

## Overbooking and customer reactions in tourism: Evidence from restaurants

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### Abstract

*This study explores the practice of overbooking in restaurants and its impact on customer reactions, drawing on insights from interviews with 15 participants. The research aims to understand the nuances of these customer experiences and the challenges restaurant staff face in managing overbooked situations. Through qualitative interviews, participants shared their experiences and perceptions, highlighting a range of emotional and practical difficulties. Participant opinions revealed transparency and effective communication are crucial in mitigating negative reactions. The findings suggest that while overbooking can financially benefit restaurants, maintaining customer satisfaction and loyalty necessitates a delicate balance. The study provides for restaurant managers, emphasizing customer relationship management's importance in accurately predicting and managing reservation flows.*

**Keywords:** Overbooking, Customer reactions, Restaurants, No-show

### 1. Introduction

Overbooking in service industries such as restaurants, airlines, and hotels is crucial in maximizing revenue and optimizing resource utilization. Overbooking involves accepting more reservations than available capacity (Alexandrov & Lariviere, 2012), anticipating a certain percentage of customers will not show up. This strategy helps service businesses avoid losses due to no-shows and cancellations, ensuring that resources are fully utilized and revenue opportunities are noticed (Antonio et al., 2017, 2019). Understanding customers' reactions to overbooking is crucial as it directly affects customer satisfaction, loyalty, and overall business reputation.

The main reason for overbooking in restaurants is to provide service at maximum capacity by compensating customers for no-show rates (Chan et al., 2007; Kimes & Robson, 2004). No-show refers to customers who made a reservation but have yet to come to the restaurant, which causes restaurants to lose revenue. The overbooking strategy is applied to minimize this loss and prevent tables from remaining empty. In this way, restaurant businesses aim to maximize their income by continually working at close to total capacity. Overbooking is more important than revenue growth. It also ensures efficient use of resources. Restaurants can efficiently plan and manage staff, food, and other resources (Chen, 2016; Roy et al., 2022). This increases profitability by

reducing operating costs. Additionally, better-managing customer flow during busy times is critical to maintaining service quality.

Similar overbooking strategies are implemented in other service sectors (Demir et al., 2023; Sierag et al., 2017; Vinod, 2022). Airlines and hotels, particularly, overbook customers, considering their no-show rates. Overbooking airline tickets ensures that each flight is close to total capacity. Hotels, on the other hand, apply similar strategies to maximize room occupancy rates (Ivanov, 2015; Phumchusri & Maneesophon, 2014). These practices target efficient use of resources and income increase in all service sectors. One main factor that forces restaurants to overbook is the highly competitive environment. Restaurants use this strategy to avoid losing customers and ensure constant occupancy. Additionally, tight margins in the food and beverage industry drive restaurants to generate maximum revenue from each customer. Overbooking is an effective method used for this purpose.

Overbooking is a strategy that businesses must carefully manage, considering customer satisfaction (Chiang, 2023; Tyagi & Bolia, 2021). If customers are still looking for a seat even though they have made a reservation or have to wait a long time, this can lead to negative customer experiences and loss of loyalty. Therefore, restaurants must develop effective communication strategies to provide customers with

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accurate information and offer alternative solutions. Overbooking is a critical strategy for restaurants and other service businesses (Haynes & Egan, 2020; McGuire & Kimes 2006). In addition to advantages such as increased revenue and efficient use of resources, customer satisfaction and loyalty should also be considered. Restaurants must constantly analyze and optimize their overbooking strategies to achieve this balance. In this way, they can increase their financial performance and maintain customer satisfaction.

## 2. Literature

Overbooking is a strategy that businesses frequently use to maximize their revenue, especially in the service sector (Hayes et al., 2021; Krawczyk et al., 2016; Zhang & Pippins, 2021). Overbooking in restaurants means accepting reservations beyond the capacity available at a particular time. In other words, overbooking is when a business undertakes to provide services by taking more reservations than its capacity. Although this strategy is widely used, especially in the airline and hotel industries, it also has an important place in the restaurant business. This strategy is used to offset customer cancellations or no-shows (Tse & Poon, 2017; Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007). When implemented correctly, overbooking minimizes revenue losses by increasing the occupancy rates of restaurants.

Overbooking strategy plays an important role in ensuring the economic sustainability of restaurants (Gregorash, 2016; Oh & Su, 2022). No-shows and last-minute cancellations can cause restaurants to lose unexpected revenue. Overbooking helps prevent such losses and allows restaurants to manage operational costs more efficiently (Heo et al., 2013; Thompson, 2002). Additionally, accepting reservations above capacity during periods of high demand helps restaurants optimize their occupancy rates.

The biggest challenge in implementing the overbooking strategy is its negative effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Fasone & Faldetta, 2013; Guo et al., 2016). Reservations that exceed capacity may extend customer wait times and even result in some customers not receiving service (Chen et al., 2018; Parsa et al., 2020). This can lead to customer complaints and negative feedback. There may also be long-term negative consequences, such as repeat customer loss and bad reputation (Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007). Restaurants that practice overbooking should develop effective customer relationship management strategies to minimize such risks (Tang et al., 2019; Tse & Poon, 2017).

The overbooking strategy, which means that businesses such as hotels and restaurants in the tourism sector receive reservations above their current capacity, aims to ensure that businesses reach maximum occupancy rates by protecting against reservation cancellations and no-show situations (Hwang 2008; Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007). However, overbooking has various positive and negative aspects for both businesses and customers (Kimes et al., 1998; Thompson & Kwortnik Jr, 2008).

The biggest advantage of overbooking for businesses is that it minimizes revenue loss (Vajpai, 2018; Vidotto et al., 2007). Reservation cancellations and no-show rates may be high in hotels. For example, a business may experience a 10 percent rate of cancellations and no-shows. Through overbooking, it can compensate for these losses and reduce the likelihood of its capacity remaining vacant. On the other hand, overbooking also has some risks for businesses. A hotel that overbooks its capacity may be forced to divert customers to other hotels when all rooms are full, and fewer cancellations are expected. This may lead to customer dissatisfaction and loss of the business's reputation. Similarly, restaurants may face complaints from customers who need help finding a seat despite making a reservation, which may negatively affect customer loyalty in the long run.

Table 1. Reasons for overbooking and its challenges

Cancellation and no-show situations	Businesses overbook to compensate for these losses by anticipating that some of the customers who made reservations will cancel or not come.
Financial efficiency	Overbooking helps businesses maximize their revenue so that empty tables do not lead to revenue loss.
High demand periods	Overbooking is used more frequently due to high demand, especially during holidays or special days.
Customer dissatisfaction	Customers who cannot find a seat despite reservation may express dissatisfaction on social media and online platforms, which may negatively affect the business's reputation.
Operational challenges	Overbooking can cause operational difficulties and put extra pressure on staff, especially during busy times.
Customer loyalty	Businesses that overbook frequently may experience a loss of loyal customers. Customers tend not to choose businesses whose reliability they question.

Sources: Adapted from Katz (1997), McDougall and Levesque (1999)

From the customers' perspective, the negative aspects of overbooking are more obvious (Phumchusri & Maneesophon, 2014; Toh & Dekay, 2002). When a hotel customer cannot find a room at his booked hotel, he may be disappointed, and his holiday plans may be ruined. Similarly, a person who makes a reservation for a private dinner will be very disappointed if they cannot find a seat when they go to the restaurant, which will seriously negatively affect the customer experience. However, overbooking can sometimes have positive consequences for customers as well. For example, if a hotel customer cannot find a room at the hotel he has booked, he may be directed to a more luxurious hotel by the hotel, which may be an advantage for the customer. Likewise, restaurants may compensate for overbooking by offering free drinks or discounts to their customers, which can increase customer satisfaction.

Overbooking significantly affects both businesses and customers in the tourism industry (Liang & Anderson, 2023). While businesses use this strategy to maximize their revenues and minimize empty capacity, they must also consider customer satisfaction. Customers, on the other hand, should be prepared for possible disappointments in case of overbooking and evaluate the compensation efforts of the businesses. Managing overbooking in a balanced way can produce positive results for both parties.

### 3. Methodology

This study was carried out according to the decision of the University of South Africa, Scientific Ethics Committee, which met on 20.03.2024 and was numbered 2024/03-01.

#### 3.1. Research design

This study used qualitative research methods to interview 22 restaurant managers. Qualitative research aims to understand people's experiences, perceptions, and emotions deeply. This method allows participants to express their opinions and experiences more freely. The interviews were designed to understand how restaurants implement overbooking strategies, their challenges in the process, and how they manage customer reactions. The research data collection process was carried out face-to-face and through online platforms. Interview questions were open-ended and designed to allow participants to share their experiences in detail.

#### 3.2. Participant profile

The 22 restaurant managers who participated in the research worked in restaurants of different types and sizes operating in Johannesburg. Participants were selected from managers who had at least five years of experience in restaurant management and implemented the overbooking strategy.

#### 3.3. Data collection

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at times convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted an average of 45-60 minutes, and the participants were asked questions about the overbooking strategy, customer reactions, difficulties encountered, and methods of dealing with these difficulties. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and analyzed.

#### 3.4. Data analysis

The data obtained was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The thematic analysis enables the identification of the main themes in the data and the examination of patterns of these themes. The data were coded in this process, and main themes were created by combining similar codes. These themes offered essential clues in understanding the different dimensions of the overbooking strategy and customer reactions.

Research questions:

RQ-1: What are the reasons that push overbooking?

RQ-2: What kind of reaction does the overbooking cause from customers?

RQ-3: What are the solution suggestions for the problems encountered with overbooking?

## 4. Findings

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participants					
No	Role	Gender	Age	Experi- ence	Education level
P1	GM	Male	45	30	High school
P2	GRM	Female	35	10	University
P3	DGM	Male	39	14	High school
P4	RM	Male	33	16	University
P5	Chief	Male	41	24	High school
P6	Chief	Male	32	14	University
P7	RM	Female	38	18	University
P8	GRM	Female	40	21	High school
P9	RM	Male	36	20	University
P10	RM	Male	35	19	University
P11	GRM	Female	39	17	University
P12	Chief	Male	42	24	High school
P13	Chief	Female	39	22	High school
P14	Chief	Male	34	24	University
P15	GRM	Male	32	11	University

P: Participants, GM: General manager, GRM: Guest relations manager, DGM: Deputy general manager, RM: Reservation manager.

These demographic data show no gender balance within the analyzed group, with men being more represented. The average age of the participants is concentrated in the middle age group, and their professional experience is relatively high. In terms of education level, it is observed that the majority are university graduates. In distributing duties, guest relations manager and chef positions are at the forefront (Table 2).

Data from the interviews provide essential information about restaurant managers' challenges when implementing overbooking strategies and customer reactions. Participants stated that overbooking strategies are especially effective during high-demand periods (P4, P5, P8, P11, P15). However, they also emphasized that this strategy created dissatisfaction among some customer groups (P1, P3, P6, P9, P13). Overbooking also puts severe pressure on restaurant staff. As the customer density increases, the workload and stress level of the staff also increases. This situation can both reduce service quality and lead to employee dissatisfaction.

#### 4.1. Customer reactions

Most participants stated that overbooking practices lead to customer complaints. These participants (P3, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10, P12, P14, P15) stated that dissatisfaction was the most severe difficulty they experienced with customers due to overbooking. Especially customers who make reservations but need help finding a seat experience great disappointment

(P2, P7, P14). Such situations result in customer dissatisfaction and negative feedback. Two participants (P10 and P13) said, "Customers who make a reservation and come to our restaurant and cannot find a seat usually damage our reputation by making negative comments on social media."

Some prominent comments on this theme are as follows:

P-4: "We understand that customers have to wait due to overbooking, but this practice is financially necessary for us. No-show rates are high, and we must compensate for these losses."

P-9: "We always try to provide the best service possible to minimize customer reactions. However, leaving empty tables due to no-show rates means a great loss for our business."

P-13: "Some customers have difficulty understanding the reason for overbooking, so we clearly explain the situation and why we do this practice. Most of the time, our explanations are met with understanding."

P-1: "To minimize negative reactions from customers, we notify them beforehand that we are overbooking. We offer them free drinks or dessert when they have to wait."

P-7: "We do our best to reduce waiting times, but it is impossible to prevent all customer reactions. Still, as a business, we have to take this risk because we cannot afford to lose revenue."

#### 4.2. Customer loyalty

Some participants (P4, P6, P9) stated that the overbooking strategy could negatively affect customer loyalty in the long term. Customers who encounter frequent overbooking tend to turn to other restaurants, questioning their reliability. This can lead to restaurants losing loyal customers. Some prominent comments on this theme are as follows:

P-3: "We know customer loyalty is important, but losing revenue can lead to bigger problems in the long run. We carefully overbook to maintain this balance."

P-10: "We alleviate the effects of overbooking by offering special privileges to our loyal customers. We provide special discounts and priority booking opportunities to make them feel less like this."

P-14: "We explain that overbooking is essential to maintain customer loyalty. Customers who understand how this affects operating costs can tolerate the situation."

P-5: "We win the hearts of our customers with loyalty programs. By offering special offers to customers victimized by overbooking, we ensure that they return."

P-12: "To not lose customer loyalty, we produce fast and effective solutions in overbooking cases. In this way, our customers' loyalty to us increases instead of decreasing."

#### 4.3. Solution suggestions

Some managers (P1, P2, P5, P7, P11, P13) emphasized the importance of effective customer communication in case of overbooking. Restaurant managers have developed

various strategies to minimize customer dissatisfaction caused by overbooking. These strategies include reviewing reservation policies, improving customer information systems, increasing staff training, using customer relationship management (CRM) software, handling customer complaints quickly and effectively, and offering alternative solutions offers (for example, complimentary drinks or discounted meals). Additionally, some restaurants aim to ensure customer satisfaction by providing alternative solutions in case of overbooking (for example, directing them to another branch). Some participants (P2, P5, P8, P12, P15) said, "We track customer complaints through our CRM system and resolve them quickly to minimize customer dissatisfaction."

Some prominent comments on this theme are as follows:

P-2: "To reduce the negative effects of overbooking, we provide customers with more accurate information. For example, we indicate the possibility of wait times when booking and offer alternative options."

P-8: "We make customers more comfortable by creating waiting areas. Additionally, we aim to increase customer satisfaction by offering free drinks and snacks during the waiting period."

P-11: "We are making more accurate predictions by improving our reservation system. We are trying to minimize the effects of overbooking by better-analyzing no-show rates and reservation cancellations."

P-6: "To maintain customer loyalty, we offer them alternative time slots. We also give customers discounts and priority on future bookings in case of overbooking."

P-15: "We organize information campaigns explaining to customers why overbooking is necessary. In this way, our customers can understand this situation better and act more tolerantly."

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

Food and beverage services and restaurant features are important in international events (Demir & Alper, 2021). Therefore, overbooking in restaurants is an important issue that cannot be ignored. The findings of this study reveal both positive and negative aspects of the overbooking strategy in restaurants. Overbooking can help restaurants maximize their revenue and increase operational efficiency. However, its negative effects on customer dissatisfaction and loyalty should be addressed. Although the overbooking strategy in restaurants has the potential to improve business efficiency, it carries significant risks in terms of customer satisfaction. Therefore, managers must manage this strategy carefully and develop solutions to minimize customer reactions.

Overbooking in restaurants offers some important advantages for businesses (Alexandrov & Lariviere, 2012). First, it helps restaurants minimize revenue loss. Customers who make reservations but don't show up or cancel at the

last minute can leave restaurants with empty tables, resulting in lost potential revenue. Overbooking allows restaurants to compensate for such situations and increase their income by maximizing occupancy rates. On the other hand, overbooking also carries some risks for businesses. Receiving reservations that are within the restaurant's capacity may cause customer dissatisfaction. Customers still looking for a seat despite making a reservation, especially during busy times, may experience great disappointment, damaging the business's reputation. People's complaints and negative comments can cause the restaurant to lose customers in the long run.

The negative aspects of overbooking for customers are obvious (Antonio et al., 2017). Not finding a seat at a restaurant you have booked can be a huge disappointment, especially when a special event or important dinner is planned. This negatively affects the customer experience and may raise questions about the restaurant's reliability. Customers may need help finding another alternative when faced with such a situation (Kimes & Robson 2004). However, overbooking can sometimes have positive consequences for customers. For example, restaurants may try to compensate by offering free drinks, desserts, or discounts to customers who need help finding a seat due to overbooking. Such gestures can increase customer satisfaction and strengthen customers' loyalty to the restaurant. Additionally, customers can be made to feel special with such offers.

Restaurants should manage their overbooking strategy carefully (Tang et al., 2019; Tse & Poon, 2017). While they try to maximize their revenues without ignoring customer satisfaction, they should be careful not to affect customer experience negatively. It is important for restaurant employees to be trained and to approach customers politely and understanding to maintain customer satisfaction in case of overbooking (Kimes, 2004, 2011; Nazifi et al., 2021). Additionally, handling customer complaints quickly and effectively can protect the business's reputation. As a result, overbooking in restaurants requires a careful balance for both businesses and customers. While businesses use this strategy to increase their revenues and minimize empty tables, they should prioritize customer satisfaction. On the other hand, customers should be prepared for possible disruptions in case of overbooking and evaluate the company's compensation efforts. Managing this balance well can produce positive results for both businesses and customers.

### 5.1. Theoretical implications

This study significantly contributes to the existing literature on implementing overbooking strategies. To fill the gaps in the literature, it details how restaurant managers implement overbooking strategy and their effects on customer reactions. In addition, practical applications of customer relationship management and complaint management are also discussed within the theoretical framework.

This study shows that the overbooking strategy is important in restaurant management in terms of customer

satisfaction and business efficiency. The literature's mention of overbooking and the reasons for its implementation reveal this strategy's potential benefits and risks for businesses. Additionally, this study contributes significantly to understanding the effects of overbooking on customer reactions.

### 5.2. Practical implications

Restaurant managers should take various measures to increase customer satisfaction when implementing overbooking strategies. This study's findings emphasize the importance of restaurants effectively managing customer complaints using CRM software. Additionally, proactive communication strategies should be developed to minimize customer dissatisfaction. Restaurants must adopt more flexible and customer-focused approaches to manage customer expectations and anticipate possible dissatisfaction.

When implementing an overbooking strategy, restaurant managers should develop strategies that balance customer satisfaction and business efficiency. In this context, improving customer communication and information processes is very important. Additionally, staff training and optimizing operational processes are critical in reducing the negative effects of overbooking.

This study provides valuable information to restaurant managers on implementing overbooking strategies more effectively. As competition increases in the restaurant industry, innovative and customer-oriented strategies are inevitable to increase customer satisfaction and ensure loyalty.

### 5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Since this study is limited to restaurants operating in Johannesburg, the generalizability of the findings can be increased by conducting similar studies in different cities and countries. Additionally, studies can be conducted on larger sample groups using quantitative research methods, and different dimensions of the overbooking strategy can be examined in more detail.

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### **Author contribution**

The author carried out the research design and implementation, analysis, and writing of the article himself without using AI applications.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author reported no potential competing interest.

### **Ethics committee approval**

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