

A Multilevel Synthesis of Subjective and Objective Measures of Foodservices in the Experience Process

Authors

Huijun Wen, IpKin Anthony Wong, Seongseop (Sam) Kim, Frank Badu-Baiden,
Kate Mingjie Ji

Abstract

This study develops a multilevel framework that connects customer-to-customer (C2C) interaction quality to brand attachment through customer experience. Two food traits—uniqueness and taste—and service quality are posited to play different roles in this link. This research contributes to the literature on the effects of food traits and service on the experience creation process at upscale restaurants. By including both objective measures from user-generated ratings and subjective measures from customer evaluations of restaurant dining, this research sheds new light on the cross-level direct and moderating effects on the experience creation process, and thus answers the question of when and how this process is contingent on food traits and service of different dining outings. It further contributes to the brand attachment literature by revealing the cross-level moderated mediating effect of customer experience on customer emotional connection to a restaurant brand.

Keywords: experience, customer interaction, food, employee service quality, brand attachment, multilevel

Introduction

For years, foodservice research has been central to hospitality studies (Jang et al., 2012; Ji et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2009). The inimitable taste of fine cuisine is certainly highly satisfying (Zhang et al., 2013), while empathetic service along with the camaraderie of dining companions ensure luxurious indulgence (Im and Qu, 2017; Ramanathan and Ramanathan, 2011). Indeed, prior research has laid the necessary foundation by identifying the importance of food uniqueness and taste (Duarte Alonso et al., 2013; Kim and Choe, 2019) as well as employee service quality (or employee service for short; Ha and Jang, 2010; Shin et al., 2019) in facilitating a high level of customer experience. Yet, previous studies have largely viewed food and services as direct influences on patrons' perceptions and behaviors (Ji et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2019) without further assessing the interactions of these foodservice traits. More importantly, these foodservice attributes are commonly evaluated based on self-reported subjective evaluations and hence, parameter estimates may be subjected to a certain level of response bias.

In addition, prior studies on value and experience creation have shown a direct link between customer-to-customer (C2C) interaction and customer valuation in the service encounter (Huang and Hsu, 2010; Lin and Wong, 2020; Rihova et al., 2015). In particular, customer involvement and enactment in the service delivery process is a key value-added process that enhances customer experience (Harrigan et al., 2017; Yang, 2016). Hence, the quality of C2C interaction plays a vital role in the value and experience creation/cocreation process (Chathoth et al., 2016; Huang and Hsu, 2010; Wei et al., 2017). However, it remains unclear how the C2C interaction effect may be conditioned based on different dining settings.

In summary, even though much attention has focused on C2C interaction as well as foodservice traits in customer experience improvisation, two questions remained unanswered in the hospitality literature. The first research question concerns how food traits (e.g., food

uniqueness and taste) and service quality play a role in the experience creation and cocreation process based on both objective and subjective measures. The second question pertains to whether this process differs based on the broader social context. Addressing these questions will not only benefit hospitality practitioners, but also provide new insights to the academic literature on C2C-infused behaviors (e.g., Luo et al., 2019; Prebensen and Xie, 2017; Wei et al., 2017), customer experience (e.g., Jeong and Jang, 2011; Ji et al., 2018; LaTour and Carbone, 2014), food and service design (e.g., Kim and Baker, 2017; Kim et al., 2009), and contextual effects of the service setting on customer perceptions and behaviors (Zhang et al., 2013).

This study seeks to answer these two research questions. We also seek to reconcile the predominant view of experience creation, based primarily on individual-level predispositions, with subjective measures (Luo et al., 2019; Morosan and DeFranco, 2019; Wei et al., 2017). This study thus builds a cross-level framework that links C2C interaction quality to brand attachment through customer experience. Two food traits—uniqueness and taste (Ji et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2010)—and employee service (Ha and Jang, 2010; Tse and Ho, 2009) are posited to play different roles on this link. Further details about the proposed research framework are given below.

This research contributes to knowledge of the effects of food traits and employee service on the experience creation process at fine dining restaurants. These factors were selected in the present inquiry because food quality and service quality hold particular importance in such establishments (Ma et al., 2014). By including both subjective and objective measures of customer evaluations of restaurant dining (i.e., individual patrons' evaluations and user-generated ratings from social media) and applying a multilevel approach (cf. Wong, 2016), this research sheds new light on the cross-level direct and moderating effects on the experience development process, and thus answers the question of when and how such a process is contingent on food traits and employee service on different dining outings. It further contributes

to the brand attachment literature by revealing a cross-level moderated mediating effect of customer experience on customer emotional connection to a restaurant brand.

Literature Review

The proposed model presented in Figure 1 depicts a multilevel integrated framework for three major phases in the experience development process within the hospitality domain: service evaluation, experience creation, and service outcomes. This model is framed within the context of food-directed experience creation in restaurant settings. Restaurant experience improvisation is essential in foodservice operations, as it enables diners to construct meanings out of their encounters and thus imbue them with personal significance (Edvardsson et al., 2011). The customer assumes the role of an operant resource and actively participates during experience cocreation (Vargo, 2008). Using this logic, the researchers argue that experiences can be cocreated within restaurants through the intersection of salient domains of food uniqueness (i.e., novelty) and quality of C2C interaction. These domains are hypothesized to lead to dining experiences that afford escapism and indulgence, which further results in customer attachment to the corresponding hospitality brand.

Consumption of exotic food is a new experience for many diners, as it offers an inimitable opportunity to taste distinct and uniquely appealing cuisines (Favalli et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2021). Through such novel encounters, diners can build positive emotions, gain epistemic benefits, and stimulate their senses, resulting in experience enhancement in a restaurant (Andersson and Mossberg, 2004; Everett, 2019). Superior quality of C2C interaction, on the other hand, is crucial in the experience development process, because its naturally collaborative, experiential, and harmonious nature facilitates favorable outcomes (Chathoth et al., 2016; Huang and Hsu, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2006). Altogether, it is proposed that food uniqueness and C2C interaction can lead to a favorable dining experience. This outcome is posited to be activated, for example, through the creation of an avenue for pure sociability in

restaurants (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997; Ji et al., 2020). Further, favorable experience can be obtained based on the distinctiveness of the restaurant (a fine dining restaurant in this study), and the presence of other customers (e.g., companions) could facilitate social discourse with camaraderie through harmonious C2C interactions. These very experiences are a key to unlock customers' devotion to a specific foodservice brand by developing a strong bond with the provider (Brakus et al., 2009; Ji et al., 2018).

Moreover, food taste at different restaurants can moderate how food uniqueness and C2C interaction inform the experience of diners and moderate how such experience can lead to brand attachment. Ha and Jang (2010), for instance, have acknowledged the importance of employee service in restaurants by highlighting how it leads to positive customer behaviors and experiences. However, the question of how employee service moderates the relationship between food uniqueness and C2C interaction and experience, and how employee service informs customer experience leading to brand attachment, remains largely unanswered in the literature. To this end, we draw from the work of Rosenbaum (2006) on the socio-emotional supportive role of restaurants, as commercial third places, to articulate how food, service, and C2C interactions could foster memorable experience and hence, attachment to a focal brand (see Figure 1 for details). In particular, Rosenbaum and colleagues (Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2007) highlight the importance of commercial third places, such as coffee shops and eateries, in touting customer experience and social bonding to specific service outings. To many patrons, these commercial establishments often imbue connotative meanings that go beyond satisfaction of physiological needs from food and drinks offered, but they can evoke customers' favorable sensory responses that entail the ability to fulfill companion and emotional needs with empathic employee services and camaraderie induced from other patrons.

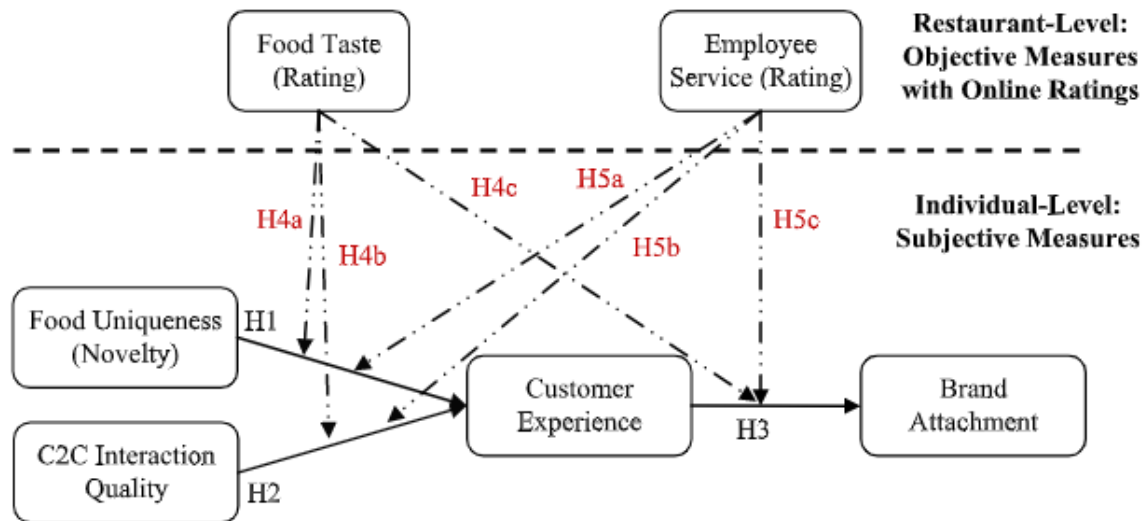


Fig. 1. Proposed framework: food-directed restaurant experience.

The proposed model offers a novel way to examine food-directed experience creation in restaurants. It disentangles this phenomenon by using a multilevel approach that applies both subjective (individual level) and objective (restaurant level) measures. Combining these measures provides a comprehensive picture of food-directed restaurant experience development and elucidates how customers develop brand attachment based on food uniqueness, C2C interaction, and customer experience. This examination is made within the upscale restaurant experience creation context. Rosenbaum and colleagues' theoretical grounding (Rosenbaum, 2006; Rosenbaum et al., 2007) underpins the present inquiry. In the sections that follow, we articulate the theoretical underpinnings for each of the hypothesized relationship with further details.

Food uniqueness and dining experience

Food uniqueness connotes the distinct elements of a food product that make it different from other foods. It also implies a strong point of difference, making the food product stand out such that it can be easily identified, recognized, and recalled over other competing foods (Favalli et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2021). Unique foods possess several attributes and benefits, and they are a major reason customers patronize a restaurant (Namkung and Jang, 2007).

Although the literature also acknowledges that some people tend to avoid novel food as they may possess neophobic tendency toward food (Ji et al., 2016), most foodservice and food tourism scholars believe that novelty in food entails strong ability to attract people with aroused sensory responses, *ceteris paribus* (Favalli et al., 2013; Kim and Choe, 2019).

Mattiacci and Vignali (2004) have noted that uncommon foods possess distinctive and superior quality compared to regular foods, which increases perceptions of high food quality; their consumption enhances diners' experience. Previous studies have found that exotic cuisines can enhance the dining experience through positive emotion building, sensory stimulation, and epistemic benefits (Kim and Choe, 2019). Eating novel gourmet food can also provide a relaxing experience for diners (Kim et al., 2020). Prior research has conceptualized customer experience as getting away from confinement or (re)gaining liberty, which goes along with the experience of relaxing, engaging in a nonroutine activity, and feeling restored (Ji et al., 2018). In this study, we adopted this definition and argue that diners obtain such opportunities when they buy unique meals in dining establishments. This notion is based on the assumption that unique foods possess distinctive attributes that can trigger consumers' desire to escape their normal routine and lifestyle (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). Tasting unique foods also reinforces customers' immersion and active participation (Pine & Gilmore, 1998) in restaurants as places for relaxation, escape, and rejuvenation.

The desire to obtain positive experience is especially heightened when diners dine with others and consume novel foods in an exotic eatery. For instance, a Chinese diner who patronizes a Western restaurant to experience novel gourmet food may do so to escape from the norm of consuming Chinese meals and indulge in a different tradition and lifestyle (Ji et al., 2020). These aspects are imperative in providing a unique dining encounter compared with the usual traditional meal (Lee and Shavitt, 2009), and they reinforce the food's distinctive characteristics. Consequently, the first hypothesis was proposed as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Food uniqueness is positively related to customer experience.

Customer-to-customer interaction quality and dining experience

Customer-to-customer (C2C) interaction quality is essential in enhancing restaurant dining experiences (Ji et al., 2018). Customers often utilize the same service setting and contribute to part of the restaurant experience creation through the quality of interaction (Jung et al., 2017). Friendly, positive, and harmonious C2C interactions symbolize cocreative behaviors and involve both physical and psychological engagement (Luo et al., 2019). As a form of indirect C2C interaction, customers can personally observe and learn the eating manners and etiquette of other customers from a distance within the restaurant (Ji et al., 2021). It is thus increasingly common for diners to interact familiarly with each other by cocreating experience in commercial places.

The literature provides empirical evidence of the centrality of customers in enhancing experiences of other customers in the foodservice settings (Ji et al., 2018; Mathis et al., 2016). Mathis et al. (2016), for instance, posited that the cocreation of experiences emerges from greater social interactions between customers, and is more common among customers with greater self-efficacy, involvement, and desire for knowledge (Andersson and Mossberg, 2004; Im and Qu, 2017). Consequently, high-quality C2C interaction in such an establishment can enhance customer experience, by providing an avenue for pure sociability to foster camaraderie (Rosenbaum, 2006). Pure sociability frees a diner from evaluation by the standards/customs of the outside world and provides an escape from workplace stress and household routines (Ji et al., 2020). Moreover, it provides an opportunity for the diner to reduce fatigue by fraternizing with others in a restaurant (Rosenbaum, 2009b).

Aside from pure sociability, the environment of an exotic restaurant can anonymize diners' identities, especially among other, similarly anonymized diners (Long, 2004). Interactions between customers allow them to learn the etiquette, manners, or culinary styles of

other cultures and imitate the lives of other diners, especially with dining companions already acquainted with these patrons (Huang and Hsu, 2010; Lin et al., 2020). Such interaction can also enable patrons to improve their social relationships with other patrons, as such outings are often occasions for companionship (Rosenbaum, 2006). Accordingly, the second hypothesis was proposed as follows.

Hypothesis 2: C2C interaction quality is positively related to customer experience.

Customer experience and brand attachment

Brand attachment refers to a strong bond that connects a brand to a customer (Prentice and Wong, 2016). This bond exemplifies a strong cognitive and emotional connection between a brand and the individual (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). The literature has established an association between positive experience and brand attachment, revealing how customers who have a positive experience with a product exhibit higher satisfaction and form a lasting relationship with the product (Japutra et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2017). In the hospitality and tourism contexts, researchers have found that customers tend to attach themselves to products and services that provide them with avenues to escape from the travails of life, offering them a means of relaxation and refreshment (Rosenbaum and Wong, 2015; Tsai, 2012).

Within the restaurant setting, customers usually attach themselves to brands that have a strong appeal, such as Melting Pot, Fleming's Prime Steakhouse, and Ruth's Chris Steakhouse. Apart from their strong brand names, these upscale restaurant chains provide distinctive dining experiences in terms of their food components, service styles, and seating, which often differ from traditional meals and settings in Asian societies (Han and Ryu, 2006). These Western foodservice enterprises emphasize escapism and luxurious indulgence, in contrast to ordinary eateries (Lee and Shavitt, 2009). Such experience reinforces the distinctive characteristics of the food and the restaurant brand, thereby increasing customers' attachment (Ji et al., 2018). Consequently, diners become strongly connected to the restaurant's brand because of its

distinctiveness, which increases the bond between customers and providers (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). Accordingly, the third hypothesis was proposed as follows.

Hypothesis 3a: Customer experience is positively related to brand attachment.

The aforementioned narratives highlight two important theoretical logics that underpin the mediation of customer experience on the relationship leading from food uniqueness and C2C interaction quality to brand attachment. First, novel gourmet meals possess both functional, emotional, and epistemic values (Kim and Choe, 2019) that are particularly attractive to epicures and those who have a strong food neophilic tendency, leading to favorable customer responses (Ji et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2010). The literature has widely acknowledged that pleasant tourist encounters could often result in a development of a strong connection between the provider and the consumer (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2016). Likewise, C2C interactions render as operant resources in that a high level of interaction quality among patrons entails connotative meanings of warmth, friendship, harmony, and care (Crocker and Canevello, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2008). Such moments that are highly appreciated in the social setting are important in shaping one's experience in the midst of restaurant dining. More importantly, the literature has also acknowledged the role of restaurants as commercial third places in building a social bond with strong emotional attachment between diners and service providers through favorable experiential encounters (Rosenbaum, 2006). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed.

Hypothesis 3b: Customer experience mediates the relationships leading from food novelty and C2C interaction to brand attachment.

Moderating Role of Food Taste

Savoring a meal is paramount in the dining experience and particularly for food with an irresistible taste (Liu et al., 2012). Food taste is often associated with dining motivations and

experiences (Duarte Alonso et al., 2013), and researchers have noted that food flavor varies across restaurant segments. For instance, compared to casual dining or fast food restaurants, fine dining restaurants offer high quality, tasty foods along with elaborate service and grand atmosphere (Ha and Jang, 2012).

In this study, we define food taste as consumers' objective evaluation, as obtained from social media platforms such as TripAdvisor, OpenRice, and Dingping (The Restaurant Times, 2020). We argue that a superior taste rating is a prominent socially constructed force (Xiang et al., 2017) that further stimulates the effect of food uniqueness and C2C interaction on customer experience. In particular, when a restaurant offers food that is unique in its marketplace, customers' experience will be enhanced if the food is also enjoyable (Everett, 2019). In other words, benefits from food offerings are complementary in nature in that unparalleled taste of a cuisine is not only able to improve diners' food satiation, it should also facilitate the role of food uniqueness in enhancing overall food quality, leading to enriched customer experiences (Favalli et al., 2013). Likewise, food with an inimitable flavor will further promote social relationships among diners, such as more pleasant conversations about the cuisine and sharing of favorable memories of the food (Kim and Jang, 2016). These shared congenial moments should further cultivate a higher level of C2C interaction quality with a stronger reciprocity and camaraderie, resulting in an elevated experience (Rosenbaum, 2006; Wong et al., 2019). Accordingly, the following hypotheses were postulated.

Hypothesis 4a: Food taste moderates the influence of food uniqueness on customer experience in that the relationship is stronger for restaurants with high food taste ratings.

Hypothesis 4b: Food taste moderates the influence of C2C interaction on customer experience in that the relationship is stronger for restaurants with high food taste ratings.

The taste of a restaurant's food, which is commonly commented on in dining platforms, reflects a strong social consensus with strong implications about the quality and importance of

the brand (Li et al., 2019). Thus, an establishment's high rating can further promote the effect of customers' experience on their attachment to it (Hsu and Scott, 2020). In other words, customers with a positive experience may still be reluctant to connect themselves with a focal brand because they are unsure whether doing so is a wise decision (Huang et al., 2020). High social media ratings, however, offer these patrons confidence that building a bond with the brand is smart because it is a socially acceptable behavior (Fong et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2015). Accordingly, the following hypothesis was proposed.

Hypothesis 4c: Food taste moderates the influence of customer experience on brand attachment in that the relationship is stronger for restaurants with high food taste ratings.

Moderating Effect of Employee Service

Employee service has been widely acknowledged as a critical evaluative metric in restaurants, and previous studies have recognized its importance in enhancing customers' perceptions, satisfaction, experience, and intentions (Ryu and Han, 2010; Waqanimaravu and Arasanmi, 2020). Employees can affect various facets of customers' dining experience because they deliver service, interact with customers (both directly and indirectly), and shape their experience and impression of a restaurant. Consequently, the quality of employee service has been found to vary among restaurant segments, with fine dining restaurants demonstrating higher quality employee service than other restaurant segments (Ha and Jang, 2012). Within a restaurant's social setting, employees and customers may work together to cocreate value, which further enhances customers' experience and leads to customer attachment to the restaurant's brand (Im and Qu, 2017).

The underpinning logic of our proposed moderation of employee service rests on the seminal work of Rosenbaum (2006), who proposed the joint influence of food, employees, and C2C interaction in the restaurant setting through a qualitative lens. In particular, Rosenbaum's research revealed that patrons forge experiences based not only on the food, but also on the

companionship and camaraderie with other diners. Rosenbaum denotes the term “place-as-practical” to reflect how food in a dining setting could fulfill one’s functional needs, while the serving staff could facilitate customer attainment of such needs with favorable experiential responses through reliable and empathic services (Rosenbaum et al., 2007). The term “place-as-gathering,” however, refers to how reciprocity among diners could improve customers’ experiences through fulfillment of their social needs; here employees work as facilitators in the experience creation process in which people may find “refuge and a sense of belonging by being among other people” (Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 61; 2009a). Accordingly, a restaurant is not merely a place for dining, but provides customers with meaning as “they receive feelings of love and safety, belongingness, and personal acknowledgment from others at the diner” (Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 64). Empathic employee service thus adds to this equation with a dash of love, care, and sympathy (Rosenbaum et al., 2007) and hence, further promotes the role of food and C2C interactions, resulting in more positive experiences. Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed.

Hypothesis 5a: Employee service moderates the influence of food uniqueness on customer experience in that the relationship is stronger for restaurants with high employee service ratings.

Hypothesis 5b: Employee service moderates the influence of C2C interaction on customer experience in that the relationship is stronger for restaurants with high employee service ratings.

Importantly, the socially supportive role of third places such as restaurants often results in greater customer attachment (Rosenbaum et al., 2009). Socio-emotional supports from others (e.g., employees) elevate the impact of an experience on the bond between the customer and provider (Park et al., 2010). In essence, hospitality operators, who are renowned for service excellence, are conversant with customer needs and hence present a positive brand image through warmth and compassion (MacInnis and Folkes, 2017). These are attributes that could

induce customers, who have already had a pleasant experience with the restaurant, to associate themselves with the brand. Accordingly, we propose the last hypothesis.

Hypothesis 5c: Employee service moderates the relationship between customer experience and brand attachment in that the relationship is stronger for restaurants with high employee service ratings.

Methods

Data Collection Procedure

The population of interest was Chinese tourist diners in Portuguese restaurants in Macau, China. This research context is ideal for testing the proposed model, as Portuguese food is unusual for Chinese tourists, while the cuisine is renowned for extraordinary flavor (Ji et al., 2021). Data were collected by in-person surveys, conducted in several steps to increase representation of the population of interest and reduce sampling bias. First, 23 fine dining restaurants that served Portuguese food were selected as the research context. This helped to control the research context in terms of food and dining style. Next, a quota was set for each of the participating restaurants: 25 to 30 respondents were recruited from popular restaurants and 5 to 10 target respondents were recruited from less popular ones; popularity was assessed using ratings from social media. We then conducted an on-site observation to distinguish popular restaurants from less popular ones by counting the number of diners visiting these establishments. After the sampling plan was developed, a group of field investigators were instructed to approach patrons outside of the participating restaurants after they had finished their meals. The objective of the survey was explained to each patron. We mitigated response bias through a systematic sampling method by approaching every third subject. The next available subject was used to replace a respondent who failed to respond to the survey. The questionnaire was originally developed in English and was translated into Chinese by two bilingual researchers. It was back-translated into English again to ensure consistency between versions. Multiple refinements of the questionnaire were performed to improve the content

validity of the scale items. A pilot test with 12 people was also carried out to achieve this objective.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analytical procedure followed several steps as described below. First, we assessed scale validity and reliability based on Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, factor loadings from confirmatory factor analysis, and average variance extracted. Second, we diagnosed common method variance and multicollinearity. Third, we evaluated appropriateness of using multilevel analysis. Finally, we examined the proposed relationships using hierarchical linear modeling in two separate models: one for the mediator (i.e., customer experience) and the other for the dependent variable (i.e., brand attachment).

Findings

Sample Characteristics

The final sample included 356 complete responses, for a response rate of around 40%. The sample had an equal number of males and females. The age distribution was roughly bell-curve-shaped, with 43.5% of the respondents falling between the age of 26 and 35, 26.1% between 36 and 45, and 22.2% below 26. Most of the respondents (82.6%) were mainland tourists, and the rest were Taiwanese tourists. On average, a respondent spent US\$30 in the restaurant.

Measures

The instruments used in the study were primarily adopted from the literature. The questionnaire contained two major parts. The first part included all of the multi-item scales of interest and the second part included measures of demographic traits (e.g., gender, age, and place of origin) and prior dining experience in Portuguese restaurants. Each scale item was evaluated based on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. To validate the scales, confirmatory factor analyses were conducted. The results are presented

below.

Food uniqueness was operationalized as a 2-item scale adopted from Malär, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer (2012), using the questions “The characteristics of Portuguese food are distinctive” and “Portuguese dishes are uniquely appealing.” The scale demonstrated adequate validity and reliability with standardized loading $\geq .77$ ($t \geq 8.32$, $p < .001$), average variance extracted (AVE) = .60, and both Cronbach’s alpha (α) and composite reliability = .75.

Customer-to-customer interaction quality (C2CIQ) was operationalized by two items adopted from the literature (Ji et al., 2018). The questions were as follows: “The presence of diners with good manners enhances our dining experiences,” and “The presence of diners with good manners in the restaurant improves the dining atmosphere.” The scale showed reasonable validity and reliability with standardized factor loadings $\geq .80$ ($t \geq 5.55$, $p < .001$), AVE = .70, $\alpha = .84$, and composite reliability = .82.

Customer experience assessed customers’ dining experience with respect to their immersion and active participation in restaurants as places for relaxation, escape, and rejuvenation. The scale was measured by three items adopted from Ji et al. (2018): “Dining at the restaurant gives me a good opportunity to relax,” “Dining at the restaurant gives me an escape experience,” and “Dining at the restaurant gives me a good break from my daily routine.” The validity and reliability of the scale are demonstrated based on standardized factor loadings $\geq .90$ ($t \geq 6.30$, $p < .001$), AVE = .85, and both α and composite reliability = .95.

Brand attachment assessed diners’ connection and passion about a restaurant. The scale was operationalized as a 2-item scale adopted from the literature (Keller, 2003; Prayag and Ryan, 2012), using the items “Dining at this restaurant is especially important to me” and “The restaurant is very special to me.” The scale demonstrated good validity and reliability with standardized loading $\geq .86$ ($t \geq 6.01$, $p < .001$), average variance extracted (AVE) = .77, $\alpha = .87$,

and composite reliability = .86.

Overall, the multi-item measurement models with four constructs fit the data fairly well with $\chi^2/df = 1.82$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, goodness of fit index (GFI) = .98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .02. The scales also exhibited reasonable discriminant validity, as the AVEs were greater than the square of each interfactor correlation pair.

In addition to the multi-item measures of subjective customer evaluations presented above, two objective measures were used: *food taste* and *employee service*. Both variables were adopted from OpenRice, which is the most popular foodservice information portal and review platform amongst Hong Kong and Macau with over 15,000 restaurants included. This site provides objective measures for each restaurant based on aggregated customer evaluations of five aspects, including taste and service. Here taste refers to diners' overall rating of taste of the food prepared by a focal restaurant, while service reflects diners' assessments of the overall services provided by the frontline staff. These two measures were used as proxies for food taste and employee service, respectively. It is important to note that both measures are objective evaluations as they entail social consensus about the specific quality of a focal establishment (de Langhe et al., 2015). Twenty-three dyadic sets, with each corresponding to a restaurant, were then created to link the objective and subjective measures.

Data diagnostics were conducted using two procedures. First, common method variance (CMV) was mitigated by using multiple sources. Because all of the subjective measures were acquired from a single source, CMV may still be a limitation. We diagnosed CMV using the single-factor method, with results showing that it was not an issue as $\chi^2/df = 9.39$, which is greater than the 2.0 threshold. The mark-variable method was also used to ensure that CMV is not a threat to the results. Second, multicollinearity was assessed based on the variance inflation factor (VIF), which had values lower than 2.22 even when both food taste and employee service

were included in the model. The results indicated that multicollinearity was not an issue.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, AVEs, and reliability measures. In addition, we controlled for respondent gender, age, and prior dining experience, defined as the number of times the respondent had previously visited this type of restaurant (i.e., a Portuguese restaurant in this study). Because data came from two different sources, a multilevel method was used to link the subjective (individual-level) and objective (restaurant-level) measures. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with HLM 6.06 was used for the data analysis. To further diagnose whether HLM was appropriate, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) and HLM null model were applied to the mediator (i.e., customer experience) and dependent variable (i.e., brand attachment). The results indicated significant differences between customer experience ($F_{[22, 333]} = 25.76, p < .001$) and brand attachment ($F_{[22, 333]} = 25.76, p < .001$). A significant proportion of the variance of these variables occurred at the higher level (i.e., restaurant level) with $\chi^2_{(21)} \geq 256.41 (p < .001)$, warranting the use of HLM. In particular, the intraclass correlations for both variables ranged from .39 (for brand attachment) to .58 (for customer experience), suggesting that 39% and 58% of the variance between restaurant groups was due to these two variables, respectively.

Table 1 at back

The proposed framework was examined using two separate models: the first estimating relationships leading to customer experience and the second estimating relationships leading to brand attachment (see Table 2). Hypothesis 1 postulated a relationship between food uniqueness and customer experience. The results from Model 1a revealed a significant and positive relationship between the two constructs ($b = .27, p < .01$), supporting the hypothesis. Hypothesis 2 posited a relationship between C2C interaction quality (C2CIQ) and customer experience. The results indicated that the postulated relationship was positive and significant ($b = .15, p$

< .05), supporting the hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3a posited a positive relationship between customer experience and brand attachment, while Hypothesis 3b proposed a mediation relationship leading from food uniqueness and C2CIQ to brand attachment through customer experience. The results from Model 2a revealed that the relationship was significant ($b = .45, p < .01$), supporting the hypothesis. The mediating effect was examined using the Sobel test. The results indicated a significant mediating effect of customer experience ($Z \geq 1.81, p < .10$). Although the result falls outside the .05 level, it is still within the acceptable level within a 90% confidence interval (Burns and Bush, 2005).

Hypotheses 4a and 4b postulated a moderating effect of food taste on the relationships between food uniqueness, C2CIQ, and customer experience. The results from Model 1b revealed that the food uniqueness \times food taste cross-level interaction was significant ($\gamma = -.39, p < .10$) and the direct cross-level effect of food taste was also significant ($\gamma = 1.13, p < .05$). To graphically depict the interaction, we followed the simple slope procedure from Aiken and West (1991) to redefine both the independent and moderating variables as +/- one standard deviation from their corresponding means. As Figure 2 depicts, customers enjoyed a significantly higher customer experience in restaurants that offer better food. However, the food uniqueness effect was only significant at restaurants that offered food with an inferior taste. In other words, food uniqueness is only a factor in improving diners' experience when a restaurant does not offer tasty food. However, if a restaurant offers delicious food, patrons enjoy a high level of customer experience regardless of the uniqueness of the food. However, the C2CIQ \times food taste cross-level interaction term was not significant. In sum, Hypothesis 4a was partially supported.

Table 2 at back

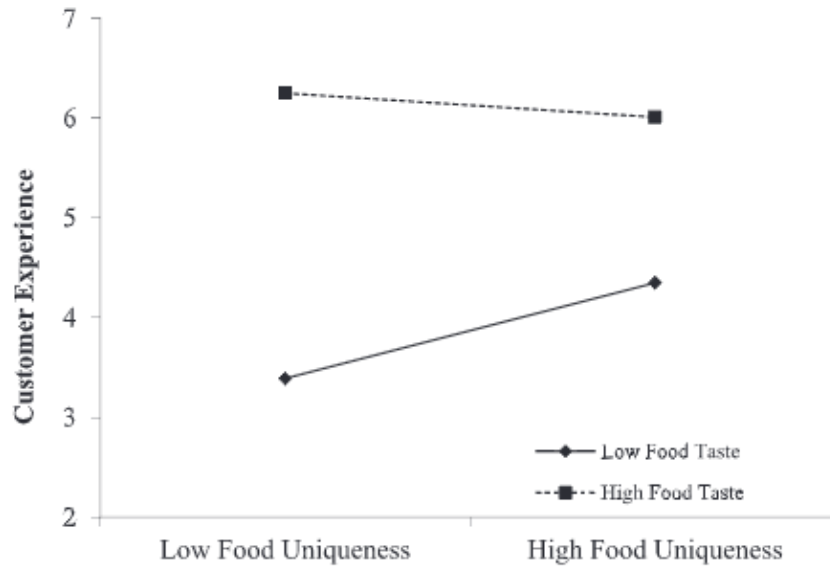


Fig. 2. Food uniqueness × taste interaction on customer experience.

Hypotheses 5a and 5b postulated a moderating effect of employee service on the relationships between food uniqueness, C2CIQ, and customer experience. Model 1b revealed a significant food uniqueness × employee service cross-level interaction effect ($\gamma = .51, p < .05$). We followed the procedure detailed above in Figure 3 to illustrate the interaction term. The positive effect of food uniqueness on customer experience was only significant in restaurants with good employee service. In contrast, even when customers perceived unique food in a restaurant, relatively poor employee service resulted in a worse dining experience, as demonstrated by the solid line in Figure 3. The C2CIQ × employee service interaction effect was also significant ($\gamma = -.29, p < .01$). Using the same graphical procedure, Figure 4 illustrates that the positive effect of C2CIQ was only significant in restaurants with relatively poor service. In other words, a high quality of C2C interaction acts as a remedy for or buffer against inferior

employee service; however, the C2C interaction is relatively unimportant in restaurants with excellent employee service.

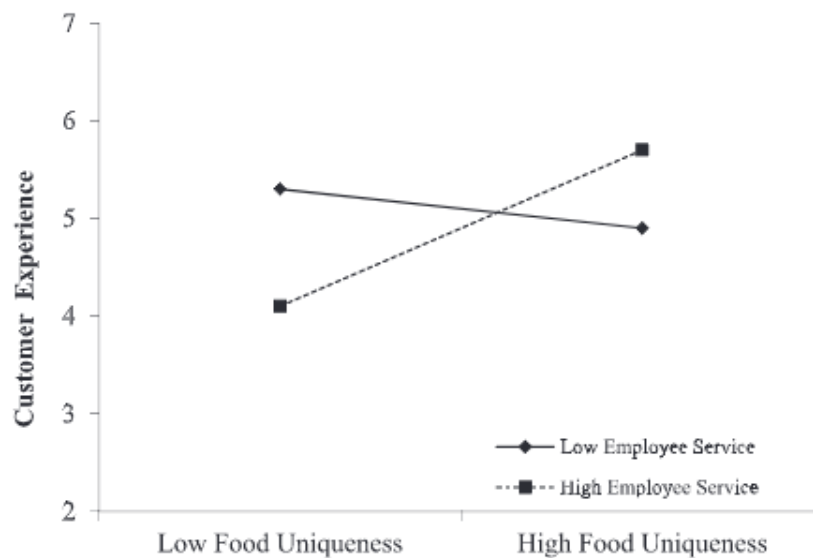


Fig. 3. Food uniqueness × employee service interaction on customer experience.

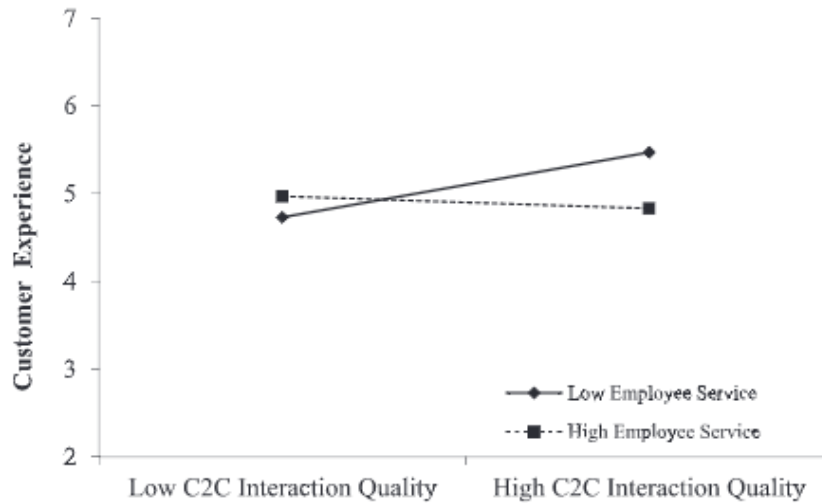


Fig. 4. C2C Interaction quality × employee service interaction on customer experience.

Hypothesis 4c postulated a moderating effect of food taste on the relationship between customer experience and brand attachment. The results from Model 2b indicated that the customer experience × food taste cross-level interaction was significant ($\gamma = -.42, p < .10$), supporting the hypothesis. In addition, the cross-level direct effect of food taste on brand

attachment was also significant ($\gamma = 1.08, p < .01$). Figure 4 follows the graphical illustration procedure detailed above. As it shows, restaurants that offer good food taste enjoy a significantly higher level of consumer-based brand attachment than those that do not. Furthermore, the effect of experience is far more salient in restaurants that offer food with inferior taste. In other words, a high quality of customer experience serves as a remedy or buffer for restaurants that do not provide tasty food. Hypothesis 5c postulated a moderating effect of employee service on the experience–brand attachment relationship. However, neither the cross-level direct effect of employee service nor its cross-level moderating was significant, thus failing to support the hypothesis.

Results further revealed that none of the control variables were significant, indicating that gender, age, and prior experience with Portuguese food did not play a role in brand attachment, *ceteris paribus*, when other factors were controlled. Overall, the proposed framework accounts for 14% of customer experience and 24% of brand attachment, while food taste and employee service cross-level effects contribute 4% and 10% of the variances of these

two dependent measures, respectively.

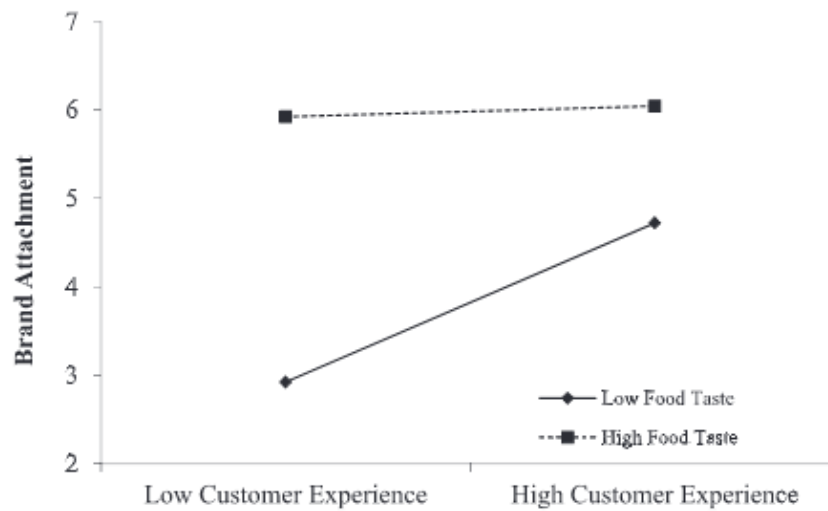


Fig. 5. Customer experience \times food taste interaction on brand attachment.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

This research offers several implications for specific hospitality research domains. First, it has previously been found that novel food consumption leads to satisfaction, enhanced loyalty behaviors, and positive brand outcomes in different contexts (Ji et al., 2016; Kim and Jang, 2016; Lai et al., 2020). However, the connection between food uniqueness and dining experience has yet to be thoroughly addressed in the literature. As exotic cuisine could influence restaurant-going when consumption of such food results in positive dining experiences, our findings suggest that food uniqueness can elicit favorable experiences in hospitality settings. Importantly, the effect of uniqueness is contingent upon two firm-level appeals: food taste and employee service. Our findings clearly differ from prior research, which primarily takes a linear approach in assessing the role of food uniqueness and novelty on diners' consumption and restaurant evaluations (Favalli et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2021; Jaeger et al., 2017; Kim and Choe, 2019). Thus the current inquiry showcases a synthesis among food uniqueness and taste

and dining service, offering a new understanding of the effect of this cross-level moderated relationship on customer experience and brand attachment.

In a similar vein, we unravel the boundary condition of food taste rating to identify a moderated mediation effect of customer service on the relationship between food uniqueness and brand attachment. Importantly, as Figures 2 and 5 depict, the role of food uniqueness and customer experience is fairly salient in establishments with inferior food taste; however, their effects are fairly stable (i.e., unchanged) in restaurants that offer food with inimitable taste. These findings are intriguing, as they illustrate the accommodating role of taste in the brand attachment formation process. Restaurants that offer irresistible flavor can enjoy a competitive advantage over rivals with an elevated level of customer experience and brand attachment. However, those that fail to cultivate superior taste may need to rely on novel food products and a higher level of dining experience (e.g., a grand atmosphere and wide range of cuisine). This divergent view of food taste provides us with a fuller picture of the experience-brand creation mechanism. It thus answers the question “Does food quality really matter in restaurants?” previously asked by Namkung and Jang (2007, p. 387). However, to answer this question relies not merely on our ability to assess the direct impact of food traits on diners’ perceptions, as most prior studies acknowledge (Duarte Alonso et al., 2013; Everett, 2019; Liu et al., 2012); rather, this research takes food taste as a firm-level construct to explore its conditioning role on the experience-attachment link. Accordingly, food quality, taste in particular, is central to restaurant success through its complementary role on the effect of customer experience.

Our findings also reveal how food uniqueness and employee service together create novel outcomes for customer experience. In particular, excellent employee service works as an experience facilitator, in that it enhances dining experience with food products that are perceived as uncommon. In contrast, poor service coupled with standard food offerings can create a devastating experience for customers. In other words, employee service acts as a

double-edged sword in the customer experience creation process, which is highly dependent on the food being delivered. This counterintuitive finding sheds new light on employee service, which is often considered to be ideal in almost all situations (e.g., Ha and Jang, 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1991; Shin et al., 2019). Through the cross-level interaction model presented in this study, we highlight the importance of disentangling service elements into different levels. Doing so gives a deeper understanding of service management.

This study also contributes to the experience cocreation literature. In particular, prior studies often take a linear view of C2C interaction, focusing on how value and experience are cocreated (Huang and Hsu, 2010; Ji et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2019; Wei et al., 2017) without assessing how cocreated experience could be bounded within different hierarchical orders. As the proposed framework in Figure 1 shows, C2C interaction quality (C2CIQ) acts as a remedy for poor employee service. This buffering mechanism is novel in the hospitality literature, as our study points to the role of customer-based interaction, which is highly contingent upon how services are delivered by employees. This dynamic view of experience cocreation goes beyond the existing static understanding of cocreation in the service setting. In essence, the buffering mechanism of C2CIQ reveals the paradox of hospitality services: (1) when services are delivered properly with care and warmth, customers are less reliant on their own efforts to meet their experience expectations; but (2) when services are disappointing, customers attempt to induce a high level C2C interaction to ameliorate the harm from poor service. Taken together, this study advances the literature. The findings have theoretical and practical implications that provide new means to gauge experience and attachment in the foodservice field.

Practical Implications

Commercial third places, such as restaurants, have long been recognized as a critical element in our daily lives (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997; Meng and Choi, 2017); but “little is known about how and why [these] places become especially meaningful to consumers”

(Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 60). In fact, restaurant dining provides meanings beyond merely satisfying the need for food and hunger. Such a fulfillment of diners' consumption needs entails only practical meaning for a place. Yet, eateries often render connotative meanings beyond their utilitarian appeals, to imbue socio-emotional nuances that transcend a commercial establishment into a place for friendship and belongingness while sharing memorable experiences. The present research showcases how food traits, interactions among customers, and employee services are intertwined during such unforgettable dining experiences, cultivating an emotional bond between patrons and providers.

To engender such exceptional experience and commercial bonding, Rosenbaum (2006) points to the socially supportive role of restaurants to facilitate the essence of human interactions within a place. Here employees and other diners can act as resources that can replenish a focal customer with positive socio-psychological values through companionship, love, and warmth. To this end, our findings highlight a rather unique situation in experience cocreation, in that a high level of C2C interaction quality can elevate customer experience only in restaurants with a low level of employee services, as Figure 4 illustrates. These findings provide revelations for service design; for example, a high level of employee service may not always be desirable as it may seem irritating when customers are looking for intimate interaction among their peers. In such a circumstance, operators can offer on-call service to allow diners more private spaces, while providing oasis services only upon request.

From a food perspective, our findings illustrate the complementary role of food uniqueness on food taste in that restaurants that offer superior flavor of gourmet food would find themselves enjoying a distinctive competitive advantage over rivals. More importantly, results show that customers would treasure similar experiences regardless of whether the eateries provide exotic food or not. Only when establishments fail to offer such superior taste to patrons, can food uniqueness then play a supplementary role. A similar finding also applies

to the experience-attachment relationship, in that only when dining outings fail to deliver a superior food taste to their diners, would they need to make up the void by facilitating customer experiences through other means in order to nurture a high level of brand attachment. Given that assessment of food taste is based on user ratings from social media, it follows that operators should not only make an earnest endeavor to prepare cuisines that could please palates for their guests, they should also invest heavily in social media marketing in an effort to cultivate favorable evaluations in cyberspace.

Methodological Implications

For years, scholars have attempted to identify factors that could cultivate positive experiences and better behavioral and brand-related outcomes. One common approach has been to utilize surveys of consumers at a specific establishment, as a proxy for interest (e.g., Khan and Rahman, 2017; Lin et al., 2018). Another approach has been to acquire data from user-generated content (UGC) on social media to assess consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding a given focal outing (Phillips et al., 2015; Zhu et al., 2019). These two streams of research both have strengths and limitations.

This inquiry heeds the call from Wong (2016, 2017) and unites these two analytical approaches within a framework that uses both subjective measures from individual diners and objective measures from online ratings. By synthesizing these two perspectives, this study develops a unique multilevel model for assessing customer experience and brand attachment from three different angles: food-related traits, employee-related attributes, and customer-related factors. Our model showcases how individual-level perceptions are often contingent upon the higher level influence of restaurant-specific situations that relate to the firm level. Because these firm-level characteristics are aggregated based on online ratings from diners at large, it follows that an individual diner's evaluation is necessarily situated within the broader social setting. Such a complex phenomenon is best reflected by the systems thinking paradigm

(Senge, 1994) in which actors are considered within the broader scope of a tourism-hospitality ecosystem (Baggio, 2008). To this end, this research offers new insights into the complex dynamics of foodservice evaluations articulated through a blend of individual and media-constructed assessments. It thus bridges self-based and UGC-based perspectives of hospitality service evaluations to develop a symbiotic view of the customer experience formation process.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

We studied foodservice in Portuguese restaurants at a popular tourism destination. On the one hand, this design reduces the generalizability of the findings as results are limited to such outings among Chinese diners. On the other hand, this design has the advantage of controlling for discrepancies among different types of restaurants. Use of a hierarchical linear model also takes random errors at the firm level into consideration. We encourage future research on a broader range of restaurants to assess the reliability of the proposed model. In regard to the subjective measures of foodservice, we only focus on C2C interaction and food uniqueness, which poses a limitation in assessing the foodservice traits. We believe other aspects of food and service-related attributes could be considered in future studies, to provide more insights into the mix of restaurant attributes in customers' experience journey. In regard to the objective measures, there are other restaurant ratings that have yet to be explored. We acknowledge that service environment and pricing could also play a role in customer experience and branding; however, our preliminary analysis indicates that including these measures in the proposed model would result in multicollinearity. We believe that it is worthwhile to investigate similar firm-level ratings in hospitality services to gauge their roles in the consumer experiential process.

References

- Aiken, L.S., West, S.G., 1991. Multiple Regression: Testing and Interpreting Interactions. Sage, Newbury Park, London.
- Andersson, T.D., Mossberg, L., 2004. The dining experience: Do restaurants satisfy customer needs? *Food Service Technology* **4** (4), 171-177.
- Baggio, R., 2008. Symptoms of complexity in a tourism system. *Tourism Analysis* **13** (1), 1-20.
- Bahri-Ammari, N., Van Niekerk, M., Ben Khelil, H., Chtioui, J., 2016. The effects of brand attachment on behavioral loyalty in the luxury restaurant sector. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **28** (3), 559-585.
- Beardsworth, A., Keil, T., 1997. *Sociology on the Menu: An Invitation to the Study of Food and Society*. Routledge, London.
- Brakus, J.J., Schmitt, B.H., Zarantonello, L., 2009. Brand experience: What is it? How is it measured? Does it affect loyalty? *Journal of Marketing* **73** (3), 52-68.
- Burns, A.C., Bush, R.F., 2005. *Marketing Research*, 5 ed. Pearson, Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Chathoth, P.K., Ungson, G.R., Harrington, R.J., Chan, E.S.W., 2016. Co-creation and higher order customer engagement in hospitality and tourism services. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **28** (2), 222-245.
- Crocker, J., Canevello, A., 2008. Creating and undermining social support in communal relationships: The role of compassionate and self-image goals. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* **95** (3), 555-575.
- de Langhe, B., Fernbach, P.M., Lichtenstein, D.R., 2015. Navigating by the stars: Investigating the actual and perceived validity of online user ratings. *Journal of Consumer Research* **42** (6), 817-833.
- Duarte Alonso, A., O'Neill, M., Liu, Y., O'Shea, M., 2013. Factors driving consumer restaurant choice: An exploratory study from the Southeastern United States. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* **22** (5), 547-567.
- Edvardsson, B., Tronvoll, B., Gruber, T., 2011. Expanding understanding of service exchange and value co-creation: A social construction approach. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* **39** (2), 327-339.
- Everett, S., 2019. Theoretical turns through tourism taste-scapes: The evolution of food tourism research. *Research in Hospitality Management* **9** (1), 3-12.
- Favalli, S., Skov, T., Byrne, D.V., 2013. Sensory perception and understanding of food uniqueness: From the traditional to the novel. *Food Research International* **50** (1), 176-188.
- Fong, L.H.N., Lei, S.S.I., Law, R., 2017. Asymmetry of hotel ratings on TripAdvisor: Evidence from single- versus dual-valence reviews. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* **26** (1), 67-82.
- Ha, J., Jang, S., 2010. Effects of service quality and food quality: The moderating role of atmospherics in an ethnic restaurant segment. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **29** (3), 520-529.
- Ha, J., Jang, S., 2012. Consumer dining value: Does it vary across different restaurant segments? *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* **15** (2), 123-142.
- Han, H., Ryu, K., 2006. Moderating role of personal characteristics in forming restaurant customers' behavioral intentions: An upscale restaurant setting. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing* **15** (4), 25-54.
- Harrigan, P., Evers, U., Miles, M., Daly, T., 2017. Customer engagement with tourism social media brands. *Tourism Management* **59** 597-609.
- Hsu, F.C., Scott, N., 2020. Food experience, place attachment, destination image and the role of food-related personality traits. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* **44**

- 79-87.
- Huang, G.I., Liu, J.A., Wong, I.A., 2021. Micro-celebrity restaurant manifesto: The roles of innovation competency, foodstagramming, identity-signaling, and food personality traits. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **97** 103014.
- Huang, G.I., Wong, I.A., Law, R., 2020. Dilemma of hotel reviews: The role of information processing and validation through metacognition. *Journal of Travel Research*0047287520938863.
- Huang, J., Hsu, C.H.C., 2010. The impact of customer-to-customer interaction on cruise experience and vacation satisfaction. *Journal of Travel Research* **49** (1), 79-92.
- Im, J., Qu, H., 2017. Drivers and resources of customer co-creation: A scenario-based case in the restaurant industry. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **64** 31-40.
- Jaeger, S.R., Cardello, A.V., Jin, D., Hunter, D.C., Roigard, C.M., Hedderley, D.I., 2017. Product uniqueness: Further exploration and application of a consumer-based methodology. *Food Quality and Preference* **60** 59-71.
- Jang, S., Ha, J., Park, K., 2012. Effects of ethnic authenticity: Investigating Korean restaurant customers in the U.S. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **31** (3), 990-1003.
- Japutra, A., Ekinci, Y., Simkin, L., 2018. Positive and negative behaviours resulting from brand attachment. *European Journal of Marketing* **52** (5/6), 1185-1202.
- Jeong, E., Jang, S., 2011. Restaurant experiences triggering positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) motivations. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **30** (2), 356-366.
- Ji, K.M., Wong, I.A., Eves, A., Scarles, C., 2020. Encountered space and situated lay-knowledge: A mixed methods approach. *Journal of Travel Research*0047287520944241.
- Ji, K.M., Wong, I.A., Eves, A., Scarles, C., 2021. Encountered space and situated lay-knowledge: A mixed methods approach. *Journal of Travel Research* **60** (6), 1265-1281.
- Ji, M., Wong, I.A., Eves, A., Leong, A.M.W., 2018. A multilevel investigation of China's regional economic conditions on co-creation of dining experience and outcomes. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **30** (4), 2132-2152.
- Ji, M., Wong, I.A., Eves, A., Scarles, C., 2016. Food-related personality traits and the moderating role of novelty-seeking in food satisfaction and travel outcomes. *Tourism Management* **57** 387-396.
- Jung, J.H., Yoo, J.J., Arnold, T.J., 2017. Service climate as a moderator of the effects of customer-to-customer interactions on customer support and service quality. *Journal of Service Research* **20** (4), 426-440.
- Kang, J., Manthiou, A., Sumarjan, N., Tang, L., 2017. An investigation of brand experience on brand attachment, knowledge, and trust in the lodging industry. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* **26** (1), 1-22.
- Keller, K.L., 2003. *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*, 2 ed. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Khan, I., Rahman, Z., 2017. Brand experience anatomy in hotels: An interpretive structural modeling approach. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* **58** (2), 165-178.
- Kim, J.-H., Jang, S., 2016. Determinants of authentic experiences: An extended Gilmore and Pine model for ethnic restaurants. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **28** (10), 2247-2266.
- Kim, K., Baker, M.A., 2017. The impacts of service provider name, ethnicity, and menu Information on perceived authenticity and behaviors. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* **58** (3), 312-318.
- Kim, S., Badu-Baiden, F., Oh, M., Kim, J., 2020. Effects of African local food consumption experiences on post-tasting behavior. *International Journal of Contemporary*

- Hospitality Management* **32** (2), 625-643.
- Kim, S., Choe, J.Y., 2019. Testing an attribute-benefit-value-intention (ABVI) model of local food consumption as perceived by foreign tourists. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **31** (1), 123-140.
- Kim, W.G., Ng, C.Y.N., Kim, Y.-s., 2009. Influence of institutional DINESERV on customer satisfaction, return intention, and word-of-mouth. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **28** (1), 10-17.
- Kim, Y.G., Suh, B.W., Eves, A., 2010. The relationships between food-related personality traits, satisfaction, and loyalty among visitors attending food events and festivals. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **29** (2), 216-226.
- Lai, M.Y., Wang, Y., Khoo-Lattimore, C., 2020. Do food image and food neophobia affect tourist intention to visit a destination? The case of Australia. *Journal of Travel Research* **59** (5), 928-949.
- LaTour, K.A., Carbone, L.P., 2014. Sticktion: Assessing memory for the customer experience. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* **55** (4), 342-353.
- Lee, K., Shavitt, S., 2009. Can McDonald's food ever be considered healthful? Metacognitive experiences affect the perceived understanding of a brand. *Journal of Marketing Research* **46** (2), 222-233.
- Li, J., Kim, W.G., Choi, H.M., 2019. Effectiveness of social media marketing on enhancing performance: Evidence from a casual-dining restaurant setting. *Tourism Economics*(0), 1354816619867807.
- Lin, H., Gursoy, D., Zhang, M., 2020. Impact of customer-to-customer interactions on overall service experience: A social servicescape perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **87** 102376.
- Lin, S., Yang, S., Ma, M., Huang, J., 2018. Value co-creation on social media: Examining the relationship between brand engagement and display advertising effectiveness for Chinese hotels. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*.
- Lin, Z., Wong, I.A., 2020. Cocreation of the hospitality brand experience: A triadic interaction model. *Journal of Vacation Marketing* **26** (4), 412-426.
- Liu, B., Norman, W.C., Backman, S.J., Cuneo, K., Condrasky, M., 2012. Shoot, taste and post: an exploratory study of food and tourism experiences in an online image-share community. *e-Review of Tourism Research* **10** (6), 917-922.
- Long, L.M., 2004. Culinary Tourism. University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky.
- Luo, J., Wong, I.A., King, B., Liu, M.T., Huang, G., 2019. Co-creation and co-destruction of service quality through customer-to-customer interactions: Why prior experience matters. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **31** (3), 1309-1329.
- Ma, E., Qu, H., Eliwa, R.A., 2014. Customer loyalty with fine dining: The moderating role of gender. *Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* **23** (5), 513-535.
- MacInnis, D.J., Folkes, V.S., 2017. Humanizing brands: When brands seem to be like me, part of me, and in a relationship with me. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* **27** (3), 355-374.
- Malär, L., Nyffenegger, B., Krohmer, H., Hoyer, W.D., 2012. Implementing an intended brand personality: A dyadic perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* **40** (5), 728-744.
- Mathis, E.F., Kim, H., Uysal, M., Sirgy, J.M., Prebensen, N.K., 2016. The effect of co-creation experience on outcome variable. *Annals of Tourism Research* **57** 62-75.
- Mattiacci, A., Vignali, C., 2004. The typical products within food “glocalisation”: The makings of a twenty first century industry. *British Food Journal* **106** (10/11), 703-713.
- Meng, B., Choi, K., 2017. Theme restaurants’ servicescape in developing quality of life: The moderating effect of perceived authenticity. *International Journal of Hospitality*

- Management* **65** 89-99.
- Morosan, C., DeFranco, A., 2019. Co-creation of value using hotel interactive technologies: Examining intentions and conversion. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **31** (3), 1183-1204.
- Namkung, Y., Jang, S., 2007. Does food quality really matter in restaurants? Its impact on customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* **31** (3), 387-409.
- Parasuraman, A., Berry, L.L., Zeithaml, V.A., 1991. Refinement and reassessment of the SERVQUAL scale. *Journal of Retailing* **67** (4), 420-450.
- Park, W.C., MacInnis, D.J., Priester, J., Eisingerich, A.B., Iacobucci, D., 2010. Brand attachment and brand attitude strength: Conceptual and empirical differentiation of two critical brand equity drivers. *Journal of Marketing* **74** (6), 1-17.
- Phillips, P., Zigan, K., Santos Silva, M.M., Schegg, R., 2015. The interactive effects of online reviews on the determinants of Swiss hotel performance: A neural network analysis. *Tourism Management* **50** 130-141.
- Prayag, G., Ryan, C., 2012. Antecedents of tourists' loyalty to Mauritius: The role and influence of destination image, place attachment, personal involvement, and satisfaction. *Journal of Travel Research* **51** (3), 342-356.
- Prebensen, N.K., Xie, J., 2017. Efficacy of co-creation and mastering on perceived value and satisfaction in tourists' consumption. *Tourism Management* **60** 166-176.
- Prentice, C., Wong, I.A., 2016. Embracing or fighting the urge: A multilevel investigation on casino service, branding and impulsive gambling. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **56** 109-118.
- Ramanathan, U., Ramanathan, R., 2011. Guests' perceptions on factors influencing customer loyalty. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **23** (1), 7-25.
- Rihova, I., Buhalis, D., Moital, M., Gouthro, M.-B., 2015. Conceptualising customer-to-customer value co-creation in tourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research* **17** (4), 356-363.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., 2006. Exploring the social supportive role of third places in consumers' lives. *Journal of Service Research* **9** (1), 59-72.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., 2008. Return on community for consumers and service establishments. *Journal of Service Research* **11** (2), 179-196.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., 2009a. Exploring commercial friendships from employees' perspectives. *Journal of Services Marketing* **23** (1), 57-67.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., 2009b. Restorative servicescapes: Restoring directed attention in third places. *Journal of Service Management* **20** (2), 173-191.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., Sweeney, J.C., Windhorst, C., 2009. The restorative qualities of an activity-based, third place café for seniors: Restoration, social support, and place attachment at Mather's -- More than a café. *Seniors Housing & Care Journal* **17** (1), 39-54.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., Ward, J., Walker, B.A., Ostrom, A.L., 2007. A cup of coffee with a dash of love: An investigation of commercial social support and third-place attachment. *Journal of Service Research* **10** (1), 43-59.
- Rosenbaum, M.S., Wong, I.A., 2015. When gambling is healthy: The restorative potential of casinos. *Journal of Services Marketing* **29** (6/7), 622-633.
- Ryu, K., Han, H., 2010. Influence of the quality of food, service, and physical environment on customer satisfaction and behavioral intention in quick-casual restaurants: Moderating role of perceived price. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* **34** (3), 310-329.
- Senge, P.S., 1994. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*. Doubleday, New York.
- Shin, Y.H., Kim, H., Severt, K., 2019. Consumer values and service quality perceptions of food

- truck experiences. *International Journal of Hospitality Management* **79** 11-20.
- The Restaurant Times, 2020. Restaurant influencer marketing: How to engage with food.
- Tsai, S.-p., 2012. Place attachment and tourism marketing: Investigating international tourists in Singapore. *International Journal of Tourism Research* **14** (2), 139-152.
- Tse, E.C.-Y., Ho, S.-C., 2009. Service quality in the hotel industry. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* **50** (4), 460-474.
- Vargo, S.L., 2008. Customer integration and value creation: Paradigmatic traps and perspectives. *Journal of Service Research* **11** (2), 211-215.
- Waqanimaravu, M., Arasanmi, C.N., 2020. Employee training and service quality in the hospitality industry. *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* 1-12.
- Wei, W., Lu, Y., Miao, L., Cai, L.A., Wang, C.-y., 2017. Customer-customer interactions (CCIs) at conferences: An identity approach. *Tourism Management* **59** 154-170.
- Wong, I.A., 2016. Linking firms, employees, and customers. *Cornell Hospitality Quarterly* **57** (1), 7-20.
- Wong, I.A., 2017. Advancing tourism research through multilevel methods: Research problem and agenda. *Current Issues in Tourism* **20** (8), 809-824.
- Wong, I.A., Liu, D., Li, N., Wu, S., Lu, L., Law, R., 2019. Foodstagramming in the travel encounter. *Tourism Management* **71** 99-115.
- Xiang, Z., Du, Q., Ma, Y., Fan, W., 2017. A comparative analysis of major online review platforms: Implications for social media analytics in hospitality and tourism. *Tourism Management* **58** 51-65.
- Yang, F.X., 2016. Tourist co-created destination image. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing* **33** 425-439.
- Zhang, Z., Zhang, Z., Law, R., 2013. Regional effects on customer satisfaction with restaurants. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **25** (5), 705-722.
- Zhu, L., Cheng, M., Wong, I.A., 2019. Determinants of peer-to-peer rental rating scores: The case of Airbnb. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* **31** (9), 3702-3721.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, correlations, AVE, and reliabilities.

	Mean	SD	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Food uniqueness	5.33	.90	.60	<i>.75 (0.75)</i>					
2. C2C interaction quality	5.06	1.06	.70	.60***	<i>.84 (0.82)</i>				
3. Customer experience	5.01	1.31	.85	.48***	.36***	<i>.95 (0.95)</i>			
4. Brand attachment	4.79	1.23	.77	.55***	.53***	.63***	<i>.87 (0.86)</i>		
5. Food taste ^a	3.16	.56	–	.28***	.33***	.32***	.38***	–	
6. Employee service ^a	2.93	.53	–	.09	.18***	.09	.16**	.58***,b	–

SD = standard deviation, AVE = average variance extracted.

Cronbach's alpha and (composite reliability) are reported on the diagonals.

Note:

† p < .10,

** p < .01,

*** p < .001

^a Variables are disaggregate at the individual level. Source: OpenRice.^b Correlation is assessed at the restaurant level.

Table 2
Results of parameter estimation.

	Model 1a Customer experience	Model 1b Customer experience	Model 2a Brand attachment	Model 2b Brand attachment
<i>Control variables</i>				
Gender ^a	–	–	.10	.06
Age	–	–	.11	.09
Prior experience	–	–	.02	.02
<i>Individual-level effects</i>				
Food uniqueness (novelty)	.27**	.18	–	–
C2C interaction quality (C2CIQ)	.15*	.14*	–	–
Escape experience	–	–	.45**	.48***
<i>Cross-level effects</i>				
Food taste	–	1.13*	–	1.08**
Employee service	–	.10	–	.08
Food uniqueness × Food taste	–	-0.39	–	–
C2CIQ × Food taste	–	-0.04	–	–
Food uniqueness × Employee service	–	.51*	–	–
C2CIQ × Employee service	–	-0.29**	–	–
Customer experience × Food taste	–	–	–	-0.42
Customer experience × Employee service	–	–	–	.24
R ²	.10	.14	.14	.24

Parameters are unstandardized.

Note:

| p < .10,

* p < .05,

** p < .01,

*** p < .001.

^a Gender: 1 = male, 2 = female.