

Let's Eat Dinner Apart: Physical Distancing and Restaurant Experience

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PURPOSE

This study aims to discuss the relationship between physical distancing and the experience of restaurant guests during the re-opening phase after COVID-19 lockdowns. The following two research questions were used in this study: 1) Do restaurant guests find it important to maintain physical distance during a pandemic? 2) Can restaurants improve their guests' experience using creative (non-standard) ways to indicate physical distance?

RESEARCH METHODS

The study's methodology includes online and offline surveys conducted in Moscow, Russia during the re-opening phase after the severe COVID-19 restrictions (December 2020 - February 2021). The online sample includes 232 respondents (65% women, 34% men) mainly from Moscow and the Moscow region. The offline sample includes 59 respondents (50.8% women, 47.3% men) who visited the "Gusi-Lebedi" restaurant located in Izmailovo, one of the largest hotel complexes in Moscow. The online sample was formed using the "snowball" approach, while the offline questionnaire was offered to guests by the restaurant staff. Frequency analysis and contingency tables were used to analyze the obtained data. The significance of differences was assessed using the Student's t-test and Chi-square test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The re-opening phase after COVID-19 lockdowns challenged restaurants and other tourist attractions to find a balance between following strict safety regulations and creating a positive customer experience (Bonfanti et al., 2021; Fusté-Forné and Hussain, 2021). Physical (social) distance may be one of the key reasons for changing customer experience in a restaurant (Taylor, 2020), as pre-pandemic research has shown the importance of the social context of the restaurant experience (Martin, 1997; Wall and Berry, 2007).

The results of the present study show that restaurant customers find it important to maintain physical distancing during a pandemic. Respondents rate the importance of physical distance in a restaurant significantly higher than the importance of wearing masks. The results support the hypothesis of a significant positive correlation between pandemic concern and the estimated importance of physical distance. Gender and age differences were also found in the perception of physical distance in a restaurant: men and middle-aged people were less agree with its importance.

This study contributes to the discussion on ways to indicate physical distance in the restaurant. The results indicate that visitors perceive various "distance approaches" differently. The safest and most attractive for respondents way is to use separate houses ("igloos") around each table. The use of teddy bears is the second-best option in terms of perceived safety. "Teddy distance" gives the highest level of

positive experiences. The distancing method, which people consider to be very safe, can create a negative experience for visitors. This can be seen in the case of ensuring physical distance using plastic face shields.

IMPLICATIONS

The research findings provide some practical insights for restaurant owners and managers. While restaurants need to maintain physical distance during a pandemic, they must do it creatively to enhance their guests' experience. Both failure to maintain distance and unattractive marking of distance can reduce visitors' satisfaction and their intention to visit. A more accurate assessment of the perception of physical distance by restaurant visitors can be obtained in an experimental study, which is one of the directions for further research.

KEYWORDS

Restaurant experience, social context, physical distance, COVID-19 pandemic.

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