

**An Exploration of Solo Dining Experience  
in South Korea**

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## **Abstract**

The University of Manchester  
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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

### **An Exploration of Solo Dining Experience in South Korea**

**2017**

A global increase in the number of single-person households has produced new societal trends, and one such emerging phenomenon is the rise of the solo diner in the restaurant industry. Embracing this growing customer market requires an understanding of what factors influence their dining experience and how best to enhance this. Despite the paramount importance of customer experience in services marketing, a model of the factors influencing the experience of diners in the restaurant sector remains elusive. This is especially true in the case of solo diners, where there is a paucity of data on what factors influence their dining experience. There is therefore a pressing need to understand the factors which influence the dining experiences of this blossoming market, and in doing so create a model of customer experience in this setting.

In order to identify, describe and analyse the influencing determinants of restaurant experience from the solo diners' perspective, experiential elements within the context of the solo diner's restaurant encounters were explored. As a country with a largely collectivistic culture and an increasing number of solo diners, South Korea provides an interesting environment through which to explore these factors. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst solo diners in South Korea. The data were subsequently analysed using a thematic technique through which common themes and patterns were identified, and their respective influence on solo dining experience explored.

The findings of this study show that customer experience is constructed from a delicate interplay between the collectivistic cultural background of solo diners and their perceptions of various factors. Such factors include: environmental factors, staff attitude and behaviour, interaction with other diners, physical environment, perceived value for money, locational convenience, service design, and food quality. Crucially the effect of some of these influential factors on solo dining experience is determined according to inherent differences in the solo diner's needs and desires. With regard to factors influencing customer experience, this study has identified a clear dichotomy between 'solitary' diners who choose to dine alone versus unwilling 'lonely' diners.

The results of this study contribute to the extension of existing knowledge about customer experience by developing a customer experience model, which not only integrates the differential determinants of solo dining experience, but also importantly shows that an individual's motivation for solo-dining influences his/her perception of restaurant experience. In addition, through this study's focus on solo diners within South Korea, this research extends the knowledge of customer experience to both the solo dining and collectivistic cultural context. A greater understanding of customer experience in these contexts is vital if the restaurant industry is to tailor its services effectively, and this study has highlighted various methods through which the customer experience of solo diners can be optimised. Such methods include careful interior design of restaurants (e.g. attractive ornaments, open-kitchen); optimal choice of tables (e.g. bar tables, communal tables, tables with partitions); distinct food menus for solo diners; and training of service employees to specifically address the needs and wishes of this growing customer group.



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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Due to global demographic and cultural trends such as aging population, late marriage, and high divorce rate, there is an escalating number of single-person households and accordingly an increasing number of so called solo diners (Kim, 2016b, Balfour, 2014; Derry, 2013). These solo diners represent an emerging target market (Grant, 2015; Hart, 2014; Lee, 2014), and restaurants around the world are evolving their standard service in order to accommodate this important customer group (Freed, 2014; Little, 2014; Mirror, 2013). A pertinent question, therefore, is how restaurants should design and manage their service to best accommodate solo diners?

Alongside the emergence of the solo diner, contemporary marketing has shifted from the making of products to the creation of experiences, as such the importance of understanding customers and their experiences with the service offerings has increased (Chang & Horng, 2010; LaSalle & Britton, 2003). Customer experience, in the context of this research, is best described as the customer's internal responses or perceptions through interactions with service offerings, such as a service organisation and its products and services, in the restaurant environment, which in turn remain in their memories (Walter, Edvardsson, & Öström, 2010). The provision of positive customer experience is a crucial marketing strategy for attracting new customers and retaining existing ones in the service industry (Wong & Wu, 2013; Sandström, Edvardsson, Kristensson, & Magnusson, 2008), and managing customer experience plays a critical role in improving company performance and profitability in a highly competitive business-market (Albrecht, Hattula, Bornemann, & Hoyer, 2016; Torres, Fu, & Lehto, 2014).

The suggestion that customer experience has a positive impact on customer behaviours is supported in the literature (e.g. Ali, Amin, & Cobanoglu, 2016a; Bujisic, Hutchinson, & Parsa, 2014; Lin & Bennett, 2014; Chang, Chang, & Yeh, 2013). For example, Ali et al. (2016a) demonstrated that customer experience has a positive impact on customer satisfaction which involves fulfilling customers' needs and desires for products or services. Chang et al. (2013) found that positive customer experience of restaurant environment induces pleasurable emotional responses, which in turn contributes to heightening revisit intention and building customer loyalty. Therefore, customer experience is recognised as one of the key determinants of success for service companies.

Customer experience has become an increasingly significant component of the core capabilities in the services industry (Jain, Aagja, & Bagdare, 2017; Ali, Ryu, & Hussain, 2016b). In order to deliver a memorable experience to their customers, service organisations need to be aware of how customers perceive the interactive components of their service environment (Bujisic et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2013). Indeed, previous research suggests that service organisations tend to provide experiential offerings based on entertainment or engagement, without actually fully understanding customer perception of the interactive components of customer experience (Berry, Carbone, & Haeckel, 2002a). In particular, there has been insufficient research investigating the integrated interactive determinants of customer experience in the restaurant industry. This is because most studies in the field of customers' restaurant experience have only focused on the specific components of the service offerings such as the physical environment and the quality of services provided by service employees (e.g. Chang et al., 2013; Lin & Liang, 2011; Ryu & Han, 2011). So arguably, what is required but as of yet not available, is an integrative view of how customers perceive interactive service offerings in the restaurant industry.

In addition, few studies of customer experience have dealt with solo customers in the services industry. Previous studies have attempted to explain solo travelling experience in the hospitality and tourism industry (Bianchi, 2016; Mehmetoglu, Dann, & Larsen, 2001), but there has been little research into the restaurant experience of solo diners (Bae & Kim, 2017; Jonsson & Ekström, 2009). Little is known about solo dining experience and as such it is not clear what factors influence solo diners' restaurant experience. This study therefore aims to explore experiential attributes within the context of the solo diner's restaurant encounters and examine how these attributes influence solo dining experience.

## **1.2 Research Context**

The context of this study is South Korea. In parallel with global trends, there is an escalating number of single-person households within South Korea, as such the solo diner is emerging as an important group within this country's restaurant industry (Kim, 2016b). The rise of the solo diner in South Korea is both an interesting and surprising phenomenon, occurring within the background of an otherwise collectivist society and culture. Within this culture, Korean people are accustomed to living in a community or a group of two people or more, and normally prefer to engage in consumption activities together as a group (Choi, 2016). Against this cultural backdrop, the term 'solo' has acquired negative connotations in Korean culture. Indeed, in the Korean standard dictionary, the term 'solo' is defined negatively as a person being alone and remote from other people, because he or

she neither socialises with the other people nor belongs to them (Kim, 2017). Korean people are accordingly more likely to have negative preconceptions about solo customers, attributing them with a lack of social skills and personality problems (Choon, 2016; Park, 2015). Within such a collectivistic culture, Korean people are more inclined to seek uniformity and harmony within a group rather than expressions of self-individuality and uniqueness (Yamaguchi, Kuhlman, & Sugimori, 1995). Furthermore, individuals from a collectivistic culture such as South Korea may be more concerned about other people's thoughts and feelings, and more sensitive to negative evaluation from other people (Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, & Horvath, 1996). Within this collectivistic cultural and societal framework, it can therefore be hypothesised that solo diners in South Korea are likely to have greater awareness of other people's thoughts and expressions and be more self-conscious compared to individuals who dine as a group.

Despite the cultural background and associated negative status, solo customers have nonetheless become distinguished as a new target market in South Korea. According to Statistics Korea (2017), single-person households made up 27.2 per cent of all households in 2015 and are forecasted to reach nearly 34.3 per cent by 2035. Since the number of single-person households is rising, the impact of solo customers on economic activity is a subject of research (Choi, 2016; Lee, 2013). The spending power of single dwellers is gradually growing (Jeong, 2013). This phenomenon results in the emergence of the so-called "solo economy", in which industries tailor certain goods and services targeting single households in South Korea (Kim, 2016a; Koo, 2014).

This trend is reciprocated in the South Korea restaurant industry, where the solo diner is emerging as a new group of customers (Kim, 2016b; Lee, 2014). This emergence of a new customer group provides restaurants with a potential opportunity to explore creative ways of attracting solo customers. Some restaurants are beginning to design their interiors to create friendly spaces for solo diners, such as seating arrangements for bar venues or individual booths, as well as coming up with various single service menus (Borowiec, 2017; Kim, 2016b; Lee, 2014). Due to an increase in the number of people eating out alone, the creation of experiences for the solo diner is another increasingly important factor in determining the quality of a restaurant. Though much previous research has focused on customer perception of the experiential components and behaviours (e.g. Ali et al., 2016a; Garg & Amelia, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016), the services marketing research in terms of customer perception of customer experience has not been shown to reflect the solo customer. The purpose of this study is therefore to explore how solo diners perceive and

conceptualise their experiences within the restaurant context, which in turn may help to redefine existing experiential marketing strategies.

### **1.3 Research Problem**

With regard to the research question, previous studies on customer experience have shown three major limitations. Firstly, most empirical studies of customer experience have not considered the solo customer's experience (e.g. Ali et al., 2016a; Garg & Amelia, 2016; Bujisic et al., 2014). Previous research has indicated that consuming alone is different from consuming with others in the consumption experience (He, Chen, & Alden, 2012; Ramanathan & McGill, 2007), as each customer's perception of experiential attributes can be influenced through interactions with his or her companions such as friends or family members during the consumption activities (Carù & Cova, 2015; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Despite the fact that several studies have found that the presence of dining companions can influence the customer's favourable and unfavourable restaurant experience (Walter et al., 2010; Hansen, Jensen, & Gustafsson, 2005), the influence of the absence of companions has been neglected in marketing research on customer experience. Therefore, an understanding of customer experience is needed from the solo diners' perspectives.

Secondly, previous hospitality research has not provided agreement about interactive determinants of customer experience (e.g. Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Wong & Wu, 2013; Tsai & Lu, 2012). Since the products or services offered by service organisations are always experiential in the field of hospitality, customer experience is critical to these marketing strategies (Williams, 2006). Experiential offerings have been designed to manage the customer experience, despite the lack of profound understanding of the customer perception of interactions with a service firm's offerings (Berry et al., 2002a). Some studies suggest that both the physical and social environment are the key attributes influencing customer experience (Ali et al., 2016a; Walls, 2013); whereas other studies suggest that customer experience is constructed through interactions with physical and social environment but also product quality (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Wijaya, King, Nguyen, & Morrison, 2013). Prior research has highlighted the inadequacy of hospitality research for identifying and measuring the attributes of customer experience (Kim, Cha, Knutson, & Beck, 2011; Knutson, Beck, Kim, & Cha, 2006). In this study, it is therefore necessary to understand customer experience from the point of view of customers, in order to examine and present interactive attributes that customers are seeking.

Thirdly, there is lack of empirical research providing an integrated model of customer experience in the restaurant industry (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Ryu, Lee, & Kim, 2012; Walter et al., 2010; Hansen et al., 2005). Prior research on customer experience has paid particular attention to the specific interactive attributes in the service setting such as: physical environment (Biswas, Szocs, Wansink, & Chacko, 2017; Ryu & Han, 2011; Hightower, Brady, & Baker, 2002); the quality of services provided by service employees (Svensson, 2004; Gabbott & Hogg, 2001); the presence of other customers (Albrecht, 2016; Brocato, Voorhees, & Baker, 2012; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010); and the service environment (Lin & Liang, 2011; Keng, Huang, Zheng, & Hsu, 2007). Therefore, a customer experience model enabling integration of differential determinants of the restaurant experience needs to be developed from the customer perspective.

## **1.4 Research Questions, Objectives and Aim**

The research questions, objectives and aim are outlined in the following sections.

### **1.4.1 Research Questions:**

Based on the aforementioned gap in the literature, this research seeks to answer two main research questions:

1. What factors influence solo dining experience?
  - 1-1. What is the impact of interactions with physical environment on solo dining experience?
  - 1-2a. What is the impact of interactions with service employees on solo dining experience?
  - 1-2b. What is the impact of interactions with other customers on solo dining experience?
  - 1-3. What is the impact of food quality on solo dining experience?
  - 1-4. What is the impact of perceived price on solo dining experience?
  - 1-5. What is the impact of restaurant locational convenience on solo dining experience?
2. How does the solo diner respond to the experiential attributes in restaurants?

The above questions will be researched in the context of Republic of Korea.

### **1.4.2 Research Aim**

The aim of this research is to develop a view of restaurant experience from the solo diners' perspective.

### 1.4.3 Research Objectives

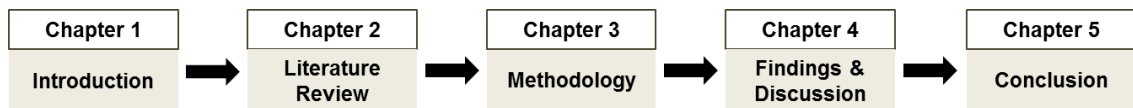
To explore what influences solo customer perception of restaurant experience, three research objectives are identified:

1. To identify what impacts customer experience in the restaurant context
2. To explore experiential elements within the context of the solo diner's restaurant interactions
3. To examine how solo diners perceive the above elements in their solo dining experience

### 1.5 An Overview of the Thesis

This research contains five chapters. The structure of the research is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: The Structure of the Thesis**



**Chapter 1** introduces an overview of this research. The rationale for the importance of solo dining experience in South Korea is discussed. A brief overview of previous research is presented to identify the research problem, thereby highlighting the research questions and objectives.

**Chapter 2** provides a review of the extant customer experience research literature. This chapter begins by discussing the definition of solo restaurant customers and then identifying the term 'solo diner'. The previous research on customer experience is examined, with particular emphasis placed on exploring the identification and measurement of customer experience. The different definitions of customer experience and the customer's multiple responses to service offerings provided by a service organisation are then discussed, and the key determinants of customer experience are examined, with particular attention towards exploring restaurant experience within the context of solo diners. The operations of customer experience within the restaurant context are then reviewed before discussing the characteristics of cultural differences which explain how customer experience is influenced by different cultural features. Finally, several research gaps in the existing customer experience research are identified.



**Chapter 3** introduces the research philosophy, methodology and method in this thesis. This chapter is organised in the following way. Firstly, the ontology and epistemology underlying the interpretivist philosophical choice are introduced, to justify the methodological choice to capture the solo diner's individual distinct point of view. The inductive research approach which guided the research process is presented and the exploratory research design employed to attain the aim of this study is then explained. Semi-structured interviews as the method for collecting data are discussed along with the purposive and convenience sampling technique and what constitutes an appropriate sample size. The process of data collection to prepare and conduct interviews is presented in detail, along with the thematic analysis and process of data analysis. Finally an account of how the quality of the research was evaluated is addressed, and a description of how ethical issues were considered is provided.

**Chapter 4** provides the findings from this research and a comprehensive discussion. Eight significant themes of solo diner's restaurant experiences are identified and discussed along with the various underlying sub-themes utilising illustrative quotations from interviews. The findings of this research indicate that solo dining experience in the restaurant originates from solo diner's positive and/or negative responses to the following factors: indirect and direct interactions with restaurant environment; people such as service employees and other diners; physical environment; price perception; restaurant location; service design; and the food quality. This chapter presents a detailed account of these key findings, together with an in-depth discussion of the findings in the context of previous research.

**Chapter 5** presents the conclusion from this research. This chapter begins by summarising the research and discussing to what extent the research questions and objectives have been achieved. Theoretical and managerial contributions are discussed. Finally, the research limitations are presented and potential areas for further research are suggested.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to review the components of restaurant environment that influence customer experience, with particular attention towards exploring customer restaurant experience within the context of solo diners. In particular, this chapter highlights that an explanation of the restaurant experience for solo diner is currently lacking in the existing literature, and that solo dining experience has not received adequate attention within this research field.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: The first section (section 2.2) reviews the existing research about solo restaurant customers. The second section (section 2.3) reviews literature from the field of customer experience research to identify and discuss the definition and dimensions of customer experience, with particular focus on the customer experience of solo diners. The third section (section 2.4) reviews the existing customer experience research, with particular emphasis placed on exploring interactive and non-interactive elements which are suggested to have an impact on the restaurant experience. The fourth section (section 2.5) discusses how customer experience is operationalised within the restaurant context, and the fifth section (section 2.6) reviews cultural theory to identify the characteristics of cultural differences that have an influence on customer experience. The final section of this chapter (section 2.7) concludes by identifying several research gaps in the current body of literature surrounding customer experience in terms of solo dining within the restaurant context.

### **2.2 Solo Restaurant Customers**

Various shifts in life styles, social structures and demographics have resulted in a growing potential market of single customers (Bianchi, 2016; Dossey, 2016; Wang, Zhu, & Shiv, 2012). With the growing numbers of solo customers as a whole, there are an associated growing number of restaurant customers who dine alone, so called solo diners. Given this large, growing potential market within the restaurant industry a greater understanding of the factors that influence solo dining experience is required. Previous studies have attempted to explain how consuming alone is different from consuming with a companion (e.g. He et al., 2012; Ramanathan & McGill, 2007; Jakobs, Manstead, & Fischer, 1996) and whilst previous research has investigated the factors that influence the customer experience of diners as a whole, there have been very few studies that have specifically studied solo diners. This paucity of prior research is despite evidence that the presence or

absence of a dining companion influences dining experience. One aspect that has been identified through the limited previous research in this area, is that solo diners may see eating differently to non-solo diners. Solo diners may view eating as a purely functional or physiological exercise, rather than the enjoyable experience felt by diners through eating in-front of the TV or with others (Hetherington, Anderson, Norton, & Newson, 2006). As such some authors have proposed that solo diners spend less time staying in the service setting and consume less food and beverages than non-solo diners (Sommer & Steele, 1997).

According to a definition provided by Goodwin and Lockshin (1992), solo consumers are people who choose to engage in consumption activities alone. The term solo refers to the state of physical isolation without acquaintances (i.e. family, friends) being present in a consumption situation (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992). Depending on either the deliberate choice for or the unwilling choice for the state of being alone, people experience enjoyable solitude or feelings of loneliness that derive from their perception of insufficiency of social relationship respectively (Peplau & Perlman, 1982). Solitary people seek and enjoy pleasant time being alone whereas lonely people experience undesirable social isolation when they are alone (Burger, 1995). Thus, solo customers can experience different feelings of aloneness in accordance with their emotional states.

There is a parallel in the tourism sector, in that recent studies on tourism experience suggests that the solo traveller can be thought of as a solitary traveller who regardless of marital status, chooses to deliberately travel alone (Bianchi, 2016; Mehmetoglu et al., 2001). Similarly, the term solo diner refers to the solitary customer who is intentionally eating alone in a restaurant (Jonsson & Ekström, 2009). In this research, solo diners can therefore be defined as people who have made a conscious decision to dine out alone in a restaurant. Such solo diners may experience either undesirable loneliness or enjoyable solitude depending upon the balance of conflicting preferences for eating with other people versus eating alone (Peplau & Perlman, 1982).

There remains a paucity of marketing research on the solo customer, but a few studies have been carried out in relation to solo consumer behaviour (Bianchi, 2016; Wang et al., 2012; Brindal, Wilson, Mohr, & Wittert, 2011; Duck, Pond, & Leatham, 1994). Studies have found for example, that solo customers who feel lonely are more sensitive to and conscious about the presence of others (i.e. staff and other customers) than non-lonely customers (Wang et al., 2012), and that the awareness of and inferences from the social presence (e.g.

facial expressions) lead lonely customers to a negative emotional response (Pickett & Gardner, 2005; Duck et al., 1994). In addition, solo customers who experience feelings of loneliness during their consumption are more fearful of being negatively evaluated and perceived as lonely by other people in the service environment (Wang et al., 2012; Bearden & Rose, 1990). Sommer and Steele (1997) argue that self-consciousness about dining alone, originates from fearing the anticipated negative evaluation of others, and such self-consciousness may ruin the enjoyable restaurant experience of solo diners.

In contrast, solo customers who deliberately choose to be alone can experience more pleasurable consumption activities (Leary, Herbst, & McCrary, 2003). In solo travel experience, for example, the feelings of freedom and independence from the constraints of other people (e.g. without considering for other people's opinions or preferences) can be an important driver of satisfactory experience for solo travellers (Bianchi, 2016). In an investigation into travel motivation of solo travellers, Mehmetoglu et al. (2001) found that solitary travellers have a desire to be more practical, flexible, freer, and more spontaneous. Within the restaurant sector, solo diners who eat out in pleasant solitude pay more attention to convenience, the flavour of food and internal states (i.e. attitudes) and have more diverse expectations (Bagozzi, Wong, Abe, & Bergami, 2000).

### **2.3 Understanding Customer Experience**

The view of contemporary marketing has evolved to focus on customer experience, which in turn has become a significant part of marketing practice in company performance (Jain et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; LaSalle & Britton, 2003). Previous product-based and service-based marketing strategies are inadequate for a business to sustain profitable growth in an environment through which advanced technology, stiff competition, and more complicated demands of customers prevail (Knutson et al., 2006). Companies therefore need to engender an environment or stage which creates memorable experiences for their customers and thereby generate greater economic value (Gilmore & Pine, 2002). Creating and managing a meaningful customer experience are considered as a crucial role in the attainment of competitive advantage and the enhancement of customer satisfaction (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015b). As such customer experience holds a fundamental place in the service sector (Bianchi, 2016; Kim et al., 2011).

In an early study, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) addressed how the overall consumption experience is examined based on subjectively experiential features derived from symbolic, hedonic, and aesthetic aspects of consumption in order to deeply understand consumer

behaviour. Pine and Gilmore (1998) further explain that an experience environment, in which memorable events are generated through the engagement of individual customers with the arranged stage, allows the extraction of economic value from customers. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) later indicate that experiences involve both the extraction of economic value and value co-creation between the customer and the company through the personalised interactions based on how individual customers desire to interact with the experience environment that the company facilitates. High quality interactions, which have the capability of the co-construction of customers' unique experiences, enable a company to achieve a competitive advantage (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Customer experience has been increasingly recognised in a service marketing context because experience inevitably occurs through customers' interaction with a service organisation (Harris, Harris, & Baron, 2003). According to Walter et al. (2010), offering positive customer experience is the best way to retain existing customers whilst attracting new ones in the service industry. Customer experience has exerted a profound influence on consumer behaviour such as satisfaction, revisit intentions, or word-of-mouth motivations (Chang et al., 2013; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Wu & Liang, 2009). A positive customer experience plays a crucial role in sustaining business growth in the competitive business market (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007).

A considerable amount of literature has been published on customer experience. These studies have attempted to identify what customer experience is and understand the interplay between customer experiences and consumer behaviour (Ali, Hussain, & Ragavan, 2014; Kim & Choi, 2013; Walls, 2013; Jeong & Jang, 2011). Nevertheless, a complete theory remains elusive and ambiguous due to the fact there has been disagreement on identification and measurement of the customer experience (Kim et al., 2011; Gupta & Vajic, 2000). The different ways, in which the term "experience" and "service" can be understood depending on the service contexts, give rise to the different opinion on a single meaning for the definition of customer experience (Johnston & Kong, 2011).

Additionally, the existing customer experience research has limited empirical support for a view of customer experience which encompasses multiple interacting factors throughout the customer journey (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Walls, Okumus, Wang, & Kwun, 2011b; Walter et al., 2010). That is because much of the current literature on customer experience pays particular attention to the customer's specific interactive aspects with a service

organisation to improve the chance of providing a positive experience (Albrecht et al., 2016; Michel, Velasco, Gatti, & Spence, 2014; Chang et al., 2013). A majority of empirical research on customer experience does not take into consideration the question as to whether the customer is accompanied by other people or not, despite the fact that several researchers theoretically argue that the customer's company has the ability to impact on the customer's own experience (Walls et al., 2011b; Verhoef et al., 2009). The definition of what customer experience refers to and the nature of customer experience, therefore, will be examined through a review of the underlying theories on customer experience in the following sections.

### **2.3.1 Definition of Customer Experience**

The term "experience" has been mentioned and discussed by researchers and practitioners in different ways (Jain et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Nasution, Sembada, Miliani, Resti, & Prawono, 2014; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). For Pine and Gilmore (1998), experience refers to the way in which a memorable event remains in an individual's state of mind through interactions with staged services and products. Gupta and Vajic (2000) described experience as generation of sensations or acquiring knowledge through individual interactions with various elements of a context created by the service provider. An experience is perceived with regard to an individual's perspective of the entertaining, enjoyable and memorable encounters in consuming activities (Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007).

A number of studies on service marketing have suggested that the concept of customer experience is considered inseparable from service experience (Lipkin, 2016; Jaakkola, Helkkula, & Aarikka-Stenroos, 2015; Walter et al., 2010; Schembri, 2006). According to Schembri (2006) the terms customer experience and service experience can be used interchangeably in service research, due to the inseparability of the customer and the holistic services. From the customer's perspective, a service comprises customers' experiences with the service and their perception of the consequences of the experience (Johnston & Clark, 2008). Within the restaurant sector, it may be particularly difficult to clarify an obvious borderline between the customer experience and service experience, because the product being provided is both a dining and service experience. The customer's experience of ordering a meal, eating and being served are hence all inseparable from service experience (Walter et al., 2010). In this research, the term "customer experience" is, hence, considered in the same sense as the term "service experience".

Customer experience has been viewed as customers' direct experience with various aspects of services in the service environment (Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Johnston & Clark, 2008). Shaw and Ivens (2002) describe the term customer experience as customer's direct experience of the holistic service process in which a customer interacts with a service organisation during all moments of contact. This definition is close to those of Walls et al. (2011b) and Fatma (2014), who describe customer experience as a set of impressions formed from individual customers' perceptions during encounters with a service organisation, its products and services. Other researchers, however, have argued for a broader view of the definition of customer experience. From the expansive perspective, customer experience can be defined as the customer's direct and indirect experience gained through the customer's interactions with every aspect of a service organisation's offerings (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015b; Walter et al., 2010). It incorporates not only direct experience but also indirect experience which is concerned with the customer's responses to implicit messages in a service firm's brand, advertising, recommendations, or restaurant reviews (Meyer & Schwager, 2007).

In restaurant marketing, a number of studies on the essence of customer experience have focused on the customer's direct experience of eating-out in restaurants rather than the customer's direct and indirect experience (e.g. Rezende & Silva, 2014; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Ryu & Han, 2011). Previous research on customer experience in the restaurant context has been carried out through the use of the term "restaurant experience", "dining experience" or "meal experience" (Tsai & Lu, 2012; Chang, Kivela, & Mak, 2011; Noone, Kimes, Mattila, & Wirtz, 2009; Hansen et al., 2005). For example, the term "restaurant experience" is used by Jeong and Jang (2011) to refer to the customer's knowledge or observation during a period of time when the customer is involved in or interacts with the multidimensional attributes that the restaurant facilitates. According to Josiam and Henry (2014) the customer's restaurant experience encompasses the customer's eating experience and the overall experience of restaurant service environment. While a variety of definitions of the term customer experience have been suggested, in this research, customer experience will be conceptualised as the customer's individual response to direct and indirect interactions with the restaurant in the service environment.

### **2.3.2 Dimensions of Customer Experience**

It has been suggested that the overall service offerings of a service organisation elicit the customer's personal and internal responses through direct or indirect interactions (Walter et al., 2010; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Hedonic goods or services can stimulate customers'

emotional responses such as pleasure, enjoyment, and fun, which in turn create consumption experience (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Addis and Holbrook (2001) argue that the functional feature of the product or service and the customer's emotional responses play a crucial role in constructing consumption experience. The customer's subjective or emotional responses are originated by sensorial and cognitive aspects of consumption (Addis & Holbrook, 2001; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Several studies, however, have placed emphasis on the customer's multiple responses achieved dependent on the level of customer engagement rather than the functional features of products or services (Srivastava & Kaul, 2016; Schmitt, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 1998).

Schmitt (1999) proposes five dimensions of customer experience as involving sensorial, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and relational experience. Gentile et al. (2007) identified that customer experience consists of six components, namely sense, emotion, cognition, pragmatism, lifestyle and relation as broadening the scope of experiential dimensions. Walls (2013) found that affective, cognitive and relational responses of customers are triggered by stimuli in the environment of a service organisation. Furthermore, Verleye (2015) suggests that customer experience emerges from six different types of experiences such as hedonic, cognitive, social, personal, pragmatic and economic experience. In contrast, a number of studies have indicated that the role of emotional and cognitive responses is critical for the customer experience (Jüttner, Schaffner, Windler, & Maklan, 2013; Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Olsson, Friman, Pareigis, & Edvardsson, 2012). Table 1 illustrates the customers' perceptions of experiential stimuli provided by a company in terms of the existing definitions of customer experience that have been identified in previous research. Each of these dimensions is discussed in further detail below.



**Table 1: Dimensions of Customer Experience in Previous Research**

Scholar(s)	Sensorial perception	Emotional perception	Cognitive perception	Behavioural perception	Relational perception	Functional perception
Pine and Gilmore (1998)	X	X	X			
Schmitt (1999)	X	X	X	X	X	
Berry et al. (2002a)		X	X			
Shaw and Ivens (2002)		X	X			
Edvardsson, Enquist, and Johnston (2005)		X	X	X		
Mascarenhas, Kesavan, and Bernacchi (2006)		X	X		X	
Gentile et al. (2007)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Meyer and Schwager (2007)		X	X			
Yuan and Wu (2008)	X	X	X			X
Brakus et al. (2009)	X	X	X	X		
Tynan and McKechnie (2009)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Verhoef et al. (2009)	X	X	X	X	X	
Walter et al. (2010)		X	X	X		
Zomerdijk & Voss (2010)	X	X	X	X		
Olsson et al. (2012)		X	X			
Pareigis, Echeverri, and Edvardsson (2012)		X	X	X		
Bagdare and Jain (2013)	X	X	X	X		
Jüttner et al. (2013)		X	X			
Walls (2013)		X	X		X	
Srivastava and Kaul (2014)	X	X	X	X	X	
Jaakkola et al. (2015)		X	X	X		
McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015b)	X	X	X	X	X	
Ali et al. (2016a)		X	X			
Hwang and Seo (2016)	X	X	X	X	X	
Lemon and Verhoef (2016)	X	X	X	X	X	
Homburg, Jozic, and Kuehn (2017)	X	X	X	X	X	
Jain et al. (2017)	X	X	X	X		

This list illustrates that within the customer experience research literature, there is a consensus that customer experience is conceptualised by the customer's emotional and cognitive responses to the overall service offerings of a service organisation (Jain et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Walls, 2013). Several researchers put emphasis on the emotional and cognitive components of customer experience (Ali et al., 2016a; Jüttner et al., 2013). The emotional component of customer experience refers to the customer's internal mood, emotions, and feelings that are evoked by an affective relationship with a service organisation, its products and services (Ali et al., 2016a; Schmitt, 1999). Otto and

Ritchie (1996) demonstrated that emotional responses in creating the service experience are comprised of excitement, enjoyment and memorability whereas Hanefors and Mossberg (2003) found that customers' emotional responses such as excitement, curiosity, joy and surprise have a significant effect on memorable experiences in the restaurant. Han, Back, and Barrett (2010) showed that emotional experience was empirically measured using four dimensions of consumption emotions such as excitement, comfort, annoyance, and romance in the restaurant setting. In his study of hotel customer experiences, Walls (2013) found that customers' emotional responses, such as pleasure, relaxation, enjoyment, good feelings, satisfaction and comfort, to physical and social environments have a positive effect on overall positive hotel experience.

The cognitive component of customer experience appeals to customers' thought processes and curiosity in various ways, with a view to evaluating the service organisation, its products and services through the processing of creative thinking (Schmitt, 1999). In other words, cognitive responses are also used to refer to intellectual engagement with customers (Brakus et al., 2009; Mascarenhas et al., 2006) and a number of authors have emphasised that cognitive responses play a crucial role in creating service experience (e.g. Ingerson & Kim, 2016; Han & Jeong, 2013). Jüttner et al. (2013) propose that seven cognitive customer responses or states: perceived healthiness, informed, sated, promptness, professionalism, comfort, and perceived value for money, have an influence on customer experience. In terms of restaurant experience, cognitive responses are derived from customers' perceived service quality as the overall evaluative judgement of service performance in the restaurant environment (Lee, Hsiao, & Yang, 2010; Kim & Moon, 2009). Walls (2013) demonstrated that cognitive responses were measured by economic value, service quality and efficiency in hotel customer experience. Ryu and Jang (2007) suggest that customers' cognitive responses are stimulated by a variety of food, quality of food, price and location in the restaurant setting.

In a slightly different view, several researchers refer to not only the emotional and cognitive components of customer experience, but also a behavioural component (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Pareigis et al., 2012). The behavioural component of customer experience deals with the customer's patterns of activity, lifestyle, opinions, and interests, which are reflected in the customer's values and beliefs (Gentile et al., 2007). A company is able to generate behavioural experiences through providing an activity or lifestyle to customers, which allows them enrich their lives (Hsu & Tsou, 2011; Schmitt, 1999). For example, a positive behavioural customer response is attributable to service employee's positive

emotional display in interactional service experience (Albrecht et al., 2016). Previous studies on customer experience in the service environment have paid particular attention to behavioural responses such as customer behavioural intentions, customer satisfaction and loyalty (Marinkovic, Senic, Ivkov, Dimitrovski, & Bjelic, 2014; Ryu et al., 2012). Bujisic et al. (2014) propose that customer behavioural intentions are composed of return intention and word-of-mouth in the restaurant setting. Heung and Gu (2012) showed that behavioural intentions could be empirically measured using return intention, willingness to pay, and word-of-mouth in the restaurant. Other authors have attributed behavioural responses of service experience as customer satisfaction (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Yuan & Wu, 2008) and customer loyalty (Ali et al., 2014; Kim & Choi, 2013).

Furthermore, a number of researchers have argued that in addition to emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses, customers may also have a sensorial response and that a combination of these four responses constitutes customer experience (Jain et al., 2017; Bagdare & Jain, 2013; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). The sensorial component of customer experience refers to customer perception of sensory stimuli through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch (Jain et al., 2017; Schmitt, 1999). The sensorial experience is particularly important in hedonic consumption as enjoyment is engendered through the stimulation of five senses (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) and a number of authors have argued that the physical value is incorporated in the sensorial experience (Verhoef et al., 2009; Gentile et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1998). The sensory stimuli play a crucial role in designing physical environment to create customer experience in a service organisation (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Schmitt (1999) suggests that the sensory stimuli can be used to engage customers' buying motivations and create added values to their products in their environment. It can be considered that the more involved the senses of customers are in an experience, the more memorable it is (Haeckel, Carbone, & Berry, 2003).

Another group of authors puts emphasis on an additional determining factor in customer experience, that of relational association within the service environment (Homburg et al., 2017; Hwang & Seo, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015b). The relational component of customer experience enables the customer to establish a relationship with other individuals, groups, society, or his or her ideal self during the consumption process (Gentile et al., 2007). Relational responses are provoked through interactions with other people such as service employees and other customers, and brand value (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Prior research has indicated that relational customer responses resulting from interactive and non-interactive social exchange of both service

employees and other customers in the service environment have an impact on customer experience (Albrecht, 2016; Gabbott & Hogg, 2001). Several studies have attempted to explain the relationship between relational aspect of service encounters and customer experience based on gender and cultural differences (Hwang & Seo, 2016; Patterson & Mattila, 2008; Mattila, 2000; Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993). For example, in their work on gender differences in the evaluation of service experience, Iacobucci and Ostrom (1993) found that the effects of the relational facet of service interactions for women tend to be stronger than men.

There is an interrelationship between the sensorial responses and multidimensional responses of customers such as emotion, cognition, relation, and behaviour. Customers perceive interaction with the physical and social environment in a service organisation through their five senses (Jain et al., 2017), and customers' sensorial perceptions lead to cognitive, emotional, and behaviour responses (Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014; Zomerdijs & Voss, 2010; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Nasermodeli, Ling, and Severi (2013) demonstrated that sensory experience perceived through interaction with the social environment is positively related to emotional and relational experiences. Other authors have similarly shown that perceived customer interaction with service environment influences the emotional and cognitive responses of customers, which results in behavioural responses (Han & Jeong, 2013; Lin & Liang, 2011; Kim & Moon, 2009). Customer perception of interaction with the restaurant environment through the senses can therefore influence emotional, cognitive, relational, and behavioural responses.

Although numerous studies have examined customer experience, there is no consensus regarding the multiple responses of customers that conceptualise customer experience. The importance of both customer emotion and cognition has been recognised as the most commonly researched dimensions of customer experience (Jüttner et al., 2013; Olsson et al., 2012). As such, several studies have suggested that a service organisation should focus on designing products and services that stimulate emotional and cognitive customer responses with a view to providing a positive experience to customers (Walls, 2013; Berry et al., 2002a). It should be noted, however, that sensorial, behavioural and relational customer responses, which add to value of the perceived quality and functions of products and services, are also considered a significant part of customer experience. Customer experience can thus be achieved by triggering the customer's multidimensional responses to, or perceptions of, experiential stimuli provided by a service company. Hence, a service

organisation may add sensorial, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and relational values for a memorable customer experience to its products and services.

## **2.4 Contributory Factors to Customer Experience**

Much of the current literature on customer experience pays particular attention to the design of experiential service offerings in the service industry, based on the fact that customer experience with distinctive competence in maintaining competitive advantage has been placed at the core of the service offering (Albrecht et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2016a; Beltagui, Candi, & Riedel, 2016; Jaakkola et al., 2015; McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, & Ferrier, 2015a). The customer experience is constructed through a series of encounters and interactions with the overall service offerings of a service organisation, also called “clues” (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006) or “touchpoints” (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Berry et al. (2002a) suggest that these ‘clues’ can be classified into three distinct groups: mechanic clues (i.e. the tangible elements related to the service), human clues (interactions with service employees), and functional clues (i.e. the technical quality of the service).

Other authors have proposed slightly different contributors to customer experience depending on the research context. In the retailing sector, Verhoef et al. (2009) through an analysis of the existing literature on aspects of customer experience suggests that the contributory factors to customer experience include: the social environment, service interface, atmosphere, assortment, price, brand, and customer experiences in alternative channels (e.g. the Internet). Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) similarly propose that customer experience in the retail sector is constructed through customer interaction with not only atmosphere, product and aspects of service interface such as technology and service employees but also service process, communication, and other customers. Ali et al. (2016a) and Walls (2013) had similar findings in the hotel sector, in that hotel guests’ experience is built through their interactions with the physical environment and human environmental factors such as service employees and fellow guests. Within the restaurant sector, some previous studies have identified physical environment, food quality and service quality as the most prominent contributors to customer experience (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Ryu et al., 2012; Tsai & Lu, 2012). Other authors (Kim, Ng, and Kim, 2009) demonstrated that the fundamental factors which influence restaurant experience also include perceived price and convenience. Table 2 illustrates the current status of the literature on how customer experience is generated through the customer’s interactions with the service offerings that are designed and provided by a service organisation.

**Table 2: Literature Review of Factors Influencing Customer Experience in Different Service Sectors**

Author(s)	Research context	Influential factors of customer experience	Research type	Empirical context	Sample size
Andersson and Mossberg (2004)	Restaurant experience	(1) service (2) fine cuisine (3) restaurant interior (4) dining company (5) other customers	Empirical	Sweden	310 interviews
Hansen et al. (2005)	Restaurant experience	(1) core product (2) restaurant interior (3) dining company (4) personal social meeting (5) restaurant atmosphere	Empirical	Sweden	5 focus groups, 7 interviews
Gustafsson, Öström, Johansson, and Mossberg (2006)	Restaurant experience	(1) room (2) meeting (3) product (4) atmosphere (5) management control system	Theoretical		
Grewal, Levy, and Kumar (2009)	Retailing experience	(1) promotion (2) price (3) product assortment/brand (4) supply chain management (5) location	Theoretical		
Hu, Chen, and Ou (2009)	Restaurant experience	(1) food quality (2) staff service (3) service speed (4) food scent (5) noise (6) comfort (7) restaurant scent (8) lighting (9) interior design (10) price (11) new experience (12) music (13) cleanliness	Empirical	Taiwan	541 questionnaires
Jang and Namkung (2009)	Restaurant experience	(1) atmosphere (2) food quality (3) service quality	Empirical	USA	290 questionnaires
Kim et al. (2009)	Restaurant experience	(1) atmosphere (2) food quality (3) service quality (4) price and value (5) convenience	Empirical	USA	770 questionnaires
Knutson et al. (2009)	Hotel experience	(1) benefit (2) convenience (3) incentive (4) environment	Empirical	USA	152 questionnaires
Verhoef et al. (2009)	Retailing experience	(1) social environment (2) service interface (3) assortment (4) retail atmosphere (5) price and promotion (6) customer experience in alternative channels (7) retail brand (8) past customer experience	Theoretical		
Wu and Liang (2009)	Restaurant experience	(1) restaurant environment (2) service employees (3) other customers	Empirical	Taiwan	392 questionnaires

(Continued)

Author(s)	Research context	Influential factors of customer experience	Research type	Empirical context	Sample size
Chang and Horng (2010)	Customer experience	(1) physical surroundings (2) service providers (3) other customers (4) customers' companions (5) customers themselves	Empirical	Taiwan	20 interviews, 327 questionnaires, 550 questionnaires
Walter et al. (2010)	Restaurant experience	(1) social interaction (2) core service of the restaurant (3) physical environment (4) restaurant (5) atmosphere (6) price and payment procedure (7) guest (8) occasion	Empirical	Sweden	122 interviews
Walls, Okumus, Wang, and Kwun (2011a)	Hotel experience	(1) physical environment (2) human interaction	Empirical	USA	15 interviews
Jeong and Jang (2011)	Restaurant experience	(1) food quality (2) service quality (3) atmosphere (4) price fairness	Empirical	USA	201 questionnaires
Ryu et al. (2012)	Restaurant experience	(1) physical environment (2) food quality (3) service quality	Empirical	USA	300 questionnaires
Teixeira et al. (2012)	Customer experience	(1) physical environment (2) people (customers/employees) (3) service delivery process	Empirical	Portugal	17 interviews
Tsai and Lu (2012)	Restaurant experience	(1) environmental concerns (2) food concern (3) employee concern	Empirical	Taiwan	538 questionnaires
Wong and Wu (2013)	Casino experience	(1) service environment (2) employee service (3) value (4) hedonic and novelty (5) brand experience (6) perceived luck	Empirical	China	180 interviews, 274 questionnaires
Wijaya et al. (2013)	Restaurant experience	(1) physical dining (2) social environment (3) food quality (4) food cultural-related	Theoretical		
Marinkovic et al. (2014)	Restaurant experience	(1) atmosphere (2) service quality (3) perceived price	Empirical	Serbia	218 questionnaires
Ali et al. (2016a)	Hotel experience	(1) physical environment (2) employees (3) other customers	Empirical	China	170 questionnaires
Garg and Amelia (2016)	Restaurant experience	(1) mechanic clues (2) human clues (3) functional clues	Empirical	Malaysia	152 questionnaires
Stein and Ramaseshan (2016)	Retailing experience	(1) atmospheric (2) technology (3) communication (4) process (5) employees (6) other customers (7) product	Empirical	Australia	28 interviews
Hwang and Seo (2016)	Customer experience	(1) service/product quality (2) physical environment (3) social environment (4) employees (5) price (6) self-service technologies	Theoretical		

From the literature there is a consensus that customer experience is constructed through the customer's encounters and interactions with: physical environments; social environments such as service employees and other customers; and products. A number of authors have emphasised that physical environment and human interaction dimensions are commonly the key features of customer experience (Walls, 2013; Walter et al., 2010; Wu & Liang, 2009; Berry et al., 2006). As noted by Walls et al. (2011b), the physical environment refers to tangible and intangible elements of services and products provided by a service organisation; and the human interaction is related to the interactive relationship between the customer and the service employees or other customers during the consumption experience.

Within the restaurant sector, physical environment or atmosphere is similarly identified as a generator of customer experience (Ariffin, Bibon, & Abdullah, 2012; Heung & Gu, 2012; Ryu & Han, 2011) but many studies also identify service quality and food quality (Ryu et al., 2012; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Jang & Namkung, 2009) as the major determining factors in generating customer experience. Within the restaurant literature, service quality in restaurant operations has been widely measured in order to assess and understand the services related to the experiences encountered by the customer during service delivery process (Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha, & Yun, 2007; Lee & Hing, 1995). Service quality is described as the customer's judgment about a service that results from the comparison of his or her expectations with the service performance (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988). Several restaurant researchers have argued that service quality has been considered as embedded in customer experience (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Wall & Berry, 2007) and that service quality is one of the interactive stimuli determining the customer's evaluation of the service and product, thereby contributing to understanding customer experience (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Liu & Jang, 2009a; Yuan & Wu, 2008; Gustafsson et al., 2006). For example, in terms of customer experience, service quality is used by Yuan and Wu (2008) to refer to the customer's subjective perception in evaluating interactions with the contact employee or the quality and functions of the service and product that the customer encounters. In an investigation into the relationship between restaurant experience and online word-of-mouth, Jeong and Jang (2011) use restaurant service quality to measure the customer's restaurant experience.

The suggested attributes in dimensions of service quality are similar to the aspects of interactive determinants of customer experience. For example, Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggest five dimensions of service quality, also named SERVQUAL: tangibles, reliability,



responsibility, assurance, and empathy. The elements of service quality, which are designed to access and evaluate the customer's perception of services and products provided by a service company, are likely to be similar to the physical environment, food quality and the interaction with service employees of customer experience (Barber, Goodman, & Goh, 2011; Liu & Jang, 2009a). Tangibles of service quality are related to restaurant physical facilities and food quality whereas reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy of service quality are associated with customer perception of behaviours of service employees (Bujisic et al., 2014; Barber et al., 2011; Kincaid, Baloglu, Mao, & Busser, 2010; Wall & Berry, 2007).

Along with the three general aspects of physical environment, service quality, and food quality some authors have also identified other customers, perceived price and locational convenience as key contributors of customer experience (Ali et al., 2016a; Walter et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009). Both customer perception of price fairness (Marinkovic et al., 2014; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Hu et al., 2009), and convenience of the service location (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014) have a positive impact on behavioural responses in restaurant experience.

Despite the fact that customer experience is at the core of service settings in the restaurant sector, several authors have pointed out that empirical research on customer dining experiences in the restaurant sector is still insufficient from the customers' perspective (Ingerson & Kim, 2016; Wu & Liang, 2009; Hansen et al., 2005; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). Detailed exploration is therefore necessary to understand the creation of the customer experience and the customer's internal and external responses to interactive aspects. Each of the contributors to customer experience will be discussed in the subsequent sections in the following order: the physical environment, the social environment, the product, price perception, and locational convenience.

#### **2.4.1 The Physical Environment**

The majority of research investigating customer experience has paid attention to the physical environment as a fundamental factor in retaining and attracting customers and in strengthening competitiveness in the service industry (Dong & Siu, 2013; Ryu & Han, 2011; Wall & Berry, 2007). The importance of the physical environment in the restaurant context has also been emphasised, based on the fact that the restaurant environmental setting affects a majority of services during the customer's presence in the service process (Marinkovic et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2010). The physical environment has been

conceptualised through the use of several different terms such as “atmospherics” (Kotler, 1973), “servicescape” (Bitner, 1992), “store environment” (Baker & Grewal, 1994), “mechanic clues” (Berry et al., 2002a) and “DINESCAPE” (Ryu & Jang, 2008). In an early study, Kotler (1973) identified that atmospherics are designed to embody the customer’s perception through his or her five senses: sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste, and argues that the atmospherics may leave behind an image of the surrounding environment in the customer’s mind, which has the capability of influencing behavioural intentions mediated by the customer’s affective state. Hoffman and Turley (2002) suggest that customer experience is not necessarily associated only with intangible elements of atmospherics related to the physical senses, but also tangible elements of atmospherics (e.g. furniture, layout, and décor).

Numerous studies have utilised similar definitions and held a similar view of physical environment dimensions in service settings (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Brunner-Sperdin, Peters, & Strobl, 2012; Lin & Liang, 2011). Previous research commonly suggests that physical environment encompasses three dimensions: facility aesthetics; ambience; and spatial layout (Walter et al., 2010; Han & Ryu, 2009; Kim & Moon, 2009). For example, Walter et al. (2010) found that in terms of the restaurant physical environment, the interior and exterior design and the sensory aspects of the restaurant are the key frequent drivers of the customer’s favourable experience. Several studies have argued that attributes of service employees are also incorporated into the restaurant physical environment (Heung & Gu, 2012; Ryu et al., 2012; Liu & Jang, 2009b). For example, Heung and Gu (2012) suggest that such attributes include employee appearance, presence of attractive employees, and the number of employees in the restaurant experience. Table 3 provides an overview of dimensions related to the physical environment.

**Table 3: Prior Research on the Physical Environment**

Author(s)	Research context	Environmental dimensions/attributes	Empirical context
Bitner (1992)	Service experience	Ambient conditions, space and function, signs, symbols and artefacts	Theoretical research
Wakefield and Blodgett (1996)	Leisure experience	Layout accessibility, facility aesthetics, seating comfort, electric equipment and displays, cleanliness	USA
Wakefield and Blodgett (1999)	Leisure experience	Building design and décor, equipment, ambience	USA
Turley and Chebat (2002)	Retailing experience	Exterior, general interior, layout and design, pop and decorations, human factors	Theoretical research
Hansen et al. (2005)	Restaurant experience	Colours, centre objects (e.g. tableware, cutlery, plates), remote objects (e.g. paintings, windows, mirrors), furniture	Sweden
Ryu and Jang (2008)	Restaurant experience	Facility aesthetics, ambience, lighting, table settings, layout, service staff	USA
Han and Ryu (2009)	Restaurant experience	Décor and artefacts, spatial layout, ambient conditions	USA
Kim and Moon (2009)	Restaurant experience	Facility aesthetics, layout, electric equipment, seating comfort, ambient condition	Canada
Liu and Jang (2009b)	Restaurant experience	Interior design, ambience, spatial layout, human elements	USA
Jeong and Jang (2011)	Restaurant experience	Environmental cleanliness, interior design and décor, service employees	USA
Walls et al. (2011a)	Hotel experience	Ambience, multisensory, space/function, sign/symbol/artefact	USA
Ariffin et al. (2012)	Restaurant experience	Style, colour, lighting, layout, furnishing	Malaysia
Heung and Gu (2012)	Restaurant experience	Spatial layout, ambience, facility aesthetics, service employees, view from the window	Hong Kong
Ryu et al. (2012)	Restaurant experience	Interior design and décor, background music, cleanliness, service employees	USA
Uhrich and Benkenstein (2012)	Leisure experience	Physical factors (ambience, design), social factors (customer density, customer appearance, customer behaviour)	Germany
Wong and Wu (2013)	Casino experience	Atmosphere, interior décor, architecture, facility, scale	China
Garg and Amelia (2016)	Restaurant experience	Ambience, facility layout, lighting	Malaysia
Stein and Ramaseshan (2016)	Retailing experience	Amenities, ambience, store attractiveness, store layout and design, store display	Australia

Facility aesthetics are a visually appealing dimension of the restaurant environment, which are concerned with architectural design, interior design and décor (e.g. paintings/pictures, wall décor, furniture, colour and table settings) (Han & Ryu, 2009; Ryu & Jang, 2008). The attractiveness of the restaurant environment can evoke the customers' positive emotional response to evaluating their overall dining experience (Jang & Namkung, 2009; Liu & Jang, 2009b). Ryu and Han (2011) found that the pleasant appearance of the dining environment in an upscale restaurant was the most significant factor in both enhancing customer satisfaction and engendering customer loyalty. Moreover, Bellizzi and Hite (1992) investigated the effects of colour in the store design and concluded that customers tend to experience more favourable reaction and higher purchase intentions in cool-coloured backgrounds of the retailing environment than in a warm-coloured store environment.

Ambience dimension of the restaurant environment represents intangible characteristics of the restaurant background which consists of temperature, background music, restaurant aroma, restaurant lighting, and cleanliness (Heung & Gu, 2012). Previous research has indicated that the restaurant ambience is the most significant inducer of customers' positive emotions, and thereby pleasurable dining experiences (Kim & Moon, 2009; Liu & Jang, 2009b). Background music tempo is also able to induce positive emotions and positive evaluations of restaurant experience amongst customers (Lin & Wu, 2006; Michon & Chebat, 2004) enticing customers to spend more time at tables (Stroebele & de Castro, 2006; Milliman, 1986). An enticing restaurant aroma can similarly induce positive emotions and enhance customer experience (Chebat & Michon, 2003; Bone & Ellen, 1999). Furthermore, Areni and Kim (1994) found that brighter lighting within a store environment has a positive impact on customer behaviours such as the examination and handling of products.

Spatial layout refers to the arrangement of the physical surroundings in the restaurant setting, which consists of space between seats, table and seating arrangement, and equipment layout (Ryu & Han, 2011; Kim & Moon, 2009). Efficient spatial layout of the service environment, which is designed with consideration for functional needs of customers, can engender a sense of convenience and comfort (Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). The table and seating arrangement in restaurants may have a positive effect on the customer's evaluation of dining experience (Han & Ryu, 2009) whereas Liu and Jang (2009b) found that the seating arrangement in the restaurant was the most influential factor of spatial layout that contributes to customer emotions. A poor spatial layout in service settings can lead to perceived crowdedness, which produces negative emotional effects such as unpleasant feelings in customer experience (Hui & Bateson, 1991).

Previous studies have argued that the physical environment is an important determinant of the customer's evaluation of the service experience (Josiam & Henry, 2014; Ryu & Han, 2011). As noted by Wilburn (2006), the influence of the physical environment such as facilities, lighting, and décor on the customer's emotions and behaviour intentions has been highlighted as an important aspect of the creation of customer experience. Hansen et al. (2005) found that the restaurant interior was the most significant contributor to the customer's memorable experience of the restaurant meal. Prior empirical attempts have also been made to explain the influence of the physical environment on customer satisfaction and the customer's behavioural intentions in the restaurant industry (Josiam & Henry, 2014; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Liu & Jang, 2009a; Ryu & Jang, 2008). For example, in

their analysis of the customer's perceptions of the restaurant, Liu and Jang (2009a) found that the interior design and décor, and environmental cleanliness of a restaurant significantly affected the customer's overall satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Ryu and Jang (2008) found that lighting and ambient factors such as music, temperature, and aroma have the highest effect on the customer's emotional responses, which in turn influence the customer's revisit intention.

#### **2.4.2 The Social Environment**

There is a consensus among service marketing researchers that one of the crucial components generating customer experience is social environment, which comprises the customer's interactions with service employees and other customers (Ali et al., 2016a; Marinkovic et al., 2014; Srivastava & Kaul, 2014). Several studies have suggested that service experience is influenced by human clues, namely the behaviour and attitude of service employees (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Wall & Berry, 2007; Berry et al., 2002a). In addition to human clues, the presence of other customers, such as companions and fellow customers, is also considered as a significant influential factor that contributes to customer experience (Albrecht, 2016; He et al., 2012; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). According to Zomerdijk and Voss (2010), the interactions between customers and service employees or other customers have the capability of stimulating the customers' emotions and engaging them. Previous studies have found that a customer's interaction in the social environment has a positive impact on perceived service quality and customer satisfaction, which can both lead to revisit intention (Marinkovic et al., 2014; Srivastava & Kaul, 2014). Walls et al. (2011a) demonstrated that the distinctive interactions between customers and service employees, as well as between or among customers have the potential to generate positive customer experience.

##### **2.4.2.1 Service Employees**

Previous research has indicated that various interactions between customers and service employees have a considerable impact on customer experience (Albrecht et al., 2016; Hwang & Seo, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The customer-employee interaction can be defined as the customer perception of the behaviour and attitude of service employees (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Wall & Berry, 2007; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002). The interactive performance and service delivery of service employees are vital to the customer evaluation of restaurant service offerings, which in turn influences the creation of customer experience (Ali et al., 2016a; Wu & Liang, 2009). Indeed positive interactions between customers and service employees are found to have a positive impact on

behavioural intentions such as customer satisfaction and revisit intentions (e.g. Ali et al., 2016a; Marinkovic et al., 2014; Srivastava & Kaul, 2014).

Prior research has suggested that various attributes of the customer-employee interaction contribute to customer experience (e.g. Liu & Jang, 2009a; Wu & Liang, 2009; Namkung & Jang, 2008; Hansen et al., 2005). For example, reliability (i.e. dependency and accuracy), responsiveness (i.e. willingness to help and promptness), assurance (i.e. knowledge and courtesy), and empathy (i.e. attentiveness and caring) have been examined as intangible social aspects of service quality (Namkung & Jang, 2008; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999). Furthermore, in an investigation into restaurant experience, Hansen et al. (2005) found that the complicated customer-service employee interaction involves a range of restaurant experiential attributes including the speed of payment, attention from service employees, complaint handling, trust, and recognition. Walls et al. (2011a) showed that attitude (e.g. friendliness, body language, courtesy), professionalism (e.g. knowledge of the menu, communication), proactive service (e.g. recognition, attentiveness) and appearance are the main aspects of the customer's interaction with service employees that contribute to the hotel experience. Table 4 illustrates the attributes of the interactions between customers and service employees, which are drawn from the literature review.

**Table 4: Prior Research on Customer-to-Employee Interactions**

Author(s)	Research context	Attributes	Empirical context
Stevens, Knutson, and Patton (1995)	Restaurant experience	Responsiveness, courtesy, caring, attentiveness, appearance, professional behaviours	USA
Raajpoot (2002)	Restaurant experience	Employee dress, gender, manners, number of employees present	Canada
Hansen et al. (2005)	Restaurant experience	Trust, Attentiveness, complaint handling	Norway
Andaleeb and Conway (2006)	Restaurant experience	Attentiveness, helpfulness, promptness, understanding of customer needs, courtesy knowledge of menu	USA
Gupta, McLaughlin, and Gomez (2007)	Restaurant experience	Greeting, attentiveness, promptness, appearance, friendliness, attitude	USA
Namkung and Jang (2008)	Restaurant experience	Promised service, willingness to help, competency, empathetic response	USA
Kim et al. (2009)	Restaurant experience	Appearance, attentiveness, knowledge about food, friendliness, service provided by staff	USA
Liu and Jang (2009a)	Restaurant experience	Friendliness, helpfulness, attentiveness, knowledge of menu, promptness, dependability, consistency, professionalism, order error-free	USA
Wu and Liang (2009)	Restaurant experience	Attitude, responsiveness, appearance, professionalism, friendliness, proactive service	Taiwan
Walls et al. (2011a)	Hotel experience	Attitude, professional behaviour, proactive service, appearance	USA
Walls (2013)	Hotel experience	Caring/attentiveness, professionalism, reliability/trustworthiness, responsiveness	USA
Srivastava and Kaul (2014)	Retailing experience	Courtesy, attitude, concern, proactive	India
Ali et al. (2016a)	Hotel experience	Service provided by staff, reliability, professionalism	China
Stein and Ramaseshan (2016)	Retailing experience	Helpfulness, personalised service, friendly greeting, argumentative employee	Australia

Namkung and Jang (2008) showed that the promised service, helpfulness, and knowledge about food of service employees can be the key determinants of customers' high satisfaction regarding their dining experience. In their investigation into the full service restaurants, Andaleeb and Conway (2006) found that service responsiveness such as willingness to help and promptness of service employees was the most significant influential factor of customer satisfaction with the overall restaurant experience. According to Pugh (2001), emotional displays of service employees, such as: frequent smiling, eye contact, friendly greetings and polite thanking, can contribute to generating customer positive emotions and enhancing customer positive evaluation of the service quality. Similarly, in a study on the effect of service employees' affective services on customer

behavioural intentions, Tsai and Huang (2002) found that greeting, thanking, voice tone, smiling, and eye contact of service employees have a positive impact on customers' willingness to revisit and recommendation to friends.

#### **2.4.2.2 Other Customers**

In recent years, an increasing amount of consumer and services literature has recognised the importance of the presence and behaviours of other customers in the service environment. Numerous studies have attempted to explain the influence of the presence and behaviours of other customers on customer experience (e.g. Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013; Moore, Moore, & Capella, 2005; Grove & Fisk, 1997). Customers are influenced through direct or indirect interactions with other customers who concurrently share the service setting (Albrecht, 2016; Miao, 2014; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Prior research that has focused on interactions between customers has often viewed other customers as mere presence of other customers (i.e. strangers) (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013; Brocato et al., 2012; Argo, Dahl, & Manchanda, 2005; McGrath & Otnes, 1995). Although the social presence of acquaintances is involved in evaluations of customer experience (Ramanathan & McGill, 2007), in solo customer experience it is not necessary to consider this factor due to absence of companions.

Prior research has suggested that the presence of other customers in the service environment is a social factor that can be considered as an atmospheric factor outside the control of the service company (Miao, 2014; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Wu, 2008) and customer experience can be enhanced or reduced by the presence of other customers (Brocato et al., 2012; Hoffman & Bateson, 2011). In an early study, Martin and Pranter (1989) argue that the influence of other customers results from: the number of other customers; their behaviours; direct conversations with them; their appearance and demeanour; and physical proximity to them. Moore et al. (2005) propose that customers may be positively or negatively influenced by potential atmospheric factors of interactions with other customers such as seating arrangement (sitting face to face or sitting side by side), the number of other customers, background sounds generated by them, and the observation of them. Table 5 illustrates the attributes of the presence of other customers drawn from the literature review on customer-to-customer interactions.



**Table 5: Prior Research on Customer-to-Customer Interactions**

Author(s)	Attributes
Latané (1981)	Number of other customers, spatial distance, relevance
Baker (1987)	Number of other customers, appearance, behaviour
Martin and Pranter (1989)	Behaviour, verbal exchange, appearance and demeanour, proximity, stereotypical impression
Moore et al. (2005)	Seating arrangement, size of waiting area, number of other customers, background sounds, the observation of other customers
Hansen et al. (2005)	Politeness, attention, esteem
Walls et al. (2011a)	Demeanour, behaviour, appearance, socialisation
Brocato et al. (2012)	Number of other customers, proximity, physical appearance, behaviour
Kim and Lee (2012)	Number of other customers, gender, age, appearance, attire, public behaviour
Uhrich and Benkenstein (2012)	Density, appearance, behaviour
Albrecht (2016)	Characteristics, emotions, status, expertise, behaviours

As shown in Table 5, previous literature suggests that the perception of other customers' appearance and behaviours in the service environment influences customer experience (Albrecht, 2016; Brocato et al., 2012; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Walls et al., 2011a). Physical appearance is characterised as an individual customer's perception and evaluation of the physical characteristics and general appearance of other customers sharing a service environment (Brocato et al., 2012). McGrath and Otnes (1995) suggest that customers judge aspects of other customers such as: appearance, age, gender, social status or character in the retail environment. For example, the awareness of other customers' differences, such as age, gender and race, tends to be linked to a negative experience of more dissatisfying incidents (Grove & Fisk, 1992), and it has been suggested that the presence of old customers leads to not only young customers' negative attitudes toward to the service but also their low patronage intention in the service context (Thakor, Suri, & Saleh, 2008).

The behaviours of other customers refer to the extent to which they behave properly in a specific consumption context as perceived by individual customers (Brocato et al., 2012). It encompasses gregariousness, untidiness, inconsideration, violence, crudity, malcontent and relaxation (Wu, 2008; Martin, 1996). The perception of behaviours of other customers can positively and negatively influence customer experience (e.g. Albrecht, 2016; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Moore et al., 2005; Grove & Fisk, 1997). For example, with regard to the behaviour of other customers, prior studies suggest that the consumption experience of customers can be enhanced by particular behaviours that engender an enjoyable

atmosphere (e.g. shouting and clapping at a football game, having a good time, and friendly demeanour), but distracted by the dysfunctional behaviours (e.g. rowdy and unruly children, drunkenness, and loud and boisterous behaviours) (Miao, 2014; Brocato et al., 2012; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Martin & Pranter, 1989).

Previous research that has focused on customer-to-customer interaction has also indicated the noticeable features of customer density (i.e. the number of other customers present in the service environment) as perceived by individual customers (e.g. Kwon, Ha, & Im, 2016; Uhrich, 2011; Argo et al., 2005). Specifically, close physical proximity due to a high level of customer density can result in negative perceptions by customers due to crowding (Rüstemli, 1992; Martin & Pranter, 1989) and a number of studies have found that high customer density perceived as crowding can have negative consequences for the customer's emotional and behavioural responses in both a retail context (Eroglu, Machleit, & Barr, 2005; Hui & Bateson, 1991) and in the restaurant setting (Hwang, Yoon, & Bendle, 2012).

Physical proximity to other customers can also have a profound impact on customer experience irrespective of the level of customer density (Albrecht, 2016; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). In the tourism sector, close physical distance has been found to have a positive effect through inducing social interactions among coach passengers (Holloway 1981). On the contrary, in the service environment close proximity to other customers may increase negative emotions such as annoyance and discomfort (Argo et al., 2005; Beaulieu, 2004; Dabbs, 1971). Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2010) found that customers regulate the distance of other customers, taking into account the level of the irritation felt by the close physical distance, and in the restaurant and hotel context, customers in close physical proximity may be more aware of dysfunctional behaviours of other customers, and this may have a negative effect on customer experience (Harris & Reynolds, 2003).

Previous research has shown that active or passive interactions with other customers can influence customer experience (Brocato et al., 2012; Hoffman & Bateson, 2011; Huang & Hsu, 2010). In numerous service contexts, the awareness of other customers simultaneously sharing the service environment may have both a positive and negative effect on individual customers' emotional responses and evaluation of the service organisation (Albrecht, 2016; He, Chen, & Alden, 2008; Wu, 2008). For example, the presence of other customers with whom to socialise or bond may address the customer's

social needs, and thereby generate a positive experience (Harris & Baron, 2004; Grove & Fisk, 1992, 1997). Contrary to this, other authors have reported that the awareness of other customers has been found to trigger emotional discomfort and thereby encourage customers to spend less time in the service context (Uhrich & Tombs, 2014).

### **2.4.3 The Core Product**

The core product of a restaurant is its food quality, and this has been generally accepted as a key component of the overall dining experience (Bujisic et al., 2014; Ha & Jang, 2010a; Walter et al., 2010; Sulek & Hensley, 2004). As noted by Peri (2006), food quality is the requisite condition to satisfy the customer's needs and expectations in the restaurant setting. Researchers have investigated the importance of food quality in the restaurant industry and food quality has been found by some authors to be a significant influential factor in: customer's decision to revisit (Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Luke, 1997; Qu, 1997); customer loyalty in restaurant choice (Mattila, 2001; Clark & Wood, 1998); and customer satisfaction (Ryu & Han, 2010; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Food quality has also been found to have a positive impact on customer's dining experience, and this plays a critical role in the success of the restaurant (Bujisic et al., 2014; Sulek & Hensley, 2004).

Previous studies have assessed which attributes of food quality influence customer experience (Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2014; Ryu et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2009; Hansen et al., 2005). For example, Hansen et al. (2005) found that food taste, food presentation, and menu composition are the main features of the core product that contribute to the restaurant meal experience. Kim et al. (2009) similarly found that food quality dimensions including the overall quality of the food, food taste, food presentation, and freshness of the food were the influencing factors. Ryu et al. (2012) considered six factors: food taste, healthy food options, a variety of menu items, food freshness, aroma of food, and food presentation as the optimum measures of food quality, whereas Liu and Jang (2009a) suggested that seven factors including food safety and food temperature were the key attributes determining customer experience. Other authors have examined food quality with the six dimensions of food presentation, taste, variety, freshness, healthy options and temperature (Zhang et al., 2014; Namkung & Jang, 2007). Table 6 lists the food attributes identified as being part of food quality.

**Table 6: Prior Research on Food Quality**

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Food Attributes</b>
Qu (1997)	Consistency, menu variety, food quality
Wandel and Bugge (1997)	Food taste, freshness, appearance, nutritional value, food safety
Kivela, Reece, and Inbakaran (1999b)	Food presentation, menu variety, taste, food temperature
Raajpoot (2002)	Food presentation, portion size of food, menu design, food variety
Sulek and Hensley (2004)	Food taste, food presentation, textures, food colours, food temperature, size of the portions, entrée complexity
Hansen et al. (2005)	Taste sensations at consumption, presentation form, composition of the menu
Namkung and Jang (2007)	Food taste, food presentation, food variety, healthy options, food freshness, food temperature
Qin and Prybutok (2008)	A variety of food and beverage, freshness, cleanliness, healthy options
Kim et al. (2009)	Overall quality of the food, food taste, food presentation, food freshness
Liu and Jang (2009a)	Food taste, food presentation, menu variety, healthy food options, food freshness, food temperature, food safety
Ha and Jang (2010)	Food taste, food portion, a variety of menu choices, healthy food options
Jeong and Jang (2011)	Food taste, food presentation, food temperature
Ryu et al. (2012)	Food taste, healthy options, a variety of menu items, freshness, food aroma, food presentation
Jüttner et al. (2013)	Healthy food, choice of food and beverage, freshness and food quality
Zhang et al. (2014)	Food presentation, variety of menu items, food taste, food freshness, Healthy options, food temperature
Bae and Kim (2017)	Food presentation, menu, ingredients, tastiness, food portion

Other authors have considered other factors. Raajpoot (2002) found that food presentation and portion size of food were the most important factors in determining restaurant quality whereas Kim, Park, Kim, & Ryu (2013) found that food ingredients were the most significant contributor to customer restaurant experience. This is in contrast to Namkung and Jang (2007) who found that food presentation and food taste were the most significant influential attributes and this is alignment with the findings of Michel et al. (2014) who found that good food presentation is able to induce a pleasurable dining experience. Other authors have considered food hygiene, for example Walter et al. (2010) found that defective food hygiene was a significant factor in inducing a customer's unfavourable experience.

#### **2.4.4 Price Perception**

Perceived price has a strong effect on customer perception of value (Ryu & Han, 2010; Oh, 2000). Price perception takes into account how customers comprehend actual prices of products and services in ways that can be made meaningful (Oh, 2000). Similarly, price perception can be represented as value for money from customer experience of restaurant

service (Marinkovic et al., 2014). Customers tend to evaluate their restaurant experiences with the quality of products and services, namely according to how much they paid for them (Han & Ryu, 2009; Varki & Colgate, 2001).

Price perception of dining experience is associated with value in terms of price, portion size, food, and overall value of the dining experience (Kim et al., 2009). Customer experience may be positively enhanced through customer perception of price such as good value for the price of food, reasonable price of food and appropriate price of overall restaurant experience (Walls, 2013). Similarly, several studies have revealed that customer perception of price is influenced by the relationship between both the cost and quality of food, and the cost and total offerings of the restaurant (Namkung & Jang, 2010; Walter et al., 2010; Han & Ryu, 2009).

The role of price perception in customer experience and customer behaviour has been examined in several service studies. Previous authors have suggested that customer perception of reasonable price can have a significant effect on positive evaluation of customer experience (Fatma, 2014; Wong & Wu, 2013; Han & Ryu, 2009), and that customer perception of price fairness can cause customers to experience more positive emotions such as feelings of joy, peacefulness and refreshment (Namkung & Jang, 2010). In addition, customer perception of good value for money is found to be associated with positive customer experience (Walls, 2013; Oh et al., 2007). By contrast customers can experience a negative emotional reaction such as feelings of disappointment or anger to perceived unfairness of price (Xia, Monroe, & Cox, 2004).

Customer perception of reasonable price, intervenes as a moderating factor to enhance customer experience and a number of studies have attempted to explain that price perception is a significant determinant of customer behaviours such as satisfaction, loyalty and return intention in the restaurant industry (Voon, 2012; Ryu & Han, 2010; Kim et al., 2009). For example, customer perception of reasonable price can enhance the effect of total restaurant service on customer satisfaction (Ryu & Han, 2010). Similarly, customer perception of price fairness in relation to restaurant service is found to be positively related to customer satisfaction (Liu & Jang, 2009a). Perceived fairness of price can be described as the customer's comparative judgement regarding the differences between the actual price and the acceptable price (Namkung & Jang, 2010). By extension, price fairness is found to be a major driver of customer satisfaction that in turn affects customer revisit intentions (Kim et al., 2009).

### 2.4.5 Locational Convenience

The term locational convenience tends to be used to refer to how customers perceive the time and effort that they spend in purchasing and using services (Berry, Seiders, & Grewal, 2002b). It has been suggested that location of the restaurant is critical to provide service convenience of customers and attract customers (Tzeng, Teng, Chen, & Opricovic, 2002). Mattila (2001) found that locational convenience has an effect on purchase motivations, specifically for the group of customers who have no special attachment to the restaurants. Convenience of locational accessibility is considered to be one of the prominent factors in enhancing positive customer experience (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Wong & Wu, 2013; Seiders, Voss, Godfrey, & Grewal, 2007; Seiders, Voss, Grewal, & Godfrey, 2005).

There is currently no consensus about which factors describe locational convenience but that the following factors have been identified. Tzeng et al. (2002) suggest that convenience of location encompasses physical location, convenience of public transportation and parking capacity. Other researchers have shown that important attributes of convenience are location of service facility, car parking availability and easiness to locate (Murphy, Moscardo, Benckendorff, & Pearce, 2011; Anselmsson, 2006; Seiders, Berry, & Gresham, 2000; Bell, 1999). Seiders et al. (2007) propose that operating hours along with physical location, car parking availability, and ease of way-finding are incorporated into access convenience. Table 7 illustrates the attributes of the locational convenience, which are drawn from the literature review.

**Table 7: Prior Research on Locational Convenience**

Author(s)	Convenience Attributes
Bell (1999)	Proximity to the location, car parking availability, ease of way-finding
Seiders et al. (2000)	Location of service facility, car parking availability, ease of way-finding
Tzeng et al. (2002)	Physical location, convenient transportation, parking capacity
Anselmsson (2006)	Car parking availability, ease of way-finding, movement
Seiders et al. (2007)	Ease of way-finding, car parking, physical location, operating hours
Kim et al. (2009)	Convenient location, short walking distance
Murphy et al. (2011)	Location of service facility, car parking availability, ease of way-finding
Wong and Wu (2013)	Physical accessibility, geographic location
Srivastava & Kaul (2014)	Location, utilities, entertainment

Previous studies have attempted to explain that perceived locational convenience is a significant determinant of customer behaviours such as satisfaction, word-of-mouth and return intention (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Kim et al., 2009; Seiders et al., 2007; Berry et

al., 2002b). For example, customer perception of locational convenience has a positive effect on customers' overall service evaluation in terms of customer satisfaction, the quality of the service and price fairness (Berry et al., 2002b). Seiders et al. (2005) demonstrated that the positive relationship between perceived convenience and customer satisfaction enhances repurchase behaviour such as revisit and repurchase spending. Srivastava and Kaul (2014) attested to the positive effect of convenience on customer experience.

## **2.5 Operationalising Customer Experience in the Restaurant Sector**

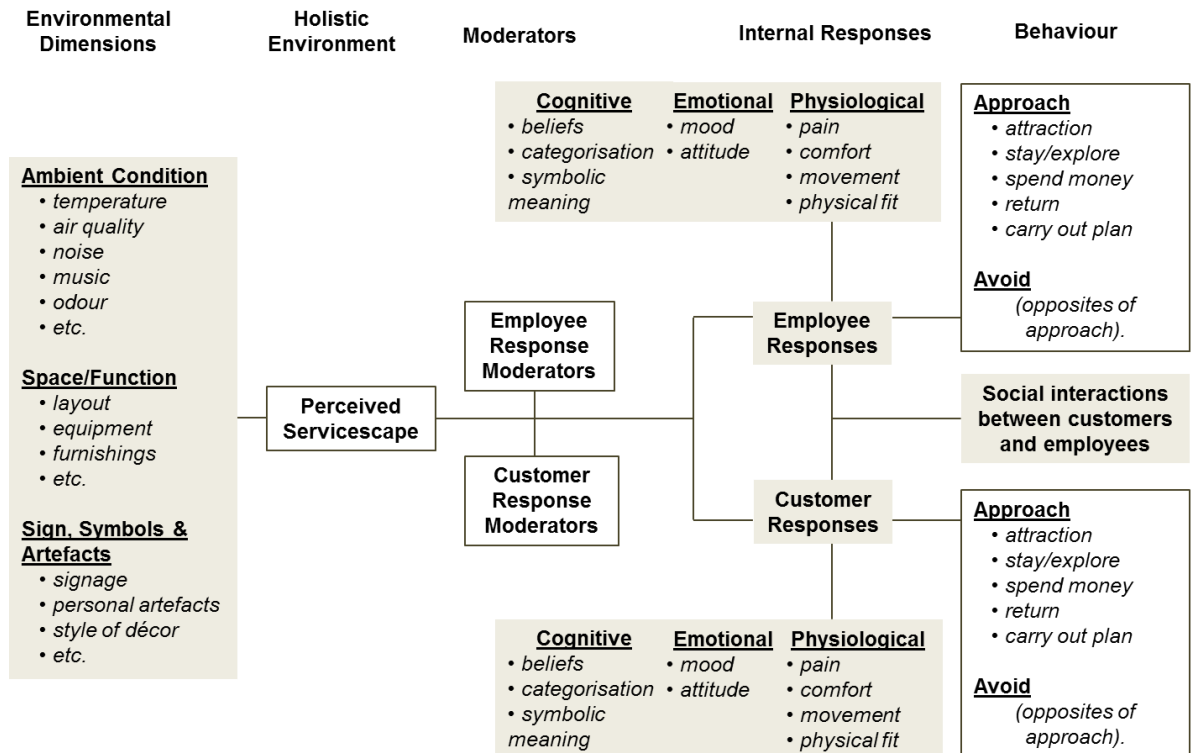
Numerous studies have attempted to explain the customer evaluation of service experience in different services contexts including: retailing (e.g. Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009); hotels (e.g. Ali et al., 2016a; Walls, 2013); restaurants (e.g. Marinkovic et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2010); and casinos (e.g. Wong & Wu, 2013). The importance of customer experience in the restaurant context, has been emphasised, based on the fact that a number of studies have found a positive relationship between customer experience and customer behaviours such as customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and behavioural intentions (i.e. revisit intention, word-of-mouth, recommendation) (Bujisic et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2014; Chang et al., 2013). In highly competitive markets, providing a positive customer experience can be an effective marketing strategy for restaurant management, with a view to attracting and retaining restaurant customers as well as making profit (Grønholdt, Martensen, Jørgensen, & Jensen, 2015; Torres et al., 2014; Han & Jeong, 2013). Hence, it is vital to understand what experiential attributes that compose restaurant experience concretely influence customers.

Previous research has indicated that multiple interactions with tangible and intangible attributes of the restaurant stimulate the customer's emotional and cognitive responses, thereby generating customer experience (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Bujisic et al., 2014; Marinkovic et al., 2014). Several authors propose that customer perceptions of the physical and social environment, the core product, price, and convenience in restaurants have a significant impact on customer experience (e.g. Marinkovic et al., 2014; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Walter et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009). In contrast to this, another group of authors puts emphasis on the perception of service environment of restaurants (i.e. physical and social environment) that considerably contributes to customer restaurant experience (Chang et al., 2013; Voon, 2012; Ryu & Jang, 2008).

The empirically derived experiential attributes of the service environment of restaurants seem to be considerably similar to Bitner's (1992) conceptual framework of the servicescape, which describes how the physical environment has an impact on customer and employee experiences in service organisations (see Figure 2) (Chang et al., 2013; Heung & Gu, 2012; Ryu et al., 2012; Voon, 2012). According to Lovelock and Wirtz (2003, p.285), the servicescape involves “the style and appearance of the physical surroundings and other experiential elements encountered by customers at service delivery sites”. Bitner (1992) identifies three environmental dimensions: ambient conditions; spatial layout and functionality; and signs, symbols, and artefacts. Ambient conditions are related to aesthetic appeal, including the architectural design, cleanliness, lighting, temperature, air quality, music and scent. Spatial layout and functionality imply the ways in which seats, aisles, hallways and walkways, restrooms, and the entrances and exits are designed and arranged in service settings. Signs, symbols, and artefacts encompass the décor and signage used to interconnect and heighten a certain image, or to direct customers to desired places. The customer's perception of the environmental dimensions and physical settings for interpersonal services provokes cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses, and they in turn influence the customer's behaviours such as customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, and revisit intention (Bitner, 1992).



**Figure 2: The Conceptual Framework of the Servicescape**



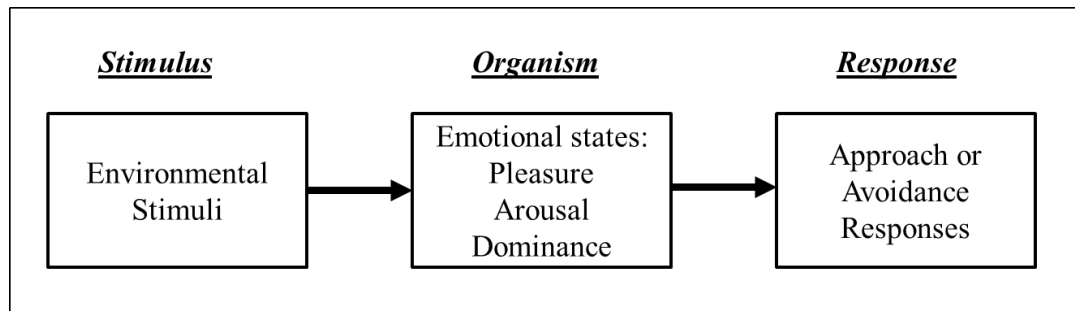
Adapted from Bitner (1992, p.60)

Thus, it can be suggested that the elements of the servicescape are analogous to the experiential attributes that condition customer experience. Despite the argument that the environmental dimensions of the servicescape tend to neglect the social aspects of restaurant environments (Harris & Ezech, 2008), Bitner (1992) suggests that the servicescape affects the nature and quality of interactions between customers and service employees in interpersonal service. The overall conceptual frameworks of customer experience and the servicescape is similar, in that they both cover various attributes of the restaurant environment that customers perceive and the stimulated emotional and cognitive responses. From this perspective, it can be considered that the servicescape overlaps with customer experience.

Bitner (1992) takes into consideration the potential influence of the physical environment to enhance the customer's perception of the services, on the basis of the fundamental models in environmental psychology. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) examined how individuals respond to environments and draw from the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm, which postulates that the environment is a stimulus (S) affecting people's inner evaluations (O), which in turn drive approach or avoidance responses by way of two

contrasting forms of behaviour (R) (see Figure 3). In their S-O-R model, various environmental stimuli of the physical atmosphere induced emotional states (pleasure, arousal, and dominance) within the customer, thereby driving approach and avoidance behaviours in a marketing environment (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974).

**Figure 3: Mehrabian and Russell's S-O-R Model**



Adapted from Donovan and Rossiter (1982, p.42)

Russell (1980) posits that emotional responses to the environment can be interpreted as two independent and bipolar dimensions including a pleasure–displeasure dimension and an arousal–sleep dimension. In Russell's (1980) model of affect, excitement, boredom, distress, and relaxation are described as cognitive spatial representations of emotions defined by the pleasure and arousal axes. Pleasure refers to the evaluation of an individual's current state of the environment; and arousal refers to an individual's emotional response to the state of the environment. Such affect can be potently influenced by the customer's perceptions and cognitive processes, depending on the degree of complexity of the environmental stimuli (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2003). In addition, the evaluated responses to the environment are linked to approach or avoidance behaviours (Russell, 1980).

Previous studies have applied Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) S-O-R model in the service settings to indicate the significant effect of the service environment on the customer's emotions and behaviours (Spence et al., 2014; Jang & Namkung, 2009; Liu & Jang, 2009b; Wakefield & Baker, 1998). For example, the influence of the physical environment as the key stimuli of the restaurant experience and enhancing the possibility of favourable behavioural intentions, can be mediated by the customer's positive emotion (Spence et al., 2014; Liu & Jang, 2009b). Jang and Namkung (2009) suggest that the physical environment along with the product, and the services provided by service employees

constitute the customer's comprehensive evaluation of the restaurant environment. They demonstrated the effect of customer's perception of the restaurant environment on the creation of customer emotions and thereby behavioural intentions. Despite the fact that the S-O-R model has attempted to understand the mediating role of the customer's emotion during the consumption experience in the service process, it seems to lack the ability to explain the effect of environmental stimuli on the customer's cognition. By being grounded in environmental psychology, Bitner's (1992) conceptual model of the servicescape extends the model to include the cognitive responses such as beliefs, categorisation and symbolic meaning, which are experienced by customers upon interaction with environmental cues.

There are, however, limitations to both the S-O-R and servicescape models in defining customer experience. It can be difficult, for example, to fully account for the social dimensions of a customer's experiences with the service environment, such as the customer's interactions with service employees and other customers, through the use of the S-O-R model and the servicescape model. Harris and Eze (2008) noted that whilst the servicescape model takes into account physical aspects of the environmental setting, social aspects are less accounted for. Use of this model in defining customer experience in certain service settings is therefore problematic. As Knutson et al. (2006) noted, a hospitality organisation cannot solely rely only on physical elements to provide a fascinating customer experience, as experience is more complex than the architecture, décor, and appearance of service employees. A need for further empirical research on the servicescape has therefore been identified, in order to reconceptualise it to include more of the social aspects of the service environment such as the presence of others (i.e. service employees and other customers) (Harris & Eze, 2008).

Another limitation of both the S-O-R and the servicescape model is that they lack the ability to account for all aspects of the customer's response to the experiential stimuli in a service organisation, which is discussed in the prior section (see section 2.3.2). The dimensions of customer experience state that customers respond on emotional, cognitive, sensorial, social and physical levels during their direct or indirect interactions with a service organisation. A number of studies that claim to understand the customer experience in the service industry have paid attention to one or two dimensions, such as sense, emotion, and cognition (Han & Jeong, 2013; Bigné, Mattila, & Andreu, 2008). However, this may lead to a lack of research concerning the customer experience only from the

perspective of the customer, viewing experience as a multidimensional construct in the service industry.

## **2.6 Cultural Context**

Customer evaluation of the service experience is dependent on different aspects of customer culture (Hwang & Seo, 2016; Akaka, Vargo, & Schau, 2013; Verhoef et al., 2009; Johns & Pine, 2002; Winsted, 1997). With respect to cultural values and characteristics, Hofstede (2010) identifies six cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty-avoidance, masculinity-femininity, long-term orientation and indulgence-restraint. Power distance refers to the extent of inequality of power within a society, namely the power of social hierarchy; Individualism-Collectivism refers to the extent to which individuals are interdependent within their group or society; Uncertainty-Avoidance refers to the degree to which individuals embrace their uncomfortable feelings against unknown and ambiguous situations; Masculinity-Femininity reflects fundamental gender roles in any society; Long-term orientation reflects that societies seek the long-term benefit with pragmatic adaptation of useful time-honoured traditions and convention, in contrast to the focus on the ideological, short-term benefit (i.e. Short-term orientation); and Indulgence-Restraint refers to the extent to which individuals' gratification of their desires and impulses is controlled.

Schwartz (2006) proposes three value dimensions of culture: Embeddedness vs. Autonomy, Hierarchy vs. Egalitarianism, and Mastery vs. Harmony. The first dimension (Embeddedness vs. Autonomy) refers to the extent to which the individual is related to the group within societies; the second dimension (Hierarchy vs. Egalitarianism) describes guarantee of individuals' responsible social behaviour to maintain their social structure; and the last dimension (Mastery vs. Harmony) describes regulation of individuals' management of the relationship between them and social world.

Previous authors have criticised that Hofstede's cultural dimensions have methodological limitations such as the internal validity and the method of establishing a survey (Jahandideh, Golmohammadi, Meng, O'Gorman, & Taheri, 2014; Furrer, Liu, & Sudharshan, 2000). Hofstede's cultural dimensions are deemed to be insufficient to describe different sub-cultures such as age, gender, and religion underlying the cultural dimensions (McSweeney, 2002; Schwartz, 1999). Despite this criticism, Hofstede's framework encompasses comprehensive national cultural dimensions (Schwartz, 2006). In addition, the sample size and the systematization of cultural characteristics along with

numerical indices are deemed appealing attributes in Hofstede's study (Furrer et al., 2000). Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been also applied in a number of studies on customer experience (e.g. Torres et al., 2014; Patterson & Mattila, 2008; Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007; Mattila, 2000; Winsted, 1997).

Previous studies have examined the influence of culture on customer evaluation of the service, particularly with regard to cultural dimensions of Power Distance and/or Individualism-Collectivism (e.g. Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007; Furrer et al., 2000; Mattila, 2000; Winsted, 1997). Most Asian cultures (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore) are characterised by relatively high power distances and high collectivism whereas many Western cultures (e.g. the UK, Canada, Ireland, and the USA) are characterised by low power distance and high individualism (Hofstede, 2001). Furthermore, Hall (1984) recognised two cultural dimensions with respect to communication styles across cultures: high-context culture prefers indirect and implicit communication and low-context culture prefers direct, explicit and clear communication. The cultures of most Asian countries are closer to high-context culture whereas the cultures of most Western countries are closed to low-context culture (Hall, 1984).

People from a collectivistic cultural background are inclined to pay more attention to the feelings and desires of others during a conversation, in addition to non-verbal specific factors such as body language, voice tone and eye contact. By contrast people from an individualistic cultural background are more aware of the content of conversation (Triandis, 2001; Kim, Hunter, Miyahara, & Horvath, 1996). People from collectivistic cultures may be more conscious of the social evaluation from others than individualistic people (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2012), who tend to be more at ease in interactions with strangers than people from collectivistic cultures (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987). Hwang and Seo (2016) suggest that with regard to cultural differences, relational responses of customer experience are more crucial for Asian customers than for Western customers.

Another factor to consider is that people from larger power differentials cultures are inclined to perceive that service employees rank low in the social scale (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007). Previous studies have examined customer perception of the service environment in view of cultural differences (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007; Furrer et al., 2000; Mattila, 1999; Donthu & Yoo, 1998). For example, Donthu and Yoo (1998) found that customers from high power distance culture had lower expectations of responsiveness and

reliability from the service employees than low power distance customers; while customers in collectivistic culture placed less importance on empathy and assurance of service quality than individualistic customers. In contrast to the findings of Donthu and Yoo, however, Furrer et al. (2000) found that collectivistic customers had higher expectations of empathy and assurance from the service employees than individualistic customers. Mattila (1999) suggest that customers in Western countries may expect a more appealing physical environment and higher levels of personalised services than those in Asian countries. Additionally, Kong and Jogaratnam (2007) found that the concern dimension, relating to the behaviour of service employees such as caring, attentiveness, and friendliness, was more important for Korean customers than American customers; while the personalised services (i.e. recognition, greeting, and expressed familiarity) was more important for American customers to evaluate service encounters.

## **2.7 Research Gap**

Previous research has argued that interactions with social presence (e.g. friends or family members) have either a positive or negative impact on customer experience (Albrecht, 2016; Carù & Cova, 2015; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). Evidence within the literature suggests that there is a clear distinction between experience when alone and experience when with others (see section 2.4.1). For example, Ramanathan and McGill (2007) suggest that retrospective experiences can be differently evaluated depending on whether individuals were with others or were alone. Most empirical research on customer experience has not, however, considered the influence of the absence of social presence specifically (e.g. Garg & Amelia, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Bujisic et al., 2014). As such there remains little understanding of solo dining experience. There have been some, albeit limited, prior research studies that have examined individual aspects of solo dining experience such as the relationship between meal duration and the amount eaten by solo diners (Brindal et al., 2011; Hetherington et al., 2006), and the relationship between social presence (i.e. acquaintance or unacquaintance) and solo customers' service experience (He et al., 2012; Kim & Lee, 2012; Jakobs et al., 1996). The current research is, however, limited and insufficiently explains the restaurant experience for solo diners, exploration of this is therefore a pertinent research aim.

A review of the literature on customer experience also highlighted that different cultural backgrounds influence customer evaluation of the service experience (e.g. Hwang & Seo, 2016; Torres et al., 2014; Akaka et al., 2013) (see section 2.6). Despite the influence of culture on customer evaluation of the service environment, the conceptual model of

customer experience developed in most empirical studies is based on customers from Western cultures, and due to cultural differences may therefore not be applicable in Asian cultures. It is therefore necessary to understand how customers perceive the service environment to create customer experience from a different cultural view. Hence, in this study, a customer experience model will be developed as integrating interactive components of the restaurant settings perceived by Korean solo diners, who are characterised by the cultures of high power distance and collectivism.

In order to measure customer perception of dining environment (i.e. physical and social environment) in restaurant experience, several studies in other customer groups have utilised Bitner's (1992) servicescape framework (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Voon, 2012; Ryu & Han, 2011). Another group of authors highlight that various features of the restaurant environment that influences customer experience has the capability of embodying the concept of the servicescape, but the servicescape model is insufficient to fully explain the customer evaluation of service experience in the restaurant context (Kim et al., 2009; Ryu & Jang, 2008) (see section 2.5). The customer experience is shaped through interactions with various experiential aspects of the service environment including physical aspects (e.g. facility aesthetics, ambience, and spatial layout), social aspects (e.g. service employees, fellow customers, and companions), functional aspects (i.e. the core product), perceived price fairness, and convenience (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Wijaya et al., 2013; Chang & Horng, 2010; Kim et al., 2009). The servicescape, however, focuses on the physical features more than on social features of environmental element (Harris & Ezech, 2008) and only accounts for customer's cognitive, emotional and physiological responses to the environmental elements (Bitner, 1992). Thus, customer experience is broader and more extensive than the servicescape. In order to understand the role of the restaurant environment as interactive stimuli of customer experience based on the customer's multiple responses (i.e. sensorial, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and social), the service environmental factors of a service organisation in the servicescape model need to be developed to reflect customer's multiple responses to physical, social and functional aspects of the service offerings.

In this study, the interactive and non-interactive dimensions and detailed experiential attributes will be explicitly explored to understand how solo diners perceive their experience with the support of qualitative data. The literature review identifies customer perceptions of five dimensions: the physical environment, the social environment (such as interactions with service employees and other customers), food quality, value for money,

and locational convenience, as the most important contributors to customer restaurant experience. The detailed research gaps will be discussed below in order to identify the research questions.

Firstly, based on the fact that physical environment is considered an important factor in the creation of customer experience, the service organisation needs to provide an environmental setting which is able to both engage and enhance the customer's desired experience (Walls, 2013; Yuan & Wu, 2008; Schmitt, 1999). Despite an increasing recognition of the importance of designing a distinctive physical environment in the service industry, there still seems to be insufficient research to fully understand a view of the customer's responses to physical environment (Walls, 2013; Ryu & Han, 2011). Also, there has to date been little research into the relationship between physical environment and restaurant experience in the context of solo diners (Bae & Kim, 2017). A pertinent area for further research therefore, is to deepen and enhance the understanding of the combined effect of both the physical environment and the physical experiential attributes from the solo diner's perspectives. This research will address what specific experiential factors of physical environment actually influence solo diners in the restaurant environment setting.

#### **RQ1- What is the impact of interactions with physical environment on solo dining experience?**

Secondly, although previous studies have attempted to demonstrate the importance of the social environment including the customer-employee interaction and the customer-customer interaction, there is still insufficient empirical research investigating the effect of social interactions on customer experience in the service setting (Albrecht, 2016; Nasermoadeli et al., 2013; Brocato et al., 2012). Furthermore, services marketing research lacks a comprehensive understanding of how to assess customers' perceptions of the social environment through direct or indirect interactions with both service employees and other customers. That is because numerous studies have only examined a specific dimension of the social environment such as either interactions between customers and service employees (Bae & Kim, 2017; Pugh, 2001) or interactions between customers and other customers (Kwon et al., 2016; Miao, 2014; Uhrich & Tombs, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2012).

In addition, previous research has argued that customer experience can be influenced by the presence of companions, with whom a customer visits a restaurant (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Verhoef et al., 2009; Raajpoot, 2002). The customers' interactions with their dining companion during the meal can enhance or ruin their restaurant experience (Walter et al.,



2010; Hansen et al., 2005). Nevertheless, most empirical studies have not considered the effect of the presence of a companion on customer experience (e.g. Ali et al., 2016a; Walls, 2013; Wu & Liang, 2009). There remains an unexplained aspect of how the social environment influences the customer's restaurant experience from the solo diner's perspectives. Hence, in this study, the social environment component of customer experience will be empirically examined with the goal of understanding how solo diners interact with service employees and other customers, and how their interactions impact the solo dining experience.

Despite the importance of interactions between customers and service employees in the restaurant experience, there is no consensus on the different attributes in customer's perceptions of interaction with service employees (e.g. Kim et al., 2009; Wu & Liang, 2009). Furthermore, most empirical research on customer-to-employees interactions in the service context has not considered differences in individual experience when either alone or with others. Hence, in this study, experiential attributes relating to interactions with service employees of the social environment will be explored to understand what and how customer-to-employee interaction stimulates solo diners' responses in the creation of their restaurant experience. Based on the review of literature regarding the customer-service employee interaction as one of determinants of customer experience (see section 2.4.2.1), the following research question was derived below:

**RQ2a- What is the impact of interactions with service employees on solo dining experience?**

Despite being recognised as an important determinant of customer experience, the influence of the presence of other customers has been relatively neglected in the services literature (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Wu, 2008; Moore et al., 2005). The effect of presence of other customers on customer experience is differently perceived and evaluated across cultures or service contexts (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). Much of research, however, on customer-to-customer interactions has been examined in the retail context in a western culture (e.g. Argo et al., 2005; Dahl, Manchanda, & Argo, 2001). It has also been recognised that an individual customer in a group has less negative responses to the presence of other customers compared to when alone (Finsterwalder & Tuzovic, 2010; He et al., 2008; Jakobs et al., 1996). Despite this, most studies on the presence of other customers have not dealt with whether the other customer is an individual or part of a group in the customer experience. Hence, in this

study, the effect of the presence of other customers in the service environment on customer experience will be empirically examined from the viewpoints of solo diners.

**RQ2b- What is the impact of interactions with other customers on solo dining experience?**

Thirdly, despite the importance of food quality in the restaurant industry, there is no consensus on the different dimensions of customer's perceptions of food quality, and how this determines restaurant experience (Bujisic et al., 2014; Jeong & Jang, 2011). Hence, in this study, the food quality dimensions of customer experience will be explored to understand what experiential attributes that compose food quality concretely influence solo diners in the restaurant setting, and how food quality stimulates the customer's responses in the creation of customer experience. Based on this and the review of literature regarding the core product as one of determinants of customer experience (see section 2.4.3), the following research question was derived:

**RQ3- What is the impact of food quality on solo dining experience?**

Fourthly, previous empirical studies have emphasised the positive effect of price perception on customer experience that in turn enhances customer behavioural intentions (Walls, 2013; Voon, 2012; Oh et al., 2007). Additionally, reasonableness of price may positively influence customers' choices of store (Grewal et al., 2009). Despite the fact that price perception is a significant determinant of customer experience evaluation, little research has been done in the restaurant industry (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Ryu & Han, 2010; Walter et al., 2010). In this sense, the present research seeks to empirically examine the role of price perception as an influential factor in customer experience, with a view to understanding how solo diners perceive and interpret the prices they paid at restaurants in their personal restaurant experiences.

**RQ4- What is the impact of perceived price on solo dining experience?**

Finally, despite the importance of locational convenience, there is insufficient empirical research on the relationship between location and customer experience (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Farquhar & Rowley, 2009). Though location of service facility as a situational factor can intervene in the relationship between interactive determinants and customer experience (Verhoef et al., 2009), few empirical studies have attempted to explain how customers interpret their overall experiences in terms of convenience of locational accessibility (e.g. Wong & Wu, 2013; Walter et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009). Hence, in this study, customer

perception of locational convenience will be empirically examined to understand how solo diners perceive and interpret convenience of restaurant location in their restaurant experiences.

**RQ5- What is the impact of restaurant locational convenience on solo dining experience?**

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the methodology undertaken in this study. This study aims to develop a view of restaurant experience from the solo diners' perspective. This chapter offers an explanation of the philosophical position and the methodological strategy adopted in attempting to explore and understand the solo diners' perception of restaurant experience.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: The first section (section 3.2) explores the ontology and epistemology underlying the research philosophy, and then presents the rationale for the interpretivist philosophy adopted in this research. The second section (section 3.3) presents the research approach that guided the research process, and the third section (section 3.4) explains the research design employed to attain the aim of this study. The fourth section (section 3.5) discusses semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection, with an account of the sampling and sample size. The fifth section (section 3.6) provides a detailed presentation of the data collection process including preparation and conduct of interviews. The sixth section (section 3.7) presents the thematic analysis as a method of data interpretation, and key components of the data analysis such as data preparation, coding process, and data display are discussed. The seventh section (section 3.8) addresses how the quality of the research was evaluated, and the final section (section 3.9) provides a description of how ethical issues were considered.

### **3.2 Research Philosophy, Ontology and Epistemology**

Research philosophy is associated with the way in which the researcher views and believes the world (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Philosophical choices in research can help to clarify what, how, and why research should be undertaken with an obvious purpose, and also have implications for the choice of methods used to provide good answers to the research questions that the researcher is seeking (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001). Carson et al. (2001) suggest there are two main research philosophies: positivism and interpretivism. Positivist researchers believe that a single external reality can be viewed in the social world through the process of the observation (Crotty, 1998) and therefore, the researcher can have independent and objective direct access to the real world (Mason, 2002). In contrast, interpretivists believe in the existence of many realities, proposing that social reality arises through the perceptions of social actors and the consequence of their actions (Saunders et al., 2012). Within each philosophy there are inherent questions of both

ontology and epistemology. Whilst ontology is concerned with what the researcher thinks reality is, epistemology questions how the researcher gains acceptable knowledge (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Table 8 illustrates the explanations of ontology and epistemology for both philosophies.

**Table 8: Comparison of Positivism and Interpretivism**

	Positivism	Interpretivism
Ontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• have direct access to real world</li> <li>• single external reality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no direct access to real world</li> <li>• no single external reality</li> </ul>
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• possible to obtain hard, secure objective knowledge</li> <li>• research focuses on generalisation and abstraction</li> <li>• thought governed by hypotheses and stated theories</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understood through ‘perceived’ knowledge</li> <li>• research focuses on the specific and concrete</li> <li>• seeking to understand specific context</li> </ul>

Adapted from Carson et al. (2001, p.6)

Ontology is about the nature of reality in the social world, and questions: what it is composed of; what social entities work within it; and how these social entities interact with each other (Station-Rogers, 2006). It is fundamentally concerned with what aspects of the social world can be conceptualised (Crotty, 1998), and this challenges the researcher to think about the fundamental aspects of reality that underlie their research (Mason, 2002).

The positivist philosophy goes hand in hand with an objectivist ontology which proposes that the world is composed of objective social entities, and that these entities exist external to social actors (Saunders et al., 2012). It regards reality as a concrete structure, which is influenced in the same way by all social entities (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). The objectivist ontology asserts that there is a single reality, which exists independent of, or apart, from the human mind (Crotty, 1998) and that a meaningful reality exists apart from the researcher (Creswell, 1994).

In contrast, the interpretivist philosophy is associated with a subjectivist ontology and is therefore predicated on the belief that meaningful realities come out of the individuals’ own perceptions of their world (Crotty, 1998). According to Guba and Lincoln (1982) the social and behavioural phenomena generated through social interaction should be explained based not on a simple objective point of view, but rather on a variety of views on

one universe of multiple realities. Interpretivist researchers believe that multiple realities exist in people's minds through the process of interaction between human beings and their world (Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge, addressing the question of what is counted as acceptable knowledge (Saunders et al., 2012). Similarly, epistemology portrays the position of how the researcher gains acceptable knowledge, by examining the relationship between the researcher and that which is being researched in the social reality (Carson et al., 2001; Creswell, 1994). Epistemology can not only assist the researcher in producing valid knowledge and explanations about the researcher's different views of the social world (Mason, 2002), but also have an impact on how the researcher sets out to determine the data collection method (Denscombe, 2002).

The positivist epistemology portrays that valid knowledge can be observed and measured through independent and objective methods, based on the objectivist ontology of the existence of a single reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2002). Additionally, the positivist epistemology proposes that knowledge can be arrived at in a value-free manner, through the gathering of facts relating to social phenomena in an observable reality (Station-Rogers, 2006). With a positivistic position, researchers seek to explain a causal relationship, and the basis for laws relating to patterns and regularities in human and social behaviour (Carson et al., 2001). The hypotheses formulated through the use of existing theory can be rigorously tested and gradually refined to build up general laws of social life (Saunders et al., 2012) as such positivists often use quantitative research methods.

Contrary to the positivist epistemology, the interpretivist epistemology is based on the belief that knowledge is created through the meanings that people attach to social phenomena. Knowledge is thus differentially constructed through the multiple understandings and interpretations of people (Station-Rogers, 2006). The different views and meanings that emerge from individuals' experiences are achieved through their accumulations of thoughts, feelings, concerns and communications, which is based on the interpretivist ontology that there are multiple realities which exist inside the mind (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). The interpretivist epistemology asserts that meaning can be influenced by the presence of the researcher, because it is obtained from interactions between the researcher and the research participants (Crotty, 1998; Creswell, 1994). In interpretivist research, the researcher should try to describe, translate and arrive at the

meanings in order to understand the differences between people (Collis & Hussey, 2003), hence interpretivists often use qualitative research methods.

In this research an interpretivist philosophy was adopted in order to understand the restaurant experience of solo diners. The emergence of solo diners in the restaurant industry has identified the restaurant experiences of this distinct customer group as a novel area of research. There has, however, been very little research on the solo diner's restaurant experience to date (e.g. Bae & Kim, 2017; He et al., 2012; Brindal et al., 2011). Specifically, there is very little known about customers' solo dining experiences in South Korea despite the emergence of solo diners as a new customer group. Adopting an interpretivist philosophy allows the researcher to explore the different meanings of solo diners' experiences and interpretations, and its relation to the phenomenon of increasing solo diners within South Korea.

Secondly, individual solo diners based on their own view, may perceive different experiences from various interactive attributes of the restaurant and therefore, it cannot be generalised. In this study, multiple realities are viewed from solo diners' perception of their restaurant experiences. The adoption of the interpretivist philosophy can offer an effective way of seeking a deeper understanding of customers' personal experiences (Walls et al., 2011a; Hansen et al., 2005). This is because the interpretivist believes, that through being closely involved with the subject of research, a greater understanding of what is occurring and why people have different experiences in a specific context can be gained (Carson et al., 2001). The interpretivist researcher can seek to comprehend and elucidate why people have different experiences, by reflecting on what people think and how they communicate with each other (Station-Rogers, 2006).

Lastly, whilst there is an abundance of theories on restaurant dining experience, there is not a model of the customer experience of solo diners. A qualitative approach is adopted when there is a paucity of theories. This study, therefore, is based upon a qualitative exploratory research approach with an underlying interpretivist philosophy, in order to gain an initial in-depth understanding of the interactive and non-interactive attributes, which influence solo diners' restaurant experiences. Such a qualitative approach could then provide a model or a framework for future quantitative studies.

### **3.3 Research Approach**

Research approach concerns the question of what the research process is and how methodological assumptions arise from the philosophical position taken (Creswell, 1994).

It concerns the way in which theory and research are connected (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Evaluating the research approach can help the researcher to determine how research is conducted and how the problem is identified in the research (Carson et al., 2001). It can be summarised as falling into two different research designs and methodologies, the deductive approach, and the inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2012; Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The deductive approach is based on hypotheses constructed from the existing theories, influencing the rest of the research process (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). Carson et al. (2001) state that the deductive approach begins with the development of a theoretical or conceptual framework derived from the existing knowledge, and moves to testing or verifying whether these hypotheses can be accepted or rejected. It starts with ‘why’ as the general and drives ‘whether’ as the specific (Babbie, 2012). The deductive approach as theory testing with the use of statistical analysis, is normally placed under a positivist philosophical position (Collis & Hussey, 2003; Easterby-Smith et al., 2002).

In contrast, the inductive approach involves the development of a theory through the empirical observations of facts (Station-Rogers, 2006). It moves from ‘whether’ as the specific to ‘why’ as the general (Babbie, 2012). The inductive approach begins with gathering data to explore the phenomena, and moves on to improving the existing theories or formulating a new theory as the outcome of data analysis (Saunders et al., 2012). In research adopting an inductive approach, the researcher can draw explanations about what has been observed and the descriptions of the different views of the phenomena through the analysis of the data collected (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Inductive approach as theory building is normally positioned under the philosophy of interpretivism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002; Creswell, 1994).

In several studies for research methods, the abductive approach is also portrayed as one of the research approaches (Saunders et al., 2012; Station-Rogers, 2006). It attempts to develop a plausible theory by involving the constant interaction between tentative theory and observation during the research process (Rose, Spinks, & Canhoto, 2015). The abductive approach starts by observing an anomaly, and seeking for the best explanation of how it could have occurred (Saunders et al., 2012). In the abductive approach, the different themes and patterns emerge from the analysis of detailed, rich data, which may or may not have connection with pertinent theories according to circumstances (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016). The abductive approach is normally employed in either qualitative or mixed method research (Rose et al., 2015).



In terms of this research, an inductive approach under an interpretive philosophical stance was adopted. This is because, as an exploratory research, this study attempts to explore and discover the restaurant experiences of solo diners, gaining an initial insight through face to face interviews. This is due to the absence of detailed research on the subject, with very few studies carried out on customer experience in the restaurant context. According to Saunders et al. (2012), an inductive approach is usually conducted to better understand the nature of the context in which the problem is occurring by seeking out the meaning of the phenomena. In addition, it enables the researcher to have new insights that emerge from the empirical observations of the world, based on reflections of particular experiences (Carson et al., 2001). Hence, it was believed that an inductive approach would be most appropriate to understand the nature of customer experiences, interpret the exact meanings and then develop theory about the solo customer experience in the restaurant industry.

### **3.4 Research Design**

Research design is the framework or the overall plan, which allows the researcher to understand what is to be accomplished and how the research is to be carried out (Churchill & Brown, 2004). In other words, it relates to the reason why the research is conducted (Collis & Hussey, 2003). The research design is crucial to setting up the research in the beginning so as to answer or elucidate the research questions and meet the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2012). A considered and valid choice of research design is able to greatly affect the type and quality of the research (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). In terms of research design there are three main ways in which the researcher answers the research question in accordance with the fundamental purpose of the research: exploratory, descriptive, or causal research (Churchill & Brown, 2004).

When there is little or no understanding of the research problem or issue, exploratory research is most appropriate (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). An exploratory research design is particularly useful in seeking insight into the general essentiality of a problem and in clarifying the relevant issues to reveal the variables concerned with the problem (Reddy & Acharyulu, 2008). It can be conducted by observing or reflecting experience (Collis & Hussey, 2003). In addition, exploratory research enables the researcher to change his/her direction and through this flexibility and adaptability allows new data and new ideas or insights to arise (Saunders et al., 2012).

In a descriptive research design the researcher attempts to describe the phenomena as they occur (Collis & Hussey, 2003). It is undertaken to identify and gain the precise

characteristics of the relevant phenomena (Saunders et al., 2012). In descriptive research, the researcher first needs to conceptualise and define relationships between variables in the phenomena before then determining how data is collected to test hypotheses (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). Descriptive research both enables the researcher to generate hypotheses along with the means of testing the hypotheses (Stevens, Wrenn, Sherwood, & Ruddick, 2006).

A causal research design is used to analyse and explain why or how the phenomena are occurring (Collis & Hussey, 2003). It aims at establishing that a single cause of a phenomena or event results in some foreseeable consequences (Coldwell & Herbst, 2004). In comparison to descriptive research, which is useful to identify correlation between the characteristics of a phenomenon, causal research enables the researcher to better understand a problem or phenomenon by ascertaining and identifying cause-and-effect relationships between its characteristics (Churchill & Brown, 2004). Similar to a descriptive research design, in causal research it is also necessary to have clearly planned and structured procedures on how to collect data prior to the data collection, but the procedures can be controlled in the experimental research (Stevens et al., 2006).

Given the aim of the research, the use of an exploratory research approach, which refers to open questions to understand the marketing phenomena and gain insights into its problems, is appropriate to this research (Malhotra & Birks, 2006). Based on the review of literature regarding customer experience, the main research question is derived from how solo diners perceive and conceptualise their restaurant experiences. Although, there has already been much research on customer experiences in general, little is known about the experience of solo diners in the restaurant industry. Hence, it is necessary to use an exploratory research design that allows the researcher to gain insights and understanding of the topic of interest. According to Collis and Hussey (2003), if there is insufficient research related to the research problem or issue, exploratory research should be conducted as the most suitable way to develop existing or new theories by collecting empirical data about the problem. For this study, an exploratory research design was adopted to answer the research questions by obtaining thoughtful insights into, and developing a more understanding of, solo diners' restaurant experience about which there is currently little known.

### **3.5 Data Collection Method**

Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) describes two types of data collection methods: as quantitative methods and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods are appropriate to seek the answers

to ‘what kind of’ and ‘how many’ type questions on the situation, whereas qualitative research methods are adequate to seek in-depth understanding of the phenomena by addressing questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ particular phenomena happen, and what the implications are of the phenomena (Carson et al., 2001).

In quantitative data collection methods, which generally go with the positivist philosophy, research data is gathered by the use of numerical measurements and analysed by statistical techniques or other quantificational techniques (Saunders et al., 2012). Quantitative research is primarily conducted through the use of questionnaires or surveys (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). In contrast, qualitative data collection methods, which normally underlie the philosophy of interpretivism, are associated with non-numerical measurement to collect data and interpretive techniques for the analysis of the data (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Qualitative data is typically gathered through interviews, participant observations, or diaries in social research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In terms of this research, qualitative data collection methods are suitable for capturing the different views that may emerge from solo diners’ restaurant experiences, because qualitative methods offer an effective way of gaining an explanation and understanding of a person’s experience or behaviour to generate or revise a conceptual framework (Sedmak & Longhurst, 2010). In addition, the characteristics of qualitative methods enable the researcher to attain a systematic or holistic picture of the subject of research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). With regard to the aim of this study, which is to develop a view of restaurant experience from the solo diners’ perspective, the use of qualitative methods that achieve a picture of what constitutes solo dining experience is more appropriate. Finally, this study, whilst informed by previous research, is not testing any existing models of customer dining experience and hence qualitative data collection methods are the most suitable research methods to follow.

### **3.5.1 Research Instrument: Semi-structured Interviews**

Interviews, as one of the qualitative research methods for gathering data, have been generally adopted in the social sciences (Kvale, 2007). Interviewing is the most fundamental technique of qualitative methods, used to gain deep insights into how respondents perceive their life world (Carson et al., 2001). In an interview approach, knowledge is constructed through actual interactions between the researcher and the selected respondents (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). The use of interviews enables the

researcher to reveal new ideas and obtain vivid, comprehensive accounts based on the participant's experience (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002).

Through considering the research purpose (i.e. exploratory, descriptive or causal), the researcher should determine which type of interview is most appropriate to utilise (Saunders et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews are particularly suited for an exploratory study to discover new or unexpected aspects of a specific issue (Saunders et al., 2012; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). Based on the exploratory nature of this research, a semi-structured interview was employed as an appropriate technique to understand and broaden knowledge about customer experience in the restaurant industry. Semi-structured interviews attempt to understand and describe the experiences and meanings of the lived world from the respondents' own views with the researcher interpreting what respondents say (Kvale, 2007). Semi-structured interviews are conducted with a predetermined guide, including an outline of topics and issues to be covered, the size of sample, selected participants, and suggested questions (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010).

McCracken (1988) points out that most participants have difficulty giving a full account of what and how they perceive phenomena, because it is hard to recall their opinions, memories and feelings about particular events or situations. Thus semi-structured interviews, which help to stimulate discussions of previous experiences, are most appropriate to draw out the participants' perceptions of a chosen situation (Collis & Hussey, 2003). In addition, there is an advantage in adopting the semi-structured interview: that its structure is flexible, allowing opportunities for adding omitted questions or relevant questions coming into the researcher's mind when appropriate (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This can help the researcher to attain the answer to the research questions and objectives by encouraging the respondents to take account of the matter more minutely.

Several researchers have supported the suitability of semi-structured interviews in the study of customer experience. In Walls et al.'s (2011b) study on the customer's hotel experiences, a semi-structured interview technique was used to account for the participants' customer experience in depth and detail and to creatively explore customer experience. Previous research on customer experience argues that the semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to minimise the risk, in which the participants' responses could be led in a certain direction (Walls et al., 2011b; Hansen et al., 2005). With the use of the semi-structured interview, the researcher would be able to encourage the respondents to recall their solo dining experiences and, therefore, capture their different perceptions on

interactive stimuli for restaurant experiences. Hence, it was decided that the semi-structured interview would be the best method to adopt for exploring how solo diners perceive restaurant experiences and evaluate their respective dining experiences.

Semi-structured interviews are thought to be the most useful method for exploring the respondents' perspectives on a particular subject, but this method has both strengths and limitations. One strength is that semi-structured interviews facilitate honest divulging of information from respondents in an informal atmosphere. Through such an atmosphere the researcher can build and retain rapport with the respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Furthermore, the use of semi-structured interviews enables the researcher to gain a more comprehensive representation of the respondents' perspective on the particular issues (Mason, 2002), and additional information may be revealed as the respondents have more freedom to explain their feelings, memories and experiences (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As such the collected data is enriched because subsequent questions asked by the researcher are able to induce the respondents to talk about their thinking in more detail and depth (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010).

The main limitations of semi-structured interviews are the effect of the researcher on the collected data and difficulty in equivalence of meaning (Denscombe, 2007; Collis & Hussey, 2003). The respondents' answers may be altered by how they perceive the researcher, who is in the process of conducting interviews (Collis & Hussey, 2003). The appearances, gender, or racial stereotype of the researcher in particular may influence to what extent the respondents are willing to candidly reveal information (Denscombe, 2007). Furthermore, the researcher's approach to asking questions may also significantly affect information gained from the respondents (Saunders et al., 2012)

In order to minimise some of these problems in this study, the researcher gave a full explanation regarding the research topic and purpose to every participant prior to the beginning of the interview. This was to facilitate their understanding of the study and to encourage them to feel more at ease and hence talk openly about their solo dining experience.

Another potential limitation of semi structured interviews is that their flexibility could generate difficulty in comparing the respondents' answers because the researcher may ask different subsequent questions depending on the respondent's answers (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Internal consistency of questioning across the study is therefore a pertinent concern (Bryman & Bell, 2007). To counteract this potential problem, the researcher in this study

drew up a possible list of prompts and probing questions to follow up subsequent questions regarding the respondent's answers.

### **3.5.2 Sampling and Sample Size**

An inherent problem in nearly any study is the impossibility of reaching the entire population concerned, effective sampling, however, may enable the researcher to partly counteract this problem by considering only data from a selected cohort of the whole population concerned (Saunders et al., 2012). In drawing such a sample, it needs to be determined which sampling technique should be selected, and which type of and number of respondents are required in the research (Wilson, 2012). Sampling techniques can be divided into two general types: probability sampling and non-probability sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Probability sampling provides an equal chance that each element has been selected from the known population so that selected samples are representative (Babbie, 2012). For non-probability sampling, in contrast, it is impossible to draw statistically valid inferences regarding the population, and this implies that the population being selected is unrepresentative (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010).

When the researcher draws a sample with the use of a sampling frame that refers to a list of the complete population identified, to represent all the members of the total population on the basis of research questions and objectives, probability sampling should be adopted (Wilson, 2012). In addition, probability sampling using accurate statistical inferences is more appropriate to survey research, whereas non-probability sampling is more useful to qualitative research exploring the research questions and obtaining theoretical insights into the phenomena (Saunders et al., 2012). Given the qualitative nature of this research and the sample size, non-probabilistic sampling was used in this study.

This research focuses on the restaurant experiences of solo diners, who have frequently visited a restaurant to dine alone. In order to obtain solo diners' different perspectives on their restaurant experiences, participants were specifically selected through the conformity to some criteria set by the researcher. Therefore, this study used non-random, convenience and purposive sampling. In the case of convenience sampling, the researcher obtains information from people who are most easily available to participate in the research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). With regard to exploratory research, it can be a prompt and efficient way to gain information that is relevant to the researcher questions (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). In the case of purposive sampling, the specific people, who fit in the criteria set by the researcher, are targeted to gather the desired information (Malhotra &

Birks, 2006). With the use of some criteria identified in reference to developing knowledge and information, purposive sampling can best enable the researcher to answer the research questions (Dixon, Singleton, & Straits, 2016).

According to Saunders et al. (2012) a combination of sampling techniques might be the most appropriate for the researcher to answer research questions and meet research objectives and, therefore, a combination of convenience and purposive techniques were implemented to best select an appropriate sample. For the key objective, to capture the experiences of a number of solo diners, who often visit restaurants to eat alone, participants were recruited from the researcher's acquaintances or friends. These participants were not only easily accessible to the researcher but also met the purposive sampling criteria: that each respondent has had solo dining experiences in a restaurant while not travelling or at work during the day; solo dining experiences in fast food restaurants, convenience stores, and tent bars were also ruled out.

With the most appropriate sampling techniques, the researcher should proceed to the next phase when a suitable sample size is determined (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). According to Dixon et al. (2016) if the researcher selects purposive sampling, the appropriate sample size should be determined with the consideration of data saturation, in which new information cannot be elicited from the collected data any more. In terms of the sample size for this research, 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted and data saturation was satisfactorily achieved at around 23 interviews. In order to decide on a suitable sample size, many researchers take account of previous studies that can give an indication of the homogeneity of a sample size (Wilson, 2012). In previous research on customer experience in the hospitality industry, Hansen et al. (2005) posit that satisfactory data saturation occurred when they had analysed 7 semi-structured interviews, whereas Walls et al. (2011b) argue that 15 semi-structured interviews should suffice to reach data saturation through data gathering and analysis.

It may, however, be noted that the sample size of interviews adopted in existing research on consumption experience was around 20 participants (Brakus et al., 2009; O'Loughlin, Szmigin, & Turnbull, 2004). This size of sample is also consistent with Warren (2002) who believes a sample size of between 20 and 30 interviews is likely to be sufficient and useful for a single researcher. With regard to qualitative interview research, the sample size of between 20 and 30 is recommended to attain data saturation (Mason, 2010; Griffin & Hauser, 1993). Similarly, a sample of between 25 and 30 respondents ought to be

undertaken in interview-based research (Creswell, 2007). Hence, the sample size of 30 proved to be suitable for this research.

### **3.6 Data Collection Process**

The data collection process refers to how the semi-structured interview is performed to attain the purpose of the research (Mason, 2002). In general terms it describes what the researcher has done prior to the interview and how the interviews are performed (Kvale, 2007). The process of data collection begins with the preparation of interviews including an interview protocol and guide, and interview schedules and moves to conducting the interviews (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010).

#### **3.6.1 Preparing for Interviews**

The first step in preparing for semi-structured interviews is to draft an interview protocol including introduction script and interview questions. The interview questions can be formulated based on what issues the researcher needs to cover with the respondents (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The themes can be developed with reference to the academic and non-academic literature related to the research problem, along with the researcher's ideas about the topic areas (Rapley, 2004). The researcher also needs to consider the consistency between the interview questions and the research questions (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010; Mason, 2002).

A pilot study was used to test the first draft of the interview questions to ensure that the interviewee understood the research context and interview questions (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). For this research, three people were asked if they understood the interview questions and to give comments about them. The initial interview questions were subsequently modified and developed with reference to the pilot study.

The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to learn about solo diners' restaurant experiences. Therefore, questions were developed in which participants were asked to recall their recent dining experience, not their expectations about the experience. In accordance with practice, the interview questions began with a general question related to the research topic (Saunders et al., 2012). The participants were asked to describe what constitutes their solo dining experiences (e.g. "Could you please tell me about your recent solo dining experience?"). The main interview questions were developed with reference to the literature review to explore how solo diners perceive and evaluate their solo dining experiences. For example, physical and human environments, the product, perceived price and locational convenience are suggested as influential factors in creating customer



experience. Hence, the respondents were asked to describe what factors of physical and human environments, the product, price and locational convenience influenced their dining experience. In order to encourage the participants to consider their emotional feelings on various aspects of solo dining experience, probing follow-up questions (e.g. “How did you feel like?” and “Why was it important to you?”) were designed. In terms of a participant’s response to the initial question, follow-up questions were asked to delve deeper into the answers whenever it was necessary to ensure the quality of the answers and a correct understanding of the participants. **A copy of the interview guide is included in Appendix A.**

The next step was to send an information sheet and a consent form to participants via e-mail prior to the interview taking place. This included the explanation of the research purpose, a brief research problem, and the description of the type of desired information to help the participant understand how the interview would be conducted (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010), see Appendices B and C. One potential participant was not comfortable with tape recording of the interview and was therefore not recruited and substituted by another participant.

The last step was to schedule the interviews with participants. The people who agreed to take part were contacted through a mobile messenger to decide when and where to meet for the interview. A date and time convenient for each participant were arranged. Each interview was arranged to take place at places convenient and comfortable to the participant but also a quiet place where the interview seemed unlikely to be disrupted. A quiet place for the interview should be selected in order to not debase the quality of audio-recording from noise (Saunders et al., 2012). Hence, the researcher selected either a café located in a secluded area or a study room café, in which small meeting spaces can be hourly by the hour. Meeting places were chosen that were near to either the participants’ workplace or home.

### **3.6.2 Conducting Interviews**

In order to attain the aim of the research, solo diners were interviewed to reach a deeper understanding of what characterises their experiences in restaurants. For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants in South Korea between 10th December 2014 and 10th March 2015. The participants were 13 women and 17 men aged between 22 and 51. In total 20 interviews were conducted in a quiet café, and the rest were carried out in a study room café. A digital recorder was used to allow the researcher

concentrate on what the participant was saying during the interview. Prior to the interview, some refreshment was offered to the participant, as the way to show the researcher's appreciation of participation in the interview. Ghauri and Gronhaug (2010) propose that the researcher should reward the participants for participating in the interview to draw motivation to answer interview questions (see Appendix A).

The interview began with self-introduction and the explanation of the information on the research, such as a brief description of the topic area and the type of questions that would be asked. Permission to record the interview was then asked for. The recording of each interview is the most useful method to optimise the exact nature of accounts provided and the value from the interview (Saunders et al., 2012). Questioning was guided by the interview protocol identified in the existing literature, including people, the physical setting, and the food stimuli, location, and price of restaurant experience and follow-up questions were variously asked depending on the participant's answer to each pre-constructed interview question. During the interview, the majority of the participants reported multiple solo dining experiences with different restaurants. Participant interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 60 and 100 minutes.

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

After the data collection, the data was analysed to find the answers to the research questions. This section provides an explanation of how the researcher analysed the collected data step by step. It started from the rationale for utilising thematic analysis to induce interpretation and reflection of various meanings as regards solo dining experiences. It was followed by the process of thematic analysis in the collected data.

#### **3.7.1 Thematic Analysis**

The data collected were analysed in this study by adopting a thematic analysis defined as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). Thematic analysis allows the researcher to integrate analysis of interpretive meaning within the specific context (Loffe & Yardley, 2004). In thematic analysis, the extensive common threads of the entire interview are sought and identified (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). In other words, patterns or themes that disclose various interesting aspects regarding the research topic were derived from the data set (King & Horrocks, 2010). Additionally, thematic analysis that necessitates more involvement and interpretation in defining codes, as the most common method adopted for qualitative research in general,

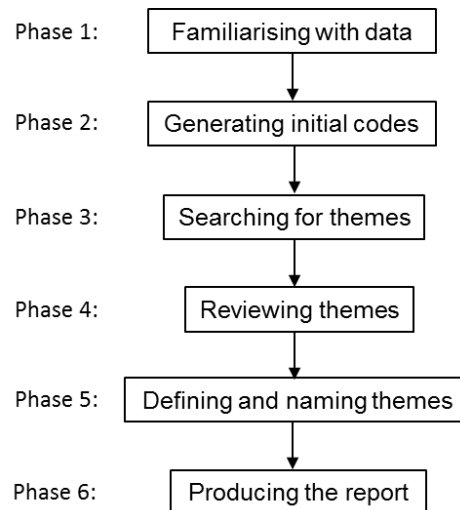
allows for flexibility with regard to the theoretical framework, to capture the complex and detailed meaning within the data set (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Thematic analysis is adequate to be used, when there is little or no understanding of the research problem or issue (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Therefore, thematic analysis is for this research the most appropriate for exploring solo dining experiences about which little is known. In order to interpret the structure and content of the themes from the data in relation to research questions, this study was planned to follow a step-by-step approach in how the researcher would conduct thematic analysis: defining descriptive codes, interpreting themes generated from clusters of defined codes, and deriving overarching themes (King & Horrocks, 2010). After reading through each transcript, the data collected was first given descriptive codes that summarised what was in the interview transcript text (Saldaña, 2015). Analytic codes were subsequently developed which interpreted the meaning of what the interview text was about (Gibbs, 2007). Through a repetition of reading each transcript, all the codes were refined. At the next stage, the codes with either similar features or common meaning of participants' description were grouped and given interpretive codes that represented meaning of each cluster (King & Horrocks, 2010). At the final stage, key themes were derived from the interpretive themes; and levels of coding were constructed under each main theme (Saldaña, 2015).

### **3.7.2 Data Analysis Process**

The data analysis process involves several stages to draw interpretation of various meanings regarding the research topic. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest the six phases of data analysis to conduct thematic analysis, as illustrated in Figure 4. By adopting aspects from Braun and Clarke's (2006) a step-by-step guide to thematic analysis, the process of data analysis in this research was broadly classified into three stages: data preparation, coding process, and data display. The first stage in the process was transcribing audio-recorded verbal data into written form, then translating extracts in Korean transcripts into English before repeatedly reading the data, and writing memos about initial ideas for coding as the data preparation stage. It moved into producing codes, categorising the codes under each potential theme, reviewing and refining coding within the themes, and identifying the names and definitions of each theme as the coding process stage. In the last stage of the data analysis process, the identified themes and sub-themes were presented for data analysis.

**Figure 4: A Step-by-step Guide to Thematic Analysis**



Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87)

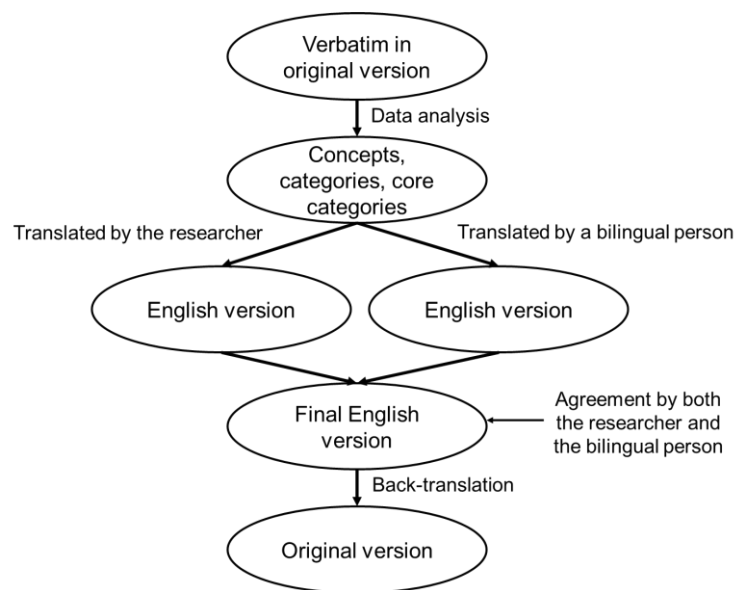
### **3.7.2.1 Data Preparation: Translation/Back-translation Issue**

For the essential stage of data preparation the collected data should be tidied up to produce a typed copy, arranged in chronological order, named appropriately including copies, and reviewed to ensure the information is adequate to answer the research questions (LeCompte, 2000). The first step in data preparation therefore is to transcribe the audio-recordings. According to Gibbs (2007) transcripts of the interview can help the researcher capture how participants were expressing themselves and draw more extensive themes than the particular words. This research is concerned with the details of various expressions regarding the solo diner's dining experience and hence all the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to reproduce a neat copy with a word processor.

The interviews were carried out in Korean. Accordingly, the second step is to translate the interviews into English. When it comes to data analysis, if the source language in the data collected is different from the target language to present the findings, it will be necessary to describe and discuss the translation and back-translation procedure in order to take equivalence of meaning into account (Chen & Boore, 2010). In cross-language research, the use of translation influences reliability and validity of the research between the qualitative data collected in one language and the interpretation of data presented in another (Twinn, 1997). Using the translation and back-translation procedure allows the researcher to minimise the loss of the participants' meanings in their situation and thereby improve the validity of cross-language qualitative research (van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010).

It is suggested that the translation is undertaken by a bilingual translator to convey correct interpretations of data to the readers (Chen & Boore, 2010). Temple and Young (2004) argue that the researcher, who can speak both source language and target language fluently, seems to be the most appropriate translator for cross language qualitative analysis to enhance the validity of trustworthy interpretation. When involved in the translation process, the researcher should take into careful consideration the cultural nuances of participants to ensure that the translated data is accurately and meaningfully presented (Cruz, Padilla, & Agustine, 2000). Although the translation and back-translation procedure affects the reliability and validity of the qualitative data, there are not yet standardised procedures to evaluate such influences in qualitative research (Chen & Boore, 2010; Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, & Maliski, 2008). The translation and back translation for this research was developed based on Chen and Boore's (2010) translation and back-translation procedure, as illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: The Translation and Back-translation Procedure**



Adapted from Chen and Boore (2010, p.237)

In terms of this research, to check for translation issues, four interviews that have been translated into English by the researcher were used for validation purposes. Two of these interviews were then also translated into English by a bilingual person. The researcher and the bilingual person sat together to agree about meanings. A number of words that were not the same after the translation process were discussed (for example, uncomfortable vs. unpleasant; harmonious vs. charming) and final agreement was reached. A further two

translated interviews in English were translated back into Korean by a bilingual person. There was no significant difference between translated English interview transcripts and Korean transcripts. The literature reports that if there is no significant difference between the original version and the translated version, it is not necessary to translate all the interviews (Lopez et al., 2008). One improvement on this process that could have been made would have been by sending the Korean back transcript of the two interviews that were back translated from English through to the relevant participants. This could have ensured that whilst there were no significant coding differences between the original Korean transcript and the Korean back-transcript, there were no subtle differences generated through the translation/back-translation process. However, because the back-translation process already validated the process it was felt that it was not necessary to undertake this additional step at this time.

Given the above, there was no requirement to translate all the interviews into English. As such the interviews were first transcribed into Korean before coding each Korean transcript using the English code terms that had been generated earlier using translated extracts. A number of the relevant quotations taken from the Korean transcripts were then translated into English to be used in the findings. Halai (2007) suggests that it is sufficient for the researcher to translate only the sections of the interviews the researcher needs, rather than all interview data.

### **3.7.2.2 Coding Process**

For the next stage of the data analysis process, thematic coding and categorisation were carried out. Coding is how the researcher assigns a label or name to the data, based on the meanings identified from short phrases or several passages (Gibbs, 2007). Coding of the data was carried out using the NVivo programme, to which 30 interview transcripts were uploaded. NVivo was used rather than paper based coding due to the sheer volume of data in this research (approximately 581 pages). The use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software can offer an effective way of accelerating data searches and securing the coding procedure (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Although the researcher feels closer to the words of participants while using paper-based qualitative data analysis, computer-assisted qualitative software enables the researcher to carry out qualitative analysis in an easier, plainer, more accurate, and more trustworthy way (Gibbs, 2007). Furthermore, NVivo can help the researcher organise, explore, code, and retrieve data in the software (Saunders et al., 2012).

Each interview transcript uploaded in the NVivo programme was carefully and repeatedly read, and notes of initial ideas were made if necessary. The initial codes were enhanced on the basis of the engagement with the literature on customer experience, and newly generated to interpret various aspects of solo dining experience. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) codes are based on the conceptual framework or key variables arising from the relevant literature, and as such it is best to create these codes prior to actually undertaking the analysis. The list of codes can help the researcher elucidate manifest ideas relating to subtle contents, but there is the inherent risk of getting bogged down in specific aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By taking care not to focus on the particular features of the data in generating lists of codes, the codes were instead inductively and deductively described, and then interpreted to represent the meanings of the participants.

The codes were used in English, with all the relevant codes categorised into the potential themes. All extracts of similarly coded data require organisation and grouping, to integrate meanings and accounts of participants that share some features (Grbich, 2013). When grouping the coded data together, the researcher should take into careful consideration the relationship between codes, between main themes, and between sub-themes within each main theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Potential themes for the next stage were emerged and developed from all the extracts of data that had been coded in English, and various probable sub-themes were arranged under each relevant main theme.

### **3.7.2.3 Data Display**

The last stage of the data analysis process involved data display, which presents themes, sub-themes, and codes categorised in a systematic way. The format of displaying data, which is organised systematically to answer the research questions, plays a crucial role in drawing a valid conclusion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For data display, the codes or categories were thematically organised in a hierarchical structure to represent themes identified in the collected data. The codes were grouped together in the lower levels of sub-themes within each main theme. Columns and row in the data display table were defined as themes and profile of the participants respectively (e.g. see Appendix D). Data display is helpful for exploring the relationships between the aspects of themes or key themes (Saunders et al., 2012).

## **3.8 Qualitative Research Quality**

Various criteria in designing and assessing the quality of research have been originally developed to ensure that the results are valid and reliable in quantitative research that

accepts a single, absolute reality (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However, there has been some controversy to apply the ideas of validity, reliability, and generalisability to qualitative research, because of multiple interpretations and descriptions presented in qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). Therefore, the meanings of these ideas need to be modified to ensure the quality of qualitative research (Gibbs, 2007). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) the meanings of validity and reliability are differentially used depending on the philosophical perspective adopted by the researcher. These were discussed to evaluate the quality of qualitative research in sub-section 3.8.1 and 3.8.2.

### **3.8.1 Validity**

Qualitative researchers need to demonstrate that the knowledge, which is generated by a variety of views and meanings of participants involved in the phenomenon, is valid (Collis & Hussey, 2003). From the interpretivist viewpoint, the validity refers to the extent the research findings are represented through the clear approach to the experiences of participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). For the quality of this research, the researcher attempted to demonstrate validity by ensuring that the views of participants were accurately represented. This representation was achieved by capturing the correct understanding and interpretations of the perceptions of solo diners' restaurant experiences. The validity of qualitative research can be analysed in different ways: respondent validation, constant comparison, and evidence (Gibbs, 2007). These different types of validity analysis were adopted in this research.

Firstly, respondent validation refers to checking with the research participants the accuracy of accounts of what was said to the researcher in the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The interview recordings were made in a quiet place to reduce the errors in making out what they said. Detailed transcriptions were made from all the audio-recorded interviews. To check the accuracy of the transcription, the researcher sent the appropriate transcript to each participant to ask them to check it was correct and thus reached their agreement about the content of the transcripts.

Next, the constant comparisons refer to checking how the codes consistently and accurately are applied to the data source (Gibbs, 2007). The researcher tried to ensure that short phrases or passages identified with the same code were actually similar. Having constantly compared the original codes with the developed codes, the coding was revised. Finally, the evidence refers to checking how the form of quotations extracted from the interviews is provided to exactly represent the findings (Gibbs, 2007). The researcher put



the relevant quotations in the following findings chapter. These quotations were neither too long nor too short; were connected to the analytic ideas that the researcher discussed and expressed; and were contextualised.

### **3.8.2 Reliability**

The reliability asks to what extent, the findings of the research are transparent from the data sources in the qualitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002). To ensure the data analysis is self-consistent and reliable, qualitative researchers need to assess two types of reliability: transcription checking and code cross-checking (Gibbs, 2007). The researcher examined if the transcriptions included any mistakes by exactly transcribing what is heard whilst ensuring no spelling or grammar errors are made. When the codes were established, the researcher tried to maintain consistency in the data analysis through constant comparisons on the coding. In addition to transcription checking, the researcher discussed if the codes were consistently and well developed in the data analysis, and concretely identified in the meetings with academic supervisors, in order to minimise the researcher bias. With regard to ambiguous concepts or ideas, the discussions with academic supervisors helped the researcher clearly represent them.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

This research was conducted through interactions between the researcher and the participant, and as such ethical concerns are inevitably raised (Saunders et al., 2012). The consideration of different ethical issues is important when designing the research process (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010). In qualitative research, the researchers need to consider two particular ethical issues that could arise from aspects of data analysis (Gibbs, 2007). These ethical issues are informed consent and anonymity/confidentiality.

Informed consent is linked closely with having access to the participants and obtaining valid responses from them (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Therefore, before conducting the interviews, the researcher informed all participants of the purpose of the research and obtained their informed consent prior to their participation. The researcher sent all participants both a consent form, and information detailing: what the research is; how collected information would be used; how the information would be confidentially maintained; and the participant's right to withdraw at any time. Each participant returned the signed consent forms to the researcher before the interview. Both the information sheet and consent form were written in Korean, because the interviews were conducted in South Korea and all the participants were native Korean speakers.

To ensure confidentiality and privacy, the researcher needs to anonymise the names of participants and places to make them feel safe (Gibbs, 2007). Preserving participants' anonymity encourages the participants to be more open with the researcher and to answer the interview questions more honestly (Collis & Hussey, 2003). For the participants' anonymity, all the names of participants were substituted with encodings in the transcriptions (for example, M-01, M-02, F-01, F-02, etc.). Furthermore, before a selection of participants' transcripts was passed on to a bilingual translator for translation/back-translation analysis, the researcher obtained additional consent for this. Throughout the data analysis the researcher ensured that all the data would be anonymously preserved, and that the participants' identities would not be revealed in the research.

### **3.10 Summary**

This chapter outlined the researcher's philosophical perspective and the adopted methods, and presented a systematic review of the data analysis process. To gain a deeper understanding and insight into solo diners' perceptions of their personal restaurant experiences, the philosophical position of interpretivism was adopted. This research position was used alongside the inductive research approach and exploratory research design in this research. In line with the researcher's philosophical position, semi-structured interviews as a qualitative data collection method were conducted to capture the multiple experiences and meanings on interactive attributes for restaurant experiences from solo diners. For the interview, a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques were applied to select the most appropriate sample.

The interview questions were initially constructed from an extensive review of literature on customer experience, and finally refined and developed through the pilot study. The semi-structured interviews were carried out with 30 participants in a quiet place within South Korea, for more than an hour. The collected data was inductively and deductively analysed through a thematic analysis. The process of data analysis incorporated data preparation, the coding process, and the data display. The data preparation stage was concerned with the transcription of interviews, the translation and back-translation issue, and memos about initial ideas for coding. In the next stage, the main themes, sub-themes, and codes were refined and identified through the coding process. The identified main themes and sub-themes were then systematically arranged and organised in a hierarchical structure through a template approach in a thematic analysis to answer the research questions.

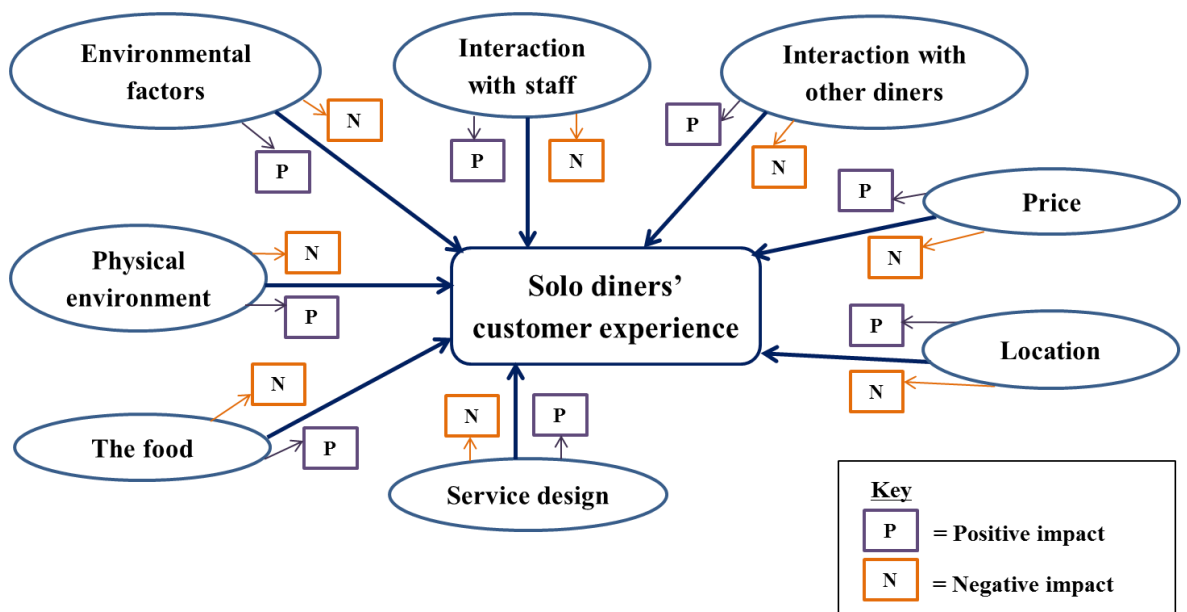
To evaluate the quality of this research, different ways to assess the validity and reliability of qualitative research were adopted. *Respondent validation*, *constant comparison*, and *evidence* were adopted to evaluate the validity of the research, and *transcription checking* and *code cross-checking* were adopted to assess the reliability of the research. Lastly, ethical issues raised from aspects of qualitative data analysis were carefully evaluated. Especially, *informed consent* and *anonymity/confidentiality* were ethically considered in this research. The findings of the data analysis conducted in this chapter are presented along with an in-depth discussion of the findings of previous research in the following Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter elucidates solo diners' customer experiences in the restaurant setting in Korea that have been derived using data from semi-structured interviews. From the analysis of the collected data, the antecedent factors that create customer experiences in restaurants are classified and described using excerpts from interviews. Figure 6 shows the eight main themes of solo diner's restaurant experiences that emerged along with the underlying sub-themes and the positive and/or negative diner responses to interactions with these factors.

**Figure 6: Solo Diners' Customer Experience in the Restaurant**



The chapter firstly presents the profile of participants regarding gender, age, and marital status. Then, the themes that emerged are presented along with illustrative quotations. A conscious decision has been made to report the actual number of diners who mentioned the various factors because some interesting patterns emerged during the analysis that showed there were groups of diners with similar characteristics and also some interesting differences between these groups that allowed the development of profiles of diners which are discussed in the later sections of the chapter.

### 4.2 Profile of the Participants

The demographic profile of the 30 participants is shown below.

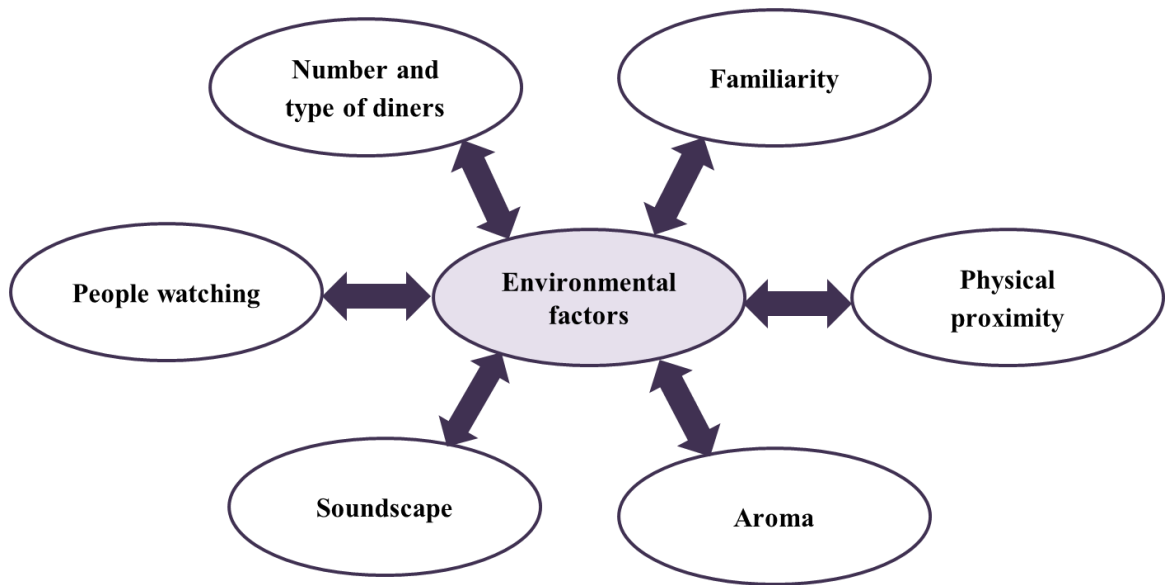
**Table 9: Participants' Demographic Characteristics**

No.	Anonym	Age	Marital status	Lives (with)	Occupation
1	F-01	29	Single	Alone	Master student
2	M-01	32	Single	Family	Musician
3	F-02	35	Single	Alone	Customs officer
4	F-03	24	Single	Alone	Nurse
5	F-04	22	Single	Alone	Undergraduate student
6	M-02	31	Single	Family	Undergraduate programme administrator
7	M-03	27	Single	Alone	Researcher
8	M-04	32	Married	Family	Theatre staff
9	F-05	27	Married	Family	Teacher
10	F-06	30	Single	Alone	Nurse
11	M-05	33	Single	Alone	Theatre staff
12	M-06	41	Single	Alone	Sole proprietor
13	M-07	31	Married	Family	IT staff
14	F-07	29	Single	Alone	Teacher
15	M-08	35	Single	Alone	Software developer
16	F-08	30	Single	Alone	Editor
17	M-09	32	Single	Alone	Designer
18	F-09	29	Single	Alone	Sales staff
19	M-10	28	Single	Family	Barista
20	F-10	31	Married	Family	Education staff
21	M-11	33	Married	Family	NGO staff
22	M-12	30	Single	Family	Engineer
23	F-11	28	Single	Family	NGO staff
24	F-12	25	Single	Family	Stage costume manger
25	M-13	31	Single	Family	Finance staff
26	M-14	33	Single	Alone	Engineer
27	M-15	24	Single	Family	Security guard
28	F-13	51	Single	Alone	Company executive
29	M-16	28	Single	Family	Theatre staff
30	M-17	25	Single	Family	Undergraduate student

### 4.3 Environmental Factors

All of the 30 participants mentioned how the environmental factors influenced their dining experience. Figure 7 summarises the themes that were identified; these are discussed in more detail below.

**Figure 7: Environmental Factors of Solo Dining Experience**



#### **4.3.1 The Number and Type of Other Diners**

All but one of the participants noted that they were influenced by how many other diners were in the restaurant and whether they were the only solo diner in the restaurant or not. The extent of how many other tables were occupied in the restaurant seems to impact on dining experience. The majority of the participants highlighted that they could dine more comfortably and slowly in a restaurant where only a few tables were occupied by other diners. Most participants expressed that they were less aware of attention from other diners when dining alone in the restaurant with low table occupancy. In addition, some participants remarked that they felt more comfortable dining out alone in a quieter restaurant because they were able to focus on their food more without distractions.

##### ***F-10***

*“... There weren’t many diners at the table ... I could feel more comfortable when I dined out alone because I got less attention from other diners in the restaurant. ... When I dine out alone, I am inclined to care more about a small number of diners sitting in the restaurant rather than about the menus. ...”*

##### ***F-03***

*“... One time there weren’t many diners at table in the restaurant, and it was good that it wasn’t too noisy. ... It was also good that I was able to have a meal comfortably and slowly.”*

In restaurants with high table occupancy, more than half of the participants remarked that they tried to finish their meal as soon as possible. When solo diners found that there were a lot of other diners sitting in the restaurant, or waiting in a queue during their meal, it made

them feel emotionally uncomfortable or burdensome. When the restaurant appeared busy, participants commented that they became more conscious of other diners, restaurant staff members or its owner.

**M-02**

*“I spent only a short amount of time savouring the full flavour of my food because of plenty of other diners in the restaurant. ... If it was crowded in the restaurant and I spent more time having a meal, other diners would have to wait that much longer for a seat in a queue. ... That’s because we traditionally put stress on politeness and consideration for others.”*

**F-11**

*“When I was dining out alone and other diners kept coming in the restaurant, I felt a psychological burden and asked myself ‘do I have to get out as soon as possible?’ or ‘is it possible for me to stay longer here?’ ... I felt uncomfortable. ... That’s because it was crowded in the restaurant and other diners kept entering. I felt like ‘if I finish my food quickly and leave early, the owner can have another diner in the restaurant’. Besides, I felt uncomfortable staying too long after my meal when I dined out alone.”*

Absence or presence of other solo diners in the restaurant seemed to be important factors in the dining experience. The majority of the participants commented that they were unwilling to visit a restaurant to dine alone or tried to finish their meal quickly when they recognised absence of other solo diners in the restaurant. Most participants remarked that they felt uncomfortable because of negative awareness of the way other non-solo diners were looking at them. Additionally, a few participants recalled that presence of other non-solo diners made them stand out more and this made them feel both embarrassed and lonely.

**F-05**

*“... I think I am afraid that other diners would disapprove of my dining alone in the restaurant. ... There were no other solo diners, and only other diners in groups, I felt uncomfortable. I felt like I was aware of what other people were thinking of me. ... When I was at a table and watched other diners in groups, I felt particularly lonely.”*

**M-14**

*“When the restaurant environment was that no one dined alone, and other diners had a talk with their dining companion, I was the only solo diner there. ... I felt uncomfortable with this situation. Other diners in groups would consider me as a social outcast because I dined alone in the restaurant. Also, other diners around me would be critical of me, thinking ‘why did I visit here alone?’ ... I didn’t want to stand out by reason of being the only solo diner in the restaurant, and it could also make me feel uncomfortable, so I finished my food quickly and left in a hurry.”*

On the contrary, many participants remarked that they felt more comfortable dining alone in a restaurant with other solo diners present. Participants remarked that they felt like other diners did not look at them in a strange way, due to the presence of other solo diners in the restaurant and they felt a close identity or communality with other solo diners during their meal. They expressed that noticing the presence of other solo diners gave them a sense of emotional comfort and communality.

***F-05***

*“When I dined out alone in the restaurant where there are other solo diners sitting at the table, it made me feel a sense of kinship with the other solo diners. When I found other solo diners sitting at the table during the meal, I could relax and eat without any burdens. I thought that ‘those people also came here to dine out alone.’”*

***M-08***

*“Once there were many other solo diners in the restaurant, I could relax and eat because I didn’t need to be aware of the way other people were looking at me. ... When I found other solo diners there, it made feel more comfortable. That was because I was not the only solo diner in this restaurant and I could identify with them. I felt like no one looked at me peculiarly in the restaurant.”*

### **4.3.2 People Watching**

The observation of restaurant staff or other diners seems to impact on dining experience. Watching others was preferred when participants dined out alone in a restaurant. A few participants recalled that they felt more comfortable dining alone when the staff appeared to have a close and friendly relationship with each other. This is because they felt that friendly interactions between staff engendered a warm friendly atmosphere. They highlighted that watching friendly interactions between staff made their meal more pleasurable.

***M-03***

*“All the staff appeared close to each other, which generated a friendly atmosphere. Dining out alone in a restaurant with such a friendly atmosphere made me feel more comfortable. ...”*

***M-04***

*“I remembered that the chef, the owner, and the restaurant staff all seemed to be close to each other, like a real family. ... They appeared to exchange jokes with each other, to make fun of each other, and got on with each other like a family. Dining out alone in such a friendly atmosphere made it a more comfortable and enjoyable experience.”*

A number of participants recalled how watching other diners impacted on their experience. In particular they enjoyed watching other diners sitting at the table while they were waiting



or having their meal because they did not have a dining companion to focus on and care about. They expressed that watching different diners sitting in the restaurant was an enjoyable experience because satisfying their curiosity made them feel less bored. Most of them remarked that they found other solo diners who ordered more than two portions interesting. Additionally, a few of them commented that solo diners having a meal with an alcoholic drink were especially interesting. This is because it was uncommon to drink alone in a restaurant.

**M-04**

*“While I was dining out alone in the restaurant, I liked watching many other diners sitting in the restaurant. ... That diner came here with someone and talked about something... That diner looked busy... That diner was a company worker... That diner was a pregnant woman... If I came here with my dining companion, I couldn’t have seen those kinds of things, however, I came here alone so I could see such things.”*

**F-06**

*“There was a skinny woman having two portions of food by herself. I kept staring at her because she managed to finish two portions of food, even though I knew staring was wrong. ‘How could she have such a large portion?’”*

**M-12**

*“When I saw the solo diner having a meal with a drink in the restaurant, he looked particularly special. To me, it was tough to dine out alone in the restaurant... If I were him, I wouldn’t be able to do that. It looked interesting.”*

### **4.3.3 Soundscape**

Comments relating to the restaurant soundscape predominantly related to overheard conversations and general noise levels. Some participants commented that hearing the nature and content of conversations between staff or other diners present in the restaurant impacted on their dining experiences. Most of them expressed that overhearing enjoyable conversations between others made them smile, and gave them a sense of fun during their meal. Especially, overhearing aspects of other diners’ conversations, such as comical accents or praise for the restaurant meal, enhanced their enjoyment of the dining experience.

**M-09**

*“The restaurant was run by a man in his mid-40s who was helped by his two daughters, both of which looked like they were in their early teens. ... Seeing the family was a lot of fun. When they prepared the food, one daughter said “Hey, prepare this. Do you know how to do?” and then the other daughter said “I know”. Watching them was a lot of fun. ... There were sometimes middle aged staff*

*watching a TV show programme together in the restaurant. Seeing them talking about the story and sharing their opinions made me smile [laugh].”*

**M-01**

*“If there were diners in groups in the restaurant, sometimes I heard their conversations during the meal. For example, children’s way of talking was fun and elderly diners who were drinking and showing off to each other was also fun. ...”*

**M-02**

*“... While I was having a meal, I overheard other diners’ conversations, in which the food was really tasty and they wanted to regularly visit the restaurant. Such conversations remained in my mind. When I heard it during the meal, it made me feel happy. It was like I felt really great about dining out here. ...”*

Contrary to this, a few of them recalled that overhearing conversations between others about them as a solo diner made their dining experience unpleasant. They felt irritation and discomfort because they did not want to stand out by reason of being a solo diner in the restaurant.

**F-12**

*“When I dined out alone in the restaurant, staff sometimes looked at me strangely. In particular, young staff said to each other “Look! She came here alone.” ... This felt unpleasant. ... While they were talking each other, I maintained eye contact with them and they glanced at my table while they were talking.”*

**F-01**

*“When I had a meal alone in the restaurant, a couple was sitting next to me. She talked to her boyfriend “Look! That woman is dining out alone” She didn’t intend that I should hear that. When I heard such a thing, I felt poorly about what she talked to him about me. ... I didn’t like other diners saying that I came to the restaurant to dine out alone among them.”*

The majority of those interviewed recalled that they felt more uncomfortable dining alone in a restaurant where either the restaurant staff or other diners generated noise. They remarked that hearing restaurant staff or other diners have a conversation in a loud voice distracted them and resulted in irritation. A small number of them expressed that loudness of restaurant staff seemed to show disrespect to them, which made them feel slighted. Most of them commented that loud noise from other diners made them finish their meal more quickly because they could not enjoy their food. In particular hearing other diners’ loud complaints about the food hygiene standard not only disrupted their attention to the food but generated an unpleasant restaurant atmosphere. A few participants remarked that other diners arguing with each other disrupted their attention to the food. They recalled that

watching other diners arguing with each other at the table ruined their enjoyable meal and gave them an unpleasant feeling.

**F-09**

*“When staff were having a meal together behind my table in the restaurant, I felt uncomfortable, because I felt I wasn’t being treated as a customer. Hearing them have a conversation in a loud voice with their meal made me feel uncomfortable, and that they would not respect me. That was because I was a customer sitting and eating at the table, and the noise they generated gave discomfort to me...”*

**F-06**

*“... The babble of voices made me feel annoyed. I thought I had to finish my meal quickly and leave there.”*

**M-09**

*“... There were drunken diners as well as other diners who were talking loudly in the restaurant. I really didn’t like that. ... There were parents who were showing video clips such as animated cartoons to their children to keep them quiet in the restaurant. But the volume level was too high. It made me really annoyed.”*

**M-02**

*“... One diner could complain calmly, but she complained to the staff in too loud a voice. It made the atmosphere of the restaurant brutal. In this atmosphere I felt like I couldn’t stomach my food. That was because I started to be bothered about such a situation and atmosphere. I felt unhappy.”*

**F-13**

*“While I was dining out alone, I saw a couple who had a conversation quietly first and then started to argue with each other. ... When I saw such a case, I felt unpleasant. It made me feel like I couldn’t remember what I had in the restaurant. I had some food and left the table feeling bloated but I thought that it was like discomfort to such an extent as not to remember what I had and how I finished my food.”*

#### **4.3.4 Aroma**

Only a small number of those interviewed suggested that the aroma of other diners sitting around them has a negative effect on dining experience. They recalled that the presence of a strong perfume fragrance on other diners or a foul smell on other diners spoiled their appetite and the taste of their food, which made them feel unpleasant.

**M-06**

*“... I really didn’t like the woman giving off a strong fragrance of perfume and sitting around me. Because I felt like such a fragrance was likely to come into my mouth, and it made the taste of my food poor. ... I couldn’t enjoy the taste of my food due to the diner’s fragrance.”*

#### **F-06**

*“Sometimes... A lot of diners, who had a drink the previous day and remained out, visited the restaurant to overcome a hangover with a soup in the early morning. They didn’t change their clothes and came into the restaurant so it smelled nasty. I felt unpleasant. When I smelled such a foul smell on other diners during the meal, it spoiled my appetite.”*

#### **4.3.5 Physical Proximity**

Solo dining experience seems to be influenced by how far solo diners maintained their personal space from other diners in the restaurant. In particular close physical proximity to other diners generated an uncomfortable feeling amongst solo diners. Most participants recalled that their dining experience was more uncomfortable when sharing a table with strangers during their meal. This is because the eye contact with other diners sitting across from them during their meal generated embarrassment and the loss of their personal distance caused discomfort. They did not like the unexpected or unwanted close physical proximity to other diners.

#### **F-02**

*“... While I was having a meal, I had eye contact with a stranger sitting across from me. It made me feel really embarrassed. Actually, I think the images of eating don’t look pretty. ... And loud slurping and chewing can be heard across from the other diner. I think that’s not a good impression. When it comes to sharing a table with a stranger, I feel like it is a big burden for me.”*

#### **M-05**

*“When I was sitting at this kind of table, a staff member told me “Excuse me, this customer will sit across from you.” And then a man sat opposite me. ... A man who I didn’t know was sitting across from me and I didn’t think that I had to say hello to him. ... I felt too uncomfortable. I felt that I wouldn’t have visited this restaurant if I had shared my table with a stranger. Sharing a table with a stranger gave me less space for my meal. ... I felt uncomfortable so I tried to finish my meal quickly.”*

Furthermore, a few participants commented that invasion of their personal space by other diners made their experience more uncomfortable and unpleasant. They wanted to respect their personal space from other diners when dining alone in the restaurant. They started to have feelings of discomfort and irritation when their personal space was encroached by strangers. One participant remarked that other diners’ things were placed on the empty seat opposite, which made for an unpleasant environment.

#### **M-01**

*“When I dined out alone in the restaurant, I saw a drunken man who was sitting behind me. But he pushed back his chair and sat comfortably at the table by taking*

*up a lot of space. I felt uncomfortable losing my space, so I try to avoid sitting near that kind of diner.”*

**F-04**

*“There was no one across from me so I put my stuff such as a bag on the seat. When the other diner put her flower and belongings on my stuff, I felt unhappy. When I took off my stuff, her stuff was also placed on mine. It made me feel unpleasant. ... She seemed not to mind at all.”*

#### **4.3.6 Familiarity**

The majority of those interviewed commented that dining alone in either a familiar restaurant or a restaurant with familiar staff members made them feel more comfortable. They were reluctant to visit any restaurant for the first time. Half of the participants remarked that they felt more confident about dining alone in a restaurant they were familiar with through previous dining experiences. They recalled that their familiarity with the restaurant helped reduce their worries about dining alone in the restaurant and about issues such as choosing from a menu or the flavour of the food.

**M-08**

*“... . If I visit any restaurants for the first time, I tend to feel nervous about dining alone. That is because I don't know what to do there. But revisiting the restaurant makes me feel comfortable dining alone. I already know well about food options, interiors, and overall features of the restaurant. This reduces my anxiety about dining alone.”*

Almost half of the participants remarked that they were less conscious of how restaurant staff looked at them and judged them when dining alone in a restaurant with familiar staff. This is because their perception of the restaurant staff who knew well about them and their wants made them feel less lonely and more comfortable. They also commented that their familiarity to staff members engendered a sense of belonging in the restaurant environment. They recalled that due to their familiarity with staff members they felt as if they were not having a meal alone in the restaurant. They expressed that having an acquaintance with staff induced them to visit more often.

**F-06**

*“...I have become friends with the restaurant owner, so I visit there more often. That is because I feel like the restaurant is run by my close friend, and it is more comfortable dining out alone there. ... If it is possible, I had better help my acquaintances by buying a meal. Also, if there is an acquaintance working in the restaurant, I feel even more comfortable in terms of solo-dining. ... I don't feel like an utter stranger runs the restaurant, but I feel as if I'm with aunties in the restaurant. ... It makes me feel a lot better after the meal. ... I could feel aunties' affections toward me and their warm hearts during the meal.”*

#### **4.3.7 Summary and Discussion**

In summary, the findings from this research suggest that solo dining experience is influenced by the presence of other diners and restaurant staff behaviour which do not involve mutual interactions. The research findings show that solo diners are impacted by both the number and type of other diners, and that solo diners experienced discomfort when surrounded by either a lot of non-solo diners or if there was a paucity/absence of other solo diners. This arises from a feeling of self-consciousness when dining alone because many Korean people misjudge solo diners as having problems related to personal relationships (Kim, 2016c). They dislike the perceived attention from others, hence the presence of either other solo diners or not many non-solo diners in the restaurant environment enables solo diners to be more comfortable in their surroundings.

Solo diners preferred observing others, such as other diners and restaurant staff when they dined out alone, and this arose from a lack of dining companion to otherwise pay attention to. Their observation of the friendly relationship between restaurant staff and other diners generated an atmosphere, which positively influenced them. When solo diners dined in a restaurant, the presence of other diners aroused their curiosity and made their experience more enjoyable and less boring as a result.

Noise that arises from restaurant staff or the presence of other diners can indirectly interact with solo diners in the restaurant. The findings indicate that solo dining experience was influenced through either the contents or loudness of overheard conversations. Overhearing interesting conversations between restaurant staff or other diners enhanced the enjoyment of solo diners during their meal. By contrast their dining experience was more uncomfortable when overhearing conversations relating to them as a solo diner. Additionally, loud noise from others generated a feeling of irritation and insecurity and resulted in an uncomfortable dining experience. In particular, the sound of a quarrel between other diners generated a negative atmospheric factor and consequently had a negative effect on dining experience.

These findings also show that solo diners are influenced through indirect interactions with other diners due to the olfactory sensation of aroma. In particular the presence of an unpleasant smell arising from other diners has a negative impact on customer's dining experience, due to the loss of both their appetite and a perceived loss of food flavour.

These findings show that solo diners can be negatively influenced through indirect interactions with the presence of other diners in close physical proximity. Solo diners seem

to be more sensitive to the unexpected or unwanted close physical proximity to other diners when dining alone in a restaurant. The personal space invasion generated by sharing a table with strangers, or the presence of other diners' personal items on their table generated negative emotions amongst solo diners.

By contrast, the findings of this study indicate that solo diners' familiarity with a restaurant or restaurant staff can be a driver of a positive dining experience. Solo diners seem to have more confidence in dining alone in a previously visited restaurant because they are familiar with both the restaurant and staff. Familiarity with a restaurant or staff members helps solo diners reduce their anxiety about dining out alone and engenders a sense of communal belonging, thereby generating a more comfortable feeling.

The findings observed in this study mirror those of previous studies that have examined the effect of the presence of other customers on customer experience in the service environment (Albrecht, 2016; Miao, 2014; Brocato et al., 2012) and confirm that the same findings also apply to solo diners. Customers are influenced through indirect interactions with the presence of other customers seen as an atmospheric factor (Argo et al., 2005). However, previous studies into the influence of the presence of customer experience have not dealt with a demarcation between group experiences and individual experiences. The findings of this study specifically add to the above literature by highlighting solo diners' reactions are affected either positively or negatively depending on the number and type of other diners present in the restaurant.

Specifically, solo diners' negative or positive responses were aroused when the number of other non-solo diners increased or decreased respectively. This finding corroborates the findings of Argo et al. (2005), who suggested that customers experienced more negative reactions when the non-interactive social presence of other customers increased. A perceived high density of other customers in the service environment engenders feelings of discomfort and displeasure and leads to negative customer experience (Kaya & Erkip, 2001; Hui & Bateson, 1991). This study has shown that a service environment with a high density of other non-solo diners engenders a more negative response amongst solo diners too.

An interesting new finding is that solo diners were positively influenced by the non-interactive social presence of other solo diners. A possible explanation for this finding is that a perceived similarity to other present customers results in a positive response (Kwon et al., 2016; Brack & Benkenstein, 2014; Brocato et al., 2012). Uhrich (2011) suggests that

the presence of others, to which customers perceive similarity, may be more favoured in the service environment. The perception of similarity to others has an effect on positive reinforcement of a sense of self-esteem and self-identity (Smith, 1998). Relational responses to the presence of other solo diners, such as a sense of kinship, lead to positive cognitive responses and this engenders a feeling of comfort. A suggestion can be made that solo diners feel more comfortable when they identify with other solo diners in the service environment.

In support of this, is the finding that solo diners feel self-conscious when they are either aware of the presence of lots of other non-solo diners or the absence of other solo diners specifically. These findings seem to be consistent with other research, which suggested that when customers are alone, envisioning the perspective of other customers watching them and their behaviour can engender a feeling of embarrassment (Dahl et al., 2001; Miller & Leary, 1992). The customer's perceptions regarding other customer's social evaluations about them, can be either real or imagined, and this results in embarrassment (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Negative emotional responses such as embarrassment and discomfort are thereby induced through self-consciousness and other negative cognitive responses, and ultimately result in avoidance behavioural responses. It can therefore be assumed that solo diners are influenced through indirect interaction with the presence of other non-solo diners in the restaurant.

The idea of Albrecht (2016), who suggested that customer's experience can be influenced by watching other present customers in the service environment, supports these findings. Customers can indirectly interact with the presence of other customers through the observation of behaviours of other customers (McGrath & Otnes, 1995). This study found that solo diners' perceptions of watching other present diners or restaurant staff proved to be an influential factor on customer experience. Sensorial perceptions, such as the observation of other diners' and staff members' appearance and demeanour evoked both cognitive and emotional responses. Induced cognitive responses included interest and curiosity, whereas feelings of pleasure and enjoyment constituted some of the evoked emotional responses. These findings seem to be consistent with Tombs and McColl-Kennedy's (2013) findings which showed that when exposed to the positive or negative emotional state of other present customers, customers' enjoyment increases or decreases respectively in the restaurant. It is likely therefore that observation of others can have an effect on solo dining experience.



In accordance with some of the above findings, previous studies have demonstrated that the noise and loudness generated by the presence of other customers can intrude into customer's experience (Wu & Liang, 2009; Hui & Bateson, 1991). Grove and Fisk (1997) describe that overly loud conversations between other customers has a negative impact on customer experience by giving a feeling of displeasure. The unexpected and undesirable sound disrupts customer's concentration and arouses irritation and tension (Kryter, 1970). The finding, however, that overhearing enjoyable conversations from other diners or staff has a positive effect on customer experience, has not previously been discussed. This suggests that the perception of the sound generated by other diners or staff is an important sensorial response, which is able to evoke emotional responses within solo diners such as feelings of pleasure and comfort. The sensorial perception of enjoyable conversations amongst other diners may also induce a cognitive awareness of other customer's positive emotions, and previous authors have indeed noted that customer experience can be more enjoyable when customers are aware of positive emotions showed by others in the service environment (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013).

The findings of this study also support the notion that a perceived unpleasant smell on other customers within the service environment has a negative influence on customer experience (Wu, 2008; Harris, Baron, & Parker, 2000). The study findings suggest that olfactory sensory perceptions such as a bad aroma are able to induce negative emotional responses amongst solo diners, and this is in accordance with previous literature which showed that the presence of other customers' bad aroma was associated with customer feelings of displeasure and dissatisfaction (Martin, 1996).

These findings also corroborate the ideas of Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2010), who suggested that customers were influenced by the physical distance from other customers within the service environment. Customers regulate the distance of other customers, taking into account the level of the irritation or discomfort felt by close physical distance (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Beaulieu, 2004). This study found that the personal space invasion that resulted from the physical proximity to other diners, induced cognitive responses such as burdensomeness or consciousness, and emotional responses such as embarrassment, discomfort, or irritation. This finding is in agreement with Dabbs's (1971) findings which showed that confronted with personal space invasion due to the presence of other people in close physical proximity, a person begins to feel anxiety and uneasiness and confirms that the same findings extend to solo diner.

The personal space is differentially presented depending on the relationship between individuals (Gifford, 2007). Personal space is larger when there is no familiarity between a person and another person compared to the relatively familiar relationship, such as friends, siblings, and acquaintances (Hall, 1959). Furthermore, personal space is differently secured according to culture (Beaulieu, 2004; Sussman & Rosenfeld, 1982). Beaulieu (2004) showed that personal space is larger among Anglo Saxons (i.e. British, English Americans and English Canadians) and Asians (i.e. Chinese, Japanese and Thai) than either Caucasians (i.e. French Canadians) or Latinos (i.e. Brazilian and Italian). Therefore, the restaurant experience of Korean solo diners may be more negatively influenced by the close physical proximity to other diners, due to increased sensitivity about personal space invasion. It can be hypothesised that a similar phenomenon may influence the solo dining experiences of other such groups e.g. Anglo Saxons.

These findings confirm the close association between customer experience and familiarity (Tam, 2008; Alba & Hutchinson, 1987) for solo diners in addition to groups of diners. Hence, this research finds that solo diners also have different dining experiences according to familiarity levels with a restaurant (cf. Ha & Jang, 2010b) because their experiences are evaluated with reference to different levels of familiarity (Söderlund, 2002). Familiarity with a restaurant, such as food options, is important to customers when selecting a restaurant (Ayala, Mueller, Lopez-Madurga, Campbell, & Elder, 2005). Previous authors have shown that within collectivistic cultures, customer familiarity to staff was associated with a more positive evaluation of service employee performance and overall service irrespective of whether it was a successful or unsuccessful service encounter. This is in contrast to individualistic cultures where unfamiliarity with staff was associated with a more positive evaluation of service quality in a successful service encounter (Patterson & Mattila, 2008).

In addition, this study found that a familiar restaurant environment enhanced solo diner's confidence and reduced anxiety relating to the how restaurant staff members viewed them dining alone. A familiar restaurant environment was thereby able to induce not only relational responses such as a sense of belonging, but also both positive cognitive and emotional responses such as self-confidence and comfort respectively. These relational, cognitive, and emotional responses in turn induced positive behavioural responses such as willingness to re-visit. This finding corroborates the ideas of Dahl et al. (2001) who suggested that customer familiarity was linked to less awareness of the presence of others in the service environment. Familiarity with a product or service gives warmth and affinity

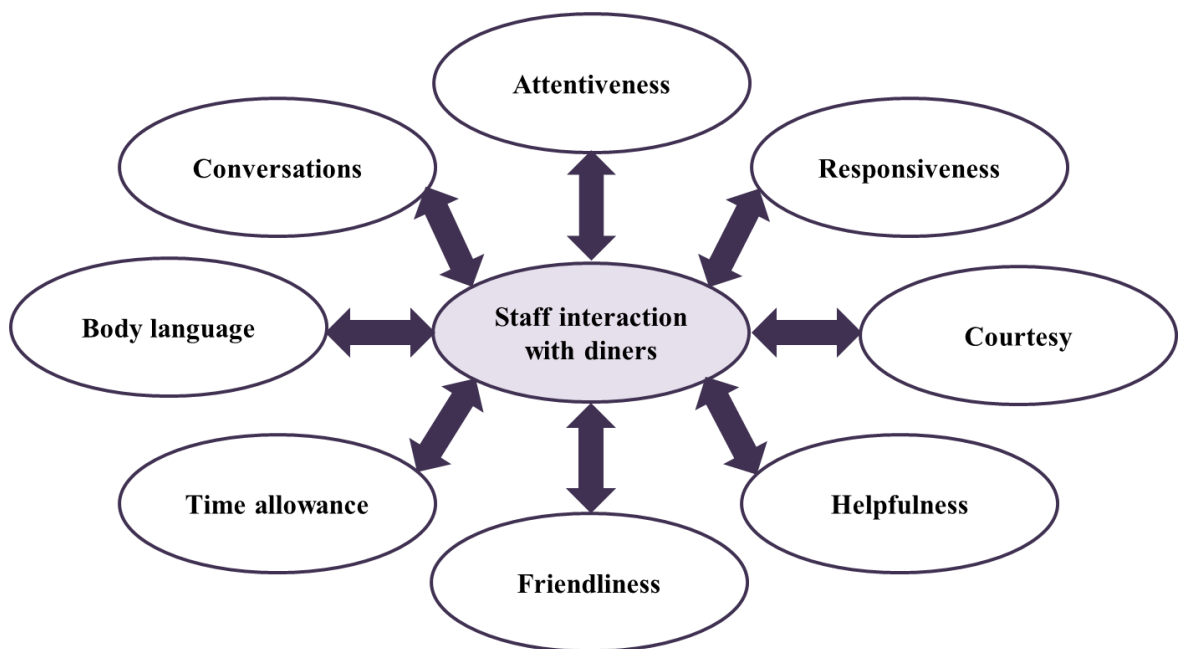
to customers and induces positive evaluations (Zajonc & Hazel, 1982). Familiarity with a restaurant with respect to food, service and environment instils customers' sense of confidence in buying a product or service (Tam, 2008).

Furthermore, the findings of this study showed that a sense of communal belonging engendered by familiarity with a restaurant gave a more comfortable feeling and induced solo diners to revisit as a regular customer. It is commonly assumed that South Koreans are higher in collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), and people from collectivistic cultures seek connectedness through belonging to groups (Oyserman et al., 2002). Another possible explanation for this is that in collectivist culture, people experience more anxiety and discomfort before becoming familiar with the new surroundings (Triandis, 2001). This suggests that customer familiarity with a restaurant is a stronger inducer of a positive dining experience amongst customers from collectivist cultures.

#### 4.4 Staff Interaction with Diners

All of the participants remarked how they encountered and interacted with the restaurant staff members. Various factors were identified and explained under staff interaction with diners, see Figure 8 and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 8: Interactive Factors between Staff and Diners of Solo Dining Experience**



##### 4.4.1 Conversations

Almost all of the participants remarked that having a conversation with restaurant staff impacted on dining experience. A number of participants noted that they were influenced

by whether a restaurant staff member's conversation was well timed or not. Some of them highlighted that they preferred to have some conversation with staff while they were waiting for their meal, because their feeling of loneliness arising from the absence of dining companion was heightened then. They remarked that having a conversation with the restaurant staff either before their food was served or before they paid the bill made them feel less bored and more comfortable. Most of them commented, however, that they felt uneasy if they had a conversation with restaurant staff during their meal. They commented that in such situations, engaging with the staff member in conversation, made it difficult to focus on their food. As such, they did not want the staff to start a conversation after their food was served.

**M-01**

*"The acquainted staff said a throwaway word to me, went about her business, and talked to me again. She wasn't bothering me much so I didn't feel uncomfortable. ... When I visited the restaurant to dine out alone, I enjoyed having a little chat with the staff before receiving my food and before paying the bill. In such a case, it was no inconvenience to me."*

**F-06**

*"It didn't matter if the staff talked to me during the waiting time for my food. But I wanted the staff to leave me alone after I received the food. ... I was happy to have a conversation with the restaurant staff until my food was served. Actually, I was bored while I was dining out alone in the restaurant. Having a talk made me feel less bored."*

**M-07**

*"... When she started a conversation with me during my meal, it was bothering me. I cared about her and I couldn't focus on eating because she was just a restaurant staff member but not my dining companion. It was uncomfortable as she couldn't eat with me and I was eating alone at the table."*

**M-16**

*"I didn't want the staff to start a conversation during my meal. Warm rice and soup served by the staff was getting cold while we were having a talk. ... After the acquainted owner served the food, we kept up a long conversation so my food got cold. He re-served my food reheated. I felt a bit uncomfortable."*

With regard to conversations with staff members, level of familiarity to them seemed to be an important factor in their dining experience. More than half of the participants remarked that they preferred to have a conversation with familiar restaurant staff. They commented that having a simple, light conversation with staff familiar to them, made them feel better and more comfortable dining alone in the restaurant. They did not have feelings of wariness because they recognised the staff as their acquaintance but not a stranger. They

recalled that by virtue of the warm remarks made by restaurant staff familiar to them, the staff members appeared kind. Furthermore, they commented that exchanging a few words with familiar staff members, reduced their feeling of loneliness and boredom.

**M-06**

*“I visited the same restaurant to dine out several times, the staff recognised me first as ‘he is our customer who has come to our restaurant several times’. And she started a conversation with me. ... Although I dined out alone, if I had a conversation with the familiar staff, I felt like it made me less bored and less lonely. I felt emotionally comfortable dining out alone in the restaurant and was able to have my meal.”*

**M-15**

*“The familiar staff and I talked of this, that and the other. She was someone to talk to, so I felt like I was having a meal with her. I enjoyed something like this. ... I wanted to have a meal with my friends or people around me but we couldn’t do that. In such a situation, the familiar staff acknowledged me and talked to me, and I felt pleasant. I felt as if she was my friend’s mum. I felt like having a conversation with a familiar staff member made me feel more comfortable dining out alone. ...”*

**M-04**

*“I thought that the restaurant staff didn’t intrude into my meal and would be like a companion to talk with to some degree, so I was able to dine out alone in more comfort. ... She told me a slight joke as well as gave warm words to me. I liked such a thing. ... That left a good memory in my mind. ... So far from leaving a restaurant after eating only food, feeling warm human affection through a conversation made me dine out in more comfort.”*

The majority of the participants highlighted that having a conversation with unfamiliar restaurant staff was both awkward and uncomfortable. This stemmed from participants not wishing to talk about personal matters with unfamiliar staff members. They recalled that intractable conversation from unfamiliar staff both embarrassed and bothered them because they wanted to enjoy their meal alone. A few of them commented that having conversations with unfamiliar staff made them stay longer than planned, thereby making it uncomfortable, as they wanted to just relieve their hunger and leave quickly.

**M-02**

*“... I think that the relationship between the restaurant owner or the staff and me is strictly business, as an owner and a customer, because we don’t have any personal connections. In particular, I felt like having a chat with an unfamiliar staff member made me feel annoyed and uncomfortable.”*

**M-05**

*“When I first visited a restaurant to dine out alone, a staff member seemed to be interested in me. The staff asked me “have you moved here recently?” “do you live*

*near here?”, and it made me uncomfortable. ... I wasn’t ready to have a conversation with her yet, because I was unfamiliar with her. When she started to talk to me, I felt uncomfortable. ... It made me not visit there again.”*

**F-11**

*“... I think that solo diners are used to dining alone and being alone, so they like spending time alone. ... I went to a restaurant to have some time alone, but having a conversation with unfamiliar staff gave me feelings of discomfort and irritation.”*

**4.4.2 Attentiveness**

The attentiveness of restaurant staff members towards solo diners during their meal seems to impact on dining experience. Many participants remarked that adequate attention from restaurant staff while they were dining out alone, made them feel more comfortable. They commented on feeling daunted as a solo diner because dining alone has not prevailed yet in Korea, and that their tension was relieved by the restaurant staff member immediately acknowledging whenever they needed anything, and promptly replenishing anything before their request.

**F-08**

*“I was glad that the staff filled my glass with water, even though I didn’t call her in when it was empty. I didn’t feel like she wasn’t watching me carefully, but she knew it right away when there was anything I wanted or needed. This made me feel better.”*

**F-12**

*“I was glad that the staff took away empty plates as soon as I had finished eating off them. I don’t like it when empty plates are left on my table during my meal. ... It showed that the staff were paying attention to me sitting at the table.”*

The majority of the participants, however, recalled that either inattention or over-attention from restaurant staff gave them an uncomfortable feeling. Some participants reported that inadequate attention from restaurant staff, made them feel neglected during their meal. They remarked that the staff seldom came to their tables to check what else they needed during their meal and this had a negative impact on their dining experience. This is because they had to call the staff several times whenever they needed anything. Additionally, they commented that due to staff inattention, they had to wait a long time to order food or pay and this annoyed them. In contrast, a larger number of participants recalled that the staff kept staring at them to check if they needed anything, and this made them feel uneasy, due to a sense of staff meddling in their meal. They remarked that it was tiresome when the staff frequently asked if there was anything they needed.

**M-06**

*"I had a nasty experience regarding the restaurant staff. When I dined out alone in the restaurant, it got really busy. While I was standing at a counter to pay for my food, the restaurant owner cared for other diners first and he didn't even look at me .... It was very annoying."*

**M-11**

*"I wanted the restaurant staff to leave me alone during my meal. If I needed anything, I would ask her for what I needed. She frequently came to me and kept asking "May I pour you some water?" or "Shall I offer you some more side dishes?", and it was uncomfortable. ... The staff standing next to me in order to take an order quickly, made me feel uneasy when I dined out alone."*

**4.4.3 Responsiveness**

Almost half of the participants noted that they were influenced by how fast the restaurant staff members responded to their requests. Most of them recalled that prompt responses from the staff members displayed a sense of kindness amongst the restaurant staff and this made them feel more comfortable dining alone. This is because the staff came to them as soon as they called him/her and immediately satisfied their needs. Some of them commented that slow responses from the restaurant staff member made them feel uncomfortable. They recalled that staff delay in responding to their request engendered a sense of both annoyance and waiting a long time because they had no one to talk to.

**F-05**

*"When I told the restaurant staff member what I needed, she didn't let me wait a long time for it and immediately brought it to me. ... It is important to me that the staff member has to be responsive to my request, when I call him/her to ask what I need."*

**M-14**

*"She was promptly responsive to my request during my meal. I felt like she was kind to me if she was quick to satisfy what I needed. ... When I asked her to get a wet tissue, she brought it immediately. Such prompt responsiveness from the staff made me feel like I received a proper service."*

**F-03**

*"I called the staff member to pay for my meal, but he didn't come to me so I had to wait for a while. As such I didn't want to visit there again. If the staff member wasn't responsive to what I needed, I felt annoyed. I think that the staff member, who responds late to the customer's request, isn't doing very well in the service industry."*

#### **M-17**

*“When it was crowded in the restaurant, the staff came to me after I had called her two or three times. I was displeased with her slow response. ... When I needed something and asked the staff, she brought it to me too late so I felt annoyed.”*

#### **4.4.4 Courtesy**

Three important areas emerged relating to courtesy: manner and type of greeting; acknowledgement; and politeness. These are described in the sections below.

##### **4.4.4.1 Manner and Type of Greeting**

The majority of the participants highlighted that their dining experiences were influenced by the manner and type of greeting from the restaurant staff when they entered the restaurant. Almost half of the participants remarked that the staff greeted them happily with the phrase “Hello, welcome to our restaurant” and this enhanced their happiness before a meal. They emphasised that such staff greetings felt courteous towards the customer. On the contrary to this, some of the participants commented that when they entered the restaurant, the staff did not greet them, and this engendered a negative feeling. They remarked that not being greeted by any staff felt both unfriendly and spoiled their appetite and in addition to the absence of a greeting, the restaurant staff pretended not to see them, which offended them.

#### **M-15**

*“When I entered the restaurant the first time, the staff member greeted me with a face wreathed in smiles. I felt as if she and I have been long acquainted with each other. It didn’t feel like the relationship between a seller and a diner, and I felt as if I came to my friend’s house to have a meal. It was pleasant.”*

#### **F-06**

*“When I entered the restaurant, I had an expectation, in which the meal was probably delicious. As soon as the staff treated me coldly without any greetings, I felt like I lost my appetite. ...”*

#### **M-01**

*“When I entered the restaurant, the staff looked at me in an absent sort of way without any greetings. I would get out of there if I could, as I felt unpleasant.”*

Some of the participants recalled that the staff greeted them in a context befitting of the restaurant theme and this generated a sense that the restaurant specialised in a particular foreign cuisine. As such they felt as if they were dining out in a foreign country, which gave them an enjoyable experience. Only one participant recalled that staff greeting in keeping with the restaurant theme irritated him. This is because he disagreed with the type



of greeting, in which the Korean restaurant staff greeted Korean customers in a foreign language.

**M-07**

*“When I entered a Japanese restaurant, the staff member greeted me in Japanese. ... Such an atmosphere was fun so I often went there. I like that restaurant staff members greet me in a language in keeping with the restaurant theme. ... If the staff greeted like that, I felt as if I were experiencing foreign cultures without having to visit the countries and that the restaurant must have specialised in this particular foreign cuisine.”*

**M-09**

*“... As a Korean visiting a Japanese restaurant run by a Korean owner in Korea, I didn't understand why the restaurant staff greeted me in Japanese. ... It was really odd. When they greeted me in Japanese, I wanted to say that you are Korean, not Japanese. That greeting didn't agree with me.”*

Many participants highlighted that the restaurant staff members greeted them with a question relating to the number of dining companions, despite the staff member's recognition that they had visited alone. They commented that responding to such a question both embarrassed and daunted them, and contributed to their anxiety about other people's negative preconceptions on their social ability when dining alone. They recalled that they felt uncomfortable.

**F-01**

*“When I entered the restaurant, the staff asked me “Are you coming alone?”. It was an unpleasant question. That was because I was already upset about dining alone, and they assured that I came here alone. ... It was so obvious that I came alone to dine out in the restaurant, but the staff asked me “How many people?”. I felt like such questions put me down. I felt small in front of the others before eating.”*

**4.4.4.2 Acknowledgement**

Many of the participants highlighted that they were glad the restaurant staff remembered them. They commented that when the staff acknowledged them with a smile and a nod, they felt more comfortable dining alone in the restaurant. This is because through the restaurant staff member acknowledging them, they felt more familiar with the restaurant staff and less lonely.

**M-16**

*“I think that the staff member, who already knows I often dine out alone in the restaurant, acknowledged me with a nod, which made me more comfortable. ... She already knew what kind of side dishes I like, so she tried to care more about such things. ... I could dine alone with a less lonely feeling in the restaurant because of the acknowledgement from staff acquaintances, so it remained in my memory.”*

#### **4.4.4.3 Politeness**

The majority of the participants noted that they were influenced by the level of staff politeness in a restaurant. Some of them highlighted that a restaurant staff member who was polite and behaved well made them feel more comfortable. They remarked that they were courteously served by the restaurant staff using honorific language during their meal and this gave them an enjoyable experience. In contrast, most of them highlighted that impoliteness from restaurant staff members during a meal persisted in their memory. They commented that the staff's brusque manner of service negatively impacted on their emotions and ruined their appetite. They recalled that the staff either served their food rudely or lacked focus when they were ordering their food from them and this made them feel slighted and irritated.

##### **M-03**

*"All of the restaurant staff members were polite and showed respect to me, this made me feel pleasant."*

##### **M-11**

*"The staff courteously left my food on the table in front of me, as such I felt pleasant during my meal."*

##### **M-17**

*"... When I felt like she found me a bother, I didn't want to eat the food. I thought why I was treated like that even though I paid for that. I felt unpleasant, and I felt I wouldn't want to come here again."*

##### **M-10**

*"After a staff member took an order from me, he came to me several times to keep a check on my order. It gave me an unpleasant feeling. ... When he received my order, I thought that he seemed not to focus on me. I was almost angry with him."*

##### **F-03**

*"I found that there were no spoon and chopsticks in the drawer in the table at which I was sitting, so I asked a restaurant staff member to bring them to me. She said to me that "Ah, there you are", snapped the drawer opposite to my seat open, and then went off. I felt unpleasant. ... So I would never revisit this restaurant."*

Additionally, half of them recalled that the restaurant staff member talked to them in a brusque manner, which made them feel irritated. This is because they felt hard done by, from the manner in which the restaurant staff talked to them with a fussy tone, when they visited a restaurant or ordered food. Several of them recalled that they felt uncomfortable when they heard staff shout orders to the kitchen staff immediately after taking them. They

commented that staff taking orders in such a way engendered a feeling of being treated with disdain and it embarrassed them.

**M-08**

*“... I have had a bad experience because of the way that the owner of a restaurant talked to me. He talked to me in an impolite manner because I looked younger than him ... He used a patronising tone toward me so I felt like I wasn’t treated as a customer.”*

**F-13**

*“Some staff turned their back and shouted the order to the kitchen staff immediately after receiving it. Taking the orders in this way made me feel slighted. They made me think “Should I have ordered the other food instead?” and this made me feel unpleasant. ... There was a table where orders could be given to the kitchen staff, but they couldn’t be bothered doing that, and instead shouted the order to the kitchen staff on the spot. This made me feel upset.”*

#### **4.4.5 Body Language**

One key element of body language that seemed to impact on dining experience was the various facial expressions used by the restaurant staff members. Almost half of the participants emphasised that it was important for them to be served by staff with a smile during their meal. They commented that they felt a little uncomfortable dining alone in the restaurant due to the attention of either the restaurant staff members or its owner looking at them. They recalled that the restaurant staff served them with a smile, which made them feel happier and more comfortable dining alone. Some of them commented that they preferred to be served by restaurant staff members who had a cheerful look and were full of energy. They recalled that they saw the restaurant staff looking bright, which made them feel happier and more comfortable.

**M-11**

*“... When I saw a restaurant staff member’s face wreathed in smiles, she made it more pleasant to dine alone. I couldn’t remember what she looked like, but I only remembered she smiled at me. ... I wish that the staff serve and treat me with a smiling face.”*

**M-06**

*“I was pleased with the restaurant staff member looking energetic and bright. I felt like ‘I was treated well’. It was pleasant in the restaurant. I came to the restaurant to spend my money so it was better to be served by a bright staff member than a blunt staff member.”*

Contrary to this, some of the participants commented on the effect of negative facial expressions used by the restaurant staff members on solo dining experience. They

remarked that they were served by restaurant staff members who both wore a ‘poker-face’ or a sullen look and looked tired and exhausted, which gave them an uncomfortable feeling. They commented that when either sullen-faced or exhausted-faced staff served them during their meal, they felt like the service was not worth what they paid for it.

#### ***F-12***

*“I think that the essential kindness of the staff is in their facial expressions. ... I felt unpleasant due to staff frowning at me, when I gave an order in the restaurant. ... I don’t want to be served by staff pulling a long face. I did not only want to know what happened with him, but also need to understand such a thing as a customer.”*

#### ***M-01***

*“I sometimes found restaurant staff members who looked too tired and worn out. When I saw such a facial expression, I felt like that it was emotionally uncomfortable, not unpleasant.”*

Additionally, many participants remarked that a restaurant staff member had a look of embarrassment on their face or looked at them weirdly, when they came to the restaurant alone to dine out. They recalled that the staff looked embarrassed by them visiting alone to dine out, which gave them an uncomfortable feeling. Being given a look of such embarrassment engendered a sense that they should not have visited this restaurant. They highlighted that on realising the staff were looking at them weirdly, they felt ashamed to dine alone in the restaurant.

#### ***M-12***

*“When I answered “I came alone” to the staff in a restaurant, they looked at me so strange. I felt like they looked embarrassed, ‘Why is he coming here alone? ... They looked at me with a strange look, ‘Why is he coming alone in the evening?’ or ‘Does he have no friends?’. It was unpleasant.”*

### **4.4.6 Helpfulness**

Some of the participants commented that when they visited a new restaurant alone, they preferred to receive help from the restaurant staff in respect of menus. The staff helpfulness made them feel happier and more comfortable. They recalled that on hearing detailed explanations about menus or on receiving the staff recommendation of food their treatment by staff felt special.

#### ***M-11***

*“I didn’t know what I wanted to have so I asked a staff member “What about this menu?”, she answered thoughtfully. It wasn’t that “It’s taste. Try this one.”, but “If you have this food with this one or that one, I think you will like it.” I was happy to be treated by that kind of staff explaining the menu in detail.”*

#### ***F-11***

*“When I asked a staff member about the tasty food in the menu, she gave me her recommendation with a detailed explanation that this food was popular in this restaurant. I was happy with her recommendation. ... She gave me a feeling of warmth, which was pleasant.”*

#### **4.4.7 Friendliness**

Many participants highlighted that the friendly behaviour of staff members towards them made them feel more comfortable dining alone. They recalled that it was heart-warming to be kindly treated and served by the restaurant staff in a friendly manner. They remarked that when restaurant staff were affectionate towards them, it made them feel as if they were a special guest or friend of the restaurant staff. Participants recalled that this comfortable relationship with staff was distinct from the business-like relationship usually encountered with restaurant employees. They expressed that the staff in a friendly manner induced them to visit again.

#### ***M-15***

*“When I visited a restaurant, the owner was affectionate towards me. I felt very comfortable dining alone in the restaurant. ... I was pleased that the restaurant staff provided a friendly atmosphere during the meal, because I didn’t feel like I was dining alone.”*

#### ***F-04***

*“I was pleased that a restaurant member was very kind to me. A bowl was filled full of food and it looked too hot, so she friendly served my food on the table in front of me.”*

#### **4.4.8 Time Allowance**

A number of participants, commented on whether they were allowed sufficient time to finish their meal or not. Some of them recalled that they enjoyed their meal in the restaurant without time constraints. They remarked that they preferred to have time to enjoy their meal, or spend some time alone in the restaurant either reading a book or watching a tablet PC. They reported feeling emotionally comfortable when the restaurant staff allowed them to enjoy their meal without being rushed. On the contrary, most of them commented that they were rushed to finish their meal quickly by the restaurant staff, which made them feel uncomfortable. They remarked that the staff frequently stared at them during their meal or kept standing near their table, when the restaurant was crowded. This gave them a sense of pressure to finish their meal quickly. In addition, they recalled that every time they had empty plates, the staff whisked away their plates hurriedly. They felt that their meal was interrupted.

#### **M-14**

*“When I dine out alone, I tend to have a meal unhurriedly in a restaurant. I usually have a meal while watching my tablet PC. There was no constraint on me about doing that in this restaurant. I felt comfortable dining alone in such an atmosphere in which the staff didn’t rush me into finishing my meal.”*

#### **M-09**

*“I heard that a restaurant owner had told other diners to leave as soon as they were finished. ... He didn’t speak to me directly but instead showed this in his manner and quickly cleared up the table next me. ... He kept whisking away my empty plates during a meal. I think that such things are like a silent message.”*

### **4.4.9 Summary and Discussion**

In summary, the findings of this study show that solo diners can be influenced through direct encounters and interactions with staff members in the restaurant environment. Solo diners preferred to have a conversation with the restaurant staff familiar to them either before their food was served or before they paid the bill and this reduced a feeling of loneliness and boredom. In contrast, restaurant staff’s conversation during their meal was a distraction and this engendered a feeling of discomfort. Furthermore, participants did not wish to have an intractable conversation with unfamiliar restaurant staff as they felt they were strangers. Such an unwanted conversation bothered and irritated solo diners, who wanted either to enjoy their meal alone or rush to have their meal.

Solo diners felt daunted about dining alone, and as such were very specific about the exact sort of attention they felt appropriate from staff. Appropriate attention from staff, in which the restaurant staff member immediately acknowledged whenever solo diners needed anything before their request, made the solo dining experience more comfortable. Both inadequate attention and over-attention from staff, however, impacted negatively on dining experience. A number of participants commented that perception of inadequate attention from staff engendered feelings of being ignored because they were a solo diner. Staff over-attention was also reported to negatively impact dining experience, as participants commented that over attention from staff interrupted their dining.

In addition to the above, solo diners were perceptive to staff responsiveness, as due to the absence of a dining companion their waiting time for actions from staff seemed longer when dining alone. Solo diners’ perception of prompt responses from staff made them feel more comfortable whereas late responses gave them a feeling of discomfort and irritation.

Solo dining experience was influenced by aspects of staff courtesy such as: manner and type of greeting; acknowledgement; and politeness. Solo diners preferred that the

restaurant staff greeted them on entering the restaurant because through self-consciousness about dining alone, solo diners already felt intimidated when entering the restaurant alone. Staff questioning them with regard to the number of dining companions, however, made them feel embarrassed and daunted. Solo diners' emotional reactions to staff greetings in a context befitting of the restaurant theme were positively or negatively affected depending on their personality and preferences. Acknowledgement from restaurant staff, with a smile and a nod, helped solo diners reduce their anxiety about dining out alone generating a more comfortable feeling. In addition, solo diners' perception of the restaurant staff being polite gave them a more comfortable and enjoyable experience whereas a brusque or impolite manner of staff members made them feel slighted and irritated.

The various facial expressions used by the restaurant staff impacted on solo dining experience. Restaurant staff serving them with either a smile or a cheerful look generated a feeling of happiness and comfort while dining alone. Negative facial expressions of the restaurant staff, however, such as a sullen or exhausted look were perceived unfavourably. Furthermore, when solo diners entered the restaurant alone to dine out, a perceived look of bewilderment and embarrassment on the faces of staff members induced a feeling of remorse for visiting the restaurant alone.

Solo diners, who tried a new restaurant, were pleased with staff help in respect to menus. The detailed explanations about menus or the staff recommendation of food helped to alleviate their indecision regarding what to eat and this made them feel like a special guest and gave them a feeling of pleasure and comfort. A friendly demeanour of the restaurant staff towards solo diners that was heart-warming caused them to feel more comfortable dining alone. Solo diners preferred to have sufficient time to enjoy their meal in the restaurant without time constraints although the restaurant was crowded. In contrast, a perceived sense of pressure from restaurant staff to finish their meal quickly distracted them from their meal and resulted in an uncomfortable dining experience.

Previous studies have noted the importance of the customer's interactions with service employees in the customer experience (Carù & Cova, 2015; Wu & Liang, 2009). The current study found that various interactions with the restaurant staff can have a considerable effect on solo dining experience. In accordance with the present findings, previous studies have demonstrated that the interactive service performance of service employees includes professional behaviour (e.g. conversations, helpfulness), attitude toward customers (e.g. facial expression, courtesy, friendliness) and proactive service (e.g.

attentiveness, responsiveness) and this contributes to building customer experience (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Walls, 2013; Walls et al., 2011a; Hansen et al., 2005). These studies have not been described in the context of solo diners, however.

The findings of this study indicate that solo diners were reluctant to engage in conversations with the restaurant staff unfamiliar to them whereas they were interested in having a conversation with familiar restaurant staff. These findings partially support previous research which described that conversations with service employees make customer experience more enjoyable (Harris et al., 2000), and that conversations with the service employees that bring added value to customer experience plays an important role in building rapport between customers and employees (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015a; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). In addition, Goodwin and Lockshin (1992) suggest that lonely solo diners, who are unwilling to dine alone in the restaurant, may desire to engage in a conversation with the service employee unlike solitary solo diners who want to enjoy their meal alone.

A new finding from this study was that conversations with unfamiliar restaurant staff had a negative impact on both ‘solitary’ diners who chose to enjoy their meal alone and ‘lonely’ diners who were unwilling or reluctant solo diners. Solo diners’ perception of the conversations with unfamiliar staff engendered a feeling of annoyance and irritation. Conversations with unfamiliar staff generated negative cognitive responses such as wariness and awkwardness amongst solo diners, which engendered negative emotional responses, and resulted in avoidance behavioural responses. A possible explanation for these findings might be that customers in Asian cultures consider conversations with the service employees as being less important relative to those in Western cultures (Winsted, 1997). Customers from a high power distance culture tended to perceive that service employees have a lower social status than those originating from a low power distance culture (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007). In addition to this, customers in collectivistic countries are more inclined to be reluctant to engage in conversations with strangers than those in individualistic countries (Oyserman et al., 2002; Gudykunst et al., 1987). Korean customers are part of a collectivistic and large power differential culture based on in-group norms and tend to perceive that service employees, who do not belong to their social group, have a lower social status and as such, they have less of a desire for expressions of familiarity shown by service employees (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007). It can therefore be assumed that solo diners in collectivistic and larger power differential cultures are more



unwilling to engage in conversations with unfamiliar restaurant staff and such conversations impact negatively on dining experience.

The findings indicate that the attentiveness and responsiveness from the restaurant staff had an impact on solo dining experience, and that solo diners are more inclined to perceive their waiting time duration as longer due to the absence of dining companion. This study confirms the findings of other studies that proactive service in customers' interactions with service employees, such as caring, attentiveness and responsiveness, is associated with customer experience (Walls et al., 2011a). In particular, caring and attentiveness from the staff have a positive impact on customer experience through perceived emotive and cognitive value (Walls, 2013). The study findings suggest that either inadequate attention or late responses from staff, generated negative cognitive responses amongst solo diners such as disdain, which in turn induced unfavourable emotional responses such as feelings of annoyance and displeasure. Customer perceptions of enough attention from staff, in which the restaurant staff are around them or take care of them when customers request what they need, generate a favourable restaurant experience (Walter et al., 2010; Hansen et al., 2005). These previous studies had not been carried out in the context of solo diners specifically. A study by Goodwin and Lockshin (1992) did, however, show that the necessary attention from staff differs depending on whether the customers were solo or as a group. In summary therefore, this study suggests that solo diners are more concerned about the attentiveness and responsiveness from the restaurant staff than other groups of diners.

Interestingly, the findings of this study show that attentiveness and responsiveness from the restaurant staff seem to be important factors in the restaurant experience of Korean solo diners. The literature suggests that customers from Asian countries pay more attention to treatment through caring and attentiveness from the staff to evaluate their experience than customers from Western countries (Winsted, 1997), and that behaviour of staff such as caring and attentiveness have a more positive impact on Korean customers than American customers (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007; Furrer et al., 2000). With regard to staff responsiveness, however, customers in more collectivistic cultures tend to less expect the service staff to provide prompt services to them than individualistic customers (Furrer et al., 2000; Donthu & Yoo, 1998). By contrast, the results of this study suggest that service employee's responsiveness does significantly influence solo dining customer experience amongst South Koreans. The disparity between these discordant findings may lie in the fact that previous literature had not specifically looked at solo diners as a distinct group. It may be therefore that solo diners are a distinct entity amongst Korean restaurant customers

in being more sensitive to prompt services of service employee than the customer population as a whole.

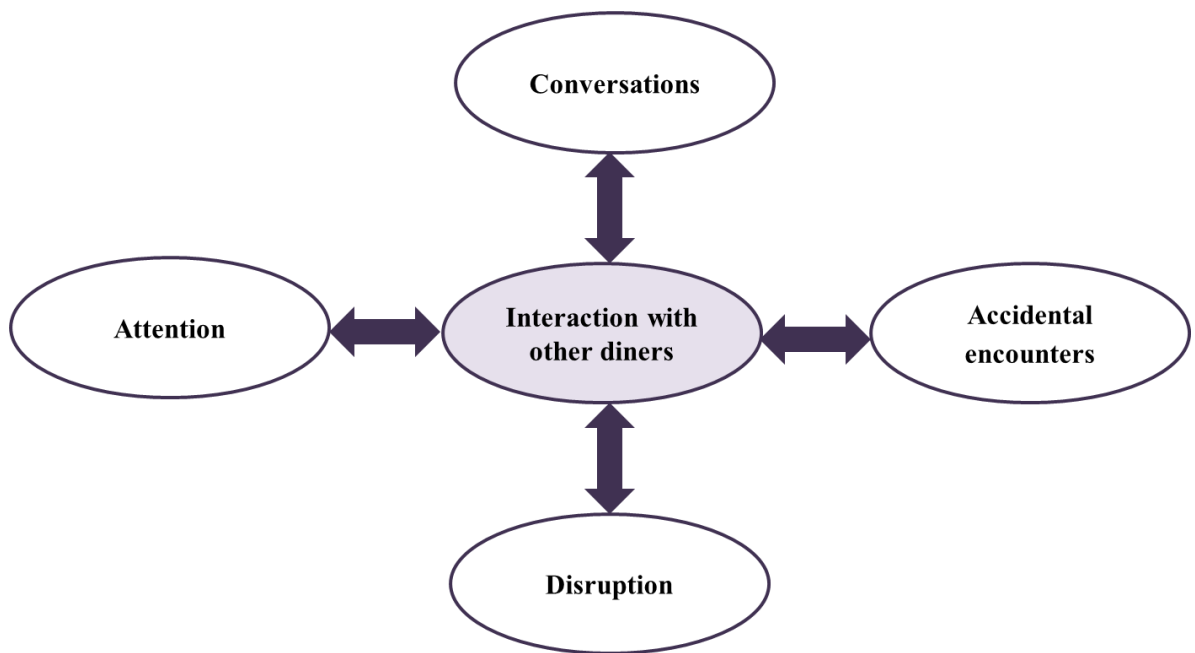
This study found that the attitude of the restaurant staff perceived through courtesy, body language, friendliness and time allowance played a vital role in solo dining experience. Perception of a positive attitude and demeanour from restaurant staff stimulated positive cognitive responses within solo diners such as value for money and favourable evaluation of service quality, which engendered positive emotional responses such as pleasure and comfort. By contrast, the perception of negative attitudes and demeanour from restaurant staff generated negative cognitive responses like disdain amongst solo diners and induced unfavourable emotional responses such as irritation, embarrassment, and displeasure, thereby resulting in avoidance behaviour responses. The present findings are consistent with other research which found that perceptions of positive attitude and demeanour of service employees have a considerable effect on customer experience (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Walls et al., 2011a), and that friendliness and courtesy of service employees contribute to positively influence customer experience (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Walter et al., 2010). In addition, these findings agree with the findings of other studies, in which customer perception of positive emotions displayed by the service employee results in a more positive emotional response to customer experience (Albrecht et al., 2016; Pugh, 2014). Pleasant non-verbal communication such as casual smiling and frequent eye contact engendering feelings of warmth and friendliness enhances customers' positive evaluations of the service experience (Sundaram & Webster, 2000). These previous studies have not been described in the context of solo diners, however.

Previous literature has suggested the performance of service employees is differently perceived depending on customers from different cultural backgrounds (Mattila, 2000). For example, Korean customers in the restaurant are more sensitive to aspects of service employee's demeanour such as manner, body language and courtesy of service than other groups such as American customers, due to cultural norms of social distance and social status differences (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007). In addition, the behaviours of service employees such as body language, attitudes and courtesy are more important in collectivistic cultures whereas customers from individualist cultures pay more attention to the specific language used by service employees (Triandis, 2001). It is possible, therefore, that the behaviours and demeanour of restaurant staff are more sensitively perceived in the restaurant experiences of Korean solo diners.

## 4.5 Active Interaction with Other Diners

Almost all of the participants remarked how their encounters and interaction with other diners during their meal remained in their memory. Various factors were categorised and explained under active interaction with other diners, see Figure 9 and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 9: Interactive Factors between Other Diners and Diners of Solo Dining Experience**



### 4.5.1 Conversations

More than half of the participants remarked that their dining experiences were influenced by having a conversation with other diners. Some of them were delighted to have conversations with other solo diners during their meal because they felt lonely when they dined out alone. They commented that they undertook light conversation with other solo diners and this enhanced the pleasantness of the meal. They recalled that talking with another diner who shared their viewpoint and interests, made them feel less lonely. In contrast, a few of them recalled that it was uncomfortable having a conversation with another solo diner who expressed different opinions on the same topic and that such a disagreement made them feel uncomfortable.

**M-08**

*"I had a conversation with the other solo diner sitting at the table next to my table. We talked politics, and laid the blame on politicians together. We shared the common opinion on the topic. It made me feel better and less lonely"*

**M-16**

*"When an elderly man sometimes sat across my seat, he tried to start conversation with me. "Are you coming alone?" "Yes" "I am coming alone, too. Are you not bored with dining alone?" "Not too bad" ... Having a talk with an elderly man was very amusing. Having a light conversation during a meal was more fun than having a meal alone."*

**M-06**

*"I had a talk with a diner sitting at the next table while watching TV. ... We talked about the important issues such as political or serious social issues. ... He held firm opinions which usually conflicted with mine. It was uncomfortable. ... I stopped talking to him and then, tried to leave the restaurant as soon as possible."*

The majority of the participants had experienced having an unwanted conversation with another diner during their meal. They commented that they did not wish to have conversations with other diners because they preferred to have time to enjoy their meal themselves. They remarked that such an unwanted conversation disrupted their eating, and made them feel emotionally uncomfortable.

**F-01**

*"I didn't like that a diner started a conversation with me during my meal. I felt like she trespassed on my time. It was unnecessary to have a talk with strangers. It was uncomfortable."*

**F-08**

*"... That's because having a conversation with strangers is an unnatural behaviour in Korea. ... If a diner initiates a conversation with me in a restaurant, I have a strong impression that they want to obtain something they need."*

**4.5.2 Attention**

The degree of attention from other non-solo diners seemed to be an important factor in determining dining experience. Several participants recalled that perceiving other diners were paying attention to them and judging their ability to socialise, made them feel uncomfortable. They remarked that they were afraid of attention from other diners when they dined out alone, and that many people misjudge solo diners as having problems related to personal relationships. This is because, due to the Korean communal culture, dining alone has not prevailed as a cultural norm despite the increasing number of solo diners. In fact, some of the participants remarked, that an atmosphere in which other diners

paid no attention to them was more comfortable for dining alone. This is because they felt less concern about other diners' negative preconceptions relating to them. They remarked that they did not want attention from other diners because of being a solo diner, and this is illustrated in the quotes below.

**M-05**

*"... I felt uncomfortable with other diners' attention I didn't want. ... I didn't like that they cared why I was dining out alone. ..."*

**M-13**

*"It is hard to have a meal alone in a restaurant. People in Korea regard a solo diner as a person who has no friends because there is something wrong with him or her, so I am worried about other diners staring at me in a disapproving manner. ... I felt uncomfortable because I felt that I was being watched by other diners who were judging me for dining alone."*

**M-14**

*"... It had an atmosphere, in which all of the diners didn't bother each other with their meal. Having a meal alone in such an atmosphere didn't look odd at all. ... I felt comfortable being able to dine alone without other diners' attention, and to enjoy my favourite meal without other diners' gaze."*

#### **4.5.3 Disruption**

A few of the participants commented that being bothered by children during their meal influenced their dining experience. These participants commented that some diners brought their children to dine out in a restaurant, but were then unable to control their children's behaviour. They recalled that these children then bothered them during their meal, making them feel annoyed.

**M-09**

*"... There were lots of other diners with their children in a restaurant. Some parents didn't prevent their children from running all over the place, which made me very annoyed."*

**F-13**

*"... I don't like it when the children go loose in a restaurant. ... As soon as I acknowledged other diners' children, they kept bothering me during my meal. It was uncomfortable. ... I was displeased that little children kept coming to my table, and touched my food with their fingers. ..."*

#### **4.5.4 Accidental Encounters**

Some of the participants recalled that encountering an acquaintance during their meal made them feel emotionally uncomfortable. They remarked that they did not want their acquaintance to misconstrue their solo dining as being reflective of problems with personal

relationships. In addition they commented that they did not want their meal to be disrupted through exchanging greetings with their acquaintance.

**M-07**

*“... I don’t mind being watched by other diners, unless they are acquaintances of mine ... I felt concern about my acquaintance misinterpreting and getting the wrong end of the stick. ... When I visited a restaurant alone and found my acquaintances having a meal in a group, I felt uncomfortable. They asked me “Why are you coming alone?” and then, we separately sat and had a meal. It was really uncomfortable.”*

**F-07**

*“... I was uncomfortable exchanging greetings with my acquaintance during my meal. I didn’t want my meal time to be disturbed by greeting each other. Also, I didn’t want to care what anyone else thought of me dining alone in a restaurant. ...”*

#### **4.5.5 Summary and Discussion**

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that solo diners can be influenced through direct encounters and interactions with other diners in the restaurant environment. Conversations with other diners have either a positive or negative impact on solo dining experience depending on either the individual solo diner’s motivation to dine alone or the content of such conversations. Solo diners, who wanted to have time to enjoy their meal, or spend some time alone in the restaurant, preferred not to have conversations with other diners. In contrast, ‘lonely’ diners (i.e. reluctant solo diners) preferred an opportunity to have light conversations with other diners as it reduced subjective feelings of loneliness. An additional factor was the content of such conversations as sharing either the same opinions or divergent opinions on with other diners engendered a feeling of enjoyment or irritation respectively amongst the participants.

Attention from other customers, such as other non-solo diners or accidentally encountered acquaintances in the restaurant, also influenced solo dining experience. A concern amongst the participants was that other customers misjudged their solo dining as being reflective of personal relationship problems. As such, when dining alone, the absence of attention from other customers was preferable. Another reported factor that influenced solo dining experience was the presence of children in the restaurant. Distractions related to the behaviour of unruly children led to a negative dining experience amongst solo diners and engendered a feeling of discomfort and irritation.

These findings further support the idea of the impact of direct encounters and interactions with other diners on dining experience (Walter et al., 2010; Andersson & Mossberg, 2004).

This study extends research from other services settings that shows that verbal interactions with strangers in service settings are linked to customer experience (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Harris & Baron, 2004), and that customers are directly influenced by conversations with strangers in the service environment (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013). Prior research suggests that the conversations with strangers help customers reduce dissatisfaction with their service experience (Harris & Baron, 2004). For example, engaging in conversations with strangers in the service environment engenders a feeling of pleasure and enjoyment (Moore et al., 2005; Harris et al., 2000; Martin, 1996). Additionally, feeling part of society engendered through enjoyable conversations on common interests with other customers can enhance a positive experience (Walls et al., 2011a).

In contrast, the findings relating to solitary solo diners did not reflect the above pattern. In the case of solitary solo diners, conversations with other diners had a negative impact because they wanted to have time to enjoy their meal or spend some time alone in the restaurant. This was regardless of the content of the conversations. As such verbal interactions with other diners induced negative cognitive response amongst solitary solo diners such as awkwardness, which in turn induced feelings of discomfort and avoidance behavioural responses. This finding is consistent with the suggestion that customers who desire to be alone by themselves are unwilling to engage in conversations with unacquainted people (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992; Pedersen, 1979). It is possible, therefore, that conversations with strangers (i.e. other customers) in the service environment can enhance or detract from solo dining experience depending on solo diners' main purpose of solo-dining.

One of the issues that emerge from these findings is that Korean solo diners seem not to prefer having conversations with other diners when dining alone in the restaurant. A possible explanation for this finding might be that Korean people from a high collectivistic culture have greater disjuncture between interactions with in-group members and with strangers than American people in an individual culture (Gudykunst et al., 1987). People from collectivistic cultures tend to feel more embarrassed with and less at ease in direct interactions with strangers (Oyserman et al., 2002). Engaging in conversations with strangers is therefore a weaker inducer of a positive dining experience amongst customers from collectivist cultures than individualistic cultures.

With regard to the effect of the attention from other customers on customer experience there is very little reported in the literature. It was found in this study that the negative

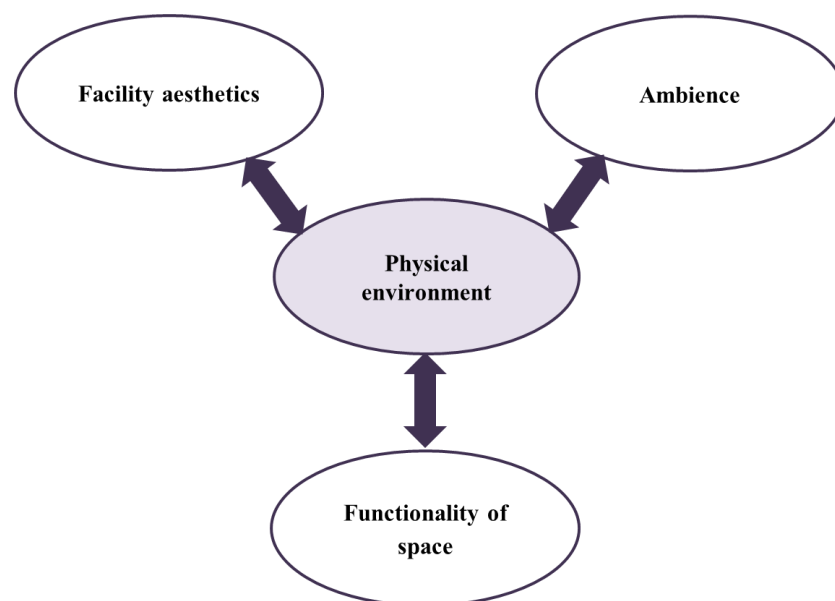
effect of solo diners' perception of the attention from other customers originated from concerns about social evaluation by other diners. As such negative emotional responses of solo diners were engendered from cognitive responses such as self-consciousness. A possible explanation for this might be that reluctant solo customers who feel lonely tend to experience more fear of being negatively evaluated by other customers (Wang et al., 2012; Bearden & Rose, 1990). Another possible explanation for this is that people from collectivistic cultures seem to be more sensitive to and aware of the social evaluation from others than people from individual cultures (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2012).

The findings of this study extend previous research, which shows the association between the presence of children in the service environment and customer experience (Walls et al., 2011a). Previous research has suggested that the presence of unruly children without adult supervision in service settings is associated with dissatisfaction, and can ruin customer experience (Wu, 2008; Grove & Fisk, 1997; Martin & Pranter, 1989). In this study solo diners' perceived disruption of their meal due to unruly children induced negative emotional responses such as annoyance and discomfort.

#### 4.6 Physical Environment

All of the participants remarked how their interaction with the restaurant's physical environment during their meal remained in their memory. Various factors were categorised and explained under interaction with physical environment, see Figure 10 and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 10: Physical Environmental Factors of Solo Dining Experience**





#### **4.6.1 Facility Aesthetics**

Five important areas emerged relating to facility aesthetics: architectural design, table settings, wall décor, interior accessories and furniture. These are described in the sections below.

##### **4.6.1.1 Architectural Design**

Distinctive architectural design features of both the exterior and interior structures of the restaurant and restrooms emerged as important factors in the dining experience. Several participants commented that they were influenced by the age of the restaurant building. Only one participant remarked that she felt more comfortable dining out alone in either a restaurant in an old building or an old restaurant itself. She recalled that looking at traditional Korean features in an old restaurant, which had been handed down across the generations, generated a feeling of warmth. Contrary to this, most of them remarked that they felt more uneasy dining alone in a restaurant in an old building because in such a case, they personally felt smaller and more miserable. A few of them recalled that having a meal in either a new restaurant or a restaurant in a new building, gave them a feeling of enjoyment because they felt like they dined out in a pleasant environment. In addition, they highlighted that the newness of the restaurant instilled a sense of curiosity in them.

##### ***F-13***

*“... It looked like a time-honoured restaurant but the old building was shabby. The restaurant has been handed down from generation to generation. When I visited such a restaurant, I felt more comfortable because of a long tradition.”*

##### ***M-05***

*“... The building seemed to be old and worn out, so I felt that it was lousy. ... It was a little uncomfortable. ... When I went to a restaurant alone in such an old building, it made me feel smaller. I felt like a pathetic person when dining alone in a restaurant in the building that seemed to come down. ...”*

##### ***M-16***

*“... The building seemed to be clean and new, and a new restaurant just moved in such a new building. As I passed along the street, I saw a new restaurant in a new building and entered the restaurant, because I was curious about that.”*

Some of the participants commented that their dining experience was influenced by either the distinctive exterior or interior design of the restaurant. A few of them commented that if the exterior design of the restaurant was consistent with the restaurant theme, it encouraged them to dine out alone there. They remarked that such an exterior design engendered not only a sense that the restaurant specialised in a particular foreign cuisine,

but also a sense of curiosity. They recalled feeling as if they were travelling alone in a foreign country and this gave them a sense of enjoyment. Most of them remarked that the distinctive interior design of the restaurant looked interesting to them and this made their experience more enjoyable. They recalled that restaurants that possessed a unique interior design gave them both a sense of fun and enjoyment.

**M-07**

*“I went to a Greek restaurant that looked as if it was located near the Mediterranean Sea. If we go to one of the famous beaches in Greece, we can look at white houses and blue sea. The Greek restaurant building was painted white and its roof was painted blue. This made me curious.”*

**M-10**

*“I was surprised that... there were square glassed-in frames on the wide pillars in the restaurant. I thought that it was a mirror, but it was a square-shaped hole bored through the pillar. So I was able to look at the interior of the restaurant through the hole. ... This was a little different from other restaurants. ...”*

**F-11**

*“... Part of the restaurant floor, which was on the way to the toilet, was made by a whole glass to enable its diners to watch the decorated basement. ... And there was the staircase next to the toilet, leading to the attic above. ... It was a pleasurable experience.”*

The majority of the participants highlighted that they felt more comfortable dining alone in a restaurant designed with a specific type of interior design, such as a modern interior, a wooden interior or an old-fashioned interior. Many of them remarked that the modern interior design made the restaurant look tidier and cleaner. In addition, most of them remarked that aspects contributing to a wooden interior such as wooden furniture, wooden walls, wooden framed windows, and the particular colour of the wood, aroused a feeling of warmth. Some of them recalled that they felt more comfortable dining alone in a restaurant designed with an old-fashioned interior. They remarked that they felt like other diners did not pay attention to them by virtue of being a solo diner in such an old-fashioned restaurant atmosphere and this made them feel less burdensome.

**M-05**

*“It was a restaurant atmosphere in which elderly people, as well as young people could easily go to dine out. ... In such a restaurant atmosphere in which everyone can comfortably dine out... The modern restaurant atmosphere looked neat. I felt more comfortable dining alone in a restaurant atmosphere with a simple and modern interior.”*

**F-12**

*“... Most of tables and chairs were made of wood. The walls were made of wood. There were menus written on wooden boards on the wall. Most of the restaurant interior was designed with wood materials. I felt warmer with wooden interior than iron or glass interior. ... I felt more comfortable dining alone in such a wooden interior.”*

**M-01**

*“I am inclined to like dining alone in an old-fashioned restaurant, in which I can hear a rattle and be greeted by an old woman, when I slid open the door of a restaurant. I felt more comfortable dining alone in such a shabby restaurant.”*

**F-13**

*“It looked an old-fashioned restaurant. Seeing stainless steel bowls, metal bucket, yellow stainless steel kettle, and wood-burning fire, reminded me of the past. I would comfortably enjoy my meal in such a restaurant atmosphere. ...”*

Additionally, the interior design structure of the restaurant seems to impact on dining experience. Almost half of the participants commented that having an open-kitchen enabled them to watch the whole cooking process during their waiting time for their food, and this gave them a feeling of enjoyment. They recalled that watching the cooking process made them feel both a sense of fun and enhanced their trust in the restaurant's food hygiene. Some of the participants noted that the restroom location of a restaurant impacted on their dining experience. They recalled that they felt physically and emotionally uncomfortable if the restroom was located outside of the restaurant. They remarked that they were not only bothered by moving out of the restaurant, but also concerned about their possessions when using the restroom.

**M-08**

*“... I sat at the table in front of the open-kitchen, in which I was able to watch that the chef was cooking. ... Watching the cooking process gave me a sense of fun, as it offered various attractions while I was waiting for my food. It also enhanced my trust in food. ... In particular, I prefer to visit the restaurant having an open-kitchen, whenever I dine out alone.”*

**F-01**

*“The restroom of the restaurant was poor, because it was located outside. I felt uncomfortable going to the restroom and leaving my bag at the table, when I came there alone.”*

**M-09**

*“The restroom located outside of the restaurant was uncomfortable. I do mind dining alone in such a restaurant. I have to leave my stuff during my meal, and go outside to use the restroom despite cold weather.”*

#### **4.6.1.2 Table Settings**

Some of the participants commented that they were influenced by the restaurant table set up such as the design of tableware they used to dine in the restaurant and the table presentation. A few of them remarked that they felt as if they were dining alone in a foreign country when they used foreign-style tableware in the restaurant. They recalled that the foreign-style tableware was interesting and this added to the pleasantness of their meal. Some of them recalled that the pretty tableware the restaurant provided gave them both a sense of fun and enjoyment and this made their dining experience more memorable. They remarked that the pretty tableware produced an informal restaurant atmosphere and this made them feel more comfortable dining alone.

##### **F-11**

*“All of the European-style plates and tableware looked pretty, and there was a cute water bottle that was seen in the film ‘Beauty and the Beast’. ... When dining alone in this restaurant with European-style tableware, I felt as if I was travelling in Europe. I felt that ‘Ah, this restaurant has much appeal’. ...”*

##### **F-12**

*“The tableware ... was very pretty, so I didn’t feel like a formal restaurant. It made me feel more comfortable. ... If I use very pretty tableware in the restaurant when dining alone, it remains in my memory. ... Because I am more interested in the tableware the restaurant provides.”*

Additionally, several participants commented that the unique sauce pots on the table were interesting and this enhanced their dining experience. They remarked that the use of small earthen sauce pots rather than common plastic sauce pots on the table signified a specific country, which gave them a sense of enjoyment.

##### **M-14**

*“The sauce pots on the table were very interesting. We can see the common sauce pot in a plastic tube in lots of restaurants, but they didn’t provide that type of sauce pot. It was like the special sauce pot that we were able to see in the restaurant in Japan.”*

#### **4.6.1.3 Wall Décor**

The majority of the participants noted that they were influenced by the restaurant wall décor. Most of them commented that they felt more comfortable dining alone if the walls of the restaurant were painted in either warm colour or achromatic colour. The walls painted in warm colours such as ivory, beige, and light brown seemed to enhance the warmth of the atmosphere of the restaurant. On the other hand, the achromatic-coloured walls such as white, black, and grey looked simpler and cleaner.

**F-12**

*“The walls of the restaurant were painted in warm colours like ivory or beige. It wasn’t a louder colour or a cold colour. I felt easy. I would dine alone with a sense of comfort in such a restaurant.”*

**M-14**

*“The walls looked simple and clean. I was comfortable with the aspects of the wall quality and the wall colour when dining alone in the restaurant. I like a solid colour such as white or black. ...”*

**M-16**

*“The colour of the restaurant walls was dark. I was pleased to dine alone in such a gloomy restaurant. ... It was a heavy gunmetal colour. ... It looked okay with me, because of the peculiarity. ...”*

A few of them remarked that information pertaining to the food served by the restaurant or the history of the restaurant was written on the walls and it was interesting. They recalled that reading such information, whilst waiting for their food, made them feel less bored. Some of them remarked that the walls of the restaurant were decorated with various ornaments such as travel photos, pictures, and framed pieces of writing and this gave them a sense of fun and enjoyment. They recalled that looking at such ornaments whilst waiting for their food made them feel less bored.

**F-03**

*“Good points of the food that the restaurant is selling were written on the wall. ... It was something like ‘Having this food is good for health, especially a specific part of our body, because this food includes blah, blah’. ... It was a little fun to read such information on the wall during the waiting time for my food.”*

**M-01**

*“There were photos of the restaurant owner and travel photos on the wall in the restaurant, so I looked on those photos during the waiting time for my food. ... A framed good piece of writing or four different coloured ukuleles hung on the walls of the restaurant. ... I wasn’t bored. I didn’t need to sit and wait for my food with a blank look. ...”*

**4.6.1.4 Interior Accessories**

Decoration of the restaurant with interior accessories seems to be an important factor in their dining experience. The majority of the participants remarked that they felt more comfortable dining alone if they went to a restaurant decorated with either a specific theme or cute ornaments. Most of them commented that the restaurant was decorated with ornaments reflecting cultural context, which generated a sense of authenticity about the restaurant theme and gave the impression that the restaurant specialised in a particular type

of cuisine. They remarked that looking around decorations reflecting cultural context gave them a more enjoyable dining experience. Some of them recalled that the restaurant was decorated with household utensils and house furnishings to present a home from home and this produced the friendly and informal atmosphere. In addition, many of them commented that looking at the cute ornaments with which the restaurant was decorated whilst waiting for their food made them feel less bored. They felt easier when they dined alone in the restaurant decorated with cute ornaments such as toys, souvenirs, and miniatures. This is because such cute ornaments gave them a sense of fun and enjoyment.

**M-04**

*“... There were Japanese lucky beckoning cat dolls and wood carvings on a long shelf on the wall of the restaurant. Watching Japanese folk toys was fun. The restaurant was decorated with various ornaments reflecting cultural context. ... Clearly, this restaurant was a Japanese restaurant. I felt more pleasant, and had a more favourable impression.”*

**M-10**

*“... Both a sauce pot and a table number stand on the table were decorated with Christmas ornaments. And I was pleased with a small plant pot with a cone hat on the table because it made me feel like Christmas was just around the corner. ... While looking around such Christmas ornaments in the restaurant, I thought like that ‘how pretty it was!’ and ‘I love this ornament!’ ...”*

**M-16**

*“... The restaurant owner displayed plastic models involved in animated cartoons, props used in television shows, mini Rubber Ducks. ... These remained in my memory. ... It wasn’t boring to sit at the table alone and wait my food. ...”*

**4.6.1.5 Furniture**

Comments relating to the restaurant furniture had predominantly relevance to table and chair at which they sat to have a meal. A number of participants noted that they were influenced by the shape and type of table and chair. Most of them preferred to sit at a square-shaped table rather than a round-shaped table for a meal. They remarked that they felt more physically comfortable if they dined at a square-shaped table. This is because they could put both their hands comfortably on such a table to do something, such as eating or reading.

**F-06**

*“I had a meal alone at the square table in the restaurant. I felt more comfortable dining at the square table, since I could put both my hands comfortably on the table.”*

**F-11**

*“... I don’t like dining at the round table. When reading a book or studying at the round table after a meal, both my hands were out of the table, which was uncomfortable. ...”*

One aspect of normal dining culture in South Korea is that some customers choose to sit on the floor rather than a chair to eat a meal. This aspect of dining culture was discussed by the participants, as a few of them commented that they preferred to sit on a chair rather than on the floor when dining alone. They remarked that they felt more physically comfortable sitting on a chair at the table to dine alone because they did not want to stay long in the restaurant. Contrary to this, they recalled that they could not be bothered taking off their shoes to sit down on the floor to have a meal.

**M-01**

*“There are two types of tables in the restaurant, sitting on a chair and sitting on the floor. As I dine out alone, I prefer to sit on a chair. Dining at the table with a chair is more comfortable, because I want to have a meal quickly and leave.”*

**F-06**

*“The restaurant has both types of tables, sitting on a chair and sitting on the floor. I tend to avoid sitting on the floor to dine alone, because I am bothered by taking off my shoes to sit on the floor, in order to have a meal alone.”*

Additionally, some of them remarked that they preferred to sit on a soft, comfortable chair when having a meal in the restaurant. They commented that having a cushioned chair made them feel that they could stay longer in the restaurant to enjoy their meal and this gave them a comfortable dining experience. One participant recalled that he felt uncomfortable being seated on the stool at the bar in the restaurant when dining alone, due to the absence of back-support.

**F-06**

*“... The restaurant had a thick cushioned sofa, so I really liked sitting on such a sofa. The seat was very soft and comfortable. I felt as if I fell asleep during the meal. ... I thought of my seat as a comfortable nest, a haven due to the cushiness of my bottom and back.”*

**M-13**

*“My seat was uncomfortable to have a meal, because it didn’t have back of a chair. I was seated on the stool at the bar table to dine alone in the restaurant.”*

Some of the participants reported different dining experiences depending on whether or not there was a table call button on the table. Most of them remarked that they pressed the table call button on the table whenever they wanted to ask a restaurant staff member for

what they needed and this gave them a more comfortable dining experience. On the contrary, a few of them highlighted that they felt uncomfortable raising their hand or calling a restaurant staff member to ask him or her for what they needed because there was no table call button on the table, at which they sat down.

**F-12**

*“Table call button on the table was more comfortable. I didn’t need to call a staff member to ask what I needed because I just pressed the table call button on the table. ... I felt that the restaurant staff member more quickly responded to my request.”*

**F-05**

*“There was no table call button on the table in the restaurant, so I felt uncomfortable raising my hand to ask a staff member for what I needed. When dining alone in the restaurant, raising my hand was shy and hesitant. I felt very uncomfortable keeping raising my hand until the staff member noticed me. ...”*

#### **4.6.2 Ambience**

Six important areas emerged relating to ambience: lighting, aroma, soundscape, cleanliness, tidiness, and colour. These are described in the sections below.

##### **4.6.2.1 Lighting**

The majority of the participants commented that they were influenced by the lighting of the restaurant. Most of them remarked that they felt more comfortable having their meal alone under subdued warm-coloured lighting such as yellow and orange. They recalled that subdued lighting gave them a cosy and warm feeling and let them concentrate more on their meal. On the other hand, some of them recalled that they felt uneasy if they dined alone under dim lighting. They remarked that such dim lighting of the restaurant negatively influenced their way of thought, which made them have a sombre mood.

**M-07**

*“The restaurant had subdued lighting. I felt more comfortable dining alone under the lighting. ... I felt that I was able to escape other diners’ eyes. ... I was able to focus more on my food without being aware of other diners. ...”*

**M-09**

*“The interior lighting of the restaurant was dim. I felt like the old restaurant set a dismal mood with the dim lighting. ... I was displeased that I had a meal alone in such a dispiriting restaurant.”*

Additionally, many participants commented that dining alone under the bright fluorescent lighting of the restaurant left an impression on them. Most of them remarked that dining



alone under the bright fluorescent lighting of the restaurant attracted more attention from other diners, which gave them a sense of discomfort. Contrary to this, a few of them recalled that having bright lighting in the restaurant positively influenced their way of thought, which made them feel easy.

**F-11**

*“I don’t like to dine alone under the bright fluorescent lighting of the restaurant. ... I thought that the fluorescent lighting ruined the mood. ... Other diners could plainly see my face, in which the makeup was washed away.”*

**M-11**

*“Inside, the restaurant was brightly lit. ... I prefer to dine alone under the bright lighting in the restaurant. ... The bright lighting had a positive impact on what I thought during my meal.”*

**4.6.2.2 Aroma**

The aroma of the food served by the restaurant seems to impact on their dining experiences. Some of the participants commented that on entering the restaurant it was filled with the aroma of food. They remarked that such an aroma promoted their appetite and made the food taste better, resulting in a more enjoyable dining experience.

**M-17**

*“When I entered the restaurant, it was filled with aroma of food, steamed dishes and stew with pork mostly. I felt like such aroma of food stimulated my appetite. ... It gave me a more pleasant feeling.”*

**4.6.2.3 Soundscape**

Comments relating to the restaurant soundscape predominantly related to the presence of background music and the sound from TV. Some of the participants commented that the restaurant played different types of music. One of them recalled that dining alone in a restaurant that played music in keeping with the restaurant context increased his satisfaction with the food. He remarked that the music made the restaurant feel more authentic and it was pleasing. On the other hand, most of them commented that the restaurant background music, especially pop music, was unbefitting of the restaurant atmosphere. In addition participants commented that hearing a sad ballad song gave prominence to solitude, which gave them a feeling of loneliness.

**M-07**

*“... I visited an Indian restaurant to dine alone. The restaurant played Indian music while I had a meal. It made my meal experience more pleasurable. ... I felt*

*as if I dined in a restaurant in India. ... I felt like the background music made food taste better. ...”*

**M-10**

*“... I thought that the background music was pretty bad. ... It was melancholy songs, in which the lyrics reflected an account of someone’s sad life. For example, I am not supposed to be doing this here. ... The music highlighted ‘dining alone’ ...”*

A number of participants commented that the tempo and volume of background music played in the restaurant created an atmosphere. Most of them remarked that the restaurant played slow tempo background music, which made them have an enjoyable dining time. They recalled that the slow tempo music created a serene ambience, making them feel more comfortable dining alone. Contrary to this, a few of them highlighted that the restaurant turned on fast tempo background music and this made them have their meal quickly. They recalled that fast tempo music disrupted their own time to rest, which gave them a feeling of discomfort. Additionally, some of them remarked that the background music of the restaurant was played quietly, which allowed them to enjoy their meal slowly. They recalled that they felt more comfortable dining alone in a relaxed atmosphere with low volume background music. A few participants specifically highlighted that loud background music distracted them from their meal, and that dining alone in such an environment was uncomfortable.

**F-07**

*“... The restaurant turned on soothing music that had no lyrics. It was the slow temp music. It was good that I was able to have a meal slowly and comfortably. ...”*

**M-11**

*“... The fast tempo background music disrupted my thoughts. ... my meal time was only for me. It disturbed me from thinking in a world of my own. ... It encouraged me to eat fast, so I suffered from indigestion.”*

**F-12**

*“The background music of the restaurant was played in low volume. I felt that I was able to have a good rest with my meal. It was also good that I was easy to call the restaurant staff member to ask what I needed.”*

**F-04**

*“The background music of the restaurant was too loud. It drove me out of my mind. ... I was displeased that I couldn’t focus on my meal due to the noise from the loud music and the babble of other diners’ voices.”*

Many participants commented that they preferred to sit with a good view of TV in the restaurant because they were bored due to absence of dining companion. They remarked

that watching TV during their waiting time for food or meal made their dining experience less boring and more comfortable.

**M-05**

*“The TV was on in the restaurant so I sat close to TV to watch. ... I was bored because I didn’t have dining companion to talk to. I watched TV while waiting for my food and having a meal. ... If there is TV in the restaurant, I felt more comfortable dining alone. ”*

**4.6.2.4 Cleanliness**

Half of the participants highlighted that the restaurant’s state of cleanliness and hygiene was important for them when dining out alone. Some of them remarked that the restaurant was in a good state of hygiene and cleanliness, which gave them a sense of pleasure before beginning their meal. They recalled that a good hygienic condition and cleanliness of the restaurant enhanced their trust in food served by the restaurant. On the contrary, many participants remarked that the restaurant was in a poor state of cleanliness and unhygienic as glasses, plates, or spoons were not clean. They recalled that such a poor state of cleanliness and hygiene spoiled their appetite, which degraded their restaurant experience.

**M-10**

*“When I sat at the table in the restaurant, the seating area looked neat and clean. It was managed in a hygienic way and sauce pots and chopsticks box placed on the table looked clean. I was pleased with such good conditions of cleanliness and hygiene of the restaurant before my meal. ... ”*

**F-06**

*“There was chilli powder on the glass, and several spoons in the chopsticks box looked less clean. I didn’t want to stay and have a meal in this restaurant from the beginning of my meal. I had no sooner found them than I lost my appetite. ... ”*

**4.6.2.5 Tidiness**

A number of participants commented that they were influenced by whether the interior of the restaurant, such as furniture, tableware, and kitchenware, was well arranged or not. They recalled that they felt more comfortable dining alone in a tidy restaurant rather than a cluttered restaurant. Some of them commented that the interior of the restaurant was neat and tidy and this gave a good first impression to them. Contrary to this, some of them recalled that some cluttered food ingredients or kitchen utensils of the restaurant were carelessly neglected on the table, which looked messy and this make them feel uncomfortable.

#### **F-10**

*“... The interior of the restaurant looked tidy. ... Tables and chairs were well arranged, and sauce pots and a chopsticks box were tidy. ... The first impression of the restaurant was good. It was pleasant to dine out in a tidy environment of the restaurant.”*

#### **M-06**

*“... When I sat at the table to dine alone in the restaurant, food ingredients were stacked on the table next to mine. ... The restaurant staff members left them alone on the next table. ... I was displeased that I dined alone in the restaurant that was poorly managed and cluttered.”*

### **4.6.2.6 Colour Scheme**

Many of the participants commented on the influence of colour scheme and the interior design of the restaurant on their dining experiences. Most of them recalled that they felt more comfortable dining alone if the restaurant was designed in overall harmonious colours. They remarked that an interior design comprising matching colours made them more relaxed and feel calmer. On the contrary, a few of them commented that dining alone in a restaurant decorated with inharmonious colours made it difficult for them to enjoy their meal. They highlighted that non-matching colours used in the interior design of the restaurant gave them an emotional instability.

#### **M-11**

*“The interior of the restaurant was designed in harmonious colours. The matching colours of the interior design made me relax and feel calm. ... I felt like I was able to sit at ease and enjoy my meal.”*

#### **F-13**

*“... The colour combination of the interior design of the restaurant seemed to clash. I felt like too brightly coloured tile and red-coloured tables were irrelevant to the menu. ... I felt unsettled and dined alone in a condition of emotional instability because of the un-matching colours. It was unsatisfactory.”*

### **4.6.3 Functionality of Space**

Two important areas emerged relating to functionality of space: table layout and seating arrangement. These are described in the sections below.

#### **4.6.3.1 Table Layout**

All of the participants commented that the table was crucial to the furniture layout in the restaurant. Comments relating to the table layout predominantly related to the design and size of table and space between tables. The majority of the participants remarked that they felt more comfortable dining alone if they sat at a long and narrow bar table, a communal

table or a table with partitions in the restaurant. Most of them recalled that when sitting at bar tables, that were either fixed to the wall or surrounding the open-kitchen, they were able to identify with other solo diners sitting at the table. Additionally, other participants remarked that they felt less lonely and more comfortable if they sat on the communal table, in which lots of chairs were placed beside the table. They felt like they were not conscious of the eyes of other diners around them because it was more difficult to draw clear lines of demarcation between solo diners and groups of diners. A large number of participants remarked that they preferred to sit at the partition table when they dined alone. They recalled that they felt like the partition screened other diners' attention, which gave them a more comfortable experience.

**M-08**

*"... When I went to the restaurant to dine alone, I sat at the table, in which people were able to sit in a line. ... It seemed to be a seat for solo diners, because other diners sat next to me and dined alone like me. I didn't feel that I was separated from other diners. ..."*

**M-03**

*"... I sat at the long communal table. ... There were already several groups of other diners sitting at the communal table, but I didn't feel lonely. ... I felt like there was no demarcation between me and groups of other diners at the same table. ... Although I dine alone, I didn't feel alone."*

**F-02**

*"... The partition enabled me to avoid eye contact with the other diner sitting down across me. I felt more comfortable, when sitting at the partition table to dine alone. ... I think that the figure of people eating doesn't look pretty, but the partition can conceal this embarrassing figure. ..."*

Almost all of the participants commented that they felt more comfortable dining alone if they sat at a small table for one or two rather than a large table for four or six. They recalled that they felt less burdensome when they dined alone at a small table because they took up less space and inconvenienced both the restaurant owner and other groups of diners less. Some of them additionally remarked that they felt concern about the restaurant owner losing out on profits as well as other diners misapprehending them as self-centred people when they were sitting at the large table to dine alone.

**M-07**

*"... The small table didn't stand out empty space. ... Dining at the small table made me feel less alone. ... When I dined alone at the small table, I felt like I took up less space in the restaurant so I felt free to eat by myself. "*

**F-09**

*“I underwent a psychological burden to dine alone at the large table. A group of diners weren’t able to sit at the large table because of me. And, that was more beneficial to the restaurant owner. ... Part of me felt sorry for the owner. ... I had an experience that when I sat at the large table and ordered a portion of food, her smile died and the look in her face hardened.”*

The majority of the participants commented that they were influenced by how much space there was between tables. Some of them highlighted that enough space between tables made them feel secure in their private space in the restaurant, resulting in less concern about other diners and a sense of emotional comfort. On the contrary, some of them commented that insufficient space between tables interrupted their meal, which made them feel uncomfortable, and that other diners bumping into them whilst they were eating displeased them.

**F-08**

*“It is more important for me to secure enough space that I comfortably enjoy my meal. ... When I secured private space for my meal in the restaurant, I didn’t bother myself about other diners around me. I felt more comfortable dining alone. ... ”*

**M-16**

*“I felt uncomfortable dining alone in the narrow space between tables. ... In the old days, other diner passed by me dining alone at the table, and his bag was bumped against my head. It offended me. ... ”*

**4.6.3.2 Seating Arrangements**

All of the participants noted that their dining experiences were influenced by the location of their seat in the restaurant. Many of the participants commented on how much they felt exposed to being viewed by other diners when they sat in a certain seat in the restaurant. Some of them remarked that they received more attention from other diners when they sat at the table in the centre of the restaurant and this made them feel uncomfortable dining alone. They felt concern about other diners misinterpreting them in a negative way when they dined alone in a seat that allowed other diners to see them from every direction. On the other hand, all of them highlighted that they preferred to sit in a corner seat or a seat with their back toward the door of the restaurant, due to avoidance of eye contact with other diners, when they visited the restaurant to dine alone. They remarked that the corner seat allowed them to have a meal in the relatively quiet atmosphere of the restaurant whilst avoiding eye contact with other diners. They recalled that dining alone in a corner seat made it a more comfortable and enjoyable experience. Some of them commented that they

felt more comfortable if they dined alone in a seat with their back toward the door because a seat with their back toward the door allowed them to avoid the gaze of other diners.

**M-14**

*“... I don’t like sitting alone at the table in the centre of the restaurant, because it makes me stand out from the crowd at the restaurant. I felt that the seat in the centre of the restaurant attracted other diners’ gaze. ... I felt like I looked lonely and forlorn. I felt concern about other diners misunderstanding me like ‘does he have a flaw in his character?’ ...”*

**F-01**

*“... I sat in a corner seat to avoid eye contact with other diners, because I dined alone. And, I had a meal in a relatively quiet atmosphere. I felt more comfortable dining alone at the corner seat. ... Some diners may misinterpret that I came to the restaurant alone because I had no friends. ...”*

**F-07**

*“I felt more comfortable sitting with my back against the door to dine alone in the restaurant. ... I didn’t want other diners to watch me, whenever they passed by me. ... I would rather keep eye contact with my acquaintances than to sit in a seat with my back toward the door.”*

Almost half of the participants highlighted that rather than being seated between other diners they preferred to sit as far away from other diners as possible. Most of them commented that they felt uncomfortable when they sat at a table close to a group of other diners and that seeing other diners having a conversation with their dining companion during their meal heightened their feeling of loneliness. In addition, some of them remarked that the seat far from other diners gave them a more comfortable feeling and resulted in less interruptions from other diners.

**F-03**

*“... When a group of diners sat at the tables on either side of my table, I felt sad. It heightened a feeling of loneliness, because they had a talk with their dining companion.”*

**F-02**

*“... I sat as far away from other diners as possible. I think I want to keep my distance from other diners, when I dine alone. I don’t want to be interrupted during my meal.”*

More than half of the participants commented that they felt uncomfortable dining alone if they sat close to communal areas, such as the door, the toilet and the water purifier in the restaurant. They recalled that other diners walked up and down behind them having a meal and this interrupted their meal. On the contrary, some of the participants remarked that

they were able to enjoy their meal in a less distracting and quieter atmosphere if they sat away from the communal areas.

**M-09**

*“I don’t like sitting in front of the door or the toilet. I had uncomfortable experience. When I dined alone, other diners walked up and down behind me. It was offensive. It distracted me. ...”*

**F-13**

*“I sat in a seat far from the door in the restaurant, when I dined out alone. It was the seat, in which other diners didn’t walk up and down. And, I wasn’t distracted by the noise from other diners.”*

Many of the participants commented that they preferred to sit in a window seat when they dined alone in the restaurant. They remarked that watching people passing through the window was interesting and this made them feel less bored.

**F-12**

*“I was pleased that I dined alone in a window seat of the restaurant. I had a clear view of outside, so I felt less bored. ... I watched the world go by through the window during my meal. That was interesting. ...”*

#### **4.6.4 Summary and Discussion**

In summary, these findings show that solo dining experience is influenced by various aspects of the restaurant’s physical environment such as facility aesthetics, ambience and functionality of space. Factors relating to the facility aesthetics include architectural design, table settings, wall décor, interior accessories and furniture. Solo diners are more inclined to visit a modern restaurant, a restaurant in a modern building or a restaurant with a distinctive exterior design reflecting a particular restaurant theme. Both modernity and peculiarity of the restaurant instilled a sense of curiosity in solo diners, which gave them an enjoyable experience. The interior design of the restaurant such as modern, wooden or old-fashioned interior was positively perceived depending on solo diners’ preferences, which made their dining experience more comfortable. Solo diners preferred to dine out alone in a restaurant with an open-kitchen because watching the cooking process through the open-kitchen reduced their feelings of boredom and loneliness arising from the absence of dining companion.

Table settings such as the design of tableware and the distinctive table presentation enhanced solo diner’s enjoyment of their meal. Depending on their preferences, solo diners tended to feel more comfortable dining alone in a restaurant with walls painted in either a



warm or achromatic colour. In addition, restaurant walls that were decorated with various ornaments reflecting the cultural context or a specific theme generated a friendly and informal atmosphere, giving solo diners a sense of fun and enjoyment. Solo diners preferred to dine at square-shaped tables and sit on cushioned chairs with back-supports due to physical comfort. The existence of a table call button in particular pleased solo diners who were hard pressed to call a restaurant staff to ask what they needed.

The ambience of the restaurant generated through lighting, aroma, soundscape, cleanliness, tidiness and colour also impacted solo dining experience. Either a subdued warm-coloured lighting or bright fluorescent lighting was positively or negatively perceived depending on the purpose of solo-dining. Solo diners additionally reported that a restaurant filled with the aroma of food enhanced their dining experience. Regarding the presence of restaurant background music, solo diners are more inclined not to wish to listen to pop music, and in particular sad music appeared to incite feelings of loneliness amongst solo diners. Fast tempo loud volume background music disrupted their meal and ability to rest generating an uncomfortable dining experience. However, solo diners were able to enjoy their meal if slow tempo low volume background music was used as this generated a serene and relaxed atmosphere.

Solo diners were also influenced by the hygiene level, cleanliness and tidiness of the restaurant, with high cleanliness enhancing trust in the restaurant and reassuring solo diners' anxieties about food safety. The restaurant colour scheme also influenced dining experience with harmonious colours engendering a feeling of relaxation and calmness, in contrast to the reported emotional instability generated by an inharmonious interior design colour scheme.

Furniture layout and seating arrangements in the restaurant influenced functionality of space within the restaurant and this also influenced dining experience. Long and narrow bar tables and communal tables reduced solo diners' anxiety and their feeling of loneliness through blurring the demarcation between them and groups of other diners. Tables with partitions were also favoured by solo diners as they obscured the attention from other diners. Solo diners were concerned about not inconveniencing the restaurant owner or other groups of diners and as such preferred to use small one or two person tables. Ample space between the tables was also an important determinant of dining experience, as solo diners could enjoy their meal if they felt secure in their personal space without being bothered by other diners around them.

The seating location within the restaurant is also associated with a sense of emotional comfort. Solo diners are more inclined to sit in a seat far away from either the communal areas or other diners such as a corner seat or a seat with their back toward the door of the restaurant. This was in order to enjoy their meal in a relatively quiet atmosphere and also to avoid being visible to or making eye contact with other diners. On the contrary, sitting in a seat exposed to being seen by other diners such as a seat close to the communal areas, a seat in the centre of the restaurant or a seat between other diners interrupted solo diners' meals and heightened their feeling of loneliness. Whilst avoiding communal areas and the gaze of other diners was important, solo diners did prefer to sit next to a window as watching people passing by outside reduced their feeling of boredom and enhanced their dining experience.

Prior studies have noted the importance of the physical environment in the restaurant industry (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Heung & Gu, 2012). The findings of this study show that solo diners' perception of the various aspects of the physical environment has a considerable effect on their dining experience. The findings of this study are in alignment with other studies which found that the physical environment influences customer's emotional reactions and therefore customer experience (Ryu & Han, 2011; Liu & Jang, 2009b). There were, however, differences in our study relating to the impact of certain aspects of the physical environment. For example, this study was unable to demonstrate that physical aspects of service employees such as the number and appearance have a positive impact on customer experience, which is in contrast to earlier studies.

Previous research has also shown that the attractiveness of the physical environment induces positive emotions amongst customers such as feelings of pleasure and excitement (Lin & Liang, 2011). The findings of this study indicate that facility aesthetics such as attractive table settings, wall décor, and interior accessories elicit solo diners' positive responses to their restaurant experience. These findings are in agreement with other research, which showed that customers experienced more positive emotional reactions to the attractive design factors of the physical environment (Lin & Liang, 2011). Restaurant aesthetics that contribute to positive visual effects have a significant effect on customer perception of high levels of positive disconfirmation which generates a satisfactory restaurant experience (Ryu & Han, 2011). For example, the visual appeal of both the interior and architectural design generates a cosy atmosphere, which enhances customers' positive evaluation of their restaurant experience (Jang & Namkung, 2009). Similarly previous authors have found that restaurant interior design which incorporates ornaments

reflecting cultural context, elicits positive emotions in customers such as pleasure and interest and reduces their perception of waiting time in a restaurant experience (Liu & Jang, 2009b). In addition, customers tend to positively respond to visually appealing table settings and interior decorations (Ryu & Han, 2011). This research confirms that the same findings can also be extended to the context of solo diners. These findings suggest that solo diners' visual perception of an attractive restaurant interior design induces not only positive cognitive responses such as curiosity but also emotional responses such as comfort, enjoyment and pleasure. These positive cognitive and emotional responses are then manifested through positive behavioural responses such as a willingness to stay longer in the restaurant environment or an intention to revisit.

Interestingly, this study also found that either a warm or achromatic colour of the restaurant walls had a positive influence on solo dining experience, and was related to positive emotional responses such as comfort and relief amongst some solo diners. This finding differs from previous research, which found that customers tend to perceive more negative responses to a warmer background colour in a service environment than cooler colours (Baker & Cameron, 1996). Similarly, the findings of Bellizzi, Crowley, and Hasty (1983) showed that customer perception of a warm-coloured store (e.g. red and yellow) induced a feeling of tension and nervousness, whereas customers experienced a relaxation and pleasure to cool colours (e.g. blue and green). Part of the discordance between these apparently contradictory findings result from the fact that these previous studies were not conducted in either the context of the restaurant sector, or solo customers in a collectivistic culture.

The findings of this study extend existing research by showing that solo diners were also influenced by various aspects of the restaurant ambience such as lighting, aroma, background music, cleanliness, tidiness, and colour scheme. These findings confirm the effects of ambience on the evaluation of customer experience in previous studies (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Ryu & Jang, 2008). In accordance with the present findings, prior research has demonstrated that customer perception of lighting in restaurants has an effect on their mood (Ariffin et al., 2012). This study found that subdued and warm lighting was positively perceived by both 'lonely' and 'solitary' diners (i.e. reluctant and non-reluctant solo diners). These findings are in partial agreement with the findings of previous work, which showed that customers experienced more positive emotional reactions to low levels of lighting that were able to generate a comfortable and warm atmosphere (Baron, Rea, & Daniels, 1992; Baron, 1990). Similarly previous authors have noted that soft or warm

ambient lighting may lead customers to spend more time and money in the restaurant (Wansink, 2004).

One finding, which has not previously been described in the literature, is that some of ‘solitary’ diners (i.e. non-reluctant solo diners) interviewed, preferred to dine alone under bright fluorescent lighting and such bright lighting was reported to promoted positive thoughts amongst this cohort of diners. This is an interesting finding, and previous authors have found that the emotional effect mediated by the level and nature of restaurant lighting differs depending on demographic aspects such as customer’s gender and/or age (Knez & Kers, 2000). Previous studies have similarly found that customers have different preferences of the brightness of ambient lighting to enhance their experience (Spence et al., 2014), but this is the first reported finding of a select group of customers, namely solo diners, being positively influenced by bright fluorescent lighting in particular. These findings suggest that solo diners have different preferences for the level of lighting, depending on their main purpose of dining alone.

This study found that the aroma of food within a restaurant enhanced the solo dining experience. Whilst a bad aroma on other customer’s induced negative emotional responses amongst some solo diners, the findings of this study suggest that olfactory perception of food aroma was by contrast, able to induce positive emotional responses amongst some solo diners. These findings corroborate the ideas of Bone and Ellen (1999), who suggest that aroma can have an impact on customers’ mood and emotional state, and that customers tend to more positively evaluate the store image and environment under the presence of an ambient scent than no ambient scent (Spangenberg, Crowley, & Henderson, 1996). Enticing ambient aroma can influence customers’ positive emotional responses and result in enhancing their evaluations of customer experience (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001). The findings of these previous studies were not conducted in either the context of the restaurant sector or solo customers from collectivistic cultures. Therefore, these findings suggest that enticing ambient scent of the restaurant can have a positive influence on the restaurant experience of Korean solo diners.

These findings extend previous research into dining experience to confirm that solo dining experience is influenced by different genre, tempo and volume of the restaurant background music. These findings support the association between background music and customer experience (Jain & Bagdare, 2011), and that the background music is a significant factor in eliciting customers’ positive emotional responses such as feelings of

pleasure or relaxation (Ryu & Jang, 2007). Bruner (1990) found that the tempo and volume of music have an effect on customers' affective responses and this study indicates that solo diners generally preferred slow tempo low volume background music that generates a relaxed atmosphere. Indeed, previous authors have found that slow tempo music induces customers' positive emotions such as feelings of pleasure and satisfaction (Michon & Chebat, 2004), and entices customers to spend more time to enjoy their meal in the restaurant (Caldwell & Hibbert, 2002; Milliman, 1986). Customers tend to spend more time in the restaurant with soft background music in comparison to loud music (Sullivan, 2002), and soft background music elicits positive emotions in customers (Lin & Wu, 2006).

This study also found that solo diners were influenced by spatial layout of the restaurant, and these findings confirm the association between spatial layout and customer experience (Ryu & Han, 2011). The literature suggests that spacious layout of tables not only respect customers' privacy and personal distance but also establishes clear lines of demarcation from other customers (Lin, 2004). Furthermore, the layout of tables is able to enhance customer pleasure and adds to the restaurant experience (Ryu & Jang, 2008). Customer perception of adequate and comfortable seat space also induces a positive emotional response (Liu & Jang, 2009b). These findings confirm that the same findings extend to solo diners and suggest that adequate space between tables is positively related to solo dining experience. Indeed, the findings of this study suggest that perception of adequate space between tables by solo diners is able to not only induce positive cognitive responses such as less self-consciousness about others and a sense of stability, but that this in turn also engendered positive emotional responses like comfort.

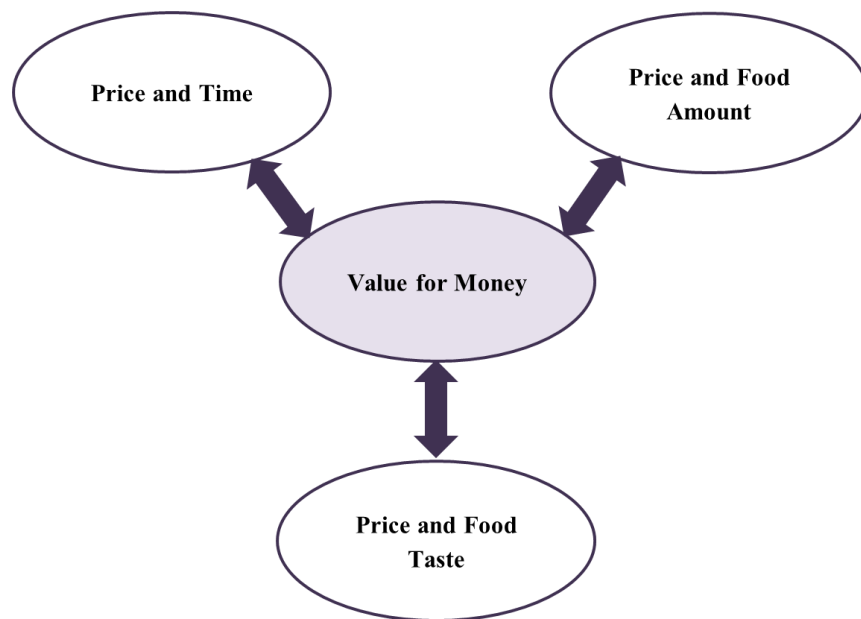
Interestingly, this study also found that solo diners tended to care more about other existing diners' seats when selecting their seat in the restaurant, and that the perception of other existing diners' seats influences both cognitive response like self-consciousness, and emotional responses such as degree of comfort and loneliness. In accordance with the present findings, previous studies have demonstrated that customers' self-selection of seating is influenced by the tables occupied by existing customers (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). The findings of this study indicate that solo diners are more inclined to sit at tables far away from other existing diners. These findings, however, do not support the previous research which found that solo customers tend to select their seat adjacent to other existing customers than groups of customers (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010). The findings of these previous studies were not conducted in either the context of the restaurant sector or solo customers from collectivistic cultures. Therefore, dining alone at a table

adjacent to existing customers can have a negative effect on the restaurant experience of Korean solo diners.

#### 4.7 Value for Money

All of the participants remarked on how the price of the meal cost influenced their dining experience. They recalled that the price of food influenced their dining experiences, and various factors were categorised and explained under value for money, see Figure 11 and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 11: Factors relating to Value for Money of Solo Dining Experience**



##### 4.7.1 Price and Time

Some of the participants commented that the price of food compared to the time they stayed in the restaurant influenced their dining experiences. Most of them remarked that they were unwilling to have an expensive meal if they dined out alone because they spent less time actually in the restaurant. They recalled that given the short time they actually spent in the restaurant, having an inexpensive meal seemed more satisfactory. In contrast, only one of the participants remarked that she gave less consideration to the price of food if she stayed a long time in the restaurant. She commented that she was able to relax with her meal, which made her meal experience more pleasurable and as such did not mind paying a slightly higher price for food.

### **M-01**

*“If I dine out alone, I tend to quickly finish a meal. The average time I stay in the restaurant is short. So if the price is high, I mind going to the restaurant to dine alone. ... I pay a bill according to how much I spend time to have a meal, and sit in the restaurant, but my meal time is short.”*

### **F-11**

*“I tend to be free with my money regarding food. I spent time enjoying myself for a few hours in the restaurant, so I didn’t mind paying a slightly high price. I had a meal, as well as spent time doing a lot of things in the restaurant. ... I like to relax with my meal in a better atmosphere as I pay more.”*

## **4.7.2 Price and Food Amount**

The majority of the participants commented that the amount of food they were served influenced their perception of whether their meal was value for money. Most of them recalled that it was worth spending their money and made them pleased if the amount of food they ordered was adequate compared to the price of the food. Some of them remarked that they paid an unreasonable price for food compared to the amount of food they received and this adversely affected their dining experience. They recalled that having such an inadequate amount of food reflected poor value for money, and this gave them an unpleasant feeling.

### **M-15**

*“I thought the price was a little cheap compared to the amount of the food. The restaurant owner gave me a large amount of food. ... This food definitely gave me my money’s worth and I was happily satisfied.”*

### **M-12**

*“The amount of food for one person wasn’t enough for me. ... I thought that the restaurant meagrely served side dishes to me, because I came alone. ... If the price of food is similar to the price of other restaurants, and the amount of food is small compared to the price, I am reluctant to go to the restaurant to dine alone.”*

## **4.7.3 Price and Food Taste**

More than half of the participants commented that their willingness to pay for the food was related to the flavour of food. Most of them remarked that they were less sensitive about the price of food if the food was tasty. They commented that they were willing to pay the price of their meal due to a feeling of satisfaction with the flavour of the food, which gave them a more pleasant dining experience. Contrary to this, some of them recalled that they were unwilling to pay the bill when the flavour of food was tasteless. They commented that tasteless food was not worth the money they paid and it detracted from the enjoyment of their meal.

#### **F-02**

*“If the food is tasty, I often visit the restaurant to dine alone despite a little higher price of food. The food tasted very good. It made me think ‘I want to visit this restaurant again’. ... I was satisfied with the good flavour of food compared to the price, which made my experience more pleasurable.”*

#### **F-12**

*“I get sharp as a needle, when the food had very little taste. I felt bad when the flavour of food had no sting in it, and the price of food was high. ... I felt like the price of food was overpriced compared to tasteless food. ... I am not particular about the flavour of food. ... This remained with me an unpleasant memory.”*

### **4.7.4 Summary and Discussion**

Overall, these findings indicate that solo diners are more sensitive to the price of their meal, and that they tend to predetermine a meal cost within their acceptable price range when choosing a restaurant. In particular, solo diners, who desired to relieve their hunger quickly, preferred to visit inexpensive restaurants to spend less money on dining out alone. By contrast solo diners who either, wanted to stay a long time in the restaurant to relax with a meal, or perceived the food was tasty, were less sensitive about the price of food. Crucially, the findings of this study show that solo dining experience is influenced by key determinants of perceived value for money such as: the price of food compared to the time they stayed in the restaurant; the amount of food; and the flavour of food. These key determinants influenced the cognitive perception of value for money by a solo diner, which in turn engendered either positive or negative emotional responses, and ultimately resulted in approach or avoidance behavioural responses. Indeed, when solo diners perceived that either, the amount of food they received or the flavour of food was good value for money, their dining experience was more pleasurable, and they were more inclined to revisit the restaurant.

The finding that solo diners’ perception of value for money is an important attribute in their dining experience, is partially consistent with previous research which found that customers are inclined to evaluate their customer experience based upon perceived value for the price paid (Walls, 2013; Wong & Wu, 2013). A finding of this study, which has not previously been described, however, is that solo dining experience was influenced by the perceived price of food compared to the time solo diners stayed in the restaurant. This study also found that solo diners’ perceptions of good value for money compared to the food they received, induced a more pleasurable dining experience; which extends extant customer experience research that notes that customers report a better experience when product and service are offered at a reasonable price (Wong & Wu, 2013). The perceived



reasonable price of product and service offered tends to engender more positive and less negative emotions (Namkung & Jang, 2010).

Han and Ryu (2009) found that physical environments in a restaurant are positively associated with price perception. Similarly, Walls (2013) demonstrated that both positive physical environment and human interaction in customer experience have a positive effect on value for price. In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of the relationship between physical environment and human interaction in customer experience and the perception of value for money was detected in solo dining experience. The findings of this study indicated that solo diners are more inclined to evaluate their dining experience based upon value for the price compared to the amount and taste of food. In contrast to previous research, it can, therefore, be suggested that solo diners consider the food served as a greater determinant of whether a restaurant is good value for money than either the physical or human environment in the restaurant.

Furthermore, it seems that solo diners evaluate their dining experience based on the value for the price compared to the time they stayed in the restaurant. This finding has not previously been described and therefore extends extant literature. This study found that solo diners are more inclined to spend less money on their solo dining to relieve their hunger whereas solo diners, who want to enjoy their meal slowly, are less sensitive to the cost of their meal. It can thus be suggested that solo diners differently perceive value for money depending on their main purpose to dine alone.

#### **4.8 Location**

All of the participants commented on where the restaurant was located when they dined out alone. Various factors were categorised and explained under location, see Figure 12 and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 12: Factors relating to Location of Solo Dining Experience**



#### **4.8.1 Accessibility of the Restaurant**

Solo diners' accessibility to the restaurant seems to be an important factor in their dining experience. All of the participants commented on whether the restaurant was accessible to them when they dined out alone. A few of them remarked that they preferred a restaurant with its own car park because they sometimes drove to the restaurant. They recalled that they felt comfortable parking their car at some restaurants, due to the wide space of the restaurant car park. Additionally, some of them highlighted that it was important for them that the restaurant was easily accessible by public transportation. They usually stopped by the restaurant alone for a meal on their way home and, therefore, they did not want to waste much time visiting the restaurant. They remarked that visiting a restaurant near a tube station or a bus stop was much easier, enabling them to save time when dining alone.

##### ***M-14***

*"... I often drive to the restaurant to dine out alone, so I prefer to visit the restaurant with its own car park. ... It was a good place to park my car. The restaurant had a large car park, so it was convenient to park my car anywhere. It presented a good image to me. ..."*

##### ***F-12***

*"I frequently use the tube. ... I often go to the restaurant near a tube station to dine alone. I don't have enough time left, and I have a poor sense of direction. I prefer to go to the restaurant conveniently situated, when I dine out alone."*

All of the participants commented on how long it took to get to the restaurant when they dined out alone. They commented on the proximity of the restaurant to where they lived because the required daily journey time to obtain their meal was an important factor. Visiting a restaurant near to their home allowed them to reduce their travel time, making them feel less weary. On the contrary, some of them remarked that if they had time, they looked for a famous restaurant to dine at, irrespective of distance from them. Such participants commented that visiting unusual restaurants distant from their home felt like a novel experience.

##### ***F-04***

*"The restaurant I visited to dine alone was close to my home. ... Once I dine out alone, I don't mean to stay long in the restaurant for my meal. I want to enjoy my meal quickly, so I don't want to waste time visiting the restaurant far away from my place. I want to cut down my meal time as far as possible."*

##### ***M-10***

*"When I dine out alone, I prefer to visit the distant hidden restaurant that is famous and sells tasty food. My solo meal time is for me to relieve hunger as well as to*

*enjoy myself. ... I can easily meet with a new experience through visiting an unusual restaurant.”*

#### **4.8.2 Location of the Restaurant**

Some of the participants commented that their restaurant dining atmosphere was framed by whether the restaurant was in a secluded or a crowded area. They highlighted that they felt more comfortable dining alone in a restaurant situated in a secluded area rather than a crowded area. They recalled that restaurants sited away from busy streets were not crowded, which allowed them to enjoy their meal slowly in a quiet atmosphere. In addition, a few of them remarked that it was difficult for them to visit a restaurant situated in a crowded area to dine alone, due to the bustling atmosphere. They recalled that in a crowded atmosphere they felt themselves being rushed to finish their meal quickly and this negatively impacted on their dining experience.

##### ***M-16***

*“The restaurant was located away from the central area. All was quiet in the street, I felt good. ... When I visited the restaurant situated in the secluded area, no one cared I stayed long to relax with my meal. ... I felt more comfortable dining alone in the restaurant away from the busy street. ”*

##### ***F-11***

*“It was difficult to dine alone in the restaurant on the busy street. There were too many people, and the overall atmosphere was quite noisy. The restaurant owner made a gesture to tell me to finish my meal quickly and leave, in order to accept other customers in groups. So I felt discomfort dining alone.”*

#### **4.8.3 Summary and Discussion**

In summary, these findings show that solo dining experience is influenced by restaurant location. For example, solo diners, who stop for a meal on their way home to relieve their hunger, seem to be more concerned about the accessibility of the restaurant and the travel time. In particular, ‘lonely’ diners (i.e. reluctant solo diners) who wanted to satisfy their physiological needs did not want to waste much time visiting the restaurant and hence, they preferred to visit restaurants which were easily accessible by public transportation and located close to their home. On the other hand, ‘solitary’ diners (i.e. non-reluctant solo diners), who want to satisfy intellectual needs and like to try new restaurants to dine alone, are less sensitive to the travel time. They sought a novel experience and were willing to spend time looking for an unusual restaurant. Additionally, solo diners preferred to visit the restaurant in a secluded area rather than in a crowded area when they dined out alone. Due to the quiet atmosphere, dining in a restaurant situated away from busy streets made them feel more comfortable enjoying their meal slowly without having to consider others.

The findings of the study indicate that the access convenience of a restaurant location, such as parking capacity, convenience of public transportation and locational proximity, has a positive impact on solo dining experience. This finding is in agreement with other studies and suggests that convenient location is important in creating a good customer experience (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Wong & Wu, 2013). Previous studies have demonstrated that locational convenience including short distance, physical location, and parking availability directly affects the time, effort and energy that customers expend (Farquhar & Rowley, 2009; Berry et al., 2002b). The customer's perception of lower time and effort expenditure on access convenience can generate enjoyable experience (Seiders et al., 2007). The findings of these previous studies, however, were not conducted in either the context of the restaurant sector or solo diners. It can thus be suggested that locational convenience can positively influence solo dining experience in the restaurant sector.

Another new finding from this study is that solo diners, whose main purpose was to relieve their hunger quickly, were sensitive to their travel time and effort in visiting a restaurant when they dined out alone. Solo diners are more inclined to consider a high level of convenience to minimise their wasted time, effort and energy costs as important. Conversely, solo diners, who liked to try new restaurants, were willing to more spend their time and effort on dining out alone. They positively perceived long distance to a restaurant. This finding has not previously been described. Depending on solo diners' main purpose of dining-out, travel time can have a positive or negative impact on solo dining experience. It can therefore be assumed that the main purpose of solo dining can intervene in the association between locational convenience and customer experience.

#### 4.9 Service Design

All of the participants reported on how the restaurant designed services for diners. Various factors were categorised and explained under service design, see Figure 13, and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 13: Factors relating to Service Design of Solo Dining Experience**



#### 4.9.1 Complementary Services

The majority of the participants commented that the delivery of complementary services pleased them. Participants reported that the serving of both unordered additional food and replenishment of the food that they were already eating made them feel special. They remarked that such apparent special treatment made their experience more enjoyable. In addition, some participants commented that they felt more comfortable dining alone when the restaurant had the self-service side-dish station. This was because it enabled them to eat their favourite side dishes as much as they pleased without the judging eyes of the restaurant owner or staff members. In contrast, they highlighted that asking the restaurant staff members to replenish their empty plates of side dishes with new side dishes, felt uncomfortable.

##### ***M-06***

*“... The restaurant staff member said “Try this one” and gave me more food, when I dined alone. ... I didn’t have any appetite on that day, so I ordered ramen. The restaurant owner told me that you had to eat well if you had no appetite, and gave me kimchi stew with rice that they were going to have for free. I was touched. I was pleased that I felt like I was looked after.”*

##### ***F-02***

*“... There was my most favourite food among side dishes. When I dined alone and wanted to have this side dish more, I felt embarrassed to ask the restaurant staff member to replenish this side dish. So I felt more comfortable dining alone in the restaurant with a self-service station. I was able to eat side dishes as much as I liked.”*

#### 4.9.2 Waiting time

The waiting time seems to be an important factor in determining solo dining experience. Interestingly, all of the participants remarked that their waiting time for food seemed longer when dining alone and that the dining experience was more pleasant if the food was served quickly. Participants reported that a short waiting time for food enabled them to satisfy their hunger faster, and engendered less concern with the attention of other diners. In contrast, some of the participants commented that a long waiting time for food made them feel both bored and uncomfortable, as they felt burdened sitting alone at the table for a long time with no one to talk to.

##### ***M-04***

*“... I was pleased that the food was quickly served, when I dined alone. It is important for me that my food is served fast. ... I felt less bored during the waiting time for my food. I less bothered my head with other diners, because the food was served fast. ...”*

### **M-03**

*“When I dined out alone, it was unpleasant with the long waiting time for my food. I had nothing to do in the restaurant. I didn’t have dining companion to talk to. The long waiting time for food made me feel bored. ... I felt that I wasted time, because I sat absent-mindedly during the waiting time for food. ...”*

In addition to the above, all of the participants remarked that they avoided joining queues in restaurants because they wanted to satisfy their hunger faster and spend less time waiting. They reported that their meal was more enjoyable if they visited a restaurant in which there was no queue. In addition, some of them recalled that they felt uncomfortable waiting in such a queue, as their feeling of loneliness was enhanced through watching other group diners talking to each other during the long waiting time.

### **M-10**

*“I was pleased that I sat straight at the table, when I visited the restaurant to dine alone. It was really good, because I was very hungry. ... It is important that the restaurant staff member doesn’t make me wait to sit at the table for a meal. I think I don’t need to spend more time for my meal, when I dine out alone.”*

### **F-08**

*“There were some customers in a queue, when I came to the restaurant to dine alone. ... It was uncomfortable waiting near the entrance to the restaurant due to hearing the noise from other customers in groups in queue. ...”*

## **4.9.3 Summary and Discussion**

These findings suggest that solo dining experience is influenced by how the restaurant designs services for diners. Solo diners had a more enjoyable experience when the restaurant offered them complementary services such as additional food and food replenishment. Such unexpected complementary services made them feel valued and as a special customer, which generated a more pleasurable dining experience. Through self-consciousness about dining alone, solo diners felt intimidated when asking staff to replenish their empty plates of side dishes. They therefore experienced a more comfortable feeling if the restaurant had a self-service side-dish station.

Solo diners also showed concern about their waiting time for food. Dining out alone consistently generated a perception of a longer waiting time amongst solo diners. As such, a shorter waiting time was better as it both quickly satisfied solo diners’ main purpose of dining-out to relieve their hunger, and secondly mitigated their concerns about attention from others as a solo diner. A longer waiting time, by contrast, enhanced their feelings of boredom and loneliness arising from the absence of dining companion and consequently had a negative impact on dining experience.

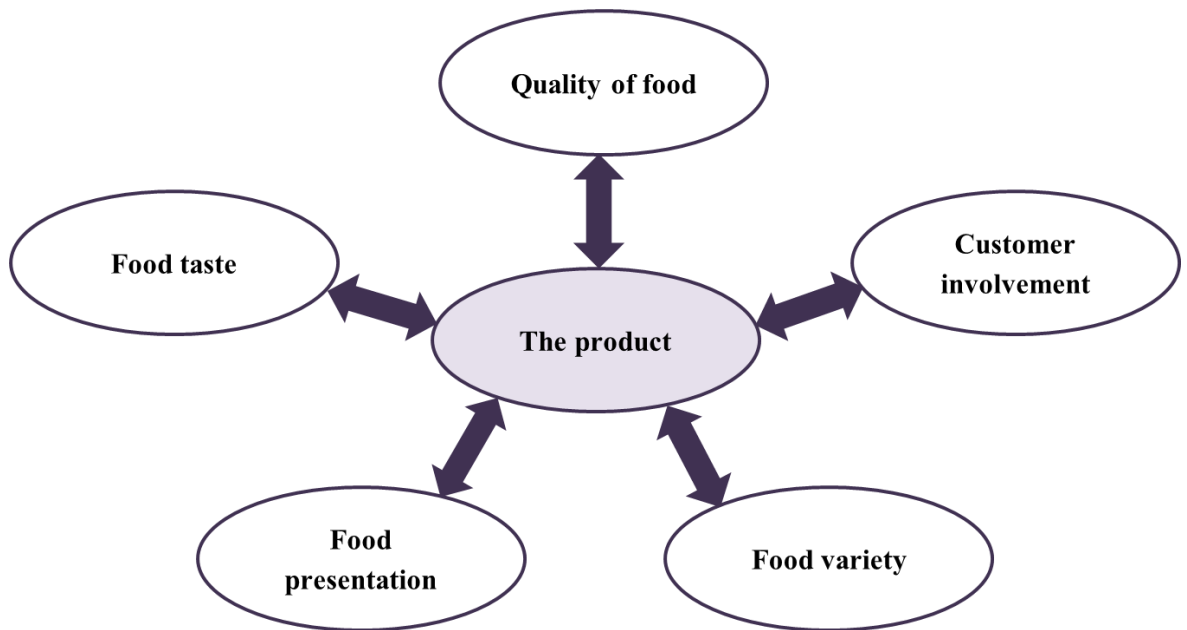
The findings of this study indicate that service design of the restaurant can have a considerable effect on solo dining experience. These findings corroborate the idea of Su (2011), who suggested that service operations of the restaurant played a significant role in creating memorable customer experience. In this study, solo dining experience was more memorable when the restaurant provided complementary services such as additional food and food replenishment to solo diners. Indeed, the perception of unexpected complementary services by solo diners, cultivated positive emotional responses such as pleasure and enjoyment, and in turn engendered positive reminiscence about the dining experience and other favourable cognitive responses. This study extends previous research, which shows that customers evaluate their experience based on complementary offerings (Wong & Wu, 2013). Solo diners perceived a more pleasurable dining experience when receiving unexpected complementary services, and this is in alignment with Walter et al. (2010) who found that customers' restaurant experience was favourable when an unexpected dish was served as a complementary service. Other authors have commented that the unexpected fulfilment of customer needs or desire can be a key driver of customer delight in their experience (Torres et al., 2014; Ma, Gao, Scott, & Ding, 2013). These previous studies have not been described in the context of solo diners specifically, however. It can thus be suggested that unexpected complementary services can have a positive impact on solo diners' customer experience.

In addition, this study found that solo dining experience is influenced by solo diners' perception of the time spent in queues for food or a seat. This finding further supports the idea of the association between waiting time perception and evaluation of service experience (Noone et al., 2009; Taylor, 1994) and confirms that the same findings also apply to solo diners. Solo diners are likely to be more sensitive to waiting times due to the absence of a dining companion. Customers gauge their experience based on 'subjective time' referring to individual perception and feeling about the length of a time duration (Baker & Cameron, 1996) and, as such, unfilled waiting time duration is perceived as longer than the actual wait duration (Kumar, Kalwani, & Dada, 1997). Customer perception of a long waiting time engendered a feeling of tension and irritation due to waste of time and uncertainty about waiting time duration (Osuna, 1985). This study showed that a perceived long waiting time induced a feeling of discomfort and loneliness and result in a negative dining experience for solo diners. It can thus be suggested a negative relationship between waiting time perception and customer experience exists.

## 4.10 The Product

All of the participants recalled that their dining experiences were influenced by how they perceived the food they ordered. Various factors were categorised and explained under product, see Figure 14 and are discussed in more detail in the sub-sections below.

**Figure 14: Factors relating to the Food Quality of Solo Dining Experience**



### 4.10.1 Quality of Food

Many of the participants commented on how the quality of food was an important component in their dining experience. Most of them remarked that the food ingredients used influenced their dining experience, even before they had actually starting consuming their meal. In particular they recalled that if the restaurant used fresh ingredients, the food quality appeared higher, making their dining experience more pleasurable. Contrary to this, a few of them remarked that perceived use of stale ingredients in their food degraded the food quality, and it negatively affected their dining experience. In particular they commented that the stale ingredients spoiled the flavour of food, which gave them a feeling of displeasure.

**F-13**

*“... The vegetables seemed to be very fresh. I was pleased that I ate some food cooked with fresh vegetable in the restaurant.”*

**F-01**

*“... When my food was served to me, the vegetables looked stale over time. I felt unpleasant before I ate it. It spoiled my appetite ...”*



Health concerns influenced solo dining experience. They reported that they were worried about their health because they frequently consumed a quick snack rather than a proper meal, with some of participants highlighting that they valued eating nutritious food and staying in shape. They recalled that their dining experience was more pleasurable if they took in a variety of nutrients from a meal and ate food derived from organic ingredients in the restaurant.

***M-02***

*“The thing I liked the most about the food was that the restaurant didn’t use a flavour enhancer, and used organic vegetables. And, various side dishes were served to me allowing intake of all kinds of nutrients at a meal. It served well-being foods to me. ...”*

**4.10.2 Food Taste**

The majority of the participants noted that they were influenced by the food taste. Most of them remarked that food suiting their taste enhanced their enjoyment of their meal. They recalled that delicious food allowed them to focus more on their meal and engendered less concern regarding other diners’ attention. Furthermore, some participants commented that food without flavour enhancers had a very clean taste and made their dining experience more pleasurable because they were health-conscious. They commented that having food without flavour enhancers was good for maintaining their health.

***M-05***

*“I often visit the restaurant to dine out alone because of the tasty food. ... As soon as I ate the food, I gave an exclamation ‘Wow, how tasty it is!’ Although I dined alone in the restaurant, the tasty food made me forget the discomforts of dining alone as well as feel more pleasant. ... I easily feel happy, when I eat the tasty food.”*

***M-11***

*“The taste of the food wasn’t pungent. I felt like there were no flavour enhancers in my food. I felt that the restaurant used natural seasonings in food. The food was very light. ... I thought that the food with natural seasonings was good for maintaining my health.”*

On the contrary, some of them highlighted that the food was not to their taste, which had an impact on their overall dining experience. They commented that they were displeased that they ate tasteless food, which made their experience more unenjoyable. A few of them remarked that it was unpleasant to have strong-tasting food, and that salty foods were not good for maintaining their health.

**M-06**

*“I was displeased that I ate tasteless food. I went to a restaurant alone to have a sweet and spicy chicken a few days ago. The food tasted too sweet. I kept thinking ‘It doesn’t taste very good... This is flavourless’, during my meal. Afterwards, I had an upset stomach from the meal, because I forced the tasteless food down my throat.”*

**M-09**

*“... The rice soup had a pungent flavour. I was displeased that the food was too salty. When I ate this soup, I felt concern about my health in terms of heavy sodium intake. ...”*

**4.10.3 Food Presentation**

The appearance and presentation of food served in the restaurant also seems to impact on their dining experience. The majority of the participants highlighted that food presented nicely generally tasted good as well. They commented that if the food was neatly arranged and nicely presented on the plate this improved their overall mood. They remarked that the good appearance and presentation of the food enhanced their appetite, which gave them a more pleasant experience.

**F-11**

*“I was pleased that the presentation of the food looked pretty. ... I felt like the restaurant put effort into the appearance and presentation of the dishes. ... The rice on the plate seemed like a pudding. Various salad leaves were well decorated surrounding the rice. ...”*

Several participants commented that they felt uncomfortable if the presentation and appearance of food was poor. Some of them remarked that having their food simply left on the tray on their table negatively impacted on their solo dining experience. They recalled that having their meal on the tray in such a way engendered a feeling of insignificance and detracted from their enjoyment of the restaurant.

**M-12**

*“The restaurant staff member brought me my meal on a tray. There were rice and side dishes on the tray. If I had been with a dining companion, the restaurant could have served my food and spread them out on the table. She left the tray on my table as it was, when I dined alone. It made me feel insignificant.”*

One of them remarked that too much food in the bowl made the experience unpleasant. This is because it was hard to eat due to the food brimming over with soup. A few of them commented that the restaurant put less effort in to the appearance and presentation of food. They recalled that the poor arrangement of food on the plate was embarrassing and made their experience less enjoyable.

**F-04**

*“... I felt like the bowl seemed to be small compared to the amount of food. When my food was served to me, the bowl of food was brimming over. The soup easily overflowed, so it was hard to eat. ...”*

**F-13**

*“... When the food was served to me, I thought it was an empty plate. The restaurant spread white sliced raw puffer fish out on the white plate so the plate looked empty. When he served me the food, I asked him “Why did you give me the empty dish?” It was embarrassing.”*

**4.10.4 Food Variety**

The variety of menus available in the restaurant was an important factor in their dining experience. Some of the participants remarked that they wanted to have different dishes as a meal and as such they preferred to visit a restaurant that provided either combination menus mixing two different dishes on the same plate, or set menus for solo diners. They commented that it was a waste of money if they ordered two dishes for one meal. They remarked that being able to eat two different main dishes at the same time made their dining experience more pleasurable. In addition, several participants commented that the restaurant provided distinct food from other restaurants and this instilled a sense of curiosity in them. They highlighted that the novelty of new menus of the restaurant made their dining experience more memorable.

**M-01**

*“... The restaurant provided three kinds of menus for solo diners, in which two kinds of dishes are combined to one menu. ... I think this kind of menu is very good for diners to eat alone in the restaurant. It is hard for solo diners to have various dishes at the same time as a meal. ... I was pleased that I was able to eat different dishes as a meal, when dining alone.”*

**M-06**

*“... There was a salad pizza in the restaurant. The pizza with salad on it tasted very light and tasty. I remembered that particular menu, because I had never seen such a menu in any restaurant. I was pleased that the restaurant provided a distinct food, and I was able to have a different experience in the restaurant. ... ”*

On the other hand, the majority of the participants commented that ordering different dishes was not possible due to the acceptable portion size being for two people minimum in many restaurants. They recalled that not being able to order the food dishes they wanted in such cases impacted negatively on their dining experience:

#### **F-08**

*“When I ordered food, the restaurant staff member told me that “You can’t order this food for one person.” and “You have to order two dishes if you want to eat.” It was unpleasant. Some restaurants offered several menus having such an acceptable minimum portion size, so it was almost impossible to eat when I dined out alone. ...”*

Many of the participants commented that their dining experience was more pleasurable if the restaurant had a large number of different types of menus for solo diners. Most of them remarked that they felt more comfortable dining alone when they had their choice among various menus for one person and different types of side dishes were served to them. They felt like the restaurant was considerate of solo diners when they were able to choose a particular meal they wanted to have from the wide selection. Additionally, some of them remarked that the restaurant provided only a few choices, which allowed them to quickly choose food they wanted to eat. They commented that they tended to have difficulties of determining what they chose to eat regarding a variety of choices served by the restaurant. They recalled that they felt like the restaurant specialised in a few dishes and instilled confidence in the food, which gave them a more pleasant feeling:

#### **F-03**

*“... Various menus for one person were very important to me. It was also important for me to be able to have what kinds of side dishes I wanted when I ordered a main dish. I felt pleasant on receiving many different kinds of side dishes. ...”*

#### **M-16**

*“The restaurant only had two menus, so I came there to dine alone. It was good to choose the food I want to eat. The restaurant with few menus serves food faster than the restaurant with lots of menus, and it must specialise in such few dishes. It made me have confidence in the food. ...”*

### **4.10.5 Customer Involvement**

The majority of the participants commented on whether the restaurant enabled them to take part in the preparation of their food while they were ordering it. Some of them remarked that the restaurant involved them in how the food was prepared, which allowed them have the food they wanted. They recalled that the restaurant prepared their food as they wished and this made their dining experience more pleasurable. Being able to have food that suited participant’s tastes impacted positively on their dining experience. In contrast, most of them commented that it was unnecessary for them to take part in preparing their food except when giving an order. They highlighted that it was important for them to have food quickly and conveniently. This is because their main purpose of solo dining was to relieve their hunger as fast as they could. They remarked that food that was easy to eat alone as

well as eaten immediately after cooking lightened the burden of solo dining and impacted positively on their dining experience:

**F-06**

*“... The restaurant staff member asked me whether I want my egg sunny-side up or down. I was happy with this service. ... I was pleased that I was also able to choose which ingredient between sundae (Korean blood sausage) and pig’s intestines I wanted to put in my soup. ...”*

**F-07**

*“I was pleased that I was able to eat the food quickly and conveniently, when I dined out alone. The reasons why I dined out were that I didn’t need to raise a hand to cook my food at the table, and I was able to eat right away, after the cooked food was served to me. I felt like the food that was quickly easy to eat alone lightened the burden of solo dining.”*

#### **4.10.6 Summary and Discussion**

In summary, the research findings show that solo diners are impacted by various aspects of the food provided by a restaurant. Solo diners perceived a higher quality of food if they either had food derived from fresh ingredients or nutritious food in the restaurant and both these factors engendered a feeling of happiness and satisfaction. Factors relating to the taste of food such as food suiting solo diners’ preference and food cooked without flavour enhancers helped solo diners focus more on their food, which enhanced their enjoyment of their meal. On the contrary, food with stale ingredients and tasteless food detracted from their enjoyment of the restaurant. Solo diners, who frequently dined out alone in the restaurant, were more health-conscious and hence were more inclined to consider the nutrient intake from a meal and any flavour enhancers used. Fresh, nutritious and healthy food was perceived as being good for maintaining their health, which made their dining experience more pleasurable.

Additionally, visually attractive presentation of food served in the restaurant stimulated solo diners’ appetite as well as improved their mood, whereas poor food presentation gave them feelings of being ignored and embarrassed. Either a high or a low level of food variety made solo dining experience more pleasurable depending on solo diners’ tendency to be decisive or indecisive about determining their food choice. In particular, solo diners, who were indecisive about determining their food choice, perceived that a restaurant with only a few specialised menus made them have confidence in the food. Solo diners were also positively impacted by whether the restaurant enabled them to take part in the preparation of their food. Solo diners have preferences for involvement in the preparation

of their food depending on their main purpose of solo-dining. Solo diners, who enjoyed their solo meal, were pleased to be involved in how the food was prepared due to being able to have the food that suited their tastes, whereas solo diners, who wanted to relieve their hunger as fast as they could, preferred to have food quickly and conveniently.

Prior studies have noted the importance of customer's perception of the food in the restaurant experience (Bujisic et al., 2014; Raajpoot, 2002; Kivela, Inbakaran, & Reece, 1999a). The findings of this study indicate that solo dining experience is influenced by solo diners' perception of various aspects of the food served. The food aspects in this study were similar to a measure of the customers' perceptions of food quality as the core product of a restaurant (Jeong & Jang, 2011; Ha & Jang, 2010a). As for core product attributes, previous research has indicated that the encompassing attribute food quality, which includes food freshness, nutritional value, taste, presentation, variety, and temperature, is accepted as the key element to measure restaurant experience (Liu & Jang, 2009a; Namkung & Jang, 2007). There is, however, a difference in the categorisation and nomenclature in the literature as whilst other studies have considered food taste, presentation and variety as individual product attributes, they are considered distinct from food quality as an attribute (Walter et al., 2010; Hansen et al., 2005). In alignment with these authors, in this study, food quality, food taste, food presentation, food variety, and customer involvement are considered as separate core attributes. In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of the relationship between food temperature and restaurant experience was detected.

It was found that the food quality perceived through freshness of food ingredients and nutritional value played a crucial role in how the meal was experienced by solo diners. This finding extends previous research that shows that customer's perception of both the freshness of the food and its nutritional quality has a significant effect on the restaurant experience (Jüttner et al., 2013; Wandel & Bugge, 1997; Johns, Tyas, Ingold, & Hopkinson, 1996). Previous research has shown that people in South Korea are more health-conscious regarding their meal due to an awareness of the potential negative health effects of an increased frequency of dining-out (Kim et al., 2013), and the findings of this study indeed showed that Korean solo diners are also concerned about the nutritional value from a meal. The findings of this study suggest that perceived nutritional value of a meal is able to moderate the cognitive health anxieties of solo diners, and in doing so induces positive emotional responses, which result in a more pleasurable dining experience. The taste of food was a factor that many of the participants remarked as important for their

restaurant experience, and this similarly is reflected in the literature (Hansen et al., 2005). The findings of this study suggest that food taste as a sensorial experience influences cognitive responses such as value for money, health concern, and self-consciousness, and in doing so engenders positive or negative emotional responses. Tasty food that enhances customers' perceptions of good value for the money has a positive impact on customer's evaluation of the restaurant experience (Namkung & Jang, 2007).

The study findings also indicate that the sensorial appreciation of both the appearance and presentation of food is able to induce positive and negative emotional responses within solo diners such as pleasure, discomfort, and embarrassment; and that these emotional responses have an impact on solo dining experience. This extends previous studies by Hansen et al. (2005) and Gustafsson et al. (2006), which were not carried out in the context of solo dining. The visual presentation effect of food plays a crucial role in creating a favourable quality image (Raajpoot, 2002). In particular, a visually good and attractive presentation of food beyond the customer's expectations engenders an emotional state of pleasant surprise (Rust & Oliver, 2000) and leaves an exceptional experience in the customer's mind (Rezende & Silva, 2014; Hanefors & Mossberg, 2003). The food presentation in an aesthetically pleasing manner can play a crucial role in enhancing pleasure in the dining experience (Michel et al., 2014).

Another new finding of this study was that solo dining experience was positively influenced by either high level or low level of food variety in the restaurant. The present findings seem to be consistent with other research, which showed that the composition of various menus was an essential attribute of food quality in creating restaurant experience (Liu & Jang, 2009a; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Hansen et al., 2005). However, the observed relationship between the low level of menu variety and restaurant experience has not previously been described. The findings of this study show that solo diners, who tend to find it difficult to determine their food choice, experienced more positive reactions when the level of menu variety served by the restaurant was low. Solo diners have different needs regarding menu aspects depending on whether they were decisive about their food choice or not.

Furthermore, this study found that either customer involvement in specifying the preparation of food or no involvement had a positive impact on solo dining experience depending on the customer concerned. This finding is therefore in partial agreement with Walter et al.'s (2010) findings, which showed that customer involvement remained in the

customer's memory as a favourable restaurant experience, and confirms that the same findings extend to a subset of solo diners. Solo diners, who want to enjoy their solo meal, are more inclined to perceive a pleasurable experience when consuming the food that suits their tastes through customer involvement in their food. The ability of the product to meet the customer's personal needs arouses positive emotional feelings, which results in a positive experience (Beltagui et al., 2016). However, solo diners, who want to relieve their hunger as fast as possible, are more inclined to have a positive dining experience through no involvement in the preparation of their food. A convenient meal is easy to fulfil the customer's physiological needs and arouses a feeling of contentment rather than feelings of pleasure (Andersson & Mossberg, 2004). These findings suggest that solo diners have different preferences for involvement in the preparation of their food, depending on their main purpose of dining alone.

#### **4.11 Summary**

The research findings from thematic analysis of the collected data are presented in this chapter. The eight important themes of solo diner's restaurant experiences were identified and discussed along with various sub-themes categorised under each main theme using excerpts from interviews. They indicate that solo dining experience in the restaurant is originated from solo diner's responses to indirect and direct interactions with environment, people such as staff and other diners, physical environment, value for money, location, service design, and the product. The detailed account of these key findings was presented together with an in-depth discussion of the findings in the context of previous studies. The next chapter introduces the conclusions from this study.



## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION**

### **5.1 Summary of the Thesis**

The purpose of the current study was to develop a view of restaurant experience from the solo diners' perspective, by exploring what influences solo customer perception of restaurant experience. Based on the review of the extant literature regarding customer experience, very little is known about solo customers and the factors which influence solo diner's perceptions of their restaurant experience. Across all diners, both non-solo and solo, there is a lack of an integrated view on the factors affecting customer experience in the restaurant industry. Previous studies have only focused on specific components of customer experience (e.g. Albrecht et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2016; Michel et al., 2014), and there is no overall view on what constitutes customer experience amongst restaurant customers (e.g. Garg & Amelia, 2016; Marinkovic et al., 2014; Tsai & Lu, 2012). This study was, therefore, undertaken to comprehensively examine the contributors of restaurant experience from the solo diner's perspectives and generate an integrative model on the customer perception of the various interactive elements that constitute solo dining experience. Such a model is paramount if restaurants wish to effectively satisfy the needs and desires of the rapidly growing solo diner market.

In order to achieve the research aim, there were three research objectives in this study:

1. To identify what impacts customer experience in the restaurant context;
2. To explore experiential elements within the context of the solo diner's restaurant interactions;
3. To examine how solo diners perceive the above elements in their solo dining experience.

With regard to the first objective, this study has shown that customer restaurant experience is constructed through interactions with the following eight significant influential factors: environmental factors; staff attitude and behaviour; active interaction with other diners; physical environment; perception of value for money; locational convenience; service design; and perceived quality of food. In terms of the second and third objectives, Table 10 outlines the contributory attributes to solo dining experience and solo diners' perception of their dining experience identified in this research.

**Table 10: The Solo Diner's Responses to the Determinants of Customer Experience**

<b>Determinants of Customer Experience</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Relationship to Extant Literature</b>
<b><u>Environmental factors</u></b>			
<i>The number of diners</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• niceness, comfort e.g. low table occupancy</li> <li>• discomfort, burdensomeness e.g. high table occupancy</li> </ul>	Extends (Kwon et al., 2016; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Kaya & Erkip, 2001) Confirm (Kim & Lee, 2012)
<i>Type of diners</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, communality e.g. the presence of other solo diners</li> <li>• discomfort, embarrassment, lonesomeness e.g. the absence of other solo diners</li> </ul>	No previous literature
<i>People watching</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, warm-heartedness, curiousness, less boredom e.g. friendly interaction between staff, interesting other diners</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. talkative staff</li> </ul>	Extends (Albrecht, 2016; Brocato et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2012; McGrath & Otnes, 1995)
<i>Soundscape</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fun, less boredom e.g. conversations of staff/other diners</li> <li>• displeasure, annoyingness, discomfort e.g. the noise from between staff/other diners</li> </ul>	Extends (Moore et al., 2005; Grove & Fisk, 1997; Hui & Bateson, 1991)
<i>Aroma</i>	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• displeasure e.g. foul smell on other diner, strong fragrance of a perfume on other diner</li> </ul>	Extends (Wu, 2008; Harris et al., 2000; Martin, 1996)
<i>Physical proximity</i>	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discomfort, embarrassment, displeasure e.g. sharing a table with strangers, invasion of solo diner's space for meal</li> </ul>	Extends (Argo et al., 2005; Martin & Pranter, 1989; Dabbs, 1971)
<i>Familiarity</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, less lonesomeness e.g. familiarity with the restaurant/to staff</li> </ul>	Extends (Patterson & Mattila, 2008; Tam, 2008; Ayala et al., 2005)
<b><u>Staff behaviour in interaction with diners</u></b>			
<i>Conversations</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure, comfort, less lonesomeness e.g. good timing of conversations, conversations with familiar staff</li> <li>• discomfort, burdensomeness e.g. bad timing of conversations, conversations with unfamiliar staff</li> </ul>	Extends (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015a; Gremler & Gwinner, 2008) Confirm (Goodwin & Lockshin, 1992)
<i>Attentiveness</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. appropriate attention</li> <li>• displeasure, annoyingness, discomfort e.g. inappropriate attention, too much attention</li> </ul>	Extends (Walls, 2013; Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007; Winsted, 1997)

(Continued)

<b>Determinants of Customer Experience</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Relationship to Extant Literature</b>
<i>(Continued)</i>			
<i>Responsiveness</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. prompt responsiveness</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. late responsiveness</li> </ul>	Extends (Furrer et al., 2000; Donthu & Yoo, 1998; Stevens et al., 1995)
<i>Courtesy</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure, comfort e.g. being greeted, being acknowledged by acquainted staff, polite manner of serving</li> <li>• annoyingness, displeasure, embarrassment, burdensomeness e.g. not being greeted, being greeted with questions related to the number of companion, staff way of speaking</li> </ul>	Extends (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Andaleeb & Conway, 2006)
<i>Body language</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. cheerful look, smile</li> <li>• displeasure, discomfort e.g. sullen look, look of embarrassment at solo diners</li> </ul>	Extends (Pugh, 2014; Sundaram & Webster, 2000)
<i>Helpfulness</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. detailed explanation of menus, recommendation of food</li> </ul>	Extends (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Liu & Jang, 2009a)
<i>Friendliness</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, pleasure e.g. friendly attitudes, friendly manner of serving</li> </ul>	Extends (Wu & Liang, 2009; Gupta et al., 2007)
<i>Time allowance</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. being not rushed to finish the diner's meal</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. being rushed to finish eating meal quickly</li> </ul>	No previous literature
<b><u>Active interactions with other diners</u></b>			
<i>Conversations</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• less lonesomeness, pleasure e.g. similar interest</li> <li>• displeasure, discomfort e.g. conflicting opinions, unwanted conversations</li> </ul>	Extends (Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2013; Huang & Hsu, 2009; Harris & Baron, 2004)
<i>Attentiveness</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. no attention</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. attention</li> </ul>	Extends (Wang et al., 2011; Hansen et al., 2005)
<i>Disruption</i>	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• annoyingness e.g. the other diner's children bothering the diner</li> </ul>	Extends (Miao, 2014; Walls et al., 2011a; Harris & Reynolds, 2003)
<i>Accidental encounters</i>	Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discomfort e.g. encounter with acquaintance</li> </ul>	No previous literature
<b><u>Physical environment</u></b>			
<i>Architectural design</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, pleasure, curiousness, less burdensomeness e.g. exterior design reflecting a restaurant theme, open-kitchen, wooden interior</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. old building, the restroom located outside the restaurant</li> </ul>	Extends (Kim & Moon, 2009; Turley & Chebat, 2002; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1999)

(Continued)

<b>Determinants of Customer Experience</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Relationship to Extant Literature</b>
<i>(Continued)</i>			
<i>Table settings</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. foreign-style tableware, distinctive sauce pot</li> </ul>	Extends (Ryu & Jang, 2008; Hansen et al., 2005)
<i>Wall décor</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, less boredom e.g. food or restaurant information on the wall, walls painted in either warm or achromatic colour</li> </ul>	Extends (Baker & Cameron, 1996; Bellizzi & Hite, 1992; Bellizzi et al., 1983)
<i>Interior accessories</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, pleasure, fun, less boredom e.g. decorations for thematic design, cute ornaments on display</li> </ul>	Extends (Han & Ryu, 2009; Jang & Namkung, 2009)
<i>Furniture</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. square table, soft chair, the presence of table call button</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. round table, sitting on the floor, the absence of table call button</li> </ul>	Extends (Ryu & Han, 2010; Ryu & Jang, 2007)
<i>Lighting</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. warm-coloured lighting (orange or yellow), bright lighting</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. dim lighting, bright lighting</li> </ul>	Extends (Spence et al., 2014; Ariffin et al., 2012; Wansink, 2004; Areni & Kim, 1994; Baron et al., 1992)
<i>Aroma</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. the restaurant filled with the aroma of food</li> </ul>	Extends (Chebat & Michon, 2003; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Bone & Ellen, 1999)
<i>Soundscape</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure, comfort e.g. music in keeping with the context, slow tempo, low volume</li> <li>• lonesomeness, discomfort e.g. pop-music, fast tempo, high volume</li> </ul>	Extends (Jain & Bagdare, 2011; Lin & Wu, 2006; Stroebele & de Castro, 2006; Caldwell & Hibber, 2002)
<i>Cleanliness</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. good cleanliness and hygiene</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. poor cleanliness and hygiene</li> </ul>	Extends (Ryu et al., 2012; Walls et al., 2011b; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996)
<i>Tidiness</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. tidy restaurant</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. untidy restaurant</li> </ul>	Extend (Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008)
<i>Colour scheme</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. matching colour of design</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. un-matching colour of design</li> </ul>	Extends (Ryu & Han, 2011; Namkung & Jang, 2008)
<i>Table layout</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, less burdensomeness, less lonesomeness e.g. bar/partition/communal table, small table</li> <li>• discomfort, displeasure e.g. large table, not enough space between tables</li> </ul>	Extends (Garg & Amelia, 2016; Liu & Jang, 2009b; Lin, 2004)
<i>Seating arrangement</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort, less boredom e.g. corner seat, seat with the diner's back toward the door, window seat</li> <li>• discomfort, lonesomeness e.g. seat in the centre, close distance from other diners/communal areas</li> </ul>	Extends (Heung & Gu, 2012; Tombs & McColl-Kennedy, 2010)

(Continued)

<b>Determinants of Customer Experience</b>	<b>Responses</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Relationship to Extant Literature</b>
<b><u>Value for money</u></b>			
<i>Price and time</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. price related to short/long time spent in the restaurant</li> </ul>	No previous literature
<i>Price and food</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. price related to adequate amount of food, reasonable price related to tasty food</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. price related to inadequate amount of food; unreasonable price related to tasteless food</li> </ul>	Extends (Voon, 2012; Jeong & Jang, 2011; Namkung & Jang, 2010; Kim et al., 2009)
<b><u>Location</u></b>			
<i>Accessibility of the restaurant</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. available car park, ease of public transport, close/far proximity to restaurant</li> </ul>	Extends (Srivastava & Kaul, 2014; Kim et al., 2009; Anselmsson, 2006; Bell, 1999)
<i>Location of the restaurant</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comfort e.g. secluded area</li> <li>• discomfort e.g. crowded area</li> </ul>	Extends (Murphy et al., 2011; Hu et al., 2009; Seiders et al., 2007; Tzeng et al., 2002)
<b><u>Service design</u></b>			
<i>Complementary services</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. free replenishment of food, self-service side dishes</li> </ul>	Extends (Torres et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2013; Wong & Wu, 2013)
<i>Waiting time</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. a short waiting time for food/being seated at table</li> <li>• displeasure, discomfort e.g. a long waiting time for food/being seated at table</li> </ul>	Extends (Noone et al., 2009; Berry et al., 2002b; Taylor, 1994)
<b><u>The product</u></b>			
<i>Quality of food</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. fresh ingredients of food, nutritious food</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. stale ingredients of food</li> </ul>	Extends (Jüttner et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013; Qu, 1997; Johns et al., 1996)
<i>Food taste</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure, comfort e.g. food without flavour enhancer, tasty food</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. tasteless dishes, strong-tasting food</li> </ul>	Extends (Zhang et al., 2014; Ha & Jang, 2010; Sulek & Hensley, 2004; Kivela et al., 1999b) Confirm (Bae & Kim, 2017)
<i>Food presentation</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. good presentation of food</li> <li>• displeasure, embarrassment, discomfort e.g. small plate compared to the amount of food, poor arrangement of food on the plate</li> </ul>	Extends (Michel et al., 2014; Raajpoot, 2002; Rust & Oliver, 2000)

(Continued)

Determinants of Customer Experience	Responses	Example	Relationship to Extant Literature
<i>(Continued)</i>			
<i>Food variety</i>	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure e.g. combination menus for one person, distinct food, high/low amount of food variety</li> <li>• displeasure e.g. the acceptable minimum portion size</li> </ul>	Extends (Qin & Prybutok, 2008; Namkung & Jang, 2007; Wandel & Bugge, 1997)
<i>Customer involvement</i>	Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pleasure, comfort e.g. customised food, food that is easy to eat alone</li> </ul>	Extend (Walter et al., 2010)

The most interesting and significant finding to emerge from this study is that the experiential attributes in restaurants are differently perceived by two distinct groups of solo diners, namely ‘lonely’ diners and ‘solitary’ diners. ‘Lonely’ diners are reluctant solo diners whose primary desire is to satisfy a physiological need through their dining experience, whereas ‘solitary’ diners are willing solo diners whose primary desire is to satisfy an intellectual need. In order to explicitly answer the main research questions, the sub-questions that were identified in section 2.7 will be discussed, together with the summary of the findings of this study.

#### **RQ1: What is the impact of interactions with physical environment on solo dining experience?**

The findings of this study show that various aspects of a restaurant’s physical environment contribute to solo dining experience, and these aspects include facility aesthetics (e.g. architectural design, table settings, wall décor, interior accessories and furniture), ambience (e.g. lighting, aroma, soundscape, cleanliness, tidiness and colour) and functionality of space (e.g. furniture layout and seating arrangements). Generally, modernity of the restaurant was favoured by both groups of solo diner, whereas peculiarity of the restaurant exterior design engendered a sense of curiosity in ‘solitary’ diners in particular. Visually attractive design features (e.g. wall décor, table settings, and interior accessories) and interior structure (e.g. an open-kitchen, distinctive interior structure), gave both ‘solitary’ and ‘lonely’ diners an enjoyable experience by reducing their feelings of boredom and loneliness from the absence of dining companion. The existence of a table call button, pleased reluctant ‘lonely’ solo diners in particular, as it alleviated the perceived psychological burden of calling staff members for help.

With respect to the lighting of the restaurant, ‘solitary’ diners preferred either subdued/ warm lighting (e.g. yellow or orange coloured lighting) or bright fluorescent lighting whereas ‘lonely’ diners preferred to dine alone under only subdued warm-coloured lighting. A restaurant filled with the aroma of food was preferred by some solo diners as it induced appetite and enriched the food taste, thereby enhancing their dining experience. ‘Solitary’ diners in particular appeared sensitive to the presence of restaurant background music and reported that slow tempo low volume background music helped to generate a serene and relaxed dining experience. Solitary solo diners also favoured a harmonious interior design colour scheme of the restaurant. Both groups of solo diners reported that hygienic conditions, cleanliness and tidiness of the restaurant enhanced solo diners’ trust in the restaurant and helped alleviate their anxieties about food safety.

Table design was an important aspect in determining solo dining experience. Certain table designs (e.g. a long and narrow bar table, a communal table or a table with partitions) helped solo diners reduce their concerns about observation from other non-solo diners, whereas increased space between tables also had a positive impact on solo dining experience. Small, one or two person tables alleviated solo diners’ concern about inconveniencing the restaurant owner or other groups of diners, whereas a seat far away from either the communal areas or other diners (e.g. a corner seat or a seat with their back toward the door of the restaurant) was favourable as it enabled solo diners to enjoy their meal in a relatively quiet atmosphere and avoid the gaze of other diners.

#### **RQ2a- What is the impact of interactions with service employees on solo dining experience?**

Solo dining experience was influenced by both the mere presence of service employees without mutual interactions (e.g. friendly interaction between staff and the contents or loudness of conversations between staff) and various direct interactions with service employees (e.g. conversational ability, attentiveness, responsiveness, courtesy, facial expression, helpfulness, friendliness, and time allowance). Regarding solo diners’ perception of the presence of restaurant staff, the friendly relationship between restaurant staff generated a pleasant atmosphere, which engendered positive solo dining experience. Conversely, loud noises arising from restaurant staff induced feelings of irritation and insecurity amongst solo diners.

The impact of conversations with service employees differed between the two groups. ‘Solitary’ diners were generally reluctant to engage in conversations with service

employees regardless of their familiarity in the restaurant but found conversations with staff about menus and food recommendations helpful and pleasing. 'Lonely' diners by contrast, favoured conversations with restaurant staff either before the food was served or before the bill was paid as it reduced feelings of loneliness and boredom. Both groups of solo diners reported, however, that overly inquisitive long conversations with unfamiliar service employees in the restaurant engendered a feeling of discomfort and irritation.

Alongside this both attention and responsiveness of staff influenced solo dining experience. Solo diners felt appropriate attention and prompt responses from staff members induced a more pleasant dining experience. By contrast both inadequate attention and over-attention from staff and late responses from staff engendered a feeling of irritation and discomfort and resulted in negative solo dining experience.

Regarding attitude and demeanour of service employees, staff courtesy (e.g. greeting, acknowledgement, and politeness) impacted positively on solo dining experience. In particular, staff courtesy helped 'lonely' diners reduce their anxiety about dining out alone. Specific questioning from staff, however, with regard to the number of dining companions, gave both groups of solo diners a feeling of embarrassment and anxiety. Staff facial expressions also influenced dining experience with positive facial expressions engendering a happier and more comfortable dining experience whereas negative facial expressions (e.g. sullen, exhausted, bewilderment, and embarrassed) generated a feeling of discomfort,. In addition to this a friendly restaurant staff demeanour (e.g. heart-warming and affectionate) made certain solo diners feel like a special guest or friend of the restaurant staff. A sense of pressure from restaurant staff to finish their meal quickly, however, induced an uncomfortable dining experience amongst solo diners.

#### **RQ2b- What is the impact of interactions with other customers on solo dining experience?**

Solo dining experience is influenced by both the mere presence of other diners without mutual interactions (e.g. the number and type of diners, behaviour of other diners, the contents or loudness of conversations between other diners, aroma of other diners and physical proximity to other diners) and active interaction with other diners (e.g. conversations, attentiveness, disruption, and accidental encounters with acquaintances). Solo diners' perception of high customer density in the restaurant gave an uncomfortable and burdensome dining experience due to a high sense of awareness of other diners, restaurant staff, or its owner. 'Lonely' diners were more concerned about absence or



presence of other solo diners in the restaurant environment than ‘solitary’ diners. In particular, paucity or absence of other solo diners gave ‘lonely’ diners a feeling of anxiety about unwanted attention from other non-solo diners. Additionally, the unexpected or unwanted close physical proximity to other diners (e.g. sharing a table with strangers and other diners’ personal items presented on solo diners’ table) made solo diners feel discomfort and irritation due to perception of the personal space invasion. The presence of an unpleasant smell arising from other diners (e.g. a foul smell and a strong perfume fragrance) ruined solo diners’ appetite and the flavour of their food and resulted in an unpleasant dining experience.

With respect to active interactions with other diners, conversations with other diners were more positively perceived by ‘lonely’ diners than ‘solitary’ diners, as such conversations helped reduced subjective feelings of loneliness. Attention from other non-solo diners or accidentally encountered acquaintances in the restaurant, aroused solo diners’ concerns about the potential misconceptions of other diner who might perceive solo-dining as reflective of problems with personal relationships. Both perceived attention from other non-solo diners and encountering acquaintances during a meal gave solo diners an uncomfortable dining experience. The behaviour of unruly children present in the restaurant also made solo diners feel discomfort and irritation due to the disruption of their meal.

### **RQ3- What is the impact of food quality on solo dining experience?**

The findings of this study show that solo dining experience is affected by various aspects of the food such as food quality, food taste, presentation, menu variety, and customer involvement. Solo diners’ perception of a higher quality of food (e.g. fresh ingredients and nutritious food) induced a feeling of contentment and resulted in a more pleasurable dining experience. Food that either suited solo diners’ taste or cooked without flavour enhancers enabled them to shift attention away from their concern regarding attention from other non-solo diners and focus instead on their meal, thereby enhancing their enjoyment of the restaurant. Visually appealing presentation of food served in the restaurant enhanced solo diners’ appetite and their overall mood, which made their dining experience more pleasurable. On the contrary, poor food presentation (e.g. food served on a tray, small plate compared to the amount of food, and poor arrangement of food on the plate) resulted in an uncomfortable and unpleasant dining experience.

Additionally, the variety of menus available in the restaurant (e.g. combination menus for one person, distinctive food, and a high/low level of food variety) gave more pleasurable solo dining experience. In particular, solo diners, who are decisive about determining their food, preferred to have a particular food from the wide selection whereas solo diners, who are indecisive about their food choice, experience more positive responses to limited menu variety. Customer involvement, in which solo diners can take part in the preparation of their food, enhanced their enjoyment of the restaurant. In particular, 'solitary' diners, who want to satisfy their intellectual needs, prefer to be involved in the preparation of their food, which enabled them to have food suiting their taste, thereby making their experience more pleasurable. On the contrary, solo diners whose physiological needs took precedent, preferred limited involvement in the preparation of their food.

#### **RQ4- What is the impact of perceived price on solo dining experience?**

A key finding of this study is that solo diners are inclined to evaluate their restaurant experience based upon perceived price of food compared to either the time they stayed in the restaurant, the amount of food or the flavour of the food served. Perceived good value for money enhanced solo dining experience, and solo diners appeared less sensitive to the price of their meal as the time they actually stayed in the restaurant lengthened. Similarly solo diners' perception of a good price compared to either the amount or flavour of food induced positive evaluation of their restaurant experience. 'Lonely' solo diners, who primarily wished to satisfy their hunger, were more sensitive about food price relative to quality and portion size, than 'solitary' diners, who wanted to satisfy their intellectual needs. In particular, 'lonely' diners wanted to spend less money on dining alone because they primarily wanted to relieve their hunger quickly.

#### **RQ5- What is the impact of restaurant locational convenience on solo dining experience?**

The findings suggest that solo dining experience is affected by solo diner perception of locational convenience such as accessibility of the restaurant and location of the restaurant. Solo diners' perception of ease of accessibility of the restaurant (e.g. close proximity to the restaurant, car park availability, and convenient public transportation) made their meal experience more comfortable and pleasurable. 'Solitary' diners appeared less sensitive to locational convenience than 'lonely' diners, and were more willing to spend time and effort travelling in order to achieve a novel restaurant experience. This is in alignment with them prioritising their intellectual need rather than a physiological one. A restaurant located in a

secluded area made solo dining experience more enjoyable than in a crowded area, as a restaurant in a secluded area enabled solo diners to enjoy their meal slowly in a quieter atmosphere.

In addition to the answers to the research questions outlined above, two more factors contributing to solo dining experience, customer familiarity and service design, emerged from the findings of this study. An interesting and significant finding of this research is that customer familiarity with a restaurant or service employees engenders a more positive response to the evaluation of restaurant experience of solo diners. Solo diners' perception of familiarity with a restaurant or restaurant staff developed their sense of confidence in dining out alone, reduced the negative awareness of the presence of other non-solo diners, and engendered a sense of communal belonging. Such perceived familiarity made solo dining experience more comfortable.

Another significant finding is that the service design of the restaurant services such as provision of complementary services and waiting time, strongly influence the solo dining experience. Unexpected complementary services provided by the restaurant (e.g. the delivery of unordered food and replenishment of the food) made solo diners feel valued and as a special customer in the restaurant, thereby generating a more pleasurable and memorable dining experience. The self-service side-dish station helped solo diners lessen their anxiety about asking the service employee to replenish their empty plates, which made their dining experience more comfortable. The absence of a dining companion also made solo diners sensitive to waiting periods for either being seated or service, and a longer waiting time negatively influenced solo dining experience.

## **5.2 Theoretical Contributions**

There is a paucity of existing literature on the factors influencing the customer experience of solo diners in the restaurant sector. This study theoretically contributes to the existing knowledge of customer restaurant experience in three distinct ways. Firstly, it suggests a model of solo diners' restaurant experience. Secondly, it proposes a classification of solo diners into two distinct groups (solitary vs. lonely diners) and an evaluation of the differential aspects that influence their respective customer experience. Thirdly, it exemplifies solo diner customer experience within a specific cultural context.

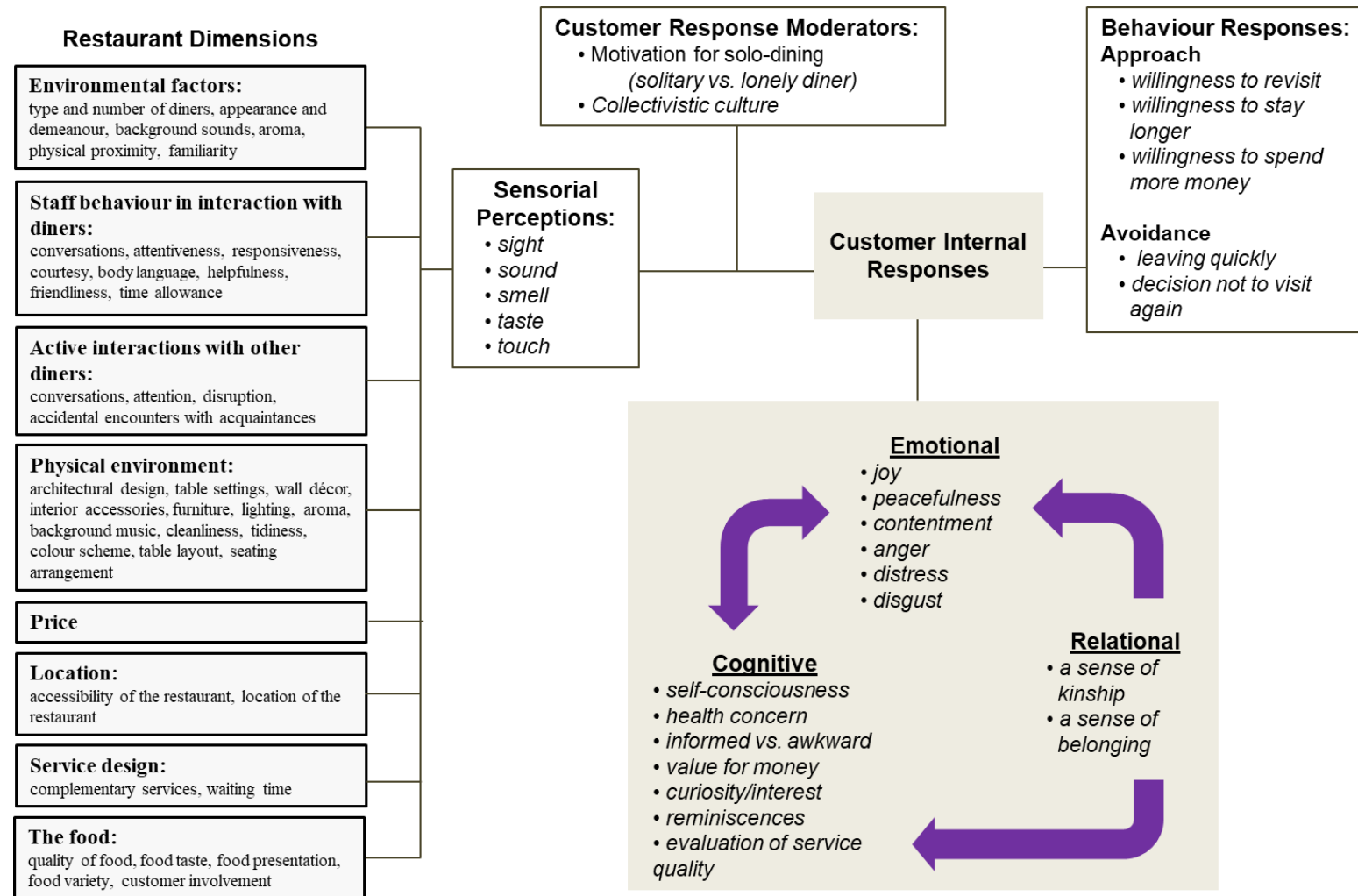
### **5.2.1 A Customer Dining Experience Model**

This study contributes to existing knowledge about customer experience by providing an analysis of solo diners' perceptions of restaurant experience within a collectivist cultural

background. A number of previous studies have only focused on the physical aspects, food quality and service quality of the restaurant environment, despite the complexity of determinants of customer experience (e.g. Garg & Amelia, 2016; Tsai & Lu, 2012; Ryu et al., 2012). As such the existing literature on customer experience is limited and insufficiently explains the restaurant experience, which encompasses customer's multiple responses to various interactive service offerings for solo diners.

This study develops a model of customer experience enabling integrative factors that influence solo diners' perceptions in a restaurant setting to be explored. This model of solo dining customer experience in restaurants (Figure 15) has been based on the findings of interviews with solo diners in South Korea. The model depicts that interactive and non-interactive dimensions (i.e. environmental factors, staff behaviours and attitudes, behaviours of other diners, physical environment, price, location, service design and the food) influence solo dining customer experience. There is an interrelationship between different restaurant dimensions, and solo diners perceive multiple dimensions through their five senses namely sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Fundamentally, these sensorial perceptions lead to internal emotional, cognitive, and relational responses within solo diners, which in turn engender either approach or avoidance behavioural responses. Emotional responses (e.g. comfort, pleasure, annoyance, and embarrassment) and cognitive responses (e.g. self-consciousness, curiosity, value for money, and the evaluation of service quality) are inherently inter-related whereas relational responses (e.g. a sense of kinship and a sense of belonging) are a precursor to both respectively. Contributing to and interfacing with this model, are two key customer response moderators, namely motivation for solo-dining and collectivistic cultural background. Both motivation for solo dining (i.e. 'solitary' vs. 'lonely' diner) and the characteristics of a collectivistic culture such as within South Korean, influence the solo diner's internal response to sensorial perceptions, and thereby solo dining experience. The final result of these differential derived internal responses within solo diners is the production of two fundamental behavioural outcomes, namely an approach behavioural response (e.g. willingness to revisit and willingness to stay longer) or an avoidance behavioural response (e.g. leaving the restaurant quickly and decision not to visit the restaurant again).

**Figure 15: The Framework of Solo Dining Experience**



### **5.2.2 A Classification of Solo Diners into Two Distinct Groups**

The empirical findings in this study enhance understanding of solo diners as a customer group. Solo diners are classified into two groups, a classification dependent on their *raison d'être* for dining alone. In essence, 'solitary' diners voluntarily aspire to dine alone and their dining wishes are mostly driven by a cognitive desire to seek out novel and pleasurable dining experiences. 'Lonely' diners by comparison are reluctant solitary diners, whose dining experiences are driven by a physiological desire to relieve their hunger quickly. The differentiation between these two groups is apparent in how 'solitary' diners or 'lonely' diners perceive the presence of other people (i.e. restaurant staff and other diners) in the restaurant experience. 'Lonely' diners, who may in part be more self-conscious about their status within society, are more negatively aware of the attentiveness from other people (e.g. restaurant staff, other non-solo diners, and acquaintances whom they accidentally encounter), whereas the observation of behaviours of restaurant staff or other diners has a more positive effect on 'solitary' diners. Interestingly though, when social connection with the restaurant staff through conversations is considered, the reverse is true. 'Lonely' diners are more interested in engaging restaurant staff in conversation compared to 'solitary' diners, as attempts to engage 'solitary' diners in conversation disrupts their inherent desire for solitude, thereby inducing a negative evaluation of dining experience.

The differential experiences of these two fundamental groups, also extends to various aspects of the food such as food quality, food tastiness, food presentation and customer involvement. 'Solitary' diners expect to derive pleasure from their intellectual needs fulfilled by the food whereas 'lonely' diners wish to satisfy their physiological hunger. 'Solitary' diners seek more hedonic value and, therefore, the appearance and presentation of the food and customer involvement in the preparation of food is prioritised. Both visually attractive presentation of the food and customer involvement in the preparation of food can heighten a sense of fun and excitement amongst 'solitary' diners and enhance their overall mood, which in turn gives a more pleasurable dining experience. In contrast, 'lonely' diners pay more attention to utilitarian value (i.e. functional features of the food), and favour food quality, tastiness, and having no involvement in the preparation of the food. 'Lonely' diners' perception of utilitarian value of the food can reduce their concern regarding attention from other non-solo diners and engender physical comfort, thereby generating a satisfactory dining experience. These findings about the sub-groups of solo diners are also a theoretical contribution of this study.

**Proposition 1:** Different motivations for solo-dining result in differences in perceptions of restaurant experience with respect to (1) reaction to other diners (2) attentiveness and conversation of restaurant staff (3) value perceptions.

### **5.2.3 Understanding of Solo Diner Customer Experience within a Specific Cultural Context**

This study presents a complex phenomenon that is culturally and contextually embedded. Three important factors that influence solo dining experience have been identified in this specific cultural context:

Firstly, the evidence from this study suggests that the perception of other customers present in restaurants is significantly associated with solo dining experience. This study has confirmed the findings of previous research within individualistic cultures which found that the influence of the presence of other customers arises from the number of other customers, the observation of them, background sounds generated by them, aroma of them, verbal-exchange, behaviour and physical proximity to them (Brocato et al., 2012; Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012; Moore et al., 2005; Martin & Pranter, 1989). The findings from this study, which specifically studied solo diners as a customer group within a collectivistic culture, demonstrates that along with those factors, solo diners perceive the type of other diners (i.e. other solo diners and non-solo diners) and accidental encounters with an acquaintance when evaluating their dining experience.

The perception of the presence or paucity/absence of other solo diners is a prominent influential factor in solo dining experience. Solo diners' perception of paucity or absence of other solo diners in the restaurant engenders a feeling of remorse for visiting the restaurant alone and incite them to finish their meal quickly, due to their concern regarding other non-solo diners' attention. In particular, solo diners appear to be conscious about the awareness of and inferences from other non-solo diners present in the restaurant. In Korean culture, there is a strong sense of community and solo-dining is generally perceived as representing a lack of social skills and personality problems. As such perceived negative social evaluation from other non-solo diners has a negative influence on solo dining experience. Perception of the presence of a lot of non-solo diners heightens solo diners' inherent anxiety. By contrast, the presence of other solo diners with whom they can identify positively influences the experience of solo diners, and prevents the inherent anxiety that would arise from being the only solo diner in a restaurant. Solo diners'

perception of the presence of other solo diners engenders a sense of comfort and communality, thereby making their experience more enjoyable.

Additionally, the presence of acquaintances accidentally encountered in the restaurant gives an uncomfortable dining experience amongst solo diners. Encountering an acquaintance in a group heightens solo diners' anxiety about their acquaintance's misconception on their social ability as well as interrupts their meal to exchange greetings. Solo diners, also, perceive the presence of unpleasant aroma of other diners such as not only a foul smell but also a strong perfume fragrance in their dining experience. Solo diners' perception of unpleasant smell on other diners spoils their appetite and the flavour of their food, which detracts their enjoyment of the restaurant. Within collectivistic cultures, therefore, the perception of the presence of other diners has a significant impact on solo dining experience.

**Proposition 2:** Within collectivistic cultures, the presence of other diners has significant, direct effects on solo diners' evaluations of their dining experience.

Secondly, the present study suggests within collectivistic cultures, the familiarity with a restaurant or service employees significantly influences solo diners' restaurant experience. Customer familiarity intervenes in solo diners' determination of a restaurant choice to dine out alone. In particular, this study demonstrates that solo diners in South Korea are more inclined to visit a familiar restaurant amongst plenty of restaurants to dine alone. Solo diners in a collectivistic cultural background positively perceive familiarity with certain restaurant factors such as food, services, service employees, and physical environment. Solo diners' perception of familiarity in the restaurant environment strengthens their relationship with a restaurant as well as makes them have a sense of belonging about the restaurant as one of their communities.

The familiarity with a restaurant engenders a greater sense of confidence in dining alone amongst solo diners. Perceived familiarity with a restaurant reduces solo diners' concerns regarding solo-dining in the restaurant and regarding the issues of either a selection from menu items or the taste of the food. In particular, solo diners in South Korea consider familiar service employees as part of their social group. For that reason, solo diners experience more positive responses to a light conversation with familiar restaurant staff. This perception of familiarity to service employees helps solo diners think that they are not alone in the restaurant, which enables them to dine out alone in a more comfortable



environment. Therefore, customer familiarity with a restaurant or service employees within collectivistic cultures can be a strong inducer of a positive solo dining experience.

**Proposition 3:** Within collectivistic cultures, customer familiarity with a restaurant or service employees has significant, direct effects on solo diners' perceptions of their dining experience.

Lastly, this study suggests that solo diners evaluate their dining experience based on various aspects of the attitude and demeanour of service employees such as courtesy, facial expression, friendliness and time allowance. These findings enhance our understanding of the relationship between customers in collectivistic cultures and the service encounter. Previous research suggests that high-context non-verbal communication and the interaction quality of the service encounter is more significant to customers in Asian cultures (Mattila, 2000, Riddles, 1992). In alignment with this, this study suggests that solo diners are more attentive to non-verbal aspects of service employees' communication such as body language, eye contact, and facial expression. In particular, solo diners' perception of staff embarrassment through facial expression or body language engenders feelings of shame and remorse amongst solo diners.

Time allowance for customers is also identified as one aspect of service employees' attitude which determines solo dining experience. Solo diners desire to have sufficient time to enjoy their meal without a perceived sense of pressure from service employees in the restaurant, and adequate time allowance is thereby positively associated with solo dining experience. Perception of the observation of restaurant staff (e.g. frequent eye contact, hovering around solo diners' table) and haste of restaurant staff (e.g. whisking away their empty plates hurriedly) induces a sense of pressure to finish their meal quickly. Such an association between time allowance and dining experience has not been previously reported in the literature, and this finding extends our knowledge of the aspects of customer-service employee interaction. Overall these findings assert that within collectivistic cultures, the attitude and demeanour of service employees during the service encounter is of paramount importance in perceived customer experience.

**Proposition 4:** Within collectivistic cultures, the way in which service employees use negative non-verbal cues in relation to speed of service delivery and consumption is important.

### 5.3 Managerial Implications

Enhancing customer experience is paramount in ensuring the competitiveness, profitability and success of any service company. The restaurant industry is no exception to this, and in order for this market sector to fully embrace the growing number of solo diners, it is first necessary to gain an understanding of solo diners as a unique demographic and their respective experiences with the service offerings. This study presents the factors that influence customer experience from solo diners' perspectives, and in doing so may help restaurants design and manage their services to best accommodate solo diners. Some of the issues that emerge from these findings provide managerial recommendation for enhancing solo dining customer experience to fulfil solo diners' needs and desires.

One such issue is physical factors such as restaurant design. Almost all 'solitary' and 'lonely' diners were sensitive to interior decoration and design, with a visually attractive design engendering a more positive emotional response to their restaurant experience. Whilst these findings are in alignment with previous literature on other customer groups in the restaurant sector (Ryu & Han, 2011), the apparent high sensitivity of solo diners to this aspect suggests it would be prudent for restaurant owners/managers to consider interior design closely when catering for solo diners specifically. The restaurant environment must provide opportunities for solo diners to become immersed in aesthetic experience. Across our study cohort, solo diners were also universally sensitive to perceived waiting time for their food, due to the absence of dining companions. A visually appealing interior decoration and design, however, gave solo diners a sense of fun and enjoyment and helped them to relieve the boredom of the waiting time for their food. Given the above, it may be prudent to generate a visually attractive restaurant decor, which reduces boredom whilst waiting for food thereby enhancing solo dining experience. Such a décor could be generated by various ornaments on display (e.g. toys, souvenirs, miniatures) or on the wall (e.g. travel photos, pictures) and foreign-style or pretty tableware. A distinct interior design structure of the restaurant was also shown to arouse solo diners' interest and sense of enjoyment in this study. As such, utilisation of a distinct restaurant design such as an open-kitchen may be beneficial. Such a design may enable solo diners to watch the whole cooking process during the wait for their food, and secondarily enhance trust from customers' in the food hygiene standard of the restaurant, which was also identified as an important factor by solo diners in this study.

Another important restaurant design aspect that owners/managers should consider is table layout. A key finding of this study is that solo diners are generally self-conscious about

dining alone, and this is a manifestation of the cultural environment, which views solo dining as being reflective of a lack of social skills or personality problems. Crucially though, table layout aspects such as the design, size and space between tables can reduce solo diners' anxiety. For example, a long and narrow bar table or a communal table can blur the demarcation between solo diners and non-solo diners in the restaurant, thereby reducing anxiety. Similarly tables with partitions can screen the attention from other diners, thereby enhancing customer experience. Furthermore, small one or two person tables can also make solo diners feel less burdensome and helps avoid the perceived inconvenience of solo diners in sharing their table with strangers. A mix of both large communal tables and small one/two person tables, or separate areas for solo diners and non-solo diners may therefore be optimum for attracting this customer group.

Restaurants should have adequate space between tables. Similar to previous literature on other customer groups in the restaurant sector (Liu & Jang, 2009b; Ryu & Jang, 2008), solo diners value adequate space between tables. Enough space between tables helps solo diners feel secure in their private space in the restaurant and to reduce their concern about other diners. The findings of this study indicate that the close physical proximity to other diners can result in the personal space invasion, which gives solo diners feelings of discomfort and displeasure. Therefore, the table layout of the restaurant should be considered as to create a more comfortable environment for solo diners to dine alone.

Alongside physical factors, restaurant owners/mangers should also consider human factors such as staff training. The attitude, demeanour and body language of service employees is the most important factor in solo dining experience relating to staff interactions. In particular, 'lonely' diners (i.e. reluctant solo diners) are more inclined to feel daunted about dining alone in the restaurant and therefore, facial expression used by the restaurant service employees is important in determining their dining experience. For example, negative facial expressions such as a sullen look, or a look of embarrassment at solo diners, can make solo diners feel ashamed to dine alone in the restaurant. Staff training should ensure that service employees are conscious of how their facial expressions and body language are perceived by solo diners, and the positive/negative experiences this can engender. Similarly, some solo diners appear highly sensitive to staff attitudes, and service employees should avoid negatively perceived attitudes such as rushing customers to finish their meal quickly.

Customer conversations with restaurant staff members can also impact positively or negatively on customer experience depending on the level of customer familiarity with the staff. Conversations with unfamiliar restaurant staff may bother and irritate solo diners due to in-group norms and social status differences. On the contrary, conversation with familiar staff helps solo diners reduce their feeling of loneliness and boredom arising from the absence of dining companions. The first step towards familiarity may be an acknowledgement by restaurant staff with a smile and a nod when solo diners revisit the restaurant. Acknowledgement by restaurant staff can abrogate solo diners' feelings of loneliness and help nurture a friendly acquaintance. Alongside this, service employees should pay regular attention to solo diners and respond to their requests promptly in order to avoid engendering negative perceptions of being ignored. The high sensitivity of solo diners to these attributes of staff behaviour mandates continued reassessment and training of restaurant service staff, so that a positive solo dining experience can be provided and maintained.

A final factor for restaurants owners/managers to consider alongside physical and staff human factors is the food and menu itself. The absence of a dining companion, and the impossibility of therefore sharing dishes, inherently alters the way solo diners choose food in a restaurant. In particular this study has demonstrated that solo diners often desire to have two different dishes at the same time for the price of one meal. Restaurants should endeavour to facilitate this desire through combination menus that allow mixing of two different dishes or affordable set menus that contain a selection of dishes. Another pertinent factor to consider is the nutritional value of the food served. Solo diners favour high nutritional healthy foods and body fitness. This important factor should be considered when designing restaurant menus and preparing food dishes.

#### **5.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Although this study has successfully demonstrated solo diners' perceptions of various influential aspects of their restaurant experience, it has important limitations that need to be considered. In the following paragraphs, these limitations along with potential future research suggestions will be described.

Firstly, an important limitation to consider is the time interval between the solo dining experience and the interview with the solo diner. In this research, this time interval varied considerably between participants and between multiple dining experiences in the same individual. This is a potentially pertinent concern, as there is a possibility with longer time

intervals that there is a degree of reporter bias. Longer time intervals could conceivably affect the accuracy of recalled details, and potentially blunt the reported emotional response to aspects of the solo dining experience. Future research could address this limitation by either restricting recruitment of participants to individuals who have had a solo dining experience within a specified time period, such as within the last month.

A second limitation is the nature of sampling used in this study. Convenience sampling was used in this research in order to optimise participant recruitment within a useable time frame. This method of convenience sampling, however, could potentially introduce a degree of bias into participant recruitment. Whilst care was taken to recruit participants from different age and socioeconomic groups, this method of sampling inherently recruited participants from a limited geographical area, namely the metropolitan Seoul area. It is conceivable that the attitudes and behaviours of solo diners who live outside this geographical area differ from those within it. Whilst South Korea is a comparatively small densely populated country with an estimated 82.5% of the population lived in urbanized areas (CIA, 2017), significant geographical, socioeconomic and cultural differences between different regions still exist (Armstrong, 2008). It is not unreasonable to expect that an individual from a sparsely populated more rural region has different attitudes to dining alone compared to an individual who lives in heavily populated central Seoul. In addition to this, the participants in this research study were either students, professionals (teacher, nurse) or had occupations in the service industry. The results of this study may therefore not directly relate to solo diners in different socioeconomic groups such as agricultural or 'blue collar workers'.

A related factor to this is the age representation across the participant cohort. Only two participants were older than 40 years old, and the oldest participant was 51 years. As such, this study is unable to comment on the solo dining experiences of individuals older than this. Compared to the UK, South Korea has a comparatively younger population with 72.5% of the population being under the age of 54 (CIA, 2017). There is, however, a rapidly ageing population in South Korea (Yoon, 2016). As such further research investigating the dining experiences of older solo diners would be pertinent.

Within the participant group there is both first time and repeat solo dining experiences. Even within the same participant, there was sometimes reporting of multiple solo dining experiences with a mix of both first time and repeat solo dining experiences. Examining the differences between first time and repeat solo dining experiences in terms of

experiential attributes was not an objective of this research, and due to insufficient numbers within each group, a meaningful comparison would not have been possible. Previous literature has looked at the differential impact of the physical environment on either first time or repeat diners (Ryu & Han, 2011), but there has been no such study investigating solo diners specifically or other non-physical attributes of customer experience. This is therefore a future research direction.

Another factor to consider in terms of sampling method limitations is the overall sample size. As discussed in the methodology chapter, data saturation was reached at 23 participants. As such, no new experiential attributes that influence solo dining experience could be identified after this. Given this research was exploratory and analysed using a qualitative method, the sample size was therefore sufficient to allow the research aims to be fulfilled. A larger sample size, however, may be required for undertaking further work in this area. For example, among the research participants, there are also defined subgroups, such as single person households vs. married solo diners. There are, however, insufficient numbers within each group to allow a valid comparison between these different subgroups. A larger sample size may permit qualitative analysis of differences between subgroups, and adequately power the study to detect such differences if a subsequent quantitative analysis were to be undertaken.

A final limitation to consider is the general applicability of this research to solo diners outside the cultural context of South Korea. Whilst there are clear cultural differences between South Korea and Western countries, it is difficult to accurately say how these differences influence the attitudes and behaviours of solo diners, as there has been no comparison between solo diners from different cultural backgrounds. Two pertinent research questions could therefore be asked in further work. Firstly, do the same experiential attributes operate within the solo dining experiences of matched cohort of solo diners from a Western culture such as the UK. Secondly, what if any are the differences in the experiential attributes across these two different demographic groups and can these differences be explained by the background cultural context.

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## Appendix A: The Interview Protocol



### *An Exploration of Solo Dining Experience in South Korea*

#### Introduction script and Interview protocol

##### Introduction Script

I would like to thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Songyi Han and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester. I have been studying the effects of the restaurant's environmental and service settings on the solo diner's experience.

Specifically I would like to invite you to participate in the interviews that will be carried out as part of this research study. In particular I would like you to share with me your experiences of dining out alone in the restaurants. I'm about to ask you for the questions, please answer in as much detail as possible.

##### Interview Protocol

##### Main Research Question:

##### Could you please tell me as much as you can about your recent experiences about dining out alone in the restaurant?

- Prompts: the type of the restaurant; the restaurant interior; the location; the price; friendly services; staff appearance; speed of service; special treatment if alone; the ambience
  - How was it?
  - How did you feel about?
  - Was it important to you? Why was it important to you?

1. Could you describe your solo dining experience with the location of a restaurant you visited?

- Prompts: near the station; around the company; near home; a little far from home; in a quiet area; near the busy streets
  - What did you think of the distance of the restaurant?
  - Was it important to you? Why was it important to you?
  - Did the restaurant have its own private parking lot?
  - Did you take public transport?
  - How long do you allow your travel time to visit the restaurant to dine alone? Why?

2. Could you describe your solo dining experience with the physical environment you encountered in the restaurant?

- Prompts: furniture; decoration; the room; the table; the seating; the theme;

lighting; background music; colour; my personal style; atmosphere; facilities; scale of the restaurant; cleanliness; air quality; noise; smell; temperature; the view; space

- What did you like/dislike?
- How was it? How did you feel about?
- Can people see you dining alone?
- Was it busy/quiet/relaxed?
- Where did you sit down to eat in the restaurant?

3. Could you describe your solo dining experience with the restaurant food?

- Prompts: portions; food cuisines; food presentation; food tasty
  - What did you like/dislike?
  - How was it? How did you feel about?

4. Could you describe your solo dining experience with the food price you paid?

- Prompts: an affordable price for solo diners; a good price compared to overall service; a reasonable/expensive/inexpensive price compared to the food
  - Did it leave you satisfied?
  - How did you feel about?
  - Was it important to you? Why was it important to you?

5. Could you describe your solo dining experience with restaurant staff you encountered?

- Prompts: greeting/welcome; staff appearance; speed of service; special treatment; casual conversations; staff attitude towards solo diners
  - Do you prefer to be left alone or to talk with the staff?
  - Do you like it when they recognise you?
  - Do they make extra effort to talk with you? Do you like this?
  - What did you like the best/least about the service staff?

6. Could you describe your solo dining experience with other restaurant guest you encountered?

- Prompts: staring at you; making a noise; the presence of other solo diners
  - Were there with other solo diners or families?
  - Do you like talking to others?
  - Was there anything you dislike?

### **Closing script**

Is there anything more you would like to add?

I will analyse the information you and others gave me for the next step and then submit a thesis to the school.

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet



The University of Manchester  
Manchester Business School

### ***An Exploration of Solo Dining Experience in South Korea***

#### **Participant Information Sheet**

You are being invited to take part in a research study, exploring the lone diners' experiences in the restaurant setting. The research will be for my PhD at the University of Manchester. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

*Songyi Han*

*Marketing, Operation Managements & Service Systems (MOMS Division),  
Manchester Business School,  
University of Manchester,  
Booth Street West,  
Manchester,  
M15 6PB*

#### **Title of the Research**

*An Exploration of Solo Dining Experience in South Korea*

#### **What is the aim of the research?**

*The aim of this research is to identify and analyse the impact of interaction with the physical environment, service employees, other customers, perceived price, and restaurant locational convenience on solo diners to construct their experiences in the restaurant setting.*

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

*You have experiences of often dining out alone in the restaurant.*

#### **What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

*You would be expected to minutely explain your feelings, opinions, and experiences about dining out alone in restaurants.*

#### **What happens to the data collected?**

*Through the analysis of the participants' dining experiences, it would gain insight into how restaurant experience is formed in the solo diner and understand the specific*

*experiential attributes the lone diner is seeking in the restaurant setting.*

**How is confidentiality maintained?**

*The data will be recorded on my computer and will be password protected. No one will access the data you provided without any consents from you.*

**What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

*It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself.*

**Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

*During the interview, I will offer you a beverage in the café.*

**What is the duration of the research?**

*The interview will typically take an hour.*

**How the research will be conducted?**

*The session will be recorded because I don't want to miss any of your comments. Although I will be taking some notes during the session, I can't possibly write fast enough to get it all down.*

**Where will the research be conducted?**

*The interview will be conducted in a quiet place to where the participant is easily available and convenient in South Korea.*

**Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

*The results of this study may be published in academic journals and elsewhere.*

**Contact for further information**

*songyi.han@postgrad.mbs.ac.uk*

**What if something goes wrong?**

*If you subsequently want help or advice, please contact me at any time. This might be yourself, or in the case of vulnerable subjects, a specialist agency.*

*If a participant wants to make a formal complaint about the conduct of the research they should contact the Head of the Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL.*

## Appendix C: Participant Consent Form



The University of Manchester  
Manchester Business School

### *An Exploration of Solo Dining Experience in South Korea*

#### CONSENT FORM

Please  
tick the  
box

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above research and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to any treatment/service
3. I understand that the meetings will be audio recorded to help the researcher transcribe our discussions and the recorded data will be confidentially protected.
4. I understand that no names or information leading to my identification will be included in research contexts and pseudonyms will be used to conceal my identity.

☐☐☐☐

I agree to take part in the above research

Name of participant

Date

Signature

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## Appendix D: A Data Display Table: Themes and Gender

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
1. Environmental Factors																														
1.1 Number and Type of Diners																														
1.1.1 Low table occupancy (P)																														
1.1.2 High table occupancy (N)																														
1.1.3 Being the solo diner (N)																														
1.1.4 Presence of other solo diners (P)																														
1.2 People Watching																														
1.2.1 The friendly interaction between staff (P)																														
1.2.2 Talkative staff (N)																														
1.2.3 Interesting other diners (P)																														
1.2.4 Other diners at the table (P)																														
1.2.5 Other diners arguing with each other (N)																														
1.3 Soundscape																														
1.3.1 Staff conversation (M)																														
1.3.2 Staff dialect accent (P)																														
1.3.3 The noise from between staff (N)																														
1.3.4 Staff shouting the order to the kitchen staff (N)																														
1.3.5 Other diners' conversation (M)																														
1.3.6 The noise from other diners (N)																														
1.3.7 Loud complaints by other diners (N)																														
1.4 Aroma																														
1.4.1 Strong fragrance of a perfume on other diner (N)																														
1.4.2 Foul smell on other diner (N)																														
1.5 Physical Proximity																														
1.5.1 Sharing a table with strangers (N)																														
1.5.2 Invasion of solo diner's space for meal (N)																														
1.6 Familiarity																														
1.6.1 Familiarity with the restaurant (P)																														
1.6.2 Familiarity to staff (P)																														

P = Positive responses, N = Negative responses, M = Mixed responses

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
<b>2. Staff Behaviour in Interaction with Diners</b>																														
<b>2.1 Conversations</b>																														
<b>2.1.1 Timing of conversations</b>																														
2.1.1.1 Good timing of conversations (P)																														
2.1.1.2 Bad timing of conversations (N)																														
2.1.2 Level of familiarity																														
2.1.2.1 Conversations with familiar staff (P)																														
2.1.2.2 Conversations with unfamiliar staff (N)																														
2.1.3 Light conversations (P)																														
2.1.4 Unwanted conversations (N)																														
<b>2.2 Attentiveness</b>																														
2.2.1 Adequate attention (P)																														
2.2.2 Inadequate attention (N)																														
2.2.3 Being paid too much attention (N)																														
<b>2.3 Responsiveness</b>																														
2.3.1 Prompt responsiveness (P)																														
2.3.2 Slow responsiveness (N)																														
<b>2.4 Courtesy</b>																														
<b>2.4.1 Greeting</b>																														
2.4.1.1 Being greeted by staff (P)																														
2.4.1.2 Not being greeted by staff (N)																														
2.4.1.3 Staff greeting in keeping with the context (M)																														
2.4.1.4 Questions related to the number of companion (N)																														
<b>2.4.2 Acknowledgement</b>																														
2.4.2.1 Being acknowledged by acquainted staff (P)																														
<b>2.4.3 Level of politeness</b>																														
<b>2.4.3.1 Politeness</b>																														
2.4.3.1.1 Polite manner of serving (P)																														
<b>2.4.3.2 Impoliteness</b>																														
2.4.3.2.1 Impolite manner of serving (N)																														
2.4.3.2.2 Staff way of speaking (N)																														
2.4.3.2.3 Brusque manner (N)																														



Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
<b>2.5 Body Language</b>																														
2.5.1 Staff with a cheerful look (P)																														
2.5.2 Staff with a smile (P)																														
2.5.3 Staff with a sullen look (N)																														
2.5.4 Staff with tired faces (N)																														
2.5.5 Staff look of embarrassment at solo diners (N)																														
<b>2.6 Helpfulness</b>																														
2.6.1 Detailed explanations of menus (P)																														
2.6.2 Recommendation of food (P)																														
<b>2.7 Friendliness</b>																														
2.7.1 Staff friendly attitudes (P)																														
2.7.2 Friendly manner of serving (P)																														
<b>2.8 Time Allowance</b>																														
2.8.1 Being not rushed to finish the diner's meal (P)																														
2.8.2 Being rushed to finished eating meal quickly (N)																														
<b>3. Active interactions with other diners</b>																														
<b>3.1 Conversations</b>																														
3.1.1 Similar interest (P)																														
3.1.2 Light conversations (P)																														
3.1.3 Unwanted conversations (N)																														
3.1.4 Conflicting opinions (N)																														
<b>3.2 Attentiveness</b>																														
3.2.1 Attention (N)																														
3.2.2 No attention (P)																														
<b>3.3 Disruption</b>																														
3.3.1 The other diners' children bothering the diner (N)																														
<b>3.4 Accidental encounters</b>																														
3.4.1 Encounter with acquaintance (N)																														
<b>4. Physical environment</b>																														
<b>4.1 Facility aesthetics</b>																														
<b>4.1.1 Architectural design</b>																														
<b>4.1.1.1 Structure</b>																														
<b>4.1.1.1.1 Exterior</b>																														

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
4.1.1.1.1.1 Old building (M)		N			N														N											P
4.1.1.1.1.2 New building (P)																														
4.1.1.1.1.3 Exterior design reflecting a restaurant theme (P)																														
<b>4.1.1.1.2 Interior</b>																														
4.1.1.1.2.1 Open-kitchen (P)																														
4.1.1.1.2.2 Distinctive interior design (P)																														
4.1.1.1.2.3 Modern interior (P)																														
4.1.1.1.2.4 Wooden interior (P)																														
4.1.1.1.2.5 Old-fashioned interior (P)																														
<b>4.1.1.2 Restroom location</b>																														
4.1.1.2.1 The restroom located outside the restaurant (N)																														
<b>4.1.2 Table settings</b>																														
<b>4.1.2.1 Tableware design</b>																														
4.1.2.1.1 Foreign-style tableware (P)																														
4.1.2.1.2 Pretty tableware (P)																														
<b>4.1.2.2 Table presentation</b>																														
4.1.2.2.1 Distinctive sauce pot (P)																														
<b>4.1.3 Design of the menu</b>																														
4.1.3.1 Distinctive menu design (P)																														
4.1.3.2 Menu design reflecting cultural context (P)																														
<b>4.1.4 Wall décor</b>																														
<b>4.1.4.1 Wall design</b>																														
4.1.4.1.1 Wall paper presenting a specific concept (P)																														
4.1.4.1.2 Food or restaurant information on the wall (P)																														
<b>4.1.4.2 Wall colour</b>																														
4.1.4.2.1 Walls painted in warm colour (P)																														
4.1.4.2.2 Walls painted in achromatic colour (P)																														
4.1.4.3 Ornaments on the wall (P)																														
<b>4.1.5 Interior accessories</b>																														
4.1.5.1 Decorations for thematic design (P)																														
4.1.5.2 Cute ornaments on display (P)																														

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
<b>4.1.6 Furniture</b>																														
<b>4.1.6.1 Shape of table</b>																														
4.1.6.1.1 Square table (P)																														
4.1.6.1.2 Round table (N)																														
<b>4.1.6.2 Type of table</b>																														
4.1.6.2.1 Sitting on chair (P)																														
4.1.6.2.2 Sitting on the floor (N)																														
<b>4.1.6.3 Type of chair</b>																														
4.1.6.3.1 Soft chair (P)																														
4.1.6.3.2 Stool (N)																														
<b>4.1.6.4 Presence of table call button</b>																														
4.1.6.4.1 Table call button on the table (P)																														
4.1.6.4.2 No table call button on the table (N)																														
<b>4.2 Ambience</b>																														
<b>4.2.1 Lighting</b>																														
4.2.1.1 Subdued lighting (P)																														
4.2.1.2 Poor lighting (N)																														
4.2.1.3 Bright lighting (M)																														
<b>4.2.2 Aroma</b>																														
4.2.2.1 The restaurant filled with the aroma of food (P)																														
<b>4.2.3 Soundscape</b>																														
<b>4.2.3.1 Background music</b>																														
<b>4.2.3.1.1 Music genre</b>																														
4.2.3.1.1.1 Music in keeping with the context (P)																														
4.2.3.1.1.2 Pop music (N)																														
<b>4.2.3.1.2 Music tempo</b>																														
4.2.3.1.2.1 Slow tempo (P)																														
4.2.3.1.2.2 Fast tempo (N)																														
<b>4.2.3.1.3 Volume of music</b>																														
4.2.3.1.3.1 Low volume (P)																														
4.2.3.1.3.2 High volume (N)																														
4.2.3.2 TV sound (P)																														

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
<b>4.2.4 Cleanliness</b>																														
4.2.4.1 Good cleanliness and hygiene (P)																														
4.2.4.2 Poor cleanliness and hygiene (N)																														
<b>4.2.5 Tidiness</b>																														
4.2.5.1 Tidy restaurant (P)																														
4.2.5.2 Untidy restaurant (N)																														
<b>4.2.6 Colour</b>																														
4.2.6.1 Matching colour of design (P)																														
4.2.6.2 Un-matching colour of design (N)																														
<b>4.3 Functionality of space</b>																														
<b>4.3.1 Table layout</b>																														
<b>4.3.1.1 Table design</b>																														
4.3.1.1.1 Bar table (P)																														
4.3.1.1.2 Partition table (P)																														
4.3.1.1.3 Communal table (P)																														
<b>4.3.1.2 Size of table</b>																														
4.3.1.2.1 Small table (P)																														
4.3.1.2.2 Large table (N)																														
<b>4.3.1.3 Space between tables</b>																														
4.3.1.3.1 Enough (P)																														
4.3.1.3.2 Not enough (N)																														
<b>4.3.2 Seating arrangement</b>																														
<b>4.3.2.1 Visibility of the diner</b>																														
<b>4.3.2.1.1 Visual</b>																														
4.3.2.1.1.1 Seat in the centre (N)																														
4.3.2.1.2 Not visual																														
4.3.2.1.2.1 Corner seat (P)																														
4.3.2.1.2.2 Seat with the diner's back toward the door (P)																														
<b>4.3.2.2 Distance from other diners</b>																														
4.3.2.2.1 Close (N)																														
4.3.2.2.2 Far (P)																														
<b>4.3.2.3 Distance from communal areas</b>																														
4.3.2.3.1 Close (N)																														

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
4.3.2.3.2 Far (P)																														
4.3.2.4 Window seat (P)																														
<b>4.4 Size of Restaurant</b>																														
4.4.1 Small (P)																														
4.4.2 Large (N)																														
<b>5. Value for price</b>																														
<b>5.1 Price and time</b>																														
5.1.1 Price related to short time spent in the restaurant (P)																														
5.1.2 Price related to long time spent in the restaurant (P)																														
<b>5.2 Price and food amount</b>																														
5.2.1 Price related to adequate amount of food (P)																														
5.2.2 Price related to inadequate amount of food (N)																														
<b>5.3 Price and food taste</b>																														
5.3.1 Reasonable price related to tasty food (P)																														
5.3.2 Unreasonable price related to tasteless food (N)																														
<b>5.4 Price range</b>																														
5.4.1 Acceptable price range for a solo diner (P)																														
<b>6. Location</b>																														
<b>6.1 Accessibility of the restaurant</b>																														
6.1.1 Available car park (P)																														
6.1.2 Ease of public transport (P)																														
6.1.3 Close proximity to restaurant (P)																														
6.1.4 Far proximity to restaurant (P)																														
<b>6.2 Location of the restaurant</b>																														
6.2.1 Secluded area (P)																														
6.2.2 Crowded area (N)																														
<b>7. Service design</b>																														
<b>7.1 Complementary services</b>																														
7.1.1 Free replenishment of food (P)																														
7.1.2 Self-service side dishes (P)																														
<b>7.2 Waiting time</b>																														
7.2.1 Waiting time for food																														

Themes	M (Male)																	F (Female)												
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13
7.2.1.1 A short waiting time for food (+)																														
7.2.1.2 A long waiting time for food (-)																														
<b>7.2.2 Waiting time for being seated at table</b>																														
7.2.2.1 A short waiting time for being seated at table (+)																														
7.2.2.2 A long waiting time for being seated at table (-)																														
<b>8. The product</b>																														
<b>8.1 Quality of food</b>																														
8.1.1 Fresh ingredient of food (+)																														
8.1.2 Stale ingredient of food (-)																														
8.1.3 Nutritious food (+)																														
<b>8.2 Food taste</b>																														
8.2.1 Food without flavour enhancers (+)																														
8.2.2 Tasty food (+)																														
8.2.3 Tasteless dishes (-)																														
8.2.4 Strong-tasting food (-)																														
<b>8.3 Food presentation</b>																														
8.3.1 Food served on a tray (-)																														
8.3.2 Good presentation of food (+)																														
8.3.3 Small plate compared to the amount of food (-)																														
8.3.4 Poor arrangement of food on the plate (-)																														
<b>8.4 Food variety</b>																														
8.4.1 Combination menus for one person (+)																														
8.4.2 The acceptable minimum portion size (-)																														
8.4.3 Distinct food (+)																														
8.4.4 High amount of food variety (+)																														
8.4.5 Low amount of food variety (+)																														
<b>8.5 Customer involvement</b>																														
<b>8.5.1 Involvement</b>																														
8.5.1.1 Customised food (+)																														
<b>8.5.2 No involvement</b>																														
8.5.2.1 Food that is easy to eat alone (+)																														