



Original Research Article

Why not eat alone? The effect of other consumers on solo dining intentions and the mechanism

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ABSTRACT

The radical change in contemporary lifestyles and demographics has led to the sharp increase of solo consumers in the marketplace, calling for an understanding of solo consumption behaviors. This study examines the determinants of solo dining intentions with respect to the other consumers in the restaurant, and its underlying mechanism through anticipated loneliness and the anticipated negative evaluation from others. Using a scenario-based, 2 (group type of other diners: in-group vs. out-group) × 2 (crowding level: high vs. low) between-subjects experimental design, online survey data were collected from 248 participants.

Findings reveal that the group type of other diners (i.e., mostly solo diners vs. group diners) is a major predictor of solo dining intentions. The effect is further found to be greater by high-crowding (vs. low-crowding), and mediated by anticipated loneliness and the anticipated negative evaluation from others. The enhanced knowledge about solo consumers provides implications for researchers, restaurateurs, and consumers.

1. Introduction

One of the significant trends in today's marketplace is the enormous growth in the number of solo consumers. A good example is solo travel, considered to be one of "the fastest growing segments" in the tourism industry (Laesser et al., 2009, p. 218). Solo dining is certainly not an exception. Recently, a worldwide restaurant online reservation company reports a 62% increase in restaurant reservations by solo consumers over a two-year period ("OpenTable Study", 2015). The growth in solo consumption activities can be attributed to changing demographics, education and career requirements, and individualized lifestyles (Bianchi, 2015; Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992). The U.S. Census Bureau (2016) notes that the rate of single households has rocketed to 28.1%. The rise in single households due to late marriage, divorce, or voluntary singles as well as dual-career couples has apparently forced people to increasingly engage in consumption activities that were performed with family in the past alone (Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992; McPherson et al., 2006; Ratner and Hamilton, 2015). Accordingly, for some meals, more consumers are found to eat alone than with someone else (Sobal and Nelson, 2003).

In this respect, understanding the emergent phenomenon of solo dining is critical to the hospitality industry to gain insight into a potential target group that will ultimately increase profits in the long term. In the present study, we define solo dining as dining in a public

restaurant alone, either by choice or by circumstances, and it excludes eating carry-out or home-cooked food in a home or an office alone. The increase in solo dining is advantageous from the perspectives of both consumer welfare and industry profits. For consumers, despite the possibility of carry-out food from restaurants, solo dining provides greater value with regard to retaining the immediate food temperature and taste, ambience, and cordial service from staff (Liu and Jang, 2009). Also, even without partners, solo consumption experiences can be as enjoyable as group experiences (Ratner and Hamilton, 2015). For restaurants, the extended duration of consumers in the restaurant can increase additional orders of desserts and drinks and thus solo dining may lead to more orders than the consumers simply carrying out food (Wansink, 2004). Except for a few exploratory qualitative studies (Danesi, 2012; Heimtun, 2010; Sobal and Nelson, 2003), however, solo dining is poorly understood, and it is necessary to understand the determinants of solo dining intentions.

Still, a number of people are hesitant to dine out alone for particular reasons. This study suggests that loneliness, the unfavorable feeling of social exclusion, is the primary underlying principle negatively affecting the intention of solo dining (Danesi, 2012; Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992; Heimtun, 2010). The literature has emphasized that commensal eating, sharing mealtimes with other people, has been a deeply embedded human behavior (Sobal and Nelson, 2003). Since most consumers dine in restaurants with others, prospective solo diners

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may anticipate feeling alienated while dining alone in the restaurants, and this anticipated loneliness—*loneliness anxiety* (Rokach, 2004)—may interrupt the intention of dining out alone. Second, the literature also suggested that the potential of negative judgment from others makes solo diners hesitant to dine out in public (Danesi, 2012; Goodwin and Lockshin, 1992; Pliner and Bell, 2009). In a society in which communal eating has been the standard, common group diners might instinctively ask why one might dine out alone and negatively judge the sociability or other characteristics of the solo diner. Thus, prospective solo diners' anticipation of a negative reaction from others may render upcoming solo dining experiences undesirable, negatively affecting their solo dining intentions (Danesi, 2012; Heimtun, 2010; Ratner and Hamilton, 2015).

The literature has also alluded to the possible antecedents of the anticipation of loneliness and negative assessment from others. In the service environment, other consumers have been highlighted as one of the crucial human factors influencing consumers' affective and cognitive responses (Lin and Liang, 2011; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Miao et al., 2011; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). This study proposes that other diners may become a reference group for the focal solo diner and that the degree to which the solo diner identifies with other diners in a restaurant (i.e., solo diners as in-group vs. group diners as out-group) will impact the intention to dine in the restaurant (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985). Furthermore, it is proposed that the crowding level will have a moderating effect, such that the effect of the major group type of other diners in the restaurant (in-group vs. out-group) on solo dining intentions will be strengthened or weakened by the number of other diners based on social impact theory (Latane, 1981; Miao and Mattila, 2013). Altogether, this study addresses whether solo dining intentions are affected by other diners, operationalized by the group type and the crowding level, and whether the effect is mediated by anticipated loneliness and the anticipated negative evaluation from others.

2. Literature review

2.1. Other consumers

Since Mehrabian and Russell (1974) suggested the Stimuli-Organism-Response model to explain the effect of environments on human behaviors, human elements such as employees and other consumers have been considered as significant stimuli in the service environment (Lin and Liang, 2011; Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2003). Other consumers particularly impact various consumer outcomes, ranging from emotions to satisfaction and experiences (Lin and Liang, 2011; Liu and Mattila, 2015; Miao and Mattila, 2013; Miao et al., 2011). In the solo dining context, the importance of other consumers may become greater because the solo diner does not have a dining partner. This study operationalizes other consumers by taking (1) the group type as a composition and (2) the crowding level as a number.

2.1.1. The group type

According to social identity theory and social categorization theory, people form their self-concept with respect to which social groups or categories the individual belongs to, is affiliated with, and feel psychologically connected to (Mastro, 2003; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985; White and Dahl, 2007). Thus, the group to which people feel they belong, such as women, Americans, or vegans, helps activate an identity by providing group members with a reference point for normative attitudes and behaviors (Mastro, 2003; Reed, 2002). These groups of one's own are termed the "in-group," as opposed to the "out-group" to which an individual does not belong (Escalas and Bettman, 2005). The literature has shown that the group categorizations are dependent on the context and can thus be activated situationally, temporarily, or even arbitrarily (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Escalas and Bettman, 2005; Mastro, 2003; White and Dahl, 2007). Theory has

also been widely used to explain the perceptions and preferences of individual consumers in the marketing literature (e.g., White and Dahl, 2007; Escalas and Bettman, 2005).

This study argues that the focal solo diner may temporarily activate the group distinction of other diners in the restaurant based on whether the other diners are solo or in a group. On the subject of consumption decisions, Reed (2002) suggests the key factors of what activates a certain social identity among all: salience in the distinct context and the relevance to decision making. Based on salience, the unique social identity as a solo diner in restaurants among all other identities may become particularly more salient because the convention in typical decent restaurants has been dining in a group (Reed, 2002). Based on the relevance, the social identity as a solo diner is directly related to the decision of dining alone in the restaurant and will thus exert a greater influence than other identities on the decision-making process (Reed, 2002). Therefore, the focal solo diner may quickly determine whether there are other solo diners in the restaurant (i.e., in-group) or conventional group diners (i.e., out-group) to make the decision of whether to dine in the restaurant alone. In fact, the sense of belonging is a fundamental need of human beings (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), driving people to constantly seek connections with other people. Once the group distinction is made for other diners in a restaurant, it will influence the intention of the focal solo diner because the in-group becomes a reference point to favor, adopt, and conform, whereas the conformity motive is not activated by the out-group (Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000; Escalas and Bettman, 2005; White and Dahl, 2007). The hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H1a. The focal solo diner will have a stronger (vs. weaker) intention to eat alone in the restaurant when the majority of other diners are an in-group (vs. out-group).

2.1.2. The crowding level

Retail and hospitality research has revealed mixed findings regarding the effect of crowding on consumer outcomes (Eroglu et al., 2005; Grewal et al., 2003; Hwang et al., 2012). Additionally, the significant role of crowding has been recognized in the pre-consumption stage such as in the waiting area (Grewal et al., 2003; Hwang et al., 2012). In the psychology literature, social impact theory (Latane, 1981) suggests the three important determinants multiplicatively driving the magnitude of the effect of other people on the focal individual: strength, immediacy, and number. Strength denotes the salience and the importance of other people, immediacy denotes the closeness in space or time from other people, and number literally denotes the number of other people (Latane, 1981). Therefore, in addition to the salience and the relevance of the group type of other consumers, the spatial closeness and the number of other consumers will have a multiplicative impact. In a restaurant, the level of crowding is an indicator of the number of other consumers and the spatial closeness, as the number of other consumers and the seating proximity increase in a crowded setting.

Therefore, this study proposes that the crowding level may play a moderating role, such that the social impact of the group type of other diners on solo dining intentions will be amplified or dampened by the number and the immediacy of such salient group members. Focal solo diners will be more strongly influenced by a number of in-group or out-group diners in the adjacent area of the restaurant than a few of those diners scattered in the outlying distance. In other words, solo dining intentions will be much stronger (vs. weaker) in restaurants that are crowded with other solo (vs. group) diners, and the variation in solo dining intentions will be relatively attenuated in less crowded restaurants. Thus, the hypothesis is proposed as follows:

H1b. The effect of the group type of other diners on the intention to eat alone in the restaurant will be stronger (vs. weaker) when the restaurant is more (vs. less) crowded.

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