focusing on areas of convergence and divergence.

This approach enabled the study to move beyond descriptive summaries and develop a structured understanding of the operational drivers of DCX.

2.5 Reliability and Rigor

To enhance the rigor of the review, the study applied the following measures:

- Use of predefined selection criteria
- Transparent documentation of the screening process
- Cross-comparison of findings across multiple sources
- Focus on well-established and frequently cited studies

These steps help ensure that the findings are grounded in consistent and credible evidence.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Conceptualizing Digital Customer Experience

Digital customer experience (DCX) refers to the customer's holistic perception formed through interactions with digital touchpoints across the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). These touchpoints include websites, mobile applications, and third-party platforms that mediate the interaction between customers and retailers.

Early research on customer experience emphasized emotional and cognitive responses to service encounters (Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl, 2017). However, more recent studies have shifted toward viewing customer experience as a multi-layered construct, shaped not only by interface design but also by system performance and service execution (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020).

This shift is particularly relevant in digital retail environments, where the boundary between front-end interaction and backend operations is increasingly blurred. As a result, DCX cannot be fully understood without considering the operational processes that support digital interactions.

3.2 From Interface Quality to System-Based Experience

A dominant stream of research has traditionally focused on interface-related dimensions of digital experience, such as usability, aesthetics, and interactivity (Rose et al., 2012). These studies suggest that ease of use and visual design play a significant role in shaping customer perceptions.

However, more recent work challenges this perspective by emphasizing that customer experience is not limited to interface design. Instead, it emerges from a broader system that includes operational elements such as order processing, inventory availability, and delivery performance (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020).

This creates a critical distinction:

Interface-centric view: CX is driven by design and usability

System-centric view: CX is driven by integrated execution across touchpoints

The system-centric perspective is particularly relevant in food retail, where the outcome of the service (e.g., delivered product condition) is as important as the interaction itself.

3.3 Operational Drivers of Customer Experience in Retail

Service quality literature has long identified reliability and consistency as key determinants of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). In digital retail, these dimensions take on new forms, including:

System reliability (platform stability)

Fulfillment accuracy (correct orders)

Delivery consistency (timing and condition)

Omnichannel research further reinforces the importance of operational integration. Verhoef, Kannan and Inman (2015) argue that seamless customer experiences require alignment between digital interfaces and physical operations. Failures in this alignment often result in fragmented experiences, even when digital platforms are well designed.

Recent industry studies also support this view, showing that logistics performance and last-mile delivery are critical drivers of customer experience in digital retail environments.

Food retail presents unique challenges that amplify the importance of operational performance. Unlike other retail sectors, food products are often perishable, time-sensitive, and subject to quality variation during handling and delivery.

Empirical research in this sector indicates that customers place greater emphasis on functional outcomes than on experiential features (Jarrar, 2026).

However, when compared with broader literature, these findings suggest that the importance of reliability is not unique to Saudi Arabia but reflects a more general pattern in high-frequency, service-dependent retail environments.

3.4 Customer Outcomes: Satisfaction, Trust, and Loyalty

The relationship between customer experience and behavioral outcomes has been widely studied. Satisfaction is often considered the immediate outcome of experience, reflecting the degree to which expectations are met (Oliver, 1980). Trust, on the other hand, becomes particularly important in digital environments where customers rely on service providers without direct control over product selection or delivery (Gefen, Karahanna and Straub, 2003).

Loyalty is typically conceptualized as a long-term outcome, encompassing repeat purchase behavior and positive word-of-mouth (Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, 1996).

While many studies confirm a positive relationship between CX and loyalty, recent research suggests that this relationship is often indirect, mediated by satisfaction and trust. This is especially relevant in digital contexts, where trust in system performance and service reliability plays a central role.

3.5 Identified Gap in the Literature

Despite extensive research on customer experience and its outcomes, two key gaps remain:

- Limited integration of operational factors: Most studies treat customer experience as a front-end construct, with insufficient attention to backend execution.
- Lack of sector-specific synthesis: Few studies systematically examine how operational drivers shape digital customer experience in food retail environments.

As a result, existing literature does not fully explain how digital experience translates into customer outcomes in contexts where operational performance is critical.

3.6 Positioning of the Current Study

This study addresses these gaps by:

Shifting the focus from experience as interaction → experience as execution

Integrating insights from customer experience, service quality, and retail operations

Providing a sector-specific synthesis for food retail

The study proposes that digital customer experience is fundamentally shaped by operational drivers, and that these drivers play a central role in determining customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty.

4. FINDINGS

The thematic analysis of the selected studies reveals that digital customer experience in food retail is shaped primarily by operational execution rather than interface design alone. Across the reviewed literature, five dominant themes emerge: reliability, execution consistency, usability, transparency, and personalization.

These themes reflect a shift from traditional experience models toward a more integrated understanding of digital and operational performance.

4.1 Reliability as the Core Determinant

Reliability emerges as the most consistently emphasized factor across the reviewed studies. It refers to the ability of the system and the retailer to deliver services accurately and without failure.

In digital retail contexts, reliability includes:

- Accurate order processing
- System stability
- Error-free transactions

Service quality literature has long identified reliability as a key driver of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1988). However, in digital food retail, reliability extends beyond system performance to include fulfillment accuracy and delivery outcomes.

Empirical evidence from food retail further reinforces this finding. For example, Jarrar (2026) highlights that reliability significantly influences customer perceptions and behavioral outcomes in Saudi food retail.

4.2 Execution Consistency and Predictability

The second dominant theme is execution consistency, defined as the ability to deliver a predictable and standardized service across repeated interactions.

Customers expect:

- Similar delivery times
- Consistent product quality
- Stable service performance

Inconsistency—such as receiving different product quality or experiencing variable delivery times—negatively impacts customer trust, even when individual transactions are successful.

Omnichannel literature supports this finding by emphasizing the importance of seamless and consistent experiences across touchpoints (Verhoef, Kannan and Inman, 2015).

4.3 Usability as an Enabling Factor

Usability remains an important but secondary driver of digital customer experience. It includes:

- Ease of navigation
- Speed of interaction
- Simplicity of transaction processes

Earlier research placed strong emphasis on usability as a primary determinant of digital experience (Rose et al., 2012). However, the current synthesis suggests that usability functions more as an enabler rather than a differentiator.

In other words:

Poor usability → negative experience

Good usability → expected baseline

4.4 Transparency and Information Visibility

Transparency refers to the availability of clear and timely information during the customer journey. This includes:

- Order tracking
- Delivery status updates
- Communication regarding delays or issues

Studies indicate that transparency enhances customer confidence by reducing uncertainty, particularly in digital environments where customers lack direct control over the process.

While transparency does not directly create satisfaction, it plays a critical role in maintaining trust during service disruptions.

4.5 Personalization and Interactivity

Personalization and interactivity are frequently discussed in digital experience literature but appear to have a relatively weaker impact in food retail contexts.

These include:

- Product recommendations
- Customized offers
- Interactive features (chatbots, feedback tools)

While such features enhance engagement, their contribution to overall experience is limited when core operational issues are present.

Table 1: Thematic Synthesis of Operational Drivers of DCX

Theme	Description	Strength Across Studies	Role in CX
Reliability	Accuracy and system stability	Very High	Core driver
Execution Consistency	Predictable service delivery	High	Trust builder
Usability	Ease of use and navigation	Moderate	Enabler
Transparency	Information visibility	Moderate	Risk reducer
Personalization	Tailored interaction	Low–Moderate	Enhancer

4.6 Cross-Theme Integration

The findings indicate that these themes do not operate independently but interact to shape overall customer experience.

- Reliability and consistency form the core foundation
- Usability enables interaction with the system
- Transparency supports trust during uncertainty
- Personalization enhances engagement but does not compensate for operational failure

This layered structure suggests that digital customer experience should be understood as a hierarchical system, where operational performance underpins all higher-level experience elements.

4.7 Key Finding of the Study

The most significant insight from the analysis is: Digital customer experience in food retail is primarily determined by operational execution rather than digital interface quality alone.

This finding challenges dominant perspectives in the literature that prioritize design and interaction as the main drivers of experience.

Instead, the results suggest that:

- Customers judge experience based on outcomes, not interfaces
- Operational failures override digital excellence
- Consistency and reliability are more critical than innovation in features

5. Discussion

This study set out to examine the operational determinants of digital customer experience (DCX) in the food retail sector. The findings indicate a clear pattern: customer experience in this context is shaped primarily by service execution and operational performance, rather than digital interface quality alone.

5.1 Reframing Digital Customer Experience

A key implication of the findings is the need to reconsider how digital customer experience is conceptualized. Much of the existing literature has emphasized interface-related dimensions such as usability, aesthetics, and interactivity (Rose et al., 2012). While these factors remain relevant, the results of this study suggest that they do not fully explain how customer experience is formed in operationally intensive environments.

Instead, the findings support a system-based perspective, where experience emerges from the interaction between digital platforms and underlying service processes (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Customers do not separate the digital interface from the outcome of the service; both are evaluated as part of a single experience.

5.2 Operational Execution as the Primary Driver

The prominence of reliability and execution consistency indicates that customers evaluate digital experiences based on whether the service is delivered as expected.

This extends traditional service quality theory, where reliability is a key determinant of satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). In digital food retail, reliability includes not only system performance but also fulfillment accuracy, delivery timing, and product condition.

Customers prioritize:

- Receiving the correct items
- Receiving them on time
- Receiving them in acceptable condition

5.3 The Conditional Role of Usability and Experience Features

The findings also clarify the role of usability, personalization, and interactivity.

Usability remains essential but functions as a baseline requirement rather than a differentiator. A platform that is difficult to use creates immediate dissatisfaction, but improvements beyond usability do not significantly enhance the experience if operational issues persist.

Similarly, personalization and interactive features contribute to engagement but have limited influence when core service performance is inconsistent.

5.4 Trust as a Function of Consistency

Execution consistency plays a critical role in building customer trust. In digital retail, customers rely on the retailer's ability to deliver without direct control over product selection or service execution.

Repeated consistency reduces uncertainty and strengthens trust over time. Conversely, variability in service performance undermines confidence, even if individual transactions are satisfactory.

5.5 Sector-Specific Dynamics of Food Retail

The findings highlight the importance of context in shaping customer experience. Food retail differs from other sectors due to:

- High purchase frequency
- Time sensitivity
- Dependence on logistics and delivery

These characteristics shift the focus of customer evaluation from experiential design to service outcomes. As a result, conclusions drawn from general digital retail studies may not fully apply to food retail environments.

5.6 Integration into a Hierarchical Framework

The study proposes that digital customer experience can be understood as a hierarchical structure:

- Foundation: Reliability and execution consistency
- Enabler: Usability and system performance
- Enhancer: Personalization and interactivity

This structure suggests that higher-level experience elements depend on the stability of underlying operational factors. Without a reliable foundation, improvements in usability or personalization are unlikely to produce meaningful outcomes.

5.7 Contribution to Existing Literature

This study extends existing research in three key ways:

- It shifts the focus of digital customer experience from interface design to service execution
- It integrates operational considerations into customer experience theory
- It provides a sector-specific perspective, highlighting how the importance of different experience drivers varies in food retail

While prior studies, including Jarrar (2026), have identified the importance of reliability, this study positions it within a broader framework, demonstrating its central role in shaping overall experience.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined the operational determinants of digital customer experience (DCX) in the food retail sector through a structured synthesis of existing literature. The findings demonstrate that digital customer experience in this context is primarily shaped by operational execution rather than digital interface quality alone.

Reliability and execution consistency emerged as the most critical drivers of customer experience, while usability functions as a necessary but insufficient condition. In contrast, personalization and interactivity play a secondary role and contribute to experience enhancement only when core operational performance is stable.

These findings suggest that digital transformation in food retail should not be viewed solely as a technological upgrade but as an integrated system involving both digital platforms and operational processes. The study

highlights that customer experience is ultimately evaluated based on outcomes—specifically, whether the service is delivered accurately, consistently, and as expected.

By shifting the focus from interface-centric models to execution-based understanding, this study provides a more realistic perspective on how digital customer experience is formed in operationally intensive retail environments.

7. IMPLICATIONS

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the customer experience literature in three main ways.

First, it challenges the dominant assumption that digital customer experience is primarily driven by interface design and engagement features. Instead, it positions operational execution as a central determinant of experience. Second, it integrates insights from service operations and omnichannel retail into customer experience theory, demonstrating that experience should be understood as a system-level outcome rather than a touchpoint-specific construct.

Third, the study introduces a hierarchical understanding of DCX, where operational reliability forms the foundation, usability acts as an enabler, and experiential features serve as enhancements. This layered perspective provides a more structured framework for analyzing customer experience across different retail contexts.

7.2 Managerial Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings offer several important implications for food retailers and digital platform managers.

First, organizations should prioritize operational reliability and consistency before investing in advanced digital features. Improvements in interface design or personalization are unlikely to generate positive outcomes if core service delivery remains inconsistent.

Second, digital customer experience should be managed as a cross-functional responsibility, involving coordination between technology, logistics, supply chain, and customer service teams.

Third, performance measurement systems should expand beyond traditional CX metrics to include operational indicators, such as order accuracy, delivery timeliness, and service consistency.

Finally, retailers should recognize that in high-frequency sectors such as food retail, customers value predictability and trust more than innovation in features. Consistent performance over time is more effective in building long-term relationships than occasional improvements in digital interaction.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

8.1 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the research is based on a structured review of existing literature and does not include primary data. As a result, the findings rely on the interpretation and synthesis of prior studies rather than direct empirical validation. Second, the analysis focuses primarily on the food retail sector, which has specific characteristics such as perishability, delivery dependency, and high transaction frequency. These factors may limit the generalizability of the findings to other retail sectors.

Third, while the study identifies key operational drivers of digital customer experience, it does not quantify the relative impact of these factors or test causal relationships between variables.

8.2 Future Research

Future research can build on this study in several directions.

First, empirical studies using quantitative methods such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) could be conducted to test the proposed relationships between operational drivers, digital customer experience, and customer outcomes.

Second, future work could explore the role of moderating variables, such as market competition, customer demographics, or platform type, in shaping the relationship between operational performance and customer experience.

Third, comparative studies across different retail sectors could help determine whether the operational dominance observed in food retail applies to other industries or is context-specific.

Finally, qualitative research involving interviews with customers and managers could provide deeper insights into how operational failures influence customer perceptions and decision-making processes.

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