Dining alone: Improving the experience of solo restaurant goers

Abstract

Purpose

Solo travel for leisure and business is increasing. It is therefore timely to conduct research into the experiences of solo tourists. This paper explores one aspect of the solo tourist experience that can be challenging, that of dining alone. This topic has received little attention in the tourism or hospitality literature.

Design/methodology/approach

A qualitative approach was adopted, and narrative inquiry was selected as the optimum route to obtaining detailed and rich accounts of the experiences of solo diners. 27 in-depth interviews were conducted with solo tourists with varying sociodemographic characteristics.

Findings

This study shows that though travelling alone is prized by participants, dining alone, especially in the evening, is often discomfiting. Discomfort is caused by the perceived negative judgement of others and is mitigated by the use of various props such as books and mobile phones.

Research limitations/implications

A research agenda is put forward on aspects of the solo tourist/diner experience.

Practical implications

The paper concludes by asking what can be done to ameliorate the solo dining experience, and provides some recommendations to hospitality operators in order to support this market and improve competitiveness and profitability. The paper shows that inclusive environments can attract multiple market segments and agile restaurants can develop both solo and plural dining experiences.

Originality/value

This paper addresses a topic that has received limited scholarly attention as well as industry engagement despite the growth in solo travel.

Key words

Solo dining   stigma   coping mechanisms   industry response

Introduction

Tourism arrivals worldwide are growing (UNWTO, 2019), and solo travel for both business and leisure is also on the increase (Cohen and Gossling, 2015; Bianchi, 2016; Her and Seo, 2018). According to the Holiday Habits Reports, more than one in six people from the UK travelled alone in 2018, an increase by one-third since 2011 (Haines, 2019), notably among 35-44 year olds (ABTA, 2018). In the US, the trend towards solo travelling is also growing (Devajyoti, 2014). This phenomenon is attributed to the fact that an increasing share of the population in developed countries lives in single-person households (DePaulo, 2014), owing in part to an increase in divorce and to an inclination common in individualist cultures to living alone (Laesser et al., 2008). Single person households are set to grow by 31% in England and Wales between 2007 and 2031 (Mintel, 2009; Hay, 2015). Globally, single-person households are expected to be the fastest-growing household profile between 2014 and 2030 (Bae, 2016).

Tourists view food and dining out as important components of their experience (see Sparks et al., 2003; McKercher et al., 2008; Mak et al., 2013; Okumus et al., 2018). There is a strong relationship between tourist satisfaction and the perceived quality of local foods that influence tourist's intentions and purchase behaviour (Rahman et al., 2018). Positive food tourism experiences can increase destination attractiveness, visibility and competitiveness (Rihova et al., 2013, 2018, 2019).

It is easy to assume that dining out is a commonplace experience for a growing proportion of the population because research shows that meals eaten outside the home, for both work and pleasure, have climbed steadily in the past few decades (Edwards et al., 2013). However, the literature shows that solo dining can be a fraught experience whereas eating in a group is more welcome. As Meiselman (2008) states, going out to eat alone is uncomfortable for people across many cultures. This is supported by Seo and Hwang (2014) who observe that customers tend to visit restaurants in groups of two or more. This is probably because the goal of eating out is to both eat *and* socialise.

For solo tourists, it is harder to avoid dining out alone than it might be at home. Besides, they may not want to miss out on the food aspect of the tourism experience (see Okumus et al., 2018). An important element of satisfaction with dining in destination restaurants is the emotional experience (Kim et al., 2014). Therefore it is important to understand the responses of solo tourists to dining alone when away for business or leisure, given the growth in this market segment. This paper explores the solo tourist experience of dining alone through narrative interviews. The paper first reviews the literature on the social component of dining, using studies from food science and anthropology. It then explores the literature on eating alone, using studies from a range of sources including food studies and education. The paper introduces stigma theory, which has relevance to social attitudes towards eating

alone. Jordan and Aitchison (2008) note that tourism is not an abstraction from everyday life. Rather, it frequently offers a mirror on society that permits a useful context in which to view everyday life practices. The challenges faced by solo tourists may result not from the tourism context but from the attitudes towards aloneness held by wider society. Looking at industry engagement and experience cocreation, the paper explores how the hospitality industry can support the solo diner market profitably, adopting strategies that combine care for the customer experience with the needs of managers. A key question is: what can hospitality managers do to ameliorate the solo diner experience, whilst supporting the drive for profitability and competitiveness?

Literature review

The social component of eating

Anthropologists emphasise the social component of eating, which is cast as central to satisfaction and food intake. Counihan and van Esterik (1997), for example, describe eating and sociability as intertwined, echoing Simmel's (1950) statement that eating is both a personal and a social act. The sensual pleasure of eating is experienced subjectively, but it is often a group activity (Sobal and Nelson, 2003; Heimtun, 2010; Danesi, 2012). In their study of the eating habits of international students in the UK, Brown et al. (2010) found that food played a key role in the construction and maintenance of social relationships, particularly among Southeast Asian students. Food was a vehicle for socializing, conferring a sense of belonging and security and providing the opportunity to eat the food that students preferred. In a later study of the impact of emotion on British students' eating habits, Brown et al. (2012) uncovered a unanimous view that eating was at once a physical and social activity. Eating was associated with socialising and forming relationships, and being in a group improved the experience of eating, whilst aiding physical and mental relaxation. There were therefore emotional benefits to be obtained from eating their meal that were not attributed just to the food participants ate. Eating in a group was a route to feelings of belonging and security. This is corroborated in studies by Fischler (2011) and Polivy and Pliner (2014).

There is a strong impact of eating with others on food intake (de Castro and de Castro, 1989; Pliner and Bell, 2009; Herman 2015), which is attributable by Macht (1999) to the fact that there is a stronger tendency to eat if people are happy. According to de Castro and Brewer (1992), there is a positive link between a large group size and the size of the meal. This is witnessed across a variety of meals and settings (de Castro, 1990; Edwards and Hartwell, 2004), and is due to the increased time spent eating if people dine together (Bell and Pliner, 2003; Pliner and Bell, 2009; Brown, 2009; Brown et al., 2012). Eating in groups appears to create a happy atmosphere that increases the food consumed

Eating alone

As Pliner and Bell (2009) observe, for most people, dining alone presents an uncomfortable social situation. Oxford Economics suggests that eating alone is more strongly associated with unhappiness than any other factor, other than mental illness (Bespoke, 2018). Research by Brown et al. (2012) found eating alone to be a lonely experience for students, something they wanted to avoid whenever possible. Brown et al. (2010) discovered that loneliness is heightened at mealtimes for international students who were the only representatives of their nationality. They often expressed envy of their Asian colleagues, whose collective identity was consolidated through their interactions around their home food.

Heimtun (2010) found in her study of Norwegian tourists that they were self-conscious about dining alone. In her qualitative study of solo female tourists, Jordan (2008) found solo dining to be an uncomfortable experience, particularly in the evening. As Lahad and May (2017) observe, being alone in a restaurant in the evening can make women feel particularly vulnerable. This was also found in Seow and Brown's (2017) study of solo female Asian tourists. When there was no choice but to eat alone, participants found that they ate too quickly in order to avoid emotional unease, or they ate what they perceived to be low quality take-away food. Thus eating alone was linked with negative physical and emotional impacts. In their study of food and ageing, McIntosh and Kubena (1999) highlight a correlation between social isolation and a lower food intake, as does Sen (2011).

Brown et al. (2010, 2012) found that the act of eating alone was experienced negatively by participants from both individualist and collectivist cultures. This is an interesting point, as collectivist cultures tend to be associated with group affiliation whilst those from individualist cultures are usually cast as tolerant and indeed welcoming of time alone (Triandis et al., 1988). Nevertheless, the experience of dining alone appears to be capable of catalysing feelings of isolation and marginalisation, regardless of cultural background. According to Sommer and Steele (1997), solo diners feel self-conscious, perceived to be lonely and friendless.

Ladhari et al. (2008) observe in their work on dining satisfaction that both positive and negative emotions impact on the enjoyment of food. Furthermore, eating behaviour is influenced by the emotions a diner experiences (Desmet and Schifferstein, 2008). Jani and Han (2011) also note that affect carries a major impact on both customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Furthermore, Meiselman (2008) notes that people traveling alone usually like to dine in restaurants, and as such they represent an important clientele group that deserves the attention of the restaurant sector. Solo diners don't have to compromise on the type or price of venue, accommodate dietary requirements or avoid particular cuisines to please their company. They value the opportunity to

discover what happens in a restaurant, to watch the "theatre" of the chef doing the cooking and to connect with local people or fellow diners without being accountable to their companion (Morrissy-Swan, 2019).

Stigma theory and the psychology of diners

Stigma theory is helpful to understand why dining alone may be discomfiting. Frable et al. (1990) argue that society can make an individual feel culturally devalued or stigmatised. Using Goffman's (1963) definition, stigma acts to disqualify a person from social acceptance. It can be inferred from the above review that eating alone is not always felt to be socially acceptable; that it is in some way deviant. Giddens (1991) argues that self-esteem is always vulnerable to the response of the Other. As Sartre (1969) postulated, people live constantly subject to the judgement of the Other who is a 'threat to the order and arrangement of your whole world... Your world is suddenly haunted by the Other's values, over which you have no control' (p.124). But as Quarantelli and Cooper (1972) claim, it is often the perceived, as opposed to the actual response from others, that influences self-concept. Thus a person eating alone in public may perceive a response from others based on their own and society's responses to their aloneness, regardless of whether such perceptions are accurate.

Why being alone is poorly viewed is considered from a psychoanalytic and a philosophical perspective in Storr's (1997) landmark text entitled *Solitude*. Storr (1997) observes that there are two competing human drives: one for companionship and love, and the other for independence and autonomy. Both are viewed as equally important for a fulfilled life. However, it is increasingly noted in social discourse that human happiness is equated with companionship, that it is dependent on relationships. Intimate personal relationships are viewed as the chief source of human happiness; they are a touchstone of health and happiness. Those without such relationships are stigmatised as 'neurotic, immature, abnormal' (ibid, p. 6). According to Storr, the burden of value with which society loads interpersonal relationships is far too heavy: love is idealised as the path to salvation; work and leisure are meanwhile underplayed. The psychoanalyst Winnicott (1958) stated that solitude offers a break from social convention, allowing a person to get in touch with their true feelings. It allows them to reduce their compliance with the wishes of others.

The restaurant perspective on the solo diner

There has been little empirical research on the restaurant owner/manager's perspective on the solo diner. As Evesham (2015) notes, if businesses can understand and respond to the needs of solo diners, satisfaction can be increased, as can competitiveness and profitability. Solo diners can be seen as less profitable for restaurants compared to groups in the sense that they order smaller portions and take up a table meant for more people (Sen 2011) whereas people in groups tend to eat and drink more

(Asimov, 1999; Pliner et al., 2006). However, lone dining is usually quicker with 71% of meals eaten under 20 minutes (Yates and Warde, 2016). This is a major advantage to restaurants as space is freed up for larger groups (Danesi, 2012; Quinn, 2015). Tables can be turned around faster, effectively increasing the capacity and consumption, supporting profitability.

Understanding the needs of particular market segments allows businesses to position themselves in a unique way and leads to long-term competitive advantage (Dolnicar, 2020). Hospitality managers and restaurant owners need to develop new market strategies to attract and retain this increasing population (Goodwin and Lockshin, 2005; Lahad and May, 2017). This includes creating one-person seating arrangements, allowing diners to watch and interact with the chefs and to enjoy a view while eating (Haines, 2019). Some restaurants include tech-friendly features like free Wi-Fi, charging spots and interactive displays to keep diners engaged with online games and digital distractions (Dutton, 2016). Balfour (2014) notes that some restaurants welcome solo diners by adding more counter seating arrangements. Through the model of optimal table mix propounded by Kimes and Robson (2004), having an appropriate mix of table arrangements can increase restaurant revenue, and attractive seating arrangements will make consumers stay in the restaurant for longer, thereby allowing for higher spending. Staff training on how to welcome solo diners may also be prioritised (Balfour, 2014; Bainbridge, 2016). Though there is evidence of some restaurant and coffee shop chains that have started addressing the solo diner market, the literature nevertheless shows that the industry is still coming to terms with the global growth of single households.

Methodology

Given the limited amount of literature on the topic of solo dining among solo tourists, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study. The study focuses on "the understanding of social phenomena and the ways in which people make sense of and extract meaning from their experiences" (Jones et al., 2013, p.3). A qualitative approach is appropriate for research on a topic that has been under-explored to allow an in-depth understanding of the key problems (Denzin and Lincoln, 2006). Narrative interviews were used because they permit the participant a great degree of flexibility and freedom of response, and limit the influence of the interviewer (Riessman, 2008). A loosely structured interview guide was prepared based on the gap that emerged from the literature. The key topics included: dining patterns whilst being away on holiday or on business, feelings about dining alone, and the strategies used to minimize feelings of discomfort (if applicable). Many prompts and probes were used to delve further into responses to the second interview topic.

Purposive and criterion-based sampling was adopted. Three sampling criteria were identified: participants must have travelled solo before, be adult, and have dined solo whilst traveling away from home for business or leisure. A total of 27 participants took part in the study: 14 men and 13 women.

Participants were recruited through social and professional networks, and thereafter through snowball sampling. All had travelled solo before for both business and leisure. Other than a few references to safety concerns in the evening by female participants, analysis showed that there was little difference in participants' experiences and responses to dining solo. There were no variations according to purpose of trip (business or leisure) or destination. The evening meal, as the findings section will show, was discomfiting for all. The participant profile is presented below, with pseudonyms, to protect identity.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE:

Interviews were conducted in English and in the UK, in a site of the participant's choosing (coffee bar, workplace, home). They lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, and were digitally recorded. Ethical approval was granted through the authors' university research ethics committee. A participant information sheet was developed and passed to participants, detailing the purpose of the research and promising confidentiality and anonymity. At the start of the interview, participants were informed that they could halt the conversation at any point if they wished, and that they could withdraw from the project at any time.

The technique of thematic analysis, conducted manually, was used to treat the data, involving the four steps of transcription, familiarization, coding and categorizing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis led to the development of 5 themes, which are represented in the headed sections of the findings section. These five themes focused on: Feeling stigmatized; The challenge posed by the evening meal; A hasty affair; The value of dining in company; Using props. Participants also raised a range of suggestions as to what the hospitality industry can do to improve the solo diner experience and make them more welcome. As is typical in qualitative research (Riessman, 2008), a dialogue with the relevant literature, tied to the emergent themes, is held in the Findings section.

The validity of this qualitative study is established through the criteria identified by Brewer (2000). Firstly, a study should have relevance, reflected in this research through the growing increase in the phenomenon of the solo tourist and the solo diner. Secondly, it should be authentic and reflective of the participants' voice, which is achieved through the use of meaningful quotations. Thirdly, there should be a clear audit trail, which is displayed in the methodology. Finally, the study should attempt to achieve transferability, referring to the transfer of findings to other similar settings (Holloway and Brown, 2012). In this study the findings presented below could resonate with those who have travelled and dined solo.

Findings

Participants felt that the research topic was very contemporary and interesting. They felt strongly about the subject and were keen to share their experiences, hoping that they might help to improve the situation for themselves and others in the future. Not only did interviewees often feel uncomfortable eating solo but they also felt unwelcome in many restaurants. They had a strong desire to find suitable venues that would welcome them and offer a better experience.

Feeling stigmatised

Participants described feeling highly uncomfortable about dining alone. The source of their discomfort was the perceived judgment from others in the restaurant, either staff or customers:

"I think socially it's always been viewed negatively like, 'oh they're alone', like there is always this negative thoughts about people that dine by themselves." (Kurt)

"People do sort of look at you, going, 'why are you dining alone', especially being I suppose female more so than male." (Julie)

"In terms of social acceptance I have the feeling that people are considering you in a certain way if they see you dining out alone, and having this pity look. Because of their attitudes, because of the look they are giving me, this pity look makes me feel uncomfortable and it kind of ruined the whole experience for me. I started feeling that okay I want to finish quickly, leave the place so that I can avoid all the sense of judgement like I'm doing something wrong, as if I am acting in a peculiar way. The judgement from other people is the worst thing, this look you get or the feeling they create for you, that's the most horrible thing." (Maria)

As the above excerpts reveal, participants were keenly attuned to the attitudes and judgements of others, which were felt to be pitying. They felt uncomfortable dining alone and they often thought that they should not be there. In stigma theory, stigmatised individuals are likely to be mindful in social exchanges, paying close attention to how interaction develops and trying to negotiate and manipulate unpredictable social environments to help them to avoid distressing situations (Frable et al., 1990). In this study, this involved avoiding eating out, ordering room service or a take away meal, or carefully considering their chosen venue:

"I definitely pay attention to the type of place I would go to, in terms of choosing somewhere that looks more solo friendly, like it's not overwhelmingly couple-oriented there or romantic–looking!" (Emre)

"As I don't like the embarrassment when I eat alone, I increasingly find myself ordering take away or I may even pop into a supermarket and get some cold food and a couple of beers." (Michael)

"I find it so difficult that I completely avoid eating in the evening; I just have a snack in my room." (Shama)

This study reveals that perceived stigmatization was the driving force behind feelings of discomfort when dining alone. Feeling judged and pitied by others was subjectively experienced and influenced both choice of restaurant and behavior when dining. This led to being careful about where to dine: the more expensive or sophisticated restaurant might be avoided as it might be deemed too couple or family-oriented. It is recognized that this is subjective; however, the feeling of solo diners was strong; participants clearly feel uncomfortable in this social situation. If the restaurant set-up was more appealing to solo diners, in terms of its atmosphere and layout, it is possible that these feelings would be alleviated. This will be considered in further detail in the conclusion to the paper.

The challenge posed by the evening meal

The most stressful meal for participants was the evening meal. Most participants were frequent solo travelers, and yet for many, the evening meal proved to be most discomfiting in terms of dining alone, even in a fast food establishment. Breakfast and lunch times tend to be easier because the social stigma is felt to be less pronounced whereas their solitary status is pronounced in the evening.

"I find solo dining difficult… breakfast and lunch are the easiest ones. It's the dinner that is a little more challenging, because usually you are the only one sitting by yourself. You look around, you see a lot of people, you know, eating together, you know, you see couples, you see families, you see groups of friends. With lunch and breakfast you see a lot of other solo diners at that time, but dinner is mostly a group thing." (Melinda)

"It's really only the evening meal that is a problem because in the morning and at lunch time, eating alone seems to be more common, so you don't stand out so much. Whereas in the evening, dining is more special, more of an event, just like at home really." (Peter)

"The evening meal is somehow less comfortable because everyone has company and is so happy, socializing, and in a good mood and I felt uncomfortable even if the place itself is nice and cosy, on your own it feels different so I tried to again eat as quickly as I could and run from the place." (Natalia)

For business and leisure travelers alike, the evening was cast as a time for being social: being alone made participants stand out. Being a woman added an extra layer of discomfort in that being alone in the evening could make women a target:

"Especially if you're a woman and you're in a new place and you a little concerned about your security, it's maybe a little bit more intimidating to go out on your own at night to eat." (Melinda)

"When I travel for conferences, I will be very happy to join the organised dinners or arrange with colleagues to go for dinner, but if I have no company, I will stay in my room, do some work or watch movies on my laptop and order take away. I just don't feel that safe on my own." (Vera)

This is an important point, but it must be noted that this was not the major source of discomfort for participants. Indeed, gender did not appear to make much difference in participants' experience of solo dining. Dinner is an opportunity to unwind, reflect on the day and prepare for the next one. When dining alone this is not possible and many interviewees expressed their disappointment.

A hasty affair

Dinner is associated with sociable eating, and when dining in company, it is expected to take one to two hours. Participants generally agreed that dining alone takes up less time than eating in company due to the discomfort associated with being alone, and the lack of social interaction which ordinarily prolongs the dining experience.

"I spend as long as it takes for me to order, get my food, eat, maybe sit for a little while, maybe five minutes after that and that's it. Usually, if you're with someone else, you will sit around, you will still continue to talk, the meal is actually part of our itinerary. But if you're by yourself it's a shorter time, there is really no one to talk to, you've already eaten. In company, it's not just the experience of the food, it's also the experience of socializing with your friends." (Melinda)

"I will definitely say it's quicker than when I am with people, so probably less than an hour. If I am with people it's more of an experience and even if you not eating and drinking all of the time you just stay for longer. Whereas when I'm on my own it's just for the purpose of coming in eating my food and leaving. At dinner I will just think I am not really enjoying the experience of being on my own in

the restaurant so therefore let's make this quick, I'll eat what's going to be prepared quickly and then I'll just go." (Kimberley)

Participants reported that they tend to eat quickly and leave the restaurant as soon as possible to avoid stigmatization. The way they describe the experience is rather functional – refueling – rather than a pleasurable experience. Instead of enjoying the experience over one to two hours they tend to be "done" in less than 30 minutes.

The value of dining in company

Many interviewees implied that eating is secondary to the social interaction, especially at dinner time. Participants commented on the disparity between solo dining and eating in a group, highlighting the social component of group dining and a preference for this particularly in the evening:

"Eating in company is obviously more sociable, it is less about the actual food and the eating and more about being there in the presence of other people and the catching up - the food almost becomes secondary to the experience of being with the people." (Kimberley)

"Dinner I like doing with others. A shared experience is more memorable for me. Everything is heightened whether it's the food, the atmosphere, everything. Yes, you can appreciate it if you are solo, but if you got someone with you, it's shared, it becomes special. Nothing wrong with dining alone, but it's not the same." (Julie)

"For me, eating alone is something that you do if you don't have a choice. For me, it's nothing that I will actively seek out. Dining out with friends is an experience. You're sharing company, enjoying a good laugh, so it's not really about the food per se, it's about the atmosphere being created." (John)

The above excerpts reveal that social dining is enjoyable and comforting, and as important as the food consumed. The findings are therefore confirmatory of the literature on the social component of eating (see Counihan and van Esterik, 1997; Brown et al., 2010).

Using props

Stigmatized people are careful in social situations that feel stigmatizing and adopt techniques to help them to avoid distress (Frable et al., 1990). This study reveals that participants used many tactics to ease their discomfort when dining alone, as displayed in the table below:

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Participants used many props and tactics including observation of others, maps and books. All interviewees suggested that by far the most useful and used prop is the smartphone. It is helpful in both distracting them from their aloneness and consequent awkwardness and in connecting them with others in the online communities to which they belong. It is also used to create a virtual dining companion, often chatting with loved ones far away. The evocative language used by some of the participants to describe their smartphones (barrier, armour, defensive, courageous) conjures a sense of battle. Their phone offers a distraction from their solo status and a way to keep themselves occupied. It also represents an emotional shield against perceived attack.

Conclusions

This study reveals that participants valued the social interaction of dining in company and often felt uncomfortable when dining solo. Participants often avoided this situation, by not eating out, ordering room service, buying street food, purchasing a takeaway meal or looking for a specific environment that was more welcoming. Participants confirmed that dining alone was a hasty affair, and they used a range of props to ease their discomfort.

The paper provides strategic managerial direction to accommodate the phenomenon of the solo diner profitably and to strengthen the competitiveness of hospitality organisations by identifying two particular strategies, namely: Go Solo, supporting comfortable solo dining, and Go Plural where solo guests are invited to take part in a communal dining experience. These strategies help hospitality organisations to address the phenomenon of the solo diner profitably and to strengthen their competitiveness. The paper clearly advocates that restaurants that understand solo dining as a trend can develop their operational and strategic management to improve their inclusiveness and welcome new market segments. By attracting more diners especially at low occupancy periods, they can reduce idle times and improve yield management. A clear understanding of the needs and motivations of different segments of diners can support restaurants to meet customer requirements and provide better hospitality. Addressing the needs of solo diners can also enhance Word of Mouth and eWord of Mouth, through reviews and user-generated content on social media such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, Zomato and Open Rice. Good experience and positive WoM are paramount for competitiveness, loyalty, profitability and sustainability.

Theoretical Implications

This study identifies feelings of discomfort associated with dining out alone, particularly in the evening, when other diners tend to be in company, and a diner alone is felt to stand out. Stigma theory is used to explain participants' emotional responses to dining alone in the evening. The study shows that being alone is felt to be stigmatising, to draw unwanted attention. Psychoanalytic theory is used to understand why solitude may be frowned upon in society to such a degree that it becomes a stigmatising attribute.

Practical implications

Competitive organisations in the hospitality industry need to understand their market segments and address their needs profitably (Dolnicar, 2020). They should be able to accommodate different customers and to ensure that they have an excellent personal experience. Restaurants that develop their physical environment and service attitude to attract and deliver excellent experiences can gain considerable benefits (Balfour 2014). Equally the financial viability of restaurants depends on the level of their hospitability and their ability to satisfy their clientele, attract positive Word of Mouth, including increasingly eWord of Mouth through TripAdvisor and other review sites (Dolnicar 2020). Restaurants that develop their physical environment and service attitude to attract and deliver excellent experiences will gain considerable benefits (Balfour 2014). This study puts forward two complementary strategies that hospitality businesses could adopt for solo diners, as presented in Table 3, namely:

- "Go Solo", where solo diners are supported to have a pleasant experience on their own; and
- "Go Plural", where hospitality organisations create an environment where solo diners eat together and share their meal experience.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

"Go Solo" Strategy
The "Go Solo" strategy aims to facilitate the solo experience, whereby hospitality organisations offer an inclusive environment for diners who prefer to eat alone. Solo diners can be seen as less profitable for restaurants compared to groups as they take up a table meant for more people, order smaller portions and often they do not consumer profitable alcohol, such as wine or cocktails (Sen 2011). However, they stay for shorter period of time, enabling a quick table turnaround (Yates and Warde 2016). Understanding and responding to the needs of solo diners increases satisfaction and loyalty, leading to competitiveness and profitability (Evesham 2015).

The layout of the facility can determine the solo diner experience, as discussed by Haines (2019). The restaurant could include some tables with only one chair or individual seats, or bench seating and stools to make more efficient use of restaurant space. Arranging single seat tables flexibly allows restaurants to change formation according to reservations and times. The principle is to promote an inclusive design that makes everybody feel welcome and supported and to allow the restaurant to change format flexibly in order to maximise profitability. Furthermore, solo diner seating arrangements, with kitchen, bar and window views allow solo diners to watch and interact with chefs and bartenders. Such arrangements could communicate to solo diners that they are welcome and that they are a common feature of restaurant life. Figure 1 demonstrates possible serving configurations designed for solo diners.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Increasingly restaurants may use high-tech solutions, robots, interactive displays and tables (Berezina, et al, 2019; Pieska, et al, 2013; Qiu, et al, 2019). These technologies can keep diners engaged with online games and digital distractions. Gamification and/or augmentation are also possible tools to engage solo diners. The OTG Experience, a restaurant chain in major USA airports, places iPads in restaurants to facilitate order-taking, duty-free shopping and instant online access. Gamification and/or augmentation are also possible tools to engage solo diners. High-tech props create talking points, and may reduce the self-consciousness of solo diners (Dutton 2016). More traditional props such as books, maps and destination information may also be of use to create distraction. This is particularly the case for the period between ordering and waiting for food to arrive. Solo diner promotions, such as free appetizers and cocktails, for eating earlier or later than the peak times, can help make this segment more welcome in restaurants. Potentially these strategies may well encourage the solo diner to stay longer. This could erode the 'advantage' of fast table turnover; or it might not. Having said this, surely the aim of the hospitality industry should be to give people positive experiences and to make profit. If people have a good experience they tend to pay more at the time (an extra course, a more expensive glass of wine) and are also more likely to generate repeat business (Evesham 2015).

Go Plural Strategy

Restaurants can orchestrate an environment and a range of activities that bring solo diners together and encourage interaction. Figure 3 demonstrates Go Plural serving configurations for solo diners. Communal tables facilitate mingling with fellow guests and locals such as at Protea Hotel Fire & Ice! by Marriot Cape Town as well as Japanese Teppanyaki Restaurants, which facilitate eating together: guests occupy seats around an entertaining chef. Theme dining activities are also opportunities for solo diners to enjoy group activity. Restaurants can target solo diners, by hosting events, such as wine

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tasting, talks, live music, and cookery demonstrations. Hospitality managers can orchestrate an environment where solo travellers meet and eat together. Restaurant staff could act as host in terms of introducing solo customers, so that a club environment is produced. One of the key reasons for travelling is meeting new people and cultures. Rihova et al. (2013) explain that tourists who adopt participatory and active co-creation roles can contribute to a better service experience for other tourists, enjoy satisfactory experiences themselves and consequently become loyal to an organisation. Figure 2 demonstrates Go Plural serving configurations for solo diners.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Strategically restaurant owners may decide to primarily focus on one of the strategies, but the paper encourages hospitality operators to consider both strategies and support what is appropriate for their context, location, clientele, food service and timing. The strategies are not offered on an either / or basis but as complementary strategies that offer the choice to both customers and service providers. Strategies may also be time-specific, for example, a restaurant could have a "go solo" strategy for lunch and a "go plural" strategy for dinner. The study offers a menu of different strategies that will encourage restaurant managers to consider and pilot what will best fit their situation.

Limitations and future research

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of solo diners on a business or leisure trip. It did not focus on a specific destination or on a specific purpose of visit. Future research could therefore investigate the solo diner experience by destination and by purpose of visit. It could also adopt a quantitative approach in order to capture a broader picture.

Further research could also determine the extent to which unease is felt in other areas of the trip, such as going to the theatre alone, negotiating transport alone and being out at night alone, especially for women who may feel more vulnerable, as suggested by some participants in this study.

The experiences of single parents travelling with children who may find they spend much of their trip alone, in contrast with couples, is also an area of potential interest. Heimtun and Abelsen (2014) note the dominance of the 'heterofamily reality', whose gaze acts as a judgment on those who do not conform to accepted norms of interaction.

As in any human experience there is a continuum of emotional response to dining alone, from unconcerned to highly discomfited. The influence of several variables on the solo dining experience should be investigated, including gender. As Pritchard and Morgan (2000) argue, gender is an

important consideration in the study of the experiences of men and women engaged in tourism activities. It is possible that women in particular may be prone to feelings of vulnerability when alone (see Berdychevsky et al., 2013), and this may extend to the solo dining experience, as this study alludes to. As Seo and Hwang (2014) observe, scant attention has been paid to the gender composition effect on restaurant customer behaviour. The influence of age, purpose of visit and cultural differences on the experience of dining alone are also indicated as avenues for future research.

Future research could investigate the dining experiences of solo diners on home territory. An analysis done by OpenTable (2015), a restaurant booking service, revealed that single table reservations increased by 160 % between 2014 and 2018 in the UK %, making it the fastest growing table size whilst single table bookings in New York increased by 80% (Haines, 2019). This is therefore a growing market trend, and an exploration of the issues faced by solo diners on domestic soil is worthy of investigation.

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