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Artificial Intelligence in the Restaurant Industry: Transforming Experiences, Operations, and Finances

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Abstract

The rapid diffusion of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the food service industry by reshaping customer experiences, streamlining operations, and strengthening financial management. This paper provides a narrative synthesis of academic and industry sources published between 2020 and 2024, exploring how AI applications are associated with changes in customer experiences, workflow management, financial operations, and implementation risks. Ranging from kiosks to predictive inventory systems, restaurants are increasingly adopting new technologies to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and meet customer expectations. Evidence from case studies and industry reports suggests that AI integration is linked to enhanced personalization, optimized labor management, and reduced waste, particularly among global restaurant chains seeking to remain competitive. However, these benefits are constrained by high implementation costs, data privacy concerns, and the reduction of human interaction. Overall, this review highlights both the promise and the limitations of AI in the food service sector, emphasizing that its transformative potential depends on careful integration, ethical governance, and sustainable technological adaptation. This narrative synthesis is intentionally framed to be accessible to both academic readers and industry practitioners, emphasizing applied insights relevant to restaurant managers and decision-makers rather than extensive theoretical modeling.

Keywords

AI Technology, Restaurant Operations, Customer Experience, Workflow Optimization, Labor Management

1. Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the food service industry, making it increasingly essential for businesses to adopt AI technologies to remain competitive and meet evolving customer demands. The global AI market is expected to grow from approximately US $235 billion in 2024 to over US $631 billion by 2028, underscoring the speed and scale at which AI-driven solution are reshaping commercial sectors, including hospitality and food service (Perrone-Goldstein, Lee, & Rauch, 2025). With technological progress advancing at an unprecedented rate, restaurants that fail to integrate AI are likely to fall behind in an increasingly competitive environment. From enhancing customer experiences through AI-powered kiosks and chatbots to streamlining workflows and operations, AI is reshaping nearly every aspect of restaurant management.

This transformation not only raises customer expectations but also enables restaurants to optimize labor use, reduce costs, and improve efficiency. For instance, AI applications support data-driven decision-making by analyzing sales patterns, customer behaviors, and operational metrics, allowing businesses to make more informed strategic choices for profitability and growth.

However, the implementation of AI also presents several challenges. High upfront costs can be prohibitive for smaller operators, and increased automation may diminish the quality of human interaction between customers and staff. For many small and medium-sized enterprises, the financial and technical barriers remain substantial, as initial investment costs, data infrastructure, and cybersecurity protections can exceed operational budgets (Tussyadiah, 2020). In addition, the growing reliance on AI raises concerns related to data privacy, employee adaptation, and ethical governance. This paper adopts a narrative synthesis approach to examine the major implications of AI for customer experience, operations, and financial management, while also considering the limitations and risks associated with its implementation. Through this analysis, it aims to provide a balanced understanding of both the opportunities and constraints of AI adoption in the food service industry.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Background

Recent studies highlight that AI adoption in hospitality is not solely a matter of technology, but also of user perception and readiness. According to the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), users' perceived usefulness and ease of use strongly predict acceptance. In restaurant contexts, this means that employees' trust and training, along with customers' comfort with automation, determine whether AI tools are used effectively (Gursoy, Chi, Lu, & Nunkoo, 2019). Thus, successful implementation depends as much on human adaptation as on technological capability.

Empirical research in hospitality further supports this view. Li, Yin, Qiu, and Bai (2021) find that AI-based service encounters can significantly improve service personalization and operational efficiency, though these benefits depend heavily

on customer trust and perceived service quality. Similarly, studies on service automation and robotics suggest that while AI systems can reduce repetitive tasks and improve consistency, poorly managed implementation may negatively affect employee morale and customer perceptions of hospitality (Tuomi, Tussyadiah, & Stienmetz, 2020).

More recent scholarship has expanded this discussion to include ethical, equity, and sustainability considerations. Research indicates that algorithmic management systems—such as predictive scheduling—may reproduce existing inequalities if trained on historically biased data (Turčinović, Vujko, & Mirčetić, 2025). At the same time, AI applications have demonstrated potential to reduce food waste, optimize resource use, and support sustainability objectives in restaurant operations. Collectively, this literature suggests that effective AI adoption requires balancing efficiency gains with ethical governance and human-centered service values.

3. Scope, Methodology, and Guiding Questions

This article employs a narrative synthesis to review how AI influences customer experience, operational processes, and financial management within the restaurant industry. Consistent with the goals of a narrative review, it does not seek to develop or test formal theoretical models of AI adoption. Instead, it synthesizes recent academic and industry evidence to present an applied, structured overview of AI implementation in food service contexts. This approach is intended to support not only scholars but also practitioners—such as restaurant managers and organizational decision-makers—who require clear, actionable insights to evaluate AI use in real-world settings.

The analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- How is artificial intelligence currently applied to customer experience, operations, and financial management in the restaurant industry?
- What operational and strategic benefits are associated with AI adoption in food service contexts?
- What limitations, risks, and ethical challenges accompany the implementation of AI in restaurants?

By addressing these questions, the paper aims to provide a balanced assessment of AI's transformative potential while acknowledging the constraints and trade-offs that shape real-world adoption. The subsequent sections examine the impact of AI on customer experience, operational workflows, labor management, financial performance, and the risks and drawbacks associated with increased automation.

4. Impact of AI on Customer Experience

One of the most significant ways AI is reshaping the restaurant industry is through customer experience and interactions. While technological advances have made AI more accessible than ever, robots that prepare and deliver food remain out of

reach for most restaurants. Despite this, AI tools that assist with ordering and customer service are rapidly gaining traction as customers increasingly value frictionless and personalized experiences. This shift is most evident in the rise of AI kiosks, chatbots, and AI-powered drive-thrus, which are transforming operations by streamlining workflows and optimizing labor costs.

The growing adoption of AI-driven kiosks and voice-ordering systems is changing how customers interact with restaurants while improving efficiency and reducing costs. For instance, McDonald's has introduced AI-powered kiosks in many of its locations, resulting in shorter wait times and higher average order values (Bhardwaj, 2025). Similarly, Wendy's has partnered with Google to implement AI-powered voice ordering in its drive-thrus, enabling customers to place orders through an automated system that reduces wait times and operational costs (Ghaffary, 2024). These innovations highlight how AI is redefining convenience and speed—two features that have become central to customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry.

Another area where AI enhances customer experience is through chatbots and personalization. Many restaurants now use AI chatbots to answer calls, respond to inquiries, and manage reservations, providing 24/7 online customer support. Domino's, an internationally recognized pizza chain, has extended this concept further. CEO Russell Weiner explained that the company's AI algorithms can predict when customers are likely to place an order and begin preparing pizzas before the order is even confirmed (Velasquez, 2025). This innovation has led to reduced wait times and demonstrates how AI-driven predictive systems can anticipate customer behavior, allowing restaurants to deliver faster and more personalized service.

In addition to major chains, small and medium-sized restaurants are also beginning to adopt AI tools to enhance the guest experience, often through affordable cloud-based systems that integrate with digital reservation or delivery platforms. Recent studies show that smaller operators benefit most from AI when it enhances rather than replaces human interaction, preserving the sense of warmth central to hospitality (Zahidi et al., 2024). These findings highlight how AI can augment authentic service delivery, helping independent restaurants balance efficiency and personal connection.

Academic research also supports this trend. Li, Yin, Qiu, and Bai (2021) found that AI applications in hospitality significantly improved service personalization and operational efficiency but depended heavily on customer trust. Similarly, Suttikun and Meeprom (2024) demonstrated that AI-driven personalization enhances customer engagement when paired with transparency and emotional resonance. Collectively, these studies suggest that effective AI adoption in restaurants relies not only on speed and automation but also on the ability to strengthen the emotional and social elements of dining.

Overall, AI is transforming the dining experience by prioritizing convenience, personalization, and operational efficiency. As automation continues to expand,

the challenge for restaurants—especially smaller ones—will be integrating AI in ways that elevate, rather than diminish, the human touch that defines meaningful hospitality. These technological shifts reflect a broader trend toward frictionless service, where automation and data-driven insights redefine how customers interact with restaurants.

5. AI Can Optimize Workflow, Operations, and Labor

The advancement of AI has disrupted traditional labor models in the restaurant sector. A substantial number of restaurants are taking advantage of the benefits of AI, which include automation of complex processes and optimization of resource allocation (Yang et al., 2025). On average, 70% of restaurants that have integrated AI into their operations have reported increased efficiency, as they are better able to address labor shortages and manage operational costs. Restaurants can now efficiently manage their staff based on demand patterns and external factors with the help of predictive staffing, an AI tool that analyzes historical data and real-time information to optimize workforce management (Gill, 2019). With such tools, managers can minimize labor costs by increasing staff during peak hours and reducing it during slower periods to avoid overstaffing.

Furthermore, restaurants are increasingly incorporating AI tools into inventory management. On average, restaurants can reduce waste by up to 30% through AI-powered inventory systems, which allow managers to monitor ingredient usage, stock levels, and purchase orders in real time (Tiwari et al., 2024). Consequently, AI-driven inventory management helps restaurants not only predict customer demand but also ensure menu consistency and sustainability across multiple locations.

The emergence of AI-powered robotics has also significantly altered labor models in restaurant kitchens. These robots can maintain consistent cooking quality and minimize food-safety risks, which are often associated with human error (Tuomi, Tussyadiah, & Stienmetz, 2020). An example is *Flippy*, an AI-powered robot developed by Miso Robotics to prepare food and perform repetitive kitchen tasks accurately. This technology has gained popularity among restaurant managers seeking to address labor shortages while appealing to tech-savvy customers who are eager to experience innovative dining environments. Restaurants implementing such systems often adjust their entire workflow management processes to optimize kitchen efficiency. AI systems analyze cooking times and order patterns to organize task sequences based on capacity (Vinay et al., 2024). For instance, popular pizza chain Papa John's has improved its kitchen efficiency and reduced customer wait times by implementing an AI system that optimizes oven and ingredient usage.

While these operational gains are significant, recent hospitality research highlights critical ethical and equity issues. For example, AI-driven scheduling and predictive staffing systems can inadvertently reproduce bias if historical data reflect underlying inequalities—such as fewer hours offered to certain demographic

groups (Turčinović, Vujko, & Mirčetić, 2025). Furthermore, digital exclusion remains a real concern: smaller independent restaurants often lack the infrastructure, training, or capital needed to implement AI systems effectively, which can widen the gap between large chains and smaller operators (Filimonau, Ashton, Derqui, & Hernandez-Maskivker, 2025).

AI models also intersect with sustainability beyond simply reducing waste or labour costs. Recent studies in hospitality demonstrate that AI implementations can serve environmental goals by optimising energy and water usage, reducing food waste, and enabling more circular operational flows (Vukolić, Cabral, Gajić, & Pecić, 2025). In small- to mid-sized restaurants, such systems not only lower costs but also improve long-term resilience and environmental footprint. This emerging "green AI" paradigm underscores how operations, labour and sustainability can align rather than conflict. As more restaurants integrate AI systems into their operations, they are becoming increasingly automated. The rise of fully automated restaurants is gradually becoming a reality as household names such as *Spyce* have established locations that are entirely managed by AI and robotics. Although this trend has not yet achieved mainstream adoption, it demonstrates that AI can be used for comprehensive restaurant operations. Overall, the integration of AI-powered systems facilitates continuous monitoring, reduces labor costs, and maintains consistent quality standards across multiple restaurant locations.

6. AI, Cost Control, and Revenue Management

AI is transitioning from a theoretical concept to a common practice in restaurant-related finance. U.S. operators report that they are already implementing AI tools, and most users note clear benefits such as faster decision-making and lower operating costs (SevenRooms Data Reveals the Top Restaurant Trends Defining the Era of SuperHuman HospitalityTM in 2025, 2025). This adoption matters because even small fluctuations in food or labor expenses can erase thin profit margins. When managers rely on AI models that learn from variables such as sales, weather, and local events, they can order inventory more accurately, schedule staff more efficiently, and avoid costly last-minute adjustments.

The most consistent gains have been observed in forecasting and inventory management. Food waste represents a direct financial loss, and kitchens typically waste a meaningful share of purchased goods. Vendors that track waste analytics report that an average kitchen discards between four and twelve percent of its purchases, but that clients using AI systems often cut that figure by about half within a year (Light, 2025). These savings can range from several thousand dollars per location to substantially more in larger operations. By using these insights to guide purchasing and preparation lists, restaurants can maintain leaner storage, reduce rush orders, and align staffing schedules with real demand. Managers can then allocate labor where it is most needed while minimizing overtime and emergency expenditures.

AI also supports revenue management through dynamic pricing and guest-facing decision tools. When designed transparently, these tools can boost profitability, though public acceptance depends on fairness. For example, one major U.S. burger chain faced backlash after testing surge-style pricing and ultimately decided not to increase prices during peak hours following customer criticism (Cunningham & Sophia, 2024). However, restaurants can still apply price intelligence in more acceptable ways, such as offering small off-peak discounts or suggesting profitable add-ons. Many large brands now use AI on digital menus to personalize recommendations at scale. One case study describes the deployment of AI decision technology in over twelve thousand U.S. drive-thrus, enabling more refined recommendations and improving order efficiency—an approach that raises average check amounts without undermining customer trust (Mastercard, 2024). AI is also reshaping supply chain and budgeting processes by making them more data-driven. Fast-food groups now feed point-of-sale data and external variables into predictive systems that anticipate demand, minimize stockouts, and maintain appropriate inventory levels across distribution centers. New adopters have reported that "having the right products on hand supports longer operating hours, which can lift sales without adding waste" (Kapadia, 2025). The same analytics that inform purchasing decisions can also detect cost spikes, flag invoice errors, and strengthen rolling forecasts, allowing managers to respond to financial challenges proactively. While these developments are most pronounced in the United States, they reflect a broader global shift toward more efficient, predictive, and resilient restaurant operations.

7. Risks and Drawbacks

While there is significant potential behind the adoption of AI in the restaurant industry, it also presents a range of risks and challenges. One of the greatest barriers is implementation. Many restaurants continue to rely on outdated systems such as Point of Sale (POS) software, kitchen displays, and loyalty programs; integrating AI across these platforms requires complex coordination among vendors, developers, and staff. Studies indicate that integration difficulties remain among the most frequently cited obstacles for operators considering new technology investments (Hospitality Technology, 2024).

Financial constraints are another major concern. The deployment of AI systems often requires substantial investment in new hardware, software updates, and employee training. These expenses create high barriers to entry, particularly for small and mid-sized restaurants that already operate on narrow margins. Customer experience also poses risks. AI interactions with customers can be unpredictable, and missteps may damage brand reputation. For instance, McDonald's decision to halt a multi-year AI voice-ordering program with IBM due to persistent accuracy issues illustrates how technical errors can quickly erode consumer trust (Grantham-Philips, 2024). Similarly, public backlash against AI-based dynamic pricing demonstrates how sensitive customers are to perceived unfairness when algorithmic prices fluctuate throughout the day.

Beyond these operational and financial concerns, AI adoption raises broader ethical challenges related to algorithmic decision-making and social equity. Similarly to the situation with employees, AI systems may inadvertently encode and amplify societal biases with regard to consumers, leading to unfair outcomes in areas such as pricing and service personalization. Algorithmic bias occurs when the design or training data of an AI system systematically privileges or disadvantages certain groups, potentially resulting in discriminatory effects even without explicit human intent. Algorithmic pricing systems, for instance, can lead to differential pricing strategies that some consumers may perceive as unfair or discriminatory, particularly if prices vary based on location, purchase behavior, or demographic signals without transparency. This phenomenon reflects broader concerns about fairness in automated decision systems, where algorithmic structures—not human judgment—drive economically significant outcomes (Choi, Song, & Jing, 2023).

Another ethical issue is algorithmic exclusion and digital inequality with constumers, just as was seen with restaurants themselves. AI models rely on data to generate predictions and interactions, but individuals with limited digital footprints can be left out of these processes entirely—resulting in "algorithmic exclusion," where AI systems make no meaningful predictions for certain populations. This form of exclusion is not merely technical: it reflects structural inequities in how data is collected and who benefits from AI. People with limited access to digital technologies—including older adults, lower-income customers, and those with disabilities—may be underserved by AI systems, reducing their ability to interact effectively with digital restaurant platforms such as kiosks, mobile apps, and online ordering systems. Digital exclusion can thus compound existing social disparities by making technology less accessible to those who already face barriers to digital engagement (Ge, Li, Hu, Feng, & Wu, 2025).

Equally important are the social implications of automation. Many guests value authentic personal interactions, and the replacement of human contact with chatbots or automated systems may diminish the warmth and hospitality that customers expect. From the employee perspective, poorly managed automation can heighten anxiety about job security. Research has documented cases of "robotphobia" among hospitality workers, reflecting fear of replacement and reduced workplace morale (Tornone, 2024).

Finally, the long-term reliability of AI systems depends on continuous monitoring and retraining. As menus evolve and customer behaviors shift, AI models must be regularly updated to maintain accuracy. Without sustained investment in human oversight, data quality, and technical maintenance, these systems risk declining performance—especially during periods of high operational stress.

8. Conclusion

In the foreseeable future, AI is expected to become one of the most influential forces shaping the food service industry. The integration of AI into customer ser-

vice, labor management, and inventory monitoring is opening new pathways for innovation and redefining how restaurants operate. Leading restaurant brands of all sizes have already begun incorporating AI across both front-end and back-end operations, demonstrating its potential to transform the entire dining experience. Although significant risks remain—such as high implementation costs for smaller operators and concerns about the loss of human interaction—restaurants that adopt AI responsibly are best positioned to achieve sustainable growth. When applied thoughtfully, AI can enhance efficiency, improve decision-making, and create more personalized, seamless dining experiences. The challenge for the industry will be to balance technological progress with the core human elements of hospitality that define successful restaurant service.

9. Limitations of the Article

Despite the potential benefits of AI adoption, this article is subject to several limitations. Although significant risks are discussed—such as high implementation costs for smaller operators and concerns about the loss of human interaction—this review relies primarily on secondary academic and industry sources rather than original empirical data. As a narrative synthesis, the analysis does not evaluate causal relationships or long-term outcomes of AI adoption, nor does it capture the full diversity of restaurant contexts across different regions and business models. In addition, much of the available evidence reflects the experiences of large chain restaurants, which may limit the generalizability of findings to small and independent operators.

10. Future Research Directions

Looking forward, future research should move beyond short-term adoption outcomes and explore the long-term implications of AI adoption in hospitality labor markets, particularly how automation reshapes workforce skills, job satisfaction, and employee well-being. There is also a need to examine scalability and accessibility—how small and medium-sized enterprises can implement AI cost-effectively without widening the digital divide. Comparative studies across firm size, geographic context, and regulatory environments would help identify best practices and policy interventions that promote equitable access to AI technologies. Additionally, scholars could investigate the ethical governance of AI in restaurant decision-making, including transparency in algorithmic pricing, equity in predictive hiring, and consumer trust in AI-driven services. Finally, as AI becomes increasingly intertwined with sustainability initiatives, future studies might assess how AI-enabled systems contribute to environmental efficiency and social responsibility across diverse cultural and economic contexts, particularly as algorithmic decision-making becomes less visible but more influential in everyday dining experiences.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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