

Co-Creating Food Experiences “Delivered” from Iconic Local Restaurants

Abstract

Purpose – This research explores an emerging phenomenon – gourmet meal kits delivered to out-of-towners from iconic local restaurants. The study explores the interplay of goal framing and basic needs and their effects on customer intentions. The study also examines the underlying mechanism of experience co-creation and the moderating effect of food involvement.

Design/methodology/approach – The study develops a framework that combines the self-determination theory (SDT) and customer experience co-creation. Two online experimental studies involving 478 US consumers were conducted to examine the underlying mechanism of customers' decision-making on purchasing gourmet meal kits (Study 1) and visiting destination restaurants after receiving the meal kit (Study 2).

Findings – Intrinsic goal-framing leads to stronger intentions to purchase gourmet meal kits and to visit destination restaurants that sell meal kits. In contrast, extrinsic goal-framing enhances the positive influence of perceived relatedness and competence on behavioral intentions. The effects of goal framing and basic needs on behavioral intentions are moderated by food involvement and mediated by experience co-creation to varying degrees.

Originality – This study is among the first to empirically examine an emerging business model – delivering restaurants' food experiences to out-of-towners. The study also expands the application of the SDT by incorporating customer co-creation as the underlying mechanism.

Keywords gourmet meal kit, iconic restaurant, co-creation, self-determination theory (SDT), goal-framing, competence, relatedness

Article classification Research paper

1. Introduction

“A canceled vacation to New York can be evoked with mile-high deli sandwiches and black-and-white cookies.”

- Joe Ariel (Founder & CEO of Goldbelly)

The foodservice industry is a major sector of the global economy. In the United States, restaurant sales exceeded more than \$659 billion in 2020 (Kelso, 2021). They are also a key source of an individual's memorable experiences (Josiam and Henry, 2014). Although the foodservice industry generates billions of dollars annually, existing business models are susceptible to catastrophic events (Kim *et al.*, 2021). For example, the foodservice industry has been drastically affected by COVID-19, with many businesses temporarily shuttering particularly during the initial outbreak (Nicola *et al.*, 2020).

Following the initial COVID-19 outbreak, many shuttered restaurants were able to re-open by solely offering takeaway and deliveries. Many restaurants saw reduced sales and needed to look for alternative revenue streams. For example, many local restaurants have been able to sure-up their sales by shipping pre-cooked, gourmet meal kits, containing their iconic menu items, to customers across the United States (e.g., Goldbelly). These gourmet meal kits are a relatively novel product and differ from traditional "meal kit boxes," which are typical "food bundles with step-by-step instructions to prepare home-cooked meals" (Cho *et al.*, 2020; Horning *et al.*, 2021). What makes gourmet meal kits unique is their association with iconic, independent restaurants.

Gourmet meal kit delivery has been growing in popularity since the early 2010s, but during the pandemic, there was rapid growth. The largest online sales platform in the United States, Goldbelly, currently works with over 500 establishments from around the world: from

casual restaurants to Michelin-starred restaurants. What ties all of the restaurant vendors on Goldbelly together is their iconic brand image (Krader, 2020). Gourmet meal kits are growing in popularity in other countries. In China, many catering and restaurant companies (e.g., Haidilao) have launched production lines for shipping-ready half-cooked food products (Wang, 2020).

By shipping gourmet meal kits, restaurants can reach a much larger audience than local customers. This has the effect of bringing food tourism experiences into consumers' homes. This was very popular with individuals who had been locked down and prevented from traveling during the pandemic (Krader, 2020). According to several news reports, this service has offered new avenues and opportunities for destination restaurants to engage with out-of-towners and make them motivated to dine at their actual restaurant or visit their local city (Dixon, 2017; Jackson, 2020; Krader, 2020). Although conventional meal kits have attracted some attention from academia (e.g., Cho *et al.*, 2020; Gee *et al.*, 2019; Horning *et al.*, 2021), no study has associated gourmet meal kits with iconic local restaurants and culinary travel. To date, there is a paucity of research assessing gourmet meal kit customers' decision-making vis-à-vis visiting a destination or restaurant from which they purchased a kit.

It is important to note that for customers, the experience of consuming a gourmet meal kit does differ from consuming a meal in a dining room. Customers who purchase gourmet meal kits are required to participate in the preparation and assembly of the meal to co-create a dining experience. However, to date, empirical research that examines the factors that influence the decision to purchase gourmet meal kits from and intention to visit these restaurants after having gourmet meal kit experiences is lacking. This again represents a gap in the literature.

To address the gaps in the literature, this study explores the under-researched phenomenon of gourmet meal kits. This emerging model opens opportunities for destination

restaurants to capture a greater market share from out-of-towners. As the rise of food delivery platforms has diversified restaurants' service models, creating shippable gourmet meal kits has empowered destination restaurants to embark on a new path to reach distant diners beyond on-premises foot traffic. The current study combines the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 2008) with customer experience co-creation to explore: 1) the interplay of goal framing and basic needs (e.g., competence, relatedness) and their effects on purchase intentions of restaurants' meal kits and intentions to visit restaurants; and 2) the underlying mechanism through experience co-creation and the moderating effect of food involvement that conditions this decision-making process.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1 SDT

The SDT is “a macro-theory of motivation, emotion, and personality in social contexts” (Gilal *et al.*, 2019; p. 31) that contains sub-theories with different focuses on explaining the link between psychological needs and human behaviors. Considering the contextual relevance, two sub-theories of the SDT, namely the basic psychological needs theory (BPNT) and the goal content theory (GCT), foster the understanding of consumer behaviors related to the emerging gourmet meal kit experiences. The BPNT holds that the satisfaction of psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) is the basis of psychological functioning and well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2002). The GCT, on the other hand, stresses the goals of different motifs (intrinsic vs. extrinsic goals) that individuals pursue, and how these goals influence consumer behaviors (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Goal framing strategies applied in marketing messages have been found to powerfully affect consumer behavior in the domain of hospitality consumption and food purchase (e.g., luxury goods, organic food) (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2006).

2.3 Extrinsic vs. intrinsic goal framing

GCT categorizes two distinct ways individuals formulate life goals: internal and external goals (Gilal *et al.*, 2019). Intrinsic goals are related to one's inherent need for self-actualization, such as personal growth, health, and self-acceptance. By comparison, extrinsic goals are often contingent upon others' judgment (e.g., praise, rewards) and can serve as a means to achieve a further goal, such as material wealth, fame, or image (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Intrinsic and extrinsic goal framings have had differing impacts on attitudes toward luxury brands (Norris and Williams, 2016), customer satisfaction (Botti and McGill, 2011), purchase orientation (Meyer-Waarden *et al.*, 2013), and customer loyalty (Gilal *et al.*, 2018b).

Intrinsic goals are aligned with individuals' ultimate pursuit of self-actualization and are independent of others' evaluations. Extrinsic goals have less of a salubrious effect on general mental health (e.g., positive affect) and well-being, as extrinsic aspirations may reflect insecure psychological states and high neuroticism (Vansteenkiste *et al.*, 2004). When product attributes align with individuals' intrinsic goals, messages that denote achievement of intrinsic goals can prompt a series of behavioral tendencies, such as curiosity-driven actions, discovery and exploration, and challenge-seeking behavior (Gilal *et al.*, 2018a). Therefore, the study proposes that consumers generate higher behavior intentions regarding restaurant meal kits when exposed to messages with intrinsic goal framing, as compared to extrinsic one.

H₁: Intrinsic goal framing (vs. extrinsic) motivates higher behavioral intentions (a. purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries and b. travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants).

2.4 The need for competence and the need for relatedness

Competence is a fundamental psychological need that involves an assessment of one's

knowledge, skills, and ability to achieve. Individuals are motivated to engage in tasks to which they bring a high degree of competence (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Customers appreciate products that they feel confident using. In the case of gourmet meal kits, competence particularly depicts consumers' perceived ability to prepare the meal according to instructions provided by meal kits, namely their cooking-related competence. As evidenced by existing research, competence often results from the perceived difficulty of completing a task (e.g., Mochon *et al.*, 2012).

Competence is a salient predictor of various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., brand attachment, technology adoption) in numerous cultural contexts, indicating the universality of this psychological need (Ahn and Back, 2019). Therefore, it is posited that:

H₂: Customers with higher levels of perceived competence (vs. customers with lower levels) express higher purchase intentions of gourmet meal kits.

Consumers appreciate products to which they feel psychologically proximate.

Relatedness has been found to positively influence brand attachment (Thomson, 2006), engagement in co-creation (Hsieh and Chang, 2016), and knowledge sharing (Yoon and Rolland, 2012). Studies also suggest that consumers are willing to bear the functional costs in exchange for fulfilling relatedness needs in the subsequent behavior/purchase (Deci and Ryan, 2002). In the context of meal kit deliveries, customers have little contact with the producers of the meal kits, further highlighting the importance of creating connections between customers and the restaurants. If gourmet meal kits contain cues (e.g., flyers) that familiarize customers with and help them be psychologically connected to the restaurants (the producers), relatedness tends to be created that motivates customers to visit the iconic restaurants.

H₃: Customers with higher levels of perceived relatedness (vs. customers with lower levels) express higher travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants.

The basic psychological needs interact with goal framing to influence behavioral tendencies (Loroz and Braig, 2015). For example, extrinsic goal framing interacts with the need for competence to determine customers' attachment to the brand and anticipated joy (Proksch *et al.*, 2015). The study proposes that the effects of goal framing, along with competence and relatedness, can further account for consumer behaviors in the context of online purchase of meal kits. First, the prosocial impact of intrinsic goal framing (e.g., helpfulness, health, growth) is likely to be enhanced when customers feel they are competent to prepare the meal. As a result, high competence levels may bolster overall purchase intentions, making them less susceptible to the goal-framing effect.

H4: The impact of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) goal framing on purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries is smaller when perceived competence is high (vs. low).

Second, products with closeness cues can stimulate customers' attachment to the products and develop perceptions of relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2008). The need for relatedness is prominent in the case of gourmet meal kits as the food is provided by a local destination restaurant. Gourmet meal kits that contain identifiable information about the restaurant can bring customers closer to the business. Taken together, perceived relatedness is likely to exaggerate the impact of intrinsic goal framing on customer behavioral intentions through the internalization process.

H5: The effect of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) goal framing on travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants is smaller when perceived relatedness is high (vs. low).

2.6 Customer experience co-creation

Co-creation refers to “a joint, collaborative, concurrent, peer-like process of producing new value, both materially and symbolically, through the voluntary contributions of multiple

actors resulting in reciprocal well-being” (Busser and Shulga, 2018, p. 70). Hospitality organizations have worked to create more opportunities for customers to become actively involved in service production to create greater value for customers (Shaw *et al.*, 2011). Given the unique characteristics of hospitality products (e.g., co-production, simultaneous production, and consumption), research has explored opportunities for the co-creation of value (Chathoth *et al.*, 2014). Busser and Shulga (2018) developed the notion of co-created value, incorporating five dimensions of meaningfulness, contribution, collaboration, recognition, and emotional response.

Meaningfulness refers to a self-assessment of the value co-creation process and the extent to which this process contributes to the overall value of the service product (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011). In the gourmet meal kit co-creation process, meaningfulness depicts customers’ perceptions as to the value that the co-creation from both parties can bring. High levels of meaningfulness suggest customer acknowledgment of their co-creation efforts, which may increase the perceived value of the product/service. Contribution describes customer-perceived skills and resources that need to be invested in creating the service products. In the current context, customers invest not only monetary but also intelligence resources (e.g., cooking skills) to create value for products. By contrast, collaboration and affective response stress the interdependent and synchronous cooperation between consumers and service providers (Busser and Shulga, 2018). Recognition often occurs when firms acknowledge customers for participating in activities that do not conceptually fit the current context.

When consumer centrality in the service process is enhanced via co-creation, positive behavioral outcomes are likely to occur (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Considering the essential role of customer participation in hospitality services, the current research integrates co-creation into the theoretical underpinning of the SDT to explain intentions to use destination restaurants’ meal

kit delivery services. Customers' co-creation experiences of gourmet meal kits, influenced by informational cues regarding the goal framing and psychological needs of relatedness, are likely to exert a spillover effect on their intentions to visit iconic restaurants (e.g., Gupta and Polonsky, 2020). When working with restaurants' gourmet meal kits supports diners' internal goals and psychological needs of relatedness, customers are more likely to perceive the co-created experience to be meaningful and valuable, thereby being motivated to engage with the product as well as the business (Chathoth *et al.*, 2014).

H₆: Customer perceived co-creation (a. meaningfulness and b. contribution) mediates the effect of goal framing on behavioral intentions (purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries and travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants).

H₇: Customer perceived co-creation (a. meaningfulness and b. contribution) mediates the effect of perceived competence on purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries.

H₈: Customer perceived co-creation (a. meaningfulness and b. contribution) mediates the effect of perceived relatedness on travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants.

2.7 Food involvement

Food involvement refers to beliefs regarding the role of food in one's diet, health, and overall life satisfaction. Individuals attach varying degrees of importance to food in their lives (Bell and Marshall, 2003). Scholars have constructed food involvement into four aspects, namely food-related identity (e.g., food enthusiasts' identity expression and affirmation), food quality (e.g., food-related knowledge development), social bonding (e.g., dining-out experience), and food consciousness (e.g., after-meal experience) (Robinson and Getz, 2016). Food involvement entails salient individual differences that influence one's food intake habits and product preferences (Hu, 2010). Those highly involved with food have higher enthusiasm in tasting food

in leisure time, developing food-related knowledge, and enjoying dine-out experiences (Robinson and Getz, 2016).

In the context of travel, food involvement can account for food-seeking behaviors, as paying a visit to destination restaurants lessens the psychological distance between food enthusiasts and restaurants (Robinson and Clifford, 2007). Those with high levels of food involvement are interested in topics or events related to food, enjoy trying new food, and often visit different restaurants. Low food involvement levels impede efforts to explore or utilize food experiences to fulfill life satisfaction. Assuming food enthusiasts have an innate desire to affirm their identities by making pro-food decisions (Okumus *et al.*, 2007), individuals who exhibit high (vs. low) food involvement are less susceptible to the impacts of goal framing as well as basic needs on behavioral intentions.

H₉: The effects of intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) goal framing on (a. purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries and b. travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants) are stronger among low (vs. high) food involvement consumers.

H₁₀: The effect of perceived competence and purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries is stronger among low (vs. high) food involvement consumers.

H₁₁: The effect of perceived relatedness and travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants is stronger among low (vs. high) food involvement consumers.

2.8 Research framework and overview of studies

We conducted two experimental studies to test the research framework and proposed hypotheses (Figure 1). The two studies are designed to examine customers' two behavioral intentions – purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries and travel intentions to visit iconic local restaurants in sequential order. Study 1 manipulated scenarios of a gourmet meal kit

delivery service to explore customers' purchase intentions of gourmet meal kits. Study 2 manipulated scenarios of receiving a gourmet meal kit and continued to examine post-consumption outcomes (travel intentions to visit the iconic local restaurant).

Insert Figure 1 about here

3. Study 1

3.1 Method

Study 1 aimed to explore how goal framing and one basic need (competence) impact customers' decisions to purchase online gourmet meal kit deliveries. Study 1 adopted a two (goal framing: extrinsic vs. intrinsic) \times two (competence: high vs. low) between-subject experimental design. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in May 2021. The participants must have been older than 18, residing in the United States, and have ordered meal kit delivery before. A sample of 211 participants (46.9% male; 78.2% White; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.30 \pm 12.37$ years) was collected in Study 1.

The participants were first introduced to a gourmet meal kit delivery website and given a scenario of purchasing a meal online for a family dinner. The participants were then randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In the intrinsic goal framing condition, customers were exposed to a poster saying that by ordering gourmet meal kits, they are supporting local small restaurants, which reflects community contribution as an intrinsic goal defined by Kasser and Ryan (1996). In the extrinsic goal framing condition, customers were exposed to a poster saying that by ordering the meal kit, they could share meal pictures with friends on social media, which embodies the extrinsic goal of social recognition (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Perceived competence was manipulated by altering both the instruction language (Sheldon and Filak, 2008)

and the difficulty level of preparing the gourmet meal kit (Mochon *et al.*, 2012). In the high competence condition, customers first read instructions with wording such as “challenging,” “you will be able to do it,” and “have confidence in you.” They were then given a meal kit with easy preparation instructions that included three steps. In the low competence condition, customers read instructions with wording like “difficult,” “hope turn out as expected,” and “hard” and then were given a meal kit with hard preparation instructions consisting of 9 steps.

Finally, the participants completed a questionnaire that included questions to measure their purchase intention, co-creation experience (meaningfulness and contribution), and food involvement. All measures were sourced from the previous literature (Appendix A).

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Manipulation check.

To check the manipulation of goal framing, the participants answered a bipolar question (anchored from 1 = “help local restaurants” through 7 = “impress others on social media,” Lee and Pounders, 2019) to indicate their reason for purchasing gourmet meal kit deliveries. T-test results demonstrated that the manipulation of goal framing was successful ($t = 11.86, p < 0.001$). Participants who were exposed to intrinsic goal framing reported their purpose as helping local restaurants ($M = 2.24$), while those exposed to extrinsic goal framing reported their purpose as impressing others ($M = 5.03$).

To assess the manipulation of competence, one question was asked regarding how the participants felt about their meal kit preparation ability on a seven-point scale, anchored from 1 = “not competent” through 7 = “competent” (La Guardia *et al.*, 2000). T-test results again showed a significant main effect for the manipulation of perceived competence ($t = 4.24, p < 0.001$). Participants in the low competence condition reported a lower level of competence ($M = 5.82$)

than those assigned to the high competence condition ($M = 6.48$).

3.2.2 Main & interaction effects.

After controlling for the preference of Texas BBQ and previous meal kit ordering experience, the ANCOVA results revealed significant main effects for both goal framing ($F = 4.16, p = 0.043$) and competence ($F = 5.08, p = 0.025$). As proposed, customers who were exposed to the intrinsic goal framing message showed greater intentions to purchase gourmet meal kit deliveries ($M = 5.64$) than those who viewed the extrinsic goal framing message ($M = 5.27$), supporting H₁. Similarly, customers who read the shorter set of instructions (high competence) expressed greater intentions to purchase gourmet meal kit deliveries ($M = 5.61$) than those who read the longer set of instructions ($M = 5.29$), supporting H₂.

Insert Figure 2 about here

A marginally significant interaction effect between goal framing and competence ($F = 2.82, p = 0.095$) was also revealed in the ANCOVA results, supporting H₄. As shown in Figure 2, when customers were exposed to the extrinsic goal framing message, those who perceived themselves as more competent in preparing gourmet meal kits showed greater purchase intentions than those with lower competence levels ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.58, M_{\text{low}} = 4.93, t = 2.47, p = 0.016$). For customers with low competence levels, those who read the intrinsic goal framing message reported greater purchase intentions than those assigned to the extrinsic goal condition ($M_{\text{intrinsic}} = 5.63, M_{\text{extrinsic}} = 4.93, t = 2.69, p = 0.009$). Among customers who were exposed to the intrinsic goal framing message, no difference was found in purchase intentions between the high competence and low competence groups ($t = 0.07, p = 0.942$).

3.2.3 Mediation & moderation effects.

PROCESS Model 4 was employed to test the proposed mediation effects of two co-

creation dimensions as proposed in H₆ and H₇: meaningfulness and contribution. As shown in Figure 3, meaningfulness partially mediates the relationship between goal framing and purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries ($B = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.24]), and fully mediates the effect of competence on purchase intentions ($B = 0.25$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.43]). Conversely, contribution does not significantly mediate either proposed relationship. Thus, H_{6a} and H_{7a} are supported while H_{6b} and H_{7b} are rejected.

Insert Figure 3 about here

PROCESS macro model 1 was used to test the proposed moderating effects of food involvement as proposed in H₉ and H₁₀. The results show that food involvement has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between goal framing and competence and purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries ($ps < 0.1$), supporting H₉ and H₁₀. The positive effect of intrinsic goal framing on purchase intention is more pronounced when customers had lower levels of food involvement. Similarly, the positive effect of competence on purchase intention of gourmet meal kit delivery is also magnified when consumers had lower levels of food involvement.

4. Study 2

4.1 Method

Study 2 examined how goal framing and another basic need, relatedness, impact customers' travel decisions to visit iconic local restaurants after purchasing gourmet meal kits. Study 2 also used a two (goal framing: extrinsic vs. intrinsic) \times two (relatedness: high vs. low) between-subject experimental design. Participants were recruited through Mturk in May 2021 using the same recruiting criteria and quality controls as Study 1. A sample of 267 participants (49.8% male; 74.2% White; $M_{\text{age}} = 38.78 \pm 11.24$ years) was collected in Study 2.

The participants were given an introduction to the same gourmet meal kit delivery website and asked to imagine that they purchased a gourmet meal kit from a restaurant on this website. Commander's Palace was selected for this study, as it is a New Orleans landmark known for creating great dining memories. To ensure all respondents were considered "out-of-towners," people who currently live in the state of Louisiana were excluded in the data collection. Next, the participants were assigned to one of the four conditions randomly. In this scenario, when participants received the gourmet meal kit package, they also received a flyer. In the intrinsic goal framing condition, customers were exposed to a poster saying that travel allows them to learn about local culture and feel happy, which reflects self-development as another intrinsic goal defined by Kasser and Ryan (1996). In the extrinsic goal framing condition, customers were exposed to a poster saying that travel lets them share photos on social media to impress others, which embodies social recognition as an extrinsic goal defined by Kasser and Ryan (1996). Perceived relatedness to the iconic restaurant was manipulated by pictures and headings on the flyer. Following Pavey *et al.*'s (2011) relatedness priming, the heading in the high relatedness condition focused on "you" as a unique individual, while the heading in the low relatedness condition was more general. The flyer in the high relatedness condition featured restaurant-specific pictures, showing the dishes and the staff of the restaurant. In the low relatedness condition, the flyer featured destination-related pictures, showing the people and buildings of New Orleans (Appendix A). Finally, the participants completed a questionnaire that included several questions that measure their intentions to visit local restaurants.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Manipulation check.

Similar to Study 1, the participants answered a bipolar question (anchored from 1 =

“impress others on social media” through 7 = “learn the culture and live a happy life,” Lee and Pounders, 2019) to indicate their reason for purchasing gourmet meal kit deliveries. T-test results again showed that the manipulation of goal framing worked as expected ($t = 10.29, p < 0.001$). Participants exposed to intrinsic goal framing reported their purpose as leaving culture and living a happy life ($M = 6.12$), whereas those exposed to extrinsic goal framing reported their purpose as impressing others ($M = 4.07$).

To assess the manipulation of relatedness, participants were asked two questions regarding the extent to which they felt “connected” and “close and intimate” to Commander’s Palace Restaurant on a seven-point scale (La Guardia *et al.*, 2000). T-test results again revealed a successful manipulation of perceived relatedness ($t = 6.57, p < 0.001$). Participants in the low relatedness condition reported a lower level of relatedness ($M = 4.24$) with the iconic restaurant than those assigned to the high competence condition ($M = 5.36$).

4.2.2 Main & interaction effects.

After controlling for the preference of Louisiana cuisine and previous experiences of meal kit ordering and Commander’s Palace visit as confounding variables, the ANCOVA results showed significant main effects for both goal framing ($F = 6.33, p = 0.012$) and relatedness ($F = 4.84, p = 0.029$). As proposed, customers who were exposed to the intrinsic goal framing message showed greater intentions to visit the local restaurants ($M = 5.25$) than those who viewed the extrinsic goal framing message ($M = 4.98$), supporting H₁. Similarly, customers who were exposed to the flyer featuring restaurant-related pictures (high relatedness) expressed greater intentions to visit the iconic local restaurants ($M = 5.27$) than those who viewed a flyer featuring destination-related pictures ($M = 4.98$), supporting H₃.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Similar to Study 1, a significant interaction effect between goal framing and relatedness ($F = 5.17, p = 0.024$) was found in the ANCOVA, supporting H₅. As shown in Figure 4, when customers were exposed to the extrinsic goal framing message, those who felt a higher degree of relatedness with the iconic local restaurant showed greater visit intentions than those who felt lower levels of relatedness ($M_{\text{high}} = 5.23, M_{\text{low}} = 4.67, t = 2.43, p = 0.017$). For customers who express low levels of relatedness, those who read the intrinsic goal framing message reported greater visit intentions than those assigned to the extrinsic goal condition ($M_{\text{intrinsic}} = 5.20, M_{\text{extrinsic}} = 4.67, t = 2.43, p = 0.017$). Among customers who were exposed to the intrinsic goal framing message, no difference was found in purchase intentions between the high relatedness and low relatedness groups ($t = 0.66, p = 0.512$).

4.2.3 Mediation & moderation effects.

Same as Study 1, PROCESS Model 4 was employed to test the proposed mediation effects of two co-creation dimensions as proposed in H₆ and H₈: meaningfulness and contribution. The results did not reveal any significant mediating effect for both meaningfulness and contribution in the relationship between goal framing and purchase intentions of gourmet meal kit deliveries. As shown in Figure 5, contribution fully mediated the relationship between relatedness and visit intentions ($B = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.01, 0.15]$), whereas meaningfulness did not show a significant mediation effect. Thus, only H_{7b} is supported, while H₆ and H_{7a} are rejected.

Insert Figure 5 about here

PROCESS model 1 was employed to test the proposed moderating effects of food involvement as proposed in H₉ and H₁₁. The results show a significant moderating effect of food involvement in the relationship between goal framing on visit intentions ($p = 0.039$), supporting H₉. The positive effect of intrinsic goal framing on visit intention is more pronounced when

customers have lower levels of food involvement. However, food involvement does not significantly moderate the relationship between relatedness and visit intention, rejecting H₁₁. A further investigation shows that the interaction effect between goal framing and relatedness on visit intention is also magnified when customers exhibit lower levels of food involvement. Table I summarizes the results of hypothesis testing.

Insert Table I about here

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Conclusions

The current study examined the emerging dining phenomenon of gourmet meal kit delivery from destinations' iconic restaurants. This emerging business model is not only an emerging meal delivery service but also an alternative means for destinations' iconic restaurants to deliver an authentic dining experience to out-of-towners. Although preliminary research has examined conventional meal kit services from different perspectives, existing literature has not yet examined restaurant gourmet meal kits, nor taken a deep dive into the psychological forces that influence meal kit purchase intentions and intentions to patronage the restaurant.

The findings reveal that goal-framed messages can interact with the psychological needs of competency and relatedness to influence customers' intentions to purchase restaurants' gourmet meal kits and intentions to visit the local restaurant. Consistent with the existing literature, intrinsic goal framing is more likely to motivate customers to purchase online meal kits than extrinsic goal framing (Kasser and Ryan, 1996). Conversely, Huang *et al.* (2016) found that the need for competence was not critical in predicting consumer behaviors. The current results highlight the importance of meeting customers' needs for competence and relatedness out of context-specific reasons. First, unlike traditional dining experiences, working with meal kits

requires customers' higher level of engagement in the meal preparation, which affects experience quality. Therefore, customers' perceived competence is an indispensable contingent factor that determines purchase intentions. Second, as customers receive meal kits without physically being in the restaurants, relating them to an unfamiliar business becomes a salient factor that drives intentions to visit the restaurants. The findings confirm the importance of fulfilling customers' needs for competence and relatedness in the context of online meal kit delivery. In addition, the impact of goal framing is conditioned by levels of competence and relatedness, respectively. Therefore, our findings corroborate the intertwining dynamics between basic psychological needs and goal framing found in previous research (e.g., Dysvik *et al.*, 2013).

Moreover, consistent with the limited literature on the subject (Hsieh and Chang, 2016), customer co-creation partially explains the underlying mechanism of how goal framing, perceived competence, and relatedness influence consumer behavioral intentions. The findings are in sync with previous studies that validated the mediating effect of co-creation in various service contexts (e.g., Shulga *et al.*, 2021). In this research, customer co-creation is operationalized as meaningfulness and contribution. The results suggest a mediating effect of meaningfulness, whereas the contribution dimension fails to mediate the relationships in Study 1. A possible explanation might be that preparing gourmet meal kits requires minimal contribution, not like co-creating an entire stay at a destination resort or hotel (Busser and Shulga, 2018). In Study 2, the mediation role of contribution became significant because the scenario asked participants to imagine a trip to the destination that requires more contributions from participants.

The current research also reveals that food involvement significantly moderates the impacts of goal framing and competence on customers' intentions to purchase meal kits,

highlighting the important individual differences to understand gourmet meal kits purchase behavior. Consumers with strong food involvement are naturally attracted to food-related events. As such, the positive effect of goal framing and competence on visit intention is weakened when consumers' food involvement is high. As those with strong food involvement are motivated to visit the iconic restaurant, their decision is less affected by goal framing. However, food involvement does not moderate the effect of relatedness on visit intentions. This non-significant moderating effect might be explained by the fact that culinary travel is motivated by various factors on top of the appeals of iconic local restaurants (Su *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the extent to which one can relate to the business has a robust influence on intentions to visit the restaurant, and this significant effect is not conditioned by levels of food involvement. Taken together, the current research identifies the importance of goal framing and basic needs in predicting customers' intentions to purchase gourmet meal kits and to visit the restaurant via the mediating role of experience co-creation and the moderating effect of food involvement.

5.2 Theoretical implications

Using the SDT as its theoretical framework, this study examines an emerging dining/delivery model that bridges food delivery services and physical restaurants. For the first time, this study successfully identifies psychological needs to predict both customers' purchase intentions of meal kit deliveries and visit intentions. Perceived competence is essential in determining intentions to purchase gourmet meal kits, whereas perceived relatedness is a significant predictor of intentions to visit the iconic local restaurant. This finding supports the arguments that 1) competence is a crucial factor when the service requires customers' indispensable inputs to be produced, and 2) relatedness is essential in driving behavior in the context of virtual and intangible transactions, as it enhances customers' internalization

(Burhanudin *et al.*, 2019).

Second, this research examines the underlying mechanism of customer co-creation in the gourmet meal kit. Customer co-creation of experiences is likely to prompt positive outcomes given customers' dynamic and central roles during service production and delivery (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). In this vein, the current research contributes to the indirect value co-creation process by considering two unique factors. First, customer-business co-creation in the gourmet meal kit context involves an indirect interactive process, wherein business' input (e.g., meal kit preparation) occurs before customers' participation (e.g., cooking the meal), whereas co-creation in a conventional dining context often co-occurs between customers and employees at the same place, namely direct co-creation (Woratschek *et al.*, 2020). Second, customer participation in the current context is a relatively independent step to complete the service product. The current research reveals that co-creation is a significant mediator that explains the effect of perceived competence and relatedness on behavioral outcomes.

Third, the current hospitality and tourism literature on food consumption calls for the exploration of individual characteristics that influence consumption behaviors. One salient individual factor that has attracted attention is food involvement (Caber *et al.*, 2018). Previous research has mostly conceptualized food involvement as a direct antecedent of consumer attitudes and behaviors (Caber *et al.*, 2018), or loyalty to food events and festivals (Kim *et al.*, 2010). This study demonstrates its moderating effect to expand the nomological network of restaurant meal kit consumption. Given the growing diversity of food consumption models in recent years, this research demonstrates the relevance of food involvement as a critical individual trait that influences intentions to purchase restaurants' meal kits and to visit the local restaurant.

5.3 Managerial implications

Based on these findings, practitioners can strategize marketing communication and the design of materials to emphasize the approachability of their dishes, the connection with potential guests, and the intrinsic satisfaction of consuming their dishes. These are key forces driving customers' intentions to purchase gourmet kits and visit a restaurant while traveling.

First, restaurant practitioners should develop gourmet meal kits that are accessible to lay customers. Someone with limited cooking experience should be able to manage the preparation. For example, ingredients need to be clearly labeled with their purposes, and instructions should be straightforward. It should take only a few steps to prepare a gourmet meal kit and utilize all the included ingredients. The ingredients should also be familiar to minimize preparation anxiety. Besides streamlining the preparation, restaurants may carefully select suitable signature dishes to be developed into gourmet meal kits to prevent customer backlash.

Second, based on the significant direct and indirect influence of relatedness on behavioral and purchase intentions, when designing promotional materials, it is vital to create a liaison with customers to foster a sense of relatedness to the business. Restaurants can emphasize the unique history of the business, the heritage of their dishes, the origin of the ingredients (such as "locally-sourced"), and their accolades (e.g., awards featured on television). Some Goldbelly restaurants seem to be adopting effective variations on these recommendations. For example, relating to accolades, dishes from famed chef Jose Andres mention that he has been a James Beard award-winner (Goldbelly, 2021).

Third, based on the effect of goal framing on behavioral and purchase intentions, restaurant practitioners may want to differentiate their meal experience from the competition with the use of unique ingredients or secret recipes to encourage intrinsic interest. In doing so, customers may feel that they have a special, unique experience. Again, some Goldbelly

restaurants have adopted such practices. For example, the aforementioned gourmet meal kit from Jose Andres has been marketed as a “secret” menu item (Goldbelly, 2021).

Lastly, based on the moderating effects of food involvement, this study has important implications for restaurant practitioners to reach culinary novices. Individuals with low food involvement are more responsive to marketing appeals that tap into goal framing and basic needs. Accordingly, promotional materials should be inviting, simple, and devoid of technical terms (such as by using bold images with limited text) and should be disseminated via marketing channels (e.g., social media, television food shows, or popular recipe websites) trafficked by the general public.

Overall, the current findings may help destination restaurants reach out to customers via gourmet meal kits, and design effective marketing materials to support the growth of this emerging model. Given the rise of culinary experiences as tourist attractions, the findings also offer new strategies for tourism destinations to leverage their “deliverable” gastronomic appeal to attract visitors.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This study is not free from limitations. First, the study only used U.S. restaurants in the scenarios. The generalizability of the research framework should be further tested in other countries and with other types of restaurants. Second, as an exploratory attempt, this study examined the psychological process of consumers’ decision-making regarding gourmet meal kits and culinary tourism. Future research may utilize this theoretical framework to examine actual consumer behaviors to provide more meaningful practical implications. Third, this study explored the mediating role of co-creation and the moderating role of food involvement, with the SDT used as the theoretical framework. Future studies may examine other possible mechanisms

such as the mediating role of intrinsic motivation (Gilal *et al.*, 2019) and emotions (Dholakia, 2006), and the moderating role of food neophobia (Kim *et al.*, 2010) and causality orientations (Gilal *et al.*, 2019). This may achieve a comprehensive understanding of the causal relationships and the underlying mechanisms that shape consumers' decision-making processes.

Appendix A. Measurement items

Construct (Reference)	Items
Meaningfulness (Busser and Shulga, 2018)	The time I spend on preparing gourmet meal kits is worthwhile. Preparing gourmet meal kits is meaningful. Preparing gourmet meal kits is important to me.
Contribution (Busser and Shulga, 2018)	I contribute my skills to the meal preparation process. I contribute my experience to the meal preparation process. I invested my resources in preparing gourmet meal kits.
Purchase intention (Cai and Leung, 2020)	I am willing to order the gourmet meal kit from the Texas BBQ restaurant. It is likely that I am going to order the gourmet meal kit from the Texas BBQ restaurant. I am inclined to order the gourmet meal kit from the Texas BBQ restaurant.
Visit intention (Leung <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	It is very likely that I will visit Commander's Palace Restaurant. The probability that I will consider visiting Commander's Palace Restaurant is very high. I am willing to visit Commander's Palace Restaurant in the future.
Food involvement (Kim <i>et al.</i> , 2010)	When I travel, one of the things I anticipate most is eating the food there. Compared with other daily decisions, my food choices are very important. I think a lot about food each day. Talking about what I ate or am going to eat is something I like to do.

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Table I. Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Study 1	Study 2
H ₁ Goal framing → Behavioral intention	Supported	Supported
H ₂ Competence → Behavioral intention	Supported	--
H ₃ Relatedness → Behavioral intention	--	Supported
H ₄ Goal framing × Competence → Purchase intention	Supported	
H ₅ Goal framing × Relatedness → Visit intention	--	Supported
H ₆ Goal framing → Co-creation → Behavioral intention	Partially supported	Rejected
H ₇ Competence → Co-creation → Purchase intention	Partially supported	--
H ₈ Relatedness → Co-creation → Visit intention	--	Partially supported
H ₉ Goal framing × Food involvement → Behavioral intention	Supported	Supported
H ₁₀ Competence × Food involvement → Purchase intention	Supported	--
H ₁₁ Relatedness × Food involvement → Visit intention	--	Rejected

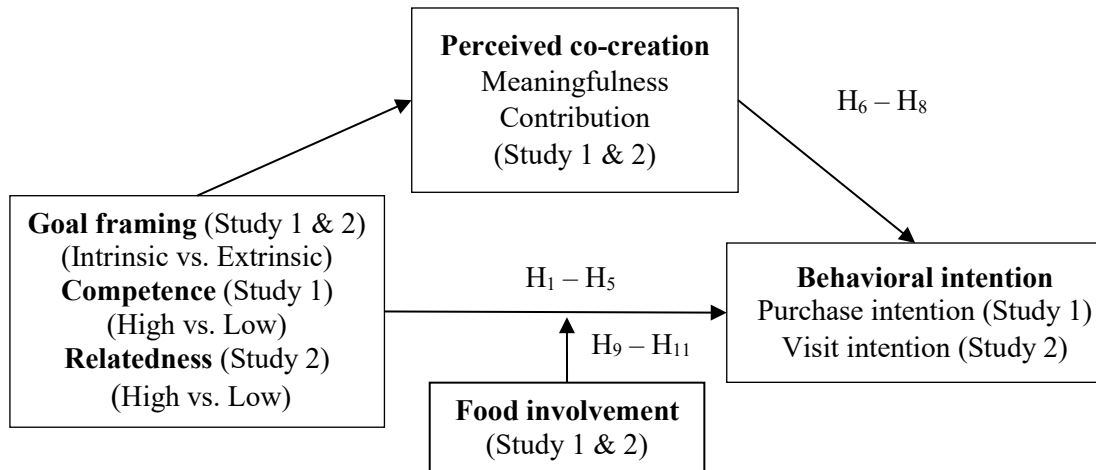


Figure 1. Research framework

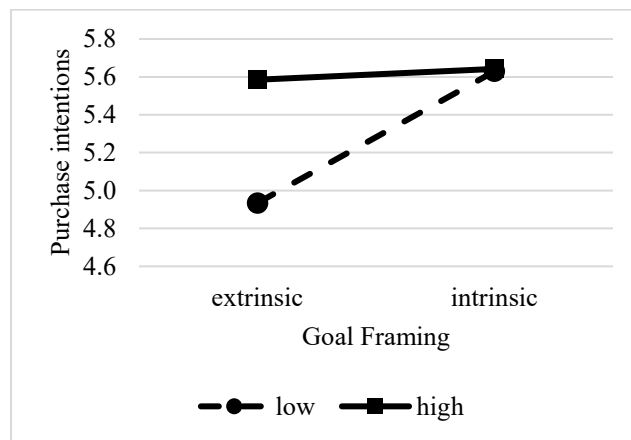
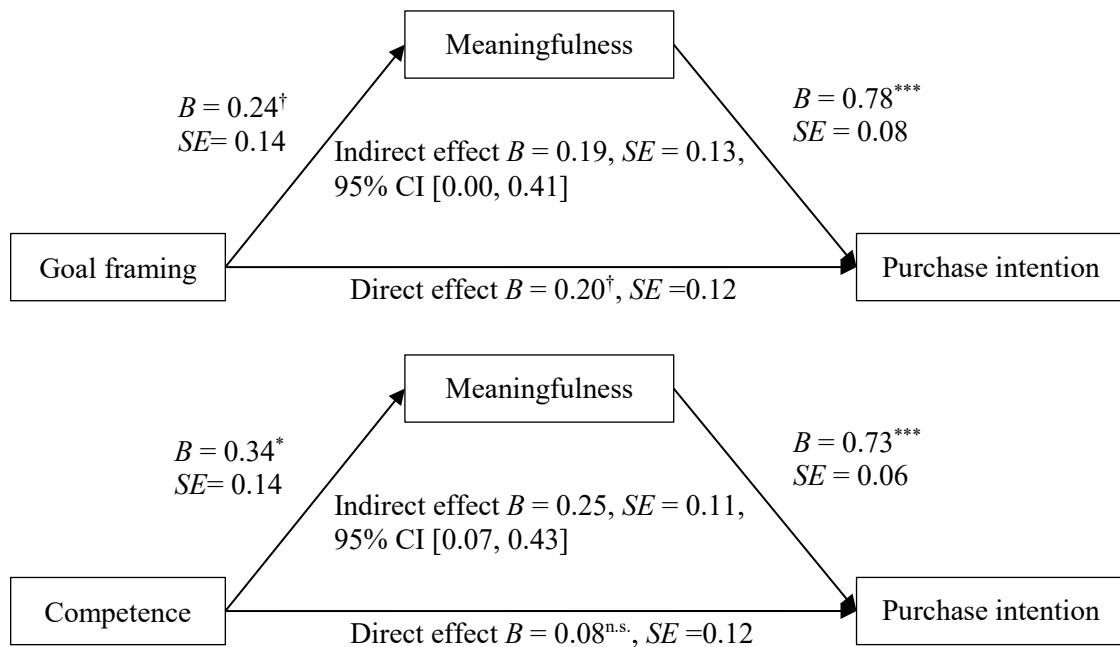


Figure 2. Interaction effect between goal framing and competence



*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, $^{\dagger} p < 0.1$, n.s. $p > 0.1$

Figure 3. Mediation effects of co-creation

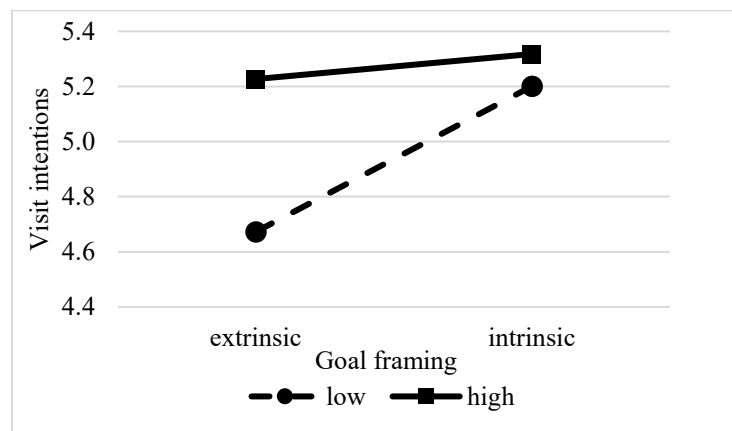
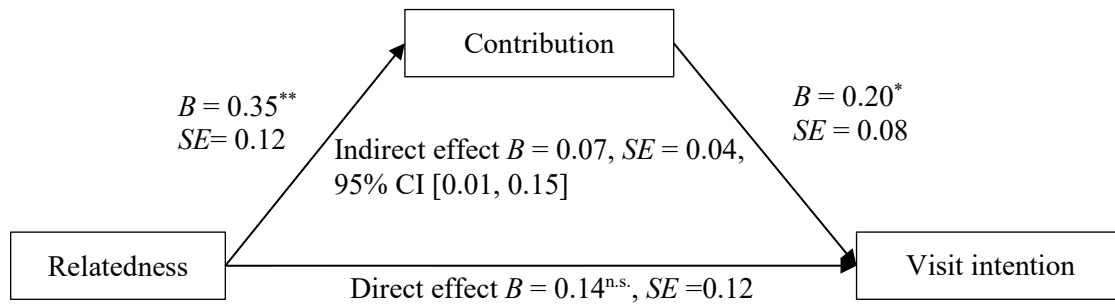


Figure 4. Interaction effect between goal framing and relatedness



*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, $^{\dagger} p < 0.1$, n.s. $p > 0.1$

Figure 5. Mediation effects of co-creation