

## FLYING MEALS, GROUNDED EMOTIONS: A GROUNDED THEORY OF DRONE FOOD DELIVERY IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract

The blistering development of independent tools has proposed the food transporting with the help of drones emerge as a brand-new service mode in the food logistics market. Although the available body of literature focuses mainly on practicality and feasibility of the operations, less focus has been exclusively on customer experience and perception regarding the existence of such services. This research is a grounded theory study to understand the meanings and feelings of consumers regarding drones' food delivery in Pakistan. The study finds five major themes through the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews of early adopters (n = 15), namely emotional ambivalence, trust and control concerns, displacement of humanized service norms, the prestige and visibility of technology, and conditional acceptance. The results indicate that speed or innovation do not necessarily comprise the issue of consumer acceptance, but foster a delicate negotiation of the ideas of trust, emotional safety, symbolic identity, and situational adequacy. The futuristic nature of drones was enjoyed by the participants but they were not comfortable with the lack of accountability of humans and interpersonal service interactions. A section of the users particularly younger groups found drone delivery as a status symbol but for some users, the issue of safety, and handling of food, along with reliability in terms of the weather left a doubt. The suggested grounded theory postulates that drone food delivery will change expectations in the service sector in terms of altering the customer-service provider relationship to service technology rather than a relationship of people. The research can help policymakers and service designers as well as food tech companies interested in expanding drone-based delivery services. It concludes on the following; emotional resonance, social signaling, and situational trust are focal to consumer acceptance of innovations in autonomous delivery.

### INTRODUCTION

Consumer logistics have undergone a paradigm shift with improved delivery technologies emerging at a rapid pace, the food delivery systems taking place using drones have been at the very edge of this revolution. With the concern of increased urbanization and demand of real-time fulfillments, as well as the popularity of contactless service after

COVID-19, drones, or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) are the potential solutions to the last-mile delivery issues that have risen among logistics companies and food delivery services (Yeik & Kei, 2023). In the quest to transform the area of delivery of goods, especially food, companies like Amazon, Google Wing, and Uber Eats have started

experimenting or implementing drone delivery systems which presents a promise of revolutionizing the way goods may be delivered in the future, especially in food delivery. Although studies so far have concentrated on answers regarding the technologies available, the regulations, and the economics of drone logistics (Filiopoulou et al., 2025), an increasing body of literature shows the primary importance of consumer perception and behavioral response to the adoption and sustainability of such services (Wu et al., 2024). Nonetheless, the theoretical insight into the pathways of drone food delivery experienced by consumers, their interpretation, and evaluation has not been developed yet. Due to this loophole, when applying criteria of expectations, trust, perceived risk, emotional response, and the perceptions of service quality, this gap is more pronounced.

In contrast to phenomenology whereby the researcher tries to define the nature of lived experiences, Grounded Theory (GT) attempts to construct theory based on data (Charmaz, 2014). Since drone-delivered food is still a booming industry with experimental characteristics, grounded theory can best approach the identification of the hidden processes, patterns, and conceptual categories in the delivery and create meaningful categories that define the experience of the customer in this set-up. A systematic and flexible approach is required to work out the complexity of this innovation involving autonomous technology, aviation, logistics, and consumer interaction as it tries to keep up with the changing meaning and behavior that are involved. In addition, currently available adoption models (e.g., Technology Acceptance Model, UTAUT) do not necessarily encompass the distinctive features of the drone-based communication (e.g., aerial visibility, automated delivery processes, and lack of human contact). The use of grounded theory approach will enable the researcher to transcend the preset designs and develop a theory reset that is data-driven and which will present the explanation of the meaning that consumers create around their drone deliveries and how these meanings are derived to impact their satisfaction, expectation, and future behavioral intentions. The purpose of the study is to design a grounded theory of customer experience in drone food delivery based on the voices of the people who

have already used the service as early adopters of the new technology. The simultaneous use of iterative coding and constant comparison will allow the study to determine the core categories and relations that developments in user experience would shape a conceptual model of user experience with drone logistics. Thus, the central research question guiding this study is: What are the experiences and interpretations of customers of food delivery using drones and what connotations do the customers make out of such experiences? Which social, emotional, and cognitive-level processes affect the trust, satisfaction and acceptance of drone-based food delivery services by the customers? What is the building process of the customers regarding their expectations, concerns and assessments of a drone food delivery in the long term, such as getting exposed to the idea and up to the evaluation after the delivery?.

Amid the lightning speed changes experienced in logistics and food service as they assimilate autonomous technologies, the potential of drone-based food delivery is one of the innovations that is likely to transform last-mile delivery. Nevertheless, even with the technological innovations and growing number of implements by international companies, the spread of popularity and popularity of drone delivery services is dependent upon the perceptions, behavior as well as meaning construction activities of consumers. What this means is that in this context customer experience comprehension is not only advantageous, it is a necessity. Awareness of customer concerns (safety, privacy, reliability and environmental impact) can guide regulative bodies and policymakers with the duty of managing drone operations. The results of the current study can guide the creation of the public communication policies, consumer protection policies, and regulations that fit the expectations of the users, which will lead to the easier adoption of technology in the town and suburban environments.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Emergence of Drone Delivery in Food Services

Use of drones or what is commonly referred to as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in commercial food has been described as an innovator in the field of logistics and consumer services. Over the past few

years there has been a rapid development of drone technology providing the technologies of aerial delivery which performs delivery up to ten times faster than a conventional method, requires no physical contact, and is much more efficient (Gomes et al., 2025). Specifically, the demand in contactless delivery systems grew exponentially after the COVID-19 pandemic, and some food businesses and startups began trying their hand with drone deliveries (Chi & Nam, 2023). Food is a unique industry with unique drone delivery opportunities because the products are time-sensitive and perishable, which makes precision, safety, and user experience even more valuable. Other companies like Amazon Prime Air, Wing (by Alphabet), and Uber Eats have already introduced pilot programs, but there are concerns in regard to technical feasibility and regulatory policies, as well as consumer confidence blocking larger-scale adoption (Berke et al., 2023).

## 2.2 Consumer Technology Adoption and Behavioral Response

The current literature has addressed drone delivery mostly in terms of technology adoption literature such as Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). They also mention such aspects as the perceived usefulness, usefulness of use, and social influence as some of those that are also important to the ability of consumers to adopt drone services (Schmidt & Saraceni, 2024). Nevertheless, having these kinds of models is based on the quantitative constructs that might not be representative of the subtleties of experiences and changing perception of users within an actual situation. By comparison, grounded theory enables a processual and contextual interpretation of the ways in which individuals become social constructors of meanings concerning experiences of drone delivery. The fact that this technology is rather new in most parts of the globe means that consumers are not merely adopting a product, but are engaging with a socio-technological system that disrupts expectations and routine.

## 2.3 Trust, Risk Perception, and Ethical Concerns

One of the most recent issues of drone delivery services is trust of consumers, mainly of safety,

reliability, and privacy. These concerns include fear in case of drone crash, theft of the package, trespassing in the airspace, and lack of human responsibility (Jazairy et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2025). Besides, the subjective sense that human touch in service interactions is being lost may result in emotional distance or uneasiness and this is especially true among consumers who appreciate relational contact.

One of the barriers to adoption is risk perception. The literature does show that the common threats among users under drone delivery are data security, technical breakdowns, loss of control, and noise pollution (Askerbekov et al., 2024). These issues impose the perspective that adoption entails more than utility but affective trust and social acceptance as part of the adoption process as well-suited dimensions to be investigated based on grounded theory research.

## 2.4 Emotional and Experiential Dimensions of Drone Delivery

The functionality of the drone food delivery is not the only experience that users should have. Being a new type of service, it raises both positive and negative feelings, the spectrum being between curiosity and excitement on the positive side, and anxiety and skepticism on the negative side. Vu (2021) assert that one of the keys to success of every industry in the technology-driven services is emotional satisfaction, especially where there is a substitution of human involvement with automated services. In the case of drone delivery, such emotional responses are influenced by the initial encounters, aesthetic values of visual appeals, and unanticipated problems, e.g. ineffective delivery, unclear tracking, etc (Chi et al., 2023). In addition, those who adopt the practice of drone delivery early might develop a special identity story on doing so one, considering themselves innovative, tech-savvy, or socially conscious. On the other hand, people who have little knowledge about technology, or who do not wish to use technology first hand may be opposed to it regardless of its posed advantages.

## 3.0 Methodology

This research paper is based on a qualitative study design that incorporated a grounded theory

approach in exploring the consumption experiences of drone food delivery and how consumers develop meaning around the said phenomenon. Due to the intent of the first use of grounded theory in a field where little research has been conducted, grounded theory will be the most viable in generating theoretical understanding of the drone delivery in food services (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The study was placed in the constructivist research paradigm where the researcher and participants co-construct meaning. This orientation identifies that reality is not objective but is constructed through the unique experiences and treatments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The grounded theory approach in the constructivist tradition (Charmaz, 2014) enabled the emerging insights to be brought out through repeated cycles of data collection and analysis.

The purposive and theoretical samples were used in selecting the participants. The study involved 15 participants that had encountered drone-based delivery of food in the urban centers. The first users were attracted using food tech forums and food delivery app pilot tests. When coding was carried out, later participants were selected according to the requirement to elaborate on new categories. The information was collected with the help of semi-structured interviews, and they took place in person or on Zoom, within 45-70 minutes. Individual meaning-making was investigated by asking open-ended questions that included how to walk me through your drone delivery experience and what emotions or thoughts you had before and after the

delivery. Audio recording and verbatim transcription of interviews were done. Transcripts were supplemented by field notes and memos in the analysis.

Using the procedure of grounded theory as described by Charmaz (2014), data analysis was conducted in three stages: Initial (open) coding: Line-by-line coding was able to identify important events, emotions and assessments, Focused (axial) coding: Codes were grouped into categories and forms of relationships investigated, Theoretical (selective) coding: There emerged a core category, namely, Navigating Trust and Emotion in Human less Delivery that combined all the categories into a theoretical framework that explained customer experience. Other methods used to guarantee trustworthiness were strategies on member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trail. Triangulation was reached by the means of incorporating field notes, interview data, and analytic memos. Credibility and transferability was increased by thick description and quotations of participants. The study was approved by the respective ethics committee.

#### 4.0 Finding and Results

The grounded theory method produced five related themes that characterize the customer experience of food delivery by drones: emotional ambivalence, trust and control issues, disruption of humanized service norms, technological prestige and visibility, and conditional acceptance. The below table shows the theme identified.

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote
Emotional Ambivalence	Mixed feelings of excitement and apprehension during drone delivery experience.	"I was thrilled, but I kept thinking—what if it drops the food halfway?" (P4)
Trust and Control Issues	Concerns about reliability, accountability, and lack of human interaction.	"There was no one to complain to if something went wrong." (P8)
Disruption of Humanized Service Norms	Loss of social interaction typical in traditional delivery experiences.	"There was no 'thank you', no smile—just the sound of wings." (P2)
Technological and Visibility	Prestige Using drone delivery as a novelty experience to share on social media.	"I uploaded the video to Instagram and everyone was like, 'That's insane!'" (P11)
Conditional Acceptance	Willingness to use drone delivery based on food type, weather, or location.	"For a sandwich, maybe. But for soup or curry? That's risky." (P6)

The novelty and futuristic attraction of drones, together with concerns about their performance, were the causes of this emotional ambivalence. "It felt like living in a sci-fi movie, but I couldn't stop thinking—what if it just crashes or drops my food?" one participant said. The literature on consumer psychology as a whole indicates that new technologies frequently evoke a mixture of interest and dread, which is reflected in this tension (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Issues of control and trust, especially in relation to the lack of human accountability, were a recurring concern. Not having a delivery rider they could get in touch with or hold accountable in the event of delivery mistakes or delays caused pain for a number of participants. "It just hovered awkwardly when it got stuck above the gate—there was no one to call," one participant underlined. This is a reflection of customers' perceived lack of control and worries about system autonomy, which are reflected in research on service robots and driverless cars (Lu et al., 2020).

As compared to drones, drones eliminate this relational buffer as human riders are used in traditional delivery that offers immediate reassurance, solution and emotional connection. Together with this, the theme of the breach of the humanized service standards emphasized the fact that the delivery with the use of drones reduced the element of human connection that most customers relate to hospitality and food culture. There was a feeling of loss on the part of the participants due to

the lack of eye contact, greetings or even the comfortable exchange of pleasantries. According to one of them, "No smile, no small talk—just this machine buzzing down, dropping food, and leaving.". The absence of human and continuous interaction also distorted the expectation of human warmth and appreciation of service that most of the participants had assumed in the previous experience of delivery. This implies that in the case of food delivery the relational interactions are a low-level but important means of customer satisfaction as compared to other forms of logistics.

Despite these reservations, some participants—particularly the younger, tech-savvy ones—saw drone meal delivery as a source of technological pride and prominence. As evidence of early acceptance and status, some users claimed to have recorded their drone delivery encounters and posted them on social media. This is consistent with ideas of identity signaling in consumer behavior and symbolic consumption (Belk, 1988). As demonstrated by one participant who commented, "My followers couldn't believe it—I felt like I was part of the future," the sight of drones flying in from the sky generated a moment of performance and validation. However, the last theme—conditional acceptance—tempered this zeal. Although drone delivery was exciting, participants said that a number of things would determine whether or not they would utilize it again. Although drone delivery was exciting, participants said that a number of things would determine

whether or not they would utilize it again. These included the type of food (liquid versus solid), the delivery location (safe versus open space, or urban versus rural), and the weather (wind or rain). One user said, "I wouldn't trust a drone with soup or biryani—it's not worth the mess," indicating that foods that were prone to spilling or that were sensitive to heat were considered less appropriate. These complex results imply that consumers assess drone delivery using a multifaceted lens of trust, emotional comfort, contextual fit, and social signaling rather than just innovation or speed.

According to the newly developed grounded theory, consumers' interactions with drone food delivery involve balancing symbolic value, perceived control, and emotional resonance. Functional efficiency is crucial, but how effectively this self-sufficient service satisfies expectations for responsibility, personal connection, and lifestyle identity will determine the deeper consumer response. In this way, drone delivery redefines what "service" means in the digital era and goes beyond simply being a technology instrument. Therefore, companies looking to expand drone-based food delivery must consider not only operational logistics but also customer perceptions of reassurance, empathy, and customisation. In addition to accuracy and dependability, drone delivery's future hinges on its capacity to mimic—or politely replace—the emotive connections that human service providers have historically provided.

## 5.0 Conclusion

### 5.1 Discussion

This paper discussed customer experience with drone food delivery using a grounded theory analysis to provide a novel understanding of emotionally, socially and situationally complicated dynamics that underlie the acceptance of the technology by consumers. Findings would be of interest to the developing literature related to autonomous service technologies as it demonstrates that autonomous service usage is not merely a topic of how efficient the technologies have become but is set within a wider context of trust, identity, and emotional investment. Although past investigations on autonomous delivery system have focused on logistics-related convenience and affordability (Boysen et al., 2021; Otto et al., 2020), this paper

highlights psychological bargain that customers engage in when considering new and non-humanized service forms.

This emergent theory on customers processing drone delivery to represent a negotiation of emotional comfort, control, social meaning fits previous literatures as consumer behavior and service innovation. Remarkably, it supplements the service-dominant logic by Vargo and Lusch (2008) to demonstrate the way technological innovation can interfere with co-creation of value in event of a reduced degree of human relations. Drone delivery eliminates the old-fashioned service clues including eye-contact, greetings, and prompt resolution of issues and thus the delivery of food becomes purely transactional, not relational. Further, on the basis of symbolic interactionism approach (Blumer, 1969), the research also emphasizes that drone delivery serves as a performance and means of direction to identity of some of the people using it, particularly among young consumers who consider it a statement and sign of technological sophistication and a modern device.

However, even this symbolic attraction cannot make trust, safety and conditional suitable not be needed. The theme of conditional acceptance shows that customers do not blindly go raving over novelty thinking but apply measured, situational standards of judgment to drone delivery the environmental safety of what you are getting whether it is a meal or how it is impacting the weather conditions. Such observations underline that service design should not only consider technical feasibility but also emotional security and the sense of control. The result of this finding echoes with human-technology interaction theories of designing technologies that can be incorporated into social practices (Norman, 2002; Rogers, 2006). In this way, the study will help us understand the customer experience better because the drone delivery is one of the regional areas where technological transformation and social expectation meet.

### 5.2 Research Implication and Future Recommendations

This paper has formulated a grounded theory of citizen experience with drone food delivery and it is clear that the acceptance of a user is influenced by an

recurrently changing association of emotional ambivalence, considerations of trust, anticipation of service, value symbolism and situational details. The analysis notes that beyond a logistical method, drone delivery will be an emotional, experiential, and symbolic change in consumer-service relationship. Although the technology is fast and innovative, its ability to generate social-warmth and accountability reflects the traditional food delivery services where the new technology should be successful. The possible outcomes to food delivering platforms and technology solutions designers are substantial. The efficiency and reliability of providers are not sufficient in engaging human aspects of adopters and thus they must consider integrating human like features or blended channels of interaction (e.g. customer service live assistance with the interface of the drone). Also, in promoting drone delivery, the tactic should take into account both functional and emotional advantages, potentially by presenting it as a convenience-incorporating yet socially responsible innovation. Policymakers and urban planners can also contribute to creating drone regulations that would ensure safety as well as create a spirit of trust in the minds of the citizens.

Future studies may expand the current research by carrying out cross-cultural analysis or obtaining insights on the long-term psychological implications of completely autonomous delivery ecosystems. In addition, a more comprehensive view of adoption dynamics can be obtained by combining a quantitative model of technology acceptance and the qualitative theory of grounded processes. Conclusively, the idea of food delivery through drones is a very crucial frontier given to the evolution of service innovation, where success will partly be determined by the knowledge of human behavior.

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