

Consumer Intentions on Solo Dining Behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Due to a revolutionary transformation in demographics and lifestyles of people, there has been an exponential jump in the solo dining and food consumption activities. This pattern of behaviour calls for understanding this new emerging trend. This study examines the various factors that affect the solo dining intents with respect to the other customers in the restaurant. The factors were grouped in multiple categories, and a survey was designed to get the pertinent data from 251 solo dining respondents. Findings reveal that there are multiple factors that actually impact the solo dining intentions. The research finding on solo dining behaviour of the consumers provides valuable inputs for researchers, restaurateurs, and consumers

Keywords

Solo dining, restaurant dining, consumer dining behaviour and consumer dining intentions

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Introduction

It is a general understanding that going out for dining is considered to be dining in a group, along with friends, colleagues, family members or a date. But the concept is changing with the will ever evolving lifestyles, career requirements and demographics. Be it travelling, going for cinema or attending social events, everywhere solo visitors are on a grow. The same trend can now also be seen in food service industry. It has been evident from a recent research study that there has been a leap in the in the advance booking percentage (around 62%) of tables in restaurant by solo diners ("Open Table Study", 2015). The rise in nuclear families, voluntary singles, late marriages, working couples – all these factors have in a made a way for people to engage in solo activities that were not visible earlier (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; McPherson et al., 2006; Ratner and Hamilton, 2015). Therefore, understanding this emerging phenomenon is of utmost importance as it will help to get insights of the evolving target customer group which in turn would help in making huge revenue and margins in long term for those who are in the dining business.

Literature Review

Solo Dining can be defined as the activity of dining in a public space by an individual alone. The upward trend in solo dining is beneficial for both the customers and the industries. To consumers, it provides value with regards to getting the food served hot and cordial service from the restaurant staffs (Liu and Jang, 2009). For restaurants, solo dining may mean more orders from customers due to extended stay in restaurant as compared to customers who take their order and leave (Wansink, 2004).

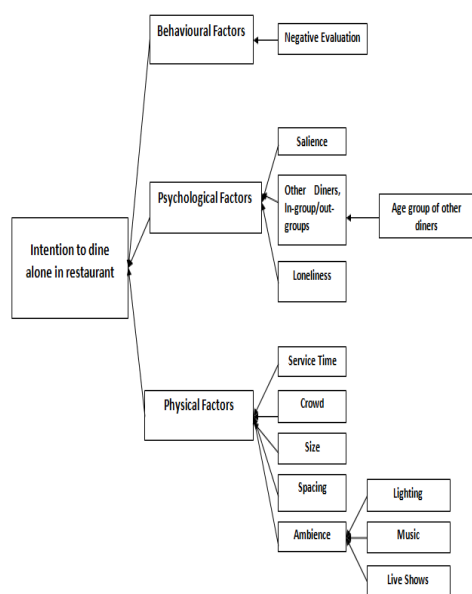
On the contrary, factors such as feeling of loneliness and socially excluded (Danesi, 2012; Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992; Heimtun, 2010) along with the fear of negative evaluation of sociability of the solo diner, from the other diners in the restaurant has an adverse impact on solo dining

decision (Danesi, 2012; Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992; Pliner and Bell, 2009). Anticipation of such negative perception from the people around ruins the solo diners dining experiences and hence the intentions to dine alone (Danesi, 2012; Heimtun, 2010; Ratner and Hamilton, 2015). Other diners in the restaurant become the reference group for solo diner with which he/she identifies himself/herself as an in-group or out-group. This impacts the solo dining decision (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). Also, the level of crowding in the restaurant has a moderating effect on the solo dining intention (Latane, 1981; Miao and Mattila, 2013). The research overall studies various physical, psychological and behavioural factors that affect the solo dining intention of consumers.

Through S-O-R model, it is obvious that changes in the environment are a form of stimuli and it does have a significant impact on human behaviour. The stimuli also include presence of other people in vicinity which highly influences emotions and experiences (Lin and Liang, et al., 2011). This becomes important in the case of solo diners as these are the ones who are alone and do not have dining partners. In a research study, it was found that the group with which an individual identifies self, helps him/her give an identity by providing a reference point of behaviours and attitudes (Mastro, 2003; Reed, 2002). Such groups are called in-groups whereas the groups with which the individual doesn't identifies self are called out-groups (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). A study explains the key factors which actuates the social identity among individuals: salience and relevance (Reed, 2002). A solo diner evaluates the presence of in-groups and out-groups in restaurant before making the decision of dining alone. As opposed to out-groups, in-groups are the ones that become the reference point for solo diners for conformity purpose (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). Research conducted in hospitality and retail industries has recognized the role of crowding level in waiting area or queue, on consumption behaviour (Grewal et al., 2003). The salience of other diners, their proximity with self and their number are the key factors impacting solo

diners' behaviour (Latane, 1981). When a person is alone in a public space, it's natural that he will get a feeling of loneliness and might also feel the pangs of social exclusion. This is because the need to belong to a group is strong and is deeply embedded in human nature (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, Pp. 497). Since eating together as a community is common, some people might find it weird when they see a solo diner and judge that they have no family or friends (Danesi, 2012). Overall, the factors that affect the intention of dining alone are categorized as Physical aspects of the restaurant, Psychological factors and Behavioural Factors of solo diners.

Research Model



Hypotheses Development

Based on the theories mentioned in the Literature review section, hypotheses on multiple factors that may affect the decision of solo dining were developed. These are as follows:

Physical factors: The physical factors refer to the physical aspects of the restaurant in which a solo diner goes. It may include tangible characteristics such as the size of the restaurant, the arrangement of tables there, the no. of people there etc. as well as non-tangible characteristics such as the ambience or feel of that restaurant, the service time by the waiters and many more.

Service Time: Whenever a solo diner goes into a restaurant, there is quite a high chance that he will feel lonely, given the dominance of out-groups there. The focal solo diner would prefer not to be in such a situation for long and that's exactly where service time of the restaurant becomes important. Faster the service of the restaurant, lesser would be the waiting time for the diner and hence lesser would be the overall time spent in the restaurant alone.

H1: The solo diner will not intend to go to a restaurant where the service time is high.

Crowd-level: No one in general likes to visit a crowded restaurant even in groups. It becomes all more difficult

when the diner is alone. He becomes uncomfortable in such an environment because of the fear of judgement from people around him. Therefore, it's obvious that crowd level of the restaurant plays an impactful role in solo dining decision.

H1: The solo diner is not likely to go to a highly crowded restaurant.

Size of the restaurant: Bigger the size of the restaurant, more is its seating-capacity. In a restaurant with high seating capacity, the solo diner can go and take any corner seat and dine peacefully. Chances are there that he might even go unnoticed by a majority of people around him. But such is not the case while dining in a small restaurant. There is a possibility of getting unwanted attention from other diners which ultimately hampers his dining experience.

H1: The solo diner does not prefer to eat in a restaurant with low-seating capacity.

Spacing between tables: Arrangement of tables in a restaurant also makes an impact on solo dining decision. A solo diner prefers to have his own space in which he can dine peacefully. Immediacy to other diners due to closeness of successive tables infringes with his personal space. The diner unwanted might become a listener to conversations happening on the table next to him. This unpleasant experience discourages one to go for solo dining.

H1: The solo diner will not intend to go to a restaurant where immediacy to other diners is high.

Ambience: Ambience plays the most important role in overall experience of the diner in the restaurant. A happening restaurant which host events or live shows are more likely to be preferred by solo diners because it draws their attention away from their act of eating alone. It provides a platform for relaxation of mind and so they don't feel lonely anymore. In addition, the focus of other diners too is more towards the event which is desirable for a solo diner. Further, he would prefer a restaurant where the lighting is dim, so that he is not explicitly visible by other diners around him.

H1: The ambience (music, lighting, live shows) of restaurant highly impacts the intention to eat alone.

Psychological Factors: Apart from the physical factors, there are also some factors that derive from the psychology of the solo diner which ultimately drives his decision of eating alone. This includes his perception, attitude, beliefs etc. of and towards the environment around him. The psychological factors affecting our study are discussed below.

Salience: Salience refers to be the quality of being prominent. The solo diner would not want to be noticeable in the restaurant where he goes. He would like to go, dine and come back from the restaurant in the most non-discernible way possible.

H1: Salience highly impacts the decision to go alone in a restaurant.

Impact of out-groups: As discussed in the literature review section, the solo diners identify themselves more with the in-groups rather than the out-groups. So, presence of a large no. of outgroups definitely affects the decision of dining alone.

H1: The solo diner will not intend to go to a restaurant where the majority of other diners are out-group.

Age group of other diners: This means what are the characteristics of the out-group. A person would be more comfortable to dine alone with people of similar age group around him rather than a group of diners with whom he doesn't relate to.

H1: The solo diner will prefer to dine in a restaurant where other diners are of same age group.

Loneliness: Loneliness is something that nobody would want to feel. But sometimes, due to psychology of a person, he might feel lonely from within in a crowded place like restaurant. This impacts the solo dining decision.

H1: The solo diner is not likely to go to a restaurant where he feels alone.

Behavioural Factors: These factors stem from the human behaviour which may be due to the personality of the person, the situation around him or the reaction to the environment.

Negative Evaluation: There is a possibility that a solo diner might feel that the diners around him might make preconceived notion about his sociability on seeing him dining alone. The diner fears of negative judgement from these diners which directly impacts the decision of dining alone.

H1: Negative evaluation from other diners highly impacts the decision of going alone to a restaurant.

Objective Of The Study

- To identify the factors affecting the customers' intention to dine alone in a restaurant.
- To derive measures to be taken by hotels and restaurants to cater to solo diners in an effective way.
- To assess the possibility of an alternative revenue model this focuses on solo diners.

Research Methodology

The Exploratory research is conducted by involving 251 respondents. The respondents were selected by adopting simple random sampling methods, the sample of respondents were selected from the population of undergraduate students, office goers, Professionals. The research had 10 constructs, with 11 items based on validity of content. With the help of SPSS, the reliability of the instrument was validated. The 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 "Highly Likely" to 5 "Highly Unlikely" was utilized. The Cronbach's alpha for all the constructs is higher than 0.6 as depicted in the Table 1 below. The reliability has been conducted and the constructs can be used for further analysis.

Data Analysis And Results

The questionnaire had a total of 11 items measuring multiple parameters affecting solo dining intention. The researcher subjected scale items of each and every distinct construct to FA along with Varimax Rotation to identify the dimensions that were underlying in every construct. The final results of the FA are illustrated in the table 2. The ultimate factor matrix produced after carrying out thirteen rotations was Three-Factor matrix with zero cross-loadings. All the three

factors had stability in their structure. The eigenvalue of each of the six factors came out to be more than 1. All the variables held one significant factor loading with a single factor. The lowest factor loading was found to be 0.551, which is more than the threshold of 0.50. We were able to interpret all of the three factors and they could be easily categorized together into logical taking literature review as the base. The sum total of variance explained by all the six factors is 63.17 percent.

Table I: Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, SCR and AVE for each construct namely, Intention to Purchase and Brand Connectivity, Brand Loyalty, Personalization, Entertainment, Monetary Benefits & Trust

Component	Items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha	SCR	AVE
Physical	1. Less time taken to deliver service	0.756	0.820	0.825	0.542505
	2. Less crowded	0.801			
	3. Large number of seating capacity	0.628			
	4. Ample seating space between you and other diners	0.750			
Ambience	1. Light music or live shows	0.813	0.685	0.726	0.571302
	2. Dim lighting	0.694			
Psychological and Behavioral	1. Majority of the diners are solo diners	0.782	0.776	0.790	0.433705
	2. Diners with similar age group	0.656			
	3. Not explicit	0.705			
		0.571			

ly discernible by other diners					
4. Do not feel lonely					
5. Anticipation of negative judgment from other diners impacts your solo dining intention					

Reliability and Validity

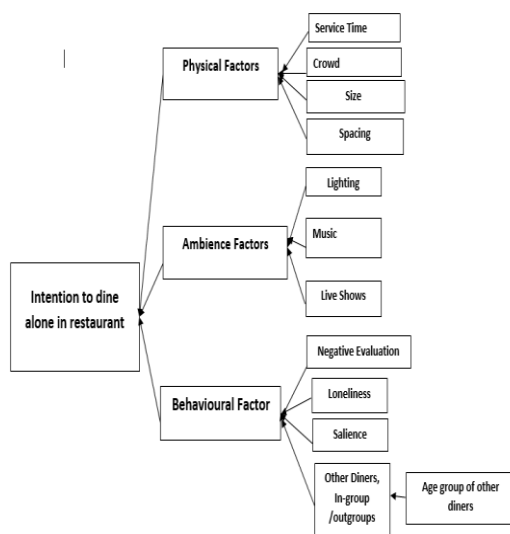
The extent or amount of consistency in measurement across a number of operationalization's is known as convergent validity. The table 1 depicts that all of the constructs exhibit convergent validity who are the part of the framework since the standardized factor loadings of maximum no of items is generally greater than 0.6 of the theoretical framework exhibit convergent validity, since the standardized factor loadings of most of the items are mostly greater than 0.6. When dimensions are independent of each other, they are referred to as Discriminant validity. In order to ascertain this discriminant validity, we derived the inter-factor correlation matrix in table 2. The diagonally coloured components elements represent signify the AVE square root value. The bottom half of the table displays the correlation coefficients between among different constructs under in the study. In case the diagonal elements components of the table are greater larger than those in the bottom half, then discriminant validity is possessed by the constructs. All of the constructs in the study is found to have discriminant validity. There are absolutely no cross-loadings between all variables in the factor loadings. This positively shows discriminant validity.

Table 2: Discriminant validity test through Inter correlation matrix for constructs of theoretical framework

	Physical	Ambience	Psychological & Behavioural
Physical	0.73655		
Ambience	0.543	0.755846	
Psychological & Behavioural	0.605	0.529	0.658563

Hypothesis Testing

Physical factors	Service Time: H1: The solo diner will not intend to go to a restaurant where the service time is high. Crowd-level: H1: The solo diner is not likely to go to a highly crowded restaurant	As the p value is less than 0.05, we reject the null. As the p value is less than 0.05, we reject the null.
Ambience:	H1: The ambience (music, lighting, live shows) of restaurant highly impacts the intention to eat alone.	As the p value is less than 0.05, we reject the null. Hence the alternative hypothesis is proved
Psychological and Behavioural Factors:	H1: Salience highly impacts the decision to go alone in a restaurant. H1: Negative evaluation from other diners highly impacts the decision of going alone to a restaurant.	As the p value is less than 0.05, we reject the null. As the p value is less than 0.05, we reject the null.

Model after analysis:**Discussion and conclusion:**

Through the research findings indicates the major factors that leads to solo dining, these findings provide guidance on what efforts to be taken by the restaurants to cater and improves their services to solo diners in their restaurant. It has been found that there are three major factors which affect the solo dining in consumers which are Physical factors, Ambience of the restaurant, Psychological and Behavioural factors.

Psychological and Behavioural factors such as saliency, loneliness, negative evaluation from other diners, and age group of other diners have a major impact on the intention of dining solo. So, keeping that in mind one needs to develop better infrastructure which will cater to the requirements of the solo diners.

Ambience too plays a vital role in the intention to dine alone. Facilities like music, live shows and lighting in restaurant impacts the intention to dine alone in the restaurant. Thus, marketers have to consider this before moving ahead with their strategies.

The study also shows there is strong relation between physical factors of restaurant and intention to dine alone. Several factors like service time, crowd, size of restaurant and spacing between tables in the restaurant has positive impact on the same. Consideration of these factors will help restaurants boost up their sales and eventually create a separate brand identity for solo diners which can be leveraged to create a new target segment with a significantly different revenue model.

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