

## *Tourists' Private Social Dining Experiences*

### **Abstract**

While private social dining has emerged as a new activity in the sharing economy, associated research is limited. This study aims to conceptualize tourists' private social dining experiences by incorporating the concept of the experience economy with the sharing economy. Thematic analysis of 29 interviews unveiled a hierarchical framework, beginning with a personalized experience and leading to sensory experience before ending with emotional experience in private social dining settings. Seven identified emotional experiential domains were then situated within a four-quadrant framework to address how private social dining can enrich the four original experiential domains of the experience economy (i.e., entertainment, education, esthetic, and escapism) to trigger tourists' emotional pleasure. These results lay a theoretical foundation for future studies and provide practical implications for the development of food tourism.

**Keywords:** private social dining, sharing economy, experience economy, food tourism, dining experience

**Word count:** 8635

### **Introduction**

Why does a meal at Tokyo's Aragawa Steakhouse cost more than one from a franchised restaurant? Essentially, consumers are willing to pay extra for a meal that provides a unique experience (Chang, 2018). The experience economy suggests that industries can generate high revenues to the extent that additional experiential value is offered. Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy framework has been extensively applied in hospitality and tourism (e.g., Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012; Radder & Han, 2015; Shim, Oh, & Jeong, 2017), mainly because associated contexts depend on creating memorable encounters (Gilmore & Pine, 2002).

The experience economy framework effectively conceptualized the tourist experience until the sharing economy altered the consumer landscape (Heo, 2016). Mody, Suess, and Lehto (2017) attempted to compare the experiential value of Airbnb with traditional hotels. The sharing economy presents an attractive experiential value proposition, as suggested by many hotel practitioners who have lamented the challenges of competing on the basis of tourist experiences. Although some have contended that governments should shift this new business model away from the existing market to maintain a fair playing field (Tobin, 2019), others hold a different perspective. For example, former World Tourism Organization Secretary-General Taleb Rifai warned the global tourism industry that fighting the sharing economy would be a losing battle (The Diplomat, 2016).

Conceptualizing the sharing economy's appealing experiential value proposition is timely and necessary because the experience economy asserts that "selling services is not enough" in service industries, including hospitality (Gilmore & Pine, 2002, p.87). The key driver behind successful hospitality businesses involves staging enjoyable experiences on top of an existing product or service. Yet research on visitor experiences remains thin (Jiang, Ramkissoon, & Mavondo, 2016), with most studies failing to consider experiential staging within the sharing economy. Traditional businesses thus tend to overlook the unique experiential value proposition of sharing-economy businesses and create disparities in the tourist experience (Mody et al., 2017).

Private social dining has rapidly emerged as a new consumption experience in the food and beverage sector of the sharing economy but has received scarce academic attention (Frenken, 2017). In this setting, tourists are provided "a unique opportunity to try an authentic home-cooked meal at the host's home" (PlateCulture, 2015). By staging innovative consumption activities within the sharing economy, such services are perfectly aligned with growing tourist demand for authentic dining experiences (Yung, 2014). This novel form of experiential consumption thus requires "new and subjective" research methods that identify "difference and uniqueness rather than similarity and patterns" (Williams, 2006, p. 493). Hence, the present study adopts an inductive approach to (a) expand Pine and Gilmore's (1998) experience economy framework to include private social dining and (b) investigate how service providers stage innovative dining-related tourist experiences.

## **Literature review**

### *Experience economy*

A prevailing belief around consumption is that placing a price tag on a product or service based on its costs leads service providers to rely on simplistic pricing strategies while neglecting other elements that may increase revenue (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). Chang (2018) demonstrated that consumers' subjective perceptions of a product's experiential value can boost company revenue because customers tend to pursue multisensory hedonic consumption over utilitarian consumption (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). This phenomenon has been conceptualized as the experience economy. More specifically, Pine and Gilmore (1998) proposed a two-dimensional plane consisting of two continuums (i.e., immersion-absorption and passive participation-active participation) from which four experiential values emerged: entertainment, educational, esthetic, and escapist values (Figure 1). Their theory implies that service businesses should transition from delivering tailored services to staging multisensory, memorable experiences.

\*Insert Figure 1

The concept of the experience economy has been emphasized throughout the tourism industry because satisfaction and quality are insufficient in operationalizing tourists' destination experiences (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2012). Although the first four

experiential domains in Figure 1 present a concise conceptual framework of the tourist experience, they only became assessable when Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (2007) developed an initial scale of tourists' destination lodging experiences. Kim (2009) pointed out that Pine and Gilmore's (1998) model fails to explain customers' behavioral intentions and then proposed a seven-dimensional construct of the tourist experience (i.e., hedonism, refreshment, local culture, meaningfulness, knowledge, involvement, and novelty). Yet this seven-dimensional construct has been underutilized, possibly given its limited generalizability due to using a non-representative sample of students who were mainly unemployed and could not fully manage their travel options (Chandralal & Valenzuela, 2015). Therefore, Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework is most often applied when considering the tourist experience. Oh et al.'s (2007) scale has typically been adopted to measure various types of tourist experiences, such as those involving wineries (e.g., Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012; Vo Thanh & Kirova, 2018), cruises (e.g., Hosany & Mark, 2010), casinos (e.g., Shim et al., 2017), and historic sites and museums (e.g., Radder & Han, 2015). These diverse experiential contexts convey the broad applicability of the original model in tourism.

No prevalent framework is available to conceptualize every tourist experience; the approach must be tailored to each situation (Williams, 2006). Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework is therefore unlikely to serve as a hard-and-fast rule; hence, scholars' continued efforts to classify the four experiential domains (Oh et al., 2007). Although most relevant studies have recognized dining as part of the tourist experience, the role of dining varies across these experiences. Similar to Quadri-Felitti and Fiore (2012), who focused on wine experiences, Musa, Kayat, and Thirumoorthi (2009) framed dining as an educational experience among cultural tourists. Later, Shim et al. (2017) acknowledged dining as an esthetic experience in casinos. These distinct positions reflect features of diverse tourism activities and corroborate Mason and Paggiaro's (2012) stance that dining plays multiple roles in the tourist experience.

The current conceptualization of the dining experience remains superficial, simply presented as a combination of food quality, service quality, and atmosphere (Ha & Jang, 2010; Jeong & Jang, 2011). Compared with other tourist activities, research on tourists' dining experiences is limited (Ko et al., 2018). The lens of the experience economy has not yet been expanded to dining, thus ignoring the experiential connection or encounters between diners and dining-related products or services (Gilmore & Pine, 2002). The notion of "dining experiences" describes how diners' experience, rather than strictly the manner of eating (de Albeniz, 2018). This theoretical problem has hindered catering service providers from appropriately designing tourist experiences and remains particularly challenging as the sharing economy complicates tourist experiences overall (Pappas, 2019).

#### *The experience economy within the sharing economy*

The sharing economy is supported by Web 2.0, which enables people to share and exchange underutilized products or services (Karlsson & Dolnicar, 2016; Ketter, 2019). Airbnb, a key player in the sharing economy established in 2008, has been commended for its role in

establishing “a decentralized, equitable, and sustainable economy” (Martin, 2016, p. 154). However, recent protests against Airbnb’s expansion have challenged the romanticism surrounding the sharing economy. Traditional hoteliers believe they are facing an unfair playing field alongside accommodation-sharing service providers. This disparity is attributable to two main elements. First, the traditional hotel industry has higher operating costs due to the required occupancy taxes and stringent safety standards (Elliott, 2016). Second, the unique experiential value proposition leveraged by accommodation-sharing service providers has introduced disruptive innovations into traditional accommodation experiences (Oskam & Boswijk, 2016). This experiential proposition addresses tourists’ increasing demands for more meaningful social interaction with locals and authentic travel activities (Tussyadiah & Pesonen, 2016). Such activities may be more striking to tourists not only because these opportunities diversify travelers’ overall experiences, but also because perceived low commercialization improves tourist experience quality (Sun et al., 2019).

From this perspective, accommodation-sharing service providers offer services beyond the four experiential domains proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) to develop more attractive tourist experiences. Mody et al. (2017) empirically verified this pattern by demonstrating the inferior competition of the hotel industry in terms of the tourist experience. That is, the authors added four experiential domains related to accommodation-sharing services: serendipity, localness, *communitas*, and personalization. Similarly, Shi, Gursoy, and Chen (2019) noted that accommodation-sharing services stage cultural and authentic experiences in addition to the first four experiential domains. Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) framework thus appears deficient in conceptualizing the tourist experience amid the sharing economy.

#### *Dining experiences with strangers in the sharing economy*

Transactions with strangers are common in the sharing economy (Botsman & Rogers, 2011). Generally, transactions with strangers (especially face-to-face) are considered unsafe primarily because they are unregulated. Karlsson and Dolnicar (2016) summarized the provision of social and informal experiences as key successes of accommodation-sharing services. Airbnb’s rapid development has led to transactions among strangers in other economic sectors. Private social dining services, as mentioned by Euromonitor International (2014), represent a noteworthy trend in the tourism/hospitality industry that has reshaped how people travel and eat (Lawler, 2014). Peer-to-peer dining services connect tourists with local hosts to enjoy a private meal in hosts’ place. Similar to accommodation-sharing services, these dining services highlight an experiential value proposition as reflected in relevant marketing campaigns, such as “Book unforgettable culinary experiences” on Eatwith (2019) and “PlateCulture experience” on PlateCulture (Yap, 2014).

The above campaigns indicate that dining experiences are at the heart of private social dining services. Michelin, the founder of Eatwith, stated that people’s cooking skills are not the most important criterion for a private social dining service provider; a provider’s ability to communicate and the ambiance of their home are essential as well (Lawler, 2014). In other

words, private social dining is far more than simply an eating activity—it affords tourists a unique opportunity to explore, socialize, and travel in a community, particularly because dining is a popular way to become immersed in a destination’s culture (Bjork & Kauppinen-Raisanen, 2019). Ketter (2019) supported this notion and pointed out that private social diners are motivated by “a trendy, authentic and social consumption experience” (p. 1072) to fulfill their sophisticated dining needs and realize experiential travel (Chang, 2018; Kivela & Crotts, 2006; Su, Johnson, & O’Mahony, 2018; Tikkanen, 2007). Qian, Law, and Fan (2020) believed that tourists gain satisfaction from three types of experiences in private social dining (i.e., sensory, emotional, and spiritual experiences), providing compelling evidence that private social dining is indeed an experiential travel activity.

In light of growing competition between sharing-economy vendors and traditional businesses in terms of the tourist experience, Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) four original experiential domains should be extended to encompass private social dining services. This expansion will clarify the design of private social dining experiences and provide meaningful insight into how conventional dining activities can be improved to provide more enriching tourist experiences (Walls et al., 2011). Therefore, this study aims to investigate diners’ experiences in private social dining and update Pine and Gilmore’s (1998) four experiential domains accordingly.

## **Methodology**

### *Data collection*

In this exploratory study, personal interviews were conducted to thoroughly examine the nature of private social dining from tourists’ perspectives. Snowball sampling was used to obtain a sample of respondents with previous private social dining experiences. The first 16 participants were recruited from researchers’ networks and asked to provide referrals to individuals who may be eligible to participate. Despite potential sample selection bias, this sampling technique has been deemed effective when gathering information about emerging and niche tourism behavior (Chen & Chen, 2015; Meng & Choi, 2019). This study focuses on the development of a theory-based integrative framework rather than population representation. Snowball sampling was thus accompanied by a theoretical sampling technique to “decide what data to collect next” by engaging in data collection and analysis concurrently (Coyne, 1997, p. 625). This approach also allowed for greater flexibility in data collection when exploring private social dining experiences in detail. Efforts were made to recruit participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The final sample consisted of 29 respondents, most of whom were women (75.9%). The gender imbalance supports Ignatov and Smith’s (2006) finding that females are more interested in food tourism than males. Nationality of the sample ranges from such Asian countries as mainland China and Taiwan, to such American countries as the United States and Canada. The majority (82.1%) were repeat private social diners familiar with the nature of private social dining experiences.

Interview questions were developed to suit the context of private social dining based on prior studies involving restaurant selection (Chan & Lam, 2009; Kivela, 1997), the experience economy (Kim et al., 2012; Mody et al., 2017; Radder & Han, 2015), and dining experiences (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Qian et al., 2020). At the start of each interview, the interviewer prompted participants to describe private social dining in general and compare it with traditional dining services. Mody et al. (2017) believed that this comparison would highlight experiential differences between sharing-economy businesses and conventional hospitality businesses. Then, participants were invited to elaborate on their overall patterns of private social dining consumption (e.g., frequency, price range, and type of cuisine). Further, participants were asked to reflect on their most memorable private social dining experiences. The authors opted to focus on participants' most memorable experience, rather than their most recent one, because many studies on the experience economy have suggested that an appealing experience is one which triggers consumers' memorability (Kim et al., 2012; Radder & Han, 2015). In this context, participants were asked to discuss the drivers behind their dining activities (e.g., "Why did you choose to use a private social dining service at that time?"; "What does private social dining mean to you?"), their overall dining experience (e.g., "Can you describe your private social dining experience at that time?"; "What were the experiences that made the activity memorable?"), and their emotional reactions (e.g., "How did you feel when you were dining there?"). Participants were also asked to describe other memorable private social dining experiences (if any) to consolidate their private social dining experiences at the end of the interview.

Interviews were held via phone or in person. They lasted roughly 40–60 minutes on average and were performed in either Chinese or English by the first and third authors, both of whom are native Chinese speakers and fluent in English. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in their original language (i.e., Chinese or English) by a professional transcription company independent from this study. The first author then translated all Chinese transcripts into English for further analysis.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis consisted of two stages. The first stage followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis in NVivo 11, advancing from content analysis to "pay[ing] greater attention to the qualitative aspects of the material analyzed" (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 56). This approach enables researchers to transfer concrete textual information into an abstract, general concept for knowledge. Given the method's flexibility in research designs and overall accessibility to an educated public (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it is popular in tourism studies for new theory development (e.g., Medhekar, Wong, & Hall, 2020; Qian et al., 2020). Pine and Gilmore's (1998) four experiential domains provided a foundation for exploring the nature of private social dining experiences and determining how these experiences can enhance the traditional conceptualization of tourists' dining experiences. The first and third authors followed all six steps when performing independent thematic analysis, while the

second author served as an auditor to verify both processes and the reliability of the analysis. All authors discussed discrepancies in their results until a consensus was reached.

Building on the first stage, the frequencies of identified themes were calculated in the second stage of data analysis to assess their relative importance (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). This approach is common in tourism and hospitality studies to establish new theories (e.g., Kirillova et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2017). In the present study, the process facilitated the authors' investigation of whether private social dining involves experiential domains apart from the four original domains when staging tourists' dining experiences.

## **Results and discussion**

Data analysis generated nine experiential domains that composed a hierarchical framework of private social dining experiences (Figure 2). The resultant framework substantiated the complex nature of dining experiences, which Ryan (2011) described as including multiple phases, influences, and outcomes.

### *Personalized experience*

In the case of private social dining, tourists can communicate with service providers either online or by phone prior to engaging in the activity. This kind of direct communication enables tourists to make special requests, while service providers gain a better understanding of visitors' expectations. Unlike conventional restaurants that usually discover diners' preferences and then stage corresponding experiences during a meal (Shen & Ball, 2009), private social dining service providers begin preparing customized dishes, tableware, and services in the pre-dining stage to deliver personalized experiences (Wijaya et al., 2013). Mody et al. (2017) also mentioned customized experiences as a consequence of online communication via e-platforms for accommodation-sharing services. Only when tourists' needs and expectations are fulfilled do they start to acknowledge other levels of their experience, as one participant indicated below:

I would say private social dining is a mixture of personalized and customized dining activity. Although I know that the chef may provide authentic dishes from some countries and provinces, I still prefer to make some adjustments. This is the reason why I go to private social dining.  
(Informant #29)

In terms of the difference between personalized experiences staged during private social dining and in conventional restaurants, tailored experiences in private social dining are not limited to tourists' dining preferences; providers can also account for special requests (e.g., arranging a party for a large group of diners; ordering a special dish and takeaway services) and personal characteristics (e.g., adjusting their service style accordingly). Although smoking is generally prohibited when dining in a destination, even at private social dining events, some service providers appeared to cater to diners' needs regardless:

We could smoke inside, which was very convenient because smoking is usually prohibited in conventional restaurants. (Informant #7)

### *Sensory experience*

Sensory experiences are poignant during dining. In particular, private social diners seem only to value sensory experiences once their personal needs have been satisfied:

Every place has its uniqueness in terms of its food products. It is hard to evaluate which one is best. Thus, I think [private social dining] should cater to my tastes. (Informant #4)

As the core product of any culinary format, food should be a crucial reason why tourists participate in private social dining (Qian et al., 2020), as exemplified by a participant who cited a desire to eat good food as a key motivation for private social dining:

Unlike other conventional restaurants that usually provide similar and standardized menu items, private social dining represents the chef. The chef provides [a] private social dining service because they are good at cooking. I went there because I wanted to eat some tasty and special foods. (Informant #20)

Consistent with other literature (e.g., Carvalho et al., 2015; Kivela & Crotts, 2006) suggesting that dining is a multi-sensory experience, our data analysis indicated that food helps providers stage sensory experiences by appealing to private social diners' senses of taste (83.9%; 125 text units), sight (15.2%; 19 text units), touch (2.7%; 4 text units), and smell (0.7%; 1 text unit). Consistent with sensory experiences in conventional restaurants, taste and sight were the top two senses involved in private social dining (Chen & Lin, 2018); however, sensory experiences during private social dining highlighted taste above all. While some respondents stated they were visually satisfied with the food presentation, the taste was pivotal in stimulating sensory experiences:

Food taste is the key. It is not necessary to be visually appealing, but it must be tasty. (Informant #11)

This finding potentially characterizes private social dining as a niche and advanced form of conventional dining, intended to satisfy tourists seeking high-quality, flavorful food (Stone et al., 2018) as described below:

[A private social dining service provider] must cook well. Otherwise, no one will go, especially if it is private social dining in which customers are looking for [a] high-quality dining experience. (Informant #26)

### *Emotional experience*

Seven experiential domains were classified based on participants' emotional private social dining experiences stimulated by the senses. In other words, tourists could realize other emotional domains only once their key motivation to eat flavorful foods was achieved. This



kind of experience, therefore, extends beyond diners' senses to involve emotional interactions with the food service itself. Chen and Lin (2018) also discussed the relationship between sensory and emotional experiences in the restaurant context.

The tourist experience is born from engaging sensory encounters that emotionally sustain experiential value (Barnes et al., 2020; Oh et al., 2007). Experience-based encounters arise from the interplay between the extent of customer involvement and consumers' influences on overall experiential performance (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). Along this line, our seven identified emotional, experiential domains were organized into a bi-dimensional plane consisting of two continuums (i.e., immersion–absorption and passive participation–active participation), as suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998).

#### *Quadrant I: Absorption–passive participation*

Quadrant I represents tourist experiences associated with travelers' absorption and passive participation in activities (Pine & Gilmore, 1998). As proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998), entertainment (0.7%; 4 text units) fell into this quadrant. *Entertainment* is a form of experience purely staged by service providers to capture and occupy consumers' attention (Oh et al., 2017). Cruises, casinos, and wineries are among the many tourism settings heavily skewed toward this experiential domain (Hosany & Witham, 2010; Shim et al., 2017; Vo Thanh & Kirova, 2018) because travel is inherently entertaining (Hsieh, O'Leary, & Morrison, 1992). Interestingly, as indicated by the smallest number of text units in the dataset, *entertainment* was rarely reflected in private social dining.

While this particular finding contradicts the literature on the tourism experience, it highlights the uniqueness of dining experiences that cannot be fully explained by Pine and Gilmore's (1998) four original experiential domains. Despite scarce investigations into the dimensionality of dining experiences, such activities are often recognized as belonging to either educational (e.g., Quadri-Felitti & Fiore, 2012), esthetic (e.g., Shim et al., 2017), or escapism experiences (e.g., Ji et al., 2018). Among the four categorizations of food tourists proposed by Hjalager (2003) (i.e., recreational, existential, diversionary, and experimental), only recreational food tourists who preferred self-catering in self-contained accommodations seemed to exhibit absorptive and passive participation (i.e., features of entertainment experiences) during dining activities. More specifically, these tourists tend to consider dining activities an unimportant part of travel experiences (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Recreational food tourists may be intimidated by additional efforts to become immersed or actively participate in dining activities that may require them to communicate with strangers or learn new things, as mentioned by a tourist who was dissatisfied with private social dining:

I was not satisfied with [my private social dining experience] because the chef kept socializing with us, telling us about how the foods were prepared, about food history, and even about himself. However, I just wanted to eat, and I found it stressful to socialize with the chef while dining with my family. (Informant #28)

Several participants also believed that *entertainment* elements contradicted the private social dining setting, in which a quiet and private atmosphere was highly expected. This finding is exemplified by an interviewee's dissatisfaction with excessive entertainment:

The staff changed their clothes and performed during the meal. I think once is okay, but it was too much. ... I think it is inappropriate to have so much entertainment because the reason for private social dining is to eat good food in a quiet and private dining atmosphere. (Informant #25)

#### *Quadrant II: Absorption–active participation*

Quadrant II included instances in which diners could absorb and actively participate in their experiences. Two types of educational experiences were observed in this quadrant: food knowledge (8.2%; 46 text units) and cultural elements (12.1%; 68 text units).

In the context of this study, *education* refers to knowledge absorption, particularly private social diners learning new things. Educational experiences, in which tourists acquire food-related knowledge, exhibited the largest variance among all categories due to its dependence on the nature of experience and a service provider's willingness to deliver knowledge (Oh et al., 2007). In private social dining events, education varied across two operational forms. At one end, private social dining could be designed as a cooking class during which participants discover how to prepare and taste their own food. This operational form is a purely educational experience deliberately staged to deliver food knowledge:

I went to a private social dining event in Vietnam, which was like a cooking class. I followed the host's instructions when cooking. The activity allowed me to learn cooking. (Informant #19)

At the other end, and to a lesser extent, educational experiences during private dining can serve a supporting role. Similar to previous findings (e.g., Hosany & Witham, 2010; Shim et al., 2017; Vo Thanh & Kirova, 2018), the supporting role of education can enhance tourists' private social dining experiences. Service providers can also indirectly identify diners' desire to learn something new through food delivery:

I found the food delicious when I was enjoying the meal. Hence, I asked the host how to cook [it] and why it was delicious. I asked the host how to prepare the tasty food. (Informant #20)

In addition to gaining food-oriented knowledge, tourists may also seek cultural elements during private social dining. This finding echoes that of Kim and Eves (2012), who named cultural elements as prime motivators behind tourists trying local foods. With respect to the distinctions between cultural experiences in private social dining settings and local restaurants, private social dining involves more than a destination's culture; it also concerns an operator's biography or cultural background when staging a cultural experience. Different from conventional restaurants, which usually rely on the history of local foods or the destination's culture to offer an educational experience (Adongo, Anuga, & Dayour, 2015), private social dining seems more closely tied to the operators themselves:

I think it is important for private social dining to represent the chef because private social dining relies on the chef. Perhaps the chef [got] very famous and then started doing private social dining. Then, it would be unique if the chef could incorporate his/her personal stories or cooking ideas into the dining experience. (Informant #17)

### *Quadrant III: Immersion–passive participation*

The original experiential domain proposed by Pine and Gilmore (1998) in Quadrant III is esthetic experience, which denotes diners' simultaneously passive feelings about and immersion in their surroundings (Oh et al., 2007). The present study confirmed that the esthetics of private social dining include man-made physical and natural environments:

The decorations were memorable. The artwork provided a good dining atmosphere. I think the artwork was beautiful, valuable, and full of cultural connotations. (Informant #4)

The private social dining event was hosted on the mountainside with a three-floor building surrounded by beautiful flowers and trees. Yes, [I think it was special]. (Informant #11).

Heung and Gu (2012) proposed four atmospheric elements restaurants use to stage esthetic experiences, including the spatial layout, ambiance, facility aesthetics, and window views. While these elements have been found to influence esthetic experiences in restaurants, exactly how diners judge whether a dining experience is esthetic remains unclear (Kirillova et al., 2014). The present study filled this gap by identifying two types of esthetic experiences in private social dining—*unrestrained* (15.9%; 89 text units) and *localness* (31.1%; 174 text units).

The first domain, *unrestrained*, is related to refreshment and relaxation, which are distinctive characteristics of tourism activities (Kim & Ritchie, 2014; Pearce & Lee, 2005). Participating in such activities “is a no-work, no-care, no-thrift situation” (Cohen, 1979, p. 181), particularly when attending special events (Lscerblanc, 2003) such as private social dining. Chan and Lam (2009) suggested that a homelike feeling is relatively important in private kitchens (i.e., a predecessor of private social dining services) (Ma & Zhang, 2019). In a similar vein, private social diners identified a private social dining esthetic—in which case an experience feels similar to enjoying a casual meal at a neighbor's home—as representing a “downshift” in lifestyle:

The private social dining event allowed me to relax compared with the noisy and impetuous [dining places] outside... It was a lifestyle of downshifting internally. (Informant #15)

The second experiential domain in Quadrant III was *localness*, representing an esthetic experience that enables diners to become immersed in local citizens' daily lives (e.g., eating local food or visiting local markets). Localness was the top experiential domain based on coded text units in this study; “enjoying the authentic regional cuisine in local restaurants” was one of the most appealing food-related tourism experiences (Robinson & Getz, 2012, p. 701). Localness experiences are particularly pertinent to cultural tourism (Wang, Huang, & Kim, 2015) and the sharing economy (Mody et al., 2016). Thus, as a special form of cultural

tourism in the sharing economy, private social dining enriches tourists' pursuit of localness experiences in a destination (Skinner, Chatzopoulou, & Gorton, 2020). Tourists can observe many local elements through the interior design of private social dining while experiencing everyday local life:

It was a local experience in a local's home. I went to a private social dining [event] in Japan, and it was held in a local home. There were some Japanese swords and I realized how they look. When the host was preparing the food, I also saw the host's daughter was writing calligraphy, which cannot be seen in conventional restaurants. (Informant #6)

#### *Quadrant IV: Immersion–active participation*

Quadrant IV included two domains of escapism experience requiring diners to be actively involved and strongly immersed in private social dining: *adventure* (12.3%; 69 text units) and *social* (19.6%; 110 text units). Our findings revealed that one's sense of escapism depends on the location of private social dining events. Other tourism attractions are typically concentrated within a tourism cluster to form a wholly different area where tourists can escape their daily routines (e.g., Sentosa in Singapore). By contrast, private social dining events are commonly dispersed and separate from tourism clusters (Lawler, 2014), leading to experiential variances in different dining locations. In particular, diners' feelings of escapism were positively correlated with the distance between private social dining and their usual living environments, as illustrated by an interviewee living in a Chinese urban city:

It took me around 40 to 50 min to drive to the private social dining event from my home. The event was located in a remote area surrounded by mountains and rivers. A farm and several ducks were owned by the host. I felt like I was experiencing farm life. (Informant #7)

Our notion of *adventure* is akin to the serendipitous experience identified by Tung and Ritchie (2011). Tourism businesses are highly encouraged to create unexpected situations that generate unique bonds with tourists, as stated by Mody et al. (2015), in terms of accommodation-sharing services. However, serendipitous experiences cannot fully describe private social dining experiences. Surprises or uncertainty are created by service providers but can emerge from the events themselves as well.

Such experience operates on a paradox: tourists seek what they believe to be risky or unfamiliar to the extent that they feel safe from perceived risks (Mackenzie & Kerr, 2012). Having a meal in a stranger's home involves greater risk than staying at a stranger's home, riding in a stranger's car, or dining in a normal restaurant due to higher uncertainty around legal issues and unstable food supply. These ambiguities can stage an adventurous experience through private social dining. Indeed, some interviewees defined social dining as an adventurous activity where many mysteries await for exploration:

I usually do not have any expectations of [a private social dining event]. I mean, the event is an adventure because you do not know what is going to happen inside. (Informant #26)

The final dimension of *social* reflected the active and immersive components of private social dining. This dimension mainly involved social interaction between operators and consumers, although Schmitt (2010) noted that the relationship construct should be extended to highlight social elements among consumers. The roles of business platforms can also become vague in the sharing economy because firms such as Airbnb, Uber, and Eatwith are somewhat external to actual experiences and instead function as mediators by linking consumers (Martin, 2016). Thus, we redefined social experience in the sharing economy by proposing two subdimensions, *interactions with strangers* (76.4%; 84 text units) and *interactions with companions* (23.6%; 26 text units).

Dining out can satisfy people's physiological and social needs. Kivela (1997) suggested that dining may occur as a social occasion, business necessity, or celebration. Private social dining is a gathering where diners can socialize with others. Similarly, Ketter (2019) revealed that private social diners are socially motivated. Most interviewees in this study believed that private social dining involves the development of a friendship between diners and the host, who are otherwise unfamiliar with each other:

The private social dining event was held in the host's home. We chatted about the food. The host was funny and loved teas, and the host's daughter loved calligraphy. ... Yes, [I had a detailed conversation with the host]. (Informant #6)

In addition to relational experiences with strangers, the relaxed and quiet atmosphere of private social dining enables diners to socialize with companions:

The private social dining event had a place for diners to drink tea. The host had a professional tea set and tea table. We were able to sit together, drinking tea and chatting. (Informant #15)

## **Conclusion**

This current study provides a fresh understanding of two main tourism areas, the experience and sharing economies, by investigating tourists' experiences during private social dining. A three-stage hierarchical relationship was uncovered to demonstrate how private social dining encompasses nine experiential domains to deliver a compelling experiential value proposition beyond the first four experiential domains suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998) from pre-dining phase to the during-dining phase. As the core domain to satisfy diners' niche needs, personalized experience can be observed before the dining experience. During the dining experience, private social diners recognize sensory experience by utilizing their four senses (i.e., taste, sight, touch, and smell) to interact with the personalized dining experience prepared by the hosts. In the end, the highest level of emotional experience can be observed if private social diners are satisfied with the personalized and sensory experiences.

### *Theoretical contributions*

First, amid the conceptualization of the experience economy, this study is among the first to incorporate the experience economy into the sharing economy by focusing on tourists' experiences with private social dining. The unstoppable rise of the sharing economy has had clear implications for global tourism, from the accommodation to transportation and catering sectors. Although nascent private social dining services may face various legal and safety issues, they continue to progress in delivering novel experiences. Hence, the present study evaluated the nature of experiential consumption in private social dining to explore how the sharing economy changes the rules of the game by leveraging experiential domains to create a compelling experiential value proposition.

Second, in response to a call from Walls et al. (2011) to expand Pine and Gilmore's (1998) framework, this study presents an extended framework (Figure 2) to visualize how private social dining events stage tourism experiences. While the hierarchy beginning with personalized experiences to sensory experiences and ending with emotional experiences does not exist in isolation, this hierarchical framework provides a theoretical foundation for future research into the dimensionality of other tourism experiences in the sharing economy.

Finally, our study provides insight into an ongoing debate on whether food tourism is a viable market segment (Quan & Wang, 2004). Localness, as the most common experiential domain in the current study, reaffirms the strong linkage between food and cultural tourism (Ellis et al., 2018). This finding supports Au and Law's (2002) claim that "food signifies cultural meaning to those who consume it" (p. 828). As such, this study deepens academic understanding of how food tourism can benefit from localness experiences staged through private social dining.

#### *Practical contributions*

Apart from its theoretical implications, this study also presents actionable guidance for industry practitioners. First, our investigation on private social dining should enable practitioners to stage tourist experiences based on the intricate linkages between various experiential domains of memorable private social dining. This study indirectly supports findings from Tsai (2016), who determined that local culture, knowledge, and refreshment had the strongest effects on the formation of memorable tourism experiences in dining settings. These three dimensions are theoretically similar to localness, education (i.e., food knowledge and cultural elements), and unrestrained domains in this study. Conventional hospitality and tourism service providers should, therefore, focus on these elements to craft memorable dining experiences, as such factors are frequently highlighted in the sharing economy.

Second, conventional hospitality and tourism operators should be proactive and expansive in designing compelling tourist experiences that go beyond dining satisfaction and the original experiential domains suggested by Pine and Gilmore (1998). The current study expanded their four-dimensional conceptualization to a seven-dimensional construct of emotional private social dining experiences. Results suggest that rules are malleable when delivering

tourist experiences through private social dining because this type of dining enriches Pine and Gilmore's (1998) initial experiential domains to a degree that sparks diners' emotional pleasure. For example, private social dining includes localness and an unrestrained experience to aesthetically appeal to tourists.

Third, private social dining may offer a "blue ocean" strategy for food tourism development. This marketing concept suggests that demand is created rather than fought over in the tourism industry (Jones, 2010). Traditional dining activities are engendered by rich tourist experiences. Whether food tourism is a viable market segment (Quan & Wang, 2004) remains uncertain, but private social dining may offer an attractive means of promoting other niche tourism markets. For example, private social dining events could be framed as "adventure tourism" activities when offering mysterious or exotic dining experiences.

#### *Limitations and future research*

This study has limitations given our use of snowball sampling to recruit 29 private social diners. These participants may share similar characteristics and values. Thus, our research findings cannot be generalized to broader contexts. Tourist experiences are also inherently subjective and may vary by personal (e.g., nationality) and external variables (e.g., type of cuisine), none of which were considered in this study. Future research should incorporate these variables to empirically validate the proposed framework for private social dining. Comparative studies are also needed to compare the effects of each experiential domain on outcome variables (e.g., visitors' dining satisfaction or intentions to recommend) at private social dining events and traditional restaurants. As indicated, private social dining emphasizes authenticity to enhance tourists' experiences and illuminates new modes of destination branding. However, how and which promotional strategies are most likely to cultivate sufficiently authentic experiences require further investigation.

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